

Expeditions, Catalogues, and Epic Tales:

The Effects of Intent and Nature on the Form of Bartram's and Lewis' and Clark's Writing

In the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, explorers of all types set out into the uncharted and largely undiscovered American Frontier. Of these people, writers like William Bartram, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark related their tales and travels through their work. Both nature and intent of the writer played key roles in determining the formula and style of Bartram's and Lewis' and Clark's pieces. Nature provided not only a setting in which to write, but much of the inspiration for the type of language and technique of writing used by the author. On the other hand, the reason that the writer created his piece in the first place also influenced the literature's final form. It is the degree to which each author allowed himself or was willing to be influenced by either of these forces that separates Bartram's *Travels Through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida* from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*. Although his journeys were financed by Dr. John Fothergill and expected to produce a catalogue of the plants throughout the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, Bartram wrote with much more dense and florid language than is customary, or even permissible, for a botanist. In essence, his prose style was much more highly influenced by nature rather than his initial purpose. Lewis and Clark, however, set out on their expedition with the intent of demystifying and cataloguing the Western Frontier. This is exactly what they did, resulting in a taxonomic and straightforward piece of literature. The merits and meanings of these pieces are both numerous and endlessly debatable, but it is clear that nature played a much more profound role in shaping the writing of Bartram than it did with Lewis and Clark.

In 1772, William Bartram set out to explore and report on North and South Carolina, Georgia, and East and West Florida. The financier of this trip, John Fothergill, expected Bartram to travel for two or three years. He desired that Bartram collect, catalogue, and report on the plants that grew in these various regions. In other words, Bartram set out with the intent of creating a piece of writing concerned with botany. It is also important to note for whom Bartram was writing. As much as his initial audience may have been other botanists, scientists, and Dr. Fothergill, his work was not as well received by these people as one might have hoped. However, romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge read and were influenced by the imaginative and somewhat epic piece Bartram produced. This is evidence that Bartram showed little concern for the audience he was expected to write for, even the man who paid his way. It is not as easy to say, however, that he completely disregarded those that might read his work. The adventurous tone succeeds in surprising the readers and perhaps even inspiring them. Even if Bartram failed in acknowledging and pleasing those anticipating botany, his style (not to mention the fact he chose to write in the first place) shows that he did intend on *someone* reading, and even further, enjoying *Travels*. It is also possible, then, that an interest in his future audience contributed to Bartram's writing style, although to a lesser degree than the nature he surrounded himself by.

What attributes then, does Bartram's writing possess that display nature's function in its creation? One of the most memorable encounters between Bartram and nature involves the alligators of Florida. His description of them epitomizes his deviation from the Linnaeus system of cataloguing:

His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder.

Not only does this depiction clearly not follow any scientific standard of describing wildlife, but it also shows Bartram's tendency to distort what he saw. It can be argued that this increases the excitement of the passage and therefore does not detract from its quality. But more importantly, it indicates the immense influence that nature had on Bartram. Despite the fact that his journey was to be one of cataloguing and identifying plants by their Latin names, he was taken aback by and in awe of the massive Florida alligator. All original purpose was forgotten, and Bartram wrote to express the effect nature had on him rather than its categorization. He also conveys this new objective through the format of his descriptions. Even though his travels should have been scientific, he is not concerned with dissection and focuses on the surface traits of what he observes. He describes the appearance of various birds, the wood-rat, and of course the alligators. Even when he catches fish, and along with them the opportunity to investigate them internally, he prepares them for food and nothing more.

Even further, Bartram's writing as a whole is a literary representation of the nature that surrounded him. He traveled through lush and dense Florida landscapes. Accordingly, his language is thick as well, using phrases like "elegantly embellished," and adjectives like "voracious," "triumphant," and "horrid." His sentences are extremely long, with abundant use of commas, colons, and semi-colons. They then make up extensive paragraphs that only break when an obvious change of subject or scene occurs. Overall, Bartram views nature as

picturesque and his writing reflects this. Nature influences both the content and formula of his writing much more than his original purpose.

Lewis and Clark also set out on a commissioned venture. As the co-commanders of the Corps of Discovery, they began their travels in 1804 under the direction of Thomas Jefferson. Their first objective concerned finding a navigable waterway that connected the east coast with the west. This, of course, would vastly increase the trade opportunities for the United States. Along these same lines, Lewis and Clark intended to examine and document the resources of the Western Frontier. This commercial imperative most strongly influenced the style of their writing. Unlike Bartram, they succeeded in sticking to their goals. Also in contrast to Bartram, Lewis and Clark wrote effectively for their original audience. It can be argued that their main intended reader was Jefferson, seeing as he manifested the idea for the trip and provided the monetary support it required. One can also find evidence that the two men aimed to educate Americans living on the east side of the continent about the opportunities awaiting them in the west. Lewis and Clark's writing is very straightforward and quantitative, and successfully takes much of the ambiguity out of the American West.

The commercial-minded nature of *The Journals* is hardly ignorable. Rather than describing the adventurous aspects of hunting or the process through which their party sought out and killed game, they simply report who brought back what animals and in what quantity. For example, on September 17th Clark writes, "8 fallow Deer 5 Common & 3 Buffalow killed to day. Capt. Lewis saw a hare and killed a Rattle snake in a village..." At the most, Lewis details following a group of antelope and the speed at which they evade his pursuit. Even so, this passage lacks the romantic language and epic qualities of Bartram's narrative. In his

recollections of the alligators, Bartram tends to cast himself as the hero battling against such creatures. Lewis focuses on the agility of the antelope and makes its survival attributes the main aspect of his description. This is another example of the commercial imperative with which they set out. Lewis might have been impressed with the abilities of the antelope to evade him, but his information is much more a tool for potential hunters (east coast civilians traveling west, perhaps) to use either in aiding their hunt for antelope or to advise them to chase an alternate source of meat. In other words, Bartram's episode might inspire one to be a daring hero while Lewis's helps future frontiersmen be efficient providers. Deviating again from Bartram, Lewis and Clark took the time to dissect the animals they captured and to send live specimens, skins, and skeletons back east. Lewis gives precise measurements of a "hare of the prairie," then dedicates almost an entire page to describing the animal's build and coloring.

Their quantitative style continued throughout *The Journals*, even with reports of Indian violence:

In this Tribe I saw 25 Squars and Boys taken 13 days ago in a battle with the Mahars in this battle they Destroyd 40 Lodges, Killed 75 Men, & som boys & Children, & took 48 Prisoners Womin & boys...

Despite the obvious opportunity to investigate the story of this battle, one that was most likely interesting, dangerous, even painful and terrifying, the reader is given a numerical account only. In fact, numerical descriptions are abundant in Lewis' and Clark's *Journals*. In essence, they viewed nature to be accessible and infinite. Nature provided the subject of *The Journals*, but the formula with which Lewis and Clark conveyed what they saw was much more highly influenced by their commercial and exploratory purposes.

Bartram's *Travels* and *The Journals* of Lewis and Clark each provide the reader with a depiction of the largely unsettled area they explored. While both writers describe the landscapes, animals, and other aspects of what they saw, the way in which they do so varies incredibly. Bartram, regardless of his assignment to create a botanist investigation of East and West Florida, North and South Carolina, and Georgia, wrote an epic and imaginative piece of literature inspired by the nature around him. Lewis and Clark, while writing about the nature they too experienced, did so in an objective and taxonomic way, much more in line with their trade-focused objective. On the whole, nature affected the style of Bartram's writing much more strongly than it did Lewis' and Clark's.