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McCABE'S IMPRESSION OF THE BOMBARDMENT OF CHARLESTON, 1863

CLAUDE C. STURGILL and CHARLES L. PRICE *

During the bombardment of Fort Sumter in August, 1863, a young artillery lieutenant, W. Gordon McCabe, visited the fortress. In a letter to a friend, he left one of the most vivid descriptions in existence of the shelling and the reactions of the garrison. McCabe in his letter also included pertinent comment on Henry Timrod and Generals Ripley and Beauregard.

McCabe was a writer of considerable literary ability and during the war and after he attained notable fame as a poet. In his later career McCabe was known primarily as an educator, attaining national attention as headmaster of the University School at Petersburg, Virginia.

The letter presented below is written to another literary figure of some note, James Barron Hope. Even before the war Hope had attracted considerable attention as a young poet. After the war, while continuing his literary career, Hope became a newspaper editor and ended his career as superintendent of the Norfolk schools. The letter reproduced below can be found in the James Barron Hope Papers in the Earl Gregg Swem Library of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. In editing we have made as few changes in spelling, punctuation, and style as possible in order to keep the original excitement.

Head Quarters, 1st Military District
Department of South Carolina, Georgia
and Florida.

Charleston, August 21st, 1863.

My dear Mr. Hope,

You see my promises are not like that tradictionary pie-crust, for lo! here is the letter. My time has been so entirely taken up by my duties since I reported here, that I have scarcely had time for writing to any one. However, I did not care to write until I had visited all the Batteries, & seen "the situation." The day after my arrival, I ran

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thigh. They are very fat and move quite slowly. They sleep in the warm sun, and one sometimes steps on them unexpectedly and is bitten. Their poison is deadly if one does not procure help immediately. But they are said to die soon from the blood of the man whom they have bitten; in fact, human saliva is said to be their death. Someone conducted an experiment with a long thin stick, the thin end of which was chewed, moistened with saliva and held to the snake's mouth. It bit into it and soon died from it. Deer fight with them and crush them with their feet and antlers. They also have a deadly enemy in the black snakes, which are likewise very thick and long but not poisonous. It is hard to believe but nevertheless quite true that some people cut off the head of the rattlesnake and roast and eat its flesh, which looks snow-white and is said to taste like the best veal. But they must be killed before they are angered or bite. Those, who have become nauseated after eating such snakes, have become somewhat ill.²¹

Two ships from the West Indian Sugar Islands arrived in Savannah and brought some coconuts, whose inner milk and snow-white kernel are quite delicious. It is an excellent fruit, whose inner hard shell itself is valuable and could be used as a drinking vessel. With their outer green husk, they are thick as a man's head. They are cut from the tree with an axe, and afterwards it takes a good bit of sawing before the actual black shell can be divided. But before people do this in order to get at the kernel, a hole is first made at one end of the nut, from which the delicious tasting milk is poured into two glasses.

²¹ The references in this note are to Laurence M. Klauber, *Rattlesnakes. Their Habits, Life Histories, and Influence on Mankind*, 2 Vols., Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1956. The folklore of the rattlesnake root; II, 879-883, 885. The belief that rattlesnakes are more poisonous in summer; II, 822-825. The myth of the rattlesnake acquiring its first rattle at age three and related myths; I, 247. The myth of the rattlesnake acquiring one rattle a year; I, 245. The rattlesnake lengths mentioned by Tobler are mythological; for similar mythological lengths, see II, 1232-1235. Rattlesnakes disturbed while sleeping as more aggressive; I, 425. Saliva or blood fatal to snake; similar beliefs in II, 1217. Enemies of rattlesnakes: deer: II, 1033-1035; black snakes: II, 1074-1076. Rattlesnake flesh as food; II, 1022-1025.

the gauntlet to Sumpter, the principal point of attack, & saw one of the most interesting sights I ever beheld. The fire of 200 pdr. shot & shell was rather severe, but our boat was unhurt. It was one of three that ran over, & the other two were struck & sunk. The gunnery of the Yankees is superb. Nearly every shot takes effect, & "Sumpter" has been struck 2,500+ times. To give you an idea of the immense force of one of these 200 pdr. iron bolts, I was standing in "Sumpter" talking to the Ord. Officer, when hearing a louder noise than usual, I looked up, & after the fall of a mass of masonry, over came a 32 pdr., carriage & all, knocked entirely off the parapet down into the parade. Within the fortress it is a gallant sight: timbers are crashing, great arches of masonry falling, but the officers are seen coolly [*sic*] walking the parapet, & the men laughing, chatting, & singing, except when some poor fellow is brought by on a stretcher. The discipline is that of the regular army, & the officers the first gentlemen in Carolina. The flag was shot away, but the men rushed out, although in the line of fire, & quickly raised it again. The north & south faces were badly breached then, all the guns on them being dismounted or so disabled as to be unfit for service. The sea-face is, however, very little hurt. On yesterday evening, I ran over again, carrying dispatches to Col. Rhett.¹ The fire was heavier than ever, but no one in our boat was hurt. The whole of the north facing is almost entirely gone. I think the whole north wall will fall either to-day or to-morrow, and there is scarcely a gun in the fortress that can harm the enemy. As my guns have not arrived from Richmond, Gen'l Ripley² has placed me upon his staff as Actg. A. A. Gen'l,³ so, of course, I see & hear a great deal, which it won't do to talk about, except to you, "a gent'l'm as how talks very little." I have also visited Ft. Johnston, Shell Pt. Battery, Battery Gregg, & Battery Wagner. I saw Col Keitt⁴ at the latter post, who inquired very particularly about you. This battery is the strongest position I have seen, but the enemy are 600 yds. in front, sapping & mining, pushing their parallels vigorously, & approaching slowly but surely. The fire

¹ Colonel Alfred Rhett was then commander of Fort Sumter. Rhett, an artillery officer, remained in command of Fort Sumter until Sept. 4, 1863, at which time the artillery was withdrawn from the fort, being replaced by the infantry.

² Brigadier General Roswell Sabine Ripley, then in command of the First Military District. This district consisted of the city of Charleston and the defenses of the harbor.

³ Acting assistant adjutant-general.

⁴ Colonel Lawrence M. Keitt, commander of Fort Wagner. See *Official Records of the Navies*, I Ser., XIV, 732.

upon this post is terrific, the "Ironsides,"⁵ monitors, & land Parrott batteries⁶ hammering away mercilessly all the time. Sumpter was meant to sweep the front of this work, but, of course, it has not been able to do anything. Nothing but an assault every night, at a terrible loss of life, can stop the enemy's working parties. It is my impression that "Sumpter" will fall by Sunday or Monday, & this will necessitate the evacuation of both "Gregg" & "Wagner," & the falling back to our second line of defence. The "Ironsides" & monitors will then, probably, try to run in, past "Moultrie" & "Johnston," & shell the city. As I have never before seen any "big" gun practice, it is, of course, very interesting for me to go over to our batteries & see our mortars & 10 in. Dahlgrens⁷ firing. We have no weight of metal, however, that can compare with that of the enemy. Getting knocked over by a shell is looked upon as very much a matter of course. We are all very hopeful of the final issue, & every one is for fighting the city to the last. The enormous (12½ in.) Blakely guns are to be brought here from Wilmington, having just run the blockade into that port, but on account of their immense weight, it will take some time to get them here. These guns are 13 ft. around the breech, 16 ft. long, & shoot a wrought-iron bolt weighing 800 pounds. The guns weigh 22 tons. There are only two of them, & a flat will have to be built to bring them over the R. R.

So far, I find my position very agreeable, & the officers here are very kind to me in every way.

I have made the acquaintance of Timrod,⁸ who expressed himself highly gratified that *you* should have thought well of his prize poem.

⁵ The *New Ironsides* was one of the major ironclads utilized by the Union Navy during the attack on Charleston. During the attack the Confederates made two attempts to destroy the *New Ironsides* with torpedo craft. The first effort was made on August 21, 1863, the same date as McCabe's letter. The attack failed when the engine of the torpedo ram broke down. A second attack on October 5, 1863, succeeded in blowing a hole in the side of the *New Ironsides*, but the ship was not sunk. See *Official Records of the Navies*, I Ser., XIV, 497-499.; *ibid.*, I Ser., XV, 10-21.

⁶ The Parrott gun was a rifled cannon widely used by both the army and the navy. These guns were produced by Robert Parrott at his Cold Spring Foundry near West Point, N. Y.

⁷ The "Dahlgrens" were naval guns invented before the war by Rear-Admiral John A. Dahlgren. During the attack on Charleston, Dahlgren was in command of the Union naval forces.

⁸ Henry Timrod, the great South Carolina poet who has been referred to as the "laureate of the Confederacy."

I find that he & I agree exactly as to Thompson's⁹ capacities. Poor fellow, he is the local editor of "The Mercury," the "res augustae domie" [res angusta domi] having compelled him to take the position.

Sumpter's flag has just been shot away for the sixth time, & the guns on the sea-face are badly used up, but the red-cross banner is floating now as proudly as ever from its shattered battlements. As Mr. Thomas Sayers¹⁰ would remark: "slightly disfigured, but still in the ring." Gen'l Ripley commands all the defences of Charleston, occupying the position of Major-General. He looks very much like "Count Fosco", except his face, which is as honest & hearty as an old Tom Brown's. I like to hear his bluff, jovial voice, as he gives his orders with the rapidity & accuracy of an old soldier. Beauregard looks very much worn, & the light in his eyes rather dim. I hope the fire is only sleeping, biding its time . . . I think that, when we fall back to our second line, there will be a great battle fought on James' Island. We *must* hold that, we *must* whip them there, or Charleston must be lost. I am, however, very hopeful, as to the final result. I send you Gen'l Beauregard's order, in regard to the observance of to-day.

Direct, "Care of Gen'l. Ripley, Com'd'g 1st Mil. Dist."

God bless you, my dear friend, & keep you well & happy.

Sincerely & affectionately your friend,

W. Gordon McCabe

⁹ Probably refers to John Reuben Thompson, editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Thompson was a close friend of both McCabe and Timrod. See Jay B. Hubbell, ed., *The Last Years of Henry Timrod* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1941), pp. 8, 36.

¹⁰ Thomas Sayers was the champion prize fighter of England during the 1850s.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CLERGY IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

DURWARD T. STOKES *

During the decade immediately preceding the American Revolution, at least forty-five Presbyterian ministers visited or settled in South Carolina, although, according to Ernest Trice Thompson, only three of them located in the colony permanently.¹ The number of residents increased gradually and more than doubled by 1776. There were fifty churches, congregations, or preaching stations in the province. The Reverend Archibald Stobo and his colleagues, comprising an independent group which had come to Charleston directly from Scotland, are not included in this number.² Virtually all of these, with the exception of Stobo's associates, were a part of the Presbyterian missionary movement which began in Pennsylvania and gradually expanded down through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The ministers were of Scotch-Irish descent and sent either by the Presbytery of Hanover, which originally included South Carolina, or the parent Synod of New York and Philadelphia. After 1770, some of the clerics were directed to go to South Carolina by the newly created Presbytery of Orange, which had been formed from the southern section of the Hanover body. Most of the clergymen had volunteered for missionary work, and they journeyed south from a sense of duty rather than because there was no useful place for them in the program of their denomination in the Northern provinces. They were divines who had qualified for ordination in the same manner as had all other American Presbyterian clergymen.³ They brought with them the same ideas, policies, goals, and practices to which they had been accustomed in their former stations, and each of them was filled with crusading Calvinistic zeal to serve the best interests of his fellow man, according to his lights.

The mission of the Presbyterians was to minister to the increasing number of settlers of their faith in the province, and neither to pros-

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¹ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, 1607-1865* (Richmond, Va., 1963), I, 65.

² Alexander Hewat, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia* (2 vols.: London, 1779), II, 52.

³ "Minutes of Hanover Presbytery," Union Theological Seminary Library, Richmond, Va. They contain many detailed accounts of the trials required of candidates before being licensed as Presbyterian ministers. Only a well educated man could satisfy the examiners.