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Patrick Spero, *The Scientist Turned Spy: André Michaux, Thomas Jefferson, and the Conspiracy of 1793*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024. viii + 334 pp. Notes and index. $34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780813952185; $32.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780813952192.

Review by Philipp Ziesche, The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Yale University.

Among the many treasures held by the library of the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia, one of the most intriguing is the Michaux Subscription List. A one-page document written in early 1793 by Thomas Jefferson, then the U.S. secretary of state and the vice president of the APS, it outlines the plan for a transcontinental scientific expedition from Philadelphia to the Pacific Ocean by the French botanist André Michaux. At the bottom of the page, thirty-eight subscribers to the expedition signed their names with the amount of their pledges. The list is the only known document signed by the first four U.S. presidents--George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison--and includes the signatures of other Founding Fathers like Alexander Hamilton, Henry Knox, and Robert Morris. The original list was believed missing until 1979, when (so the story goes) an APS library intern found it while cleaning out a storage vault.

As the librarian of the APS, Patrick Spero (who is now the institution's C.E.O.) told this story countless times to visitors. During the pandemic lockdown, he decided to delve deeper into the history behind the Subscription List. Who was André Michaux? Why did so many prominent Americans support his expedition? And why did the expedition never take place? The resulting book is divided into four parts: one for each of these questions and a final section on Michaux's post-American life and legacy.

Although *The Scientist Turned Spy* is about a French scientist in the service of successive French regimes, it is a very America-centric work. After Michaux's arrival in the United States in 1785, there are only a few, very general references to events in France. For example, Spero writes that Michaux "assumed in these heady early days of the French Revolution that his countrymen were simply establishing what he saw and enjoyed in the United States" (p. 68). However, in the early years of the French Revolution, neither Michaux nor many people in France assumed that France was headed toward a republican form of government, but rather toward a constitutional monarchy. *The Scientist Turned Spy* is based almost exclusively on published primary and secondary sources in English. Spero relies heavily on the work of American scholars who have

researched Michaux's life and made his scientific and travel writings accessible to modern readers.[1] The book is strongest when it follows Michaux's winding path across America and focuses on his scientific practice.

The book's first part recounts Michaux's career up to 1793. Michaux was born in 1746 into a farming family on the royal domain of Satory, a part of Versailles. Initially trained in agriculture, Michaux turned to botany after the death of his wife in 1770. He studied under Louis-Guillaume Le Monnier at the Jardin du Roi and Bernard de Jussieu at the royal gardens of Trianon Palace and embarked on increasingly ambitious and arduous field expeditions to England, the Auvergne, Spain, and Persia. Shortly after his return from Persia in 1785, Michaux was appointed as royal botanist by Louis XVI and dispatched to America. He was charged with collecting trees, seeds, plants, and fruits, and shipping them to France to revitalize French forestry and agriculture. Between 1785 and 1792, Michaux tirelessly pursued this mission and his own botanical research from Florida and the Bahamas to Canada and sent tens of thousands of American specimens to France.

Spero persuasively depicts Michaux as a transitional figure between "the era of the self-taught natural historian and the specialized professional scientist of the nineteenth century" (p. 273). Michaux's self-image as an autonomous, highly-trained botanist dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was in constant tension with his lack of financial independence and reliance on patronage. Spero also highlights Michaux's use of enslaved labor at his farm and nursery near Charleston as well as on his expeditions, during which he also depended on Indigenous guides. Another recurrent theme is the role of scientific research in facilitating international cooperation and exchange of knowledge while also being an arena of national competition and conflict. Spero illustrates this duality in his accounts of Michaux's encounters with British and American botanists in the field.

The book's second part examines Michaux's interactions with the APS and the creation of the Subscription List. At the end of 1792, after completing an expedition into Canada, Michaux was unsure whether he would continue to be employed by the French Republic but determined to continue his scientific work in America. He approached several members of the APS to seek the institution's sponsorship of a western expedition and found an enthusiastic supporter in Thomas Jefferson. In fact, Jefferson had been contemplating the exploration of the West beyond the Mississippi since the end of the Revolutionary War. In Jefferson's view, the destiny of the United States as an agrarian republic depended on territorial expansion, for which exploration would lay the groundwork. Jefferson took complete control of the negotiations with Michaux, setting the terms of the expedition and organizing the subscription.

Spero notes that Jefferson never sought and never received the APS's approval of his plan for Michaux's expedition or of the subscription raised in the APS's name. Spero dismisses this as a "small detail" and writes that Jefferson "had gotten a bit ahead of himself" (pp. 104, 108). This is a remarkable understatement, given that Jefferson committed the APS to the most ambitious and expensive project in the institution's history since the building of the APS's home, Philosophical Hall, in 1788. Moreover, most of the initial signers of the subscription were not APS members, but government officials. This was not a coincidence, because Jefferson personally solicited

subscribers in hierarchical order (reflected in the sequence of signatures) from the president and vice president to senators and cabinet members to congressional representatives. Only in April 1793, three months after starting the subscription, did Jefferson submit the plan for discussion at a general meeting of the APS. Spero's explanations for this behavior are unconvincing. He argues that Jefferson may have wanted to "make a statement about funding science through individual initiatives and voluntary associations rather than expecting the federal government to act" and allow "individual subscribers to show their support for a project and then present it to an institution for endorsement" (p. 109). However, anyone reading the subscription plan would have assumed that the APS had already approved the project. The first and most generous signatory, President Washington, certainly did. Presented with the signatures of the highest-ranking public officials, the APS was left with little choice but to endorse the subscription. I think that Jefferson understood that the decision-making process of the APS was torturously slow and that past APS subscription projects, like the one for Philosophical Hall, had nearly failed due to internal dissension and financial constraints. He deliberately forced the APS's hand while giving a partly government-funded reconnaissance mission for westward expansion the veneer of a scientific expedition, conducted inconspicuously by a Frenchman. How little the APS was involved in the project is evidenced by the fact that the expedition was not mentioned again in meeting minutes after April 1793 until December 1796, when it was recorded that the expedition had never happened.

The project was derailed, as Spero explains in the book's third part, by the arrival in Philadelphia of Edmond Genet, the new French minister to the United States, in May 1793. Genet enlisted Michaux in an audacious secret plan, authorized by the Girondin ministry. Michaux would help to raise an American volunteer army in Kentucky, commanded by Revolutionary War veteran George Rogers Clark, that was going to vest control of Louisiana and the Mississippi River from Spain. The assault would open a new front in France's ongoing war with Britain and Spain and draw the United States into the conflict on the French side.

Genet unofficially informed Jefferson of this plan and Michaux's role in it. The secretary of state did nothing to stop the scheme or inform anyone else in the American government about it, although President Washington had just issued the Neutrality Proclamation intended to keep the United States out of the European conflagration. Spero finds Jefferson's tacit support of the planned invasion "shocking" and "inexplicable" (p. 162) but offers several reasons for Jefferson's actions. Contrary to the administration in which he served, Jefferson believed that the United States should be allied with France and that a conflict with Spain was inevitable given the need for American territorial expansion.

Using botanical research as a cover, Michaux traveled to Kentucky as Genet's agent to prepare the invasion. Spero paints a vivid picture of the political and physical landscape that Michaux encountered during this very different kind of expedition (although Michaux still managed to fit in plenty of botanizing). Ultimately, it all came to nothing. While Michaux was on the frontier, the French government recalled Genet at the request of the Washington administration. Moreover, when the U.S. government learned of the planned attack on Louisiana, it forced Kentucky officials to clamp down on it.

The Genet mission and the role that it played in the formation of the first American party system is a very familiar story to historians of the early republic. The details of the planned assault on Louisiana are much less well known, and it is often dismissed as an exercise in futility. Spero makes a convincing case that the insurgency, fueled by French money and the grievances of the frontiersmen and condoned by state and federal officials, posed a serious threat to the young nation. The Washington administration's belated but forceful reaction marked a turning point in establishing the federal government's authority on the frontier.

The final part of the book addresses Michaux's last years. He suffered no repercussions from his involvement in Genet's plot and in 1796 returned to France. In 1801 he joined a scientific expedition to Australia but left it in Mauritius. In 1802 Michaux traveled to Madagascar where he died at the age of 56. The following year Jefferson was able to realize his long-held plan for a transcontinental expedition, this one led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (incidentally, the young brother of would-be insurgent George Rogers Clark). Spero believes that Michaux's scientific achievements have been obscured by his failure to write an account of his discoveries and travels. Hopefully, Spero's engaging narrative will spark new interest among American and European historians in this unjustly forgotten explorer.

NOTE

[1] This includes the biography by Henry Savage and Elizabeth J. Savage, *André and François André Michaux* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986), as well as *Andre Michaux in North America: Journals and Letters, 1785-1797*, ed. and trans. Charlie Williams, Elaine M. Norman, and Walter Kingsley Taylor (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020) and J.P.F. Deleuze, *The Annotated Memoirs of the Life and Botanical Travels of André Michaux*, ed. Charlie Williams (Athens, GA: Fevertree, 2011).

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