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Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: The Transformation of Florida

John T. Foster
Sarah Whitmore Foster
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Today's "snow birds"—older Northerners who frequent Florida's sun-drenched shores and lush interiors during the brutal winter months—might never care to wonder how this enigmatic state truly began to attract visitors. Similarly, few readers of Uncle Tom's Cabin would ever conjoin Harriet Beecher Stowe with the burgeoning of modern Florida. This state not only geographically appears as if a perfect puzzle piece, but indeed reveals itself quite intellectually worthy of deciphering as well.

The Fosters, both professors at Florida A & M University in Tallahassee, have proved more than adequate sleuths as they contribute the seventh in a series of "eclectic, carefully crafted" books dedicated to broadening the realm of Floridian scholarship. In this nicely layered narrative, the Fosters heap detailed example upon detailed example to allow readers to discover, along with them, Florida's fascinating formative years.

For the average American, Harriet Beecher Stowe's name will forever be linked to the Civil War, although this extremely prolific authoress? career spanned forty-four years. Few may know that the Beecher and Stowe families created an enduring legacy in the fields of religious, social and educational reform—interests which made them prime candidates for inhabiting Recon-structionist Florida. Still fewer are aware that Stowe's 1867 work, Palmetto Leaves, was the first unsolicited promotional work to interest Northern tourists.

The Fosters are quick to distinguish Florida as a unique locale for much more than its beauty and climate, and are careful to distance their "Yankee Stranger" from the de rigueur "carpetbagger." Abundant evidence culled from personal papers, public records and modern research is woven to establish a bold new foundation for Florida's re-generation, one designed and effected by transplanted Northerners able to meld a genuine concern for the well-being of their fellow man with a distinctly Yankee entrepreneurial spirit. Fascinating descriptions emerge of how the more reform-minded Beechers, Stowes and others worked with—and within—the framework of varied political machines and successfully mounted quasi-propaganda campaigns

with sympathetic Northern periodicals.

This intricate work is often betrayed by the somewhat narrow focus of its title, for the tales of numerous politicos and philanthropists are also relayed. A fuller account of the African-American experience, most often merely conveyed in generic statistics, might have enhanced this work more. Even so, scholars of the Reconstruction, literary historians and Florida residents—both year-round and "winter summer"—will glean startlingly useful information regarding this most unusual of southern states and the equally unusual people who deigned to accept the risks and rigors of a less-than-conventional "frontier" experience. What lingers withal is a thoroughly altered opinion of Florida —no longer the product of carpetbaggers and robber barons, but the hope of humane and generous individuals who envisioned "a Northern state in a southern clime."