

2001

The Historian's Craft

Jerald T. Milanich

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Milanich, Jerald T. (2001) "The Historian's Craft," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 80: No. 3, Article 7.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol80/iss3/7>

The Historian's Craft

by Jerald T. Milanich

In historical research, as in riding the hounds, the search is often at least as much fun as the end of the chase. Galloping through journals, books, and archival sources in search of an unknown historical figure can be positively exhilarating, especially when the hunt is replete with false trails, British baronets, a mysterious princess, and multiple pseudonyms.

My historical adventure began several months ago when James Cusick, head of the University of Florida's P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, sent me the newspaper clipping published in this issue of the *Florida Historical Quarterly* as "Frolicking Bears, Wet Vultures, and Other Mysteries. . . ." The 2500-word article originally appeared in the New York *Weekly Sun* in 1873. Containing important information on Indian sites in the Indian River area, especially a charming description of Turtle Mound, the document deserved to be reprinted and annotated. But there was one glaring problem. Who wrote it? The dateline, "De Soto Groves, Florida, March 20," offered no clues. I set out to find the author.

The tone of the article left the impression that the author was a visitor to the region (a journalist?). Might that person have written other things? A trip to the University of Florida library to run down early accounts of Brevard and Volusia Counties yielded nothing. But in John Erikson's *Brevard County, A History to 1955* I found mention of British baronet Sir Tatton Sykes who had an Indian River hunting camp in 1857, perhaps the same individual called Sir Francis Sykes in the 1873 article. At the library I logged on to Galenet's electronic biographical database to sort out the Sykeses and explore the British connection. Several hours peering at bio-

graphical sketches left me with two Sir Tattons and one Sir Francis, any of whom could have been in Florida around 1857.

I decided to try a different tact: perusing late nineteenth-century books about Florida to see what was known about Turtle Mound at the time. It was blind luck the first volume I grabbed was *Guide to Florida* (1875), written by “Rambler,” an obvious pseudonym. The book literally fell open to a lengthy undated quote from the New York *Sun* newspaper about the Indian River region and attributed to “Ziska.” What immediately caught my eye was three phrases; one mentioned bears hunting turtle eggs on the beach, another was about Sir Francis Sykes, and the third said Turtle Mound “looms on the horizon like a pillar of Hercules.” All three elements also appear in the 1873 New York *Weekly Sun* article. Were the authors of the two the same individual? Was Ziska a real person or a pseudonym (my money was on the latter), and did Ziska write my 1873 article? I suspected so.

Again on-line I ran Ziska through several search engines. Nothing. Then I started in on library holdings. Bingo! Almost immediately I caught a glimpse of my quarry, a novel entitled *Ziska: The Problem of a Wicked Soul*, written by Marie Corelli and published in London in 1897. Could Ziska, a fictional princess, be the pseudonym of a British woman, perhaps an author/journalist who had accompanied Sir Somebody Sykes on his Indian River expedition? Was she working as a stringer for New York newspapers? Again I turned to electronic databases.

Princess Ziska quickly led me into another realm, the *avant-garde* theatre and literary scene of Victorian London. It was an extraordinary two-day journey. On Day One I was certain I was on to the biggest story ever. It turns out Marie Corelli is a pseudonym for Marion Mackay! Novelist Corelli, whose birth date is variously given as 1835, 1854, 1855, and 1864, is listed in a host of literary biographical indexes and dictionaries, including ones focusing on women, gay women, British authors, and early science fiction writers. Ziska appears in *The Encyclopedia of Amazons, Women Warriors from Antiquity to the Modern Era*. Was my unknown writer a gay British woman who was either 50, 33, or 22 years of age, depending on which birth date one wished to accept, when she went to Florida in 1857? Even better, what if Rambler actually were Ziska (and Marie Corelli and Marion Mackay)?

Day Two found me reading Corelli novels—there were a number of them—looking for clues. Anything about Florida or British

baronets? Nothing. I did learn Princess Ziska evidently influenced a generation of women. Prior to Corelli's novel, the name Ziska only rarely appears in historical literary guides; afterwards a number of women with Ziska as a surname appear. Was the name adopted to show solidarity with Princess Ziska and Corelli? Anyone out there need a dissertation topic?

But I was in for a rude awakening. At the end of Day Two, I was systematically correlating hits received from my Galenet searches with citations in books and magazines, looking for connections among Ziska/Corelli/Mackay, New York newspapers, and Florida. One cited source was John Edward Haynes's *Pseudonyms of Authors: Including Anonyms and Initialisms*, a slender volume published in 1882. On page 103, Haynes provided the astounding news that Ziska also was a pseudonym used by Amos Jay Cummings, a New York *Sun* journalist! Princess Ziska and Marie Corelli had been a false trail.

Any lingering doubts or wishful thinking that Mackay might be Cummings in drag were quickly dissipated after I began reading his biographical information in various sources, gradually filling out details of his life. He was a journalist, a war hero, and a politician, and, yes, he had been in Florida and had written as Ziska.

More on-line searches revealed four scrapbooks belonging to Cummings were in the New York Public Library. I went there, and in the old hand-written catalogue I found eleven more. After Cummings died, the fifteen scrapbooks most likely went to his wife, and on her death (they had no children) they were tossed. In May 1927, a sharp-eyed librarian had spotted the scrapbooks at the Bargain Book Shop and bought them for the library.

In the end, truth turned out to be more interesting than fiction, and what I thought was the conclusion of my search set me on an entirely new track. Over several days I read all fifteen scrapbooks, which contain hundreds of newspaper articles Cummings wrote as well as a host of other materials about his life. I even found my 1873 *Weekly Sun* article pasted in one scrapbook, solid evidence Cummings was the author. By the time I finished, he and I were old friends.

I now am wise to his practice of writing letters on selected topics to the *Sun* editor, just so he, as managing editor, could pen the replies. I know about the battles he fought in the Civil War, reported in contemporary newspaper articles that he later found, cut out, and pasted in a scrapbook with marginal comments.

I accompanied Cummings and Mrs. Cummings on their six-month long, cross-country journey from New York to San Francisco. Along the way he interviewed tens of people, though he still found time for trout fishing. Throughout that trip and his Florida sojourns, Cummings, as an outsider, walked into situations and asked questions local residents could not. One ploy was to pump local newspaper editors for information, often gaining insights the editors themselves would not or could not put in print.

I experienced Cummings's sense of humor (in a press release he had published in a California newspaper announcing his return to New York, he referred to himself as an "accomplished angler as well as a brilliant and vivacious writer"), and I have attended elegant New York dinners with him and his cronies of the New York Press Club. Together we have been through a September hurricane on Florida's Atlantic coast, and we collected plants in the Everglades for the New York Botanical Gardens. I have even watched as Cummings delivered speeches from the floor of the House of Representatives.

Perhaps the most poignant thing I experienced is a bit of what it was like at the end of his life. The fifteenth scrapbook contains articles about Cummings's illness, a subsequent operation for kidney failure, and his contracting double pneumonia. Obituaries fill several pages. His death in 1902 was national news.

Incredibly, archival research also placed me at his bedside in a Baltimore hospital when, with death a certainty, Amos Jay Cummings was handed a pencil and a piece of his letterhead from the U.S. House of Representatives's Committee on Library. In a shaky, barely legible hand, he wrote his last thoughts: "for this is a great world and God moves in a mysterious way." That piece of paper is the last item in the last scrapbook.

Though my odyssey lasted only a fortnight, it was a very interesting fourteen days. I intend to pursue more research on Cummings, especially his articles on Florida. And if anyone is interested in pursuing Princess Ziska et al., please let me know. Historical research is always an adventure.