

EIR Books

South Carolina patriot was a Reconstruction hero

by Denise Henderson

Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915

by Edward A. Miller, Jr.

University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S.C., 1996

285 pages, hardbound, \$29.95

The period of Reconstruction in America, from about 1865 to 1876, was admittedly a failure, largely because the U.S. government did not back up its federal policy with action to defend that policy.

During Reconstruction, many heroes—sung and unsung, black and white—rose to the challenge, which was the need for economic development, i.e., reconstruction, as well as sweeping political change across the South. One of these heroes was Robert Smalls, a 24-year-old slave who immediately captured the imagination of the North with his daring escape in 1862, along with eight others, by commandeering his master's boat and piloting it from behind Confederate lines into Union-held territory. Time was to show that Smalls was not merely a one-time hero who took advantage of his wartime fame, but that he was actually prepared to be a political leader in the infamous state of South Carolina, the state which, under British direction, had spearheaded the secessionist movement, even under circumstances where his personal reputation, even his life, were at risk.

As one biography of Smalls for children noted, Smalls was not only a unique individual, but also represented the hopes and aspirations of 4 million African-Americans who

had just been liberated from slavery.

Edward Miller's new biography of Smalls, will add to his reputation, by demonstrating how Smalls attempted to act in the interests of his constituency, as well as in the interests of the national Republican Party, almost till the time of his death. Miller has undertaken some significant research not available earlier to historians of the Reconstruction period. In an interview, Miller said that the well-known historian Dorothy Sterling, whose fictionalized biography, *Captain of the Planter*, was published in 1957, had written to him that when she had tried to research Smalls's life back in the 1950s in South Carolina, most doors were closed to her. Sterling could only interview his grandson, then still alive.

Miller, however, did not have that problem. Almost 40 years later, he was able to consult sources in the U.S. Library of Congress and, more especially, in South Carolina, which enabled him to paint a more detailed picture of both Smalls and South Carolina state politics of the period 1862-1915. One of the biggest hindrances, he found, is that Smalls was not a prodigious writer of letters, or of memoirs; almost everything had to be compiled from public records, including the *Charleston News and Courier*, a newspaper which "had it in" for Smalls.

During the Civil War, Smalls, who knew the shoals and currents of Charleston Harbor very well, remained in the Navy, first as a pilot for Admiral Du Pont, who commanded U.S. naval operations in the Charleston Harbor area. He also served on other vessels, and fought in more than one military engagement. In one incident, Smalls prevented the *Planter*, on which he was serving as pilot, from being captured by the Confederates when the Union captain, apparently frightened by Confederate fire, hid below. For this, on March 1, 1864,

Smalls was named a captain in the U.S. Navy, though there was to be a dispute about this with the U.S. government (Smalls had lost his commission papers in another battle) for the rest of his life.

After the war, Smalls engaged in some trading, and may have opened a store. But soon, after a short-lived attempt by South Carolina Confederates to restore the *status quo ante bellum*—that is, to re-enslave the black population under Jim Crow laws to force them to work on rice and cotton plantations—Smalls had a chance to enter politics.

A constitution for South Carolina

The first task of South Carolina patriots (that is, those who were loyal to the U.S. Constitution, not the Confederacy), would be to re-write the constitution of the state, such that it reflected the principles of the U.S. federal government, including ratifying the federal amendments which guaranteed political rights to the formerly enslaved population. To this day, the debates of the 1868 South Carolina State Constitutional Convention make quite interesting reading, because they reflect a branching point in what could have occurred in the South, had Lincoln been alive to enforce a federal policy of economic development. Instead, thanks to British agents-in-place, such as former Confederate Gen. Wade Hampton (who had been a crucial part of the planning of the Lincoln assassination), what was to occur, was a national tragedy very much reflected in Smalls's career.

Smalls's mentor, about whom, regretfully, Miller says very little, was apparently Benjamin Franklin Randolph, who had been educated at Oberlin and who was soon to be the chairman of the State Executive Committee of South Carolina's Republican Party. Randolph was to be key in attempting to force through universal education—but not merely universal education, but an education with at least some components of a Classical curriculum. (Randolph's role in South Carolina politics and in the Republican Party, was apparently so central, that he was the first African-American political figure in the state to be assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan in 1869.)

At the convention, Republican representatives insisted on the need for economic development for the state. Most of them knew that the “cotton is king” economy had to be replaced with independent family farmers, and the idea behind the Homestead Act was to give the newly freed slaves, who had nowhere to go, the right to farm and develop, and subsequently purchase, their own homesteads. Richard Cain, one of the black representatives to the convention, pointed out, “If these people had homes along the lines of railroads, and the lands were divided and sold in small farms, I will guarantee our railroads will make 50 times as much money, banking systems will be advanced by virtue of the settlement of the people throughout the whole state. . . . What we need is a system of small farms.”

And, on the need for universal education, A.J. Ransier,



Robert Smalls about 1895.

another black delegate, argued, “If there is any one thing to which we may attribute the sufferings endured by this people, it is the gross ignorance of the masses. . . . Had there been such a provision as this in the Constitution of South Carolina heretofore, there is no doubt that many of the evils which at present exist would have been avoided, and the people would have been advanced to a higher stage of civilization and morals, and we would not have been called upon to mourn the loss of the flower of the youth of our country.”

This convention was part of Smalls's political education. Smalls imbibed the principles expressed by Cain, Ransier, B.F. Randolph, and many others, and remained a fighter for these ideals throughout his career as state legislator, U.S. congressman, and to his last great fight at the age of 59 against the full restoration of Jim Crow laws in South Carolina.

Wade Hampton's 'Red Shirts'

Smalls saw the economic development of South Carolina as the state's way out of the cotton economy, and pushed projects for the development of railroads, trolley cars, phosphate mining, and so forth. The catch was, however, that the Confederate elite, under the leadership of Wade Hampton, had no intention of sharing economic power with African-Americans, whom they still considered their inferiors. As they

began to realize that defeating Reconstruction would require time, the “gentleman general” Wade Hampton began to mobilize his Red Shirts, to use physical intimidation to break up the solid Republican vote among African-Americans and Reconstructionists who wanted to turn South Carolina into a modern, economically developed and politically integrated state.

The “Red Shirts” were modelled on the British agent and anarchist Giuseppe Mazzini’s Red Shirts. They began to attend Republican Party campaign rallies to scare away both voters and candidates. And in 1877, when Smalls was running for re-election to U.S. Congress, Smalls himself was physically threatened at a rally by Hampton’s goons. Miller reports that “Smalls blamed that part of the episode in which his life was threatened as a result of ‘Hampton’s saying in a public speech that there was but one man he now thought *ought* to be out of the way, and that man was Robert Smalls, who, by giving the Republicans one more vote in the House, would strengthen them in the choice of the next President, which would probably take place in the House of Representatives’ ” (emphasis in original).

Smalls was also the victim of an ongoing slander campaign, first by Hampton and then “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman, Hampton’s successor as governor. The slander charged that

Smalls was involved in corruption related to bribes paid out to state senators in exchange for their votes to allow a certain printing company retain its state contract. Smalls himself was alleged to have taken at least one \$5,000 bribe. But, as Smalls’s court papers show, the money in question was not in his account on the day it was said to have been; too, the clerk who supposedly deposited the money in his account on that day, had disappeared. The case was full of holes, and Smalls fought it to the Supreme Court. But, at the point that the Supreme Court was about to hear his case, Wade Hampton, by then governor of South Carolina, pardoned him—to ensure that his name could not be cleared, and that Hampton and his followers could continue to charge him with corruption. Once he had been pardoned by the “magnanimous” Governor Hampton, the Supreme Court refused to re-open Smalls’s case.

Reconstruction began to fade fast, particularly after the 1876 Presidential election between Hayes and Tilden, which almost led to a renewal of hostilities between North and South, and which also led to a political deal in which the federal government agreed to remove its remaining troops from South Carolina and other Reconstruction states (thus leaving the field almost entirely to Hampton’s Red Shirts). Still, Smalls managed to retain his Congressional seat, on and off, through 1888, when Democrats’ gerrymandering of districts finally succeeded in ousting him from office.

Smalls remained involved in politics after his defeat, and served as customs officer for Charleston Harbor until his death in 1915. Even in this post, his enemies attempted to accuse him of corruption, considering the elder statesman a threat to their Confederate Establishment.

‘I stand here the equal of any man’

In 1898, despite the success of the Hampton and Tillman regimes in disenfranchising the African-American vote, a state constitutional convention was called, mainly for the purpose of *entirely* disenfranchising the black electorate once and for all, and to codify Jim Crow laws—laws which restricted the economic and political rights of blacks, such that they were once again enslaved to plantation owners. Smalls, along with six other prominent black leaders who had survived the Red Shirts and the KKK, attended the convention of 154 whites bent on reversing the guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment—ironically, on the grounds that the Fourteenth Amendment gave the state the right to decide who should vote! States’ rights, an issue said to have been decided by the outcome of the Civil War, thus once again reared its head.

Smalls and his colleagues were walking into the lions’ den to fight a fight they could not win; but, they knew they had to make a stand, for the sake of their electorate, and their own self-respect as human beings.

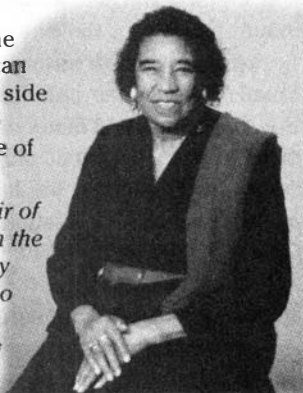
Gov. “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman used the convention as a

Bridge Across Jordan

by Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson

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platform to reiterate oft-made charges against the several Reconstruction governments of South Carolina. He also charged that the seven African-Americans at the convention, were crooks and responsible for corruption in the state. In response, Smalls defended himself, then added: "My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life. . . . I know they are not ashamed of me, for they have at all times honored me with their votes. I stand here the equal of any man . . . innocent of every charge attempted to be made here today against me."

The African-American delegation stood its ground in the face of delegates determined to deny blacks every single right it could, including the right to intermarriage. But by this time, the fate of the South's growing African-American population was sealed, not to be reversed for another 60 years. The Confederates succeeded in disenfranchisement and their other goals, including segregation of schools (meaning minimal schooling for African-American children), thus ushering in a new period of shameful injustice in South Carolina.

Propitiating the 'Lost Cause'

To sum up Smalls's life in a review, is almost impossible, and Miller's account of Smalls' different political posts, appointments, his influence in his hometown of Beaufort (where he was known as the "Boss of Beaufort" for over two decades), is quite extensive. But, where this reviewer would disagree with Miller, is on some of the assumptions which he and most other Reconstruction historians share.

In an interview, for example, author Miller insisted on endorsing what can only be called an academic cover-up: that is, that Confederate Gen. Wade Hampton was a "gentleman" who wasn't quite as bad as "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman. Yet, it has been demonstrated definitively (see "How We Know the British Killed Lincoln," by Anton Chaitkin in *New Federalist*, Feb. 6, 1995), that not only was General Hampton crucial to the plot to assassinate Lincoln, but he was also an integral part of the British intelligence machine in America.

If Miller understood anything at all about how secession was set up vis-à-vis British assets, particularly in South Carolina, then he would understand the significance of Hampton's role, and that he was more of a danger to Reconstruction, and to the principles of the U.S. Constitution, than Tillman ever could be. Here was a former Confederate general, who, gentleman or not, remained committed to the division of the United States into parts on behalf of the British monarchy. That same general told his followers that Smalls had to be eliminated, precisely because Smalls provided an element of leadership to the black community which, in the view of Hampton and his feudalist compatriots, could not be tolerated. For, not only was Smalls trying to bring Lincoln's Republican Party into South Carolina, he wanted African-Americans to become industrialists, busi-

nessmen—and he expected the white elite to share economic and political power with former slaves!

The presentation of Hampton as somehow the "lesser of two evils," is one among the academic cover-ups that Miller condones. The fact is, that historians in general have continued the cover-up of what Reconstruction was really all about, anyway, and its true meaning for the United States. From the rabidly pro-Confederate Dunning school to the revisionists, there has been such a distortion of what really happened, and why, that it is difficult for a historian working in the field to sort out those axioms and postulates which must be discarded from those which can be kept. Any concession to academic protocol, however, can only lead to a propitiation of the very dangerous myth of the righteousness of the "Lost Cause" of the South.

Economics text from Belize reflects LaRouche's influence

by Paul Gallagher

The ABCs of Economics: A Primer

by William Lindo

Belize Paper and Plastic Co., Ltd., Belize City, Belize, 1995

203 pages, paperbound, \$5

In Belize, the tiny British possession on Mexico's east coast (formerly known as British Honduras), International Monetary Fund economic poison has provoked publication of a counterattack: a new "LaRouchean" economics textbook.

The author is a businessman and political leader, and has written and published an analysis and denunciation of British "free trade" economic dogma, and all its history of sordid practice. He takes his standpoint of attack, from the unique understanding of the science of physical economy of Lyndon LaRouche, particularly from the historical researches of some of LaRouche's associates. It is significant of the rapid growth of LaRouche's ideas and influence (evidenced this year from China and Russia, to Mexico and Colombia), that a book intended as a basic economics teaching text presenting LaRouche's standpoint of physical economy, appears in a British Commonwealth nation where