

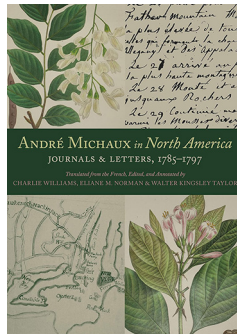
OTHER

André Michaux in North America: Journals & Letters, 1785–1797

Edited by Charlie Williams, Eliane M. Norman, and Walter Kingsley Taylor. Translated by Eliane M. Norman. Foreword by James E. McClellan. 2020. University of Alabama Press. Distributed in Canada by UBC Press. 608 pages, 124 colour figures, 18 black and white figures, and 16 maps, 68.95 CAD, Hardcover.

This weighty tome (literally, it weighs almost 2.3 kg!) provides a day-to-day account of the North American travels and discoveries of iconic 18th century French naturalist André Michaux (1746–1802). Those discoveries were essential in his preparation of *Flora Boreali-Americana* (Parisii et Argentorati [i.e., Paris et Strasbourg, France], Apud fratres Levrault, 1803). When posthumously published in 1803, it represented the first flora for eastern North America.

André Michaux in North America does more than



just translate his original journals from French. The editors of this attractive and physically well-produced book copiously annotate and expand upon Michaux's raw entries. They fill in many of the frequent gaps in the record with information gleaned from his miscellaneous papers and from correspondence by him and/or his associates.

And what a time he had! Venturing out from Charleston, South Carolina, where he maintained a large garden property, Michaux scoured the wild areas of what is now the eastern United States on foot and by horseback in search of plants of economic, medicinal, or scientific significance. The prize finds were sent back to his royal (and later republican) sponsors in France. Such an undertaking would have been incredibly challenging—even life-threatening—for anyone in the late 18th century. This was a period of

immense political and social upheaval both in North America and back in Europe. The American Revolution had just ended; the French Revolution exploded in the midst of his American period. Working under such conditions would have to have been even more difficult for Michaux, someone raised in the Versailles gardens of Louis XV but now reporting from afar to republican administrations not noted for recent kindness to royalists! However, one of the many insights offered by the supplementary materials gathered by the editors is strong evidence that Michaux was a republican at heart and did not mourn the passing of the French monarchy.

Oddly, the botanical information contained in his field journals is relatively slim. These were essentially daily diaries, highlighting travel and logistical facts but rarely going into great detail on the plants he saw, let alone the particular specimens he collected. While some entries list a dozen or so of the species he encountered in a day, others provide only descriptive statements or generic determinations, and some list no plants at all. That is frustrating, especially for Canadian botanists interested in details of Michaux's monumental canoe trip into northern Quebec. Some Quebec entries, like that for 22 August 1792 on the Mistassini River north of Lac Saint-Jean (p. 185), offer fulsome landscape descriptions but virtually nothing on the plant species he saw. The editors provide valuable supplementary information in this case, however, obtained from a list found elsewhere amongst Michaux's papers. Thankfully, they do this in many other places in the book, too. Of particular value are the footnotes, which untangle the often-fragmentary descriptions and archaic nomenclature employed by Michaux and express likely meanings in contemporary terms (e.g., suggesting that "*Cerasus racemosa* petioles glandular" [p. 186] may indicate these Mistassini River plants were Choke Cherry [*Prunus virginiana* L.] [p. 472]). Yet many of the journal entries record little more than logistical issues and a notation of the distance travelled that day.

I had hoped to see some mention of the Mistassini Primrose (*Primula mistassinica*) that Michaux famously discovered at Lac Mistassini between 4 and 7 September 1792, and which he described as new to science in *Flora Boreali-Americana*. Its absence from the journal entries seems odd, as Michaux would undoubtedly have immediately recognized this distinctive plant to be something unusual, if not unique.

Providing such an abundance of information unavoidably makes for a lengthy volume. Significant reductions in the book's length (and cost) could have

been realized with no significant loss of understanding by a judicious editing of certain sections. The Foreword goes on for nine pages where one (or two) would have done the trick. Omitting an 18-page, full-colour Appendix (pp. 355–372) comprised of pleasant but only marginally useful photos of some of the taxa mentioned would surely have reduced publication costs. And was there really a need for six pages of names in the Acknowledgements?

On the other hand, the Table of Described Plants (pp. 373–414) that identifies and then cites page numbers for every Michaux journal observation is pure gold. Indeed, this and the superb biographical sketch of Michaux's life and scientific contributions (pp. 1–24) will probably be of greatest interest to most readers. Those of us more deeply interested in the details of Michaux's peregrinations will greatly appreciate the numerous and informative footnotes populating most pages.

I found the placement of the text for the footnotes in stand-alone listings at the back of the book, their numbering restarting with each chapter, to be unnecessarily cumbersome. Having footnote numbers running continuously throughout the volume would have been simpler. It would also significantly reduce the annoying degree to which flipping back and forth is required to keep up with the valuable commentaries provided by the editors.

Those commentaries are particularly rich in detail about the people and places Michaux encountered, especially in the southern United States. Details in the footnotes underscore what a high-powered sociopolitical world Michaux operated in when he was not slogging through swamps, climbing the Appalachian Mountains, or sailing along the Spanish-held islands off the Florida coast. He routinely associated with members of the elite of the time, including such famous intellectual and political American personalities as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington.

André Michaux in North America is more a scholarly reference book than it is a can't-put-it-down adventure tale. However, the information and insights the editors provide (and I've not even mentioned their commentaries of Michaux's political intrigues against the Spanish on behalf of France and the United States during this time) could very well support the telling of such a tale. In detailing all this for a contemporary audience, the editors have served the history of North American botanical exploration very well. Still, I can't wait for the movie!

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