

Tarheel Infidel In the Holy City

Stories and a novella
by a Charleston interloper

Richard Ellett Mullin

Contents

Introduction	i
Flora and Fauna of the Charlotte Bird Garden	1
Dog People	41
Health and Happiness	47
Raconteur	57
The Buhrstone Quarry	67
The Vineyard (a novella set in the surrounding countryside)	90
The June Cruise	150
The Home School	170
June South of Broad (a story in verse)	182
Falling Objects	193
Postscript — Under the Influence of Other Writers	215
Homage Daedalus	226

Introduction

Always in the thrall of other writers, in this introduction I have to admit I find myself sounding as much as I dare like a writer I admire greatly—sharing personal feelings, wearing my heart on my sleeve like Joan Didion. Born in Sacramento, her family tree runs back five generations in California and I'm particularly fond of her memoir, *Where I Was From*. It's about the lost California. But why apologize, Joan Didion has left her mark on me just like a lot of other writers have.

Having lived in Charleston, South Carolina for the last twenty years, which in most places is a pretty long time, I suppose this book's title could have been, *Where I Wasn't From*. Because you do not just show up in Charleston and become a Charlestonian. In a place that dates its founding to 1670 things aren't as easy as that. And trying too hard to fit in is frowned upon here anyway. Better to be honest about your origins. So, I have remained steadfast, true to myself. A twenty-year Tarheel sojourner. So why Charleston? Why South Carolina?

Somewhere along the way South Carolina became an obsession of mine. I believe the seeds were sown early, in the early 60's, when South Carolina still preserved a deep regionality. It offered some unique experiences for a kid. One of them was hearing Gullah. On Sundays, a group of black ladies came up from Georgetown to help clean and change linens in the hotels and motels of Myrtle Beach, including at my grandparents' weekly rental apartments on 73rd Avenue. Help was scarce in Myrtle Beach and my grandmother, Gran, needed these ladies. But she was a Virginian, and to her ear, their Lowcountry babbling was blasphemous. She couldn't let go of it, the suspicion that they were hiding secrets or hatching some kind of conspiracy.

I hate to admit it, but my Virginia-born Gran might have been the midcentury equivalent of the antebellum white folks who inhabited Charleston, equally suspicious about what was going on within the majority black population in the prosperous coastal city. In 1822 their suspicions culminated in chasing down and hanging Denmark Vesey, Gullah Jack Pritchard, and thirty-three men for planning what became known in Charleston forever thereafter as, "the rising." As it happened, Vesey was a free black man, having paid the price of his own manumission with \$600 out of the sizable sum of \$1,500 he had won when the East Bay Street Lottery wheel of fortune landed on his number. His "fortunate ticket" cost him six dollars. Did I mention that Charleston, South Carolina is a fascinating place? With a deeply nuanced history.

Around Thanksgiving every year my family would make a trek from Myrtle Beach to Charleston to buy Christmas gifts at Sam Solomon's Wholesale. On one trip we stopped to visit Clarke Willcox at The Hermitage in Murrells Inlet. Miraculously, I still have his memoir in my collection. *Musings of a Hermit with Historical Sketches of the Waccamaw Neck* was published in 1966 when I was seven years old. Under the giant oak tree in the front yard of The Hermitage I recall Mr. Willcox telling the story of Alice Belin Flagg, a sixteen-year-old Charleston debutante, newly betrothed, killed by a fever in 1849. As the legend went, Alice's apparition, dressed in her white Saint Cecilia ball gown, floated up the steps of the Hermitage, searching for the engagement ring she had lost during her febrile delirium. After Mr. Willcox's ghost story, my parents made sure we dropped by the churchyard of All Saints Pawleys Island, where in the cemetery, a flat marble slab is inscribed with one word—ALICE.

Back in Myrtle Beach, every afternoon Gran's mahogany coffee table always formed the center of conversation for friends, neighbors, and relatives. That table was the staging platform for highballs in sweaty tumblers, homemade bene seed biscuits, and all sorts of canapes on dainty plates. After supper that same little table would see conversation start up again over slices of pound cake, chess pie, and frosty glasses of sherbet.

And on that low table, there was a copy of *Swamp Fox, The Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* by Robert D. Bass. On the dust cover, Marion, the diminutive French Huguenot, is pictured on his blaze-faced horse. And that book is my second South Carolina literary miracle. Published in January 1959, the month and year I was born, I have managed to keep it through all the moves and relocations that are part of a contemporary American life.

As the years passed by, I spent many years away from South Carolina. Going to school, working, starting a family. Then by chance South Carolina came back into my life. It started with a striper fishing trip on Lake Moultrie with guide June English about 1989. The fishing was great but the thing I remember most is the setting. At that time Russell Blackmon owned Black's Landing and although I have never been back to that storied fish camp, my mental image of it is as clear as yesterday. On the way into the dining room an entire space was dedicated to a nature diorama with a taxidermy cast of pie-bald does, stuffed wild turkeys, bobcats, and racoons. And in the painted mural backdrop, in the shade of trees festooned with Spanish Moss, a small but distinguished eighteenth century military figure was seated on horseback. But if you paused to

look closely, the face of the figure on horseback was Russell Blackmon's. A direct descendent of the *Swamp Fox*, Russell wanted everyone to know it.

Seeing Russell Blackmon there on horseback impressed me greatly that night. Despite the fact he was not nearly as handsome as the “ragged little guerrilla”¹ on the dustcover of my grandmother's coffee table book.

But in that quirky nature diorama, I could see South Carolina was indeed unique, and that uniqueness made me want to become part of life in South Carolina. All told it took about ten more years before the stars came into alignment, but in 2000 the opportunity finally came to leave Charlotte to move to Charleston. So, we've been here ever since.

In 2019, Charleston had 89 flood events on 76 different days, far higher than the prior record of 58 events in 2015². The sea level in Charleston Harbor has risen by a foot in the last eighty years alone. Even with the help of the Dutch³, Charleston will deal with flooding for many years to come. Simply put, the old peninsula city faces a future of inundation. Dr. Orrin Pilkey's⁴ oft-stated solution for coastal communities, retreat to higher ground, is not an option for a historic city like Charleston, much of it built on filled creeks and marsh.

We were fortunate to come as a family to Charleston at a time when we enjoyed a nice reception. I will always appreciate the early hospitality of the Smythe brothers, George and David, of René Ravenel, Bill Marshall and many others. My wife Janice says our two kids would not have been invited to join the Charleston Cotillion without the kindness of Leigh Smith. To think they might have missed that time-honored experience lead by Emily Whipple makes me realize how blessed we were by circumstance and timing. I came here intending to build a boat to teach my kids to sail on Charleston Harbor. That never happened, but what happened was much better. Miss Whipple taught our kids to dance at the historic S.C. Society Hall.

I found myself working on this introduction a day or so after Martin Luther King's birthday. As part of the annual commemoration Dr. King was quoted on public television, the

¹ *Swamp Fox – The Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* by Robert D. Bass. Prologue, Pg. 3.

² “Charleston and the South Carolina coast flooded record 89 times in 2019” *Post and Courier*, Jan 3, 2020 (updated Jan. 14). Bo Peterson and Mikaela Porter.

³ Dutch Dialogues Charleston Colloquium, May 2019. Collaborative effort bringing together national and international water experts working alongside Charleston's local teams to conceptualize a “Living With Water” future. Organized by Historic Charleston Foundation and the City of Charleston.

⁴ Dr. Orrin H. Pilkey, American Professor Emeritus of Earth and Ocean Sciences, Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University and Founder and Director Emeritus of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines, Western Carolina University.

familiar quote President Obama frequently used, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That quote left me thinking tangentially of similar words I could use to summarize my own observation...*The arc of the cultural universe is long, but it bends toward homogenization.*

Yvonne Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, said as much, “No matter where you go, there’s this creeping monoculture. People in yurts in Mongolia watching Baywatch on television. Pizza Huts in Santiago, where there used to be little empanada shops.”⁵ And that was before the world wide web and hashtags. Before Facebook, Instagram and Zoom. So much of Charleston, like everywhere else, has changed with the march of time and technology. So, some of the best of it is viewed looking back.

I guess the point is this. With all the things going on in the world it isn’t so easy for one man to straighten the arc of the universe. But what I can do is look back at what I was served on my own Charleston dinner plate and I can be thankful for it. Because it turned out to be a pretty good plateful. The stories here are intimate. Yes, they are fictional. But how could they not be informed by my lived experience? Together they form my testimony and my thanksgiving.

In the year 2000 we came here from off. And we were lucky to get here when we did. To see some of it like it was.

⁵ *Outside Magazine*, January 1997. “He’s Not Worthy – A Portrait of a Millionaire at a Crux” by Craig Vetter