

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Walter Kingsley Taylor, Eliane M. Norman. *André Michaux in Florida: An Eighteenth-Century Botanical Journey*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. Maps. 288 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2444-8.

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The French Flower Hunter

From February to May of 1788, André Michaux (1746-1803), botanist to King Louis XVI of France (1774-92), visited Spanish East Florida in search of plants that might bolster the prestige of his monarch and his nation. The royal botanist spent a total of eleven years (1785-96) in the United States conducting fieldwork and his trip to Florida was his southernmost venture. Biologists Walter Kingsley Taylor and Eliane M. Norman have assembled in this volume Michaux's journal on his Florida travels; biographical information; detailed historical summary; lengthy footnotes explaining the text; appendices with additional documents and information compiled on the plants found by Michaux; and as a means of comparison, lists derived from the earlier travels of John and William Bartram in Florida.

Michaux's visit coincided with the return of Florida to Spanish control after twenty years of British occupation (1763-83). Only ruins remained of the plantations worked by African slaves in British East Florida at the time of Michaux's travels. Some absentee owners had never arrived in Florida, most who did settle along the East Coast fled from the territory, and a few relocated to St. Augustine after 1783. Michaux was disinterested in the human inhabitants of the region, however, and his notes on the natural world around him dominate the short account.

The documents, historical information, and footnotes are accompanied by excellent maps of the region vis-

ited by Michaux. Some maps are reproductions based on manuscripts held by the St. Augustine Historical Society and the British Public Records Office in London. Modern maps of Florida's north-central East Coast, with landmarks mentioned in the text noted, are also included and greatly add to the readability and usefulness of the volume. Those familiar with Florida's East Coast between St. Augustine and Cape Canaveral will find the depictions of the St. John's River as well as the Indian River and Mosquito River lagoons of particular interest.

Given the great presence of such works as William Bartram's *The Travels of William Bartram* (1774), John Bartram's *A Description on East Florida* (1766), and Bernard Roman's *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (1775), where does the journal of Michaux rank among late eighteenth-century natural histories of Florida? In addition to its value for environmental historians, William Bartram's work is one of the most significant ethnohistorical sources on southeastern Indians in the late eighteenth century. Similarly, Roman's *Concise Natural History* also outshines Michaux's account for its value to historians and ethnohistorians.

Michaux's account is certainly not irrelevant as a historical source. The extract of the Michaux journal reproduced here, along with the accompanying materials, will be most relevant to specialized researchers interested in the biological diversity of historical Florida. The royal botanist was unconcerned with the relationships

between Native Americans, African peoples, and Europeans, especially when compared with his better known predecessors. He seems to have simply sought to enumerate plants, and collect seeds and animal specimens. Michaux's collections were first sent to gardens in Savannah and New Jersey before they were loaded aboard ships destined for France. While the remnants of these gardens have long since been lost, local memory in the area near the New Jersey location vaguely recalled the "Frenchmen's garden" as late as the mid-twentieth century.

Michaux's account is curiously devoid of what makes the accounts by Roman and the Bartrams significant. He was especially silent on Native Americans in the region, whom he did not personally encounter, except for gunshots and distant campfires, and through his black companions who paddled for Michaux during his trip. Michaux mentioned the ruins of East Florida plantations along the central East Coast. Though certainly brief, the reader does get a sense of the vacuum left in the area after the British withdrawal, and the ruinous state of their former investments in the region. What happened to the inhabitants of these once productive plantations was recounted by Michaux, based on information gained from locals in St. Augustine.

Despite the main appeal of the document to specialized biologists, the editors of the volume do an admirable job placing Michaux's journal in context and provide ad-

equated historical background on the royal botanist and his times. However, the reader is somewhat left with the impression that Taylor and Norman have overstated the importance of Michaux's Florida journal. What might have made the significance of the source more evident is how scholars can benefit from the copious lists and descriptions of plants left by Michaux. With other earlier sources, by such writers as the Bartrams and Roman, and later accounts by John Lee Williams (*The Territory of Florida: Or, Sketches of the Topography, Civil and Natural History, of the Country, the Climate, and the Indian Tribes: From the First Discovery to the Present Time, with a Map, Views, & c* [1837]) and William H. Simmons (*Notices of East Florida, with an Account of the Seminole Nation of Indians* [1822]), among others, what can Michaux's work add to the natural history of Florida in the late eighteenth century?

Despite the limitations of the source, Taylor and Norman have provided a volume useful to specialists on Florida's historical biological diversity. The volume will also be of use to scholars of the late colonial period in Florida, especially those interested in environmental history. For nonspecialists, Michaux's descriptions of the landscape, combined with the excellent maps, paint a picture that many will no doubt relate to their own experiences on the St. John's River as well as the Indian River and Mosquito River lagoons along Florida's central East Coast.

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