

## The Curious Mister Catesby

By E. Charles Nelson, David J. Elliott, and 23 contributors. 2015. The University of Georgia Press, 320 South Jackson Street, Athens, GA, USA, 30602. 425 pages, 42.95 USD, Cloth.

Charles Nelson and David Elliott have taken full advantage of the thirteen years of work by the Catesby Commemorative Trust, the superb ten-years-in-production documentary produced by Cynthia P. Neal in 2007 (still available online from Georgia Public Broadcasting) and the three Catesby symposia held during November 2012 in three consecutive centres: Washington, DC; Richmond, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina. Supplementing these efforts with diligent research of their own, Nelson, Elliot and their fellow contributors have produced a book which fully lives up to their claim that *The Curious Mister Catesby* is “the most comprehensive and accurate book produced to date about Mark Catesby.” It also lives up to Cromwell Mortimer’s 1749 conclusion in *Philosophic Transactions* that Catesby’s eleven fascicles with twenty colour plates each, were back then “the most magnificent work I know of, since the Art of printing has been discovered.”

The first chapter by Charles Nelson is an admirable summation of the life of Catesby. Cynthia Neal writes of “Catesby as a remarkably intelligent man with a genius for observation and recall”. Karen Reeds tells of the botanical explorers, including Thomas Harriot, John White, John Gerard, John Tradescant, John Parkinson, John Banister and John Ray, who preceded Catesby. Other important chapters deal with the talent-

ed Maria Sibylla Merian, who visited Surinam and impressed Catesby with her artistic and scientific skills; the pirate-scholar William Dampier; John Lawson’s travels in Carolina; Catesby’s journeys in Virginia, Carolina and the Bahamas; and Catesby’s plant collections sent to Oxford and to English gardens. Shepherd Krech III cites Frick and Stearn’s opinion that Catesby’s “lasting fame” has been due to “his contributions as an ornithologist—he was “years ahead of his time” in his “eyewitness evidence” that “birds of passage” migrated annually. Catesby conjectured that want of food might explain some of these movements. Krech elsewhere in 2014 wrote that Catesby’s text “surpasses” Rays’s editing of Willoughby’s *Ornithology*, the standard work to that time.

Henrietta McBurney provides insight into how Catesby based his final paintings on preliminary sketches. Leslie Overstreet discusses the extreme difficulties faced by Catesby in achieving publication, requiring major financial support from 155 “encouragers.” Charles Jarvis tells how Catesby’s paintings arrived in perfect time to benefit from Latin nomenclature in Linnaeus’ landmark catalogue of plants, *Species Plantarum* in 1753 and his catalogue of zoology, *Systema Naturae*, in 1758. Only 34 of Catesby’s new species of plants were type species for Linnaeus’ binomial Latin names,

many fewer than the over 100 new bird species to receive this permanent recognition.

During his Virginia visit, 22 April 1712 to 1719, with side visits to Jamaica and Bermuda in 1714, Catesby supported himself as a primary collector of botanical specimens for his recipients in Great Britain. On his second visit, he collected and painted specimens for himself with an eye to future publication. He arrived at Charles Town 3 May 1722 and toured South Carolina. He was the first naturalist to visit the Bahamas, arriving on Christmas day, 1725 and staying well into 1726 before he returned permanently to England. In London, he encountered Joseph Goupy, who taught him the skills necessary for the labourious task of printmaking, etching and colouring the plates for his eventual book. By the middle of May 1729, Catesby's first twenty plates, each personally hand-coloured, of his *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, were ready to present to Her Majesty Queen Caroline and to the Royal Society. Parts 2 and 3 followed in 1730, parts 4 and 5 in 1731 and the final six parts in 1734, 1736, 1737, 1739, 1743 and 1747. Failing in health from this lifetime of labour, having coloured 44,000 plates, Catesby died 23 December 1749, aged 66 years, 9 months.

I have a few minor quibbles. The chronology ceased before it informed me that the Catesby Commemorative Trust borrowed the original Catesby paintings from the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle. In 1768, King George III had purchased the standard Catesby set of 220 coloured plates from a bookseller in three leather-bound volumes. The 1997 public exhibition of some of them at Buckingham Palace and in the United States stimulated an international re-examination of Catesby's artistic and scientific achievements; they were separately mounted and photographed by *Alecto Historical Editions Limited* of Essex, England. I regret also that the project does not explain what was involved in the "digital realization of original etchings" by Lucie Hey and Nigel Frith. Co-author Charles Nelson informs me that Hey and Frith's touched-up details of Catesby paintings were used first by the Trust for the successful and still available one-hour "Vimeo" masterminded about 2007 – and more recently in the printed book.

I also regret that this book has soft-pedalled the achievements and the skills of Mark Catesby, failing to mention Elsa Guerdrum Allen's 1951 naming of Catesby as "the founder of North American ornithology." Rather than "tooting the Catesby horn," the contributors leave each reader to reach his or her own conclusion as to the unprecedented skill of Catesby as a largely self-taught artist and pioneer natural history engraver, well before the invention of lithography in 1798. As a scientist he was often a century ahead of his time, one of the first observers to understand how and why birds migrate.

What factors might have helped Catesby place Charles Town and adjacent South Carolina first for new species named by Linnaeus? As the wealthiest city north of Lima, Peru, available leisure time and ownership of slaves by many who helped Catesby may have been a benefit? Strangely, before the 1770s the North American runner-up locality that sent the second largest number of new bird species for Linnaeus to name was remote Hudson Bay and its fur-traders, via paintings by George Edwards published in 1743-1751, whereas Charles Town medical doctors John Lining and Lionel Chambers were second to Hudson Bay for meteorological observations (Houston *et al.* 2003). What a contrast between affluence and isolation!

The superb illustrations and the quality of the writing and research justify the modest expenditure for this magnificent book. The six pages of Catesby chronology, 33 of end notes, 18 of bibliography, and 12 of scientific names, add greatly to the strength of the collaboration. Books tend to be going out of style, but this landmark book about Catesby's three-centuries-old launching of scientific natural history in North America demonstrates the advantages that the printed text has over digital forms of communication. It therefore belongs in every University library world-wide. I recommend without reservation that naturalists buy it, savour it, treasure it and share it.

**Houston, C.S., T. Ball, and M. Houston.** 2003. *The Eighteenth-century Naturalists of Hudson Bay*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

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