

The Flemings of Fleming Island: An Historic Florida Family

By Scott Ritchie

(Paperback, 2019)

Reviewed here by Owene Courtney

In 1968 my family moved to northeast Florida and settled in a remote section of Clay County seven miles south of Orange Park. It was so remote that a phone call to the nearest town was considered long distance! There were only three houses on our street, and we were surrounded by woods and the St. Johns River. There was a creek beside our house, and we built a bridge so we could walk across it into what became a childhood paradise full of trails and paths, horses, an old church, remnants of houses and even an old Model A. Through the woods, there was one big house and a swimming pool where we later discovered an old woman named Honey lived. Honey had a sister named Dorit, who her grandchildren called Oma, and another sister named "Miz Biddle." Best of all, these lovely ladies had wonderful grandsons who came from up north during their spring break. They had names like Frederic and George, and they knew how to get the Model A out of the old garage, and we often rode around the dirt roads in it. My friend Cindy lived in a house with a paddock, and she had three horses which we could ride whenever we wanted to. So between the Model A and the horses, the dirt roads and trails, and the old church with a big bell and a spooky cemetery, my brothers and sisters and I thought we had found nirvana! And that was my introduction to Hibernia and the Flemings of Fleming Island!

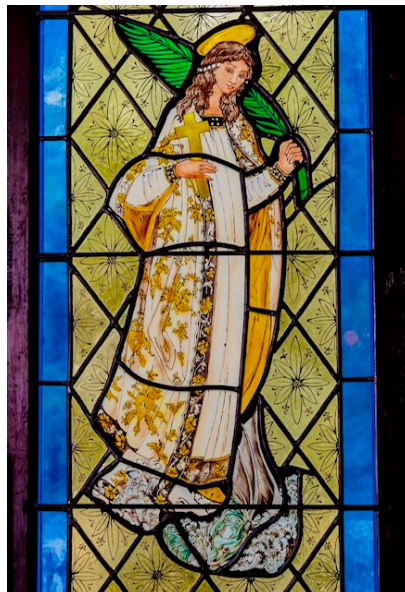
It is my great joy to review this beautiful book by my longtime friend Scott Ritchie about a family that has been like royalty to my family for many years. Scott has taken the Fleming family histories, some true and some not so true, and researched and studied them carefully, producing a superb story of the origins of Fleming Island and the great family that founded it. This book reads like a blend between *Where the Crawdads Sing* and *Killer Angels*, with detail about the Fleming men's involvement in the various wars just as precise and full of data as his description about the flora and fauna and wildlife and the land that was Hibernia. In the book, you will meet Dorit and Honey and Miz Biddle mentioned above, granddaughters of Margaret Seton Fleming and the original Frederics and Georges for whom the "northern boys" were named. Scott's wife Margot was also a Fleming, thus his attention to detail and accuracy in order to tell the family story! As Scott said when asked about the book, "I learned that we cannot accept long-standing oral histories at face value! The true stories are far more interesting."

Scott writes like the educator he is, with clarity and accuracy, and he is unabashedly honest about the fallacies of many of the Fleming family myths. He also deals honestly and delicately with the subject of slavery and the harsh truths about the Fleming family's slaves. Though they were well treated and eventually freed, they were owned as property which Scott makes sure the reader understands. Many of the descendants of those slaves were still living in Hibernia in the 60's and 70's including Margaret Frazier whose interview with Scott is one of his sources.

The story that is true that the family has always told is that St. Margaret's Episcopal Church was built by Margaret Seton Fleming and others in 1877, and the first service in it was her funeral in April 1878. So many of us here in the Diocese of Florida have been a part in some way of that beautiful church, from those of a certain generation who went to Camp Weed when it was located there, to those of us who grew up worshipping there. Today it sits rather lonely on Old Church Road with the cemetery behind it where so many of the Fleming relatives and winter visitors are buried. Clay County has grown up around it with highways and housing developments. It does not have an active parish at this time, but it is opened frequently for funerals and weddings for people who knew and loved it. There is a touch of holiness in the air as you approach it, reminding me of the words of Miz Biddle in the prologue to her book about Hibernia: "May we have peace in the world as there is peace today on this tiny debonair Island." *Hibernia: The Unreturning Tide*

If you read this book carefully and fall in love with the story and the people as I did all those years ago, you must treat yourself to a visit to St. Margaret's, and do as Scott says at the end of his book, "Park the car and take a walk through the cemetery...Sit quietly for a while and take in the sights, the scents, the sounds and the feel of this sacred ground."

NB The book may be purchased at Amazon or from the Florida Historical Society who published it:
https://www.floridabooks.net/catalog/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=1327
or any of our fine Episcopal bookstores would be happy to order it for you.



Stained glass window in St Margaret's Church, Fleming Island