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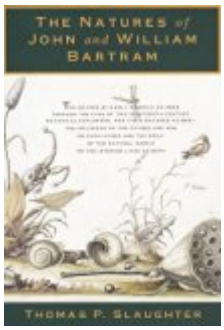
Thomas P. Slaughter. *The Natures of John and William Bartram.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. xx + 304 pp. $27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-679-43045-2.



Reviewed by Eric Robert Papenfuse

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Combining literary biography, environmental history, first-person memoir, and postmodern narrative, Thomas P. Slaughter's new book is about the meanings of "nature," the word Raymond Williams calls "the most complex" in the English language (p. xvi). On one level, Slaughter's study is a gripping, psycho-historical account of the public and private "natures" of the botanist John Bartram (1699-1777) and his son William (1739-1823), a renowned illustrator and author of the classic *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida...* (1791).[1] On another level, this history serves as an impassioned morality tale about the nature of human relationships, especially those between father and son, man and animal, imagination and experience, and author and subject. On a more philosophical level, it offers an extended meditation on the constructed nature of stories about Nature, whether penned by the Bartrams or by modern scholars.[2]

With the publication of *The Natures of John and William Bartram*, Slaughter, a Professor of History at Rutgers University and the author of *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (1986) and *Bloody Dawn: The Christiana Riot and Racial Violence in the Antebellum North* (1991), joins the growing ranks of historians who consider themselves primarily "storytellers" (p. 269). Influenced by a wide array of theorists, novelists, and filmmakers from Hayden White and Stephen Jay Gould to Graham Swift and Oliver Stone, these "new narrative historians" emphasize process, form, anecdote, perspective, emotion, and contingency over more conventional historical understandings of time, content, evidence, truth, objectivity, and causality. Blurring what some see as "natural" and ethically immutable boundaries between past and present and fact and fiction, historian-storytellers like John Demos, Richard Holmes, and now Slaughter actively weave their own feelings and visions into their narratives while openly acknowledging the historian's role in shaping past "realities." Their readers, exposed to the constructed nature of history and called upon to "imagine" and "experience" the past, are left to discern for themselves the values and lessons of such tales.[3]

To "enliven the narrative" and expose his belief that "experience provides an authority supplementing that of the sources mentioned in the Notes," Slaughter frequently writes in the first person (p. xix). Often, he employs this technique to assist readers in determining which facts are believable and which are less trustworthy, as when he exposes apocryphal tales ("I smell more romance than truth"), dissects the possible lies of his characters ("Perhaps John was more dissembling than I think"), or admits to his own fictionalizations (consider the imagined dialogues between John and William, pp. 10, 110, 223). At other times Slaughter uses the first person to break down conventional barriers between narrator and audience, whether underscoring a commonality of perspective and purpose ("we can only imagine"), confessing his deeply held beliefs and potential biases ("I'm a Quaker"), or revealing intimate biographical details about himself and his family, which clearly inform his acts of interpretation ("My hopes and fears for...[my son] share much with John's for his sons") (pp. 4, xix, 266). Indeed, Slaughter is so convinced that his own "life, consciousness, and nature" are inexorably enmeshed in *The Natures of John and William Bartram* that he includes his name in the index, between "Shakespeare" and "slavery" (pp. xix, 303).

Occasionally, Slaughter shifts into the first person as a means of revealing the constructed nature of what other scholars might conclude are normal causal sequences ("The connection between the two events seems more than a coincidence in time, so the story I tell is that John read the book first" [p. 17]). "Questions about influence," writes Slaughter, "are much more complex" than simply reading William Bartram's collected writings or knowing "the books that he touched and that touched him" (p. 52).[4] Individuals commonly transform themselves in ways that are sometimes unexpected (even to themselves) and at other times deliberate, as when William reorders the chronological sequence of *Travels* to show the person "he wanted to be," or when he possibly destroys correspondence in an effort to alter the historical record (pp. 6, 149-52):

When he didn't hear from his father, William wrote to him again. That this letter is missing, as are the previous three, can't be a coincidence ... I surmise that William sifted through his father's papers in the years after John's death ... As he went about re-creating himself, becoming a new man, the letters pained him. These weren't the work of the new William; they were letters from the Billy whom he wished to deny, to forget, to relegate to the past. (p. 170)

In Slaughter's judgment, no sources, whether paintings, manuscripts, or printed texts, have any "independent standing as evidence" apart from what scholars make of them (p. xix). If the records of human experience are best imagined, represented, and meaningfully related in the form of narratives, the most successful historian-storytellers recognize the importance of unexpected contingencies, multiple voices, shifting connections, and conflicting perspectives. At the same time, they realize they must make personal judgments about which tales are "genuine" and which are the products of self-deception; which plot lines advance their stories and which are distracting tangents; which perceptions can peacefully coexist ("[There] were simply two ways of seeing and he had the capacity for both") and which are irreconcilably "at war" (p. 73).

As with the characters of Hu and Foucquet in Jonathan Spence's *The Question of Hu* (1988), John and William Bartram can be understood as metaphors for two types of thinking about the past. On the one hard, there is the hardworking, demanding evidence-gatherer who is continually in search of the "truth." Like Foucquet and John, he accepts that to some extent the past is a story waiting to be told, even if he disagrees with certain authorities' abilities to interpret and portray it accurately (pp. 62, 67). On the other hand, there is the sensitive, soul-searching artist-observer who revels "in his imagination even while search-

ing for 'facts'" and whose nightmares are "'real' and just as 'true' as what he...[sees] when awake." Like Hu and William, this person is prone to romanticizing the past and "isn't above altering his tale to fit the story that he has to tell" (pp. 154, 88, 216). The best stories, it seems, are ones that combine John's way with William's and seamlessly blend science with art, history with literature, the old narrative with the new. But the question remains--once started down this slippery slope, how are authors to resist the allure of moral relativism? What makes some stories more important than others? Why write history at all?

Slaughter believes that certain human emotions transcend time and cultures, especially those associated with "crises," "depression," and the bonds between parents and children.[5] The basic premise of ***The Natures of John and William Bartram***, which informs nearly every narrative decision Slaughter makes, is this:

John, who was orphaned as a child, was hopelessly insecure as an adult; his ambitious, acquisitive, and sensitive nature grew from an insatiable need for reassurance that his life had meaning as measured by father figures whom he collected. William suffered from an unresolved crisis in his teen years, when he felt betrayed by adults who had encouraged his artistic talents and then wanted him to abandon his art for a more "practical" career. He may also have endured attacks of melancholia, what we call depression, which made it impossible for him to fulfill the expectations of his father and of himself. (p. xviii)

For Slaughter, all stories are not equal. History, by probing the fragile "interior lives" of past actors, speaks directly to present-day individuals' emotional needs, just as the modern authorities on depression whom he quotes at length can elucidate William's complicated thoughts and feelings (pp. xvi, 161, 202). As Slaughter makes clear in his loving dedication to his dog Willie ("who was family, too") and in his afterword, such powerful connections transcend not only time but also species.[6] The Bartrams, friends to all creatures from poisonous rattlesnakes to orphaned bears, share Slaughter's conviction that Americans must recognize their psychological "linkage" to animals and transform society before it "reaps the fruit of its own violence" (p. 133, 263, 270). In the end, our fears that this experimental narrative "might all amount to nothing," as Graham Swift puts it in ***Waterland*** (1981), are dispelled by emphatic calls to action. We must regenerate ourselves by identifying "the deeper feelings that define who we are and determine what we do no matter how we comprehend our actions or explain ourselves to others" (p. xix). We must reform society by voicing "ethical opposition to caging and experimenting on our fellow creatures" and learning "to conserve better, waste less" (pp. 265, 270). Finally, we must rethink the ways that we, as historians, envision and narrate the past.

Notes:

[1]. Since ***The Natures of John and William Bartram*** has already been widely reviewed and since Slaughter prefers to call his book a "story" rather than a biography, I have chosen not to emphasize this first level of meaning. For other reviewers' descriptive accounts of the Bartrams' lives, see especially Patrick O'Brian, ***New York Review of Books***, 17 October 1996, 4-6; Alan Taylor, ***New Republic***, 9 December 1996, 42-46; Michael P. Branch, ***Early American Literature*** 32 (Spring 1997): 196-98; Lawrence Buell, "Doing Biography Naturally," ***Reviews in American History*** 25 (June 1997): 227-31; and Ron Limbaugh, ***Journal of American History*** 84 (June 1997): 208-209.

[2]. In such a manner Slaughter answers William Cronon's call in "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," ***Journal of American History*** 78 (March 1992): 1347-76.

[3]. For exemplary works by new narrative historians, see Carlo Ginzburg, ***The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, ***The Return of Martin Guerre*** (Cam-

bridge: Harvard UP, 1983); Jonathan Spence, ***The Question of Hu*** (New York: Knopf, 1988); Robert Rosenstone, ***Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan*** (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988); Simon Schama, ***Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*** (New York: Knopf, 1991); Richard Holmes, ***Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage*** (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Stella Tillyard, ***Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa, and Sarah Lennox, 1740-1832*** (New York: FSG, 1994); David Hackett Fischer, ***Paul Revere's Ride*** (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); John Demos, ***The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*** (New York: Knopf, 1994); and James Goodman, ***Stories of Scottsboro*** (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

[4]. Slaughter is the editor of William Bartram's ***Travels, and Other Writings*** (New York: Library of America, 1996). See also his review of Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, eds., ***The Correspondence of John Bartram, 1734-1777*** (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1992), in ***William and Mary Quarterly*** 50 (April 1993): 440-43.

[5]. Here, Slaughter is in agreement with John Demos, whose ***Unredeemed Captive*** also serves as the inspiration for his chapter titles "Beginnings" and "Endings."

[6]. Slaughter might have made more of this argument by connecting William Bartram's attitudes toward the treatment of animals with his antislavery conversion (discussed on pp. 203-206). Animal identification can be regarded as the flip side of the "animalization" process discussed by David Brion Davis in "At the Heart of Slavery," ***New York Review of Books***, 17 October 1996, 51-54.

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