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From the archives of the Senate House State Historic Site

Rebel Oppression of British Subjects: Statement of a Deserter

The following is from a copy of a letter now on file at the Headquarters of this Department. The writer is an intelligent man, and his statement, written familiarly to an intimate acquaintance, bears every evidence of truth. The letter though written some months since, has not, we believe, been before published.

Folly Island, S.C., Feb., 1864

Dear Old Friend,—Doubtless you have e'en now considered me as amongst the dead. I am happy to say that I am well, and have just made my escape from what I call three years imprisonment in the so-called Southern Confederacy where I have been since the commencement of the war. It is the second attempt I have made within the past year, the first time was not so fortunate. I got away from Richmond, Va., easily, but was arrested near the Potomac River, brought back to Richmond and thrown into that Southern Bastile, Castle Thunder, where I remained six months. I was court-martialed as a deserter, and sentenced to be shot on the 31st August last, but, fortunately for me, President Davis issued his proclamation which saved me. A few days since I and six others determined to try and escape which thanks to God we succeeded in. I will now try and give you an account of my experience for the past three years, the cause of my first entrance into the rebel army &c. &c. I was, as you must be aware, employed as manager on the estate of M_____ in Louisiana. It was my intention to sail on the *Roscoe*, (from New Orleans to Liverpool), which vessel I believe was the last to sail from any Southern port previous to the blockade. I could not do it; the reason why, my employer, who pretended to be a truly patriotic Southerner, thought that as my services had been of some little use to him, my arm might possibly do the cause of Secession a benefit; thinking so, he would not pay me my justly earned wages, thereby preventing my leaving as I proposed; on his refusal to pay me, I wrote to Mr. Muir, who then was H.B. M. Consul at New Orleans, more than once, asking him to assist me in getting out of the country, and giving him my reason for not being able to go to New Orleans; the letters were, I believe, suppressed by my employer, who was post master; at least, I do not think Mr. Muir received them;

had he got them, I believe he would have given me the assistance I asked, for I was afterwards told he on all occasions gave Her Majesty's subjects all the protection and advice needful, which I much regret to say, other Consuls in the Seceded States did not. After failing to leave the country on that occasion, I was told by my employer he had no further use for me, nor could he pay me any portion of my wages; nowhere could I get employment, nor get away from there. At this time, the powers that then ruled got up a sort of proclamation, saying that all persons without employment would be arrested as vagrants and treated as such; just then a volunteer Company came along, and I was told I would be allowed the honor of becoming a soldier, which I did, though much against my inclination, as my sympathies were not at all with the rebels, neither have they from that hour to the present time, but what could I do? I was helpless after my enlistment. The company I thus became a member of proceeded to Memphis, Tennessee, and became incorporated in a Tennessee regiment. I must say that whilst I remained a member of that regiment I was amongst gentlemen, and was on all occasions treated as a gentleman. My advancement too was rapid, as I had the good fortune to please the Colonel, who was a truly good and worthy gentleman, although I considered him to be a mistaken one; he on all occasions did everything in his power for me. The only battle I participated in was the battle of Belmont, Missouri, 6th November, 1861, on which occasion I acted as Adjutant. Before the battle commenced, I vowed that for no cause whatever would my hand be the cause of depriving a Union soldier of life, and I kept my vow. 'Tis true I knocked down a member of the 7th Iowa regiment, but not before he shot a bullet through my cap, and broke my left shoulder with this musket. He surrendered to me, and we became good friends, he sharing with me the contents of his canteen and haversack, which, I assure you, were very acceptable to me. As I have, on all occasions, found the Southern papers to give false accounts of battles, I will tell you what I know of the battle of Belmont. About 8 o'clock A.M., the Federal forces under Generals Grant and McClernand advanced on Gen. Pillow's brigade, drove us back, and continued to do so until 3 o'clock, P.M., when Gen. Cheatham crossed the Mississippi with his brigade, when Gen. Grant retired, whether driven back by us or not, I cannot say. We, however, claimed the victory. The Memphis and other papers said we lost only four killed in that action; my regiment lost fourteen killed and a good many wounded, other regiments more heavily; in fact, our entire loss on that day was between two and three hundred killed, and many wounded. I defy any man to say I speak falsely; I have written too many reports on that subject to be mistaken. Soon after battle the sergeant major went home sick, I was appointed to the vacancy by the Colonel, which position I filled until the 4th January, 1862, when

I was discharged and left for Richmond, Va., on my way to Europe. I was given by my Colonel a first-rate recommendation to President Davis, by whom I was very kindly received. I stayed only a few days in Richmond, when I left for Norfolk, with a British Consular document in my possession, countersigned by the then Secretary of War, Mr. Benjamin; but two days did I remain there when I returned to Richmond at the request of a gentleman, who wished me to bear with me letters to his friends in Ireland. I did so, and two days after was arrested as a deserter from some company of which I had never heard, neither did I hear of it again, but yet I was kept a prisoner till July. When I was arrested I was taken before Gen. Winder, Provost Marshal General, at whose office I was searched, my money to the amount of \$1,763, and my consular papers taken from me. Neither papers nor money did I ever get from that day to this. I have always thought that Gen. Winder appropriated to his own use my money, for he does not bear the best character for honesty. It is said of him in Richmond, that before the war he swindled the U.S., and had to fly to the rebel capital. I have been also told that he is not above a good bribe. After my arrest I was placed in the county jail, where I was so fortunate as to make the acquaintance of a Lieutenant in the Federal Army. I was not long in jail when I was taken a second time before Gen. Winder, by whom I was kindly told I would be released if I would join the army. I said I would not, I wanted to return to my family in Ireland, and that I requested my money to be given back to me. I was told that the money was safe, and that I could get it whenever I consented to join the army, but that I could not be permitted to leave the Confederate states. On my again refusing to enter their d---d service, I was sent to the Confederate States prison, where I became a witness to many acts of cruelty which the Federal soldiers were made to suffer. I was shown by a Confederate prisoner a bullet which killed a soldier of the U.S.A., who was shot for looking out of the window; that was his only offence. About this time I saw an article in one of the Richmond papers, which purported to be from an English officer, who said he was in Richmond at the time it was reported that the soldier was shot, and that it was not the case. Now, whoever that officer is, he was misinformed on the subject, for I say, and can prove it, the man was shot, and I saw his blood and brains on the floor of the third or fourth story, and it can be proven by many who saw the wanton and murderous act committed. This was not at all the only case of cruelty committed at that time, which was after the first battle of Manassas, when the rebel soldiery were permitted, and in many cases encouraged, to commit acts of cruelty to the Federal prisoners in their hands. I was not long in the Confederate prison when I was appointed by the Surgeon in charge to the office of acting hospital steward, immediately afterwards the prison was removed to the notorious

Libby, on Cary street, where I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of many officers (some of whom are now Generals) of the Union army; also, the non-commissioned officers and privates, many of whom, I am sure, would willingly state, that I did them some little favors, and took good care of all who were under my charge in the hospital; in fact, many of them requested me to refer to them, should I ever get away from the country in which I was unwillingly detained. Were I to write to you all the petty acts of cruelty and annoyance I witnessed the prisoners receive at the hands of the commandant, Lieut. now Major Turner, and his Adjutant, Lieut. Emac, who received the sobriquet of Bowie Knife, you would, I fear say I exaggerated. I will, however, tell you one instance I witnessed. A Federal soldier was ordered to clean the arms of the guard, he refused, and was consequently made to mark time for several hours with a sentinel over him. The man, I suppose from fatigue ceased, and said he was not able to continue. The commandant came up and told the sentinel to stick the bayonet into the d--- Yankee, which command was obeyed, and the soldier was sent to his quarters. Next morning he was brought to the hospital where I saw his wound. Whilst I was at the prison, I more than once wrote to Gen. Winder, asking for a court martial, and that my money would be returned to me, but without avail. I also wrote to President Davis requesting an investigation, the letters in all cases myself handed to the commandant, who assured me he would deliver them. I do not think President Davis ever received any communication from me; had he done so, I would have had justice done me, for I believe him to be a just and Christian man, although a mistaken one. I also wrote to the Governor of Virginia, but there was no notice taken of my communication.

A short time previous to the battle of the Seven Pines, I was for the third time taken before Gen. Winder, and again told I would be liberated if I joined the army. On that occasion I told them I never would enter their service, that I was a British subject, and that I could not be forced into any measure. I was then sent back to prison and told my money was mislaid and could not be found. On my return to the prison hospital, I told of my interview to a U.S. officer, and to whom I can refer as to the truth of my statement. Whilst I was a prisoner, I was every day hearing of the bad treatment the Confederate prisoners received in the North, of that I know nothing, but I know the manner in which I saw the Union prisoners treated in the South. I was told by an Irishman, a member of a Louisiana regiment, that at the battle of the Seven Pines, he saw a certain Louisiana regiment take several, say 60 prisoners; a detail was made to conduct them to Richmond, they started, but it was not long before the detail returned, saying the prisoners died on the way; the fact is, the prisoners were shot, and I heard one of the detailed men

exult over the brutal act—saying dead men gave no trouble, and that was the best way to get rid of the damned Yankees—and I am sorry to say, that this was not the only time Federal soldiers were shot by their Southern captors, and I have heard Confederate officers boast of their men for committing such acts.

The day that the wounded prisoners were being brought in from the battlefield, I saw a Captain stand in the hospital door, and before any of the wounded were permitted to leave the ambulances, he went into them and took from the prisoners their pocket books, knives &c., which I have never heard were returned. A few days after this I got out of prison by a ruse; an officer came to the Libby prison to get 10 recruits for his company, and I went with him. I told him the circumstances of my case, and he kindly allowed me to go where I pleased, which I did, and remained out of the army some two months, during which time I stayed in the rebel capital, where I was daily witness to the many indignities to which foreigners and particularly British subjects were subjected. It was no uncommon thing to see a man arrested, and his papers taken from him and torn by the detective officers, who were in all cases from the dregs of society in Baltimore—men who would not enter the army, and who came to Richmond because they could not live at home. They were thus thrust on the citizens, by their countryman, Gen. Winder, and had from him license to do as they pleased; in fact, a reign of terror existed in Richmond, not far removed from that of the notorious Robespierre in France.

I have seen men taken from their families (British subjects) to the conscript camps. Often times there was no redress; sometimes Mr. Chidland would interfere, but generally the interference came too late; the poor fellows were immediately sent off to the army, and once there it was not easy to get them back. In this way much suffering was caused to many poor people who were enjoined by Her Majesty's proclamation to keep neutral. Many times have I heard the question asked, why will not our own government take some step for our protection? Those men had, by hard and honest industry, acquired a little competency, and surely it was not be wondered at if they did not wish to go away, and leave their all to the mercy of a set of men who did not scruple to encourage murder. In many cases it was impossible to go away, even if the parties wanted to. During this time I tried every way to obtain employment, but no, I was a British subject, and to be that, and walk round with British consulate documents, was as bad as to be a robber. In the month of September, 1862, I was again obliged to join a company, but as I entered it against my will, and never took the oath of allegiance, I felt myself perfectly at liberty to leave as soon as I found employment., which I did in November following. Perhaps you will say that my business was not very honorable, but it

was at least honest. I became a substitute agent, and there were many engaged in it who considered themselves very honorable and honest men. As a matter of course, it was a profitable business, but a dangerous one; for Gen. Winder issued an order prohibiting substitute agencies, and therefore the detectives were on the alert to arrest all in that line of business, although they were always willing, on the receipt of \$50 or \$100, to let us go on our way in peace. So long as you paid the officers well you need not fear them, but once refuse a detective money and you were done for. In March last I was arrested as a substitute agent and placed in Castle Thunder, from whence I made my escape very easily. I borrowed a colonel's uniform, and walked by the guards, they presented arms as I passed. I then got out of Richmond and crossed the Rappahannock river, to the Potomac, where I thought I was safe, but they did me the honor to send several officers after me, when I was re-arrested, and brought back to Castle Thunder the second time. I forgot to say that after I got out of Castle Thunder the first time, I was witness to the great riots which took place in Richmond, Petersburg and other places. The Richmond papers of the day stated that it was only Irish hags and w----s that participated in those riots. I was in the rebel capital at the time, and it was a hard matter to suppress the riot in that place. I am happy to state that it was not the Irish women of Richmond who got up the riot, but it was the starving wives and daughters of their own Virginia soldiers, with a good many of the so-called ladies of Richmond, and it was not bread alone that they sought after—it was clothing. I myself saw several ladies who each took three and four dress patterns and many other fancy articles.

Much has been said and written about Castle Thunder, but it falls far short of the reality. The conduct of the officers there is brutal to all. Capt. Alexander is a brute to all who are so unfortunate as to come within his reach, and his subordinates seem to vie with their superior in cruelty. It is a wonder to me that the Confederate authorities do not allow foreigners to leave the country. Surely it would be only fair to release men from a service that, do what they will, there is no credit accorded them. To show you to what extent the hatred of foreigners is carried, I not long since heard an officer (who was a member of a general court martial) say that, for his part, he would shoot every G-----d Irishman who might be brought before him, no matter for what offence, and yet this was a man sworn to do justice to all. When I was last in Castle thunder I saw a man shot (a Federal soldier) for looking out of the window of the Tobacco Factory opposite.

In September last the brigade I belonged to came to South Carolina, where I was when I fortunately made my escape. I must now tell you that provisions are hard to be got at. The soldier's ration now is, if marching, 1 1/3 pounds corn meal,

and $\frac{1}{3}$ pound of pork; if not marching, $1\frac{2}{3}$ pounds meal constitutes his entire daily ration. It is said that soldiers are re-enlisting for the war very willingly. I do not believe it, for two or three weeks since there was a great fight on James Island between the rebel troops. The time of service of some regiments had expired, and the men wanted to go home, but no, they would not be permitted to do so. They were conscripted, but the Georgians would not suffer such treatment, and therefore the fight, I know not with what result. All I know is, that the fight lasted for more than two hours. At Pocotaligo there was another fight for the same cause.

I will now tell you the way I was received by the Yankees, and show you the difference in the treatment of prisoners, &c. The Yankee prisoners are half starved in Richmond, and have their blanket taken from them. The Southern prisoners on this side receive the same rations as the Union soldiers, and if they want blankets and clothes receive them. Is that not returning good for evil? When we came here we were met with open arms and had every attention paid us, and all our wants supplied. I have seen an officer from the rebel army shed tears because he received such different treatment from what he had expected.

Sincerely do I wish that my pen was inspired, so that my feeble efforts at letter writing would be means of causing foreign governments to take some steps for the protection of their subjects in rebel American States; particularly the government of England, to whose attention I would call the fact. Her subjects are being daily forced into a service that they detest. If they refuse, their property is confiscated by the government, and their persons incarcerated in a loathsome prison. It is not so that there is now an opportunity afforded them to leave, for, since the British consuls were ordered away from the Confederacy, hard indeed is the lot of the poor British subject in the south. Forsaken by their own government, and not able to reach the country which has always been the home of the down-trodden and oppressed, he can only starve or enter the army. Irishmen are not wanted in the South but for the purpose of filling up the ranks. Thousands of them are in their graves, and many poor fellows maimed for life, are forgotten by the government for which they fought, and their families now are starving, for the authorities care not for any man when he ceases to be of use to them. In the Confederacy now they are putting every man between the ages of 16 and 45 years in the army. Even those men who put substitutes in their places are obliged to go in the army, although the government made an obligation to exempt all such. They make laws one day and break them the next. How can such a government stand? I can tell you that the Southern people, one and all, wish that times now were as they have been, three years back, and gladly would give up the struggle if they dared. Long ago have they found out what true liberty means. Liberty, indeed!—there is no such

thing known in the South at this time.

It is not easy to divine the cause of such intense hatred existing against England by the Confederates. One day the papers laud the Government—Russell and Palmerston particularly—and the next the most abusive epitaphs are unsparingly made use of. England withholds recognition, and the hopes of the Southern people are centered on foreign governments. Surely if such be the policy of Great Britain she should now and forever put an end to all hopes of recognition, and for the sake of her poor suffering subjects make a demand that they one and all be permitted to leave. Be not deceived by Southern papers or Southern agents. The cruelties committed at the South are atrocious. Were I to tell you all I have seen it would make your blood run cold. I have yet to learn if such acts are committed in the Northern States; however I should think they are not. I have heard that William Smith O'Brien is taking a great interest in American matters. Would it not be as well if he remembered '48, and turned his attention to his own business? He ought to profit thereby.

I am myself a British subject, owe allegiance to neither North nor South, yet I say to all Irishmen, if you join in this struggle at all, forget not the country in which you have homes, prosperous and happy, when the land of your birth could not afford you one. Remember that to be an Irishman in the South is sufficient cause to convict you of any crime, no matter how innocent you may be. 'Tis true I like not the South. I have received too many and saw too many acts of injustice done to speak in its favor. Yet God forbid that I would speak falsely. I regret to say that all I have written falls far short of the reality. Thank God, I am now away from their hands, and, believe me, I will endeavor to keep so.

Hoping soon to hear from you, with warmest regards to your worthy family, whom I hope are well, I am, my valued old friend, ever faithfully yours,