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REVIEW ESSAY

A River of Peace? The South Florida Frontier in the Nineteenth Century

by GARY R. MORMINO

Florida's Peace River Frontier. By Canter Brown, Jr. (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991. xviii, 483 pp. Preface, prologue, illustrations, maps, photographs, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

Napoleon Bonaparte, a mover and shaper of national boundaries, once insisted that Italy was too long to be a country. Might not reasonable people arrive at the same conclusion about another peninsula, namely, that Florida is too long to be a state?

Peninsular considerations weigh heavily in shaping the study of Florida history. During the promotional boom of the 1920s, one writer gushed that "Florida is the finger of Uncle Sam pointing the way to Paradise."¹ Jutting into the Gulf of Mexico, Florida constitutes 58,560 square miles and 8,500 miles of tidal shoreline. Florida crosses two time zones and incorporates nearly 500 years of recorded history and millennia of human habitation. A series of diverse ecosystems and climatic zones range from the Panhandle to the Florida Keys. Tallahassee lies twenty miles from the Georgia border and 500 miles from Miami. Experientially and geographically, Miami is much closer to Havana than Tallahassee.²

Considering the daunting challenges of defining Florida, it is not surprising that scholars have shied away from attempts to synthesize the history of Florida into a single volume. Charlton W. Tebeau's 1971 compendium, *A History of Florida*, still stands

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1. Jessie Atkinson Ball, "Florida's Natural Wonders," *South* 2 (February 1926), 30.
2. Edward A. Fernald, ed., *Atlas of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1981); John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York, 1982), 210-19.

as the best single treatment of the state history genre, although the study concentrates largely upon political and economic events.³

While the reluctance of historians to tackle the challenges of state history is regrettable, the movement to reinterpret and reinvigorate local and regional history must be considered admirable. During the last two decades, numerous first-rate studies have shaped the way we look at Florida history.⁴

The latest and most impressive book to examine the importance of region in Florida history is *Florida's Peace River Frontier*. The author, Canter Brown, Jr., combines a homebred love of the Peace River valley with a tenacious work ethic to find new documentation and recast old assumptions about the neglected region. Brown, currently a doctoral student at the University of Florida, has made a singular contribution to Florida history, a study that likely will define the Peace River region for decades to come.

"The stream is a stubborn, twisting, winding, crooked affair, at best," observed an 1860 correspondent.⁵ The Peace River originates in Polk County and parallels the ridge running down the peninsula. The river meanders 110 miles through the historic towns of Bartow, Fort Meade, Bowling Green, Wauchula, Zolfo Springs, Arcadia, and Fort Ogden, emptying into Charlotte Harbor at Punta Gorda.

Florida's Peace River Frontier surveys a century of south Florida life, spanning the period from the earliest migrations of

3. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971).

4. The following illustrate the health of local and regional studies in Florida: Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk, VA, 1988); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York, 1985); James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola 1900-1945* (DeLeon Springs, FL, 1976); Stuart B. McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County: An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, CA, 1983); Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay, 1528-1885* (Tulsa, OK, 1983); Janet Snyder Matthews, *Venice: Journey from Horse and Chaise* (Sarasota, 1989); Thelma Peters, *Biscayne Country, 1870-1926* (Miami, 1981); Clifton Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida, 1528-1865* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1989); Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County* (Tallahassee, 1976); Jerrell H. Shofner, *Jackson County, Florida-A History* (Marianna, FL, 1985); James Robertson Ward, *Old Hickory's Town: An Illustrated History of Jacksonville* (Jacksonville, 1982); Jean Parker Waterbury, ed., *The Oldest City, St. Augustine: Saga of Survival* (St. Augustine, 1983).

5. *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, June 23, 1860.

Seminoles and escaped slaves to the region in the early nineteenth century to the coming of the railroad and dramatic economic changes at the fin de siècle.

The opening chapter, "Early Migrations," graphically documents a remarkable story of tribal dislocation, race relations, and political intrigue in the shadows of the War of 1812 and the First Seminole War. Brown relates how a tumultuous series of conflicts in the American Southeast spilled over to the pristine reaches of south Florida. The ironically named Peace River (the etymological tangle of the Peas-Pease-Peace Creek/River is fascinating) became intertwined in a tangled web of slave maroons, Indian migrations, and international politics. Brown also has rediscovered the "black plantations at Sarasota Bay," a refuge for runaway slaves destroyed by raiders in 1821 (p. 7).⁶

Since 1812, Brown contends, runaway slaves and Creek Indians had sought protection in south Florida. The area's red and black population crested at several thousand by 1819. The dream of an Arcadian refuge collided with the founding of Fort Brooke (Tampa) in 1824, established by an expansionist republic to check the presence of Indians and their black allies in south Florida. Through the lens of the Peace River valley, readers view the unfolding of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). Events such as the treaties of Moultrie Creek and Payne's Landing, and personalities such as Osceola and James Gadsden, take on fresh perspectives. Brown's research skills make these early chapters especially valuable.

The Seminole wars were Florida's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The struggles left a bittersweet legacy upon the Peace River valley. Three terrible wars resulted in the killing and forced removal of thousands of Seminoles and their black vassals and allies. But the wars introduced new players, white Americans, principally Southerners, fiercely determined to hang on to this newly won land. In order to achieve this, a legacy of spasmodic violence hung over the ironically named River of Peace.

The Seminole wars also infused a positive and lasting influence. Most notably, the conflict introduced a formative and formidable partner in the development of Florida: the United States

6. For more on the Sarasota Bay black plantations, see Canter Brown, Jr., "The 'Sarrazota, or Runaway Negro Plantations': Tampa Bay's First Black Community," *Tampa Bay History* 12 (Fall/Winter 1990), 5-19.

government. The federal government, in war and peace, played a vital role in the development of Florida.⁷ The military-urban alliance functioned along the frontier, leaving behind forts that became towns, trails that became roads, and pioneers who became legends.

"When General William J. Worth declared the end of the Second Seminole War on August 14, 1842," writes Brown, "the Peace River Valley lay deserted" (p. 63). Ten days earlier Congress had passed legislation that would have far-reaching consequences for south Florida. The Armed Occupation Act of 1842 would enable pioneers willing to fight Indians and also battle the natural elements to homestead 160 acres of land. White settlers slowly penetrated the region. The surrender of Billy Bowlegs in 1858, ending the Third Seminole War, signaled a new opening of the Peace River valley. "The line of homesteads soon reached as far south as old Camp Ogden," notes Brown, adding that "by the beginning of the 1860s newcomers had staked their claims throughout the area" (p. 123)"

Peace River pioneers, having fought Indians and nature, confronted still another enemy in 1861. Brown's treatment of the Civil War and its aftermath combines new research with a fresh analysis. Previous narratives of Polk and old Manatee counties had painted a familiar portrait: valiant Floridians marching lockstep to the irrepressible beat of the Confederacy, only to face defeat and the ignoble spectacle of scalawags, radical Republicans, and ungrateful freedmen. Brown dashes stereotypes, and his findings doubtlessly will rattle family trees with revelations of south Florida's inner civil war. He finds complexity, not simplicity, and his work details a growing body of scholarship reinterpreting Florida and the Civil War.⁸

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7. Roger W. Lotchin has investigated the intricate relationship between the United States military and urban growth. See Roger W. Lotchin, ed., *The Martial Metropolis: U.S. Cities in War and Peace* (New York, 1984); Roger W. Lotchin, "The Metropolitan-Military Complex in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of the West* 18 (July 1979), 19-30; Roger W. Lotchin, "The City and the Sword: San Francisco and the Metropolitan-Military Complex," *Journal of American History* 65 (March 1971), 996-1021.
 8. For an overview of these events, see James W. Covington, "The Armed Occupation Act of 1842," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 40 (July 1961), 41-52.
 9. See also Robert A. Taylor, "Cow Cavalry: Munnerlyn's Battalion in Florida, 1864-1865," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65 (October 1986), 196-214; Rodney E. Dillon, Jr., "The Battle of Fort Myers," *Tampa Bay History* (Fall/Winter 1983), 27-36; David Coles, "Floridians in Blue: Militant Unionism in Florida

War drastically altered the rhythms of south Florida. Smallpox scoured the region in late 1862. Newly created Polk County received scores of anxious families that hoped interior Florida would serve as a safe haven for vulnerable property, namely slaves. For a brief interlude, south Florida seemed safely removed from Bull Run and Shiloh. But faced with a critical shortage of troops, the Confederacy enacted the first Conscription Act in April 1862, an action that disrupted life in the Peace River valley. Confederate agents “scoured the woods, looking for deserters and conscripts” (p. 152).

The fall of Vicksburg in July 1863 changed the fortunes of Florida. Western beef, a staple of the Confederate army, was no longer accessible. The beleaguered Confederate government looked to Florida for meat to feed the troops. Precisely at that moment, south Floridians were being forced to take sides in a bitter struggle over local, regional, and national sovereignty. A colorful cast of groups and characters, including the Cow Cavalry, Jacob Summerlin, Captain James McKay, James D. Green, and just plain folk make for interesting reading.

As the tenuous Confederate hold deteriorated with Sherman’s relentless march, the waters of the Peace River roiled over problems on the homefront. On February 17, 1864, the Confederate government repealed draft exemptions for cattlemen, an action involving enormous implications for Florida. This single act, contends Brown, “served to crystallize political, economic, and personal divisions that had been evolving along the Peace River Valley for almost a decade” (p. 165). The conflict turned nasty and bitter as neighbors and locales chose sides. Brown concludes, “At that point the war exploded upon the Peace River Valley, leading to the widespread destruction of homes, livestock, and farms” (p. 175).

Union forces, determined to disrupt the supply of cattle from south Florida, seized Fort Myers, which by 1864 overflowed with refugees and defectors. “That trickle became a stream” after February 1864. The Union cause typically appealed to the poor, nonslaveholding families living below Fort Meade, while slaveholding families and cattlemen residing generally north of Fort Meade remained loyal to the Confederacy.

During the Civil War” (unpublished paper presented at Florida Historical Society annual meeting, Gainesville, 1989).

The memories of war and Reconstruction burned deeply in the folk memories of south Floridians because they had paid dearly. Brown, following the earlier work of Jerrell Shofner and the recent findings of Eric Foner, exorcises the demons of Reconstruction, rejecting standard stereotypes and replacing them with a sensible narrative and solid analysis.¹⁰

If the war's end did not leave a world turned upside down, it certainly bequeathed a myriad of problems to a troubled era. Ex-slaves seemed especially vulnerable in the postwar milieu. Large numbers of freedmen voluntarily left the Peace River valley or, according to one former slave, were "dumped" by their masters in towns such as Tampa. Numbers graphically reveal the new order. In 1863, census takers in Polk County counted 237 slaves; in 1867, only 128 blacks were living in the county. In Manatee County, the number declined from 253 in 1860, to fifty-five in 1867. A Manatee County observer lamented in October 1874, "there are but few negroes here" (p. 206).

For good reasons the freedmen fled south Florida following the Civil War. Economically the region lay fallow; socially, the climate bred virulent violence. Hostilities swept the Peace River valley as settlers recoiled against what they perceived as uppity freedmen and the threat of Republican control. Groups of citizens known as Regulators organized into vigilante squads, becoming an extralegal arm of the law. When federal troops left Tampa in July 1869, Regulators interpreted the departure as an invitation to lash out at blacks remaining in the area, cow-whipping, ambushing, and murdering scores of victims.

The story is told how in New England the news of the first telegraph message was received. Bursting into the office of Ralph Waldo Emerson, an enthusiastic editor exulted, "Isn't it wonderful! Now Maine can talk to Florida." The crusty Emerson replied, "Yes, but has Maine anything to say to Florida?"¹¹ South Florida may have been remote through much of the nineteenth century, but the region began to stir economically in the 1870s. Florida had something to say, if not to Maine, at least to Cuba.

The cattle trade supplied the economic lifeline to the Peace River valley in the decades following the war. This exchange,

10. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988).

11. Quoted in Alistair Cooke, *Alistair Cooke's America* (New York, 1976), 253.

inaugurated in the late 1850s with Cuba, resurged in the early 1870s. A remarkable coterie of cowmen dominated the enterprise, and Brown has managed to balance the romantic aspects of the cattle trade with the economic realities of the business. Jacob Summerlin, Francis A. Hendry, Ziba King, and others achieved success in rounding up cattle and shipping them to Cuba and in doing so left giant imprints upon the urban, economic, and political landscape of south Florida.

The ethos of the cattle industry, with its homebrand justice, briery characters, and handshake contracts, belonged to the nineteenth-century frontier. Visionaries, however, dreamed of different plans. "Florida, in its southern part, reckons no cities of importance," wrote the French novelist Jules Verne. In his 1865 novel *From the Earth to the Moon*, Verne devised a giant cannon to launch a rocket into space. He selected the fictional south Florida town of Stones Hill as the launch site.¹² But the real propellant for south Florida's takeoff was not gunpowder or liquid hydrogen, but rather steel and steam.

The 1880s brought dramatic change to the Peace River valley. The railroad transformed city and country alike, described by one writer as "the resistless chariot of civilization."¹³ By 1886, passenger train service had reached Bartow, Fort Meade, Arcadia, Fort Odgen, and Punta Gorda.¹⁴ Residents of Polk and old Manatee counties may not have had much to say to Emerson's New England, but with the coming of the railroad, they opened a dialogue of trade, sending oranges and winter vegetables in exchange for northern cash. A new prosperity could be seen in the emergent towns along the Peace River. By 1887, Bartow numbered 2,000 residents and boasted the region's first brick building, an opera house, and baseball team. In other hamlets, the capriciousness and greed of the railroads doomed once promising locales to oblivion: witness the demise of English, Fort Ogden, and Pine Level.

Fortuitously, the arrival of the railroad coincided with the discovery of bone phosphate in the Peace River. A wildcat scram-

12. Jules Verne, *From the Earth to the Moon* (London, 1959), 47, 56.

13. Quoted in Alan Brinkley, et al., *American History* (New York, 1991, eighth ed.), 446.

14. See also Vernon E. Peeples, "Charlotte Harbor Division of the Florida Southern Railroad," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 58 (January 1980), 291-302.

ble for mineral rights and phosphate lands ensued, driving the price of real estate to boomtime levels. New towns with lyrical placenames— Pebbledale, Phosphoria, and Acme— could not hide the grievous scars left behind by the new industry.

Phosphate mining, a labor-intensive enterprise, attracted thousands of blacks to the region. Arcadia and Punta Gorda featured sizeable black settlements by the early 1890s. Regrettably, the attendant features of the phosphate industry— boom and bust cycles and rigid economic and racial hierarchies— bore heavily upon blacks.

Florida's Peace River Frontier ends with the close of the nineteenth century. The impact of the terrible freezes of 1894-1895, which devastated the region's budding citrus industry, and of phosphate companies, which left the Peace River polluted, suggest a depressing denouement. "For almost all of those one hundred years the struggles of man and nature had exacted terrible penalties as the price of conquering the frontier," Brown concludes. However, the author adds optimistically, "By 1900 the basic social, civic, and economic institutions which would endure through the twentieth century were in place" (p. 343).

Canter Brown has written an exceedingly well-researched book. How does it measure as a contribution to American and Florida history? The question was asked by Shakespeare's Henry V when, before the Battle of Agincourt, a courier estimated the enemy's distance. "How hath thou measured the ground?," asked Henry. And how has Brown measured his ground? Vaguely, if one interprets the question literally. A native of Fort Meade, the author knows well the lay of the land. But, in a serious omission, Brown neglected to provide readers with a geographical overview of the region's terrain. This reader, at least, wanted to know about the natural history of the river and how it was created and sustained prior to the nineteenth century. What makes the Peace River different, and how so from the Caloosahatchee or Withlacoochee?

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Sawyer chides Huck for thinking that Illinois was green and Indiana pink because they appeared that way on the map. Huck pleaded, "What's a map for? Ain't it to learn you facts?" *Florida's Peace River Frontier* needs more maps! Brown's strength lies in his authentic descriptions of the region, but readers living outside the area will be lost in a geographic fog. Witness this description of the region following the

Armed Occupation Act of 1842: "While most of these settlements were substantially north of the Peace River area, a considerable number were just west of the river's headwaters, particularly in the area stretching from Lake Thonotosassa to the site of the former Indian town of Itchepuckesassa and nearby Fort Sullivan (Plant City), then south to the Alafia River and west towards the river's mouth. For settlers planning a life in the cattle business, these sites were located ideally in relation to the Alafia and Myakka ranges to the south and east" (pp. 66-67). Had *Florida's Peace River Frontier* been more sensitive to the natural history of the region, or incorporated some of the recent environmental history into the story, the book would have been strengthened.

Seminal scholarship by Alfred Crosby, Donald Worster, William Cronon, and Pete Daniel has dealt with the role and place of nature in human life.¹⁵ Environmental history, argues Worster, "rejects the common assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints, that people are a separate and uniquely special series, that the ecological consequences of our past deeds can be ignored."¹⁶ While Brown provides readers with glimpses of the natural history of the region— the hurricane of 1848, the storm of 1878, the freezes of 1894-1895— a more systematic analysis is needed.

The reader comes away with the impression that the Peace River valley existed as a uniform ecosystem/region. In reality, the region supported a diverse ecosystem, a fact vitally apparent to pioneers wishing to homestead fertile hammock lands. A startling example of the region's diversity can be found along U.S. Highway 27. Millions of years ago the Lake Placid-Lake Wales Ridge formed Florida's shoreline. Waves pitched sand to create today's distinctive ridge four to eight miles wide and more than 100 miles long. On these scrub-sand hills, unusual species of

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15. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT, 1972); Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (New York, 1986); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983); Pete Daniel, *Deep 'n as it Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York, 1977).
 16. Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990), 1088. For an examination of this debate, see "A Round Table: Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990), 1087-1148.

plants and animals developed.¹⁷ Might one reinterpret some of the Peace River valley's patterns when viewed through an environmental focus? For instance, why did such divergent economic patterns take hold below and above the river at Fort Meade? In Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson, he imaginatively explained the travail of the Texas Hill Country through an examination of rain and soil patterns, a phenomenon which effectively stunted lives and vegetation.¹⁸

A splendid illustration of the importance of environmental adaptation in Florida history can be found in the aftermath of the 1823 Treaty of Moultrie Creek. "There are no people more attached to their native soil than Indians, or who are more averse to emigration," stated Florida Governor William DuVal. According to the treaty, the Seminoles relinquished their lands in north Florida for a vast reservation in south Florida, the lower portion of which included the Peace River region. The experiment proved disastrous. The reservation lands were labeled worthless. "Nineteen-twentieths of their whole country within the present boundary," reported Governor DuVal, "is by far the poorest and most miserable region I ever beheld." The Mikasuki chief Neamathla spoke with eloquence and pathos about the region. "We are poor and needy," he pleaded during the negotiations. "We hope you will not send us south, to a country where neither the hickory nut, the acorn, nor the persimmon grows." According to John K. Mahon, "The allusion to the acorn and the hickory nut was not mere caprice." Neamathla realized that the south Florida environment represented a drastic change from the traditional Creek habitat of north Florida and Alabama. Such changes often spelled death.¹⁹

Geography is destiny, the adage holds. Geographic boundaries and the retarded economic development of south Florida meant that the Peace River valley belonged to the frontier for much of the nineteenth century. The importance of the frontier correctly is asserted in Brown's study. But if *Florida's Peace River Frontier* can be faulted for its omission of a strong environmental

17. *Tampa Tribune*, February 24, 1991; Jeff Klinkenberg, "Species Threatened as Habitat Vanishes," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 20, 1990; William A. White, *The Geomorphology of the Florida Peninsula* (Tallahassee, 1970), 111.

18. Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1982), 11-15.

19. John K. Mahon, *History of The Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville, 1967; revised ed., Gainesville, 1985), 45, 53, 58.

component, it also must be critiqued for a mushy and imprecise definition of frontier as a central theme. Recently, historians of the West have raised a number of penetrating questions that invite comparisons to frontier Florida. Historians such as Patricia Limerick and Richard White deal principally with the trans-Mississippi West, but their spirited debate to understand the meaning of the elusive frontier lies at the heart of *Florida's Peace River Frontier*.²⁰

The Florida frontier served as one of the great meeting grounds on the continent, a setting where Native Americans, African slaves, Europeans, and Southerners encountered one another, struggled for solutions, and tried to figure one another out. The migration from the East to the West was only one of a great many migrations. Florida received a constant stream of new settlers, and Brown has successfully integrated these migrations, weaving both elites and ordinary people into the narrative. Brown also has successfully captured the spirit of the raucous frontier, with images literally and figuratively of Frederic Remington. But a clear and identifiable theme does not emerge except for the endemic violence affecting the region.

The study of violence, too, suffers from the problem of an overreliance upon the narrative and a difficulty in grasping the conceptual place of conflict in nineteenth-century Florida. Uninterrupted violence, from the forced removal of the Seminoles to the Regulators to labor conflicts, penetrates *Florida's Peace River Frontier*. Brown asserts, in perhaps the book's most important sentence, "[T]he unifying theme of the history of the Peace River throughout the nineteenth century was violence . . . a constant and continuing element of life on that raw frontier" (p. 240). In explaining the violence, Brown argues, "Much of the killing was random, provoked by personal grudge or affront and often fueled by whiskey" (p. 241).

It is not enough to write off the many murders and lynchings as symptoms of frontier Florida. Works by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Sheldon Hackney, Robert P. Ingalls, and Richard Slotkin

20. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environmental, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Paunees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, NE, 1983). For criticism of the "new" Western history, see Larry McMurtry, "How the West Was Won or Lost," *New Republic* 203 (October 22, 1990), 32-38.

have suggested systematic and conceptual frameworks within which to study violence.²¹ Scholars have been especially attracted to the phenomenon of violence in the American South. "Beneath the image of a gracious, hospitable, leisurely folk," observes John Shelton Reed, "has lurked that of a hot-tempered, violent, even sadistic people."²² The southern tradition of honor justified dueling and lynching to reinforce the powerful elites; indeed, the stewards of southern life frequently participated in extralegal justice. "Since lynch mobs usually enjoyed local support," argues Ingalls, "their members were rarely prosecuted for the crimes they committed."²³

To Richard Slotkin, America's penchant for violence irretrievably is linked with the myth of the frontier. "At the core of the myth," he writes in his sweeping book *The Fatal Environment*: "is the belief that economic, moral, and spiritual progress are achieved by the heroic foray of civilized society into the virgin wilderness and by the conquest and subjugation of wild nature and savage mankind. According to this Myth, the meaning and direction of American history— perhaps of Western history as a whole— is found in the metaphoric representations of history as an extended Indian War."²⁴

The myth of the frontier includes other tenets pertinent to the history of Florida, such as the myth of untrammelled freedom and success. Was the experience of nineteenth-century Peace River valley settlers a success or failure? Lydia Oregon Hendry Blount, reminiscing in 1931 about her difficult life on the Florida frontier, concluded, "I've watched the world a long time and I believe it's better than it used to be" (p. 345). On this excruciatingly difficult question, Brown hedges. Sensitive and alert to the new historical sensibilities, Brown does not revel in the American habit of conquest. *Florida's Peace River Frontier* parades a checklist

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21. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York, 1986); Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *American Historical Review* 74 (February 1969), 906-25; Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville, 1988); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York, 1985).
 22. John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South; Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Lexington, MA, 1972), 45.
 23. Robert P. Ingalls, "General Joseph P. Walls and Lynch Law in Tampa," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63 (July 1984), 62.
 24. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 531.

of tragedies and victims of conquest: native peoples (killed and removed), the landscape (mined and polluted), blacks (degraded and brutalized), and a white underclass (exploited victims of colonial economies). Who succeeded? Phosphate companies, owned and financed by foreign and northern capital? A handful of cattlemen and citrus barons? If, as Donald Worster contends, the settlement of the Great Plains represented a world-class environmental catastrophe, what are we to conclude of the wholesale extraction of minerals and the altering of the Peace River and hinterland?²⁵

Reviewers frequently and justifiably are chastised for asking their subjects to write books critics would have preferred. In other words, should not the reviewer concentrate upon what the author wrote, rather than what the critic wished he had written? In the case of *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, the author clearly expressed his goals: "Some readers will notice that the text of the book contains far more detail-particularly the identification of individuals and families with events being described-than strictly is necessary for the retelling of the story. The inclusion of the material was deliberate." Elaborating, Brown expressed hope that "the stories of individuals and families . . . should not be submerged in painting a broad picture" (p. xiii).

Brown thus introduces a delicate issue: How best can local and regional studies relate to the broader questions of the American past? Effective narrative history can be combined with a conceptual framework. One can, of course, ask big questions about small places. It is a difficult problem to master a coherent and anecdotal-rich narrative while integrating frontier expansion, the evolution of urban settlements, the transportation revolution, all the while keeping an eye toward the larger American picture. Popular history need not preclude historical insight. Curiosity about the local can open broader worlds and issues to view.

Local history frequently suffers from a willingness to accept time-honored legends and an overreliance upon secondary accounts, thus accentuating the problem. Canter Brown demolishes this stereotype. He has tracked down seemingly every manuscript and primary source related to the Peace River valley. His bibliog-

25. Worster, *Dust Bowl*.

raphy represents an excellent collection of public documents and private records. He consulted manuscript sources in at least thirteen states and the District of Columbia.

Richly researched and capably defended, *Florida's Peace River Frontier* makes a significant and lasting contribution to the understanding of south Florida. The relationship between formal scholarship and our culture's historical sensibility has been subject to recent debates. Works such as Brown's suggest that a bridge can be built between the two sides. Canter Brown has written a very good book; Floridians and lovers of Floridiana can expect from Brown future great books.