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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Florida's Flagler by Sidney Walter Martin. (The University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia, 1949. 280 pp. \$4.00.)

Henry Morrison Flagler was a logical product of the age in which he lived. In our America of the 1870's and 1880's there were dozens of men like him—free and easy but hard-working spirits, richer than Croesus, taking orders from no one, making their own rule-books as they carved out industrial empires.

Flagler's role in American history is a significant one; in Florida, his activities were even more noteworthy and forceful. Throughout his life and since his death Flagler has been the object of comment which has ranged from eulogy to execration. Story, gossip, and fact have become interwoven, and it is difficult to extract "Flagler the man" from "Flagler the legend."

A scholarly study of his life has long been wanted. Before Florida's history from Reconstruction to the boom can be adequately written, detailed research on many facets of economic, social and political activity in the State must be made available. Particularly is there a need for unbiased biographies of men who were leading figures during this vital period.

Many hoped that Sidney Walter Martin's book would be the definitive study of Flagler. His "Florida's Flagler" falls short of that. It renders great service, however, in intensifying interest in Flagler's life and works.

The author shows that Flagler's career followed the traditional Horatio Alger pattern. Born into a poor but Christian family of some standing and culture in western New York, his father was a part-time preacher and farmer. Income from either occupation was small, and at the age of fourteen young Flagler travelled westward seeking his fortune. Arriving in Republic, Ohio, "with only a French coin, a nickel, and four pennies in his pocket," Henry began working as a country clerk for his half-brother, Dan Harkness. His pay was five dollars per month, plus room and board. In 1853, Mary

Harkness, a cousin, became Flagler's first wife. Growing prosperous as a grain commission merchant, he became acquainted with John D. Rockefeller, also in the grain business. Then he branched out into the liquor distilling business. This seems a strange occupation for him, since he was always violently opposed to whiskey and its attendant evils. By 1862, Flagler had a fortune of \$50,000 but investing his money in a salt manufacturing business he was soon bankrupt.

Moving to Cleveland, Flagler made another start in the grain business. It was during this period that he became associated with Rockefeller. Flagler, Rockefeller and Samuel Andrews were interested in the new petroleum industry which was developing largely in western Pennsylvania. It was from this association that Standard Oil Company evolved into one of the wealthiest and most powerful business units the world has known; and Flagler played an active role in this development. Martin credits him with the pregnant idea of corporation, and with being the negotiator for lucrative rebates and drawbacks which poured millions into Standard Oil's tills. About 1882, he gradually retired from active participation in Standard Oil, with one of the largest fortunes in America.

His wife's prolonged poor health was the reason for Flagler's first trip to Florida. They were in Jacksonville for several weeks, and were pleased with the climate. Mrs. Flagler died in 1881, and two years later Flagler married Ida Alice Shourds, and they came to St. Augustine on their honeymoon. Enchanted with the place, they decided to return South each winter.

Martin credits Andrew Anderson, a St. Augustine physician, with being largely responsible for the first of Flagler's Florida investments. In fact, it was on land that he purchased from Dr. Anderson that the sumptuous Ponce de Leon Hotel was constructed. In 1885 Flagler bought his first Florida railroad, the Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Halifax River Railroad. He purchased other railroads, and by 1888 extended his

holdings to Daytona Beach. Through his efforts all-Pullman vestibule trains were operated between Jacksonville and New York, and a stream of winter tourists poured into Florida.

Throughout the 1890's Mr. Flagler pushed his railroad south along the East Coast, until in 1896 the road was completed to Miami. In addition to the Ponce de Leon, he built several other fabulous hotels—the Alcazar in St. Augustine, Ormond Beach hotel, the Royal Poinciana and Breakers in Palm Beach, and the Royal Palm in Miami.

An interesting chapter in "Florida's Flagler" deals with a subject, which perhaps more than any other engendered controversy and criticism. Flagler's second wife became insane and he was determined to divorce her. Although in Florida insanity was not grounds for divorce, Flagler laid his plans carefully and carried them through successfully. In 1901 the Florida legislature enacted a law which was known popularly as "Flagler's Divorce Bill." Many newspapers of the time accused Flagler of bribing legislators to secure this law. Immediately after its passage he instituted divorce proceedings, and when the divorce was granted he married Mary Lily Kenan. For her he built a marble palace, *Whitehall*, in Palm Beach.

The most valuable section of the book is that on the development of the Florida East Coast Railway and hotel system. The road past Homestead was called "Flagler's Folly" and certainly it seemed like folly to try to build a railroad across the Keys. But Flagler's dream was finally realized when the first train reached Key West in January 1912. It was operated until a hurricane in 1935 badly wrecked large sections of this overseas extension.

Although historians will question Professor Martin's bias, "Florida's Flagler" undoubtedly has wide appeal. The volume's worth would be enhanced with a clearer exposition of Flagler's activities as one of the topmost robber barons of Standard Oil and of the era. On this

the author quotes liberally from Ida Tarbell, but he does not always reach her conclusions about the oil company. Not even Allan Nevins's conclusions are agreed with entirely. The reader might like to know more about Flagler's dealings in Florida land. How much land did he secure from the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund? What were the activities of the Model Land Company? What was Flagler's profit from this company? Curiosity is aroused over the causes of the serious rupture between Flagler and his son. Martin states that Flagler was not actively involved in Florida politics. One wonders, however, if and how much he were indirectly involved, and if he supported the conservative faction in State politics which was attacked by Napoleon Broward, John N. C. Stockton, J. M. Barrs and others. The establishment of Florida's Railroad Commission in 1897 is not even mentioned. This is a serious omission.

"Florida's Flagler" will be enjoyed by the layman. There are excellent sections describing construction of the Ponce de Leon hotel, building the railroad along Florida's East Coast and across the Keys and erecting Whitehall. It seems to the reviewer that too much emphasis is put on Mrs. Flagler's insanity, and that the author assumes the role of a defense attorney for Flagler.

There are a number of minor slips, some of which might be charged to inadequate proof-reading. The format is good, it is well printed and bound, there are excellent illustrations and an extensive bibliography. The volume is an interesting and worthwhile contribution to Florida's history.

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