

IRINA PODGORNY, *La momia que habla. Microensayos de historia natural*. Rosario: CB Ediciones, 2020.

What might the link be between nineteenth-century embalming techniques, the fossil trade in Argentina, a mosque in India, Alexander von Humboldt's climb of the Chimborazo, unexploded bombs beneath the surface of German city streets, the invention of toilet paper, and eggs of the Great Auk? Each of these seemingly unrelated topics forms the basis of a short chapter in Irina Podgorny's remarkable collection of more than 70 "micro-essays," most of which have previously been published in *Revista Ñ*, the weekly cultural supplement of the well-known Argentine daily newspaper *Clarín*. Each essay is self-sufficient and can be read independently of the others. These entries are aimed at a fairly wide readership and do not require any specialized knowledge of the history of science, but their scope is vast, and historians will doubtless discover much that is new or unexpected in them. Although the subtitle mentions "natural history," Podgorny's view of what can be considered "natural" is rather broad and yields a collection of essays as varied and wide-ranging as the scope of the anecdotes they are based on. Many historians are not fond of anecdotes, too often considering them to be trivial or irrelevant, unworthy of serious attention. This is a rather unfortunate position. Beyond the fact that they can be highly entertaining, judiciously chosen anecdotes can be revealing, shedding light on little-known aspects of history (in this particular case, the history of science) which are not as minor as they may appear at first sight. Given Podgorny's experience as a historian of science, she manages to find the deeper meaning of the details and anecdotes that are the focus of each essay. Talking or not, the mummies in the title of her book, for instance, are not only museum exhibits to be gazed or shuddered at: embalming, as a technique and an art, tells us a lot about a particular quest for eternity, the mentality of those who pursue it, and the sometimes sophisticated, sometimes bizarre means that have been devised to achieve it. Finding the hidden meaning behind stories that may at first sight appear simply unusual, unexpected, quirky, or even slightly ridiculous is part of the pleasure of reading these essays. Their loose organization into sections on museums, mummies, bones, data, ethnographies, and remedies, mainly attests to the diversity of the topics, ranging from personal travel experiences to the little-known deeds and opinions of famous and not-so-famous scientists and the disreputable enterprises of forgotten quack doctors and dealers in natural history objects.

Although the entries' geographical scope is much wider, the history of Latin American science, with an emphasis on Argentina, not unexpectedly forms the background of many of the essays, and various famous participants in that history

play a part in them, from Florentino Ameghino to his arch-enemies Hermann Burmeister and Francisco Moreno, next to influential politicians and a host of more obscure characters involved in sometimes dubious activities. From that point of view, the book will have a special appeal to anyone interested in the development of the natural sciences in South America, from its beginnings to the present, including its most obscure aspects—although it should be emphasized that the topics touched upon are not restricted to Latin America.

It would be a hopeless task to try to summarize Irina Podgorny's book, or even to discover a firm and obvious connecting link between her micro-essays. The aim of this collection is not to provide a connected history of the natural sciences in Latin America (or elsewhere). Instead, it provides insights into unrelated episodes, which should encourage readers to reflect on a diversity of topics and reach conclusions on their own. Readers familiar with Irina Podgorny's previous books on the history of science will easily recognize the accuracy and depth of her observations, her talent for unearthing little-known but significant episodes and placing them in their proper context, as well as her keen sense of humor. It is no coincidence that the first essay in the collection deals with Robert Ripley, of *Believe it or not* fame. Just like this well-known syndicated feature that has appeared for decades in newspapers worldwide, Irina Podgorny often strains her readers' belief with her choice of gems of little-known, bizarre, sometimes almost nonsensical historical and scientific anecdotes. There is nothing futile, however, about this motley collection. Each light-hearted tale has its own lesson to teach, about the fallibility of scientific endeavors, the importance of unexpected external factors, the part played by chance, accident, and serendipity, the all-too-human psychology of reputable scientists and quacks alike... Out of this colorful patchwork of great and small incidents of natural history in its widest meaning, however, it would be difficult (and purposeless) to draw a single general conclusion or lesson. Suffice it to say that every reader interested in such a broadly defined history of science will enjoy reading these essays. They are informative, intriguing, thought-provoking, and great fun!

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JUAN E. DE CASTRO, *Writing Revolution in Latin America: From Martí to García Márquez to Bolaño*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2019.

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