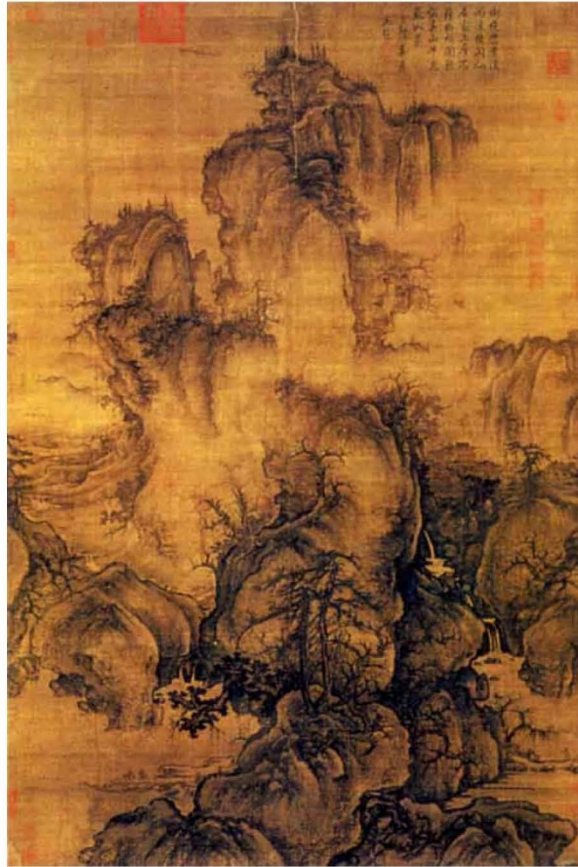


Perseid meteor shower needs hundreds of skilled amateur astronomers all over the world. Their combined results will not be over-troubled by limited hours of darkness or bad weather at any one site.

In *The Observer's Guide to Astronomy*, a work first published by the Société d'Astronomie Populaire in 1987, Patrick Martinez edits a collection of 20 contributions by experienced French amateur astronomers. Not only are the practical methods of observation dealt with in great detail but the scientific background is also stressed. The aim is to train astronomers to make better and better observations, and to guide them towards the correct analysis of these observations and to the most useful way of presenting the data. The emphasis is on the development of good observational and analytical skills.

Whereas the first two titles are for the amateur and the advanced amateur astronomer, *Compendium of Practical Astronomy* goes one step further. We are now in the realms of the accomplished amateur, the university observatory, the teacher and the budding professional. The book's predecessor, *Handbuch für Sternfreunde*, was first published in 1960, and the English edition was published in 1975. We now have a superbly translated and slightly expanded version of the fourth edition in which 21 professional astronomers contribute 28 chapters covering the length and breadth of practical astronomy. This is an invaluable source-book, detailed and thorough: it contains, for example, a two-page table on the physical characteristics of the materials used to construct telescopes and their mountings, as well as circuit diagrams for frequency-control units for synchronous telescope motor drives and ten criteria for successful telescope mounting. Also discussed are astrophotography, the fundamentals of spectral analysis, the principles of photometry, error analysis, sundial construction and the correct approach to the history of astronomy. A host of observational projects are suggested for such diverse objects as the Sun, the Moon, artificial satellites, comets, asteroids, meteors, planetary surfaces, noctilucent clouds, aurorae, variable stars, binary stars, galactic features and extragalactic objects. Great care has been taken to inform observers about how best to present and analyse their data. The book also contains a host of useful tables and figures that help the reader to compare data from different sources. The illustrations are first class and there are extensive references. I have nothing but praise for this book. It was an astronomical classic more than 30 years ago and is now even better. □

David Hughes is in the Department of Physics, University of Sheffield, Hicks Building, Sheffield S3 7RH, UK.



"Early Spring" (1072) by Kuo Hsi. In his "Essay on Landscape Painting", this Chinese writer, philosopher and painter discusses four types of landscape art: those in which one could travel, gaze upon, dwell within or ramble. For him nature is alive: "Water-courses are the arteries of a mountain; grass and trees its hair; mist and haze its complexion". The picture is reproduced from the sumptuously illustrated *A Vision of Nature: Traces of the Original World*, in which Michael Tobias provides a highly personal — and sometimes irritatingly mystical — look at the "aesthetic, psychological and philosophical impact of Earth on humanity". Kent State University Press, \$39.

In Nature's infinite book

David E. Allen

The Oxford Book of Nature Writing. Edited by Richard Mabey. Oxford University Press: 1995. Pp. 249. £16.99.

It was almost as predictable as that grass will grow that Richard Mabey, Britain's foremost present-day writer on the English countryside, would eventually succumb to an anthology. Surprisingly, although half a century ago there was one devoted just to birds and another, more recently, to the pursuit of butterflies and moths, natural history as a whole has largely passed untouched by the genre. This may be because works of this type were long regarded as too chancy commercially; more certainly, they demand a wide knowledge of the literature combined with a confident personal taste, qualifications not all that common in a field that tends to throw up either narrow specialists or the belletristically inclined insufficiently ballasted with factual information. Just as in nature writing itself, there is a necessary middle way that all too many find elusive.

Sensibly, Mabey has kept his choice

within manageable bounds by confining himself to the Western tradition and just to writings in prose, excluding both poetry and fiction. This has enabled him to concentrate on how naturalists themselves — for the most part — have described what they have seen and recorded. Even so, it has not prevented him from giving rein to one or two indulgences, such as the phrenological calendar of an eighteenth-century Swede, a bare list of one plant's English vernacular names and a classification of the animal world by a tenth-century Chinese author — this last a double bit of cheating. More ambitiously, he has further selected his material with the aim of illustrating how attitudes to nature have altered over the centuries, grouping it under several sections designed to reflect various broad tendencies of a more or less vaguely historical kind, within each of which the individual pieces are arranged roughly chronologically. Prefacing each section is a brief historical scene-setting by himself, which adds much to the appeal of the whole.

Most authors embarking on such a work would have been tempted to give undue coverage to zoology and to birds and mammals in particular (the concern, after all, of far and away the greatest number of today's students of natural history). To his credit, however, Mabey has insisted on including a proper ration of botany,