

Reading William Gilmore Simms: Essays of Introduction to the Author's Canon

Jonathan M. Atkins
Berry College, jatkins@berry.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Atkins, Jonathan M. (2018) "Reading William Gilmore Simms: Essays of Introduction to the Author's Canon," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 .
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.3.19
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss3/19>

Review

Atkins, Jonathan M.

Summer 2018

Hagstette, Todd, ed. *Reading William Gilmore Simms: Essays of Introduction to the Author's Canon*. University of South Carolina Press, \$59.99 ISBN 9781611177725

Southern historians know at least the name of William Gilmore Simms, one of the antebellum era's most popular and prolific writers. In 1825, at the age of nineteen, the South Carolinian published his first major work, a poetic tribute commemorating the death of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Over the next four decades, Simms produced a plethora of romances, novels, short stories, poems, plays, histories, biographies, reviews, and essays. Edgar Allen Poe referred to him as the nation's best novelist, and in his own day he enjoyed wider recognition than writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Nevertheless, his popularity declined before his death in 1870, not least because of his notoriety as a pro-slavery apologist and champion of secession as the nation headed toward the Civil War. The first serious study of his work, an 1892 literary biography by William Peterson Trent, dismissed the author's claim to greatness by arguing that Simms could not rise above the limitations imposed by his residence in the South, and this view long dampened attention to his work.

Revival of interest in Simms in the mid to late-twentieth century eventually led to the establishment of the *Simms Initiative* at the University of South Carolina, which has collected and digitalized almost 45,000 pages of Simms's writings and made them available for readers in fifty-eight print-on-demand volumes. *Reading William Gilmore Simms: Essays of Introduction to the Author's Canon* presents the critical introductory essays written by twenty-four historians, literary scholars, and Southern specialists for the thirty-eight volumes that contain the works published during Simms's lifetime. Editor Todd Hagstette, who until recently was the director of the *Initiative*, explains that each essay is designed to provide "a guide and a primary point of entry into the expansive landscape of Simms's imagination," with the collection as a whole serving as "a springboard to increased notice and broadened consideration of the antebellum South's most prolific writer" (xii).

Following a biographical essay by David Moltke-Hansen, a founding director of the *Simms Initiative*, the introductory essays generally follow a pattern that addresses the inception of the work under consideration, reviews its content, places it in the context of Simms's career, and surveys its immediate and long-term reception. Most emphasize important themes in Simms's writings, such as his preference for poetry, even though he mostly wrote prose; his presentation of the frontier, not as Manifest Destiny's cradle of democracy, but as "a place of great beauty and possibility, but also of great danger" (134); and the rich development of some of his Native and African-American characters. Collectively, the essays stress Simms's

contributions to American literature. Hagstette, for instance, contends that the early novel *Martin Faber* (1833) marks Simms as “the founder of the southern Gothic genre” (278), while Kevin Collins argues that *The Cassique of Kiawah* (1859) “experimented with the techniques” (56) that would later characterize American literary realism. As a historian, Simms sought to go beyond moral lessons and dry factual accounts to produce narratives that educated and entertained his readers while conveying “the genealogy of a region’s identity and the character of its people” (33). His historical fiction upheld the importance of virtue and celebrated the leadership of great men, but his Colonial and Revolutionary novels, which stressed South Carolina’s importance, also demonstrated a keen awareness of the diverse Spanish and French Huguenot as well as English origins of his home state.

Most interesting to Civil War historians will be Simms’s complementary roles as a literary nationalist and sectional apologist. Early in his career, the writer identified with the “Young America” movement’s quest to establish a unique American literature. Regionalism, though, lay at the heart of his nationalism; as Nicholas Meriwether explains, Simms believed that “the sprawling diversity of the country meant that the only way a genuinely national literature could form would be from strong representatives drawn from many states and every region” (239). The conflict over slavery’s expansion led to Simms’s break with the Young Americans as he turned to promote a literature for a distinct Southern nation—a shift, according to Moltke-Hansen, “of emphasis, not principle” (198). Through novels such as *Woodcraft* (1852), an implicit response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Simms defended slavery, patriarchy, and hierarchy as the basis for a well-ordered, organic society. Defeat shattered not only Simms’s vision for an independent Southern nation but also his understanding of history. Nevertheless, despite commemorating the Confederacy by collecting *War Poetry of the South* (1866), he quickly returned to advocating regionalism as the key to American literary independence. Yet Simms never regretted secession; according to Meriwether, he considered the war “a cataclysm to suffer and endure, not a lesson, much less a mistake, to learn from” (345). Even before Appomattox, his eyewitness account *Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, SC* (1865) revealed “inchoate expression of several of the elements that would fuse together to form the myth of the Lost Cause” (329).

Designed as a reference work, each essay in *Reading William Gilmore Simms* stands independently from the others in the collection. The introductions are organized alphabetically by title of the volumes. Those who read them sequentially will find some repetition while jumping across the various stages of Simms’s career. Even for readers consulting one or a few of the essays, a chronology or time-line outlining major developments in Simms’s life and listing publication dates would help users keep the author’s works in context. Nevertheless, this collection provides an excellent introduction to an important Southern intellectual while offering advanced scholars numerous insights on his significance.

Jonathan M. Atkins is a professor of History at Berry College and is the author of Politics, Parties, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832-1861 (1997) and The Early American Republic: From Confederation to Nation, 1789-1848 (2016). Currently he is working on a study of Tennessee during the secession crisis.