President’s Welcome

It’s hard to believe that nine months have passed since the conference this past fall at the T.R.R. Cobb House in Athens, Georgia, where Jim Kibler directed a landmark gathering of Simms scholars and enthusiasts from around the world. Since then, the Executive Council has been busy with a number of initiatives and efforts.

Our greatest effort has been planning our biennial conference, slated for fall 2010 at the University of South Carolina (see below). We are fortunate in being able to work with the University and the South Caroliniana Library, home of the greatest Simms collection in the world, to host this next meeting. Enthusiasm is high and we anticipate a number of exciting events to be held in conjunction with our panels.

Officers have also been hard at work on upgrading the Society’s infrastructure, focusing on computerizing our records and creating a membership database. We had good results from our recent effort to locate missing members, but if you know of anyone who has moved and we have lost touch with, please let us know.

Our special issue of The Simms Review is in the final stages, with our editorial review board providing expert advice on revisions for our contributors. Devoted to the topic of the last conference, Simms as poet, the issue features several contributions that represent expansions of conference papers along with new articles and a new typesetting of Simms’s first publication, Monody, on the

Simms Conference Set for Fall 2010

Plans are underway for the next Simms Society conference, to be held on the historic campus of the University of South Carolina. Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the South Caroliniana Library, has already pledged the Library’s active support and involvement, and a number of other campus institutes and departments have expressed keen interest. Final dates will be announced shortly, followed by a nationwide call for papers. Strong interest in Simms’s post-war writings from a number of Society members has already suggested that as a theme, although the conference organizers strongly encourage papers on all aspects of Simms’s life and work. “It is remarkable to reflect on how far we have come in our efforts to restore Simms’s reputation,” Executive Council member Kevin Collins mused at the recent Executive Council meeting. “This conference will mark a milestone in those efforts, bringing together scholars dedicated to exploring the full range of Simms’s multifaceted, wide-ranging talents and achievements.”
Several years ago, Simms Society member John G. Simms, Jr., began to worry about his extensive collection of materials documenting the life and work of his great-grandfather William Gilmore Simms. “I have enjoyed building the collection and learned much from the process,” Simms reflected recently. “But I also knew that I wanted scholars to be able to benefit from it.” After talks with Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the South Caroliniana Library, he realized that the Library, already home to the largest collection of Simms materials in the world, would be the best place for his collection.

“I knew that I wanted my collection to go to a repository that would respect the materials,” Simms explained, “and as archivists, the staff at the Caroliniana also appreciate the effort required to assemble the collection.” That effort is amply documented not only in scope of the collection, which numbers more than 500 items, but especially in the rarity and condition of many of the materials. Indeed, many of these items have never been seen in this condition by veteran book dealers specializing in rare Simms materials.

The meticulous annotations that Simms provided, pointing out potential scholarly uses and other significant aspects of the materials, also attest to the academic value of the collection. “John is one of the most knowledgeable collectors I have encountered,” Dr. Stokes remarked. “His grasp of what is significant about the collection and its scholarly potential is remarkable.”

Dean of University Libraries Tom McNally concurred. “This collection represents a treasure trove of information for Simms scholars,” he commented, “and it makes possible new avenues of research, which is our passion.”

Named for John Govan Simms, eldest son of Charles Carroll Simms and a grandson of William Gilmore Simms, the collection was given by Simms and his sisters Kate Simms Counts and Joan Simms Wanner.

Not long ago, scholars might have said that of all of Simms’s books, his 1865 work The Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, S.C. was perhaps the rarest. Despite a 1937 reissue, much pirated since then, the original edition is quite scarce, with even copies in poor condition fetching prices of up to $6,500 on the rare books market. First written as a serial account for The Columbia Phoenix, a newspaper Simms edited and largely wrote, the book documented the destruction of much of the city during its occupation by Union forces under the command of William Tecumseh Sherman.

For Simms scholars, the book is important for several reasons, especially for the careful editing it reveals. Often criticized for writing too hastily with little revision, Simms took pains to edit the text, excising significant portions, and printing it in a small edition in time for legislators returning to the Capital in the fall of 1865. Part of the book’s importance is its incorporation of numerous first-person accounts, showing Simms’s facility with contemporary history, and casting light on his research. In keeping with the social conventions of the time, however, he elided many of the names of his female witnesses. While scholars have been able to match some testimony recorded there with manuscript accounts and later published versions, no contemporary documentation identifying these witnesses was thought to survive.

Last spring, however, Edmund and Mary Taylor invited Allen Stokes to look at some family materials for possible accession; one of them was Isabel Martin’s copy of The Sack and Destruction, bearing her name. Although the Library has other copies, their fragility limits their use, so Dr. Stokes immediately expressed interest.

When it arrived, he was amazed to find hand written annotations on several pages, identifying several of the unnamed speakers. “This is an important find for Civil War scholars interested in assessing Simms’s text,” Dr. Stokes explained. “Although it will require work to conclusively match the names with the stories, these annotations make possible a kind of fact-checking that has always been a problem with the book.”

And for Simms scholars, it reveals even more clearly the care that its author expended in crafting and editing his most extensive wartime account.
New Simms Letter Discovered

Since the publication of the sixth volume of the monumental *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms* (6 vols., USC Press, 1952-82), dozens of Simms letters have surfaced. Recently another letter was advertised in a dealer’s catalog, and thanks to the generosity of several members of the University South Caroliniana Society, the friends society for the South Caroliniana Library, this letter was purchased by the Society and added to the Simms Collection at the Caroliniana.

“This is an important letter,” enthused Henry Fulmer, Curator of Manuscripts at the Caroliniana. “Letters from the last years of Simms’s life are comparatively rare, and this adds a number of details to our understanding of this vital but relatively undocumented phase of his life.” During the War, postal service was erratic, and the upheavals in the aftermath of the War meant that letters to correspondents may not have been delivered. Simms complained often of letters going missing, and indeed, he mentions in this letter that two letters to his family may not have reached their destination.

The circumstances surrounding this new letter are of particular interest to scholars. Written from New York City, where he was staying with friends, Simms had traveled there to revisit old friends and renew professional contacts as part of his efforts to rebuild his career. Many of these concerns echo in his words here, ranging from worry for his family and finances in a devastated postwar South Carolina to his efforts to secure publication of his anthology *War Poetry of the South*, his last major book publication. It is vintage Simms: even beset by failing health and despite the crushing losses he had endured, his optimism still shines through.

To William Gilmore Simms, Jr., June 21, 1866

New York, June 21. 1866.

My dear Gilmore.

I had expected to hear from you before this, but nothing has yet reached me from Charleston or Woodlands. I wrote you twice just before leaving the city, and wrote you again, the day after my arrival here. I take for granted that by this time all of these letters have been received. I am especially anxious to be assured that you received the one which carried to you five dfts, each of $40., upon Mr. Wagner, and that you fully comprehend the way in which you are to use them. By this, I suppose that Chevillette is again at Woodlands & trust that her visit to the city has done her all the anticipated good. My hope is equally strong that you, M.L. Govan & Carroll are all well & that Donald is healthy & vigorously at work with good prospects on his plantation. My affectionate regards for all, and best respects to Dr. [unknown] and Washy. As yet, I have little to report. I have seen numerous old acquaintances & been very kindly received. I am still with Mr. & Mrs. Ferris, both of whom send loving remembrances. I spent 2 days with Lawson at Yonkers on Saturday and Sunday last, & next Saturday visit Booker for a few days. I have given out MSS. to Richardson, & in the course of the week we shall commence printing the war poems of the South. I am, as you may conceive, quite too busy for long letter writing, and it must suffice to learn that I am well, & am as ever Your affectionate father

W. Gilmore Simms.

“As yet, I have little to report. I have seen numerous old acquaintances & been very kindly received.”

Thanks to Graham Duncan, Manuscripts Assistant at the South Caroliniana Library, for his transcription.
Memorializing Simms: An Address Honoring the Unveiling of the Bust in Barnwell

This address was given at the banquet at the Barnwell Simms Conference, June 9, 2006, by Nicholas Meriwether. The photographs were taken by Society member Jennings Owens II, who organized the conference.

Good evening. It's good to be here. Thank you for the honor of speaking tonight, though I should say that it required a certain amount of arm-twisting on the part of Jennings Owens, our host, to convince me into accepting. As one of the least accomplished Simms scholars present tonight, with only a few publications on him to my credit, I was somewhat abashed to be given the honor of making this address. Then I realized that after two earlier Simms conferences held this spring, the first string was all played out, so it was time to bring in the relief pitcher.

But it is a real pleasure to be here, and despite my meager contributions to the Simms secondary bibliography, I can lay claim to spending more time with Simms's works than anyone else in this room: as the Oral Historian at the South Caroliniana Library, I spend my days in a building housing the greatest repository of Simms materials in the world, and I walk past those volumes every day, often finding my thoughts turning to this protean talent—although faced with the proof of his fecundity, it's hard not to let those thoughts turn to self-castigation for my own productivity, a response that I suspect is one of the unspoken reasons we have the Simms researchers work there.

That, too, provides something of a justification for my talk tonight, because the scope of Simms can make almost anyone a dabbler: he wrote so much, so well, on so many topics and in so many genres, that mastering his corpus requires a scholar of extraordinary zeal and determination. He has been blessed to have a few of those, over the more than a century that has passed since his death, and there are several here tonight who have made that commitment. But for those of us who must devote ourselves to other topics—who cannot muster such dedication—there is still so much to reward our occasional forays into the incredible labyrinth of his consciousness.

Indeed, we can all take great comfort in the fact that being a dabbler is a good way to appreciate Simms, so I come before you today as a Simms appreciator, not as one of those scholars who have made serious claim to understanding him. And in my defense, I don't think that's inappropriate, given the occasion: for this is an event designed to express our appreciation for the man, the writer, the monumental talent that did so much for our state, our region, our heritage, and all American letters.

I am in good company in doing so. In 1879, on the occasion of the unveiling of the first bust of Simms, erected in Charleston's White Point Garden, one Simms admirer wrote:

To my shame, be it said, that I do not know the half that I should know of the historian, poet and novelist, to whom Carolina is about to pay honor. But this I know—that, alone among her sisters of the South, Carolina honors herself in honoring a son distinguished not in battle, but in the higher field of letters. Oppressed, impoverished beyond them all, Carolina is first among the Southern States to recognize the worth of home

literature—that only wealth which time can never dissipate—the true wealth, which best governs the world, while all other riches fade and perish.

It is a wonderful tribute—not least because he, too, admits that he hasn't read enough Simms—but it also expresses a sentiment that Simms readers will immediately recognize as one that Simms himself expressed over the years: not of his own importance, of course, but of the vital role of art and artists in sustaining the local, regional and national character of a people. In 1846 he wrote:

To write from a people, is to write to a people—to make them live—to endow them with a life and a name—to preserve them with a history forever. Whether the poet shall frame his song according to custom, or according to the peculiar nature and need of those for whom it is made, is, in other words, to ask whether he shall be a poet at all or not. It was by properly understanding this difference in ancient days that he grew into the stature of the poet, and won his reputation; and it was through the proper comprehension of this difference and this duty, on the part of the poet, that the genius and the history of the great nations have survived all the political disasters which have bowed their pillars in the dust.

That is the real thrust of my remarks here: that what we are doing in honoring Simms and his achievement is something that he taught us to do, by his words and his example. Indeed, I believe that Simms would have been most pleased by the honor bestowed on him this weekend; we can almost imagine what he might have said, were he here tonight. In one of his speeches, praised by one scholar as Simms's “most extensive published exposition of his social philosophy,” he reflected on a visit to an Alabama town he had known as a boy, and his words suit this occasion in so many ways that I ask your indulgence for another long quotation:

Little did I imagine that the...hamlet which I then surveyed,—a fragmentary form, not half made up,—was, in so short a space of time, to become so eminent a city;—her dwellings informed by intellect and enlivened by society...Learning at home, with an allotted and noble mansion in her high places, and Taste secure
in her dominions of equal peace and prosperity. Still less was it my thought, that, in that same little space of time, the unknown and obscure boy who then beheld her in that unimproved condition, was to be summoned from his distant home ... to minister at her most sacred anniversary,—to prepare the altar for the offerings of her infant literature,—and to join with her sons in the holy sacrifice to that Genius, equally proud and pure, in whose honor the song of the bard, and the voice of the orator, “never should be mute.”

For that is what we are engaged in tonight, and this weekend: to join the Barnwell County Museum and Historical Society, their benefactors, and sculptor Zan Lee Wells in honoring their sacrifice to that genius we call Simms, in whose honor our voices “never should be mute.”

We join a long line of South Carolinians and aficionados who have paid homage to Simms, and that is what I wish to reflect on tonight: what those efforts mean, especially in the context of Simms and his work. Several themes recur throughout the tributes made to Simms at the unveiling of that first bust. T. Addison Richards wrote: “America will remember Simms among her great and good men, and Carolina will surely never cease to do him honor.” A. K. McClure’s remarks echo and make an interesting twist on those sentiments: “The name of William Gilmore Simms is so interwoven with the literature of the last generation that his fame belongs not to South Carolina alone, nor yet to his country, but to the world that honors the illustrious men of letters; and South Carolina honors herself in honoring his memory.” But it was Hugh S. Thompson who gave the most pithy and eloquent tribute, in words that could well describe the activities of this weekend: “The fame of William Gilmore Simms is the common heritage of all who claim South Carolina as their home; and the erection of a monument to perpetuate his name will be regarded by all who venerate genius, learning and patriotism, as a fitting tribute to his worth.”

It is appropriate, though, that Simms himself be the person who best explains the importance of what we’re doing this weekend, reifying our praise in bronze for the ages. In one memorable passage in his Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction he says, almost eerily: “The spell of genius, in thus making sacred the ruins of time, preserves itself from oblivion. What would be the homage of our children, down to the fourth and fifth generation of those, born after, who will love us,—to that inspired bard, who shall conduct them to the high places of our glory— who shall lead them to, and designate, by a song and by a sign, the old fields of Eutaw and Saratoga....” Or now here, to Barnwell, to designate another monument.

Simms’s words provide the best epigraph, but they cannot express our own sense of enduring appreciation. If we look to the past for guidance—as Simms so often told us we should—seeking to find how our ancestors coined their ceremonial words, no more moving and relevant tribute could be found than that of A. P. Aldritch at that earlier unveiling:

...it seems to me that South Carolina gave no son to the world more worthy to be loved, revered, honored and cherished, than William Gilmore Simms. The bust of bronze poised on its shaft beneath the Heaven he now inhabits, can tell the coming generations little of that royal soul, that tender heart, that thinking brain, which in laborious research, and flame-like fancies, illustrated the history of his State, that he loved with passion and fidelity beyond expression. But it will grace the soil that holds his sacred dust, and by its somber and majestic mien, hush and inspire the passerby, reminding him that the ground he treads is holy, and the air that circles round our poet’s sculptured head is to be breathed with reverence.

Aldritch not only loved Simms but he had read him well. Indeed, his words remind us, how can we help but honor Simms, the man whose example—whose entire life—was proof of what he believed when he wrote:

The genius of our people is required to declare itself after a fashion of its own—must be influenced by its skies, and by those natural objects which familiarly address themselves to the senses from boyhood, and colour the fancies, and urge the thoughts, and shape the growing affections of the child to a something kindred with the things which he holds. His whole soul must be imbued with sympathies caught from surrounding aspects within his infant horizon. The heart must be moulded to an intense appreciation of our woods and streams, our dense forests and deep swamps, our vast immeasurable mountains, our voluminous and tumbling waters. It must receive its higher moral tone from the exigencies of society, its traditions and its histories. Tutored at the knee of the grand-dame, the boy must grasp, as subjects of familiar and frequent consideration, the broken chronicles of senility, and shape them, as he grows older, into coherence and effect. He must learn to dwell often upon the narratives of the brave fathers who first broke ground in the wilderness...These histories, making vivid impressions upon the pliant fancies of childhood, are the source of those vigorous shoots, of thought and imagination, which make a nation proud of its sons.... Simms taught us, and showed us, that a local, regional and national literature was the very bedrock of our character, our heritage, our posterity; and he explains how that literature informs our sense of pride. How appropriate that it should also impel us to honor him tonight.

Although I deprecated my own contributions to Simms studies earlier, that does not mean I am any less impassioned in my determination to see Simms treated properly by the academy. And for better or worse, the academy is where that battle rages, and has raged, ever since William Peterfield Trent wrote his dismissive biography in 1892. So I would offer a final thought about what our efforts to honor Simms mean in the grander context of the academic debate over his life and work. I
came face to face with that in my labors as Simms Fellow at the Caroliniana several years ago, when I was working on a textual and bibliographic analysis of The Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, S.C. The ways in which Simms's work has been used and misused by scholars is perhaps nowhere more striking than with The Sack and Destruction.

But I think it extends to almost every part of his corpus, for just as some historians have been quick to selectively use Simms’s account of the burning of Columbia when it suited their purposes, ignoring the broader context surrounding it as well as the monumental effort informing it, so too have some literary scholars been anxious to dismiss his work as a whole because of his defense of the South, especially for his endorsement of the American bane of slavery. As David Moltke-Hansen commented recently, “Simms has been ‘disappeared’ because of his pro-slavery writings....”

It seems to me that therein lies the challenge and the promise of studying Simms: America is characterized by immense contradictions and complexity, from the remarkable triumph of our founding to the profound shame of our genocidal treatment of Native Americans. Our greatest minds grappled with those sorts of complexities in even our very early writings. Simms’s defense of slavery is abhorrent to modern readers, but it is part of a much more complicated intellectual geography. If his work reflects that complexity, then that is the challenge for scholars—and there is no more proper one for the ancient profession of letters of which Simms was so great an exemplar.

Changes in institutional consciousness are glacial, but we can point with satisfaction to the realization that all of the good work of Simms scholars is slowly bearing fruit, and making him increasingly difficult to ignore.

For the rest of us, we can be satisfied with our own appreciation of South Carolina’s greatest man of letters, and the efforts of the Barnwell County Museum and Historical Society, their benefactors, and Zan Lee Wells for their magnificent work to memorialize him. They are part of a long and proud tradition that Simms did so much to further: the quiet, confident determination to honor our ancestors, in all their complexities. As Simms himself said, in a very different context, “the events of a national history, which we can associate with a place and with a name, endowed vitality by the song of the poet,—will make that place sacred, as a shrine for seeking pilgrims, and will render that name famous as a sound, for deep-feeling and warm-loving spirits. A national history, preserved by a national poet, becomes, in fact, a national religion. Taught by him, we every where behold the visible monuments of the agonies of our martyrs.” This weekend’s events allow us, and all future generations, to behold another of these visible monuments.


New Documentation on Simms’s Masonic Connections Surfaces

Simms Society member Paul C. Graham, a Freemason for many years, has spent several years researching Simms’s affiliation with and work for the Masons. He first presented his findings at the Simms Conference in Athens last fall, with a revised and expanded version of his talk slated for publication in the upcoming special issue of The Simms Review.

Most of the details of Simms’s membership in the Masonic fraternity were lost when the lodge Simms belonged to in Columbia burned, along with much of the city, during the Federal occupation in February, 1865. The details that we do have are mostly fragmentary. Simms writes that he was a Mason during the occupation of Columbia, and later that year wrote his friend James Lawson that he had been “persuaded to join the Masons” since Lawson’s last visit in 1859. The 1860 listing of all Masons in South Carolina does not include Simms. A 1939 history of Orange Lodge No. 14 of Charleston—the lodge that Simms would join only in February 1866—notes that Simms was “raised [that is, became a Master Mason] in Richland Lodge, No. 56.” However, Richland Lodge of Columbia’s number was 39.

Confirmation of Simms’s Masonic membership came from an unlikely source: in May 2008, Graham came across a listing on eBay entitled “Rare Confederate Letter asking for North Mason Help.” One of the original circulars sent throughout New York by their Grand Master, it reproduced the
letter of appeal sent by the Masons of Columbia—a letter likely written by Simms, and reproduced here (at right and below). Signed by Simms, who was chairman of the commission, along with six other Columbia Masons, the letter conclusively establishes Simms’s membership in Richland Lodge, listing it as his formal affiliation.

As Graham explained, “Because three other members of the commission were also from Richland Lodge and their membership can be verified independently, then we may be certain that Simms was, indeed, a member of Richland Lodge No. 39.” Moreover, this suggests that we can reasonably infer that Simms became a Mason sometime between May 1864 and January 1865.

The letter is important for more than just its biographical implications. A candid snapshot of the circumstances surrounding Simms’s trip to the North, it also casts light on Masonic behavior during the War. More than just an eloquent expression of Simms’s lifelong commitment to his native state, it also provides a vivid insight into how Simms was rehabilitating himself as a public intellectual in the aftermath of the War, an important statement of his vision for reconciliation and healing. Simms scholars are fortunate to have a knowledgeable Mason researching this neglected aspect of Simms’s life and work.

Above: The front (recto) of the Masonic Circular that Simms carried with him on his tour of Northern Masonic Lodges in the fall of 1865.

As Chairman, Simms’s name is the first listed.

Left: The back (verso) of the Masonic Circular.

Right: A receipt from the Grand Lodge of New York, acknowledging the donation of $25.

Illustrations courtesy the South Caroliniana Library, gift of Paul C. Graham.
Executive Council Meeting Marks Significant Progress

The Simms Society Executive Council met at the South Caroliniana Library on June 10. Present were President Matt Brennan, President-Elect Sean Busick, Secretary-Treasurer Nick Meriwether, Review editor and Member-at-Large Jim Kibler, and Member-at-Large Kevin Collins. The three-hour meeting continued on into a long lunch, allowing members to discuss new directions in Simms scholarship and reflect on the progress of the Society.

“It’s hard to believe that the Society will be celebrating its seventeenth anniversary next year,” mused longtime Simms Review editor Jim Kibler. “And it’s harder still to believe that the Review will have published its thirty-third issue.” The Review was one of the topics discussed, with Dr. Kibler expressing his appreciation for the Council’s willingness to assist with the production of the special issue, especially with the peer review process. The Council was saddened to hear of Dr. Kibler’s intention to step down as editor, but was relieved that he intended to remain available in an advisory capacity and thanked him for his years of service.

Financially the Society is on sound footing, although the Council noted that mounting costs require a careful look at how life memberships are handled. The new protocols implemented with computerized bookkeeping should make the transitions between officers easier in the future. This is even more important given the recent changes in regulations governing small not-for-profit organizations. This is part of a broader issue of handling the Society’s history and records, with the Council voting to look into the possible appointment of a Society historian.

The other major topic discussed was the upcoming Simms conference, to be held fall, 2010 (see p.1). Sessions and events are already in the development stage, but we welcome input from members, as always.

The Council was especially pleased to commend Society member Masahiro Nakamura’s new book (at right), and thanked USC Press for all of its efforts with Simms.