

THE OCEAN AT HOME: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE AQUARIUM

by **Bernard Brunner**

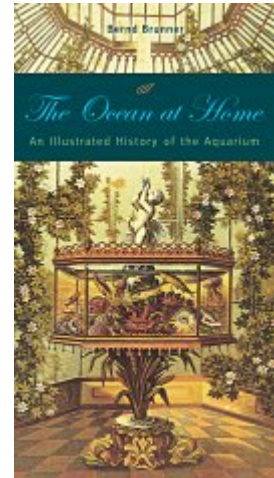
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by **Wesley Burnett**

Aquarium Adventures

Mythology and a few sailors' yarns. They furnished our only instruction about the sea and they told of a dark, cursed wilderness where terrifying monsters lurked and waited to devour anything they could wrap their fiendish jaws around. So when it became possible in the second half of the 19th century to gaze through a pane of glass into that alien world, it must have amazed and astonished. Yet the aquarium isn't something you'd just intuitively dream up and even if you did, you'd face a lot of aggravating technology problems if you were starting from scratch. That's what this book is about, how we came to have aquariums at homes and in our public buildings.

Bernard Brunner begins with the ancient practice of keeping a few fish around. The Romans even kept them under their beds but those were for eating, not study, even if they did eventually have one side of glass so you could peer in if you got bored with the orgy. But aquariums have no real history until the late 18th century with its great interest in natural history. Europeans started to bring live sea creatures home with them. Oh and what creatures they were, defying the logical symmetry of land animals. It was no simple task, Brunner explains, even to tell plants from animals while both gender and reproduction defied the imagination when it was understood at all. Ever so slowly, however, natural historians started sorting out some of the sea's complex ecology. Learning wasn't facilitated by the fact that scientists couldn't observe their captives for very long. The creatures had a propensity to die and stink up their jars if not the entire house.



Then someone stumbled on to the idea of bringing home the captives with a few of the plants that lived around it. That worked a lot better and was in fact the way we learned about that neat carbon dioxide-oxygen exchange thing plants are so good at, the one that makes it possible for us to live on this planet.

Finding a way to keep the creatures alive made it possible for more folks, the average bourgeois, to keep a little of the sea in the front room. It became a fad. Run off to the beach and bring home a critter or two with a few plants and a little seawater and there you are, the envy of your neighbors.

Say now, if it's a fad, it might be a commercial venture, and sure enough, a lot of *The Ocean at Home* is about the commerce necessary to create and support the aquarium fad. To have a saltwater aquarium in your Geneva chalet, the entrepreneur has to make saltwater available. Oh, and the critters. That presents a problem, transporting them. Well ferns were a fad back then too, and folks had developed nearly watertight cases for transporting them. A little tampering here and there, and you've a box to ship a shark in if that's your desire.

The scientists, naturalists, enthusiasts and an occasional charlatan who were into aquariums were also a literary bunch. So the commercial aquarium business came with its built-in instruction manual and marketing team. *The Ocean at Home* makes liberal use of the advertising text and illustrations that made the aquarium a commercial success.

But fads come and go; they are boom and bust. Besides, the magic of the sea was available only to a limited audience. Enter, the public aquarium, an institution much like museums, arboretums, zoos, or botanical gardens that were also the rage of the age. Vienna was the first to get one. London's Regent's Park wasn't far behind.

America wasn't far behind either. And not to be outdone, it started with two and this speaks to the contradictory way we have of thinking about such things. P. T. Barnum provided one of our aquaria; the other sat next to the Smithsonian. One was given to entertainment and sensationalism; the other was a more sober scientific affair.

One of the remarkable things that becomes obvious in *The Ocean at Home* is that women are all over it, but particularly in the early phase. The reason is that bourgeois women of the day, deprived, witless creatures that they were, weren't allowed to do much. Collecting seemed harmless enough, so out of boredom, they collected with a vengeance. They had been doing ferns and it's their fern boxes that become aquaria. So when it came to the sea, the girls rolled up their pantaloons and went to work with passion. They collected. They classified. They wrote 'how to' manuals and technical treatises. They solved tricky technical problems.

It was saltwater that had everybody in a tizzy. Attempts to interest the public in freshwater aquaria just didn't catch on. Apparently, the ocean is thought about in entirely different terms than the mundane lake just down the road. Perch, frogs and crawfish just don't fire the imagination the way hermit crabs, sea anemone, and Aesop shrimp do. And that's what this charming book is really about, how we think about the natural world and how our thoughts change as our exposure and our technologies change. Brunner writes, "Nostalgia and grief over the loss of the ocean world were part of the aquarium experience. In its magic hour, the aquarium was an adventure." Possibly it is time to wallow again in such simple wonder of a natural world or possibly we have become so callused that we are beyond nostalgia and grief for the loss of nature.

Brunner has scattered illustrations all over his little text. Varying from pen and ink to the most advanced color technology of the day, and from the absurdly romantic to the highly technical, they are a beautiful and necessary addition. In fact, that is my one complaint about the book -- it deserves to have a coffee table edition. Oh yeah, and an index might have been useful, but as the text is so concise and strictly structured, that flaw can be overlooked.

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<http://popmatters.com/books/reviews/o/ocean-at-home.shtml>