Life and Death Writing: Rowland Ward and the Literature of Taxidermy

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The naturalist Rowland Ward developed methods of taxidermy. Dufresne's methods spread to England in the early 19th century, where updated and
Abstract

This article investigates the literature surrounding taxidermy in the nineteenth century and focuses on eminent taxidermist Rowland Ward’s biography A Naturalist’s Life Study in the Art of Taxidermy. This little-studied text reveals the gory foundations of the Victorian natural history museum and its preoccupation with the annihilation, manipulation, and sanitation of the animal body. Through these processes, the museum produces a clean and often beautiful specimen that may be used to instruct museum visitors as to the anatomy, characteristics, habitat, and behavior of a given creature. Ward’s writings, in both Life Study and the Sportsman’s Guide, help the modern reader to recover these backstage elements of the museum, the processes that result in the clean and shining halls and exhibits that are often taken as the museum’s whole, providing for a richer experience and a deeper understanding of natural history and scientific culture. Ward’s work is also discussed as a form of life writing, despite its preoccupation with death, and viewed in light of a rich culture of natural history that flourished during the nineteenth century.

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