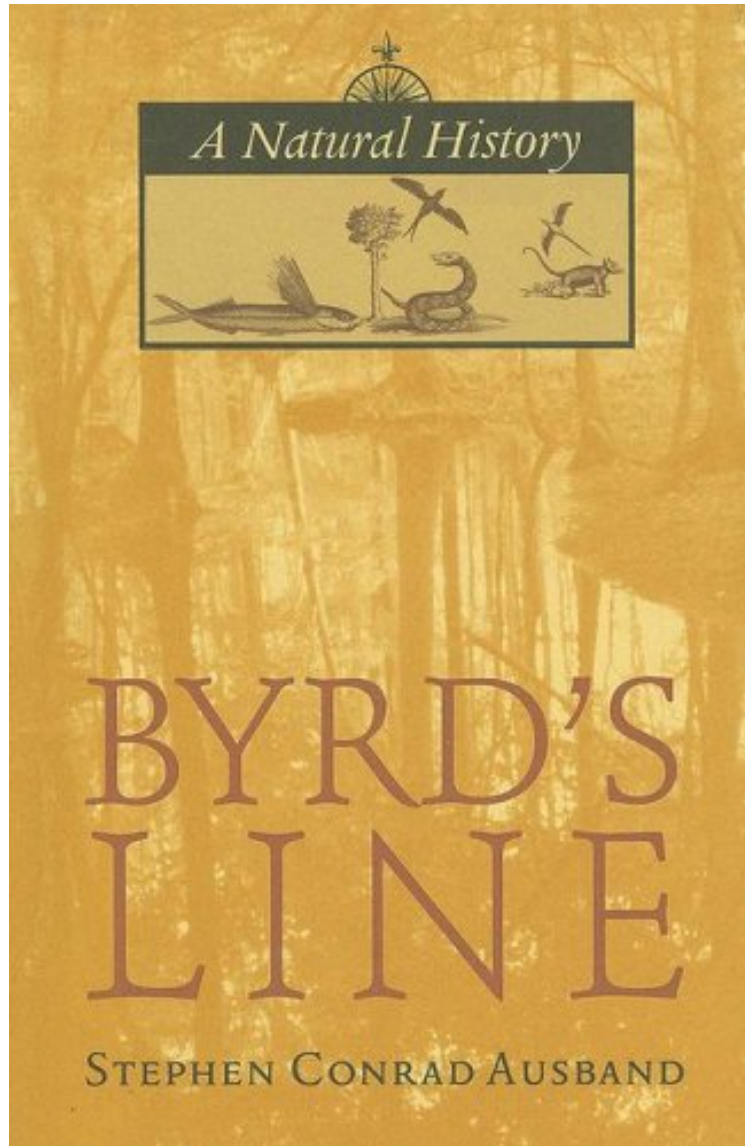


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## Byrd's Line: A Natural History

*Stephen C. Ausband*

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**Stephen C. Ausband : Byrd's Line: A Natural History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Byrd's Line: A Natural History:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. An easy, delightful read--and not a hint of leather or tweedBy A CustomerDr. Ausband's elegant, easy, affable writing style (threaded with humor and just a hint of the bawdy) mirrors that of his subject, and reading this book is very much like listening in on a conversation between two men sharing their thoughts, observations, and tall tales about their adventures in a land they both love, while warming their hands

around a steaming mug of coffee before an autumn campfire. The fact that they are separated by three centuries of "progress" is no barrier to their camaraderie, and because the book is so well written, the reader becomes a member of Byrd's expedition team, too, as Ausband does---without having to clean the mud off his or her boots, or cut through the brush in the Dismal Swamp. Almost incidentally, he or she also gets an education in botany, ornithology, and zoology along the imaginary line that separates Virginia from North Carolina, the descriptions of the animals, plants, and people Byrd encountered (and Ausband revisits) as colorful as the Carolina parakeet that once overran the area--and nowhere to be found is the cloying smell of leather elbow patches and tweed the one might expect such a book to exude. It's a skillful piece of work, written by a master storyteller, and will be of interest to anyone who is a student of Byrd of Westover, a resident of the geographic area, a fisherman or hunter or hiker, or a bibliophile unable to resist the lure of an exceptionally well-wrought book.

In 1728, William Byrd, the wealthy, English-educated master of Westover plantation, undertook a journey with a troop of commissioners, surveyors, and woodsmen to determine the exact boundary between North Carolina and Virginia. Byrd was not only an indefatigable explorer but also an amateur naturalist and diarist of considerable skill. He recorded the journey in two classics of colonial literature *The History of the Dividing Line* and *The Secret History of the Linewhich* showcase in varying measure his keen observations of natural phenomena, his erudition, his predilection for exercise and sexual conquest, and his witty and elegant prose. William Byrd and Stephen Ausband are separated by almost three hundred years, but they share a similar literary inclination complemented by an amateur interest in nature. Like Byrd, Ausband has tramped the dividing line and returned with a lively, informative book. Byrd's *Line* is Ausband's dialogue with Byrd across the years. It still requires a hike or a four-wheel-drive vehicle to reach the remote beach where Byrd began his survey. As Ausband slogs through the Great Dismal Swamp and the thickets and forests that Byrd wrote about, he interlaces his own adventure with quotations from Byrd. These range from descriptions of chestnut trees and passenger pigeons, both gone now, to accounts of the local inhabitants, both native and European. Byrd often mused about what would happen to the land in the future. While some of the dividing line still feels like wilderness, it is crisscrossed today by bridges and roads, its forests felled and paved over for parking lots and subdivisions, its waters diverted or drained. Ausband's story, therefore, is a natural history of a changed region. It is also an accessible introduction to the mind and words of an extraordinary early American.

"Byrds published journals and Ausbands own observations form the dual basis of Byrds *Line*, which reads like a journal, travelogue, and field book all rolled in one. Ausband likens the book to a conversation in which he matches Byrds recordings with our modern landscape. (*Hampton Roads Monthly*)" Ausband's book is a labor of love and a bid to re-experience what Byrd saw, felt, and even heard. (*William and Mary Quarterly*)" By consulting segments of Virginia gentleman William Byrd's writings as he worked on mapping the state line in 1728 and combining them with modern explanations of some of the explorers more colorful descriptions of what he saw, Ausband has written a lively book that features a dialogue between past and present. (*Our State*)" A... substantial work that is not only authoritative but also a pleasure to read. (*Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*) [Ausband's] deep appreciation of the original accounts and his own obvious shared enthusiasm for the study of natural history inform this genial and engaging work throughout. (*Virginia Quarterly*) About the Author Stephen Conrad Ausband is Professor of English at Averett University. He is the author of *Myth and Meaning*, *Myth and Order* and of numerous articles for *Virginia Wildlife* and other publications.