

Film Review:

Cultivating the Wild

2020. DVD. 57 min. Produced by Scott Auerbach, Eric Breitenbach, Dorinda Dallmeyer. Directed by Eric Breitenbach. Written by Dorinda Dallmeyer.

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The echoes of naturalist William Bartram still ring loudly more than 200 years after his sojourn through what today is the southeastern United States. His descriptions of the people as well as the flora and fauna of what would become Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Alabama are beloved by scholars, artists, writers, and anyone interested in the natural history of these areas. A new documentary film, *Cultivating the Wild: William Bartram's Travels*, offers a fresh glimpse into Bartram's journey while profiling six modern-day "Bartrams" who exude his love and passion for the natural world.

The film's stunning photography and adept storytelling immerse viewers into sites that Bartram visited in 1773-77 while making illustrations and collecting botanical specimens for a wealthy British collector. Viewers hear his descriptions of "diaphanous" springs, of native people, and of the world as a "glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator"—all quotes from his 1791 published account of the trip, known widely today as Bartram's Travels. It was a book that inspired European poets and "continues to fire the imaginations of all who love southern landscapes," according to the film's narrator, author Bailey White.

That also is the intent of this 57-minute documentary, a collaboration between historians, writers, and filmmakers who use Bartram's eloquent prose to frame each segment highlighting the modern successors of his sensitive, inquisitive thinking. Shot at sixteen locations during a four-year period and edited from 60 hours of film, it offers a sense of wonder at the natural world while inspiring viewers to save what remains.

Georgia artist Philip Juras's mother owned a copy of *Travels*, helping inspire his landscape painting. As the film depicts him wading through a river

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to reach a stand of brilliant white shoal lilies or painting a scene of a pine forest fire with his easel set up near the flickering flames, Juras reveals a desire to capture a “magical, mystical landscape”—what he might have seen had he traveled with Bartram. It is an opportunity to consider nature’s inspiration for art, but also a lesson about the need for fire in the endangered longleaf pine habitat, a perfect ecosystem lesson.

Although Bartram never saw manatees—only the partial skeleton of one in north Florida—the mammals are central to a segment extolling the beauty of the state’s springs. Looking into a spring, the peaceful Quaker Bartram saw “no signs of enmity” among various fish and creatures. Wayne Hartley peers into crystalline waters at Blue Spring State Park and affectionately sees manatees that he has been tracking since 1980. Gliding in a canoe on a still, chilly morning, Hartley calls them by name—many recognizable from boat propeller scars—and welcomes them. “It’s like old friends,” he says while jotting notes and drawings in his journal much the way Bartram might have recorded observations.

Drew Lanham, a writer, wildlife biologist, and professor at Clemson University, treads in Bartram’s footsteps pursuing birds. Bartram “made systematic observations about birds that no one had done before,” narrator White states. Now Lanham carries on by studying avian life, which he calls a “symbol of freedom.” Describing his “love affair with birds,” Lanham speaks poetically and a final scene of his large, gloved hand holding the preserved body of a tiny, yellow Bachman’s warbler—a species not seen alive since 1988—is especially touching.

Other “Bartrams” in the film include Jim Sawgrass, a member of the Muskogee Creek nation who works to keep native folk ways and culture alive, and Janisse Ray, a celebrated author who speaks about her life “in communion” with nature and the need for modern populations to live more sustainably. Perhaps no “Bartram” is as poignant as James Holland who once patrolled Georgia’s rivers as the Altamaha Riverkeeper, trying to stop polluters and instill a sense of stewardship to state residents. He expresses his anger at municipal pipes dumping untreated sewage into the river and denounces a pulp mill’s dirty discharge. “The people pay the price,” he states. But no scene is as powerful as Holland’s careful trek into an ancient cypress

swamp where he stands next to a massive tree with a base circumference of 38 feet. It's "God's county," he declares. "If Bartram were alive today and I could converse with him after the work that he has done in the wild and nature itself all I could say is thank you, thank you, thank you because you made my life better," Holland says.

At the film's conclusion, viewers are urged to appreciate Bartram's lessons and become advocates for the natural wonders now at risk. Although Bartram was no activist—there was vastly more wilderness than civilization in these places during his lifetime—the narrator urges that his legacy "should heighten our commitment to saving what remains of the long-gone world he described."

That is a powerful message in today's world where population is growing rapidly, bringing attendant development, resource use and extraction, and air and water pollution. And although we find ourselves today constricted in our ability to roam deep into wild areas, this film offers an "armchair" journey and education about the beauty of the southeastern United States and the complex ecology, culture, and issues it faces. Everyone interested in the region's biota and history should see it—and then get to work saving it.