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WET LEAVES



a Series On Books For The Hobbyist
by **SUSAN PRIEST**

Do you know what a madrepora is? I didn't until I read this book. There is a drawing of one in the two lower left "sections" of the accompanying cover illustration. A madrepora is a type of coral. The word madrepora means "mother of rock." They are "island builders," architects of the continents of coral reefs which took billions of years to form. (That last statement is a clue to the controversy which lies ahead.)

This book is not quite a biography, is descriptive of history without being a treatise on the subject, and is replete with both religious and evolutionary approaches to the topic of reproduction (gasp!), which was not a topic to be discussed in polite society of the nineteenth century. I would have to describe it as a narrative which doesn't lend itself to my usual approach, so I find myself scratching my head as I ask myself where to begin.

I think that I must focus as concisely as I can on our heroine. Her name is Anna Constantia Thynne. As a very young girl she was adopted by an aunt, thereby becoming the only child of a very wealthy couple. She grew up with access to voluminous libraries within her own home(s), as well as microscopes, telescopes, and any thing else, scientific or otherwise, which she might fancy. She married the Reverend Lord John Thynne in

1824, one month prior to her eighteenth birthday, and she was to become the mother of ten children.

We will now fast-forward, bypassing the many formative events and relationships in her life which nurtured her voracious curiosity, to the year 1847. Anna had developed a thorough knowledge of, and an intense interest in natural history. In addition to visiting fields and meadows, she often took her children on "collecting trips" to the nearby seashore. Among the rock pools they found many living specimens, including those of madrepores, the fossils of which she had in a glass display case in her home. She never imagined that they would be soft, with blindly probing tentacles

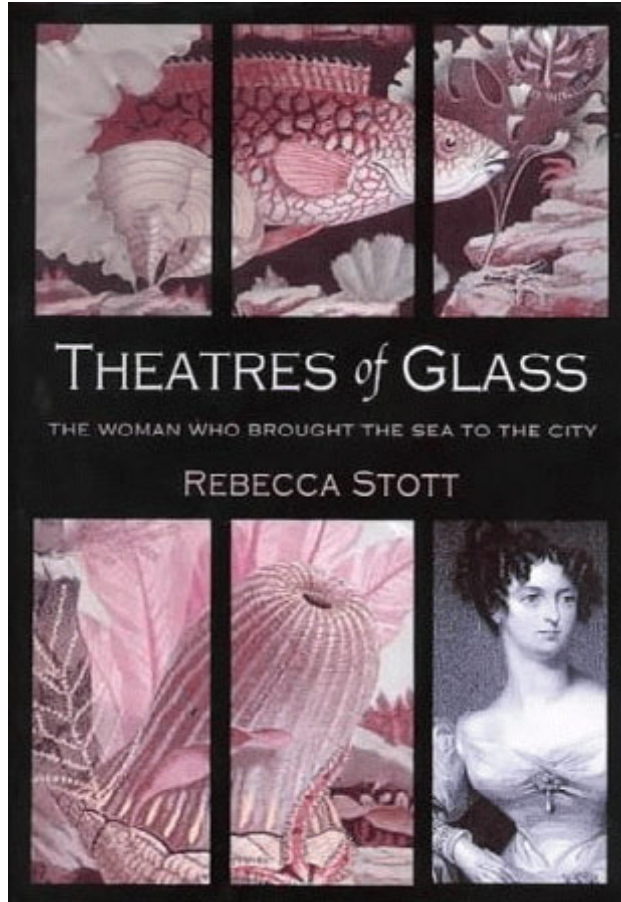
and tiny red mouths. When her children asked such questions as "can it feel," and "what did God make it for," she wasn't sure how to answer their queries about a "natural theology" which gives testimony to the wonder of God's divine

order. Was it possible to reconcile the story told by fossil records with the story told by the Bible? (The "nauralists" of today are still asking this question.)

Anna and her children took thirty of the madrepores home, along with some seawater.

They were "displayed in pie dishes on the drawing room floor." When she wanted to transport them to her home in London, she "carefully sewed each one onto a sea sponge with a needle and thread." Anna fed her madrepores cut-up shrimp. She moved them into glass tanks, and did daily water changes with fresh seawater. When this became cumbersome, her household staff took on the task of aerating the "used" water by passing it back and forth between containers in the sunlight. Eventually she discovered that the addition of living seaweed to the tanks

Theatres of Glass: The Woman Who Brought the Sea to the City
By Rebecca Stott
Short Books, 2003



meant that she didn't need to aerate the water as often. By processes of trial and error, Anna not only kept her madrepores alive, but was able to observe their asexual reproduction.

I must utilize a few quotes at this point. "While others were drying and pinning their specimens for display cases, Anna's [specimens] were alive in their own environment." "Marine invertebrates, with their budding and splitting, provide opportunity to determine nature's laws of reproduction." "It was difficult to maintain the supposed superiority of male sexual vitality when some organisms seemed to be able to dispense with males altogether."

By the spring of 1849, Anna had established the first self-sustaining, balanced marine aquarium in London. This era was a hotbed of naturalist activity. Dozens of luminaries were publishing accounts of their achievements, and

many were making claims to being "first" in the marine arena, but none of their documentation can place them before Anna Thynne and her madrepores. Anna's notes were published under the title "On The Increase Of Madrepores," in the **Annals and Magazine of Natural History** in 1859, which is the same year that Charles Darwin published **On the Origin of the Species**.

The story of Anna Thynne takes place in a time of enlightenment, a crossroad in history, and a scientific as well as religious environment. Most importantly, it is the story of remarkable woman with immeasurable curiosity and vision who has forever influenced our understanding of the natural world. Our author, Rebecca Stott, has done a much better job of telling Anna's tale than I have of reviewing her book. Nevertheless, I hope I have aroused your interest in this multifaceted story.



Merry Christmas

by SUSAN PRIEST

Fifty miles, maybe one hundred; how far from New York City do you have to go before you can safely say "Merry Christmas" to friends, neighbors and people in passing without fear of offending someone? I know you can do it in Laconia, New Hampshire, as well as in Marysville, Pennsylvania. One of our club members once told me that she was often wished a "Happy Hanukkah," which she does not celebrate, but she never felt offended by it. If someone makes their best effort to wish us what they consider to be an appropriate greeting of the season, let's all try to accept it in the spirit with which it is offered, even if they miss the mark once in a while. I'm going to go out on a limb, so to speak, and say it; "**Merry Christmas!**"

At last year's GCAS party, I made a determined effort to subdue my spirit. I chose a seat off to the side, and tried to stay put. This didn't come naturally to me. In fact, I almost didn't come at all. I was in fear of picking up a "bug" of some kind. The reason for all of this was that I was facing open heart surgery a week later. I had just resigned from my job of ten years because I was the only employee in a small office. I didn't know when or if I would be able to return, and someone else needed to be hired. I had so much on my mind that celebrating anything was out of the question for me. I'm telling you these things because my holiday message to you goes like this; **it's never too early or too late to celebrate**. On December nineteenth, the day I came home from the hospital and slept in my own bed, it was Christmas at my house! So, if you've got some pretty good stuff going on in your life, you find yourself to be in touch with your spiritual side, and maybe you have a little dog around to make you smile, well, don't let the opportunity pass you by to enjoy them. But if something heavy is weighing you down, and this holiday season just isn't happening for you, you can always celebrate it when the time is right. If you think that time might not come at all, then celebrate right now, today, and with **gusto!!**

Anyway, here I am a year later, a newer version of a not-too-old aquarist. I've got a lot to be thankful for, and a lot to celebrate, not the least of which is my association with everyone at Greater City. I want to add a few last salutations of the season. I would like to wish one and all happiness, prosperity, and most especially, abundant good health in 2010. Peace on Earth, that would be a big bonus, so while we're making wishes we'll wish for that, too!

