

William Gilmore Simms Biography

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Biography

American author William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), the dominant literary personality of the antebellum South, is chiefly remembered for his novels on subjects derived from American history.

William Gilmore Simms was born in Charleston, S.C. His father, who was "unfortunate in business," moved west; his mother died when he was an infant. He was raised by his maternal grandmother. His education was poor, but he read widely, then studied law. He visited his father in Mississippi, absorbing local color he used later in his books.

Returning to Charleston, in 1826 Simms married and was admitted to the bar a year later. A successful lawyer, by 1830 he had published five books of verse and assisted in editing several literary magazines. By 1832, after his wife's death, he was fully committed to a literary career.

Simms went north, establishing contacts with publishers and making important literary friends. His annual visit north (until the Civil War) to see his books through the press, his prodigious output, and his personality made him one of the most influential figures in American letters. Before sectional controversy eroded his popularity in the North, Simms was second only to James Fenimore Cooper as a popular novelist.

Simms began his literary career an ardent nationalist and Unionist, but he became an advocate of Southern causes in the 1840s and eventually a secessionist, and his writing increasingly turned to Southern material. His achievement was his historical romances. *Guy Rivers* (1834) is set in northern Georgia, then a frontier. *The Yemassee* (1835), his most popular colonial novel, deals with an Indian uprising in 1715. *The Partisan* (1835) was the first of a sequence of seven Revolutionary War novels which ends with *Eutaw* (1856). This series includes *Woodcraft* (1852), his best book, notable for Captain Porgy, an earthy character who contrasts with the aristocratic heroes of the series.

In 1836 Simms married Chevilette Roach, daughter of a wealthy landowner, and thereafter was master of a South Carolina plantation. During the Civil War, Simm's plantation with its extensive library was burned by Union soldiers, leaving him impoverished. He wrote doggedly but with little success and died much honored in his native state but little regarded elsewhere.