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REVIEW ESSAY

**Soldier of British West Florida:
Major Robert Farmer of Mobile**

by J. BARTON STARR

Major Robert Farmer of Mobile. By Robert R. Rea. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990. xii, 184 pp. Acknowledgments, introduction, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$31.95.)

No historian of British West Florida better understands the history of that colony than Robert R. Rea. Over the past twenty years, he has published numerous articles and books on that frontier outpost of the British Empire and has an unsurpassed grasp of the intricacies of the internal history of the colony as well as the imperial complexities posed by the large new possession. His research is always thorough, his analysis clear and often thought provoking, and his writing a model of style that attracts both the general reader and the professional historian.

But the question posed by this book is "Why Robert Farmer?" Few people other than specialists in British West Florida have ever heard of this British officer who never attained a rank higher than major. Rea obviously has had to answer this question to his own satisfaction and has done so by looking beyond the immediacy of Robert Farmer himself. He argues that "biography may be an historian's most useful tool, even though it be the old-fashioned sort that some would term life and times" (p.3). Clearly adopting this approach, Rea presents a careful analysis of one of the most important men in British West Florida, sufficient in itself to justify the book. He has gone further, however, and used Farmer's life as an illustration of the unity of the British-American experience, the complexities of British imperial administration, and the nature of the British army's command structure in America which necessitated an independence of action by its officers that is seldom recognized.

Unusual for an officer in the British army, Farmer was born in America (New Jersey), but based upon his abilities and a

remarkable unity in the Anglo-American experience, he rose to the rank of major. This often-overlooked unity that Rea portrays is seen repeatedly in Farmar's family connections, both in America and England, and within the army. Joining the army during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1742), Farmar participated in the West Indian campaign, including the disastrous expedition to Cartagena. During King George's War (1742-1748), he fought in some of the conflict's most bloody battles, including those of Fontenoy, Rocoux, and Laffeldt. In the French and Indian War (or Seven Years War, 1756-1763), his regiment played a part in the siege of Havana.

But the years following these military campaigns are the ones of most interest to readers of Florida history. In 1763, Major Farmar received orders to occupy Mobile and take possession of West Florida on behalf of the British crown. For the next fifteen years, his fortunes and those of British West Florida were inextricably interrelated. Rea presents a familiar story of the occupation of the run-down province; the internal bickering among virtually every prominent personality, as well as many minor figures, in West Florida; relations with the Spanish at New Orleans and the neighboring Indian tribes; and the attempt to develop the colony. Rea's brief account of Farmar's expedition up the Mississippi to establish British authority at Fort Chartres in the Illinois country is both the most detailed available and illustrative of the difficulties facing British authorities in America. The extended account of the court martial of Farmar, which resulted in his acquittal, while interesting to the specialist and reaffirming both the pettiness of the disputes in West Florida and the problems facing a frontier colony, probably is more detailed than most readers will want.

Farmar passed the last years of his life as a planter and politician in the vicinity of Mobile. Much of his time was spent acquiring land or attempting to confirm his title to lands (such as at Dauphin Island), perhaps the most common pastime—other than survival—of the settlers of the new-world frontier colonies. In this pursuit, he was quite successful and ultimately acquired at least 10,000 acres of land in West Florida.

As a politician, Farmar was appointed a justice of the peace and was elected from Mobile to the colonial legislative assembly. In the latter capacity, he evidenced the streak of independence that was so characteristic of him. Earlier in discussing the court

martial, Rea described "the iron determination, authority, and practicality that characterized Major Robert Farmar and every successful commander in the wilderness frontier" (p. 96). That determination and Farmar's position as a leading figure in Mobile often led to an independent stand which occasioned conflict. Lieutenant Governor Montfort Browne, an open enemy of Farmar, stated of the major: "This Gentleman is endowed with all the Violence & Subtilty of His American Brethren . . . ; he has long since become an Assembly man and leagued with the more despicable of the People, merely to form a party among them, to serve him in a Variety of law suits in which he is ever embroil'd" (p. 119).

That Farmar was an astute observer of the American scene is clear from his evaluation of the situation on the eve of the American Revolution. "The situation of affairs in the northern & Eastern parts of British America," he wrote a fellow officer in England, "are really deplorable, and let what will be the consequence of the present Struggle, Great Britain as well as America will rue that ever their politics took such a fatal turn. It on your side of the Atlantic Ocean may be thought an easy matter to reduce the Americans to a state of *Slavery* (for the present proceeding of administration will admit of no favourable appellation) without considering they are descendants from those who in England made so glorious a stand for liberty, the most laudable cause a man can be engaged in. The Americans only desire to participate with the Britains in the privileges and liberties of their happy constitution, which by nature and consanguinity they have a right to expect not withstanding the unnatural pretensions the Majority of the present British Parliament Assume" (p. 140). Later he informed his niece: "The Eastern and Northern Provinces of British America are in a melancholy situation. The Harsh and coercive measures the British ministry and Parliament have thought proper to adopt, it is to be feared, will bring on a Civil War, which gives me great concern for our friends and near relations, for should Affairs be brought to this deplorable pass, none will be suffered to remain Neuter and Idle Spectators, but all will be compelled to declare for either one or the other part" (p. 140).

What role would Robert Farmar have played in the American Revolution had he lived beyond 1778? The answer to such a question is, of course, "if history," but it seems clear that Farmar

would have struggled between his lifelong devotion to the empire and his sense of duty as a military man, and the ideas of justice and his own "American-ness." It is not difficult to paint a scenario of Farmar as either a Loyalist or a Rebel. In that sense he was a microcosm of the dilemma that faced most Americans as the wave of independence and revolution swept across the continent.

I have a few quibbles with the book. First, and most irritating, is the publisher's use of notes at end of the book. Rea includes much valuable information in his notes and with computerized typesetting no valid reason exists for not placing the notes at the bottom of the pages where they are easily accessible to the reader. Second, while admittedly beyond Farmar's lifetime, one is puzzled that Rea did not include any discussion (or at least a note) about the infamous "Robert Farmar's Journal" of the siege of Pensacola in 1781.

These points aside, Rea's judicious use of his sources is superb. His understanding of British West Florida, the empire, and the intricacies of the British army in America is unsurpassed. In short, *Robert Farmar of Mobile* likely will remain the definitive work on the major for many years to come.