

ANGLO-AMERICAN REVIEWS

CALHOUN, Joshua. 2020. *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Paper-making, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp xii + 212. ISBN 9780812251890, Hardback \$55.00.

The word “Nature” in the title here means two things: both *nature* as “quality” and *nature* as our larger physical world. The relation of these two meanings is, in fact, a point of the book: paper pages were, are, and will continue to be natural things. With the full foretitle, Calhoun tips his hat to Adrian Johns’s indispensable *The Nature of the Book* (2009), and it’s worth noting from the outset that one of the many admirable aspects of *The Nature of the Page* is its attention to and respect for existing scholarship. In fact, while this book does many things well, one of the most useful is citing and summarizing a wealth of studies related to book history and its related technologies — particularly, the intertwined, natural histories of parchment, paper, and ink.

An early gesture reveals its overall strategy. Reproducing Robert Darnton’s well-known chart of “The Communications Circuit”, which sets out a social organization of human actors involved in book production and circulation (authors, publishers, booksellers, et al.), Calhoun pulls the camera back to 10,000 feet, embedding Darnton’s fairly synchronic circuit in a much larger context of history and ecosystem. One can summarize the central question as follows: How have human communications been shaped by the natural materials used to fashion the media for those communications? Further, as human culture has moved from plant (papyrus) to animal (parchment) back to a plant/animal hybrid (paper, often “sized” with animal gelatin), how have these various stages, and the overlap of the media ecologies before, during, and after the transitions from one stage to the next, affected the meaning and experience of communication?

Between its introduction and afterword, five chapters contribute to the “story about paper in Renaissance England — about what it was elementally” (ix). These five chapters concern, in turn, the cellulose economy of paper; the role of flax (and hemp) in paper’s emergence; “blots” as both thing and idea; the “sizing” of paper in early modern England; and the relation between physical environments and book decay. Some of these chap-

ters bear the traces of conference presentations, but each is scrupulously researched and, even as case studies, connect well with the larger argument of *The Nature of the Page*.

Calhoun is very good at getting us to see — both from 10,000 feet and closer up, through call-outs of texts, leaves, and annotations — the ways in which pages have always been implicated in the world of plants and animals. Even for scholars familiar with early texts, such connections can carry real surprise. An everyday analogy here comes in the domain of nutrition: as with those engaging in new diets (say, gluten-free, vegetarian, or vegan), everywhere one looks, culture has found a way to blend things that we had presumed to be separate. Very little is distinctly one thing or another, and most things (including paper pages) are interconnected. Calhoun continually shows how books — connected elementally to their materials of composition — are, at base, natural things.

To my mind the most important material in the book relates to *sizing*. *Sizing* was the application, to paper, of a glutinous coating typically derived from animal products (bones, skulls, hides, etc.). The word *size* in this sense is quite old, apparently dating to the early fifteenth century, when, according to the *MED*, it referred to a sticky substance used to prepare surfaces for gold or silver overlay (see *sīse* n.(2) and quotations). Because *size* in any discussion of books and paper is likely to produce confusion with *size* as measurement, and because Calhoun is otherwise interested in the history of words, this term might have been defined at more length in this study. But the key thing is his argument concerning the importance of sizing in the period, and its overlooked role in the history of print culture.

Paper appears to have been sized after it was fabricated from pulp, pressed, and dried, but before it was printed on. Sizing was an additional step in the printing process, one which elevated the quality of the paper. Unrequired, this coating nevertheless allowed paper (both in printed books and as writing material) to be written upon. For without this treatment, most ink would seep into, and through the paper — “sinking”, in the parlance of readers — not allowing the pen to construct discrete, legible letters and words. As Calhoun points out, the amount and nature of sizing applied to the paper in a book — and of course this could and did vary from sheet to sheet — contributed significantly to its value for readers: well-sized paper made annotations easier and more legible. Sizing also appears to have lent durability and permanence to paper.

In the formulation of B. L. Browning, we can define *durability* as how well a paper holds up to use, and *permanence* how well it lasts (31). With these categories in mind, Calhoun persuasively argues that while we cur-

rently know very little about sizing — what it consisted of, in general and specifically, and the physical properties it lent to paper — it all but certainly played a significant, even central role in the survival rate of print. That is, in its permanence. The implications for our understanding of print history are enormous and will doubtless require many more studies of paper's chemical composition. How can we count the surviving copies of early modern books, making pronouncements about what the figures mean, without attention to the makeup of the pages that survived? As Calhoun points out in his work's afterword, "When we organize books, and our ideas about books, into categories and systems that do not account for the organic nature of the page, we overlook data that can help us to better understand and preserve the Renaissance books we still have with us" (150). Sizing, in this respect, is necessary data.

An elegantly produced book, this is a must read for those interested in book history and archival science. With that said, it's unclear how many of Calhoun's insights can be transported into the undergraduate or even graduate classroom: his observations are about the nature of books that most of our students will never handle. But the narrative he shares is nonetheless a significant one, and discovering the truth about the past will continue to be vital to learning about our present, and our possible futures. In showing us precisely how "the story of paper is as much an environmental story as it is a bibliographical story" (3), *The Nature of the Page* provides an important service to those interested in the history of books and their use.

Douglas Bruster
University of Texas at Austin

Works Cited

- BROWNING, B. L. 1970. "The Nature of Paper". *Library Quarterly* 40.1: 18–38.
DARNTON, Robert. 1982. "What Is the History of Books?" *Daedalus* 111.3: 65–83.