



Kingdom of Ants: José Celestino Mutis and the Dawn of Natural History in the New World

Edward O. Wilson, José M. Gómez Durán

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One of the earliest New World naturalists, José Celestino Mutis began his professional life as a physician in Spain and ended it as a scientist and natural philosopher in modern-day Colombia. Drawing on new translations of Mutis's nearly forgotten writings, this fascinating story of scientific adventure in eighteenth-century South America retrieves Mutis's contributions from obscurity.

In 1760, the 28-year-old Mutis—newly appointed as the personal physician of the Viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada—embarked on a 48-year exploration of the natural world of northern South America. His thirst for knowledge led Mutis to study the region's flora, become a professor of mathematics, construct the first astronomical observatory in the Western Hemisphere, and amass one of the largest scientific libraries in the world. He translated Newton's writings and penned essays about Copernicus; lectured extensively on astronomy, geography, and meteorology; and eventually became a priest. But, as two-time Pulitzer Prize—winner Edward O. Wilson and Spanish natural history scholar José M. Gómez Durán reveal in this enjoyable and illustrative account, one of Mutis's most magnificent accomplishments involved ants.

Acting at the urging of Carl Linnaeus—the father of taxonomy—shortly after he arrived in the New Kingdom of Granada, Mutis began studying the ants that swarmed everywhere. Though he lacked any entomological training, Mutis built his own classification for the species he found and named at a time when New World entomology was largely nonexistent. His unorthodox catalog of army ants, leafcutters, and other six-legged creatures found along the banks of the Magdalena provided a starting point for future study.

Wilson and Durán weave a compelling, fast-paced story of ants on the march and the eighteenth-century scientist who followed them. A unique glance into the early world of science exploration, *Kingdom of Ants* is a delight to read and filled with intriguing information.

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