

William Gilmore Simms's Unfinished Civil War: Consequences for a Southern Man of Letters

Eldred Prince

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Prince, Eldred (2013) "William Gilmore Simms's Unfinished Civil War: Consequences for a Southern Man of Letters," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.24

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/24>

Review

Prince, Eldred

Fall 2013

Moltke-Hansen, David *William Gilmore Simms's Unfinished Civil War: Consequences for a Southern Man of Letters*. University of South Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-1-61117-130-3

Essays About A Southern Intellectual

William Gilmore Simms was one of antebellum America's foremost authors. Edgar Allen Poe, a contemporary of Simms, considered him the best novelist in the country. He was certainly one of the most prolific. Besides his novels, Simms averaged a book review and a poem per week for forty-five years. From time to time he also edited various newspapers and popular magazines. A native of Charleston, Simms's novels, stories, and verse sold well on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. Simms's literary and financial success propelled him into South Carolina's elite.

In the Foreword, David Shields describes Simms as an ardent southern nationalist and defender of slavery. Simms saw Southern independence and nationhood as a historical inevitability, the logical culmination of economic and political trends predating the Revolution. He considered slavery the "natural" condition of an inferior race. According to Simms, enslaved African Americans were more fortunate than their free African cousins who had no opportunity to become "civilized" under the benevolent tutelage of white masters. Shields suggests that as the South's leading intellectual, Simms's opinions were well known and doubtless influenced many of his readers. Before the war, he helped to sell the idea of a glorious future for an independent southern nation. During the war, his patriotic verse and editorials strove to maintain enthusiasm for the Confederate cause. After the war, Simms struggled to cope with his physical losses as well as the overthrow of all he believed. The current volume brings together a baker's dozen of scholars who discuss Simms's literary legacy with special emphasis on his response to defeat and emancipation.

In the lead essay of the collection, David Moltke-Hansen examines the impact of the war on Simms: the deaths of his wife and four of his children, the burning of his home and library, and the loss of much of his influence and income. Before the war, Simms believed the South's martial success against Indians, French, Spanish, and British (twice), boded well for its chances against the North. But the Civil War proved vastly larger than the Revolution, and the Confederacy—Simms's logic notwithstanding—was overwhelmed. After the war, his circumstances much reduced, Simms was compelled to go cap in hand to Northern friends to sell his work. As cancer gradually claimed him, Simms continued to support his household with his pen. Though weakened, he was not defeated.

Steven D. Smith's essay departs from the volume's Civil War theme to discuss Simms's biography of Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion. Smith argues that Simms helped to construct a popular national memory of Marion by synthesizing existing Marion biographies by Peter Horry, Mason Weems, and William James. Indeed, Simms transforms the derogatory "swamp fox" moniker into the wily and courageous Swamp Fox of song and legend. Likewise, Simms transformed Marion's camp on Snow's Island from a dank and dangerous marsh to an American Sherwood Forest for an American Robin Hood.

In his essay "Private vs. Public Honor in Wartime South Carolina," Todd Hagstette speculates on Simms's notions of honor. Different meanings of honor and what it entailed were one of the wedges separating the regions. Simms pointed to the North's growing abolitionist sentiment as evidence of the widening gulf. Simms condemned the North for "meddling" in Southern affairs. After all, Simms observed, the South had never meddled in Northern affairs. Southern defeat was an example of an honorable people being bested by a less honorable one. Simms cites the burning of Columbia as evidence of this. History offers other examples: the barbarian sack of Rome comes to mind. In the wake of such events, how should an honorable man behave? Simms determined to maintain his personal honor by assisting his impoverished neighbors and former slaves. Obviously, Simms tempered his moral outrage in order to appeal to Northern friends for aid and to sell his work to Northern publishers.

Jeffery Rogers surveys Simms's experience as a Confederate citizen. Simms embraced the idea of Southern nationhood as early as 1830 and remained committed to the bitter end. From his editors desk he poured out advice and critique on political and military matters throughout the war. For example,

Simms predicted the amphibious assault on Port Royal and occupation of Beaufort, and he joined in the vigorous discussion over Confederate tax policy. On the literary side Simms proposed a "Library of the Confederate States," an anthology of southern letters from colonial times to the present. He even suggested a Confederate Bible. Simms was convinced, as were many Southerners, that Southern independence in 1861 was as analogous to American independence in 1776. He was a true believer.

In "Isaac Nimmons and the Burning of Woodlands," Ehren Foley examines Simms's response to the burning of his home, Woodlands. In February 1865 Federal troops looted Simms's home in present Bamberg County. Major General O. O. Howard himself stole several items, disproving the notion that larceny abided only within the lower ranks. Later that night Woodlands burned to the ground. Isaac Nimmons, a former slave of Simms, was charged with the crime. At Nimmons's trial, Simms, who was absent when the fire occurred, vigorously defended Nimmons. The evidence against Nimmons was flimsy, and with Simms's supporting testimony, Nimmons was acquitted. Ehren speculates that Simms needed to believe Nimmons was innocent because it went to the heart of Simms's identity as a paternalistic master. Simms's belief in the fidelity of his slaves was central to this. In fairness, the author admits that since the house burned on the very day that federal troops passed through the area, they were the "logical culprits."

One of Simms's postbellum publications was *War Poetry of the South* (1867). In her essay "Delusion's Carnival of Death: A different War Poetry from the South," Johanna Shields focuses on writers Simms largely ignored in compiling the anthology. Alexander Meeks and William Russell Smith were "reluctant but loyal" Confederates. As Alabamians they were more moderate—or less radical—than Simms, formed as he was in the crucible of elite Charleston. She suggests that Simms consciously selected poets who saw the South as he did: agrarian, aristocratic, and paternal. In evaluating the works of Meeks and Smith, Shields concludes they reflected Alabama's generally more democratic and pragmatic worldview. She suggests this echoes, at least in part, Alabama's more recent frontier experience.

Matthew Brennan's essay "Simms, the Civil War, and the Poetry of Trauma" explores how Simms's losses during the war influenced his postwar poems. The deaths of his wife and several of his children—two on the same day—together with the financial loss of his home and library effected Simms

profoundly. To begin with, it effected the reason for Simms's dawn to dusk writing schedule after the war. The urgent need to rebuild his home and provide for his remaining children were powerful motives as the family was living "hand to mouth." And all the while Simms was suffering from the colon cancer that eventually killed him. Brennan also suggests Simms's literary legacy needed rebuilding as well. One wonders how the man could repeatedly overcome serious episodes of despair to focus his attention upon his craft. Yet, it must have provided him some small satisfaction, even relief, if little money.

In "Simms's Last Poems and the Artifice of Eternity," James Everett Kibler invests much value in his brief essay. From the war's end to his death in 1870, Simms composed some fifty poems. These were never collected into a single volume but were published singly or in small groups in mostly Southern newspapers and periodicals. A few remained unpublished at his death. These verses reveal Simms's "grit and energy" in the face of great adversity. (The deaths of family members and his struggle with cancer are mentioned above.) Many of the fifty deal with loss, and are somewhat therapeutic in nature. Kibler discusses the multi-part series "Sketches in Hellas," Simms's best postwar work, in which he christens the vanquished South as a New Thermopylae, "militarily defeated but morally victorious." He also tells us that Simms, who clearly identified with Homer, spent his last days reading *The Iliad*.

Keri Holt's essay, "Reading Regionalism Across the War," observes a more national trend in literature following the Civil War. Southern writers were especially "fearful of reigniting Sectional tensions." Later in the century, Southern regionalism revives with writers such as Joel Chandler Harris, George W. Cable, and Mark Twain. Of course, a vast Western popular literature emerged as well. Before the war, Simms was a booster for Southern literature, sometimes scolding Southern readers for supporting Northern journals at the expense of Southern ones. Although Simms did not live to see the rehabilitation of Southern literature—he died in 1870—in many ways Simms was a role model for later Southern regionalists.

In "An Unfinished Reconstruction" Nicholas Meriwether considers Simms's unfinished novel "The Brothers of the Coast." Simms envisioned the novel as "a standard romance of Pirate life & practice." Sadly, he finished only 173 pages before cancer claimed him. Although the MS echoes themes from earlier, i.e., antebellum works, Meriwether argues that the new novel would likely have been more mature and ambitious and credits Simms's readings of European

philosophy (possibly via book reviews) with his expanded literary horizons.

One of Simms's last stories was "How Sharp Snaffles got his Capital and Wife." Kevin Collins frames this subtle satire of Northern materialism as "the most successful example of pure humor" in Simms's career. By 1870, Simms was too old and sick to reinvent himself, but he scored a final victory against the Yankees with this parody of their acquisitiveness. By doing so, Collins asserts in the title that Simms's "Had His Cake and Ate It Too." Perhaps, but isn't the joke really on Simms? After all, he accumulated considerable wealth before the war: Woodlands plantation, a home in Charleston, a 10,000 volume library. And slaves, of course. Did not Simms see the irony? Or did he, like the Bourbons, forget nothing and learn nothing?

A few weeks before his death from colon cancer, Simms delivered his final public address at a meeting of the Agricultural Society of South Carolina in Charleston. Five years had passed since Lee's surrender, and South Carolina was still struggling to recover physically and spiritually. In "The Angel and the Animal," Sara Georgini discusses Simms's call to spiritual reconstruction. Later published as *The Sense of the Beautiful*, Simms's swan song encouraged a cultural as well as a material revival through educational, aesthetic, and literary pursuits. Given his losses, his age, and his approaching death from a dreadful disease, the essay is surprisingly optimistic and hopeful. Obviously, Simms knew he would not live to see the renewal to which he summoned his audience. Still, some of his listeners could foresee a day when the city could again afford aesthetics and have leisure for literature. Doubtless, Simms would be pleased that Charleston is today considered among the most beautiful, accomplished, and friendliest of cities.

The final essay in the collection addresses other aspects of Simms's *The Sense of the Beautiful*. John Miller examines how the mostly female composition of Simms's audience at the flower show influenced his gendered approach to aesthetics. He praised the women for the beauty of the horticultural displays and cited this as an example of "angel over animal." Simms's predicted the role of Southern women in the postbellum domestic sphere would be of great value in rebuilding the region's aesthetic life. Of course, one could say women would be of greater value in all things given the number of widows and single parent families in the postwar South. A new aesthetic forming just then was public memorialization of Confederate dead in which women would play a leading part. Indeed, Southern women did much to create not merely the aesthetics but also

the narrative of the Lost Cause.

Simms was long out of favor with literary scholars because of his support for Southern nationalism and defense of slavery. (Of course, one could enlarge the indictment to include the tendency of modern intellectuals to judge nineteenth century persons by twenty-first century standards.) The present volume is a welcome exception and does much to restore William Gilmore Simms to his proper place as the South's leading man of letters before, during, and after the war. Reading these essays, one is struck by the sheer intellectual power of Simms. Closing this volume, one takes from it the desire for a better understanding of the antebellum intellectual South. How uniform was their support for secession and war? For the survivors, how did they cope with the outcome? David Moltke-Hansen and his group have made an excellent start.

Dr. Eldred E. "Wink" Prince, Jr. is a Professor of History and the Director of the Wacamaw Center for Cultural and Historical Studies at Coastal Carolina University.