

"Can the very Spirit of Freedom Die out?" ^[1]

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Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston was the daughter of a wealthy eastern North Carolina planter. In 1846 she married Patrick Muir Edmondston, a South Carolinian, and they eventually settled on a plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina, where they were living in 1860. In June of that year she began a journal in which she recorded her thoughts and observations of current events. Edmondston was a staunch supporter of secession before the war, and remained a supporter of the Confederacy throughout the war.

Below is an excerpt from Edmondston's journal, written on May 7, 1865, weeks after the final battle and Confederate surrender of the Civil War.

May 7, 1865

What use is there in my writing this record? What profit, what pleasure, do I find in it? None! none! yet altho it is an actual pain to me I continue it from mere force of habit. We are crushed! subjugated ^[2] and I fear, O how I fear, conquered, & what is to me the saddest part, our people do not feel it as they ought — like men who have lost their Liberty. The cup has not to them the full bitterness which a once free people ought to find in the draught held to them by a Victor's hand. They accept the situation tacitly ^[3], fold their hands, & say "resistance is vain," "we have done all that men could do," we are outnumbered, over-run, & have not the where withal to set an army in the field. Their once high spirit, their stern resolve, seems dead within them! "The War is over" & that fact seems to console them. O My God, can the very spirit of Freedom die out thus & leave not a trace behind it? Are the lives laid down in its defence to be but as water spilled on the ground? Is the very memory of one dead to vanish from our minds? One would think so from the conduct of those around us. On Thursday, on our way out to Hascosea, we met crowds of people, almost the whole neighborhood it seemed to me, on their way to a Pic Nic at Hills Mill. The usual preparations for dancing had been made & there they spent the day feasting, dancing, fishing, & merry making in their old familiar way. It seems almost like dancing over their husband's, brothers, & sons graves. Do they realize what they do, or are they stupefied ^[4] by the calamity ^[5] which has befallen them & say "let us eat & drink for tomorrow we die." O my Country, my Country, I look forward to the future with bitter forebodings ^[6] when I see your children thus forgetful of your and their own honour, of their own blood!

Rumours innumerable of the Yankee plans, the Yankee intentions towards us. One is that they have deposed our Governor Vance & ordered a new election to fill his Chair; another that Schofield (now in command in Raleigh, Sherman having gone to Charleston) has issued an Edict of Emancipation to our Slaves & the oath of Allegiance to the U S is shortly to be enforced upon every one of us -- men, women, & children. Every one is discussing it -- & sad to say I have not heard a dissentient voice, or rather a resistant voice. All proclaim it illegal, cruel, & tyrannous but say that they are not free agents & cannot help themselves.

Came home from Hascosea last night & found a note from Father telling us that negroes with Yankee papers were circulating amongst ours, that Lorenzo Dow whom he sold more than a year since for intending to run off to the enemy, had returned, that most of the Burgwyn negroes had gone to the Yankees, & what was good news, he was in immediate expectation of seeing Brother, having heard of him at Mr Long's the night before. He sent us a New York Herald, so intensely Yankee, so full of bragg, bluster, & triumph that it made me sick to glance over it. Read it I did not. The only interest it possessed for me was to see if there was aught of our President in it & what fate their clemency meets to our unhappy country, but naught met my eyes but low, bombastic threats against us. England, France, & I believe the rest of the habitable globe, so inflated are they with their victory!

May 8, 1865

Yesterday came Sue & Rachel with the astounding news that brother had arrived & had gone to Montrose with the intention of freeing his negroes & soon after came Messrs Gilliam & W Smith & announced that he had done so & that father was to follow suit this afternoon. I could not understand it. It seemed inexplicable to me & suicidal in the last degree. Schofield has, it is true, issued such an order, but so has his chief, Lincoln, three years ago & if Lincoln's Edict has not the force of Law, I do not see how Schofield's can. Passed a most anxious afternoon & night, Mr E and I discussing the fact & viewing it in every point of view, as it bears upon our future life, upon our plans, & our property & talking over our fears for the terrible days which seem to be coming upon us, our Country, Mr Davis, & all manner of sorrowful & harrowing subjects.

This morning came father & told us to our relief that both the girls & the gentlemen were mistaken, that brother & himself had merely announced to their negroes that Mr Schofield said they were free, but that they (their masters) did not believe they were, but that if any of them wished to go away and try their freedom to go now -- at once & to stay away, that their places could be supplied, but that in the fall when their own rights & those of the negroes were defined & settled there

would be ample time to talk of it & that if they were then free that they should be paid for their labour out of this year's crop. In this last clause I think they made a mistake. Make no promises, so as to have none to break, is a good rule in dealing with both children and negroes & negroes are but ignorant children at best, but I feel vastly relieved that they have not endorsed Messrs Lincoln & Schofield Edict &, as Hope springs eternal in the human breast, begin to think I have taken a large share of suffering causelessly & uselessly. The Lord reigneth! & out of this seeming terrible ill, good may yet result, good of which we at present dream not ...

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[Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston](#) ^[7]

[Civil War](#) ^[8]

[Halifax County](#) ^[9]

[history](#) ^[10]

[North Carolina](#) ^[11]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[12]

[Page](#) ^[13]

[Students](#) ^[14]

[Teachers](#) ^[15]

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Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston

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[1] <https://ncpedia.org/anchor/can-very-spirit-freedom-die>

[2] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/subjugate>

[3] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/tacitly>

[4] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/stupefy>

[5] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/calamity>

[6] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/foreboding>

[7] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/catherine-anne>

[8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/civil-war>

[9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/halifax-county>

[10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history>

[11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-5>

[12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6>

[13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page>

- [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/students>
- [15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/teachers>
- [16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/all-rights>
- [17] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/learn-nc>
- [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/edmondston-catherine>
- [19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/north-carolinians-debate>