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***Eighteenth-Century Florida and the Revolutionary South* edited by  
Samuel Proctor**

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**William Gilmore Simms.**

Photograph courtesy of the University of South  
Florida Library.

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

*Eighteenth-Century Florida and the Revolutionary South*. Ed. by Samuel Proctor. (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978. ix + 125 pp. Notes)

From Arburthnot and Ambrister to annexation: this chronology, argues commentator Aubrey Land, captures the conventional concept of Florida history. Yet as these seven essays and three commentaries demonstrate, Florida merits much more attention. For example, in the colonial period, Florida was different. After being acquired by the British in 1763, Florida developed into a province different than its northern counterparts. Unable completely to feed and defend themselves, Floridians needed English aid and protection. Thus, they did not joyfully embrace the Declaration; “instead, they drank to the good health and long life of their generous and good sovereign, George III” while burning effigies of Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry.

Within this broad framework of the Revolution, four of the papers suggest a theme synthesizing some aspects of Florida’s economic and military history, economic weakness if not failure and limited strategic significance for the British. David Chestnutt argues that South Carolina planters endeavored to model East Florida after their colony by planting rice and indigo. For several reasons this dream failed. Thus, East Florida was unlike the other thirteen

colonies. It never achieved levels of economic and social growth necessary to move the province toward political independence.

Gary Olson shows that East Florida's dependence on the crown attracted Southern loyalists such as Thomas Brown from Georgia. Brown formed the East Florida Rangers to attack the backcountry of both Georgia and the Carolinas as well as to spur a loyalist uprising while British forces attacked from the sea. Significantly, the British lacked a strategic plan for fully utilizing Brown and loyalist sentiment. In the face of other, more pressing interests, Florida counted too little for the British.

Successive essays develop the theme of weakness. In separate pieces Robin Fabel and Thomas Watson demonstrate that the absence of any inherent economic value precluded any major English military effort to defend either East or West Florida. The British wanted only to deny the Floridas to their foes.

Regrettably, the theme ends by shifting from Florida to the Revolutionary South and from military/economic history to intellectual concerns. Stephen Meats investigates the nineteenth-century writer, William Gilmore Simms, one of "the best-known southern Revolutionary War historians of his day." Meats contends that Simms "was attempting to portray a more complete and authentic history than could be found in history books or in historical novels." His essay also suggests that historians might profit from Simms who sought "to represent history accurately and authentically on both the formal and the legendary levels." Calhoun Winton closes the book by discussing the book trade during and after the Revolution. In the essay with the least vision, Winton sketches out the printing origins of books used in Florida.

For the most part, these scholarly essays are highly focused, concentrating on specific events and persons with only minimal attention to larger issues. Fortunately, the commentaries by Aubrey Land, John Francis McDermott and, to a lesser degree, Gloria Jahoda, seek not so much to criticize the papers as to place them in a larger interpretative framework and to suggest connective themes. Specialists of Florida's past will probably prefer the papers to the commentaries; those with a broader perspective will admire the thoughtful, but necessarily brief, reflections of the three commentators. Despite the general success of these seven papers in suggesting much-needed further research and writing on early Florida, one essay was out of place: James Morton Smith's "Historical Agencies and the Bicentennial." Smith's contribution examines historical societies, agencies and museums in the Bicentennial era, and touches only briefly on Florida.

Although this collection tells us much about economic and military history, one wonders about other aspects of Revolutionary Florida. We learn little about the colony's political system or about popular perceptions of northern neighbors. Given numerous major studies on colonial politics and ideology, such shortcomings are surprising. Thus, in both the presence and absence of information, this volume suggests new avenues of research in eighteenth – and, to a lesser extent, nineteenth-century Florida.

*Randall Shrock*