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THE “STAR OF THE WEST”:
SOUTH CAROLINA, JANUARY 1861

Catherine Edmondston:
Diary, January 9–13, 1861

On December 28, 1860, three commissioners from South Carolina met with President Buchanan and demanded the evacuation of Fort Sumter. At the insistence of Jeremiah Black, who had replaced Lewis Cass as secretary of state earlier in the month, the President rejected their demands in a strongly worded reply drafted by Black and Edwin Stanton, the new attorney general. Buchanan then approved a plan to supply and reinforce the fort, and on January 5, 1861, the chartered steamer *Star of the West* sailed from New York with two hundred soldiers on board. The ship reached Charleston on January 9 but safely retreated after being fired upon. Lacking instructions, Major Anderson did not order the guns at Fort Sumter to open fire. Catherine Edmondston and her husband were visiting his brother Lawrence at his house overlooking Charleston harbor when the *Star of the West* arrived.

JANUARY 9, 1861

On the morning of the 9th as we were dressing we suddenly heard the report of a heavy gun! followed by another! and another! A few moments sufficed to collect us all out in the front of the house where we had a fine view of Sumter, Moultrie & the Channel, and there sad to relate, steaming up the channel was a vessel with the US Flag flying at her peak! The expected re-inforcements for Sumter doubtless! Boom! Another cannon from the shore Batteries on Morris Island. “Is she struck?” No! On she comes! Another! and another, whilst Sumter opens her Port Holes and slowly runs out her cannon, prepared for instant action. Now a heavy gun from Fort Moultrie! Will Sumter respond? No! Not yet! Another from Moultrie! How with Sumter now? Still silent! The vessel turns slowly. Is she struck? No one can tell, but slowly, reluctantly as it were, almost with a baffled look, the Steamer retreats down the channel.

Thank God! Every one ejaculates! But what think we of the treacherous Government who whilst pretending to treat, assuring its own Cabinet & the nation that no re-inforcements should be sent, deliberately breaks faith and attempts it? I blush for my country! Would that the North was not our exponent! Eleven guns in all were fired. Good God! Is this true? Is this the beginning of the Civil War of which we have heard so much, was the thought which sprung into my mind. And as I afterwards sat at Lawrence's breakfast table and looked from the luxurious & peaceful family scene in doors, across the still smooth water smiling in the beauty of the crisp morning air, to Sumter, standing stern, silent, sullen, defiant as it were, bristling with cannon, whilst a light smoke stealing up from her Battlements told that they were heating shot, ready for instant action, & thought how in an instant it could all be changed, that horror & ruin might take the place of peace and comfort, never did I feel so vividly the full force & beauty of the Collect for Peace in our Prayer book. Never did I utter it so fervently, never desire it so earnestly!

The same day we went back to the city & found it full of flying rumours. Men in Uniform filling the streets, singly and in squads, all wending their way to East Bay where steamers were firing up & leaving with re-inforcements, munitions of War & supplies for Pinckney, Moultrie & the Batteries below on Morris Island. Left on the same day for Raleigh.

JANUARY 10, 1861

Arrived on the morning of the 10th carrying with us the news of the repulse of the "Star of the West"—for so was the steamer called—& Mr Buchanan's treachery. Every where it was received with surprised dismay, the feeling almost universally being to leave SC to herself, give her her Fort if she required it, but deny her all the benefits of the Government, refuse her all Postal intercourse etc. Predictions were freely made that in that event, in a year at most she would if Mr Lincoln's government should be an impartial one, petition to return into the Union. She met but few sympathizers, but Mr Miller is the only man whom I have yet seen who upholds the action of the Government. Margaret's exclamation when she heard it was "Why Kate, you have been seeing History!"

Found Annie D at home, her Mother having become uneasy at last begged her father to go for her. I am glad of it, as a grave cause of uneasiness is thus removed from their minds. Frank Coffin and John Devereux struck up a friendship to which David's & Jonathan's was but a joke. The other children all well and already inflamed against the Yankees & "old Lincoln." The North is sowing the wind; see that ere the next generation she does not reap the Whirlwind!

JANUARY 13, 1861

Got home safely to Looking Glass on Sunday the 13th. My cough much better, from a practice recommended me by Dr Coffin of "swabbing out" my throat with a sponge and a weak solution of Caustic. Saw Mrs Mills at Mt Pleasant—told me she had been cured of her Asthma by Iodide of Potassa. Made a note for Dolly's benefit.

Found Father much excited against SC—cannot say enough of the folly of her conduct. It almost frightened me to hear him. I hope he will not say so much to Mr Edmondston. I do not think he does her full justice. For instance he thinks it beneath their pretensions to chivalry, ungenerous & unhand-some in fact, that they fired one shot at the Star of the West after she turned to retreat! I do not agree with him, & tho' this "Gentlemen of the English Guards fire . . . we never fire first!" may be very grand—yet it is too high strung for me! I never before heard of an action in which the firing ceased until the Flag was hauled down.

We went on as usual all the month of Jan. Killed Hogs, attended to house hold matters, Planted garden seed, Rode, walked, went to Hascosea, wrote letters, Read my new books—in short enjoyed ourselves in our usual way, the only draw back being the difference of feeling on Political matters between ourselves & father. As for Mama & Susan they are really bitter in their expressions, & Susan talked more non-sense about her "devotion to the Flag" than I ever thought I should hear a sensible woman like her utter! Altogether it was rather uncomfortable at times being with them.

Brother had a hearty laugh on me. He declared that he thought that the war would begin then & there between Mama & myself, because when I said that SC & Va had both a

right to their Forts Sumter & Monro, & that when they reclaimed them the Government ought to restore them, she became personal, called me "Catherine Edmondston!" told me that I had been brought up by honest people, & that she was surprised that I should be guilty of uttering such dishonourable & dishonest sentiments, & more to the same purpose. I made some retort & was going on when fortunately I remembered my Mother's last injunction & checked myself. But I was very indignant! What a pity that politics will intrude into private life!