

Winner of
The Allan Nevins History Prize, 1962
The Francis Parkman Prize, 1964
The Charles S. Sydnor Prize for Southern History, 1966

REHEARSAL FOR RECONSTRUCTION

The Port Royal Experiment

WILLIE LEE ROSE

With an Introduction by C. Vann Woodward

New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

race. On the other hand, the teachers and superintendents tried persuasion and attempted to arouse in the Negroes a sense of duty to their race and some notion of patriotism. Because this method was largely ineffectual, they were often disappointed in the apathetic attitude of their charges. "I wish sincerely," wrote William Allen, "that something would turn up to make these men more willing to fight for their freedom—they have got it altogether too easily. But forcing them into the ranks at the point of the bayonet is only driving them away."⁴⁶

That was the crux of the matter. From the time of Hunter's abortive draft of 1862 straight through the war, military authorities treated the islanders as suited their convenience, with utter disregard for the claims of humanity. Nor did they ever once allow drafting policy to be influenced by any understanding of the simplicity of a people who had hardly known a world existed beyond their islands until the Yankees started teaching them geography. The colored people did understand *promises*, however, and they understood that the Yankees were not keeping faith. General Saxton had assured them at the time he began recruiting on an authorized basis that no man would be taken against his will.⁴⁷

But as soon as the induction of freed slaves into the army became public policy Hunter resumed operations, and Saxton was powerless to impede his precipitate commander. With a customary lack of foresight, Hunter waited to begin forcible drafting in the spring of 1863 until the people had put in their crops. Naturally, the Negroes did not fully exculpate the missionaries who rounded them up to explain the new developments. "Old Rachel" told William Gannett, "I tho't Mr. G. you were a gentleman and had feeling but now I see you have none."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Allen MS diary, February 24, 1864, typescript, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Pearson (ed.), *Letters*, pp. 167, 172.

⁴⁸ Gannett MS diary, March 20, 1863, Gannett MSS; Tomlinson to McKim, March 16, 1863, McKim MSS.

Hunter's own action of the year before had left a legacy of suspicion that would never be eradicated. "Robin," of the Fripp place, expressed it quite well. "Look here, sir," he said to William Allen, "I poor man, wid large famerly—my wife Rinah she can't work . . . can't work wid de hoe for more'n twenty year.—Dey took me an' kep me tree mont' an' nebber pay me, not one cent. My wife hab notting to eat—mus' starve."⁴⁹ The missionaries who were trying to teach the Negro fathers to assume family responsibilities were bound to see Robin's point.

When the people did not come voluntarily, squads of soldiers forcibly herded them into the camps. Surprise encirclements by day and sudden seizures in the night became ordinary occurrences. People were taken indiscriminately to Beaufort, without a chance to tell their families where they were, and sometimes kept for days, even when they held exemption certificates in their pockets. Much of this impressment was done by black soldiers already in the "contraband" regiments. They were not overly nice in their methods and shot at random, to the consternation of livestock and frequent injury to the people. Being for the most part illiterate, they distrusted and disregarded exemption papers; one man legally exempt was killed by a Negro press-gang that attempted to bring him in against his will. For these operations the white officers were of course fully responsible. The colored people did not take it like sheep. On one place the field women attacked the black soldiers with their hoes and were in turn fired upon. They shouted that the white men were afraid to fight and only wanted the Negroes to do their work.⁵⁰

Those who were lucky enough to elude the first forays took to the swamps, living the life of maroons just as they would have done in slavery times under unendurable circumstances. The ap-

⁴⁹ Allen MS diary, January 31, 1863, typescript, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Charles Nordhoff, *The Freedmen of South Carolina* (New York, 1863), p. 3; Towne MS diary, March 25, 30, April 14, 20, 26, May 18, September 21, 22, 1863; Gannett MS diary, April 14, March 23, 25, 1863; Pearson (ed.), *Letters*, pp. 183-189; Port Royal *New South*, June 13, 1863.

pearance of a pair of epaulets was enough to break up a church service, send the schoolchildren scurrying away, or cause the men to drop their hoes in the field and make for the woods.⁵¹

Once in uniform, the reluctant Sea Island soldiers could anticipate an inconceivably poor and inexperienced set of officers, except for a few of the highest rank; their only common trait was a belief in the use of Negro soldiers to fight the war. Some of the best men in Higginson's regiment mutinied against the leadership of an inept officer who took a contingent of the 1st South Carolina on an ill-fated raid into Georgia. The court-martial arising out of this and similar cases caused General Gillmore to rap the officers' knuckles quite smartly, accusing them of being more responsible for the troubles than the men. He blandly pointed out that the people ought not to be unusually hard to discipline, in view of their former condition, but that their officers were on the one hand guilty of "unofficer-like familiarity" and, on the other, of "extreme harshness." He was far from alone in his judgment.⁵²

It is hardly surprising that men brought into the army and held there under such conditions would take the first opportunity to desert. As a result, the plantation routine was plagued until the end of the war by sporadic details of soldiers sent to bring in deserters, even during periods when no draft was in effect.⁵³

⁵¹ "Not a man sleeps at night in the houses, except those too old to be taken. They have made a camp somewhere and mean never to be caught." Pearson (ed.), *Letters*, p. 177.

⁵² Quincy A. Gillmore's General Order No. 10, published in the *Port Royal New South*, January 23, 1864; *Port Royal New South*, June 13, 1863; Thomas Wentworth Higginson to his wife, June 10, 1863, Higginson MSS; Towne MS diary, June 29, 1863; Pearson (ed.), *Letters*, p. 189; John C. Gray, Jr., to John C. Ropes, September 28, 1863, Gray and Ropes, *War Letters*, p. 218.

⁵³ Allen MS diary, December 27, 28, 1863, typescript copy, pp. 73-75; Pearson (ed.), *Letters*, pp. 239-240. Philbrick describes a particularly ruthless scouting party, sent without white officers, which shot three deserters on sight. "One is badly wounded and may not recover, but the others probably will." *Ibid.*, p. 236.

The authorities seemed to regard the islands as an inexhaustible source of manpower. After three regiments of South Carolina "Volunteers" were raised, few fully eligible males remained on the plantations, but the drafts continued. In July, 1864, after much hesitation, Congress yielded at last to overwhelming pressure and authorized state governments to fill out their draft quotas in occupied areas of the South.⁵⁴ Officials, armed with the power to offer bounties to the Negroes they could "persuade" to enlist, descended upon the islands like the plagues of Egypt, seized men at random, and as often as not pocketed the bounty money themselves. Laura Towne wrote that on the Frogmore plantation two men were shot, one killed outright and another mortally wounded. She wrote that Secretary Stanton, when he at last made a personal investigation, found that these procedures were "not uncommon, but that men were seized, their bounty appropriated and themselves sent to Morris Island without being allowed to return to tell their families where they were going." A Treasury official completely unconnected with the missionary work wrote Governor Andrew, attempting to dissuade him from supporting state recruiting on the islands. He wrote that "The poor negroes are hunted like wild beasts. . . . There is a perfect panic throughout all these islands. Old men and invalids have taken to the bush through fear of the conscription. . . ." He could "conceive of no greater terror and distress on the coast of Africa after a slave hunt" than he had witnessed. "They have been pursued and fired at by cavalry." He had heard of one "d—d black-hearted, black-coated pseudo Chaplain turned negro broker" who had tried "to procure blood-hounds wherewith to hunt contrabands."⁵⁵

A young Massachusetts officer in a white regiment blushed to think of "this traffic of New England towns in the bodies of wretched negroes, bidding against each other for these miserable beings who are deluded, and if some of the affidavits I have in

⁵⁴ Pearson, *Andrew*, II, 143, note on p. 144.

⁵⁵ Laura Towne to "R," January 21, 1863, Towne MSS; Pearson, *Andrew*, II, note on pp. 144-145.