

Bees in America: How the Honey Bee Shaped a Nation

Tammy Horn. 2005. The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington. 333 pp., hardbound. \$27.50.

Letters from the Hive: An Intimate History of Bees, Honey, and Humankind

Stephen Buchmann with Banning Repplier. 2005. Bantam Books, New York. 276 pp., hardbound. \$24.

Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey, The Sweet Liquid Gold That Seduced the World

Holley Bishop. 2005. Free Press, New York. 325 pp., hardbound. \$24.

Sweetness & Light: The Mysterious History of the Honeybee

Hattie Ellis. 2004. Harmony Books, New York. 244 pp., hardbound. \$23.

Bees in America will most appeal to American history buffs, who may be surprised to learn how bees, honey, and beekeepers figure in events, prominent and obscure, that shaped our nation. Much of what you will learn is, in the author's word, esoteric (and I would add, to say the least), but that is part of this book's charm. Writer Tammy Horn finds a role for bees and honey in everything from their symbolic value in defining the American dream based on the beelike values of work, thrift, and efficiency, to their inspiration of musicians such as Muddy Waters, whose "Honey Bee" is a blues standard, and poets such as Sylvia Plath, whose father was a beekeeper. According to one story, George Washington credited bees with "saving America" after a quick-witted girl caused her bees to attack British soldiers so she could get away from them and warn the Revolutionary army of an impending attack. (This was not the first time bees were enlisted in the cause of war—in fact, loosing bees is an ancient form of biological warfare.) Horn even points to a growing ecotourism niche called apitourism—visiting bee farms for pleasure!

In *Robbing the Bees*, Holley Bishop, an amateur beekeeper and honey gourmet, follows a year in the life of a Florida professional beekeeper while offering a wide-ranging survey of the biology of honeybees, the long human history of honey harvesting and beekeeping, and the diverse uses of honey, wax, and other products of the hive. *Robbing the Bees* is replete with fascinating facts. For instance: In about three weeks of active foraging, a worker bee will travel some 500 miles before she dies after a total lifespan of about six weeks. While

in its egg and larval stage, each bee is fed about 10,000 separate pollen meals by many different nurse bees. The first record of honey hunting dates to 6000 B.C.E., in a petroglyph from Spain depicting a method of honey collecting that is still practiced today in parts of Asia and Africa. Fermented honey—mead—was the intoxicating beverage of choice long before wine and other spirits. Honey is a preservative as well as an antibiotic. Long a staple of folk medicine, modern studies are demonstrating its efficacy in controlling skin infections—Bishop calls it the "world's first self-adhering Band-Aid."

Stephen Buchmann covers much of the same ground in *Letters from the Hive* but includes a tasty sampler of the many varieties of honey, recipes and tips for cooking with honey, and, appropriately for a professor of entomology, an overview of bees of the world. Alone among these busy writers about bees, he also explores the decline of stingless bees, both wild and husbanded, in the Yucatán. These bees traditionally provided honey to the Maya, but declined thanks both to deforestation and the arrival of Africanized honeybees, "which take the lion's share of floral nectar, making it difficult for stingless bees to make a living."

Hattie Ellis is an "apitourist" who begins *Sweetness & Light* in the English countryside, where she accompanies a beekeeper harvesting his honey, and ends it in Chicago, where bee hives grace the roof of city hall; and New York, where city officials have banned urban beekeeping; with stops in Sicily, Greece, and even New Zealand along the way. Ellis' book, relating much of the same infor-

mation as the others, is the most beautifully written of the four. She wonderfully describes how the bees respond to a suited-up honey thief: "The bees . . . go purposefully berserk. Zinging, small, aggressive atoms, gold in the late-afternoon sun, attacking again and again from different angles, trying to find a way into the bee suit. Their persistence is unrelenting." And here she defines honey: ". . . bees perform an act of alchemy. Honey is nothing less than concentrated nectar; and a pot of good honey is the essence of its surroundings, a sweet, fragrant river from a million tributaries, carried across the air and flowing gold into the pot through the transforming power of bees."

But, as Ellis reports, in medieval Europe, beeswax for candles was the far more valuable product of the hive. Her title alludes to this, and comes from Jonathan Swift, who wrote, "We have chosen to fill our hives with honey and wax; thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light."

Many more things we value are gifts from the bees too. Choose any one of these sweet books and read all about it.

—Susan Lumpkin

