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Quicklet on Bill Bryson's Seeing Further: The Story of Science, Discovery, and the Genius of the Royal Society

Nicole Silvester

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Royal Society was founded in 1660 from a basis of more informal meetings of physicians, natural philosophers, and other interested parties (there was no such thing as a "scientist" yet). It was influenced by Francis Bacon's thinking about science and knowledge and inspired by the many discoveries that were happening at the time. In a sense, the development of the Royal Society was a mirror of the development of science itself.

2010 was the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Royal Society, and Seeing Further: The Story of Science, Discovery, and the Genius of the Royal Society was published to commemorate that fact. Rather than simply write a history of the institution, Bryson elected to edit a volume of essays displaying some of the variety of interests so evident in the Royal Society itself. He selected twenty one writers, and not just scientists, either. Though there are quite a few eminent scholars listed as authors, there are also novelists and journalists. What they all share, though, besides the ability to turn a phrase, is an enthusiasm for science and an appreciation for the achievements of the Society.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Nicole has been writing since she could make letters with a pencil, and has been making a living at it for more than ten years. She has gone back to school too many times, studying archaeology, folklore, writing and visual art. She writes fiction under several pen names, and also does printmaking, book arts, and photography. She's an avid amateur natural historian with a particular fascination for things that fly, whether it's birds, bats or insects. And if it's possible to be both a luddite, with a love for the low-tech, and a technophile, with a fascination for everything new and shiny, Nicole is both. She reads too many books, plays too many video games, and watches too much anime.

EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

The Royal Society was founded in the spirit of finding things out. Though there was some focus on practical application of knowledge, it was never certain - especially in the early days - exactly what would be useful, and besides that, a lot more was simply interesting. So rather than limit investigation to a set of topics deemed more useful or more valuable, absolutely everything was fair game for exploration. This collection of essays mirrors the interests of the Royal Society, both old and new. In the beginning, the members collected a vast range of different kinds of information, including anecdotes about events, and conducted an assortment of experiments. In retrospect, many of them seem peculiarly useless, and it was this that Jonathan Swift satirized (among other things) in Gulliver's Travels. But even some of those seemingly pointless endeavours became useful later on.

One thing many of the essays have in common is a historical view of the Royal Society and the development of science, and many of them make good use of anecdotes about the experiments and writings of the

members over its 350-year history. Just as the development of our concepts about the size and make-up of space changed the way we saw the universe over time, it also affected our metaphysical conceptions of everything, including God and the Heavens. Similarly, the scientific method developed from its beginnings in trying things out just to see what happens - like sending up a hot air balloon or inflating a dog with air - into a whole way of learning and conveying information about our surroundings. And the avid collecting of interesting specimens from all over the world developed into museums that both preserve specimens for later study, and provide access to information to the interested public, regardless of their scholarly leanings.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

...and much more

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