

*“The educated differ from the uneducated as much as the living from the dead.”*

— Aristotle

Aristotle’s “educated” quote was one of my grandfather’s favorites. He wasn’t referring strictly to formal schooling -- my grandfather only had one year of college (at UNC-Chapel Hill in the 1920s) before earning his graduate degree from the School of Hard Knocks. However he was a voracious reader who educated himself on a wide variety of topics, particularly American history. Among the many treasured volumes that he passed on to me are Churchill’s [A History of the English-Speaking Peoples](#) and Charles & Mary Beard’s [History of the United States](#).

I’ve mentioned many times that the dead of winter isn’t the time to annoy our honey bees. If there is something wrong with them, there is little or nothing we can do to fix it right now aside from generous feeding, and that shouldn’t be invasive or take long. Instead we can make the best of our indoor confinement by continuing our education with some good books.

### Our fascination with bees

My favorite book that deals with our fascination with honey bees (but not bee biology or beekeeping itself) is Hilda Ransome’s classic, [The Sacred Bee](#).<sup>1</sup> It is packed with wonderful folk stories about honey bees, from earliest times to recently. Did you know that it is bad luck to buy honey bees? It is also bad luck to dream about them. Or that honey bees escort the spirits of the dead to heaven? You may have heard of the tradition of “telling the bees” when a beekeeper dies – Ransome explains where that practice comes from, and how and why it is supposed to be conducted.

Did you know that when honey bees got together and asked God to give them a sting that kills to protect their honey, God said He *would* give them a sting that kills... but it will kill



Virgil kept his money hidden safely away from thieves inside his bee hives, as explained in Claire Preston’s [Bee](#). Illustration is from [Buzz a Buzz, or, The Bee](#) by Wilhelm Busch (Griffith & Farran, 1872).

the bee, not people? Or that arrogant Satan wasn’t impressed with the wonderful little honey bee and said he could make one just as good... but those turned out to be wasps?

Despite focusing on myths and legends, there is some practical beekeeping advice in this book. For example, if you want a new colony, try what the ancient Egyptians and Romans used to do: kill and bury a noble animal, such as an ox or a lion. For an ox, leave one horn exposed, and cut it off at the end. Come back in a week or so and collect the “bees” that are coming and going out of the horn. (For this to work properly, you must ignore the fact that these “bees” look a whole lot like carrion flies.) Don’t be a cheapskate though; if you try this with a dead horse, you’ll get wasps.

Even if you aren’t a beekeeper, this book is full of entertaining tidbits that will make you

<sup>1</sup> Hilda Ransome, [The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore](#), Dover Publications, Mineola, New York,

2004 (reprint of 1937 edition published by George Allen and Unwin, London)

the hit of any New Year's Eve party!

A delightful accompaniment to The Sacred Bee is Claire Preston's Bee.<sup>2</sup> Preston describes how honey bees have been woven into human culture over the eons as symbols of piousness, industriousness and more. A skep hive is on Utah's state flag. The analogy of the strong virgin queen was eloquently used to flatter Queen Elizabeth I. The honey bee colony has repeatedly been held up as a model for well-ordered human society, as in Virgil's Georgics. In a more recent blend of politics and apiculture, we have the following from The Bobs:

*We call them killer bees  
The Sandinistas call them their "freedom  
fighters"  
An evil empire of godless, Marxist bugs  
How can they be stopped?...  
And as they spread their Marxist pollen  
from flower to flower,  
They corrupt our pure, all American bees...  
Remember America, these are red bees, all  
workers, no drones!*

The copious artworks that illustrate Preston's book are even more enthralling than the text. Nearly every page is accented with one or more illustrations such as "Vision of Virgil" (on previous page) from Wilhelm Busch's Buzz a Buzz, or, The Bee.

### Stories from bee-land

Beekeepers often are colorful characters, although sometimes our stories can only be fully appreciated by fellow beekeepers. C.C. Miller's autobiography, Fifty Years Among the Bees,<sup>3</sup> is a not only a glimpse at a bygone era, it goes a long way in answering the question, "Why do we do what we do the way we do it?" It is part autobiography, part how-to manual (circa 1915) and all entertaining.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Preston, Bee, Reaktion Books, London, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> C.C. Miller, Fifty Years Among the Bees, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 2006 (reprint of 1915 edition published by The A.I. Root Co., Medina,



Fig. 64—Load of Forty Supers.

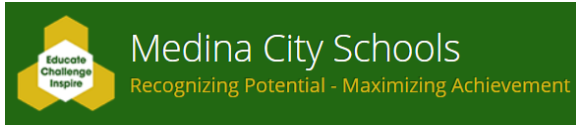
Moving supers the old-fashioned way. From C.C. Miller's Fifty Years Among the Bees.

Miller was a contemporary of Langstroth and A.I. Root. His first career was as a physician, but he disliked the pressure of having to make life-and-death decisions. So he became a renowned music teacher. One day a swarm of honey bees gathered in his backyard, and the rest is history. He quickly went from hobbyist to major honey producer and apicultural inventor, as well as teacher, writer and advisor. He is also credited with befriending A.I. Root and subsequently encouraging Root's conversion to Christianity. Miller's story also gives great homage to his long-suffering wife, who supported him in countless ways in his beekeeping endeavors.

If you enjoy Miller's autobiography, then you'll also love An Eyewitness Account of Early American Beekeeping: The Autobiography of A.I. Root.<sup>4</sup> Amos Ives Root started out as a watchmaker, but once bitten by the bee bug, he became a titan of the beekeeping industry. In its heyday, the A.I. Root Company published a magazine and books (as it still does), manufactured innovative equipment and shipped bees and queens all over the country. Root was a compulsive tinkerer and inventor, always trying to find ways to make beekeeping easier, more productive and more reliable. Some of his experiments resulted in ground-breaking successes, such as figuring out how to

Ohio). **NOTE: versions of the original are available for free download from several sources.**

<sup>4</sup> A.I. Root, An Eyewitness Account of Early American Beekeeping: The Autobiography of A.I. Root, The A.I. Root Co., Medina, Ohio, 1984



A.I. Root's influence persists today. His hometown's high school sports teams are the "Battling Bees" and the public school system's logo incorporates a honeycomb. Picture from <https://www.medinabees.org/>.

ship live queens and bees via US Mail. Others were comical failures, like his attempt to overwinter bees in a heated greenhouse. When he failed, he would try to figure out why that happened and then come at the problem from a different angle.

An interesting side note about Root is that through his interest in innovation and invention, he sought out and befriended Orville and Wilbur Wright. In 1904 he photographed and journalized their early powered flights. Thus the [first detailed account of the Wright Brothers' success](#) wasn't in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* – it was published in *Gleanings in Bee Culture* magazine!

Rounding out this category is Douglas Whynott's [Following the Bloom: Across America with the Migratory Beekeepers](#).<sup>5</sup> If you are a beekeeper but don't really know much about migratory beekeeping, you must read this book. It gives a behind-the-veil look at the life of beekeeping's version of "cowboys" ... or are they "gypsies"? To be fair they are a breed of their own – migratory beekeepers. The hours they work are ridiculous, the transient lifestyle is numbing and the risk of catastrophic failure is ever-present. Working with stinging insects is the fun part! Visiting several different operations engaged in diverse sides of the industry, Whynott weaves a fascinating and highly entertaining tale of hard work, entrepreneurship and resolve, all centered around pollinating America's food supply. Think you may want to become a commercial beekeeper? Read this before you quit your day job!

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Whynott, [Following the Bloom: Across America with the Migratory Beekeepers](#), Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 1991.

### Smart stuff

If you are looking for some brain-swelling reading, I highly recommend Jürgen Tautz's [The Buzz about Bees: Biology of a Superorganism](#).<sup>6</sup> The original German-language title of this book is [Phänomen Honigbiene](#) (The Phenomenal Honeybee), which is a much better description of the contents. The scholarship reflected in this book is top-notch, but it is written in a flowing, easy-to-read, easy-to-understand, can't-put-it-down style (the German-to-English translator did an outstanding job). Did you know that honey bees are color-blind when flying at full speed, and only distinguish colors when they slow down as they approach their target? What do you really know about what Tautz calls "the largest organ of the bee colony" – the comb? Did you know that, among many other things, the comb acts as a telegraph system within the hive, and is fine-tuned by adding and removing propolis to the cell rims so that signals can pass effectively?

If your interest was piqued by December 2019's "[Honey Bees as a Superorganism](#)", then Tautz's book is a must for you. The breathtaking photographs on nearly every page are reason enough to purchase it.

### Many more

I've got many more recommendations for excellent books but I'll save those for another slow winter day. Read these and let me know if they inspire you as much as they have me!

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<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Tautz, [The Buzz about Bees: Biology of a Superorganism](#), Springer-Herlag, Berlin, 2008.