

Musings

*To Those We Owe So Much
Great Minds from the Past*

May 13, 2019

William Bartram



William Bartram was born April 9, 1739, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to John Bartram, who we highlighted last

month. His paternal grandfather was one of the earliest settlers along the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. Traveling with his father on various collecting trips in rural Pennsylvania and New York, Bartram's interest in nature was cultivated from a young age. Sketching the plants and animals he observed during their travels, young William exhibited notable artistic ability. In his later journeys, Bartram continued to represent visually the native flora, wildlife, and peoples he encountered. Whereas his father had been largely self-educated, William was grounded in the classics, history, Latin, and French at the Philadelphia Academy (a precursor of the University of Pennsylvania), where he attended school until 1756. That same year, following his withdrawal from school, Bartram was apprenticed to a Philadelphia merchant but showed little business acumen. Nevertheless, he moved to North Carolina in 1761 in order to run a trading post on the Cape Fear River that was backed by his uncle, Colonel William Bartram. This was the first in a series of failed business ventures. In 1765, Bartram accompanied his father, Royal Botanist to King George III, on an expedition to the St. John's River in Florida and was the illustrator for his father's published journal.

William Bartram's career as a commissioned naturalist and explorer was initiated when Peter Collinson (see next month's email), one of his father's English patrons, showed his illustrations to Dr. John Fothergill, also a wealthy benefactor. Returning to North Carolina in 1770 following another unsuccessful business enterprise in Philadelphia, Bartram remained in contact with Collinson, forwarding him drawings of turtles and mollusks as well as indigenous plant samples. By 1772 John Fothergill had promised an annual stipend of 50 pounds, and Bartram was to embark on an independent expedition to Florida, gathering seeds, roots, and plants while documenting his travels through written observations and illustrations. In the spring of 1773, Bartram chose Charleston, South Carolina, as his operations center and undertook a nearly four-year, 2,400-mile excursion through the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana. Left visually impaired and considerably weakened by a serious illness contracted in Alabama, he returned to Philadelphia in January 1777. Until his

death in 1823, he helped manage the family's botanical gardens, a Philadelphia landmark. Bartram never married.

Though he most likely finished his manuscript in the early 1780's, Bartram did not publish an account of his travels until 1791. As a result, some of his botanical discoveries were attributed to other scientists initially. James and Johnson published the lengthy text, based on Bartram's collected diaries and field journals, under the full title, *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, the Cherokee County, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions, Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians*. Despite its limited sales in the United States, the book enjoyed popular and critical reception in Europe. Throughout his Travels, Bartram exhibits a deep admiration and revered awe for the natural wonders he encounters. As he writes in his Introduction, the world is "a glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator" and continually reveals "a glorious display of the Almighty hand." A Quaker like his father (though John Bartram eventually would break with this religious sect), Bartram's vibrant descriptions are imbued with mystical delight. It is in nature where Bartram finds the clearest evidence for divine Providence animating a benevolent handiwork. While divided into four parts, outlined in the book's Contents, Bartram's prose has a somewhat rambling quality, and the book is loosely organized chronologically. Yet his far-reaching observations on the southeastern states and their inhabitants—plant, animal, insect, and human alike—provide an invaluable portrait of an early American landscape. Though his official travels conclude with Part III, the book's final part contains his observations on the culture, practices, language, and government of several Native American tribes, among them the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, Cherokees, and Creeks. Bartram's narrative passages, which variously detail a lively battle with preying alligators, countless river crossings, fantastic reports of the storms he weathered, and his numerous encounters with American Indians, are interspersed with catalogs of birds, flowers, trees, and shrubs by their scientific classifications.

Interestingly, the long-term significance of Bartram's work—even as an early treatment of American natural history, with its generally reliable scientific observations on regional flora, fauna, and terrain—principally rests in its literary contributions.

Bartram's Travels profoundly influenced English Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth as well as the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. His occasional musings on the sublime reveal a familiarity and engagement with contemporary aesthetic philosophies. **Still more significant, William Bartram, in recounting his joyous, solitary communion with the natural world, emerges as one of the first writers to treat a theme that might be considered uniquely American.**

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