Parthenia Antoinette Hague

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LIFE IN SOUTHERN ALABAMA DURING THE CIVIL WAR

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Introduction to the Bison Book Edition by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Bison Book printing: 1991
Most recent printing indicated by the last digit below:
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hague, Parthenia Antoinette, b. 1838
A blockaded family: life in southern Alabama during the Civil War / by Parthenia Antoinette Hague; introduction by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.
p. cm.
Originally published: Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1888.
ISBN 0-8032-7254-5
1. Hague, Parthenia Antoinette, b. 1838. 2. United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Personal narratives, Confederate. 3. Alabama—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Personal narratives. 4. United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Women. 5. Alabama—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Women. 6. Plantation life—Alabama—History—19th century. 7. Alabama—Biography. 8. Women—Alabama—Biography. I. Title.
E605.H15 1992
976.1'05'092—dc20
[B]
91-26605 CIP

Reprinted from the original edition published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, in 1888

A Blockaded Family

INTRODUCTION

by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

Countless memoirs testify to the upheaval that the Civil War effected in the lives of southern women, mostly those of the slaveholding class who, either during or after the war, wrote of their experiences of grief, shock, and deprivation. From Appomattox to the present, many have emphasized women's passionate devotion to the cause—their heroic sacrifices and subsequent bitterness.[1] William Faulkner epitomized this view in *Absalom! Absalom!*, where he represented Mr. Compson as saying, "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?"[2] According to this widely accepted view, the war stripped southern women of wealth, slaves, material comfort, and, above all, the leisure necessary to fulfilling the role of lady. But in so doing it only reinforced the intensity of their identification with their region and its traditional values.[3]

However great women's disaffection in the final years of the war itself, their subsequent accounts of it suggest that even the humiliation of defeat did not seriously undermine their loyalty to their region, and probably strengthened it. The rash of southern women's diaries and memoirs published during the fifty years after 1865 read overwhelmingly like the seedbed of the nostalgic plantation novels in the manner of Thomas Nelson Page and his successors. Diary-keeping was nothing new for southern women. Innumerable antebellum southern women had kept diaries and journals or even written memoirs but rarely published them. Normally, they wrote in a tone that clearly reflected their primary purpose of leaving an account of their lives—and frequently their souls—for their daughters or other kin.[4]

After the war, the tone of the diaries, journals, and memoirs shifted dramatically. In the first instance, many of the diarists and memorialists were writing explicitly for publication, frequently out of the desire to make some money to contribute to depleted family fortunes.[5] In the second, the vast majority of them were also writing to justify themselves and their region to the northern readers, who still accounted for the majority of book buyers. These writings contributed mightily to the "moonlight and magnolia" view of slavery, as they did to the sanctification of the memory of the "lost cause" and "our boys in grey." In the most romanticized versions of this tradition, gracious ladies

and dashing cavaliers frequent white columned mansions set among lush grounds. Happy, attentive slaves respond eagerly to the least wish of paternalistic slaveholders. Modern cynicism has stripped this image of much of its glamor, insisting upon the crude conditions that prevailed throughout much of the slaveholding South, insisting above all upon the slaves' resistance to their own enslavement and commitment to freedom. Many have even argued that elite southern women themselves should be counted among the secret opponents of the system. Neither the myth nor the demystification serves well.

Parthenia Antoinette (Vardaman) Hague may or may not have ranked among the ladies of the slaveholding elite by birth. Born November 29, 1838, to Thomas Butts and Emily Adeline (Evans) Vardaman, she grew up in Hamilton, in Harris County, Georgia, and completed her education at Hamilton Academy.[6] She says nothing specific about the size of her father's household, or the number of slaves he owned, but he appears to have been a modestly successful, if not large, slaveholder, who served as high sheriff of Harris County.[7] And, as a girl, Parthenia certainly had some acquaintance with substantial slaveholding, for Harris County lay securely in the Georgia piedmont plantation district and included 7,166 whites and 6,972 blacks. The town of Hamilton, near which the family lived, was, like so many other southern towns, very small, with a population of only four hundred.[8]

Parthenia grew up as the second child and the oldest daughter in a large family of eleven children, although she here refers only to her three brothers who fought in the war.[9] After completing her education, presumably in the late 1850s, she moved to Alabama, where she would live during and after the war to teach in a school near Hurtville. There, she lived in the wealthy plantation district near Eufala with an apparently prosperous slaveholding family.

A Blockaded Family testifies to considerable literary accomplishment that reflects both family background and education, although we cannot be sure that she was as accomplished in the early 1860s as she was at the time she wrote. She was both cultured and well read, although she may not have read everything to which she refers until after the time about which she is writing. *A Blockaded Family* abounds with references to Christianity and the Bible, which suggest that Hague, like many other southern women, took her faith seriously and turned to it for explanations of the most dramatic events in human affairs. She attended the Mount Olive Baptist Church in Harris County with her family and may well have been a member. Her specific religious attitudes and church affiliation during the years of the blockade remain unclear, but she seems to have been reared in a strong Protestant tradition and her frequent biblical quotations apparently derive from early habits of Bible reading.[10] By the time she wrote *A Blockaded Family*, she identified closely with a nos-

talgic, elite postbellum view of antebellum life and values.

Hague laces her account with lavish descriptions of the beauty of the southern countryside. Her rhetorical strategy links her account to the work of innumerable southern women novelists, notably that of Augusta Evans Wilson.[11] She dwells lovingly upon the beauties of the trees, of the Spanish moss peculiar to the region, the soft aroma of the pines, the flowers, the fruits, and much more; and she carefully associates the feelings of the people with whom she sympathizes with nature in all its abundance. In a similar spirit, she associates the outbreak of war with a fierce, gathering storm. While returning to Alabama by train in 1861, she saw through the window "the dark green gloom of the almost unbroken forest, the low wail of the wind in the tops of the pines, the lowering dark clouds dimly outlined through the shaded vista." This prospect burdened her heart with a great sorrow, exacerbated by "the far-away mutterings of thunder." The moaning of the wind fell upon her ears like the wail of a banshee. "All seemed to presage some dire affliction" (see p.6).

However sympathetic and romantic, Parthenia Hague's views of the harmony of antebellum slaveholding society do not rest on a glossy picture of luxurious living. Early in her account she describes the house of her "generous employer" as "in every respect the characteristic Southern home, with its wide halls, long and broad colonnade, large and airy rooms,

the yard a park in itself, fruits and flowers abounding" (p. 13). Writing of the war, she focuses primarily on the prevalence of suffering and material hardship, although her detailed chronicle suggests a high antebellum standard of living. As an author, she manifests a strong determination to justify the ways and values of the South to northern readers. She wants her readers to appreciate what southerners suffered; even more she wants them to understand southerners' motivations and virtues. Although she evokes some of the familiar themes of southern gallantry and graciousness, and although she paints the most conventionally rosy picture imaginable of the happy relations between slaveholders and slaves, she focuses above all on the virtues of ingenuity, industry, and patriotism.

Hague devotes the largest part of her memoir to minute descriptions of the ways in which she and the other members of the household coped with the deepening scarcities that resulted from the blockade. As a result, she offers an extraordinarily detailed picture of household production—a topic that many antebellum women diarists passed over lightly.[12] Her memoir thus provides a rare glimpse, from a woman's perspective, of the full activities of a slaveholding household.[13] Possibly her own background made her more willing to accept and understand extensive domestic production than more elite slaveholding women, who had rarely, if ever, actually worked at it themselves. But if experience had prepared her to grasp a wide range of produc-

tive activities—and we do not know that it did—conviction almost certainly fueled her commitment to describing it in such appreciative detail.

Hague especially sought to underscore the inventiveness and industry of her compatriots, who had demonstrated their ability to survive under extreme adversity. With a telling rhetorical flourish, she claims that if instead of being hedged in by the blockade, they had been surrounded by "a wall as thick and high as the great Chinese Wall," they would not "suffer intolerable inconvenience, but live as happily as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before they tasted the forbidden fruit" (p. 110). Having given up luxuries, and even simple comforts, they were, with the crudest of resources, proving their ability to feed and clothe the people of the South. "We felt all the more pride," she notes, "when we remembered that at the beginning of hostilities we were unprepared in almost every essential necessary to the existence of our Confederacy; yet now, the best part of two years had gone, and the South was holding her own" (p. 111).

The analogy to the Garden of Eve figures as one of her many reminders of the essential innocence of the southerners in a conflict she portrays as forced upon them. Upon first hearing word of Georgia's secession—"my native State, one of the original thirteen of revolutionary fame"—she confesses that she felt a certain sadness. No one, she periodically insists, loved the Union more than she. But almost immediately, an

unpleasant recollection "rushed to mind, which caused me to think that perhaps, after all, secession was not so very bad." She remembered a temperance lecturer from New England who, having been warmly received and welcomed, betrayed the trust of his unsuspecting hosts. No one thought that "his one sole purpose was to make a secret survey of our county, to ascertain which settlements were most densely populated with slaves, for the already maturing uprising of the blacks against the whites (p.4).

No, the southern white people cannot fairly be blamed either for forsaking the Union or for the war. No less than the northerners did they love the Union, but who can fail to understand that "when a political party, with no love in its heart for the Southern white people, came into power, a party, which we believed felt that the people of the South were fit only for the pikes hidden at Harper's Ferry, we should have cried out, "What part have we in David? to your tents, O Israel" (pp.3–4).

Writing years after the fact, she cheers herself with the reflection that their "deeds and intentions have one great Judge, who will say, 'Neither do I condemn thee'" (p.4). And, in conclusion, Hague returns to the theme. Today, she insists, the people of the South are loyal to the Union, loyal to the very fibers of their beings. "Accepting all the decisions of the war, we have built and planted anew amid the ruins left by the army who were the conquerors" (p.176). They may still be

poor, but believe themselves to be destined by God "to a brilliant career of prosperity and glory" (p.176).

In building their future, southerners will be able to draw on the virtues that sustained them through the war and blockade: industry, ingenuity, determination, and good cheer. Hague's account of the range and intricacy of household production during the war retains great intrinsic interest as a source of information on the kinds of goods white southerners considered necessary and on the materials and skills that were available locally. It also serves as a running testimony to southern character. Before the war "there were none, even the wealthiest, who had not been taught that labor was honorable, and who had very clear ideas of how work must be done." The advent of disaster found none of them "wanting in any of the qualities necessary for our changed circumstances" (p.14).

From Lincoln's initial proclamation of the naval blockade of the Confederacy on 19 April 1861 until the fall of Mobile on 23 August 1864, South Alabama felt the growing pinch. Given the long range of coast to be cordoned and the initial weakness of the northern navy, the blockade did not immediately take maximum effect, although as early as the summer of 1861 southerners were complaining of its effects.[14] But in September 1861 northern forces took possession of Ship Island, which lies halfway between Mobile and New Orleans, and by the summer of 1862 most of the southern ports were closed. Thus, although the battle of Mo-

bile Bay did not occur until August 1864, South Alabama spent the years of the war effectively cut off from its normal markets and sources of supplies.

Until the outbreak of war, South Alabama, where, Hague insists, cotton indeed had been king, had depended upon the North for "almost everything eaten and worn" (p.15). In South Alabama in particular, even the cultivation of cereals had been rare. Overnight, so it seemed, everything changed and people throughout the South "put hands to the plow" (p.16). Our planters, she notes, "set about in earnest to grow wheat, rye, rice, oats, corn, peas, pumpkins, and ground peas" not to mention the "chufa," a thing she had never heard of before (p.17). Here, as elsewhere throughout her account, Hague engages in something of a sleight of hand. It is safe to assume, especially during the years before emancipation, that large planters like her generous host no more set their hands to the plow after the beginning of the war than they had before it. It is also safe to assume that throughout much of the lower South—although less on large plantations that lay close to water transport—many households cultivated many crops besides cotton and were reasonably accustomed to providing for a sizeable share of their own basic foodstuffs.[15]

The shift imposed by war and blockade was, nonetheless, dramatic and the wealthier the planter the greater it was likely to have been. In passing, Hague notes her amazement at one day finding a woman,

whose husband and sons were away in the army, doing her own threshing. "There she sat, a sheaf of wheat held with both hands, and with this she was vigorously belaboring the barrel, at every stroke a shower of wheat-grains raining down upon quilts and coverlets" (p.23). Hague's surprise reflects her own experience. Women of slaveholding households might never have witnessed threshing and assuredly would not have threshed themselves before the war; even during the war they almost certainly were not called upon to thresh. But the woman whose behavior so astounded Hague lived in a small cottage, appears to have owned no slaves, had undoubtedly seen threshing before the war, and may, conceivably, have helped with it herself.

The women of the slaveholding household within which Hague lived were never called upon to thresh, but they did rapidly turn their hands to a wide range of tasks of which they presumably had no previous experience. An excellent observer, Hague carefully details the wide range of new activities undertaken within the slaveholding household. Her extensive list of goods that had previously been purchased and were now produced within the household, or for which homemade substitutes were developed, includes agricultural products such as goobers, bolted meal, candles, coffee, tea, starch, castor oil, quinine, opium, and bicarbonate of soda. The members of the household also engaged in extensive domestic production: tanning, weaving,

carding, spinning, dyeing, sewing, knitting, hat-making.

Clearly Hague paid surprisingly close attention to a large number of activities, but she reserves her most meticulous descriptions for the various aspects of textile production in which she participated directly. From the very beginning of the blockade, she writes, sewing machines fell into disuse because they could not accommodate the homemade thread upon which the household was forced to rely. Under the new conditions, household textile production had to provide for all of the members of the household, white as well as black. The white ladies who presumably had been accustomed only to fine sewing now had to turn their skills to spinning, carding, weaving, and dyeing if they were to have anything new to wear at all. In addition, Hague insists, they had to provide for the needs of the slaves.

Hague takes visible pride in the skills that she and the other white women developed. She proudly and lovingly describes their spinning, their selection of natural dyes, their experimentation with weaving, and their ultimate ability to produce a pretty plaid or striped homespun. Finding even the most attractive homespun too warm for the steamy southern months, they improvised a way to make a simple muslin. They knitted and crocheted slippers and shoes as well as shawls, gloves, capes, sacques, and hoods. They learned to make palmetto hats from straw. The appearance in the local

store of an unexpected shipment of calico and leather slippers poignantly reminds them of the limitations of their efforts, but her pride in what they did accomplish does not flag.

Throughout, Hague stresses the novelty of their work and their pleasure in newly developed skills. But her enthusiasm for the white women's accomplishments probably obscures a longstanding tradition of household textile work. It is doubtful that the household would have had the tools—wheels, looms—of textile production at the outbreak of hostilities if some household members had not been using them all along. The narratives of former slaves and the day-books of planters from throughout the South strongly suggest that, in most slaveholding households during the entire antebellum period, slave women were regularly spinning, carding, and weaving. The evidence also suggests that many slave women had a sophisticated knowledge of dyes, which they used primarily in making their families' Sunday clothes.[16]

Many slaveholding women had their own textile skills, primarily in fine, light sewing and in the cutting of the material for the slaves' clothes, but few had much knowledge of spinning and weaving. The cloth for their clothing was purchased. Suddenly confronted with the necessity to produce cloth for their own clothing, or do without new clothing, slaveholding women turned to slave women for instruction in skills that they had never expected to need. That Hague