



Naturalist-in Series

WANDERING THROUGH DIXIE

by Christopher K. Starr



Review of:

William Bartram 1791. Travels Through North and South Carolina, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, etc. Philadelphia: James & Johnson 520 pp. Reprinted 2011 in facsimile by Cambridge Univ. Press. [54th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

William Bartram (1739-1823) was born into a Quaker family in Pennsylvania at a time when the greater part of the continent was very much a new world for naturalists. His father, John Bartram, had been King's Botanist for North America and was well regarded by scientists and horticulturists. At an early age William accompanied John on plant-hunting trips in eastern North America. He was very much a creature of the enlightenment, although he also partook of the new trend of Romanticism in its shift away from reliance on reason alone. As noted by Judith Magee, his great strength lay in harmonizing the empirical respect for data of the one tradition with the other's esthetic appreciation of nature.

A single quotation can serve to illustrate this: *"The verges and islets of the lagoon were elegantly embellished with flowering plants and shrubs; the laughing coots with wings half spread were tripping over the little coves and hiding themselves in the tufts of grass; young broods of the painted summer teal, skimming the still surface of the waters and following the watchful parent unconscious of danger, were frequently surprised by the voracious trout; and he in turn by the subtle greedy alligator."*

Bartram was a religious man, firmly situated in the natural theology framework of the time, in which natural history was not only an attempt to understand the lives of plants and animals but an exercise in penetrating God's plan. Even so, like the better contemporary naturalists, his observations came without prejudice about how they might fit into any larger scheme of things. This is seen in his skeptical attitude toward the hierarchical view of

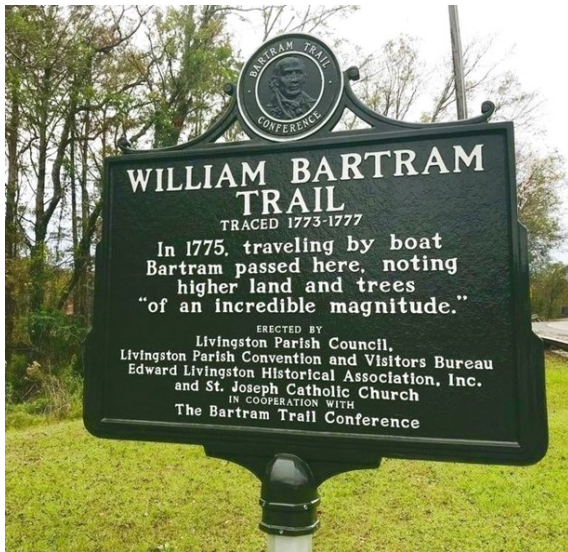


Hydrangea. Source: Bartram

nature – known as the Ladder of Nature or Great Chain of Being – that had prevailed since the time of Aristotle two thousand years earlier. According to this view, all of nature could be ranked on a more or less linear scale from inanimate matter up through plants, lower animals and higher animals to modern humans. Bartram made no attempt to shoehorn his wealth of observations into a pattern that seemed to him highly artificial.

In 1765-1766, he assisted his father on a plant-collecting trip from the Carolinas down to Florida. This undoubtedly served as preparation when William Bartram began his own more ambitious trip in 1773 that would last almost four years. As he put it, the undertaking was "impelled by a restless spirit of curiosity." Travelling mainly on horseback, he probably covered at least 2000km from the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains south to Florida and then west to the Mississippi, with much backtracking, collecting plants and natural-history observations the whole way. In recent decades his route has been mapped as the William Bartram

Trail, parts of which are developed for hiking in the manner of the Appalachian Trail. It was not an easy time for him, but it was a very happy one, a daily feast of new findings. He spent a long time in the Alachua region or northern Florida, which in my experience stands out for the conspicuous neotropical elements present at their northern limits.



WB Trail. Photo courtesy: Historical Marker Database

Bartram's account is a long book of 32 chapters in four sections, with five full-page illustrations of plants and two of animals. It appeared at a time when literate people had ample leisure for reading. Books about travels to places inaccessible to most readers were especially appreciated, and 'Travels Through North and South Carolina' met with considerable acclaim. It was widely read, reprinted many times, and ensured the author's scientific reputation in his lifetime. He provides much more detail than is now fashionable, so that today's readers will want to skip parts. Fortunately, it is an orderly narrative, so that one can be selective without worrying about what one is missing (e.g. the lists of the predominant plants in different



(Left) Gopher Tortoise & (right) alligator. Photos courtesy iNaturalist & the New York Times

habitats are no longer novel). This is facilitated by the extensive index.

It appeared not very long after Mark Catesby's first published account of the biota of North America, which was much narrower in scope and drawn from a much more settled area. The book's great popularity is readily understood when we consider that virtually all wilderness had long since been erased from Europe, yet here was a detailed, knowledgeable report from a region where wild nature still held sway in many places. And this was not the Congo or Southeast Asia but a continent with a similar climate and related biota to that of Europe. To his large Old World readership, Bartram presented a picture of how their own continent had once been. They must have wondered, for example, at his description in awed tones of some trees that had been left to grow to enormous size.

In line with this general attitude, he promoted the growth of an independent scientific community in the New World, not reliant on that of the European mother countries. Like his horticulturist father, William Bartram was ever alert to wild plants that might advantageously be brought into cultivation. This was part of an overall attention to "improvements" in the spirit of what was soon to be the young republic.

He also had a keen interest in animals, although not nearly as knowledgeable about them as about plants. This is shown by the fact that he usually mentioned plants by their scientific names, while animals are given their vernacular names. Among others, there are encounters with rattlesnakes, the coachwhip snake, pine snake and several frogs (most of them unnamed). He gave the first description of the habits of the gopher tortoise *Gopherus polyphemus*, found only in dry sand hills, where it digs deep burrows (hence the common name).

Especially along the Gulf Coast, he journeyed

through abundant swamps and wetlands, where his adventures included some close encounters with alligators. This huge carnivore emits a loud roar, especially in the breeding season. Sometimes many of them are heard roaring at once, like distant thunder. “At the approach of day the dreaded voice of the alligator shook the isle [in Lake George], and resounded along the neighbouring coasts, proclaiming the appearance of the glorious sun.” His curiosity drove him to risk approaching such a nest, described as a mound of mud and plant matter, about four feet high and a little wider at the base. The female stays with the nest, which contains about 100-200 eggs, until they have hatched, aided in their development by the heat of fermentation of the vegetation.



Carolina parakeet by John James Audubon

The question of what becomes of the birds that disappear as winter approaches, to re-appear in the spring, was still very much on the naturalist agenda at that time. Various conjectures had been set forth since antiquity, e.g. that they fly to the moon or retire into caves and other cavities. Although the phenomenon of trans-continental migration had not yet been documented, it was well known that some North American species spend the warm months further north and fly to the southern states to overwinter. Bartram included a list of birds that arrive in Pennsylvania from the south in the spring and fly

back south in the fall, and another list of those that come south to overwinter in Pennsylvania and then return north. He had been told that the Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) overwintered clustered in tree hollows and wondered if it might be true. This very colourful bird, extinct since 1918, was still widespread in the eastern USA, where its large, raucous flocks must have been an impressive spectacle.

While John Bartram focused almost entirely on plants, William showed broader interests. In addition to many of the animals (mostly land vertebrates) that he encountered, he had a great deal to say about the native peoples and how they compared with each other. Part IV of the book is in the nature of an ethnographic appendix on the Muscogulge (=Creek), Cherokee and Choctaw peoples, among others.

He traveled at a time when Amerindian communities still predominated in many parts of the Southeast, although already losing ground to encroaching white settlers. In revisiting some places where he had been with his father 15 years earlier, Bartram noted the advance of white civilization and clearing of the forest in the interim. In some places he saw indications of once substantial Indian settlements that were no more. To a large extent, traders formed the vanguard of white advance into Indian territories, and Bartram made use of trading routes and transport.

The Count of Buffon (1707-1788) – a prolific and original intellectual as well as a dreadful blowhard who never set foot outside of western Europe – had advanced a view of New World species as degenerated forms of those from the Old World. Bartram disputed this, extending his argument to the human realm, based on extensive personal acquaintance with the native peoples of the Southeast, whom he considered as in no way inferior to the immigrant white population. (Black people, as non-aboriginal, did not enter into the refutation. And he made only passing mention of slavery, which was hardly present where he traveled.)

He evinced special admiration for the Seminoles. This vigorous tribe occupied a fine territory that provided everything they could want, so that they had no cause for discontent “except the gradual

encroachment of the white peoples. Thus contented and undisturbed, they appear as blithe and free as the birds of the air, and like them as volatile and active, tuneful and vociferous.”



Seminole chief, Mico Chlucco

As a Quaker, Bartram came from a group with a long history of fair dealing with the native peoples -- most notably in the foundation of Pennsylvania in 1681 -- in contrast to the genocidal tendencies of many other immigrants. Accordingly, he entered each new Amerindian territory as a guest in an egalitarian spirit and was for the most part treated without hostility by his hosts, who facilitated his travel and collecting by furnishing guides and helpers. In entering some territories, he was even warmly welcomed and invited to attend traditional festivities, for which he had a keen descriptive eye. About one of these he noted that, *“In a few days this festival exhibited one of the most ludicrous bacchanalian scenes that is possible to be conceive. White and red*

men and women without distinction, passed the day merrily with these jovial, amorous toppers, and the nights in convivial songs, dances and sacrifices to Venus, as long as they could stand or move; for in these frolicks both sexes take such liberties with each other, and act without constraint or shame, such scenes as they would abhor when sober or in their senses.” It makes one conscious what a modest, sedate affair the Trinidad Carnival is.

Both out of pacifist principle and as a practical matter, Bartram traveled unarmed. Even so, he deemed it prudent to avoid some areas where the Indians might be hostile, either because one tribe was not at peace with another or because they had suffered at the hands of white people. While looking into some reports of depredations by Indians on white settlements, he concluded that the Indians had a legitimate grievance and took the only measure available to them by attacking others of the abusers' kind.

As a friend of the native peoples, Bartram wondered whether it would be practical without coercion to induce them to adopt the ways of European peoples. And if they did adopt them, would it be to their benefit? He had his doubts.

Thanks to Brad Sanders of the Bartram Trail Conference for information about his itinerary. 🐜

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MANAGEMENT NOTICES

TTFNC COMMUNITY PAGE: A place for members of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club to share their passion for the natural environment <https://community.ttfnc.org/>
