The organised study of the natural world in the eighteenth century, which included the practices of collecting and travel writing, had as its goal the unlocking of nature’s mysteries. But Bruno Latour describes the outcome as a failure: ‘We expected a final answer by using Nature’s voice. What we got was a new fight over the composition, content, expression and meaning of that voice. That is, we get more technical literature and larger Natural History Museums.’ The study of nature led to its scientification, the production of nature as an abstract spatiality, and to the organisation and institutionalisation of nature-as-construct in museums and literature. This chapter examines how the practices of naturalists in Europe were central to all of this as they developed new theories about nature which were dependent on systematic practices of collecting and classifying in the field. Two-way traffic developed between the centres of calculation in Europe and the traveller-scientists; the collectors, whose techniques (including their travel writing) were directed by the centres. The circularity implicit in these practices led to a conundrum facing naturalists: there was an assumption that natural history would ultimately reveal immutable truths, yet ‘truths’ were mediated by the study of nature itself. Where naturalists appealed to nature both as subject (field of study), and ally (arbiter of truth-claims), the knowledge gained was, as Latour has shown, abstract and limited.

Despite the exhaustive study of all organic life forms, including for the first time those invisible to the naked eye, natural history in the eighteenth century failed in its quest for a general theory unifying the forces, processes and underlying structures of nature. This search for ‘the final answer’ began in the eighteenth century with a global project to collect natural objects, organise these into taxonomies...
and develop theories to fit the accumulated evidence. The process of collecting, analysing and synthesis was not, however, always driven by scientific demands. For instance, the new science of nature fed public demand for curiosity and spectacle when exotic specimens collected by traveller-scientists created a fashion for cabinet displays, museums and gardens. This demand did not go unheeded by the ordinary seaman, who also filled his pockets with saleable specimens whenever possible. There was a ready market in Europe for exotic novelties, and an expectation that exploration voyages would deliver them. This undoubtedly directed some of the collecting, much to the chagrin of ‘serious’ scientists such as J. R. Forster (see Chapter 4). Curiosity remained a driver for scientific exploration, but in this chapter I focus on the major imperative for order and structure in natural history: museum order, which includes structural taxonomies (and the epistemological spaces they produce), the ethos of observation, the habit of collecting and the induction of social order through analogy with natural order.

This scientific order was not immune from economic, political and aesthetic forces, and the main argument in this chapter is that ideologically charged templates and protocols operated on the texts, images, spectacles and simulacra through which the natural world is represented and re-ordered. Political and economic forces are channelled through the national institutions, societies and museums of natural history. So although naturalists in Britain, Germany, France and Holland urged a disinterested, objective approach to nature, European governments would turn the study of nature to prevailing national interests. Theoretical models of the natural world could sometimes reflect contemporary worldviews, which in Britain and Northern Europe were broadly expansionist and progressive. These models might also infer a link between natural order and civilised society, which is paradoxical given that civilised society was othering nature and distancing itself from it. Nevertheless, taxonomies of nature offered proof of some kind of natural order, and this order was replicated in carefully laid out museums. This was now twice removed from ‘real’ nature, and perhaps served less as a contribution to the ‘final answer’ in nature than as an artificial order made analogous with the demand for social order. Whether in Revolutionary France or Whiggish Britain, some kind of order derived from nature was considered a necessary basis for progress. The search for order in nature might even be considered as essential to the project of Western modernity, with global exploration the ideal practice for disseminating it.