

Who was John Bartram?

Gareth Evans

In celebrating the life of Pennsylvanian farmer John Bartram (1699-1777) the organisers of his tercentenary conference had to summarise his achievements. They seemed to have some problems categorising his life and career. 'Botanist – Naturalist – Explorer' hardly seemed adequate to describe his work and legacy. Perhaps the best description was his own, given when he related his earliest awakenings of interest in the natural world around him. He simply stated that (to paraphrase) 'he had more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to have'. The word 'curious' has had a shifting definition over the centuries. Most of its shades of meaning seem to be pretty well covered by its Latin derivation 'to take pains over', something which John Bartram did in almost all aspects of his life.

Thankfully, in preparing a presentation to take to the Philadelphia conference we had only to focus on John Bartram's connection to his British colleagues. The sheer quantity of plant material he sent over, in more than forty years, ensured the firm introduction of many American species into this country. The quality of the material and the skill of the recipients (including Philip Miller) in propagation of the seeds and cuttings resulted in an estimated 150 to 200 North American species being introduced into Britain. The presentation was too short to portray John Bartram in any depth, but his complex character intrigued us. This was despite the Philadelphia authenticity of Christine

Riesenfeld, who played Bartram to the hilt in a bravura breeches role. (Her energy and personal effort in organising the project ensured its success and we will miss her now she has returned to America.)

Fortunately, Sue Snell, the garden's photographer-in-residence, helped us all get into character by leading us gently into the transforming world of theatrical costumiers. The beauty of the outfits, particularly the men's, was to give the cast a humbling after-show experience as members of the audience came backstage to



'meet' the costumes.

On arriving in Pennsylvania we travelled around between gardens. It was a good year for *Paulownia*, and in the flatland in-between the freeways and the airport their pink frothy blooms stood out among the scrub, reminding us of the Physic Garden. One imagined Bartram riding through there, or through the beautiful undulating country to the north, collecting locally or on his way to one of his long expeditions into then disputed territory. Among the fine gardens that we saw was the Mount Cuba Research Centre. Set in remote position among wooded hills, it specialises in the flora of the Piedmont terrain (i.e. the land between the coastal plain and the inland mountains). Under the tall canopy of tulip trees, great slipper orchids and varieties of trilliums, some newly developed, could be discovered.

We found our American hosts warm and open-handed especially at the Morris Arboretum, where we put on our first performance. Thanks to Roger Monks' painstaking rehearsals and the twin foundations of the narrators, Mary Griffiths and Mike Watts, the presentation was received with pleasure and 'approbation'. Reported comments such as; 'I know I've seen Mr. Monks on the West End stage', or 'How did you come to give the Physic Garden its name?' and 'did you get the part because you fitted the costume?' can all be authenticated. At the end of the week we gave three performances over two days at Bartram's house and garden, which has survived in the industrial landscape of West Philadelphia. Secluded by trees in its substantial grounds, the oil refineries and the skyscrap-

ers of downtown Philadelphia were obscured from the house. Schoolchildren and visitors were led around by guides dressed in period costume and one could get an impression of the little 'kingdom' that Bartram made for himself. Perhaps here was an insight into his many-sided character. In his 'estate' he was halfway between the city and backwoods, somewhere between the society of his 'learned' city friends and the homesteading farmers of Pennsylvania. Figuratively too, he found himself between worlds; Native American and colonial cultures, the unclaimed territory he loved to explore and the natural philosophers of Europe who wanted to know their contents. At the junction of these worlds he built a house decorated with huge rustic columns and humble inscriptions to his wife and God. He helped raise eleven children and presented each with his philosophy of life for them to read. A lay doctor to his servants and poor neighbours, he encouraged his fellow Americans in the use of native medicinal plants. Still he found time to read theology to a point where he was expelled from his Quaker meeting house. Respected by those around him, nevertheless, maybe only he knew all he had seen, read, and learnt in his unique position at the hub of Old and New Worlds.

The contribution of the group to the Bartram 300 celebrations was made possible by generosity of the Management Council of the Chelsea Physic Garden and The McLean Contributorship. Thanks goes to them, Christine Riesenfeld and Ruth Preucel of Philadelphia, and all who helped us to realise the project.