Introduction

Christmas Eve. Lighted bonfires. Rockets, wheels, Roman candles, frogs and serpents filling the night sky. A violin calling all inside to dance quadrilles, cotillions, Virginia reels and regular shake-downs. Midnight. Guests participating in the making of eggnog. Another round of fireworks waking the children on Christmas morning. Little glass lamps of different colors twinkling on the branches of a cedar tree dripping with gaily wrapped packages. Old Father Chrystmasse wearing a grey beard of Spanish moss, passing out gifts unhooked from the tree. Tables groaning with edible delights. A boar's head, lemon in mouth. Hunts. Games of chess and backgammon. Plays being staged in the spacious hall of a brick mansion.

This and much, much more is Christmas as it was once celebrated on plantations in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Set in the mid 1800s, drawn from personal experience, filled with characters based on people known to the author, and with places familiar to him, *The Golden Christmas* (1852) is rich with Southern tradition; it is authentic, and entertaining. As fiction rooted in fact, it sheds light on a way of life which some have tried to call myth. But one hundred years before *Gone with the Wind*, there really was a grand world in sections of the South and a man superbly able to record it.

William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) did not write *The Golden Christmas* to create a Southern mythology. In his day the abundance of the South was well known and widely envied. According to the U.S. Census, the per capita wealth of Southerners as late as 1860 was twice that of Northerners. Over three hundred Southern counties were better off than the wealthiest county in the North. In the same census the most affluent states, listed in order, were Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia. As Simms says in *The Golden Christmas*, "there is little or no poverty in the South." By 1852 the Carolina Upcountry had equaled the Lowcountry, and South Carolina was widely considered to be the most beautiful and most appealing of all the states.

Long before he published *The Golden Christmas* Simms had encouraged Southern authors to portray their agricultural worlds partly because, as an historian, he knew the value of eyewitness accounts and partly because, as a Southerner, he was tired of having his region misrepresented by a Northern press.

Yet we need not suppose Simms was hoping to enlighten only New Englanders. His work was available to Europeans with no more access to information about the American Southland than untraveled Northerners. Simms includes in his Christmas story two plantation guests: one "a learned professor from one of the Northern colleges" and the other "a young English gentleman, the younger son of a noble house." These characters may seem to be superfluous, even to slow down the progress of the story. Still they shine where they sit as testimonies both to Simms's penchant for educating readers while entertaining them, and to his talent for gently rebuking those writers who were misrepresenting a South they did not know.

He was keenly aware of social reformers like the English Harriet Martineau who attacked South Carolina in *Society in America* (1837), a work which Simms refuted in 1837, 1838, and 1852. He was equally miffed by Northern criticism of his own efforts to create a realistic American literature by producing regional and local fiction. At times he must have felt himself in a no-win situation. When he created realistic fiction to enlighten misguided reformers, he was regularly condemned for being coarse and ungenteel.

Yet Simms rose to the challenge. Some of his readers no doubt thought *The Golden Christmas* was scandalous. In 1852 polite society, when legs were referred to as limbs and ladies, not women, ate chicken bosoms, not breasts, the words and actions in *The Golden Christmas* probably raised more than a few eyebrows. One of the leading ladies in the drama catches her granddaughter in the arms of a young suitor who has "no preliminaries to overcome." A second young man informs the reader, "I drew her up to my bosom, and our lips met in the first most precious kiss of love!" It is hard to miss how shocking Simms manages to be, even though he uses "lips" and "bosoms" to accomplish his purpose.

Today's reader, lacking access to the hundreds of letters Simms wrote to his friends and associates, fails to appreciate his stubborn refusal to bow to convention, his insistence on giving members of the plantation work force a place in his fiction, and his determination to include identifiable landmarks in a story which does not lack for strong female characters. It is therefore necessary to give the author his due.

William Gilmore Simms was concerned with not one but two Lowcountry plantations as well as a home in Charleston. He shared over 6,000 acres of land with his wife, their children, her father and ninety other people for whom Simms considered himself responsible. In addition to being a vigorous agriculturist, he was well-traveled, fond of the theater, and active in politics. He was also handy with hammer and nails; he built some of his own furniture and boasted that the mattresses he stuffed by hand with Spanish moss were better than those he could purchase.

He transferred skills acquired as a young lawyer to the field of public speaking and was from an early age a much sought after orator. He was a poet, a novelist, a literary critic, an essayist, an historian, and a dramatist. During his life, he edited over a dozen publications. His command of the Bible was impressive, and until his death he professed that his life was in God's hands. Even so, he was well versed in the classics and delighted in deepening his work with references to Greek and Roman mythology. His appreciation for art and music was surpassed only by his love for literature. And in the field of literature, he was the South's leading figure.

Simms took the profession of writing seriously, so seriously one critic claimed it was easier to get a smile out of a crocodile than humor out of Simms. This criticism was not long in print when Simms confided to a friend an interest in doing something witty and filled with puns. *The Golden Christmas* is both witty and loaded with puns: some obvious, but most cleverly disguised. A good example is found in the second chapter where Ned Bulmer asks Dick Cooper to "pass the waffles." The mental eye may envision a batter cake, but the alert ear detects that indecisive way of expressing one's self for which bachelors contemplating marriage are so famous. Other word plays are evident only by sounding them out or by recognizing the double meaning a word may acquire if borrowed from another language.

Although *The Golden Christmas* is narrated by a bachelor and largely focused on the winter activities of two young men in search of wives, the drama is filled with female roles. This creation of parts for women was comfortable for Simms. He had a good marriage. He enjoyed the company of women. He

Long before he published *The Golden Christmas* Simms had encouraged Southern authors to portray their agricultural worlds partly because, as an historian, he knew the value of eyewitness accounts and partly because, as a Southerner, he was tired of having his region misrepresented by a Northern press.

Yet we need not suppose Simms was hoping to enlighten only New Englanders. His work was available to Europeans with no more access to information about the American Southland than untraveled Northerners. Simms includes in his Christmas story two plantation guests: one "a learned professor from one of the Northern colleges" and the other "a young English gentleman, the younger son of a noble house." These characters may seem to be superfluous, even to slow down the progress of the story. Still they shine where they sit as testimonies both to Simms's penchant for educating readers while entertaining them, and to his talent for gently rebuking those writers who were misrepresenting a South they did not know.

He was keenly aware of social reformers like the English Harriet Martineau who attacked South Carolina in *Society in America* (1837), a work which Simms refuted in 1837, 1838, and 1852. He was equally miffed by Northern criticism of his own efforts to create a realistic American literature by producing regional and local fiction. At times he must have felt himself in a no-win situation. When he created realistic fiction to enlighten misguided reformers, he was regularly condemned for being coarse and ungenteel.

Yet Simms rose to the challenge. Some of his readers no doubt thought *The Golden Christmas* was scandalous. In 1852 polite society, when legs were referred to as limbs and ladies, not women, ate chicken bosoms, not breasts, the words and actions in *The Golden Christmas* probably raised more than a few eyebrows. One of the leading ladies in the drama catches her granddaughter in the arms of a young suitor who has "no preliminaries to overcome." A second young man informs the reader, "I drew her up to my bosom, and our lips met in the first most precious kiss of love!" It is hard to miss how shocking Simms manages to be, even though he uses "lips" and "bosoms" to accomplish his purpose.

Today's reader, lacking access to the hundreds of letters Simms wrote to his friends and associates, fails to appreciate his stubborn refusal to bow to convention, his insistence on giving members of the plantation work force a place in his fiction, and his determination to include identifiable landmarks in a story which does not lack for strong female characters. It is therefore necessary to give the author his due.

William Gilmore Simms was concerned with not one but two Lowcountry plantations as well as a home in Charleston. He shared over 6,000 acres of land with his wife, their children, her father and ninety other people for whom Simms considered himself responsible. In addition to being a vigorous agriculturist, he was well-traveled, fond of the theater, and active in politics. He was also handy with hammer and nails; he built some of his own furniture and boasted that the mattresses he stuffed by hand with Spanish moss were better than those he could purchase.

He transferred skills acquired as a young lawyer to the field of public speaking and was from an early age a much sought after orator. He was a poet, a novelist, a literary critic, an essayist, an historian, and a dramatist. During his life, he edited over a dozen publications. His command of the Bible was impressive, and until his death he professed that his life was in God's hands. Even so, he was well versed in the classics and delighted in deepening his work with references to Greek and Roman mythology. His appreciation for art and music was surpassed only by his love for literature. And in the field of literature, he was the South's leading figure.

Simms took the profession of writing seriously, so seriously one critic claimed it was easier to get a smile out of a crocodile than humor out of Simms. This criticism was not long in print when Simms confided to a friend an interest in doing something witty and filled with puns. *The Golden Christmas* is both witty and loaded with puns: some obvious, but most cleverly disguised. A good example is found in the second chapter where Ned Bulmer asks Dick Cooper to "pass the waffles." The mental eye may envision a batter cake, but the alert ear detects that indecisive way of expressing one's self for which bachelors contemplating marriage are so famous. Other word plays are evident only by sounding them out or by recognizing the double meaning a word may acquire if borrowed from another language.

Although *The Golden Christmas* is narrated by a bachelor and largely focused on the winter activities of two young men in search of wives, the drama is filled with female roles. This creation of parts for women was comfortable for Simms. He had a good marriage. He enjoyed the company of women. He

had close associations with a wide variety of female friends and family members, and he encouraged more than a few women writers. Furthermore, he had a gift for creating believable female characters, for describing in detail their facial expressions, for portraying their courageous acts of self assertion, for depicting the methods antebellum women employed to prepare meals or to nurse the sick, and for making clear the skill with which they made their wishes known. He understood how different a woman's approach to life might be from a man's, and he realized feminine concerns and values had no less substance than masculine.

In *The Golden Christmas* Simms attributes much of man's progress to the influence of women. Sometimes he makes light of the influence in humorous sections of the story, just as he jokes about this influence in numerous letters to his male friends and associates. Yet the consistency of his detailed references to women in both his personal correspondence and in his published works betrays an abiding interest in the feminine psyche and a respect for woman's role in Lowcountry antebellum society.

This interest in and respect for the feminine is certainly evident in *The Golden Christmas* where Simms shows us a flustered housekeeper "wiping off chairs and tables with her apron" and a plantation mistress with bare arms uplifted and dusted with flour as she prepares "a wilderness of mince-pies," "a forest of patties and petties," "seas of jelly" and "mountains of blanc mange." Clearly Simms understands a housekeeper's desire to appear attentive to duty. He also understands the pleasure women of means take in the preparation of feasts for friends and family.

Elsewhere he describes one of his young heroines observing works of art at Russell's Bookstore, including a nude her grandmother has snubbed: "She looked with eager eyes at the beautiful busts, hung upon the Psyche, much to the disquiet of grandmama, even contemplated the picture of the hideous looking saint, and the vulgarly fat little angels, and, following Russell into the back room was startled into admiration by the exquisite ideal of the Escaping Soul. I can't say that she was much impressed by the Transfiguration – certainly not with the tributary scene at the foot of the mountain." Paula is not only interested in the works of art, but also studies them, and displays a preference. There is no pretending she likes it all, nor does she pretend to be less than curious or to see the nude as shocking. That Simms was familiar with both responses in the circle of women he knew is obvious. Neither response lacks for modern equivalents. The wit and whimsy of *The Golden Christmas* often spills over into satire of various polite pretensions.

Self-interest is behind each social pretension. With the possible exception of Miss Janet, every character in the book is motivated primarily by self-interest. Simms confirms in his fiction what he often says in his correspondence: self-interest is a basic in human nature. From the novel's opening to its conclusion, he paints a host of charming and comical characters -white/ black, upperclass/lowerclass, male/female, young/old – who behave to their personal advantage. Acknowledging this tendency would appear to be the first step in reconciling family, community, and national differences. It is almost as if Simms is trying to prod the reader into confessing that our seemingly noblest arguments are self-serving. Such psychological and social realism is at the heart of Simms's accomplishment in character depiction and social satire.

The use of easily identified streets in his description of a Charleston shopping expedition gives the story a timelessness it might otherwise lack. Meeting, King, and Queen Streets still lure the tourist as well as the native. Russell's Bookstore no longer exists, but it was once the favorite haunt of some of the leading minds in Charleston. Its owner John Russell dealt in books, but he also did much to support the local artists of his day. Charles Fraser was but one of many he championed.

Unwilling to confine himself to realistic street scenes, Simms carefully describes period furniture, clothing, decor, and hairstyles. He gives us a believable picture of an older woman with thinning hair, making use of fake curls she can add by day and store in her "nice little antique rose-wood cabinet" by night. Any man who has ever needed help in tying a Windsor knot can relate with ease to Dick Cooper's difficulty in adjusting his cravat. The mention of Beau Brummell is another nice touch, because extant pictures of this famous man of fashion give us a visible record of the dandy Ned Bulmer sets out to imitate.

The lasting impression of the novel is realistic. Simms wants to document life on a Lowcountry plantation, not only at Christmas time but throughout

the year. The workers on the prosperous plantations, Simms tells us, are "rich in certainty -security" and are "insured against cold and hunger." Furthermore, he tells us that work on the large plantations is "adapted to one's capacity, suited to one's nature, and not too heavy for one's strength."

Most readers of *The Golden Christmas* will remember the awakened conscience expressed in the fiction of Charles Dickens, especially in *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Dickens is well known for dramatizing the brutal laboring and living conditions of urban people during the early and middle nineteenth century. Poverty, hunger, and disease - the dehumanizing of a mass of people cruelly exploited for economic gain - are the *Conditions of the Working Class* (1844) as Friedrich Engles detailed them, miserable conditions which Dickens popularized in his fiction. Victorian smugness over the anti-slavery movement seemed, at least to Simms, an excuse to ignore all manner of social evils.

Dr. Samuel Henry Dickson, a physician and close friend of Simms to whom the author dedicated *The Yemassee* (1835), published accounts of sub-human living and working conditions in urban industrial centers. In an 1859 lecture on pain and death delivered in Philadelphia, Dickson discusses the plight of those born into poverty in large and flourishing cities:

> Being poor, the atmosphere he breathes is poisonous; the food he eats is garbage; the water with which he quenches his thirst is saturated with abominations; his clothing is rags; he earns his poor morsel through vice and humiliation; throughout the whole of his existence of sorrow and discomfort - this living death - he is watched by those who live around him in ease and comfort, and enjoyment, as dangerous to them, both morally and physically; and if he does not fall into the hands of an executioner, may consider himself fortunate to be permitted to expire in the ward of some hospital.

In contrast, Simms is maintaining that living and laboring conditions for the work force in the Carolina Lowcountry are more conducive to stability and good health than in many other sections of the world. He furthermore

contends that whatever problems there are in Southern culture should be solved by the people who live it and understand its complexity.

But above all Simms is interested in creating character and in telling a lively and entertaining story in a realistic novel; he does not pause longer than necessary before returning to the softer, warmer reality of South Carolina plantation life. He drapes his story with the cheerful glitter of a Christmas tree while remaining faithful to the truth upon which his drama is based. Seen through his eyes, the plantation assumes its proper place as a community of individuals working together and drawing out of the land a comfortable life for all. The resulting picture is one in which the planter and the worker are interdependent, and Simms notes the contributions each makes to the plantation community.

He also demonstrates the nobility and the flaws of each of his characters. The mistresses, masters, and servants are treated with equal fairness. The opinionated widows, the blustery master, the condescending body servant, and the pig-stealing coachman all have redeeming qualities. Pretty Paula can be devious; the well-groomed Ned is sometimes a rascal; sweet Beatrice lashes out at mama; and even good-hearted Dick Cooper joins in the plot to out-fox the master and the mistress.

By leisurely tracing the paths of his characters from October to late December, Simms gives himself ample time to demonstrate the sunshine and the shadows at work in the people and the place. He does not let us forget the reality of agricultural life. Animals are hunted and killed to provide food for the table. A carriage turns over on a dark road in the course of an argument. Neighbors gossip, and Romeo and Juliet live again in the persons of Ned and Paula. In this charming, although less than perfect, world Simms concentrates on peace, harmony and good will. This is, after all, a Carolina Christmas - a time of reconciliation and personal renewal.

Unlike a fairy tale, though, this story does not predict a happy-ever-after ending for the plantation community. The reader is left knowing there will be more problems up the road aways. But in giving the Romeo and Juliet theme a conciliatory conclusion, Simms is suggesting that there is enough good sense and good will in the South to solve whatever may crop up to disturb a people greatly blessed and deeply devoted to the traditional values of land, home, family, and hospitality.

In introducing this reprint of the 1852 edition of *The Golden Christmas*, I hope to provide the reader with a passport to the antebellum South in general and to the Lowcountry of South Carolina in particular. If the journey back through time succeeds in educating as well as in entertaining, William Gilmore Simms will have once more worked his literary magic. But the reader will close the novel with some sadness and not a little amazement, for he will know what Simms could not foresee. In the decade after *The Golden Christmas* was published and at the height of its preeminence, the Carolina Lowcountry was invaded, plundered, and burned, and the high culture Simms knew and lovingly portrayed was destroyed forever.

David Aiken