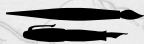




# THE LOST KINGDOM

**MATTHEW J. KIRBY**



Scholastic Press ~ New York

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*For Jim Kirby,  
still the man I want to be when I grow up*

—•••—

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557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kirby, Matthew J., 1976–

The lost kingdom / Matthew J. Kirby. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: On the eve of the French and Indian War, Billy Bartram and his naturalist  
father travel into the American wilderness in an airship — pursued by a party of  
French soldiers and haunted by a terrifying bear-wolf — on a quest to find the lost  
kingdom of the Welsh prince Madoc.

ISBN 978-0-545-27426-5 (jacketed hardcover) 1. Bartram, William, 1739-1823 — Juvenile  
fiction. 2. Bartram, John, 1699-1777 — Juvenile fiction. 3. Naturalists — United  
States — Juvenile fiction. 4. Quests (Expeditions) — Juvenile fiction. 5. Voyages and  
travels — Juvenile fiction. 6. Adventure stories. 7. United States — History — Colonial  
period, ca. 1600-1775 — Juvenile fiction. [1. Bartram, William, 1739-1823 — Fiction.

2. Bartram, John, 1699-1777 — Fiction. 3. Adventure and adventurers — Fiction.

4. Voyages and travels — Fiction. 5. United States — History — Colonial period,  
ca. 1600-1775 — Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.K633528Los 2013

813.6 — dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1    13 14 15 16 17

Printed in the U.S.A.    23    First edition, September 2013

The text type was set in Book Antiqua.

The display type was set in The Youths Companion.

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi



## CHAPTER 1

### *Spies*

**A** muffled clatter startled me awake, and I froze in my bed, listening in the darkness. Through my open window, I heard whispers from down in my father's garden.

Deep voices. More than one.

I slipped to the floor, holding my breath, and crossed to the window. The moon had come and gone, the night over our farm as dark as it would get before dawn. But I could make out the edges and borders of the kitchen garden and the flower beds. And then I caught the waver of candlelight through the windows of my father's garden study. Someone was in there.

But not my father. Not at this time of night.

I leaned farther out the window, trying to hear, but a slight breeze rustled the trees and made it hard to understand what they were saying. I swallowed, a chill deep in my chest.

## THE LOST KINGDOM

Who were they? Robbers? What did they want? What would they do to my family?

I turned to look at my little brother sleeping in his bed, undisturbed. And then I heard a creak on the landing outside my door, then footsteps down the stairs. I crept to the doorway and peered out, finding my father halfway down to the first floor.

"Father," I whispered.

He jolted. "Billy, what are you —"

"There are men outside." I stepped out onto the landing.

He laid his index finger against his lips and nodded.

"Stay in your room."

"But, Father —"

"Do as I say, Billy." He descended the rest of the way and disappeared into the kitchen.

I hesitated. A part of me wanted to do what he asked, wanted to climb back into my bed and pretend I hadn't heard anyone creeping around in the garden. But the larger part of me worried about what would happen to my father and couldn't ignore the men outside. I followed him down the stairs. As I came into the kitchen, I saw him loading his rifle by the dim red light of the coals still smoldering in the fireplace.

He looked up. "I told you to stay in your room."

"But who are they?" I took a step toward him. "What do they want?"

"Billy." He set his powder horn down on the table. "You must return to your room. Now."

Why wasn't he raising the alarm? Rousing the family? I could run to my older brother's neighboring farm and be back with him in minutes. There was something my father wasn't telling me. "I'm coming with you."

"Absolutely not."

The sound of breaking glass came from outside.

My father cocked the hammer of his rifle and slipped to the door. He opened it slowly, letting in the sound of crickets and the night breeze. He raised the barrel of the gun, tucked the butt into his shoulder, and stepped over the threshold.

I followed him to the door but stopped short. In the darkness, I could almost lose his black shape stalking up to and then around the nectarine tree that grew by the house. Beyond him, the door to his shed hung open, and shadowy figures moved inside. When he reached the gate to his flower gardens, he paused and crouched behind the fence. He seemed to be listening.

That was when I caught movement to my left. A dark shape rose up in the kitchen garden. I couldn't tell, but I thought I saw a gun taking aim.

"Father, behind you!"

The shape dropped out of sight, but a man's voice shouted from where I'd seen it.

*"Prenons la fuite!"*

French.

*"Nous avons été découverts!"*

The light inside my father's study went out, and then

three silhouettes burst from the doorway and scattered. One vaulted the fence near my father and ran right past me around the house. My father gave chase, and I followed after him, my bare feet cold on the wet ground. I rounded the corner just as the stranger leaped onto a waiting horse, spun, and galloped down the lane.

My father rushed into the middle of the road and aimed his rifle, and I ran to his side.

As I reached him, he cursed. "Too far." And he lowered his gun. Then he turned to face me, and in the darkness, I saw his eyes grow wide. "Move!"

He lunged at me, knocking me backward, throwing us both to the ground as three more horses thundered by and vanished into the night.

I tried to get up. "Who were —"

"Shh!"

He held me down for several moments, listening.

I heard nothing but the sounds of our farm.

He sighed. "I think they've all fled." Then he stood, extended his hand, and lifted me to my feet. "Are you hurt, son?"

"No."

"Thank God." He shook his head. "I told you to stay in the house."

As we walked back around to the kitchen door, I thought about what had just happened, watching it all unfold again in my mind. Those men had not been simple robbers. They

had only broken into my father's study, and they had fled even though there were four of them against us.

They had come for some other reason. Something they'd hoped to find in my father's work.

"What were they after?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Father?"

"Ask no more questions," he said. "You will return to bed, now."

"But, Father —"

"You may have saved my life tonight by shouting that warning. But that does not mean I approve of your disobedience. I would rather die than see you in harm's way. Do you understand? Do you realize that you might have been hurt? Even killed?"

I said nothing.

"Return to your bed, Billy. We will speak no more of this, for now."

"Yes, sir."

I left him standing in the kitchen doorway, still holding his rifle, staring out into the night. I trudged up the stairs, back into my bedroom, and collapsed onto my bed. I was cold. My body shook. And I knew I would never get back to sleep.

The next morning, my father put me to work drawing one of his specimens as though nothing had happened. We

were in his study, the very place the French intruders had been rummaging, though my father had cleared away any sign of their having been there. I stared at the plant, pushing down all the questions I wanted to ask, holding back the fear, ignoring the cracks forming in my world, trying to focus my attention.

The plant had a mouth.

Many of them, in fact. The little green maws sat open, waiting, lined with pale green needles for teeth. They ate flies, and their jaws snapped closed as swiftly and surely as any lizard's. My father worked nearby. He packed the tender roots of another boring plant in black soil and then swaddled it in burlap, preparing it for the journey across the seas from Philadelphia to London. He appeared calm, as though the events of the previous night hadn't happened.

I cleared my throat. "Are there many of these plants out there?"

He didn't look up. "The small ones are common enough in certain regions."

"Is this a small one?"

"Yes." He took the plant he'd been working on in both hands, like a newborn, and gently dipped the root end in a pail of water, letting the burlap soak up all it could. "The larger specimens have been known to consume men whole."

My eyes widened. I imagined myself out in the wilderness and what it would be like to stumble across a plant that could eat me.



"Where did you find it?" I asked.

"The Carolinas." He paused, laid down the dull plant, and came over to me. He picked up a slender knife, looked at me in a way that said, "Watch," and he used the tip of the blade to tease the plant mouth into closing. He chuckled. "They call it a tipitiwitchet. It grows in poor, wet soil. Bogs full of sand and peat. Now, back to your drawing. Mr. Franklin will be here soon."

"Mr. Franklin is coming?"

"Yes."

I stared out the window, wondering if the visit had something to do with the robbery.

The nectarine tree swayed in the breeze. Honeybees the size of musket balls hummed about the flower beds, visiting each blossom in turn, spreading pollen and doing what they were kept for. Visitors from as far as England and France had come to my father's garden. Some had commented on its lack of order, the seemingly haphazard way in which my father had laid it. But Father said his plants were arranged according to nature's design, not for the amusement of bored and wealthy men: Plants that had been found together, grew together, living as neighbors in spite of their differences in color, size, or shape.

It was the nearest thing to Eden I could imagine, and it had always felt like the safest place on earth.

But not anymore.

I suppressed that thought and dipped my quill, then scratched out the first line. Then I sketched out another,

and another, the broad, necklike shape of the tipitiwitchet's stems. Line by line, I translated the details of the plant to paper: the fine, almost invisible hairs that lined the green tongues, the little bead of sweetness in the center, which I guessed to be what drew the flies in for a drink. I included every detail worth noting, and as I did so I started to think that perhaps I understood this plant.

Those hairs, for example. In the absence of eyes or a nose, those hairs seemed to be what alerted the plant to the presence of a fly and closed its mouth. So I sketched one mouth with a just-landed fly, its little foot tickling the hair, and I drew the mouth near it snapped shut, fly wings and feet splayed outward. And then something occurred to me.

"Is that why it eats flies?"

"Pardon?" my father asked.

"You said it grows in poor soil. Is that why it eats flies?"

My father leaned back and looked at me. "An interesting question. Share your reasoning."

I hesitated, waiting for the thought to finish forming, not wanting to sound foolish.

"Go on, son."

"Well . . ." I felt a squirm in my shoulders that turned into a shrug. "If the plant can't get the nourishment it needs from the soil, maybe it gets it from the insects it eats?"

My father said nothing. But he smiled.

"That is a sound conclusion," he finally said, coming over. He picked up my drawing. "Another fine representation, son."

“Thank you, Father.”

For a little while after that, we worked together, surrounded by my father’s precious books and other oddities collected on his journeys. The massive, curved fragment of *incognitum* tusk, the bear-wolf claws, curious rocks and twigs, bird nests and wasp nests. I loved listening to the stories of how he came by each of them out in the frontier. And every time he left on one of his journeys, I would stand in the road, watching him grow smaller and smaller, wanting to go with him, hoping he would turn around and call to me to follow him. I wanted nothing so much as I wanted that.

But he never even looked back.

We packaged the remaining specimens within the special crates my father had designed, a variety of seeds for my father’s subscribers in England and live starts and roots for a few ardent collectors who were willing to pay the cost. The tipitiwitchet got its own box.

“Does it ever make you sad?” I asked.

“What?”

“That many of these will die before they arrive.”

He frowned. “I suppose. It is a waste, isn’t it?” He set the lid on the last crate and hammered it in place with thin nails he held between his teeth. He stood up when he was finished, hands at his hips. “But do you not marvel at those that do survive? That there are gardens in England with Pennsylvanian plants growing in them? . . . My plants.”

“John?” came a call from outside.

"We're in the study, Ben," my father said.

A figure appeared in the doorway. "Of course you are."  
And Mr. Franklin entered the room.

He and my father shook hands.

"You remember my son Billy."

Mr. Franklin turned to me. Next to my father, he appeared short and round. But he had a quality in his gray eyes, at once mirthful and sharp, that made it difficult to meet his gaze for more than a moment at a time. "Of course. Your father tells me you're growing into a fine young man, and now I am able to see that plainly for myself."

I bowed my head. "Thank you, Mr. Franklin."

He nodded and inhaled through his nose. "Ah, the smell of black soil. The shipment is in order, then?"

"Packed and ready," my father said.

"Good. I'll have my men load it onto the wagon. While they're doing so, you and I shall discuss . . . the other matter."

My father cleared his throat. "If it's agreeable, I'd like for Billy to join our discussion."

*What?* He had said nothing to me. But my heartbeat quickened with excitement.

Mr. Franklin paused and regarded me at an angle. "Oh?"

"Yes," my father said. "He was a witness to what happened last night. And I am considering bringing him on the expedition."

I nearly gasped.

"On *this* expedition?" Mr. Franklin asked.

My father paused. "Yes."

"We'll deal with that shortly," Mr. Franklin said. "But first things first. What did they find?"

My father looked around his study. "Some of our early correspondence on Madoc is missing. So is an early drawing of the ship. They knew what they were looking for. I can only conclude that our mission is known to the French and has been for some time."

What mission was he talking about? Who was Madoc, and what was this about a ship?

"We must change course." Mr. Franklin gripped his cane, his eyes hard. "You must leave at once. Ahead of schedule."

"I agree," my father said.

Mr. Franklin nodded. "I must get word to the others." He turned to leave.

"Ben," my father said. "There is still the matter of Billy. After the events of last night, and witnessing his bravery, I think it is time he join me."

My father thought me brave? I believed he'd been only angry with me last night.

Mr. Franklin pushed out his lips. "Persuade me."

I wanted to speak up, to assure him that I possessed whatever was needed. But I realized I would only hurt my chances if I did.

My father looked at me. "The nature of this journey is such that I will not have the opportunity to collect specimens according to my usual methods."

"That is true," Mr. Franklin said.

"Beyond his bravery, Billy has proven himself to be a talented artist, accurate and astute." My father picked up my drawing of the tipitiwitchet and handed it to Mr. Franklin. "He has been making such drawings for me for some time now. If I cannot collect specimens to bring back with me, I will need him at my side to record my discoveries in a way that will still profit my botanical studies."

"I see." Mr. Franklin looked over my drawing. "It is a worthy attempt. Quite remarkable, in fact." He wrinkled his brow and then pulled a piece of paper from an inside coat pocket. He unfolded it and handed it to my father.

"What is this?" my father asked.

"Just something I've been thinking about. Look at it and give it to Billy."

My father took a moment or two to examine the paper, and then he passed it to me. I saw what I supposed was a snake, though not a well-drawn one, divided into thirteen pieces. Each piece was labeled as one of the colonies, and beneath the image were written the words *Join, or Die*, suggesting the ability of snakes, when cut into pieces, to join back together again if left overnight.

"What is it, Ben?" my father asked.

"That, my friend, is us," Mr. Franklin said. "Whether Marylander or Pennsylvanian or Virginian, I have begun to believe quite fervently that if we colonists are to survive in this New World — with the French at our backs and the

Spanish at our toes, and never knowing if the Indian be friend or foe — we must recognize that our fates are shared. What happens to one of us happens to all. You're the artist, Billy." Mr. Franklin turned to me. "What do you think of my drawing?"

The idea was something I hadn't ever given any thought to. My family, me — we were Pennsylvanians. But what if we were also something else? Something larger. But I didn't want to say what I thought of the drawing. "Well . . . it might need a bit of adjustment."

"Is that so?" Mr. Franklin gestured toward the desk, where my inkwell and quill rested. "Show me how you would improve upon it."

I hesitated. "Mr. Franklin, I didn't mean —"

"Nothing to worry about, Billy," Mr. Franklin said. "I just want to assess your abilities."

So this was a test. And it seemed the outcome might determine whether I was allowed to accompany my father. My stomach tightened as I sat down at the desk. I placed a piece of paper in front of me and stared at it.

Mr. Franklin put his hand on my shoulder. "My snake, Billy."

I dipped the quill. How would I make Mr. Franklin's picture differently than he had?

Well, to begin with, I thought it needed to be more snakelike, with a coil and more curves. So I began drawing the slide and curl of a snake, adding scales and a tail and a forked tongue flicking the air. Then I drew lines where I

thought it could be cut, but in my nervousness I misjudged and ran out of snake at eight pieces. I had failed the test.

I tried to cover it up. "It's all wrong, Mr. Franklin. I'm sorry."

But Mr. Franklin slipped it out from under my hands. He pulled out his spectacles and wrapped them around his ears, and then studied my drawing, rubbing his chin.

"I can try again," I said.

"Nonsense," Mr. Franklin said. "What you've done is quite good. I'll just make this headpiece represent all of New England together, and perhaps combine some of the others. It's a striking image. Thank you, Billy. I will print this in my gazette one day soon."

I was surprised at his approval, but I welcomed it. "Thank you, sir." And though my mother had always cautioned me against the sin of pride, I allowed myself a small transgression.

My father nodded. "Very well done, Billy."

And when he said it, I sinned a little more.

Mr. Franklin pulled off his spectacles and regarded me with narrowed eyes. "I think you may be right, John. Billy seems to have a keen eye, and a keen mind as well. I think he would be a valuable addition to our society of philosophers."

*Society?*

"Have you been persuaded?" my father asked him.

"I have," Mr. Franklin said. "But I think we should find out if Billy is willing to rise to the challenge." He turned to



me. "Are you prepared to accompany your father into the frontier, lad?"

I stood up as tall as I could and was surprised to see that I was almost as tall as Mr. Franklin. "Yes, sir."

"It will be perilous," Mr. Franklin said.

"I am prepared," I said firmly.

Mr. Franklin nodded. "Then welcome to the expedition."

My father clapped his hand on my shoulder, and in my excitement, it felt like the only thing keeping me anchored to the earth.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

Mr. Franklin gave me a wry smile. "Don't thank me until you make it back home safely." He turned to my father. "Have you told him where you're going?"

"Not yet," my father said. "Until moments ago, he did not even know I thought to bring him."

Mr. Franklin nodded. "Then we should tell him, shouldn't we?"