

**Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality;*
Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies,
*North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776, 1921 (excerpt)***

Describing the street-level impact of the decisions made by the Wilmington Committee of Safety, Janet Schaw, a supporter of the Crown, illustrates the extent to which the American Revolution had, by 1775, become a close, personal insurgency, pitting neighbor against neighbor.

Schaw was a young, well-educated Scottish woman who traveled to North Carolina to visit her older brother Robert, the owner of a plantation on the Cape Fear River near Wilmington. She arrived in March of 1775 and while in North Carolina witnessed, among other things, land clearing through controlled burning and the killing of an alligator. More important, she observed a society that was splitting asunder under the stress of revolutionary politics. The decisions of the Wilmington Committee forced men and women along the Cape Fear to take sides. Patriots employed violence and intimidation and, Schaw suggests, even feigned a slave revolt to unite their countrymen in opposition to the British. As the editor of Schaw's journal reminds us, "such contemporary evidence makes us realize that our forefathers, however worthy their object, were engaged in real rebellion and revolution, characterized by the extremes of thought and action that always accompany such movements, and not in the kind of parlour warfare, described in many of our text books."¹

¹ Evangeline Walker Andrews, "Introduction," *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, 1921, electronic edition, Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/schaw/schaw.html>, p. 9.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Schaw's attitude toward the colonial militia?
2. Why, in Schaw's view, are people along the Cape Fear turning against Britain?
3. From the evidence in Schaw's journal, what sort of people remained loyal to the king; what sort joined the patriots?
4. According to Schaw, what tactics did the patriots employ to bring people to their cause?
5. What point does Schaw make by having the colonial officer read Falstaff's speech from *Henry IV*?
6. According to Schaw, what motivates the patriots to renounce allegiance to the crown?
7. How reliable is Schaw's account?

*Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative
of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies,
North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*

Janet Schaw

Field days are now appointed [by local patriots], and every man without distinction ordered to appear under arms and be drilled. Those who will not comply, must fly out of the country, and leave their effects behind them to the mercy of these people, whose kindness is little to be trusted.... [P]oor Bob, my...brother, is very much at a loss how to act, and dares not speak on the subject.

...

Mr Howe [a local patriot leader], who I told you was a candidate for the command of the army here, has got a regiment and Moor [another local patriot leader and member of the Wilmington Committee] is general. My brother has been offered every thing, but has refused every offer, and I tremble for his fate, but any thing rather than join these people.

...

[W]e go to town to see a review of the troops that remain after sending a little army to South Carolina. You at home know nothing of the power of this country, nor will you believe it till you find it with a witness. I yesterday crushed an Alligator with my foot that in six months hence would be able to devour me. Six months ago a very little force would have done here, and even yet a proper exertion would do much towards resettling peace in these Southern provinces, tho' I am far from believing that the case with those further North.

...

We came down in the morning in time for the review, which the heat made as terrible to the spectators as to the soldiers, or what you please to call them. They had certainly fainted under it, had not the constant draughts of grog supported them. Their exercise was that of bush-fighting, but it appeared so confused and so perfectly different from anything I ever saw, I cannot say whether they performed it well or not; but this I know,

that they were heated with rum till capable of committing the most shocking outrages. We stood in the balcony of Doctor Cobham's [mentioned in the Proceedings of the Wilmington Committee] house and they were reviewed on a field mostly covered with what are called here scrubby oaks, which are only a little better than brushwood. They at last however assembled on the plain field, and I must really laugh while I recollect their figures: 2000 men in their shirts and trousers, preceded by a very ill-beat drum and a fiddler, who was also in his shirt with a long sword and a cue at his hair, who played with all his might. They made indeed a most unmartial appearance. But the worst figure there can shoot from behind a bush and kill even a General Wolfe.

Before the review was over, I heard a cry of tar and feather. I was ready to faint at the idea of this dreadful operation. I would have gladly quitted the balcony, but was so much afraid the Victim was one of my friends that I was not able to move, and he indeed proved to be one, tho' in a humble station. For it was Mr. Neilson's poor English groom. You can hardly conceive what I felt when I saw him dragged forward, poor devil, frightened out of his wits. However, at the request of some of the officers, who had been Neilson's friends, his punishment was changed into that of mounting on a table and begging pardon for having smiled at the regiment. He was then drummed and fiddled out of the town, with a strict prohibition of ever being seen in it again.

One might have expected that, tho' I had been imprudent all my life, the present occasion might have inspired me with some degree of caution, and yet I can tell you I had almost incurred the poor groom's fate from my own folly. Several of the officers came up to dine, amongst others Colonel Howe, who with less ceremony than might have been expected from his general politeness stepped into an apartment adjoining the hall and took up a book I had been reading, which he brought open in his hand into the company. I was piqued at his freedom and reproved him with a half compliment to his general good breeding. He owned [admitted] his fault and with much gallantry promised to submit to whatever punishment I would inflict.

You shall only, said I, read aloud a few pages which I will point out, and I am sure you will do Shakespeare justice. He bowed and took the book, but no sooner observed that I had turned up for him that part of Henry the Fourth where Falstaff describes his company, than he colored like Scarlet. I saw he made the application [got the point] instantly; however he read it thro', tho' not with the vivacity he generally speaks; however he recovered himself and coming close up to me, whispered, "You will certainly get yourself tarred and feathered; shall I apply to be executioner? I am going to seal this up. Adieu."

...

After the review... I went into the town, the entry of which I found closed up by a detachment of the soldiers; but as the officer immediately made way for me, I took no further notice of it but advanced to the middle of the street where I found a number of the first people in town standing together, who (to use Milton's phrase) seemed much impassioned. As most of them were my acquaintances, I stopped to speak to them, but they with one voice begged me for heaven's sake to get off the street, making me observe they were prisoners, adding that every avenue of the town was shut up, and that in all human probability some scene would be acted very unfit for me to witness. I could not take the friendly advice, for I became unable to move and absolutely petrified with horror.

Observing however an officer with whom I had just dined, I beckoned him to me. He came, but with no very agreeable look, and on my asking him what was the matter, he presented a paper he had folded in his hand. [Note the Wilmington Committee's resolution of March 6, 1775.] If you will persuade them to sign this they are at liberty, said he, but till then must remain under this guard, as they must suffer the penalties they have justly incurred. "And we will suffer everything," replied one of them, "before we abjure our king, our country and our principles." "This, Ladies," said he turning to me, who was now joined by several Ladies, "is what they call their Test, but by what authority this Gentleman forces it on us, we are yet to learn." "There is my Authority," [said the officer] pointing to the Soldiers with the most insolent air, "dispute it, if you can." Oh Britannia, what are you doing, while your true obedient sons are thus insulted by their unlawful brethren; are they also forgot by their natural parents?

We, the Ladies, adjourned to the house of a Lady who lived in this street and whose husband was indeed at home, but secretly shut up with some ambassadors from the back settlements. on their way to the Gov[ernor] to offer their service, provided he could let them have arms and ammunition, but above all such commissions as might empower them to raise men by proper authority. This I was presently told tho' in the midst of enemies, but the Loyal party are all as one family. Various reasons induced me to stay all Night in the house I was then at, tho' it could afford me no resting place. I wished to know the fate of the poor men who were in such present jeopardy.

...

Rebels, this is the first time I have ventured that word, more than in thought, but to proceed.

The prisoners stood firm to their resolution of not signing the Test, till past two in the morning, tho' every threatening was used to make them comply; at which time a Message from the committee compromised the affair, and they were suffered to retire on their parole to appear next morning before them. This was not a step of mercy or out of regard to the Gentlemen; but they understood that a number of their friends were arming in their defense, and tho' they had kept about 150 ragamuffins [colonial soldiers] still in town, they were not sure even of them; for to the credit of that town be it spoke there are not five men of property and credit in it that are infected by this unfortunate disease [support for anti-British action and independence].

...

A few months ago the task [of eliminating rebellious sentiment] would have been easy; it is still possible, but (God make me a false prophetess) it will not be long so. The inclination of this country is however far from being generally for this work [rebellion]. Indolent and inactive, they have no desire to move, even where their own immediate interest calls them. All they are promised is too distant to interest them. They suffer none of those abuses they are told of and feel their liberty invaded only by the oppressive power of the [Continental] Congress and their Agents, who at this Season are pressing them from their harvest, for they know not what purpose. But tho' they show at first a very great degree of reluctance to go, yet they believe there is no retreat, after they have been once under arms and are convinced that from that moment they fight for their lives and properties, which by that act are both forfeited to their blood-thirsty enemies. You may therefore be assured they will not fail to exert all the activity and courage they are able to muster up, and, once engaged themselves, are willing to draw in others.

It is a most unfortunate circumstance they have got time to inculcate this idea. Three months ago, a very small number had not anything to apprehend; a few troops landing and a general amnesty published would have secured them all at home. For I do not suppose them of such a martial spirit as voluntarily to have joined Cother's standard. At present the martial law stands thus: An officer or committeeman enters a plantation with his posse. The Alternative is proposed: Agree to join us, and your persons and properties are safe. You have a shilling sterling a day; your duty is no more than once a month appearing under Arms at Wilmington, which will prove only a merry-making, where you will have as much grog as you can drink. But if you refuse, we are directly to cut up your corn, shoot your pigs, burn your houses, seize your Negroes, and perhaps tar and feather yourself. Not to choose the first requires more courage than they are possessed of, and I believe this method has seldom failed with the lower sort. No

sooner do they appear under arms on the stated day, than they are harangued by their officers with the implacable cruelty of the king of Great Britain, who has resolved to murder and destroy man, wife and child, and that he has sworn before God and his Parliament that he will not spare one of them; and this those deluded people believe more firmly than their creed, and who is it that is bold enough to venture to undeceive them. The King's proclamation they never saw, but are told it was ordering the Tories [Loyalists] to murder the Whigs [Patriots], and promising every Negro that would murder his Master and family that he should have his Master's plantation. This last Artifice [i.e., lie] they may pay for, as the Negroes have got it amongst them and believe it to be true. Tis ten to one they may try the experiment, and in that case friends and foes will be all one.

I came to town yesterday with an intention of being at church this day, where I was informed there was to be service performed by a very good clergyman. In this however I was disappointed, for I found the whole town in an uproar, and the moment I landed, Mr. Rutherford's negroes were seized and taken into custody till I was ready to return with them. This apparent insult I resented extremely, till going up to Doctor Cobham's, I found my short prophecy in regard to the Negroes was already fulfilled and that an insurrection was hourly expected. There had been a great number of them discovered in the adjoining woods the night before, most of them with arms, and a fellow belonging to Doctor Cobham was actually killed. All parties are now united against the common enemies. Every man is in arms and the patrols [posses] going thro' all the town and searching every Negro's house to see they are all at home by nine at night. But what is most provoking, every mouth male and female is opened against Britain, her King and their abettors — here called the Tories — tho' the poor Tories are likely to suffer, at least as much as any of them, and who were as ready to give their assistance to quell them as any independents amongst them. But whatever way this end, it will confirm the report I formerly mentioned to you past all contradiction.

...

After a sleepless night, to which the mosquitoes contributed more than my fears of the Negroes, I am sat down by the first peep of day to inform you of what further happened yesterday. I told you I was going to sup [dine] at the hill, which is at the other extremity of the town. Here I found the affair of the Negroes justly attributed to the cause I formerly mentioned, viz. [that is] that of falsifying the King's proclamation, for tho' neither they nor I had seen it, we were convinced it was in a style the reverse of what was given out. Our time passed so agreeably that it was now too late to venture so far without some male protector, and as all the Negroes were locked up, I therefore waited

till the Midnight patrol arrived, the commander of which was a Tory [Loyalist] and my particular acquaintance. Under his protection therefore I marched off at the head of the party stopping at the different houses in our way to examine if the Negroes were at home. For God's sake! Draw a picture of your friend in this situation and see if 'tis possible to know me. Oh! I shall make a glorious knapsack-bearer. You have formed a very wrong idea of my delicacy; I find I can put it on and off like any piece of dress. But to proceed with my Midnight march. While the men went into the houses, I stayed without with the commander of the party, who took that opportunity to assure me, he believed the whole was a trick intended in the first place to inflame the minds of the populace, and in the next place to get those who had not before taken up arms to do it now and form an association for the safety of the town. What further design [plan] they had, he could not tell, but made not the least doubt it was for some sinister purpose this farce was carried on. That poor Cobham had lost a valuable slave, and the poor fellow his life without the least reason, he was certain; for that it was a fact well known to almost everybody that he met a Mistress every night in the opposite wood, and that the wench being kept by her Master, was forced to carry on the intrigue with her black lover with great secrecy, which was the reason the fellow was so anxious to conceal himself; that the very man who shot him knew this, and had watched him. My hypothesis is however that the Negroes will revolt. I bade my friend good night and found Mrs. Cobham in a terrible huff from the idea I was not to come back that night. She is so much affected by the fate of her Negro that she is almost as great a Tory as her husband, which was not lately the case. But here comes the Coffee, farewell.