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Book Review: Florida, Land of Change, by Kathryn T. Abbey

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FLORIDA, LAND OF CHANGE

A Review by James O. Knauss

Florida, Land of Change by Kathryn Trimmer Abbey. (Chapel Hill : the University of North Carolina Press, 1941, XII, 426 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography and index. \$3.50).

At length there is an accurate and scholarly history of Florida, covering the entire period from its discovery to the twentieth century. To include all this in one medium-sized volume, the author must be highly selective in material used, and unless such selection is made on the basis of a definite viewpoint consistently followed, the work will be superficial and fragmentary. This criticism can not be made, as Dr. Abbey approached the subject with recognized objectives. She gives them succinctly in the preface: "Its [the book's] purposes are confined to relating the Florida of the present to the larger tides of human thought and behavior, tracing the factors which have contributed to making her what she is, and seeking to explain what she has done with the stuff of her existence." So the reader will not expect to find detailed accounts of the development of localities or even of important happenings unless the episodes help to illustrate the author's theme.

The book may be divided into three parts: chapters one to seven which are concerned with Florida

Note - Dr. Knauss, professor of history in Western State Teachers College, Kalamazoo, Michigan, is the author of *Territorial Florida Journalism* and of a number of articles relating to Florida's history published in this *Quarterly* and elsewhere. His appraisal of Dr. Abbey's volume may be had in a word: "The book is a dandy-by all odds the best general history of the state." He notes, but has omitted mention of it in his review, a minor imperfection which occurs now and then throughout: an inexact choice of word or usage, e.g. "anti-corporationists" held Florida politics for fifteen years," a "triumvirate of factors," "legal opinions . . . confirm the plan." etc. - *Ed.*

when the territory was Spanish (including the twenty year occupation by the British), chapters eight to thirteen which show the development as territory and state during the period of plantation economy, and chapters fourteen to sixteen which treat of modern Florida, extending from the chaos and nightmare of reconstruction to the present.

The first part of the work, dealing with the period prior to 1821, has greater unity than the other two parts. This is undoubtedly due to two chief factors, the comparative lack of complexity of life in the territory and the relative paucity of available records. These conditions enabled the author to center her almost undivided attention on Florida as a piece on the chessboard of diplomacy. She has succeeded remarkably well in tracing the attempts of Spain to prevent Florida from falling into the hands of her international rivals, France, England and the United States. In fact, the reviewer knows of no other work which shows as clearly and concisely the implications and complications of international rivalry in the Gulf area prior to 1821.

The second part of the book which is concerned with the period between 1821 and 1865 falls short of achieving the unity of the earlier part, although the author stresses the dominant idea of plantation economy. Life in Florida was becoming more complex, and available historical material of the period is more abundant, even if it has not been sufficiently evaluated. However, although details may have been introduced which form digressions from the main theme, there are some sections which will appeal particularly to the scholar, and other sections which will probably have greater interest for the general reader. Among the former should be included the accounts of railroad development and of banking in territorial days; among the latter the discussion of the Seminole troubles and of the War Between the States.

The third part is shorter. It includes a chapter on reconstruction after the war, another on the political history of the state prior to 1921, and a fascinating one on the economic development of the state with the chief emphasis on the contributions by Disston, Plant and Flagler. No account of the development of modern good roads and of aviation facilities is given, although surely these activities are illustrative of the theme on which the book closes: "She [Florida] was born in one Pan-American world; after drifting far away, she has come back to another." The reviewer would wish that the author had added to her work a short account of the state in the last three decades, even if the historian's "chances of error multiply speedily and his horizons become cloudy and perplexing" in attempting to evaluate the recent past.

The work is written in a good straightforward style with few ambiguities. The appendix contains a list of the governors, and of the counties with the years of their establishment. The "footnotes" are located at the end of the text, not at the bottom of each page. The extensive bibliography is composed mostly of secondary material deliberately selected by the author for its accessibility and accuracy.

The mechanical make up of the volume is very good. The numerous maps and illustrations serve as a valuable aid to the reader.

Florida, Land of Change, should have a wide circulation, not only among Florida historians and laymen but among those in other states who are interested in the factors which determined the development of the nation.

A REVIEW BY FLORENCE GLASS PALMER

As Dr. Abbey's history was written for both the historian and the general reader, and because it is the first history of Florida that is more than a historical record, the *Quarterly* reviews it from two angles. Though Mrs. Palmer is a writer of fiction,

her last book, *Spring Will Come Again*, (Bobbs-Merrill 1940), is written against a historical background, and her keen interest in our State's history might well give her the viewpoint of many of our readers. - *Ed.*

The well-advertised geography of Florida has brought the state large returns ; yet Captain Nathaniel Butler long ago declared that "geography without history seemeth a carcasse without motion", and in our day Miss Agnes Repplier maintains that "there is no beauty . . . without constant and not casual intercourse with human life." Native and adopted Floridians, vaguely conscious of our complex cultural heritage, but baffled by the lack of a comprehending history, will welcome Dr. Kathryn Abbey's Florida.

The recent vogue for historical novels has served to merge both the matter and the method of fact-and fiction-writing - doubtless for the benefit of both. Let a writer shape his story true to its geography - the red hills of Georgia or the hammock-lands of northeast Florida - and a waiting public takes the book to its heart. The rewards for writing history are seldom so evident. But the historian, too, can know a comparable satisfaction of creation - if only, as in Dr. Abbey's book, he can brush the dust from ancient manuscripts and quicken the men and women of the past into flesh and blood again.

Regarding Florida as "a region which has shared in the unfoldment of larger areas, a section, a nation, or a colonial empire," the author enlivens the scene of colonial Florida. Carefully she unravels the maze of Europe's colonizing efforts through three centuries and traces the delayed birth and retarded growth of Florida's Americanism, hinting finally at the state's present concern with an embryonic internationalism.

The trained historian's acquaintance with world history fixed Dr. Abbey's point of view for her suc-

cessful evaluation of Florida's past. We feel the often fruitless efforts at empire-building as she comes down across the centuries. Upon this stage of world intrigue much that seemed accidental or mystifying in Florida's history is rationalized; and the listless colony that lost its opportunity to win a stripe in Betsy Ross's flag is given logic for its course.

A vigorous, richly-figured style, vivifies our age-old legends. Ghosts that haunt our Spanish ruins are reembodyed. We are conscious of the hopes and courage of the pioneers forgetting disappointment and scornful of defeat.

Nowhere does the story bog down in trivialities of local economics or politics and a rare sympathy for local character and controversy, sprung perhaps from Dr. Abbey's identity with many interests in the state, pervades a book where no Floridian, no southerner will detect a prejudice inherited from the author's background. Reading her chapters on "Florida at War" and "Reconstruction," one marvels that the same lake's breezes can have blown on Kathryn Abbey that blew, years ago, on a vitriolic editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Her story of salt-makers along the Florida coast, routed often from their stills by Federal forces, but finding new ways and means to inject saline into a dying Confederacy, is one of many that lift this from the common run of dry state histories.

With the scholar's fine discrimination for source material, Dr. Abbey has written a spirited history of the earlier and obscurer periods of the state. Even the eagle's eye must lose sight of some events and interests in such a panorama, and Dr. Abbey has only a casual word for Florida's citrus industry. The First World War is overlooked, tho the new weapon of aviation for the present struggle was, even then, working out its use at Florida, bases. She

explains her neglect of modern development as due to the difficulty of appraising men and events of one's own time. The reader wonders if knowing the South's traditional resentment of the exposure of its faults, Dr. Abbey has not deliberately chosen a tactful silence. Some of us who love the state, whose pride is quickened at this able statement of its evolution, must regret that her keen but lenient mind passed lightly over gross evils in our body politic-legacies, often, of the past and so within the historian's province. Be that as it may, her book, with its lucid presentation of that past, can serve our understanding of the present, and thus aid in solving the problems of our times.