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***Cypress Gardens, America's Tropical Wonderland: How Dick Pope Invented Florida by Lu Vickers***

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Florida saw an influx of planters, many of whom were just speculating but others who developed their property with houses, wharves, cleared land, and outbuildings. During the Revolution, the local economy benefited from a demand for naval stores. After the war, planters migrated to the Caribbean. These chapters draw from Shafer's own outstanding website, *New World in a State of Nature*, which may actually serve as the better venue for this material. In *Ghost Plantations*, the same information is mired by a lack of thematic focus or narrative drive, and in lieu of a compelling argument, Schafer relies upon geographic markers to push his discussion along—"Beyond the Cowford" (111), "After passing Cowford" (111), "Beyond Trout River" (112), "Beyond Dames Point" (113).

A short epilogue defines what seems to be a major conflict in the book's approach, how Bartram's overly active literary imagination cast a "fog" over real history (120), but the epilogue's brevity only underscores a fundamental problem in Schafer's book: that a simplistic thesis remained (unlike East Florida) undeveloped. Those interested in the history of the St. Johns River will find prompts for further study in *William Bartram and the Ghost Plantations of British East Florida*. Scholars and fans of the naturalist will wonder why Schafer cast such a narrow net for his research. Still others may wish for a broader sense of relevance. In this slim volume, William Bartram serves as a premise, a "companion" if you will, who carries Schafer up and down the river. But a premise is not a point, and in the absence of the latter, *Ghost Plantations* is much less a book than it should have been.

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*Cypress Gardens, America's Tropical Wonderland: How Dick Pope Invented Florida*. By Lu Vickers. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 358 pp. Color and B&W photographs and illustrations, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95, cloth.)

Lu Vickers's *Cypress Gardens, America's Tropical Wonderland: How Dick Pope Invented Florida* offers a breezy history of the pioneering attraction that long graced the shores of Winter Haven's Lake Eloise. Although probably more at home on the coffee table than the scholar's shelf, it is nevertheless an interesting account of the Gardens as both physical creation and romantic ideal.

From tin-can tourists to the hyper-real mega-parks that now ring Orlando, the history of modern Florida's primary industry is much chronicled. Whether filtered through the prism of social history in Gary R. Mormino's *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, or deconstructed in Stephen Fjellman's *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*, tourists and their dollars stand at the center of the state's twentieth-

century story. But long before the mouse turned thousands of acres of swamp and scrub into a commodified fantasyland, Dick Pope manufactured his own fanciful Florida creation—Cypress Gardens. For a half century and for millions of Americans, Cypress Gardens *was* Florida.

Though physically diminutive, Dick Pope possessed an outsized personality and professional drive that made him, Vickers reports, “the Maharajah of the Muck” (219). His family moved to the state in 1911, and two years later, thirteen-year-old Dick went to work in his father’s real estate office. By the early 1930s, Pope had morphed from local land booster to pop-culture impresario. With the assistance of dollar-a-day New Deal labor, he transformed his pristine lakeside parcel into an object of desire. Indeed, Pope hyperbolized local color and turned natural place into idealized destination. And over an impressive swath of time and historical circumstance, Pope’s Cypress Gardens remained the state’s premier tourist attraction.

Vickers has assembled an impressive collection of first-person accounts, promotional photographs, and Gardens memorabilia. Apparently the Pope family saved much and was cognizant of its importance and legacy. Yet amidst her vast assemblage of flyers, press releases, and Barnum-like bombast, Dick Pope—entertainment visionary—remains at the center of her story. Like Henry Flagler and Henry Plant before him, Dick Pope is a transformative figure in the creation that was twentieth-century Florida, contends Vickers.

With the assistance and support of his wife, Julie, Pope never tired of hawking the Gardens. He was a master of free publicity and garnered impressive national coverage. For decades, Pope touted his tropical flora, southern belles, electric-powered boats, and, of course, Florida-shaped swimming pool. However, it was the ubiquitous shots of the Gardens’ ski shows that created the most indelible cultural imagery. Vickers quotes an Orlando publisher’s assessment of the Pope publicity machine: “If ever the state of Florida hits another depression and finds it necessary to close its advertising offices, Florida will continue in the resort picture as long as Dick Pope lives” (117).

Celebrity appearances were also part of Pope’s promotional plan. In the 1960s, Esther Williams, Mike Douglas, and late-night king Johnny Carson all broadcast from the site. Even Jordan’s King Hussein showed up for private ski lessons from Pope. Yet the seeds for the Gardens’ demise were planted then, too. In 1965, Governor Haydon Burns announced that Walt Disney was the “mystery” buyer of a massive tract just forty minutes east of Pope’s showplace (207).

Dick Pope initially rolled out “the orange carpet” for the California corporation (209). And while the Gardens did experience a short-lived surge in attendance after Disney’s 1971 opening, by the early 1980s long-standing Florida attractions were suffering, and many had closed. It is here that Vickers is weakest. For while she need not long wrestle with scholars such as Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, or even T. J. Jackson Lears, a little more analysis and theory would have helped—especially when confronting the Disney phenomenon.

The last two decades of Cypress Gardens were unsettled. The park went through a series of owners and lackluster attempts to compete with the “worlds” of Orlando. In 1988, Dick Pope died. Twenty years later the sputtering Gardens closed, only to be rescued by the parent company of Legoland in 2010. Legoland Florida opened October 15, 2011. The management team has promised that the Gardens’ historic core will be an important component of its refurbished acquisition. Nevertheless, according to company pronouncements, the belles and Aqua Maids who once strolled the shores of Lake Eloise will give way to the swashbuckling denizens of a new feature, Pirate’s Cove.

Lu Vickers’s colorful book offers a trip back to a Florida that has never completely disappeared, yet will never fully return. It is a historical journey worth taking. Still, it is indeed ironic that the future of the attraction created by a man who lived Florida writ large now belongs to a company that specializes in the miniature.

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