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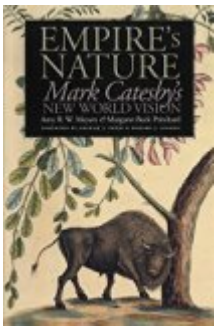

Amy R. W. Meyers, Margaret Beck Pritchard, eds.. *Empire's Nature: Mark Catesby's New World Vision.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. vi + 273 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2459-7.

Reviewed by David Wilson

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Mark Catesby (1683-1749) wrote, illustrated and published the fullest and most handsome verbal and graphic description of the flora and fauna of eighteenth-century colonial America--the folio-size, two-volume, 220-plate *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (London, 1731-47). Its beauty and its worth as a window onto the natural world as seen by the eighteenth-century eyes cannot be ignored, as the essays that constitute *Empire's Way, Mark Catesby's New World Vision* demonstrate.

"Although... his standing as the author of the first major illustrated natural history of the British colonies in the Americas has long been recognized," write Meyers and Pritchard, the editors of *Empire's Way*, "the full spectrum of his activities and productions has not been addressed in relation to the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts of which he was a part" (1). As a student of Catesby's work some years ago, I welcome this new, thorough, informed, synthesizing, and critical contribution to Catesby studies and to the growing field of garden and landscape studies and interdisciplinary eighteenth-century studies. [1] While Dr. Johnson's admonition not to "number the streaks of the tulip" bespoke the prejudices of early-Georgian literati, Catesby's circle followed an opposite esthetic. [2] The "streaks of the tulip" spoke to them especially as they sought out, described, sketched and named the novel flora and fauna found in America. As agents of empire they gathered the actual seeds and skins and cuttings of new-world abundance, what Catesby called the "Animal and Vegetable Productions" of America, and sent them back to the "Center of all Science," London. [3]

According to editors Meyers (curator of American Art at the Huntington Library) and Pritchard (curator of prints, maps and wallpaper at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation), three recent (1990s) events have stimulated fresh research and interpretation: an exhibition of Catesby's drawings by the Royal Library at Windsor, the production of a full-scale color facsimile of *The Natural History* by Alecto Historical Editions, and the essays collected here which compliment the exhibition catalog. As a result, scholars now have access to "a more thorough, interdisciplinary exploration

of Catesby's multifaceted activities as a scientific explorer, naturalist-illustrator, author, printmaker, gardener, and supplier of exotic plants" (24).

The thorough scholarship and imaginative framing of Catesby and his work opens lines of new thought about his work and that of his fellow natural historians, gardeners, seed factors, illustrators, patrons, and clients. Viewing Catesby's work within the context of colonization will doubtless inspire others to look with new eyes at other historical movements. I think, for example, of the sort of fresh perspective Frieda Knobloch brought to the mundane details of forestry and range management in America with her recent The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West *(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). The essays in* Empire's Way *explore a broader range of cultural contexts than was common earlier in studies which often treated Catesby's art more as artifact, his reportage as flawed protoscience and his* The Natural History *as an antiquarian treasure. In this,* Empire's Way_ is truly a gift to curators and scholars.

It is also a gift to those who have never looked into Catesby's folios themselves. *Empire's Way* includes fifty-eight figures --maps, garden schemata, portraits, landscapes, title pages, halftones of Catesby's sketches and engravings, and fifteen color reproductions of the tinted engravings of *The Natural History*. Remarkably, these illustrations regularly appear across from or no more than a page or two away from the text which explicates or invokes their content and style. Such integration is expensive and unusual today. Too often a clutch of illustrations on coated paper falls at the end of the work or appears as a separate signature. Integrating words and plates in this way both enables and encourages the reader more easily to pay as close attention to the graphic elements of Catesby's work as the authors were able to. The University of North Carolina Press and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (sponsored by the College of William and Mary and Colonial Williamsburg) deserve our admiration for the inspired patronage that led to their support for this fine collection of scholarly essays and a public symposium based on it.

While the book maintains an overall focus on Catesby, his works and his circle, the essays that make up the volume each make quite different contributions. Joyce E. Chaplin, associate professor of history at Vanderbilt University, contributes "Mark Catesby, A Skeptical Newtonian in America" in which she situates Catesby's theorizing, nature reporting, and engravings of flora and fauna within the larger story of the growing split between the mechanist (Newtonian and Cartesian) model of how the world works and a more vitalist, organicist story of creation and its wonderful variety and plenitude (39-40). She places the collecting and categorizing of the productions of nature within an "imperialist vision of nature present in the Linnaean system, . . . which organized all matter into universally recognizable kingdoms" (77). She finds Catesby "an important register of the modes of inquiry and types of answers that guided the early science of natural history," and looking ahead, she concludes that "the characteristics of Catesby's science--its gentlemanly confidence, its paracolonial emphasis on the English garden over and above the American wilderness, and its pitch to a luxury market--show opportunities for further examination of eighteen-century science in its cultural context" (90).

The patronage that made Catesby's and many other naturalists' explorations and publications possible is a story in itself and a window on the century. *The Natural History* was published in pieces and by subscription, a fairly common practice for such large and expensive books back then. The details of how that worked, the organizing of "labor, capital and personalities that sustained the study" of natural history exploration, collection, and publication is laid out in detail by David Brigham, curator of American Art at the Worces-

ter Art Museum, in "Mark Catesby and the Patronage of Natural History in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century" (95). Brigham's very thorough treatment of both the participants in and the structure of such patronage greatly enriches our understanding of the social underpinnings of the natural history project.

Therese O'Mally, associate dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, contributes "Mark Catesby and the Culture of Gardens." She sets Catesby's natural history collecting in the context of gardening, both in America and Europe. In a sense, she says, America became "an extensive botanic garden for Europe in which to pursue experimentation and naturalization" (162). Catesby's ***Hortus Britanno-Americanus*** (1763) as well as ***The Natural History*** became, as it were, catalogs to that "garden without walls" in America, but also a guidebook for gardeners at Kew and Chelsea of how specimens they had acquired formerly grew in their natural settings. One fashion in eighteenth-century garden design led to the creation of "'American gardens' in the form of a 'shrubbery' or 'wilderness' to emulate the natural landscape" (161). Maps of English and American gardens add an important dimension to this study.

Mark Laird, a garden historian and adjunct professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, looks at the "successes and failures of a dozen . . . species whose cultivation harks back to Catesby's collecting" (184). His essay, "From Callicarpa to Catalpa: The Impact of Mark Catesby's Plant Introductions on English Gardens of the Eighteen Century," explores gardening conventions such as planting deciduous and evergreen trees in "graduated rows," the tallest in back. Most engaging are the accounts of particular species that thrived and those that did not. Laird and O'Malley between them offer insight into the gardening practices into which Catesby fit himself and which, in turn, gave meaning and worth beyond natural history to his collecting.

Amy R. W. Meyers, in contrast, focuses on the "visual language" which Catesby coins in order to convey the "organic interplay" between the snakes and birds and plants that are the subjects of his iconography (229-30). In her concluding essay, "Picturing a World in Flux: Mark Catesby' Response to Environmental Interchange and Colonial Expansion," Meyers details how Catesby conveys such interplay "by mirroring the form of one organism in the form of another" (235). Her analysis of one plate from ***The Natural History*** (II, pl. 45), "Brown Viper and Arum," presents a most ingenious explication of such iconographic play as the bend of a snake echoes the curve of a leaf, the color of snake, that of its prey, etc. (230-31). Comparing an earlier drawing of a bald eagle with that in the published plate, she finds that simplifying the content by eliminating landscape elements and a human observer both highlights the predator/prey relationship and mutes any possible implication that colonization may be viewed as a form of thievery like that the eagle displays in stealing a fish from an osprey (234-37, 259). Meyers treats thoroughly the ambiguity Catesby demonstrates in his accounts of slaves and native Americans: "the book, in both its plates and its text," she concludes, "constitutes an attempt to explore the outcome of the changing relationships among peoples as well as among animals and plants that were resulting from the highly complicated processes of colonial expansion" (260). While Meyers's adroit analysis of Catesby's iconography places her in a long tradition of humanistic scholarship, her sensitivity to matters of power and agency in the interplay between peoples as well as between plants and the environment shows what she has learned from recent critical theorists and their perspectives on colonization.

The learning each author in this collection brings to the task of understanding Catesby in

context merits our appreciation. Each sets a standard from which others may learn. But even more, and to the editors' credit, the collective achievement that results from the convergent scholarship they assemble is superior to the sum of its parts. This, too, sets a standard others must take to heart if the promise of interdisciplinary study is to be realized in other studies as it has been in this.

Notes [1]. David Scofield Wilson, *In the Presence of Nature* (Amherst; University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), throughout.

[2]. Ibid., 2; Chapter X, *Rasselas* (1759)

[3]. *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands: Containing the Figures of Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, Insects and Plants: Particularly the Forest-Trees, Shrubs, and other Plants, not hitherto described, or very incorrectly figured by Authors, Together with their Descriptions in English and French. To which are added Observations on the Air, Soil, and Waters: With Remarks upon Agriculture, Grain, Pulse, Roots, &.* (London: 1731-47), I, p. v.

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