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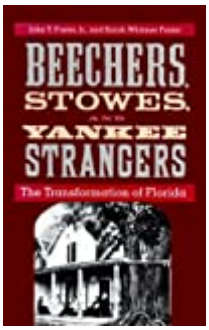

John T. Foster, Jr., Sarah Whitmer Foster. *Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: The Transformation of Florida.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. xxii + 158 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1646-7.

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Aunt Harriet's Plantation

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For over one hundred years, waves of Northern tourists have invaded the balmy climes of the Sunshine State. They brought with them much needed money as well as socially disruptive customs and values. Contrary to popular mythology, these snowbirds did not originate with the birth of Mickey Mouse in central Florida in the early 1970s. They did not start with Carl Fisher and the Miami real estate boom of the 1920s. They even predate the railroad building frenzy of Henry Plant and Henry Flagler around the turn of the twentieth century. As shown by John Foster and Sarah Whitmer Foster in this interesting little book, Northern sojourners proved instrumental in the reshaping of Florida during Reconstruction and the immediate post-Civil War era. These tourists came to Florida for the usual reasons: to view the strange and beautiful sub-tropical landscape, to improve their health by escaping the cold Northern winters, and to find an opportunity to make their fortune. But they also had another reason for coming to Florida: to help construct a new state, one in which recently emancipated freedmen and freedwomen could participate freely and equally. Their failure to enact lasting change has led to their removal from the collective memory of both historians and Floridians. The Fosters are to be commended for helping to reopen an important chapter in Florida's past.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, noted novelist and perhaps America's most famous and visible woman of the mid-nineteenth century, arrived in Florida in March 1867. Reeling from her public humiliation for publishing intimate details of the failed marriage of Lord and Lady Byron and mired in the writing of a novel that she could not seem to finish, Stowe longed to remake herself. Florida seemed the perfect place for this transformation. The northeast section of the state, from Fernandina to Jacksonville, had seen an influx of northern transplants during the last years of the Civil War and early in the Reconstruction period. Most of these individuals were similar in background to Stowe–middle- and upper-class New Englanders or New Yorkers, full of the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening. Though they came for a variety of reasons, they all expressed a desire to participate in a great experiment–insuring that newly freed

African-Americans took advantage of their status and became involved in education, politics, and economic upreach. Stowe and this cohort of northerners became important figures in a wide range of activities, including the establishment of churches, the reorganization of state government, the beginnings of a multi-racial Republican party, and the development of a commercially viable citrus crop.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was only the most recognizable of these northern migrants. While her Florida sojourn is rather well-known, most accounts focus on her descriptions of the Florida landscape, her experiments with the growing of citrus, and her therapeutic attempts to cure her son Frederick's alcoholism and war-induced melancholia. The Fosters discuss these issues at some length but place Stowe's religious zeal in the center of her Florida experience. To Stowe, as to her fellow northern compatriots, incorporating the freedmen into the mainstream of Florida life was the focus of this evangelical enterprise. Even in *Palmetto-Leaves*, her 1873 personal narrative about life in northeast Florida, generally seen as a genre piece replete with touristy descriptions of the St. Johns River and advice on the growing of citrus, Stowe spends much time describing the importance of freedom and the promise of education to newly emancipated slaves. Though couched in somewhat condescending terms towards ex-slaves, similar to that expressed by Freedmen's Bureau officials, Stowe's optimistic vision of a Florida marked by inter-racial harmony and Christian brotherhood symbolized the hope of this small band of "Yankee strangers."

The Fosters are especially good at bringing to life the experiences of Stowe's lesser known compatriots. Emphasizing the importance of evangelical Protestantism to the ideology of this cohort, they make a convincing case that the move South was simply a logical extension of antebellum abolitionist activities based around religious convictions. It was not coincidental that many of these northern migrants originated from upstate New York's "Burned Over District," an area brimming with religiosity and Republican party activism. Establishing branches of northern churches on Florida soil, northern evangelicals such as the Reverend John Swaim hoped to develop "a free and vibrant Florida ... based upon democratic ideals" (p. 29). Swaim, a circuit-riding Methodist Episcopal minister from New Jersey, arrived in Florida in April 1865. Swaim helped establish a black AME congregation in Jacksonville a year later. He also worked in conjunction with Freedmen's Bureau officials and the National Freedmen's Relief Association (NFRA) to provide shelter, jobs, and education for newly freed slaves. Swaim's career in Florida reflected the other three major aspects of northern migration stressed by the Fosters. The desire to make a good living using the abundant natural resources of the Sunshine State was reflected in many of Swaim's letters to northerners encouraging their migration to Florida. The need for agricultural innovation in Florida was another hallmark of Swaim's entreaties, and the development of commercially viable citrus, fruit, and vegetable crops can be dated from the efforts of Swaim and his fellow northerners, including Harriet Beecher Stowe herself. Finally, Swaim saw the move to Florida as beneficial to the health of himself and his family. Having lost a daughter to consumption (tuberculosis) in 1862, Swaim felt the sub-tropical climate of Florida would provide an opportunity for healthful living. Other northerners, citing a myriad of health concerns, followed Swaim's example and moved to Florida, hoping to cure their physical or mental ills.

Among those moving to Florida was Charles Beecher, Harriet's tormented younger brother. Following a church trial for heresy and the death of three of his children, Beecher settled in Florida in 1869, choosing to live in the remote coastal town of Newport, where he dabbled in citrus farming and preached to the local African-American population. Two years later, at the urging of Harriet and Republican governor Harrison Reed, Beecher took on the responsibility of state superintendent of public instruction. Infusing the office with evangelical fervor, Beecher improved public education for whites and blacks alike. Streamlining bureaucracy, raising educational standards, and extolling the virtues of an educated population, Beecher left office in 1873 with Florida claiming "to have the highest rate of literacy of any state of the old Confederacy" (p. 78). Beecher's expertise, enthusiasm, and ties to other northern reformers were crucial in providing educational opportunities for all of Florida's citizens, at least until the end of Republican rule in 1877.

The evangelical activities of the Second Great Awakening facilitated the transition of women into a more important public role. Fueled by religious energy, women played a crucial part in the northern attempt to remake Florida into a Yankee enclave of racial equality. Chief among them was Chloe Merrick, daughter of New York abolitionists, who arrived in Fernandina in 1863 and opened a school for newly freed slaves and an orphanage for African-American children. A year later, she expanded her role to include public fund raising throughout the north for her philanthropic enterprises in Florida. The Fosters conclude that "the success of her efforts gave

Merrick both financial and familial reinforcements and new energy" (p. 13). Merrick cemented her ties between religion, politics, and reform by marrying Florida's Republican governor, Harrison Reed, in 1869. She worked tirelessly to implement her program of freedmen education and was instrumental in the appointment of Charles Beecher as the superintendent of public instruction. Toiling behind the scenes, she insured her husband's public pronouncements took the concerns of Florida's freedmen into account. Merrick's efforts were helped by her connections to other northern women similarly motivated by evangelical Christian beliefs. This cohort of women, which included Harriet Beecher Stowe, proved influential in religious, educational, and political roles. The Fosters emphasize the importance of these women in participating in and shaping public decisions at a time when women were assumedly not involved in "the public sphere" at any level.

This is a valuable book, as it examines hitherto unexplored areas of Florida's history. Its brevity somewhat mitigates its impact, however, as the authors often leave the reader asking for more depth and analysis of important topics. They do not relate the Florida developments to those in other Southern states during the Reconstruction period, so we do not know how typical the experience of Stowe and her fellow reformers was. There is little here on the reaction of native Floridians, both white and black, to these "Yankee strangers." We also need to see how the story told here relates to the larger one of Reconstruction politics in Florida and the crucial transition to Redeemer rule with the election of 1876. The Fosters are quite good at centering their story on the remarkable cadre of women who transcended gender barriers in their attempts to remake Florida. However, they do not show the relationship of these women to other similar groups throughout late nineteenth-century America nor examine their actions in any sustained analytical framework, particularly regarding their relationship to ideas of feminism. Finally, there is little here that places the book in a broader historical setting. The Fosters do not discuss the historiographical context of their work and make little use of the wide range of existing secondary historical sources. I do not want to dwell, however, on what the book does not accomplish. John and Sarah Foster have written a book that will provide a springboard for much research into politics, gender, and religion in Florida in the tumultuous postbellum period.

On a broader front, *Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers* represents both the problems and the possibilities of Florida history in general. At a time when the place and importance of Florida history is being debated in Florida universities and on the H-Florida listserv, historians who do not specialize in Florida topics are likely to ignore or underappreciate a short, assumedly parochial book like this. They do so at their peril, for *Beechers, Stowes and Yankee Strangers* has much to add to the debate over the patterns of Reconstruction in the South. In a way similar to Kenneth Barnes in his *Who Killed John Clayton?*,[1] this book asks big questions about broad topics by using a local approach. But authors such as the Fosters must also do more to incorporate their books into the broader discourse of American history, or they run the risk of being labeled antiquarians. They must make explicit the implicit message of this book– that little events, elegantly described and painstakingly researched, can add much to our knowledge of Florida history and, yes, American history.

Note

[1]. Kenneth Barnes. *Who Killed John Clayton? Political Violence and the Emergence of the New South, 1861-1893* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

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