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**Educational Yet Uninspired: A Review
of F. Todd Smith's New Frontier History
of the "Gulf South"**

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F. TODD SMITH. *Louisiana and the Gulf South Frontier, 1500-1821*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. Pp. 366. \$42.50. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780807157107. [All citations in this review are from this book.]

F. Todd Smith describes his latest work, *Louisiana*, as a New Frontier History of the "Gulf South" region in the early-modern period. He begins with a discussion of the indigenous, Mississippian cultures that predated the arrival of the "Spanish invaders" of the early sixteenth century, and he ends with the solidification of American "hegemony" east of Texas in the year 1821. Smith sets the boundaries of the Gulf South region as "stretching northward from the Gulf of Mexico to the Tennessee and Arkansas Rivers, and

westward from the Suwannee River [in western Florida] to the Trinity River," in eastern Texas (1). After 1718, he states that the Gulf South can include the port city of New Orleans, Louisiana, and its hinterlands (4). Directed "at upper-level undergraduate and graduate students who are unfamiliar with the early history of Louisiana and the Gulf South," *Louisiana* synthesizes the past two decades of new scholarship on the region into a dense, 257-page survey (5). The work is a comprehensive and thoroughly researched *longue durée* history of an early American region that is usually overlooked; however, the story lacks passion, cohesion, and intimacy. While research specialists and teachers of early American History will likely reference *Louisiana* for historical information related to the Gulf South, the book is unlikely to otherwise inspire.

As Smith explains in his brief introduction, the Gulf South is a "distinctive historical region" that stands

apart from the four geographic zones that are most familiar to students of early American history: New England, the Middle Colonies, the Chesapeake, and the Low Country (1). The Gulf South differed from these British colonies along the eastern American seaboard in four main ways. The native tribes of the Gulf South “remained powerful, independent entities well into the nineteenth century;” the Gulf Coast’s European settlers were far more heterogeneous by the end of the eighteenth century; and their monarchical empires were characterized by disruptive change and a lack of interest in the Gulf territories, which their leaders viewed as backwaters. Finally, the large extent and unique nature of African slavery—defined in the Gulf South by a black majority and a three-caste system rather than a biracial system—contributed to the region’s special history (2). All of these factors are tied together by a “well-watered, fertile soil” that precipitated complex pre-Columbian cultures and helped make the region the wealthiest plantation tract of the United States in the early-nineteenth century (1).

Smith interprets the Gulf South region as a frontier from 1500 to 1821 (4). He defines a frontier as a “zone of interaction where different groups or polities are relatively equal in power, and either contend for resources and control, or establish an interdependence with one another,” (3). Looking upon Native, European, and African peoples with equal attention is crucial to the sub-field or scholarly movement of New Frontier History. Smith synthesizes two decades of scholarship written to correct the “triumphal” assumptions of colonial and national historiographies (3). He brings this particularistic scholarship together across “political divisions and chronological eras” in an attempt to emphasize both pre-Columbian peoples and the rise of American hegemony (4). In an epilogue that could have been a full-length chapter, Smith takes the narrative to the year 1845, highlighting both the consequences and further extension of American hegemony over the entire Gulf South, including Texas (4).

After reading *Louisiana*, no one will question that Smith possesses a tremendous understanding of the various historical periods that defined

the Gulf South region. Each of the seven, roughly 30-to-40 page chapters surveys an important and well-conceived period of the area's early-modern history. Smith wisely peppers these chapters with simple black-and-white maps, indicating precisely where Native and European settlements resided at each time period. For beginning scholars with an interest in either the Gulf South region or American expansion, there is no doubt that *Louisiana* can play a leading role in orienting them to the basic timeline of events and cast of characters. From the Great Southeastern smallpox epidemic of 1696 to 1700, to the Minister of the Indies José de Gálvez and the Bourbon Reforms of the 1770s and 80s, everything gets its moment in the sun. For teachers interested in working new research on the Gulf South into their lectures of early America, Smith's inclusions of interpretations like "the Woodland tradition" will prove extremely useful (7).

But Smith assigned himself a herculean task with *Louisiana*. He tries to balance demographic, economic, social, cultural, military, and diplomatic aspects of an overlooked region's

multicultural history, putting all powers on equal footing in regards to their coverage. His study is most useful for casting the rise of American regional dominance in the *longue durée*. As *Louisiana* demonstrates, only in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century did the United States manage to remove the Gulf South Indian tribes, overwhelm Louisiana's French creole inhabitants, and impose a biracial system commensurate with the rest of the Deep South. Smith is probably correct in assuming that most Americans think these feats were achieved immediately following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 (4).

Unfortunately, in trying to execute such a new approach, Smith ends up producing a dry manuscript that reverts to many old and tired traditions. On the one hand, Smith ably breaks down every period of the Gulf South's long history—from the evangelizing era of the Franciscan missions from 1595 to 1670, through the period of stabilizing crown control from 1731 to 1763, to the period of unrelenting Anglo-Protestant migration from 1783 to 1803. On the other hand, he refrains from offering much analysis, interpretation, or

evaluation about the larger meanings of these events. For some readers, the word "hegemony" carries strong connotations. Its frequent usage in *Louisiana* suggests a critique of American aggression and expansionism that is largely missing. Unfortunately, Smith does not precisely define the word. He seems to use the term as a synonym for "total control," but he reserves judgment about what that control means for our historical legacy. If readers turn to *Louisiana* expecting a pointed criticism of Anglo-American capitalism, southward expansion, or xenophobia—such as those found in the Florida and Gulf Coast works of scholars like Walter Johnson, Kathleen DuVal, Dan Schafer, and Jane Landers—they will be sorely disappointed. While Smith is willing to call the Spanish conquistadors "invaders," he has no comparable words for Anglo-Protestants. It is safe to say that this is not the kind of work Howard Zinn called for in *The Politics of History*.

In short, Smith busies himself with the arduous task of moving through the historical narrative. He discusses each major event, group, and person in a flat and cursory fashion, and the reader is

left wanting in regards to Smith's expert opinion about the history's actual significance. This problem is compounded by the fact that Smith ends *Louisiana* abruptly, with no conclusion. He suggests in the closing line that the biracial American system put in place in the Gulf South during the early nineteenth century lasted until the Civil Rights Movement (257). But this claim reads more like a stingy sop to critics who might ask, "So what's the point?," than it does like an actual claim worth investigating. Roughly one-hundred and thirty years passed between the solidification of American hegemony in the Gulf South and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the American South. Surely, historians cannot reduce the origins of the Jim Crow system to events that occurred before the 1820s. If they can, then the core of the apple still remains: what is it about Anglo society, in contrast to French and Spanish society, that fostered such oppressive conditions for blacks and natives? A line in Smith's introduction suggests that the representative government of the United States played a driving role, but this claim is not really followed up on later in the work (2).

As previously stated, one defining characteristic of New Frontier History is an equal focus on all groups inhabiting a particular zone. Smith seems to take pride in the amount of attention he pays to Native American tribes in *Louisiana*. Indeed, there are *many* native peoples discussed, from the more-familiar Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws, to the lesser-known Kadohadachos, Hasinais, and Pascagoulas. But discussions of these groups are usually limited to a few basic facts: population numbers, where and when they migrated to and from, and whom they supported or fought in a given conflict. The reader learns almost nothing about who these people actually were, culturally, psychologically, or socially. Here are two sentences that exhibit the style in which Smith often writes about Native groups:

At about the same time Eastern Muskogean speakers from the Cussita chiefdom, previously located on the lower reaches of the Coosa River and subject to the influence of Tascalusa, began to migrate eastward toward the Chattahoochee (34).

Whereas most of the descendants of the chiefdoms located along the Tombigbee, Alabama, and Chattahoochee Rivers migrated within the region following the Spanish entradas, the people living in the great chiefdoms of the central Mississippi Valley—Casqui, Pacaha, Quiguate, Quizquiz, and Aminoya, among others—abandoned the area altogether and moved southward (35).

These two sentences, taken from pages adjoining one another, are loaded with information, and yet the reader seems to learn almost nothing of interest about their subjects. Who are these groups of people, really? More importantly, and from a pedagogical standpoint, what is the kind of information about a group of people that really matters to modern-day readers? Is knowing the name of a native tribe, how many people constituted their population, and where they migrated to at a particular moment in history enough? *Louisiana* aside, historians must ask themselves, “do these basic facts pass as knowledge in our culture about who a group of people actually were?”

The same principle applies for the people of African descent who came to the Gulf South in increasing numbers through the Transatlantic Slave Trade during the early eighteenth century and onward. Readers learn that most of these people were “obtained in the Senegambia region of West Africa,” but the author does not offer much serious thought about why this makes any difference (81-82). Rather, what the reader gets is a half paragraph of generalizations about people from the Senegambia region. Readers learn that some of them were Muslim, most were polytheistic, most were brought up in agricultural communities of “crop raising and animal husbandry,” they fought with one another occasionally, and they spoke many languages and dialects. To see the absurdity here, one must imagine offering up this same dearth of information about the French, Spanish, or British settlers.

Perhaps Smith would respond that fully describing Native American and African groups in the Gulf South region is a matter of source difficulties. But the main problem with this point of argument is that *Louisiana* contains absolutely no citations and no in-text

commentary on source material. Smith includes only a ten-page “discussion” of secondary sources, entitled “Further Reading,” at the end of the book. A reader might wonder, for example, where does Smith get all of his detailed information about the number of natives in a particular group and the approximate time at which they migrated? Similarly, how does Smith arrive at his conclusion that “the slave trade voyages to Louisiana through 1723 had a loss in transit of less than 4 percent? Therefore, the Africans generally disembarked on the Gulf Coast in better condition than the Europeans.” (82)? Perhaps all of this information can be found in his other works on the American South, but that does not help the readers of *Louisiana*.

The present reviewer believes that Smith might be confused about his audience. He states *Louisiana* is intended for “upper-level undergraduate and graduate students,” but students at these levels should be focusing on historical method and process over pure content (5). Without either notes or a discussion of source material—and, more importantly, without any discussion about the unequal legacies of

information that historians encounter in their craft—*Louisiana* does not have much to offer a history student from an upper-level course. At the graduate level, most teachers do not assign books simply to teach their students about what happened in the past in a particular region. Instead, they assign books that can demonstrate larger lessons about the choices that historians make. These are books like Daniel Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country*, which teaches students how to see their imaginations as tools to fill in the gaps of the archives.

Having read *Louisiana*, the present reviewer is unsure about its potential audience. Perhaps the book is best suited for lower-level undergraduate students and non-academic readers, those who are still breaking apart the consensus narrative of American history, the one that they encountered in high school. But then again, *Louisiana* is probably too dry and academic to hold the interest of these readers. The survey reads almost like a textbook, except without the colorful visual aids. Perhaps the work is best intended for teachers and practicing scholars, those who need a sober tutorial about the history of a

region that remains outside their realm of expertise.

Smith manages to tell the *longue durée* history of the Gulf South region in a way that is reminiscent of old-fashioned, political history. There is little discussion of gender, race, culture, climate, or geography. Towards the end of *Louisiana*, the story of Native American history in the Gulf South becomes increasingly desperate and the narrative begs for the author's opinion. The relationship between Anglo-Protestant migrants and native groups becomes largely defined by land seizures, debts, alcoholism, factionalism, violence, failed resistance, and massive removal. Modern-day readers live in an age where the historical legacies of controversial figures like Andrew Jackson are criticized by advocacy groups like "Women on 20s," an organization that supports removing Jackson's face from the twenty-dollar bill. But Smith navigates Jackson's activities in the Gulf South—from the Red Stick War, to the First Seminole War, to Indian Removal—without any of the confidence found in such works as *Andrew Jackson* by Sean Wilentz, a scholar who actually defends Jackson as *not* genocidal (68). In

contrast, Smith seems to avoid any opportunity to get passionate about the consequences of American expansion one way or the other. Surely, there are many who will interpret this as the objective approach, necessary to a researcher's work. But the present reviewer sees it only as an attempt to excuse oneself from taking a stance and addressing the most difficult questions.

Let me suggest a more specific context to the generalized critique in the above paragraph. In one instance, Smith explains that "the Upper and Lower Creeks, along with the Seminoles of Spanish West Florida, owed Forbes and Company over \$100,000." As a result, "Seminole and Lower Creek leaders formally ceded over 1 million acres lying between the Apalachicola and Wakulla Rivers to the company to cancel most of the debt" (227). In a way, these sentences describe what happened without telling *why* it happened. Why did Natives like the Seminoles and Creeks frequently fall into debt? Did these Native Americans not understand American currency or the economy, or were they intentionally swindled by predatory practices? Why did natives buy American items on credit at all if the

result was debt and the forfeiture of land? Why did companies even sell them what they could not afford? Were these items necessary for survival or just luxuries? Who suggested ceding land to pay for debts in the first place, and did all parties involved have a common understanding about what land cession actually meant? The possible inquiries are endless, and each question gets the author closer to tackling the issues that really matter: the cultural differences at the heart of dispossession.

There are a few moments when Smith avoids great opportunities as an historian. Instead of not digging deep enough into the causes of a certain event, he simply shuts down the possibility for a discussion. For example, he states "Despite [Superintendent of Indian Affairs] Stuart's efforts to regulate the trade and maintain the peace [with Lower Creek and Seminole leaders], the prohibitions proved impossible to enforce, and, as a result, were scrapped by officials in Great Britain in March 1768" (137). Who has the authority to say what was *impossible* for the British Empire, especially when there exists such a hazy line between impossibility and lack of investment?

Can American historians imagine a similar line about the Compromise of 1877, stating that black political equality was “impossible to enforce”? In fact, Reconstruction and Civil Rights were possible, but they required the deployment of federal troops, something the British Empire might have done to protect Indian land but chose not to do. Now, if Smith stands by his claim that deploying British troops to protect Indian treaties from Anglo-Protestant migrants and unscrupulous traders was impossible, then he must find support for this claim in evidence. That is not too much to ask. In fact, many would say that is the historian’s job.

As *Louisiana* progresses, Smith spends a lot of time listing population numbers, demographic ratios, statistics for cash crop production and exportation, and the names of foreign and domestic treaties. He does not devote much space to people’s individual experiences, and he rarely includes quotes from primary sources. Many historians use individual experiences as opportunities to articulate larger themes in specific contexts. For example, if there are diaries, memoirs, or letters from French creoles, Spanish

administrators, Native peoples, or American settlers, then perhaps these can be used to reveal greater ideas about how contemporaries thought about the Gulf South as a geographic unit? Focusing on intimate sources every so often would allow Smith to ground claims in actual documents that readers can check for themselves. They would also break up the monotony of his encyclopedic narrative.

Saying *Louisiana* lacks passion is similar to saying the work is not driven by a clear thesis. Indeed, Smith does not seem to have an argument beyond, ‘this region is unique for the following reasons, and so its history needs to be synthesized in a broad survey.’ Strangely, there are many parts of the book where the reader is left questioning whether the Gulf South is, in fact, a cohesive geographic region. For example, Smith organizes the work with particularistic section headings. So even though the Gulf South is billed as a historically distinct area, readers constantly encounter the separate components of Texas, the Lower Mississippi Valley, the Gulf Coast, West Florida, and Arkansas. The settlements on the Arkansas River seem to be a

particular exception. At other moments, the history of the Gulf South is largely determined by external factors, such as the Native American slave trade from the Carolinas and the unrelenting migration of Anglo-Protestants from the fledgling American nation. Of course, every region in our world is connected to another, and all historians are forced to make tough decisions about the scope of their works. Nonetheless, can a geographic area really be a cohesive unit if one cannot tell its history in a flowing narrative, without section dividers for its each of its parts?

Next, this reviewer questions whether "Gulf South" is the right name for the region. This name defines the area in reference to the United States of America. Gulf South refers to the American South along the Gulf of Mexico. But one of the purposes of *Louisiana*, as clearly stated in the introduction, is to break through international boundaries (4). In this sense, the region should probably be called the "Gulf North" or the "North Gulf." After all, the area is located on the *northern* coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and it does not belong to the United States for almost all of its history in *Louisiana*.

As Atlantic historians know, foregrounding the geographic orientation of a region, rather than the political orientation, is an effective tactic for recapturing the way that contemporaries saw a given area's potential. In order to write a unified frontier history—one that privileges those who saw the region from the north as well as from the south—scholars will have to divorce the area from its eventual marriage with America. They will need to accept the possibility that the Gulf has meaning for people who live south of its boundaries, yet the name "Gulf South" makes no sense from their perspective.

Finally, *Louisiana* operates under a central assumption that this reviewer would like address. In the introduction, Smith correctly observes that the Gulf South area is overshadowed by more well-recognized regions of early American history, like New England or the Low Country (1). Smith seems to assume that the Gulf South is merely forgotten, and that once Americans know more about it, then it will assume its rightful place among these other, well-known territories. In other words, Smith does not ruminate in *Louisiana* about why the Gulf South region might

be a forgotten region in the first place. If historians want to spread this narrative, among more than just a few inside practitioners, then this larger question needs to be addressed. At the risk of being cynical, the present reviewer wants to close his review by suggesting what might be responsible for this neglect.

First, as *Louisiana* clearly demonstrates, the history of the Gulf South is defined by racial creolization and cultural heterogeneity. Its Spanish, French, Native, and African heritage does not accord well with the mainstream, American narrative. This narrative is essentially the origin story for a group of people who, because of their ancestors' unwillingness and/or inability to put the brakes on expansion, obliterated the Gulf South's heterogeneity in the early nineteenth century. This mainstream narrative of American history still privileges the British colonial experience above all others. For whatever reason, the British experience has become the origin myth of the United States. In this sense, most Americans today do not know about the Gulf South for the same reason they do not know that San Miguel de Gualdape

and St. Augustine predated Jamestown and Plymouth.

As Smith's style of writing has reminded me, the story of the Gulf South region is a difficult one to tell while still making America look good. The frontier has ever been a region of cultural mixing, and this plays well with our twenty-first century emphasis on multiculturalism and post-racialism. But the frontier has also been a region of extreme violence. The horrors of earlier times can be passed off as inherited legacies of the colonial era, but are United States citizens prepared to deal with the slave smuggling of an American pirate or the massacre of an American military general, a man who was later elected president and who still resides on American currency? On the other side of the intellectual spectrum, are people prepared to deal with the apparent fact that there was no consolidated identity among the Native American tribes, and that native peoples in the Gulf South consistently became partners in the dispossession of other native peoples? In a larger sense, how can the history of the Gulf South be told honestly to middle-school and high-school classrooms without undermining the

American political project? After all, the pre-collegiate classroom is the setting where most Americans actually learn about their history. That is where ideas about the relative importance of a particular geographic region become fastened to the collective memory. It may not be where the momentum begins; but, for most, it is certainly where the cruise control kicks in.