



PROJECT MUSE®

A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720 (review)

William Kolbrener

Common Knowledge, Volume 8, Issue 1, Winter 2002, pp. 205-206 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/7572>

of tone) on science studies, by Steven Feierman on writing the colonial history of Africa, by Caroline Bynum on writings, modern and medieval, about “the body,” and by Jerrold Seigel on the problematics of the self are valuable, and in Bynum’s case genuinely innovative. For the rest, they are harmless enough, but there is rather more of wheel spinning than there is of traction.

—Clifford Geertz

Joseph Alexander MacGillivray, *Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the Archaeology of the Minoan Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 373 pp.

Schliemann, as we all know, discovered the ruins of Troy, circa 1871, and hung jewelry, said to have been Helen’s, on his Greek wife Sophie, for a photograph. A little less widely known is Sir Arthur Evans’s work, beginning in 1894, on the palace at Knossos, in Crete. There he found the Labyrinth that was built to contain a bull-headed monster, the Minotaur. Neither Schliemann nor Evans had a scholar’s credentials. What they both had was (1) enough money to finance their explorations and (2) a belief in the essential veracity of classical myths, as that there *had* been a Trojan War, over a woman named Helen, or that there was indeed substance to Greek tales of the monster hidden in the maze. It’s not surprising, therefore, that both of them have been subjected to scholarly “correction,” based on evidence they were perhaps too naive to comprehend. Professor MacGillivray’s book isn’t immune from that tendency, but it does offer us, in its central 100-plus pages, a full enough account of the Cretan excavations and reconstructions. One could wish to be able to search the details of larger illustrations—they tend to come four or five to a page—and for less space devoted to Evans’s possible sexual proclivities, but what we have is a good survey of how one man helped relate Greek myth to demonstrable fact.

—Hugh Kenner

Barbara Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 280 pp.

“Matters of fact,” “evidences of the fact,” “truth of the facts,” “discourses of the fact,” “notorious matters of fact,” and the more emphatic “undoubted certainty of the matters of fact” emerged in the lexicon of an early modern England with an ever-increasing and “popular taste for facts.” In Shapiro’s formulation, then,

it was not a genteel class of *virtuosi* (not Royal Society scientists), but rather a culture of common-law juries and witnesses, that produced the framework for the rise of fact. Thus, as Shapiro observes, “a somewhat lower threshold than gentleman was epistemologically significant in the production of believable facts.” The cultural obsession with fact produced a concomitant anatomization of disciplines and genres: there would now be “true reports” and “blatant frauds,” “histories” and “fables,” “news” and “Rumour,” as well as versions of the “naked Truth” and mere “Rhetorical flourishes.” So much had fact triumphed, and so much had the disciplinary hierarchies shifted, that even the latitudinarian orthodoxy of the 1690’s had to justify itself not through the authority of Revelation alone, but also through recourse to the “very *Facts* of Scripture.”

—*William Kolbrener*

Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee’s Conversations with Angels:*

Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 252 pp.

Whatever John Dee’s considerable renown during his lifetime, within fifty years of his death he had acquired a reputation for self-delusion and charlatanry. This acquisition was largely due to Meric Casaubon’s publication in 1659 of parts of Dee’s “angel diaries,” with the aim of exposing them as records not of conversations with heavenly spirits but of consultations with “false lying¹ ones. Dee’s other activities as an Elizabethan magus—blending magic, astrology, alchemy, cabala, and mathematics in an eclectic Neoplatonic fusion—have now been rescued from similar disrepute by scholars such as Frances Yates, Peter French, and Nicholas Clulee. But until now, Dee’s talking to angels in a showstone (which apparently collected their “rays,” seen by professional “scryers”) has remained impenetrable. Perhaps understandably so. Where, after all, are the limits of unreason? Can we make sense of *everything* historically? Harkness, in this new book, evidently thinks that we can do so in the case of Dee. He emerges from her study as a man of his age, sharing in its intellectual traditions. His theory and practice comprised a science, as then defined, though conducted as revealed theology and via spirit experiments.

In a sense, Dee also emerges as very much a man of *our* times—obsessed with language, textuality, and communication. For him the world was an opaque holy text to be read in the light of the language that had originally created it and given it power: the true cabala of nature, taught him by the angel Raphael. In this language, as Johannes Reuchlin had explained earlier in the sixteenth century, even the punctuation signified. Dee was not always a good learner—he argued