

The Nature of William Bartram

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William Bartram (1739-1823) was the first American to devote his life to the study of nature. He was an artist, a botanist, an explorer, a gardener, an herbalist, a naturalist, and a "philosophical pilgrim," as he called himself. He was an Enlightened Romantic, a culturally transitional figure whose ideas had as many roots in the past as seeds for the future. He was an intensely private person in an age of public men. For all his travels, Bartram died in the house where he was born. For all his romance, he never married. For all his days in the same garden, he remained fascinated by its seasonal rhythms down to his last day, a day that began at his desk, where he wrote about nature, and ended in the garden that he loved.

For all the things that he was, William Bartram was principally a gardener. Once having botanized over thousands of miles and explored several professions, he returned to his family's home outside Philadelphia, where he wrote his life's book (*Travels*, 1791), practiced his art, studied nature, and worked in the garden for forty-six years. If he was more than a day's journey from the garden between January 1777, when he returned from the Southern travels on which his book would be based, and July 22, 1823, when he died, there is no record of the trip. There is, on the other hand, ample proof that he recorded the temperature of the air, the direction of the wind, the temper of the days, the presence and activities of flora and fauna in the garden with no interruption for years on end. Neither the call of the University of Pennsylvania to its first botanical chair nor of President Jefferson to help with the work of exploring the continent tempted the philosophical pilgrim to put down the hoe that he wielded against clumps of earth or the pen with which he chronicled the garden's seasons for the rest of his days. He became in his family's garden the William Bartram that he wanted to be.

What we find in Bartram's writings and drawings are insights to the temper of a life led outside the bustle of politics and trade, somewhere between the urban and wilderness settings that served as stages for the great men of his time. I could call him an eighteenth-century Thoreau, but it makes more sense to see Thoreau as a nineteenth-century heir to William Bartram's naturalistic legacy. The parallels between the two men's lives are instructive. Neither was a scientist. Both were Romantics. Each considered himself a failure in the eyes of the world. They both experienced a prolonged adolescence plagued by identity struggles; neither ever did secure a living, settle into a career, or marry. Each had just one, unconsummated, romance in his entire life. Popular appreciation of their writings came after death.

Although there may be some coincidence in the parallels — both their fathers

were named John — the leisured isolation that is the core of their artful engagement with nature was a product of rejection, flight, and a prolonged return to the environs of their youths. Neither could make it in the urban world of commerce or, for that matter, in the wilderness open to men of enterprise in each of their times. Bartram and Thoreau fled to rural settings from which they celebrated the wilds and denounced the civilized life.¹

The meaning of Bartram's life was in the days, as was true for Thoreau's sojourn at Walden, and not in accomplishments and events. As Bartram himself said, in a passage that sounds Thoreauvian only to those who do not know Bartram,

The works of a person that builds begin immediately to decay; while those of him who plants begin directly to improve. In this planting promises a more lasting pleasure than building.²

There would be no peripatetic construction for Bartram, no quest to define himself by building a mansion on a hill (like Thomas Jefferson) or a cliff (like George Washington), with a superintending view that asserts human dominance over nature. Bartram was not a nation-builder, either, as were the delegates to the Constitutional Convention who toured his garden and sought his advice about making plants grow. He would not try to capture nature's elements with a kite or in a bottle, like his father's good friend Benjamin Franklin. He did not share the ambitions of Charles Willson Peale to confine nature in a cabinet, of Alexander Wilson to capture an entire species in a book, of Benjamin Rush to alter nature's biological course, of Benjamin Smith Barton to achieve fame through his writings about nature, or of Charles Brockden-Brown to plumb the darker side of human nature in various settings.

Bartram knew all these men. After the Revolution, the family's garden became an intellectual salon in which he was sought out by the great men of politics, science, and literature. Bartram, in his role as a local wise man, even became the subject of Federalist satire, as the philosopher of the Schuylkill in Benjamin Silliman's Shahcoolen letters, where he was portrayed as a Republican anarchist, who advocated return to a state of nature. Whether there was, in fact, a partisan slant to Bartram's associations seems more a product of shared temperaments than of politics in the more literal sense. President Washington, for example, found Bartram's garden unimpressive — "not laid off with much taste, nor was it large"; Jefferson, noted for his greater affection for nature in the raw, admired both the man and the garden.³

One difference, to be sure, between William Bartram and the great men who sought him out in his garden was his largely successful quest to subdue ambition. While Franklin claims, unconvincingly, in his *Autobiography* to have vanquished his appetites, I get the sense from Bartram's writings that the struggle was real, the setbacks significant, but the conquest of personal ambition is one in which he rightly took pride. "Ambition," he cautioned himself in his commonplace book, "eager in the pursuit of Riches and Power what Oceans of Blood hast it not shed." "Envy and

avarice, the grand enemies to human happiness. . . . Let us . . . discountenance superfluities, Avarice, Ambition & inordinate gratifications," he pleaded in a passage that he later excised from the *Travels*, perhaps because it seemed too preachy.⁴

So, the closer we are to nature, the closer we come to achieving our best selves. Avarice, book-learning, and cities are the beginning of Bartram's alphabet of vices, and ambition stands at the head of his list of cardinal sins. "O may those unviolated retreats ever remain in their present state of youthful innocence," he wrote of Florida's pine forests,

unpolluted by the violent hand of invidious industry, avarice, and ambition, false politeness, and cruel civilization, which refines and sublimates humanity quite away leaving in its place a subtle, restless firey spirit, a malicious powerful principle, continually watching to enslave mankind and destroy the happiness of a future state.⁵

Perhaps failure quenched Bartram's appetites in a way that success did not satiate Franklin. Living, as Bartram did, one step ahead and two steps behind his contemporaries made for an uncomfortable fit in the public world of the founding fathers. Failure as a merchant and a planter led to flight (from creditors), exploration (of the Southern wilderness), and ultimately withdrawal (to the garden), which, in turn, contributed to self-discovery and the articulation of his vision of the natural world.

Intimately related to Bartram's battle against ambition were his efforts to shed the personal possessions by which people generally define who we are. The great men of his day, including his father, were accumulators on a grand scale — of books, correspondence, and an incalculable array of other objects. Bartram was most notable for disposing of things. At one point in the 1790s, for example, he presented his neighbor, William Hamilton, with one of his own three copies of his book. Later, he gave away one of the other ones, too. William disposed of most books identifiable as part of his personal library. When he died, William owned the clothing he wore, two chests, the feather bed and bolster on which he slept, two glasses and a tray, a tin letter box, some books, and a purse with some cash.⁶

In William's eyes, his father was the family's great man. Unlike Thoreau, William had a strong, in his eyes heroic, father with whom to contend. All sense of public identity derived from that connection. Read William's notice of his nephew's death: "18th [of April, 1818]. Cool wind high, blustering from NW. NB. died this morning Dr. James Bartram of Kingsess, grandson of the celebrated John Bartram the Botanist & naturalist." This entry is in William's garden book, in which people very rarely intrude. The obituary comes as a note to the diary's central function, the recording of the nature of days. It interrupts only briefly the larger pattern of natural events as reported by Bartram, the seasonal cycles, the daily changes of weather, bird migrations, freezings and thawings of the Schuylkill River, animal habits, and the annual appearance of insects, flowers, and plants. The brevity of the notice belies

the grief revealed by its very existence. William noted no other deaths in this book — of brothers, dear friends, or the great men with whom he was acquainted. He triangulated the loss in relationship to another over forty years past.⁷

If the publicly meaningful identity of his nephew, and of himself, came from lineal association with a man of renown, the personal meaning of his father's existence was, for William, also of another kind. Curiously, as we see his father's public identity commemorated in a private writing, William's most affectionate testament to his father comes in a published biographical sketch that he wrote at the request of Benjamin Smith Barton. Only once in the nine pages does William abandon the factual tone of the chronological narrative, and he does so to give a very private accounting of the great man.

Mr. Bartram was a man of modest and gentle manners, frank, cheerful, and of great good-nature; a lover of justice, truth, and charity. He was himself an example of filial, conjugal, and parental affection. His humanity, gentleness, and compassion were manifested upon all occasions, and were even extended to the animal creation. He was never known to have been at enmity with any man.⁸

This is the model, one of private accomplishments rather than public ones, by which William measured, and led, his own life. This is the ideal, however in conflict with the image of John Bartram that emerges from his writings and voluminous correspondence, to which William aspired. This passage gives, I think, more insight to the nature of William than to his father. The biographical sketch as a whole helps explain William's introspective focus by cataloguing his father's public accomplishments — John's standing as Royal Botanist in the colonies, his recognition by scientific societies in Europe and America, and his standing as the greatest botanist of his day. It gives insight to why William rejected all public and political roles cast before him. In his own mind, he simply could not be as great as his father; he had to focus if he were to become almost as good of a man.

William Bartram left few scraps of evidence on his political views at any point in his long life. Attempts by scholars to discern his politics have pointed to martial metaphors in the *Travels* as keys to his views about the Revolution or drawn on family lore to portray him as a Patriotic Quaker, who actively supported the Revolutionary War. What direct evidence we have in Bartram's own words does not sustain such conjecture. In a manuscript passage deleted before publication of the *Travels*, Bartram wrote, "I profess myself of the Christian sect of the people called Quakers and consequently am against war and violence in any form or manner whatever." This line, written during or shortly after the Revolution by a man who was fighting off alligators and mosquitoes in Florida's swamps while the Minute Men waged war on the British, who sketched flowers as Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, is entirely consistent with views stated elsewhere in Bartram's published and unpublished writings. The deletion of this passage reflects his rewriting toward a less personal, more secular, text rather than a change of heart. Any attempt to transform

his florid descriptions of "squadrons" of birds into metaphorical endorsement of the Patriot cause strikes me as part of a creative construction of a political self that Bartram demonstrably lacked.⁹

In any event, with Republicans and Federalists alike Bartram shared his knowledge and wisdom, but he was not one of them. His ambitions were more personal, his battles more inner-directed, his tasks more sensual — a plant nurtured, a bird observed, a hole dug, a nap taken on the lawn, honey collected, pears picked and eaten, a tree admired for its beauty, a crow adopted and trained, a day savored for its serenity — and performed at a more leisurely pace than was the norm in the bustling world of the great public men of his day. His satisfactions were simpler, more spiritual, more natural, he would say, but whether his days were less fruitful, his life less meaningful, his thoughts any less wise than those of his peers is a judgment that I will leave to you.

William Bartram had but one message to share and he voiced it, wrote it, drew it, and lived it with a clarity and simplicity that defined who he was. All of nature is one, he believed, and infused with the spirit of its creator; this common soul reveals God and is an active spiritual presence in the natural world, an essence that connects all nature and makes the characteristics shared by animals and plants more striking than the differences among us. Although a unitary and spiritually-inspired vision of nature was far from new in the history of Western thought, the implications of Bartram's naturalism, as he played them out, were unique in his own day. His was a distinctive combination of traditional notions and visionary ideals, a view of the natural world that had a greater kinship with both seventeenth-century spiritualism and nineteenth-century Transcendentalism than did the nature writings of such contemporaries as Hector St. Jean de Cr vecoeur, Peter Kalm, and Thomas Jefferson.

Look at Bartram's drawing of Florida's Alachua Savanna (Figure 1). Everything he has to say about nature is right there. The picture is really a series of mirror images that display the connections among animal and plant life. The central focus of the drawing is the lowland feature that begins with the sink-hole in the top center. The swamp is shaped like the leaf of a tree, with the streams running out of the sink-hole taking on the characteristics of both the veins of the large leaf and of branches leading to interior leaf-shaped lowlands and ponds. The cranes flying through the top right of the picture are mirrored in two terrestrial features below them.¹⁰ Mankind is represented here, too, by the building in the lower part of the picture. We know from a key to William's map of the savanna that this structure stands for the Seminole village of Cuscowilla. Typical of Bartram, where humans are represented in his views of nature, our place is modest in scale and scope, not a dominating presence on the scene. We see this also in William's well-known sketch of his father's house, which represents a man, presumably the owner, walking through the garden (Figure 2). The man is not disproportionately small, but by rendering John in context William cuts him down to a natural size.

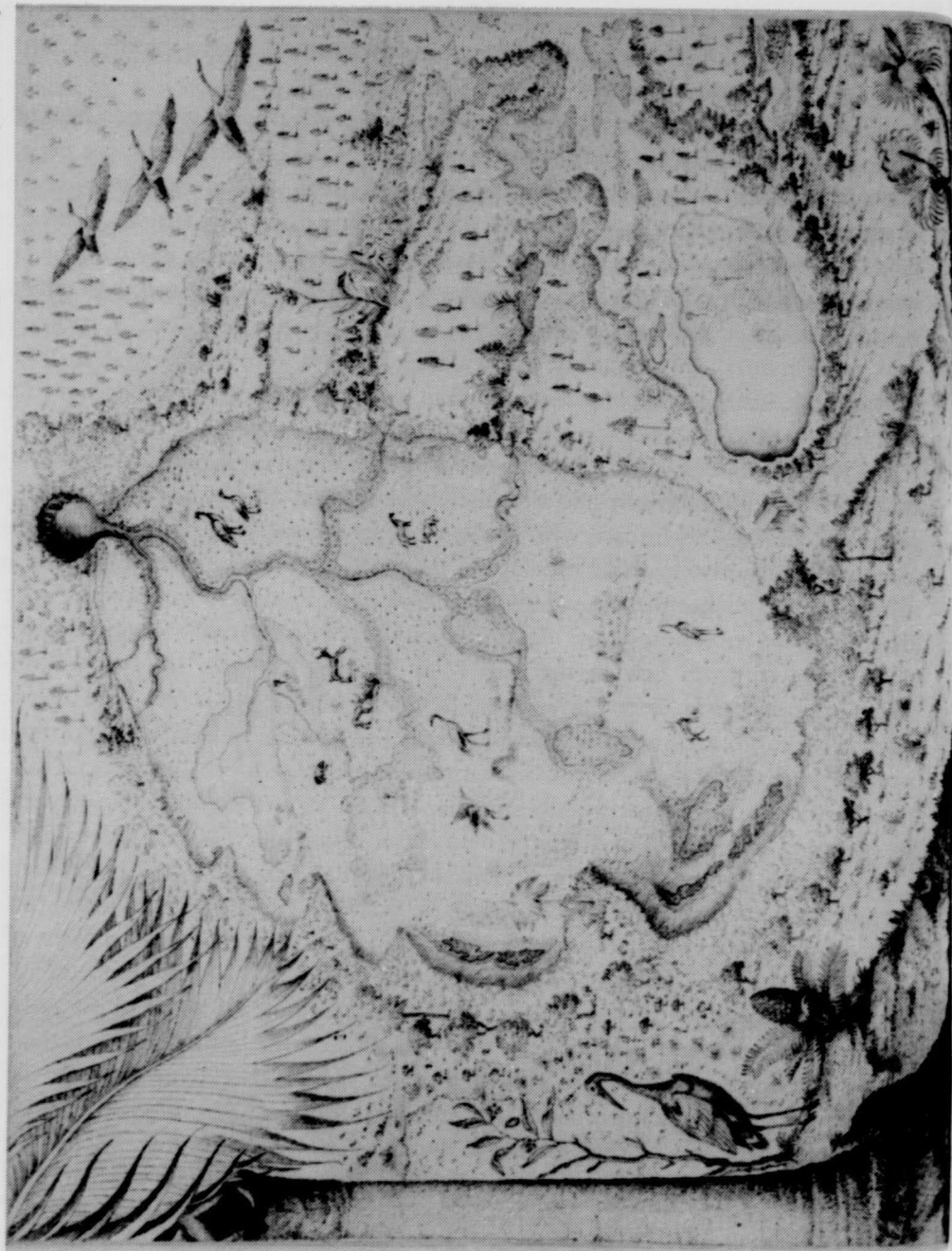


Figure 1:
The Great
Alachua
Savanna.

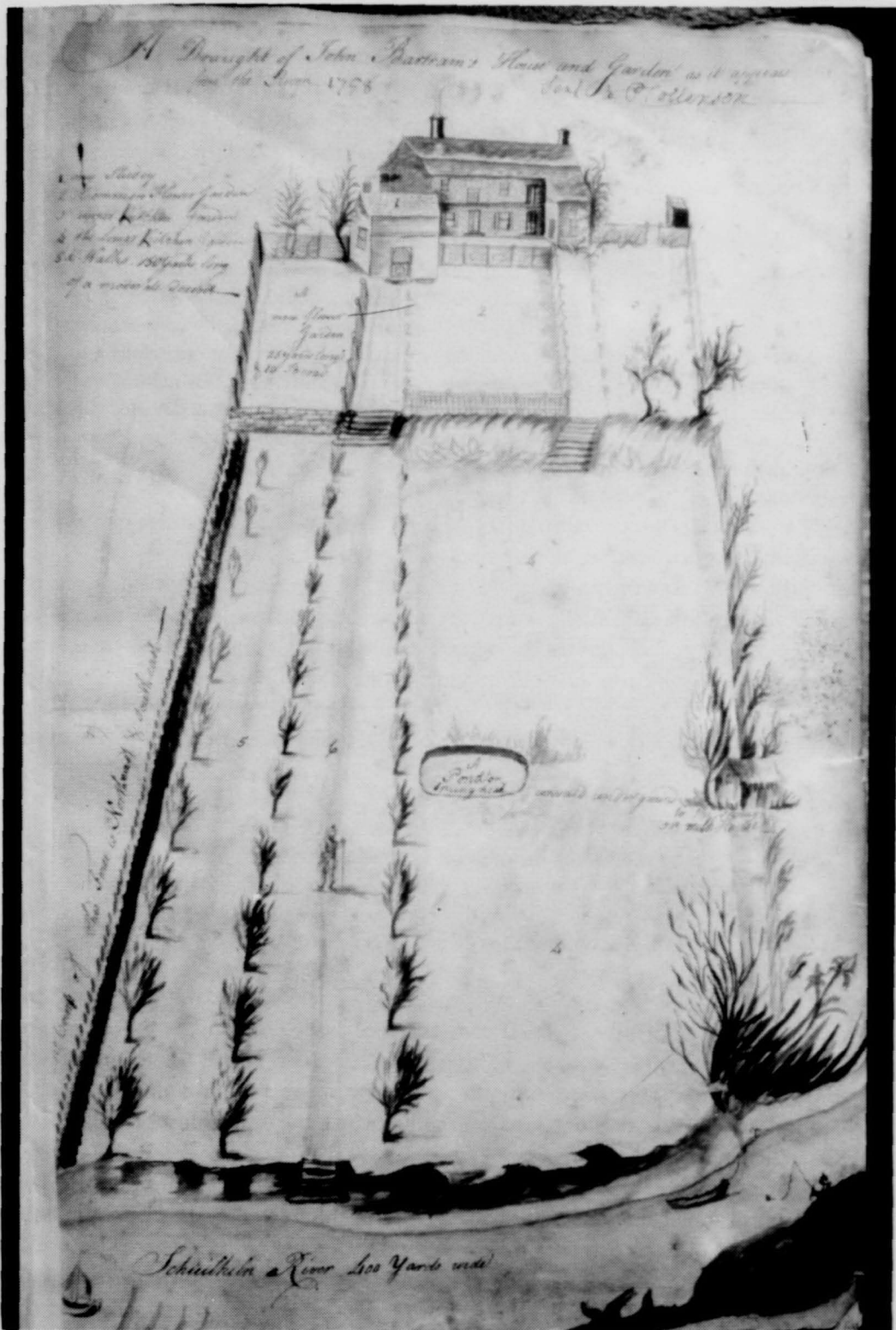


Figure 2: John Bartram's house and garden.

William Bartram accepted nature on its own terms; well, on God's terms, he would say. Wilderness was just as God intended without any improvement by man, without the clearing and tilling and fencing that his contemporaries saw as natural beauty. No American of his day waxed so romantic about wilderness settings. The *Travels* is, among other things, an ode to unspoiled natural beauty. Inhale Bartram's reverie on the Altamaha River.

How gently flow thy peaceful floods, O Altamaha! How sublimely rise to view, on thy elevated shores, yon magnolian groves, from whose tops the surrounding expanse is perfumed, by clouds of incense, blended with the exhaling balm of the liquidambar, and odours continually arising from circumambient aromatic groves of illicium, myrica, laurus and bignonia. . . . Thus secure and tranquil, and meditating on the marvellous scenes of primitive nature, as yet unmodified by the hand of man, I gently descended the peaceful stream, on whose polished surface were depicted the mutable shadows from its pensile banks; whilst myriads of finny inhabitants sported in its pellucid floods.¹¹

For all his celebration of nature, though, Bartram's was much less of a romanticized wilderness than that of Rousseau or Crèvecoeur's Farmer James. His was a clear-eyed knowledge of the harshness of nature, an acceptance of the violence and pain that were as natural as the serenity of a summer's blue sky. All consumed all in Bartram's wilderness, in a relentless warfare among animals and plants. The message is there in Bartram's denunciations of sport hunting, in his stories about larger fish stalking smaller ones in a state of continual war replete with citadels, brilliant tacticians, and "a warrior in a gilded coat of mail," of alligator battles, of the ferocity of hurricanes, and of a spider stalking a bee:

at length, in about a quarter of an hour, the bee quite exhausted by his struggles, and the repeated wounds of the butcher, became motionless, and quickly expired in the arms of the devouring spider, who, ascending the rope with his game, retired to feast on it under cover of the leaves; and perhaps before night, became himself the delicious evening repast of a bird or lizard.¹²

The message is also there in his drawing of "The Sarasena." (Figure 3) This is Bartram's most striking image of all nature as somebody's meal. The picture is most effective if you start by looking at the lower left-hand corner and then view it counter-clockwise. He need not put us in the scene to make our place clear. Mankind, the great hunter of all, becomes in our turn the prey of insects and worms. The circle is full.

There is often in Bartram's stories on this theme both a sense of regret, even sometimes of moral outrage, and of acceptance of things as they are. Sometimes, as in the drawing of "The Sarasena," he even displays a sense of humor, or at least takes an ironic tone, about the whole thing. There are tensions, by no means unique to Bartram's thought, in knowing the ways of the world, accepting the reality, yet still

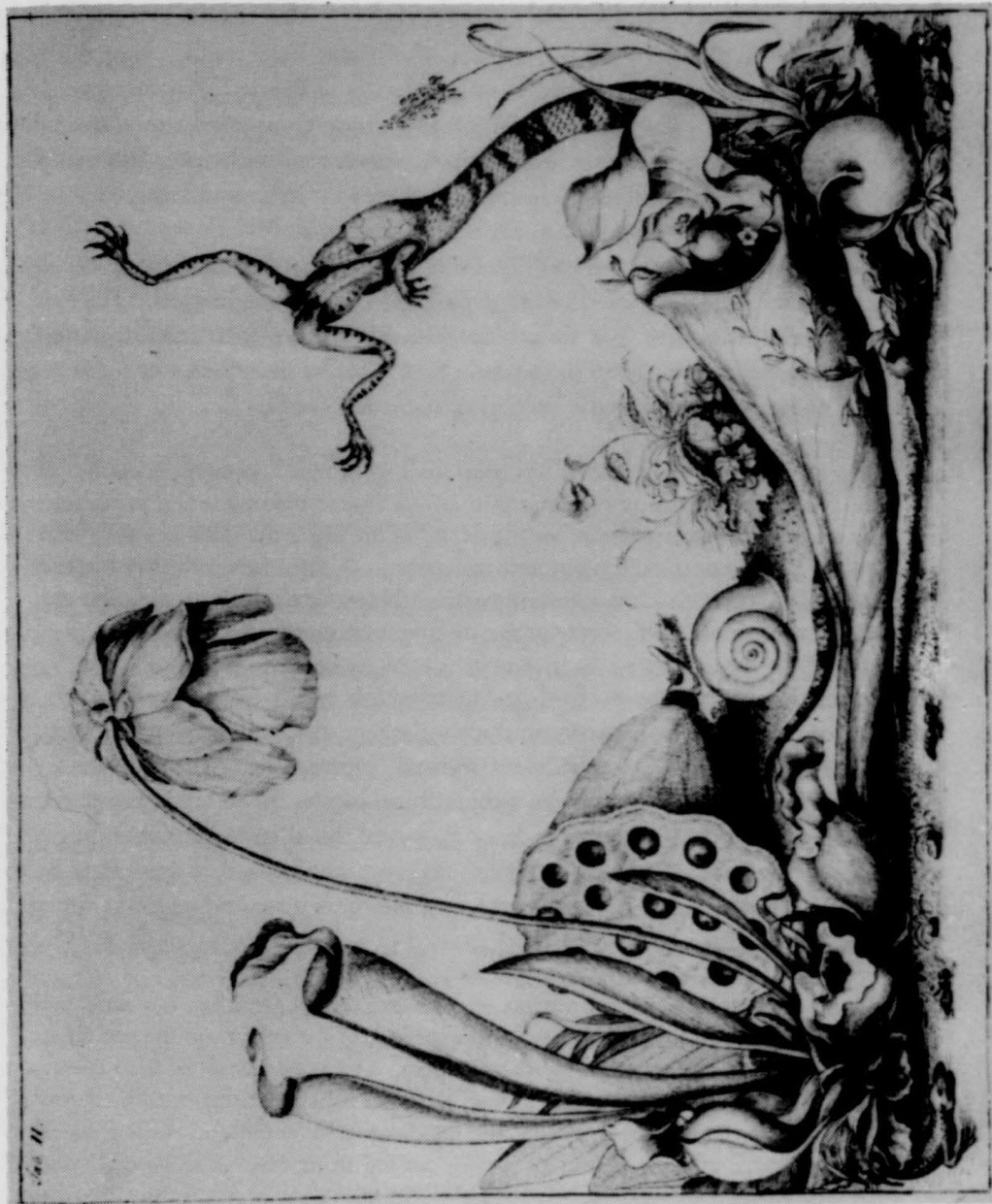


Figure 3: The Sarasena.

wishing for a place of asylum. He found such havens of sanctuary in Indian lore about "a most blissful spot of the earth," which was inaccessible to mortals, in a Seminole "elysium," and in an "enchanted little Isle of Palms." Bartram even saw in his travels a tranquil fishy paradise, which seemingly conquered the violent nature shared by all creatures. "There are no signs of enmity," he wrote, "no attempt to devour each other; the different bands seem peaceably and complaisantly to move a little aside, as it were to make room for others to pass by."¹³

In each of these cases, in each of these places, Bartram knew that the laws of nature rule everywhere on earth, except perhaps in our imagination. The best that we can hope for, the most that we can achieve, is a truce in the unending warfare of creature against creature. Even the aquatic Eden that he described was ruled more by a balance of terror than a pacific exception to nature's laws.

And although this paradise of fish may seem to exhibit a just representation of the peaceable and happy state of nature which existed before the fall, yet in reality it is a mere representation; for the nature of the fish is the same as if they were in lake George or the river; but here the water or element in which they live and move, is so perfectly clear and transparent, it places them all on an equality with regard to their ability to injure or escape from one another.¹⁴

So the seeming exceptions we find to the relentless horrors of life are islands of the imagination, oases of time, mere temporary shelters in space from nature's storms.

There are also, in Bartram's view, natural "representations" or approximations of hell. These, too, can be creatures, geographical locales, or states of mind. Bartram gives us all three in his eye-witness descriptions of the alligator's haunts, undeniably the most famous passages in all Bartram's writings, the ones that were least believed in Bartram's lifetime and that have been anthologized time and again as representative of his naturalism.

I have seen an alligator take up out of the water several great fish at a time, and just squeeze them betwixt his jaws, while the tails of the great trout flapped about his eyes and lips, ere he had swallowed them. The horrid noise of their closing jaws, their plunging amidst the broken banks of fish, and rising with their prey some feet upright above the water, the floods of water and blood rushing out of their mouths, and the clouds of vapour issuing from their wide nostrils, were truly frightful.¹⁵

Make no mistake about it, Bartram's alligators are monsters on a heroic scale. His drawing of "The Alegator of St. Johns" resembles medieval representations of the dragons battled by St. George more than the sketches of modern naturalists. (Figure 4)

Bartram's alligators are huge in their setting. His account of his own encounters with the roaring, steam-blowing, not quite fire-breathing, creatures is one of the

most psychologically tense in all of his writings. The triumph of the lone pilgrim against such great odds could be right out of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and was orchestrated for just such dramatic effect.

I was attacked on all sides, several endeavouring to upset the canoe. My situation now became precarious to the last degree: two very large ones attacked me closely, at the same instant, rushing up with their heads and part of their bodies above the water, roaring terribly and belching floods of water over me. They struck their jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured.¹⁶

Indeed, Bartram was not actually alone, as he claims, during these battles, but neither was Bunyan's Christian for most of his trip. So, we should read William's alligator stories for their psychological truths, in addition to searching them for literal facts. We can value them for their Romantic qualities, for their emotional depth, for their factual insights to the remembered state of mind of the writer as he engaged his own worst fears in a natural hell.

But it is humans chief among all God's creatures, not roaring, dragon-like alligators, who have managed to make earth a more violent place than it need be, and Bartram developed over the course of his life a withering critique of civilized man. "Man is cruel," he wrote in an unpublished essay on morality, "hypocritical, a dissembler, his dissemulation exceeds that of any being we are acquainted with for he dissembles disimmulation itself . . . in order more completely to dissemble and deceive." He lectured himself frequently in his commonplace books on the evils of ambition, the connections between avarice and war, the superiority of instinct over book-learning, and the destructively busy pace of civilized life. He sought out information in travel accounts and in his own travels about primitive peoples "whose lives are not corrupted by the false glare of learning and distinctions . . . [who] follow the dictates of right reason which nature teaches every man for the right ordering of his manners and actions."¹⁷

William reminded himself and, later in life, his nephews about the benefits of a natural simplicity in demeanor and lifestyle. "Be moderate in all thy aims and acquisition[s] with respect to reputation, riches or gratification of the passions," he counselled his nephew Moses. "Be honest and frugal," he advised his nephew James; "be cool and temperate." The connections between Bartram's Quaker up-bringing and his advocacy of natural simplicity are, perhaps, obvious, but the contrasts between his lifestyle and that of other Philadelphia Quakers, including his father, are as striking as their shared rhetoric and spiritual heritage.¹⁸

William's fatalism, his acceptance of the rule that everybody eats somebody in the natural world and that mankind has not transcended this natural state, helps me try to comprehend why he was not more morally outraged by slavery than he was. I am not looking to apologize for Bartram's actions or to explain them away. I would like to understand better the relationships among his words and his acts, how a man

Courtesy: The Natural History Museum, London



Figure 4: The Alogator of St. Johns.

who could feel the heartbreak of an orphaned bear, who was capable of making an impassioned plea for the life of a rattlesnake, could buy and sell people. Ultimately, I do not understand his perspective as well as I would like, and I find his ambivalence perplexing. About his father, William wrote that

he zealously testified against slavery; and, that his philanthropic precepts, on this subject, might have their due weight and force, he gave liberty to a most valuable male slave, then in the prime of his life, who had been bred up in the family almost from his infancy.¹⁹

And yet, when William wanted to set himself up as a Florida planter, his father purchased slaves for him, slaves that William himself later sold. In 1772, William purchased a woman named Jenny; the following year, before he set off from Philadelphia on his Southern travels, he sold Jenny to his brother George.²⁰ So, the Bartram family was trafficking in slaves on the eve of the Revolution, long after the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting barred members from the slave trade and a scant three years before it censured members who continued to own slaves.

Throughout the *Travels*, there are references to slaves without any comments about slavery. William gratefully accepted the loan of slaves, as guides and porters, from planter acquaintances during his travels. "We sat [sic] sail in a handsome pleasure-boat," he reports at one point, "manned with four stout negro slaves, to row in case of necessity." At another, a planter sends slaves to fetch and repair his small boat. Later in the book, Bartram recounts his amazement that no slaves died on the plantation he was visiting, despite the severity of the hurricane he describes. He even discusses enslaved Indians, whom he met in his travels, with an anthropologist's detachment and no moral commentary at all. He portrays in admiring words a frontier family of slave owners and quotes the patriarch's self-praise for how well he took care of his slaves. William tells us on other occasions about a gentleman, who "very obligingly sent a young Negro slave to assist and pilot me," and another, who furnished him "with horses to ride, and a Negro to pilot and take care of me." If Bartram had any qualms about the institution of slavery or about benefitting personally from the labor of slaves, we hear nothing about it in the *Travels*.²¹

What we do see, though, are several references to his horse as "my faithful slave," and "my old trusty slave." Towards the end of the journey, William narrates his need for a new horse, the old one being worn out, and his concern for the fate of his "slave."

About the middle of the afternoon, we were joyfully surprised at the distant prospect of the trading company coming up . . . and before night I struck up a bargain with them for a handsome strong young horse, which cost me about ten pounds sterling. I was now constrained to leave my old slave behind, to feed in rich cane pastures, where he was to remain and recruit until the return of his new master from Mobile; from whom I extorted a promise to use him gently, and if

possible not to make a pack-horse of him.

So, like the frontier farmer who fed his slaves well, William considered himself a good master, and seems to have equated the institution across species lines.²²

I might leave my consideration of Bartram's attitudes towards slavery right there, with a sense that he was somewhat behind the more enlightened Quaker morality of his times, which he was, and that he found a comfortable rationale in his fatalistic naturalism, which he apparently did. It seems, though, that William saw the light on this issue after he finished writing his book, some time during his years of retirement in the Kingessing garden. The essay on his father, in which he praised John for manumitting a slave at great financial cost, was probably written during 1804. There is also an unpublished essay on slavery that William drafted some time after 1783, the approximate date of which I know only because he wrote it on the back of a broadside garden catalogue printed in that year. At some point late in life, William came to see slavery as unnatural, as inconsistent with "the dignity of human nature" and contrary to God's plan for the earth. "The present plan of civilisation must be changed," William wrote, "in time for a better one more consonant to reason and general happiness, according to the first determined intentions and will of the Supreme creator and only Lord." He now believed that "God is no respecter of Persons and that the Black, White, Red and Yellow People are equally dear to him and under his protection and favour."²³

Clearly, then, William continued to grow in the garden right through the seventh decade of his life, and even the light that dawned on him late arose from his understanding of nature and of nature's God. If Bartram found much of a life's meaning in his travels, he still needed to situate his ongoing quest for self-knowledge in physical space, a place he never found in a half-life's journey. That place for him was the garden, a place of the imagination, a tranquil locale in between the greater terrors of urban and wilderness life, a place by no means safe, but safer, more peaceful, the best approximation we have of an Eden long lost. William returned the prodigal to the Bartrams' Kingessing homestead nine months before his father's death and remained in his father's garden, which became his brother's garden, the place that was his garden, too, a spot so simple, so transparent, so clear that, like the fish in a pellucid pond, he could find greater peace in a visible presence than he achieved in the isolation of his wilderness pilgrimage. Like the Biblical pilgrim, there had to be a return from the desert, a re-engagement with life, a restored sense of purpose and meaning.

Bartram continued the struggle, which for him included a decade-long effort to reduce his travels to words, and to see his words published. He finished writing his book some time during the 1780s, probably essentially by 1786, when there was an aborted attempt to secure subscriptions for its publication. He renewed his habit of keeping a commonplace book at about the same time, drew countless portraits of birds and plants, many of which appeared without attribution in the books and arti-

cles of others, and began a weather diary in the early 1790s, which evolved at the beginning of the next decade into a natural history of his garden. This garden book, what William called a "calendar," is, to my mind, the most remarkable of all his remarkable writings, the one that communicates most clearly the meaning of his days. In the eight, then separate, now bound, books that his surviving relatives called a "diary," William recorded what was for him the essence of his old age. The entries are sparse, generally made daily, span a period of twenty years (1802-1822), with a significant gap (September 19, 1808-January 1, 1818), and several minor ones. Internal evidence suggests that the gaps are real, rather than the fabrications of time, that he really did cease abruptly the habit of almost six years, then pick it up again a decade later, continue for four more years to make daily entries, then bring the project to a neat end with the last entry on December 31, 1822, six months, three weeks, and one day before his death.

From the garden book, I know that Bartram's habit late in life was to retire shortly after 10 p.m. and rise before dawn. A light sleeper, like his father, William apparently missed little that passed during the night. He heard thunderstorms that began before dawn, at 2 a.m., and at 10 and 11 p.m., felt the sultry heat of a summer's night and knew it broke at 5 a.m., and heard and felt the wind change direction at midnight. He saw a halo around the moon at 10 p.m. and smelled a "light shower of rain" that came in the night, even when a sprinkle fell between 3 a.m. and sunrise. He witnessed a snowfall's end at 10 p.m. and at midnight, saw the Northern Lights appear at all times of the evening, gazed at a comet on three consecutive nights, saw a total eclipse of the moon, and watched the stars in all seasons. He heard the spring frogs and summer insects from his bed, the migrating birds of autumn fly over his head, and the calls of night birds in winter outside his window. All this during ten of his last eighty-four years, and all of it in the same place just outside Philadelphia.

William's first act upon morning rising was, as he said, to apply "myself to God in prayer (which I generally find it best to do immediately after a few serious reflections)." These "reflections" seem to have been the inspired meditations of a Quaker, rather than the directed self-criticism of the Puritan tradition. Nonetheless, however "idle" his musings, Bartram was capable of reaching an interior space that a good Puritan would recognize. "This day," he recorded in his commonplace book, "I had a fresh instance of mine own infirmity which I am sure I ought to be humbled for, altho [I] have had warning over and over again. What a poor impotent contemptible creature I am."²⁴

Although the form of his prayer is also lost to us, if indeed he had a formulaic routine, the nature of his prayerful writings suggests that he began with adoration, which arose from humility and a worshipful fear. "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life. . . . The fear of the Lord is the instruction of Wisdom and humility is before honour," he wrote in his commonplace book. The God whom William adored was "the soul of the creation of the Universe," which was the highest and most fitting title

that he could conceive. This animating spirit or soul remained in all of nature and was the visible proof of God's existence. He believed that "we have in our Intellectual or *Divine Nature* (perhaps the Human soul) the *Archetypes* of all *Ideas** (*The Archetypes I call Innate Ideas) belonging to his [i.e., God's] Nature." The images that come to our senses, then, are products of a "fixed *Archetypal System* of the Human understanding" implanted by God in our souls. Bartram explicitly compared the soul to a "chart or Tablet, whereon is impressed or inscribed, the primordial arrangement of Ideas."²⁵

This soul unites all of creation, in Bartram's view. It is derived from and a projection of the Divine. His vision of the unity of all nature animated Bartram's approach to his God, to his fellow humans, and to the animals and plants that he studied and tended. There were differences of significance, to be sure, but what sustained William Bartram was the search for the common spirit shared by all of creation:

In every order of nature we perceive a variety of qualities distributed amongst individuals, designed for different purposes and uses; yet it appears evident, that the great Author has impartially distributed his favours to his creatures, so that the attributes of each one seem to be of sufficient importance to manifest the divine and inimitable workmanship.²⁶

Time and again throughout his adult life, and daily in his prayerful reflections, Bartram came back to this theme. Other animals and plants are not so different from us as they may at first seem. In his mind, such observations served both to elevate flora and fauna and reduce mankind to our natural place. According to Bartram,

we act most rationally and virtuously when our actions seem to operate from simple instinct, or approach nearest to the manners of the *animal creation*. For if we examine minutely the morality or manners of animals, and compare them with those nations or tribes of the human race who yet remain in the simple state of primitive nature as our Indians, who have had but little intercourse with white people, we shall find but little difference between their manners and the animal creation in general.²⁷

Bartram believed that both Linnaeus and Buffon, the great theoretical naturalists of the eighteenth century, exaggerated the differences between humans and the rest of creation:

If we examine and compare those actions and movements of animals, which they have in common with us, we find little or no difference. Why, then, have we not every reason to believe that those actions and movements are excited and proceed from the same motives or cause [?] . . . I do not say that Man is not the first order of beings in the world and accordingly his formation is such as enables him to subjugate and even tyrannize over every other animal, and probably would long

ere this have destroyed the whole animal creation if his arms were not withheld by the Supreme Creator and preserver, but his does not prove because he is the most powerful that he is the most divine.²⁸

After his return home in 1777, the significant traveling that William did was in his own head. His imagination was such that binding his body in space was no hindrance to the soaring of his mind; indeed, it may have facilitated the journeys. Whether these interior travels began in one of his prayerful meditations, while gardening, or when gazing at the sky, there was a fluid relationship among his imaginative states, a natural flow from God, to the heavens, to the earth that William knew below.

The Heavens supply us with our favourite spectacle; we admire with joy their harmony, their motion. We are transported when we behold the Sun flying in his purple Carr, spreading in every region his beaming rays of light & returning every year from the place whence he departed. From the heavens we pass and view the varied scenes of Terrestrial Nature whose works appear to us beautiful, admirable, and incomprehensible. The singing of the birds, the fountains, groves, rivers, the flowers, the stalk of an herb ravish us and afford us an inexhaustible fund of affection.²⁹

I cannot allow that last line to pass without comment, for it seems to contradict all that we know about the way nature was gendered by eighteenth-century men. In this telling by Bartram, nature ravishes "us," making humans the feminized recipient of a virile nature's advances. Perhaps what separates Bartram in this case from the legions of men who were, and saw themselves, as the ravishers of nature is his vision of nature as an extension of a masculine God, with humans an inferior part of the whole. Less than any other eighteenth-century writer, did Bartram view us as God's chosen conquerors of the earth. His experiences as a wilderness traveler made him feel vulnerable to the power of nature, at the mercy of nature's whim. Bartram may have shared his century's sense of humans as atop the earthly part of the Great Chain of Being, and of men above women, but he saw our link as both vincible and bound to the rest of the chain.

The God of all nature was the God to whom William prayed as the sun rose on each day of his life. His prayers were prayers of supplication and thanks as well as a form of adoration. He sought understanding. "God," he prayed, "what part hast thou allotted me to act on the stage of human life, where Thou O God, Angels & Men are spectators of my behavior?" And he prayed for the strength to accept what God intended for him: "That is the best thing for a man which God sends him and that is the best time when he sends it."³⁰

It is with such thoughts about nature, God, and the nature of man — some of them conscious, some of them embedded in his adult self, some of them articulated in prayerful reveries, and some of them worn on his sleeve — that William Bartram

dressed in the plain clothes described by visitors and descended the stairs at or before dawn's early light. How he looked, where he looked, and what he did when he reached the bottom of the dark stairs were of a piece with his sense of connection to God and our place in the natural world. I wish I knew what he ate for breakfast, if he ate, and more than I do about his routine, if he had one, but I am pretty sure that before he did much else he surveyed the landscape and took the pulse of the day.

So, he prayed, dressed, measured the temperature, and discerned the direction of the wind. His routine surely varied with the seasons, whim, and the day of the week. He was a man both of routine and of whimsy. I imagine that he stuck to his routine unless something "curious" led him another way. If his eyes locked on the struggle of an ant with a large load, if he sniffed the perfume of a bud blossoming for the first time that season, heard the call of a bird that he wished to know more about, or felt drawn to the banks of the river, there went whatever plans he had for the day.

William spent a great deal of time outside. I know from the garden book that even less passed him unnoticed during the day than at night. Often, he recorded the temperature at daybreak. When the fog cleared at 8 a.m. or the mist at 10:00, he was there. He felt a misty rain at 7:00 and the heat of summer at 9:00. He watched spiders "darting their webs" in January and bees searching for flowers in February, measured the depth of March snow, charted the arrival of April's flowers and migrating birds, and observed a bull frog devouring a mole during May. He celebrated summer-like winter days and lamented cold snaps that brought the end to frail blossoms in spring. He recorded the arrival of "sultry" weather in June and the death of a bird found five miles away, the ripening of apples, the flowering of lilies, and the chirping of crickets in July. He noticed that the partridges' song changed during an August drought. He also noted the course of Yellow Fever during the summer and fall, saw each species of bird as it passed South, witnessed the first frost, the first ice, and the first and last solid freezing of the Schuylkill each year. He knew how the patterns compared to the past; he knew when to hope for a change. He clearly liked moderate weather best, but was capable of describing "beautiful white frost," a July day cold enough for him to sit comfortably by the fire, and weather so warm that it was fit only for sitting under a tree. His highest compliment to the elements was the label "serene," and, not surprisingly as I get to know him better, William Bartram found serenity in all seasons.

* * *

The moral struggles of his youth were long behind William Bartram in his eighty-fourth year. His attempts to conquer ambition, forgive his enemies, and lead a simple, virtuous life, which filled the pages of his commonplace books, were, to all appearances, achieved. So for what did this eighty-four year old man pray? His wants were few, his character fixed, and he long ago came to terms with his own death. Perhaps he prayed with a greater urgency than in his youth for the ability to

"manage all your thoughts & action in such a manner as tho you were just going out of the world."³¹ He prayed for others, as his correspondence shows — for his niece and nephews, his siblings and friends. Perhaps he prayed as well for his garden, for the plants and animals that shared his part of the natural world. They were certainly much on William's mind, as his garden book attests, through every season, every day of the year. He thanked God for the blessings bestowed on the garden's inhabitants, for the warming sun, the refreshing rain, and the time and health that enabled him to continue his work and to chronicle the natural rhythms of the garden into his old age.

Others before me have tried to distill the essence of William Bartram's life. Literary critics, art historians, intellectual historians, and historians of science have told Bartram stories from the perspectives of their various sub-disciplines. This interdisciplinary interest in Bartram derives mainly from his authorship of the *Travels*, which was the single most influential nature and travel book written by an eighteenth-century American. His drawings of plants and animals were also the most accomplished and fascinating naturalist art by an American prior to the nineteenth century.

The primary texts for these other analyses have been Bartram's published writings, mainly the *Travels*, but occasionally his "Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians," (written 1789, published 1853), and his "Travels in Georgia and Florida" (written 1773-4, published 1943). More recently, art historians have looked anew at Bartram's drawings, sometimes in comparison to those of other nature artists and sometimes within the context of the *Travels*.

The principal academic debates, as I understand them, reduce to disagreements over such issues as Bartram's standing as an Enlightenment *or* Romantic figure, whether his was "good" science, whether he was more of a scientist than a poet or vice versa, and whether he was most influenced by his Quaker faith *or* the Enlightenment. As mentioned above, scholars have also attempted to discern Bartram's political views from his nature writings and whether he served as a spy for Patriot forces during the Southern journey (1773-1777) that was the basis for the *Travels*. While much of this scholarship strikes me as sound, and while some of it is even profound, all of it ignores the second half of his long and productive life, and all of it neglects to integrate the variety of written and drawn texts that he left — commonplace books, garden books, early drafts of the *Travels*, and a large number of sketches that he continued to produce throughout his long life.

Everyone who writes about William Bartram seems to share the view that the major accomplishments of his life for which he is remembered — his book and the nature drawings that he made for English patrons — define his views and his life's meaning. Although I would not want to diminish the significance of the *Travels* and drawings now in the British Museum either for the history of naturalist art, literature, and botanical science or as keys to Bartram's vision of the natural world, I do believe that his less known writings and drawings — the essays, sketches, common-

place books, and garden books that he executed during the thirty-four years before his 1773-1777 Southern trip and the forty-seven years that he lived after his return — provide more than supplementary insights to his thought and a postscript to his life.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we are only just learning how to use commonplace books and daily diaries as sources for social and cultural history. The brilliant insights of scholars — Rhys Isaac, Laurel Ulrich, and Kenneth Lockridge, among them — have recently alerted us to the revelations contained in such apparently unrevealing sources. And in a paradoxical way, the lives of such literate white men as William Bartram become more interesting as we take more seriously the histories of people less visible in the public world of politics and power that once defined the historically significant figure. Only as we become more interested in a gender history that includes the private lives of men, a social history that incorporates the lives of men who were not great public figures, and an intellectual history of ideas that transcends politics and theology do we begin to notice figures who lived through the era of the American Revolution and played no significant role in public life.

My claim is that William Bartram is significant because he devoted his life to communing with nature and because nature was the starting point for all ideas embraced by eighteenth-century Americans. Theories about nature were the beginning of the circle of interrelated ideas that defined the American Enlightenment. Every theory about politics, theology, science, history, and human relations started with a theory about nature. Bartram is special for the nature and consequences of his devotion to the natural world, but not because nature was central to all his thinking. In that, he was no different from other people of his day, which gives us a particularly clear window on ideas that others perhaps thought about less and articulated less fully. Whether speaking about natural law, natural rights, or unnatural acts, about the sublime, the beautiful, life, love, death, poverty, disease, slavery, race, war, or nature's God, the inclusive circle of Enlightenment thought began with a theory about nature and its laws. Bartram is remarkable within the history of ideas for combining a unitary sense of nature that places humans in it rather than above or outside — a way of thinking that was not unprecedented, but which has more in common with nineteenth than eighteenth-century thinkers, more like Charles Darwin and Henry David Thoreau than Thomas Jefferson, Peter Kalm, and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur — with a deeply religious conviction, which bears a greater kinship with seventeenth than nineteenth-century ways of thought, that God is not just the first mover of nature, but an active agent in the divine process that unfolds through the natural world.³²

William Bartram was different, then, because his ideas were an eccentric combination of traditional notions that made him both less Enlightened than his contemporaries and closer than they to the Romantics and Transcendentalists, whom his writings greatly influenced. He was also special because he was extreme in his habits and temperament, as visionaries often are. He was not unusual in the sources from

which he drew his ideas — a mix of religious and secular writings — or in his interest in nature. He was, in most ways, an eighteenth-century man.

None of what I have written here, it seems to me, makes a compelling case for Bartram's textbook significance, for his importance within the master narrative of American history that absorbs the attention of most historians of eighteenth-century society, politics, and culture. Not much of it even addresses questions raised by others who have written about the Bartrams. Neither here nor in the larger project from which these historical reveries are drawn am I really interested either in challenging Bartram historiography or mounting an assault on the master narrators of our profession, at least not frontally.

My ambition is greater. I encourage you to take spirituality and the emotions more seriously, to look for nature in all the texts and artifacts that survive from the eighteenth century, in sum to consider humans as part of rather than apart from the earth. I invite you to see what was there all along, to "find" nature in something of the same way that most of us have begun to "find" people who were once excluded from our histories by virtue of their class, gender, or race. This is not a call for equal standing among "ghetto" histories. Rightly heard, as the other calls should be, it is a claim that no master narrative that excludes consideration of people in nature is worth the trees killed to produce the paper it is printed on.

Notes

1. Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York, 1970; 1982); Richard Lebeaux, *Young Man Thoreau* (Amherst, 1977); Lebeaux, *Thoreau's Seasons* (Amherst, 1984); Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, 1986).
2. William Bartram, commonplace book, privately owned, microfilm copy, American Philosophical Society. Hereafter referred to as WB, cpb.
3. Benjamin Silliman, *Letters of Shahcoolien, a Hindu Philosopher, Residing in Philadelphia; to His Friend El Hassan, an Inhabitant of Delhi*, facsimile reprint with an introduction by Ben Harris McClary (1801; 1802; Gainesville, 1962), viii-ix, 138-152; Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 5 (Charlottesville, 1979), entries for June 10, 1787 and September 2, 1787, 166-7, 183.
4. WB, cpb; manuscript journal, "A Journey from Spaldings lower Trading House to Cuscowilla & the Great Alachua Savanna," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Bartram Papers, small Bartram volumes.
5. "A Journey from Spaldings lower Trading House."
6. City of Philadelphia, Register of Wills, file no. 174, administration book M, 404; Daniel McKinley, "The End of William Bartram, Naturalist, Traveler, Philosopher: But Where Was He Buried?" *Bartram Broadside* (Fall 1993): 6-7. The value of William's estate was assessed at \$927.80. His clothes were valued at \$35, his small chest at \$.50, a pine chest at \$.25, feather bed and polster at \$8, two glasses and tray at \$.50, a tin letter box at \$.50, and books at \$16.50. He died intestate, the estate going for the burial costs, settlement costs, and the bulk to Robert Carr, the husband of William's niece and the owner of the family house, for boarding and nursing William for the last decade of his life (\$838.28).
7. William Bartram, garden book, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia. Hereafter referred to as WB, gb.
8. William Bartram, "Some account of the late Mr. John Bartram, of Pennsylvania," *Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal*, I, 2d ed. (1804): 121-2.
9. Douglas Anderson, "Bartram's *Travels* and the Politics of Nature," *Early American Literature* 25 (1990): 3-17; Christopher Looby, "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy and Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram," *Early American Literature*, 22 (1987): 252-73; Francis Harper, "William Bartram and the American Revolution," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 97 (1953): 571-7; "A Journey from Spaldings lower Trading House." Bartram's martial imagery was highly derivative, and is of significance principally, I think, in identifying his stylistic debts to the classics, especially Virgil. See, Virgil, *The Georgics*, L. P. Wilkinson, trans. (New York, 1982); Virgil, *The Eclogues*, Guy Lee, trans. (New York, 1984).
10. Amy R. W. Meyers, "Imposing Order on the Wilderness: Natural History Illustration and Landscape Portrayal," in Edward J. Nygren and Bruce Robertson, eds., *Views and Visions: American Landscapes before 1830* (Washington, D.C., 1986), 105-31. I owe my initial insight to Bartram's drawings of the Alachua Savanna to Meyers, who sees his linkage of animals and plants "through reflections of form (121)."
11. William Bartram, *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida . . .* (1791; 1792; Penguin Books, 1988), 64-5. Hereafter referred to as WB, *Travels*.
12. *Ibid.* 141, 24-5.
13. *Ibid.* 47-8, 107, 143, 150.
14. *Ibid.* 151.
15. *Ibid.* 119.
16. *Ibid.* 115-6.
17. William Bartram, manuscript essay on morality, n.d., HSP, Bartram Papers, box 1, file 81; WB, cpb.
18. William Bartram to Moses Bartram, n.d., but late 1791 or 1792, HSP, Bartram Papers, box 1, file 80; WB to James Howell Bartram, September 23, 1804, copy in James Howell Bartram's hand, Bartram's Garden, Philadelphia.
19. WB, "Some Account," 122.
20. John Bartram to William Bartram, April 5, 1766; John Bartram to William Bartram, April 9, 1766, in Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of John Bartram, 1734-1777* (Gainesville, 1992), 661-5; Bill of sale for Negro woman, Jenny, American Philosophical Society, B:C692.1.

21. WB, *Travels*, 80, 84, 133, 164, 256, 268, 329.
22. *Ibid.* 277, 350, 351.
23. William Bartram, essay, written on the back of printed "Catalogue of American Trees, Shrubs and Herbacious Plants, most of which are now growing, and produce ripe Seed in John Bartram's Garden, near Philadelphia," [1783], HSP, Broad-sides, Abnd-251.
24. WB, cpb.
25. WB, cpb.
26. WB, *Travels*, 17.
27. WB, essay on morality.
28. *Ibid.*
29. WB, cpb.
30. *Ibid.*
31. WB, cpb.
32. Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago, 1990), 61, has a place for William Bartram in her larger scheme, which connects him, albeit uncomfortably, to the nature religions of those who preceded and followed him in time.