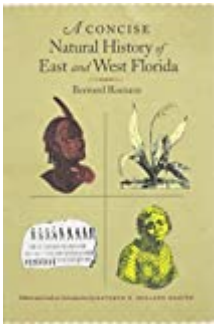
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bernard Romans. *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida.* Edited by Kathryn E. Holland Braund. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999. xiv + 442 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-0876-6.

Reviewed by Robert Olwell (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-Florida (August, 2002)

Bernard Romans was among the most colorful of the remarkable cast of characters who inhabited the Floridas during the two decades that the colonies of East and West Florida were part of the British Empire. Like most of his fellow Florida "adventurers," Romans arrived in the region armed with little more than an elaborate scheme for self-promotion and aggrandizement based on land speculation, scientific enterprise, and the cultivation of wealthy (and imperial) patronage. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that they had so much in common, the small community of Florida projectors and officials was beset by bitter rivalry and enmity. Romans was adept at making enemies, and he used the pages of his history to settle scores with many of them. The result is a profoundly biased and deeply personal, but also a very interesting and informative account of the region in the years just before the American Revolution.

Romans first arrived in East Florida (what is now the Floridian peninsula) in the spring of 1768, almost fifty years after his birth in Holland, and more than twenty years following his arrival in British-America. His first post was as the Deputy Surveyor for the Southern District of America. As Deputy Surveyor, Romans undertook a survey of the west coast of Florida from the keys to Pensacola. But Romans soon fell into a dispute with his superior, William Gerard DeBrahm, over money. Ultimately, Romans was forced to sue for his salary. In his "history," Romans dismissed DeBrahm as a "lunatic writer" and ridiculed his 1772 work *The Atlantic Pilot* for its inaccuracies (p. 262). Soon after he reached Pensacola, Romans met John Stuart, the Indian Superintendent for the Southern colonies. Romans agreed to act under Stuart and, beginning in the fall of 1771, he spent a year exploring and surveying the interior of West Florida (a region that today encompasses both the Florida "panhandle" and the southern half of Alabama and Mississippi). In the spring of 1773, Romans argued with Stuart (again over money) and left the Floridas. Arriving in New York, Romans once more sought to secure patronage. He tendered his services as a surveyor and mapmaker to General Thomas Gage (the commander of all the British troops in America) and even wrote directly to Lord Dartmouth, the American Secretary in London, offering to lead a scientific expedition to the Pacific–such as was undertaken by Lewis and Clark thirty years later. While he fruitlessly tended these vines, Romans worked upon his "natural history." He no doubt hoped that the work might both secure his reputation as a man of science and assist him in securing employment. But in the text of the book he could not forebear from revealing his own bitterness at "the LITTLE GREAT ONES, who have occasionally used me (sometimes as the monkey did the cat)" (p. 292). Unfortunately for Romans, only eight days

before the book was at last published in New York, the American Revolution began at Lexington and the attention of his hoped-for readers was diverted to the imperial catastrophe. During the war, Romans found work as a military engineer for the Americans–although he yet again complained of not being rewarded (and promoted) according to his merits. While en route to South Carolina in 1780, he was captured at sea and brought as a prisoner to England. He died while on his way home in 1784 in circumstances that led his widow to suspect that he had been murdered.

Anything but "concise," Romans's "history" is an almanac of information and opinion. He not only provides a detailed description of the climate, landscape, and flora of the region, but also takes swipes at his foes, finds room to theorize about the origin of the Indians, makes an early pro-slavery argument, provides a detailed description of indigo cultivation, and offers an elaborate schema by which 2500 dollars could be turned into a "fruitful farm" (including ten slaves) in one year (pp. 201-09). Although the book is organized by topic rather than by region, Romans's treatment of the two colonies is very different. When Romans set to work upon his history, attitudes toward East Florida had changed dramatically. In the mid-1760s laudatory accounts of East Florida sparked a great deal of interest, especially among wealthy Britons. But these early expectations had, by the early 1770s, produced only heavy financial losses and few returns. Romans's description of East Florida was therefore a cautionary tale of the hubris and ignorance of these elitist "monopolizers." Traveling down the St. Johns River, for example, Romans writes of passing abandoned plantations, "sad monuments of the folly and extravagant ideas of [these] ... adventurers and schemers" (p. 108). Romans attributed these failures to Florida's poor soil. He described Denys Rolle's settlement, for example, as "an odd attempt towards ... making an estate in as complete a sandy desert as can be found" (p. 108). But Romans's most caustic words were directed toward the New Smyrna colony where 1500 Greeks and Minorcans "deluded away from their native country" were brought to Florida as indentured servants (p. 247). The wretched conditions and barbarous treatment that they found drove the New Smyrna settlers to revolt. Although his sympathy was with the mutiny, Romans was a member of the jury that condemned three leaders of the failed uprising to death. Romans claimed that the jury's refusal to indict others disappointed "more than one great man" (p. 249). Romans described the ensuing execution (where one of the condemned was pardoned on the condition that he act as hangman of the others) as "one of the most moving scenes I ever experienced" (p. 249).

In the early 1770s, much less was known of West Florida, and in particular of the Indians of its interior. James Adair's description of the Indians of the area was published in London in the same year as Romans's book, and thus could not have influenced him. Likewise, William Bartram's account of his 1773 travels through the region did not appear in print until 1791. In this realm, untroubled with having to refute previous accounts and unclouded with reflections of his troubled relations with "great men," Romans was able to achieve a degree of detachment. His close descriptions of the culture of the Indians of this region, in particular the Choctaw, are among the earliest and most detailed that survive. Romans's objectivity was far from perfect. He judged the Indians according to his own "enlightened" standards as "primitive," and "uncivilized" (p. 62). But he was a very careful and meticulous observer. Interestingly, both Adair and Romans discussed the question of the Indians' origins at great length. But while Adair sought to prove that the Indians were descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel, Romans argued more provocatively that they were the product of a separate creation, and therefore in the sense of the Linnaen classification system, perhaps a distinct species. As a result of this assertion, Romans concluded that the Indians were not only uncivilized, but were "incapable of civilization" (p. 110).

Were it not for Kathryn E. Holland Braund's splendid seventy-page introduction to Romans and his work which begins this edition, it might be difficult to justify its publication. Original editions of Romans are rare, but a facsimile published by the University of Florida Press in 1962 is widely held in research libraries. This modern print version is, however, both easier to read and better indexed. Perhaps its publication will help the "rambling, digressive, bombastic, and opinionated" Romans finally get the respect and the fame that he always felt he deserved (p. 70).

Citation: Robert Olwell. Review of Romans, Bernard, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6604