

A Righteous Aim: Emma LeConte Furman's 1918 Diary

Edited by

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WHILE fearful battles raged in France and the Low Countries during the final months of World War I, Americans on the homefront faced other problems brought on by the involvement of their country in that awful conflict. Historians have given us detailed and specific accounts of the former, but they have offered us little insight into the latter. Our knowledge of the impressions and difficulties faced by ordinary Americans has thus been general and vague, wanting in details of the personal privations, patriotic endeavors, and daily anxieties which characterized the "John and Jane Does" of "Average City," America. Until historians fill that gap in our knowledge, however, we may turn to other sources for a glimpse into the lives of men and women as they watched and waited and sacrificed and suffered through the days, weeks, and months of American involvement in the "war to end wars."

One such source has been recently brought to light. It is the 1918 diary of Emma LeConte Furman, a resident of Macon, Georgia. Born in 1847, Mrs. Furman was the oldest child of Joseph and Caroline Elizabeth Nisbet LeConte. Her father became one of America's leading scientists, having an illustrious career as a professor at the Universities of Georgia, South Carolina, and California, respectively. A precocious child, Emma excelled as a student of French, literature, and botany. In 1869 she married Farish Carter Furman, and the young couple settled on the Furman farm near Milledgeville. A prodigious and highly articulate writer of journals, letters, and genealogical accounts, she bequeathed her materials to her descendants. Among her writings is the 1918 journal in which is recorded her observations on military events, the Germans, and affairs on the homefront,

especially in the city of Macon, where she had moved several years before the war.

Mrs. Furman's diary also reveals the effects of propaganda upon the American populace. Although German leaders belatedly recognized the importance of propaganda in the war effort, they never quite achieved the success gained through the more effective and pervasive propagandistic machinery established in Great Britain, France, and the United States during the years of the first great world-wide conflict.¹ But it must be noted that the seventy-year-old Macon resident was no dupe—far from it! Emma Furman was an astute observer of events, and she did not always drink the full glass of controlled communication, as her initial entry clearly indicates. Nevertheless, like other Americans, she had no more reliable sources than those of the daily newspaper, popular magazines, government communiques, and information disseminated through public gatherings where Allied soldiers and auxiliary personnel told their tales.

But Mrs. Furman's diary represents much more than a picture of the propaganda promulgated in 1918; it also provides a first-hand account of the patriotic fervor of American women and their efforts in Red Cross work, and it reveals their apprehensions and their adjustments to a life of rationed foodstuffs and fuel shortages. Contrary to old notions of middle-class Southern women as passive homebodies with hands untainted by hard work and minds unspoiled by pragmatic business and economic concerns, many a Southern female was actively engaged in the world of work. Mrs. Furman, in spite of her cultural upbringing as a typical lady of leisure and social gaiety, was no stranger to hard work. Indeed, following the untimely death of her husband in 1883, she operated the family farm until after the turn of the century. As her diary reveals, she and other Southern women were active participants in the movements and events of the early twentieth century. Her diary thus sheds light upon the important role of women in her time. While some of the stereotypic image remained, the Southern female had finally

Crowd so great he did not succeed in getting it until after supper. Bess . . . is scraping up the coal dust accumulations in the coal house and bought two loads of wood. We are also concerned about a threatened epidemic of meningitis and parents are considering taking children from school. Health authorities have already forbidden children to attend. . . .

January 9th. Wednesday . . . Lloyd George's speech yesterday and Wilson's today speak the same thing. N[icholas] thinks Wilson should not insist on the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine, but it seems to me if this country is going into the war on high grounds of justice that is one of the first wrongs to be righted. Peace negotiations are renewed between Russia and Germany. The first notice of a Columbus boy dead in France from gun shot wounds brings the tragedy nearer to us. . . .⁵

January 10th. Thursday . . . Weather conditions consistently cold. Still no coal and we have been shivering over wood & coal dust fires. Bess, on my reading from the morning paper that the poor could get a sack of coal for \$1.00 if they would come for it . . . got some, which has been a great comfort today—good lump coal. . . .

January 11th. Friday . . . Grand news for the Suffrage Cause—Yesterday the National Amendment passed the House of Representatives!⁶ Bess is quite jubilant.

January 12th. Saturday . . . It is very cold. . . . The forecast is for a further drop tonight. I have kept close to my chimney corner all day. . . .

January 13th. Sunday . . . Last night was a bitter night—I got between the blankets and put a flannel sacque over my gown and slept comfortably. No one went out this morning. The sun shone bright, but with the fuel situation nobody felt like venturing. It is difficult to keep warm even by the fire. . . .

January 17th. Thursday . . . The coal situation grows more serious. We are burning wood & a little coal dust from under the coal house floor. This morning brings the news that our intelligent government proposes to conserve fuel by making Monday a holiday as well a[s] Sunday & shutting down all business & work with few exceptions—Of all times when work is most needed. N[icholas] said at dinner time that it is raising a howl all over the land—especially from Labour. It is certainly a misfortune that the fool Democratic party should be in control at such a critical time as

of trouble in both Austria & Germany. It is hard to know what to believe. . . .

February 5th. Tuesday . . . Spent the morning at the Red Cross—the Vineville Circle—and worked quite steadily.⁹ We have a group of Methodist women who talk a great deal of their Sunday School—Missionary Society & W.C.T.U. work. As I am not up on these topics I can put all my energy in my work. . . .

February 8th. Friday . . . Our Red Cross Class was asked to work at Headquarters this morning and Mrs. [R. L.] McKenney took Bess & me down in her car. The big room was very full, It was quite an inspiration to see so many women at work. A couple of Bicycle-Corps women came in uniform and one of them addressed us on the work of that organization. . . .

February 11th. Monday . . . The news this afternoon is very depressing. Yesterday Ukraine made peace & alliance with Germany—and today Russia declares peace and the demobilization of her armies. Of course it seemed inevitable but yet it is very hard and seems to make the war indefinite. It looks as if this country would have to bear the chief burden of it at last. It is a most gloomy outlook however it is to end. . . .

February 13th. Wednesday . . . Yesterday's war news confirmed that of the evening before. Everyone is much discouraged. The Republican Committee has hastened to follow suit to the Democratic Senate Committee and endorses equal suffrage. It looks as if it would go thro' the Senate all right. Bess is quite jubilant. . . .

February 16th. Saturday . . . Bess went with Nicholas last night to hear Russell (Socialist) speak.¹⁰ He very strongly showed that the war is democracy against autocracy and that the burden of winning it is on this country. It is a terrible outlook and we can not see how it will end. But it will end right we know even if the powers of darkness seem to triumph. . . .

February 28th. Thursday . . . There is little to note in the war news. Since the Russians submitted to the Hun peace terms the latter continue their invasion and I suppose will soon be in possession of Petrograd.¹¹ Nothing doing on the Western front. Now the Japs are asking to come in on Siberia to save the supplies at Vladivostok from falling into the hands of the Huns. . . .¹²

March 31st. Sunday . . . The papers bring us the last piece of German

April 14th. Sunday . . . The war news continues very depressing. The [German] drive continues and the Allies still retreating.

April 15th. Monday . . . [I] went down to work at the Red Cross with Bess. Kate went with us. They will work at night until this order is filled. . . . I believe the South is at last beginning to realize the seriousness of the war and greater emphasis is being laid on prayer. There are union prayer meetings Sunday afternoons at the Auditorium and daily at the Macon theatre at noon.

April 19th. Friday . . . The evening papers brought us more cheering news from the front. The allies are holding their line and even pushing back the Germans. It is a blessed thing to feel a bit encouraged.

April 23rd. Tuesday . . . Very little news from the front—fighting, fighting, all the time, with varying gains on either side.

April 24th. Wednesday . . . The everlasting "Flu Flu" is over at last, to the great relief of the mothers and, I guess, the children also. . . . I bought a ticket for the matinée to help the Red Cross. . . . Bess & Kate went to the night performance.¹⁷

May 1st. Wednesday . . . The news gets better each day. The only thing the Germans have gained is Kemmel Hill [in Belgium]. Poor Little Hollan[d] is finding it harder & harder to preserve her neutrality and all sorts of wild rumors come from Germany.

May 5th. Sunday . . . That the strength of the Germans is the definiteness of their evil aim, the weakness of the allies their lack of aim save only that of defeating the Germans in their aim. If only we had a righteous aim . . . a common purpose, the war would soon end. We need to find out on our knees, to find out what is God's purpose for us and realize it.

May 8th. Wednesday . . . The English are having a political mess with the cabinet. There is talk of ousting Lloyd George. I haven't much opinion of George since his appointment of the Bp. [Bishop] of Hereford, but Nicholas says fears are expressed that it is a plan to pull England out of the war and would mean a compromise peace. . . .¹⁸

May 12th. Sunday . . . The war news the last days has been quite cheering. At least the great German offensive has failed thus far in its object.

May 24th. Saturday . . . I went out with them [Bess and Nicholas?]

news of Hindenburg's death seems to be confirmed. An apoplectic stroke some time ago.²¹

July 18th. Thursday . . . At last we have headlines of a drive by [the French Commander] Foch! It is indeed refreshing. O, if this might only result in the collapse of Germany in France—the prayer that has been with us for so long that the invader might be driven out of the lands he has desolated & into his own territory, be answered at last!. . . .

July 26th. Friday . . . Worked with Bess at the Red Cross in Vineville—23 women working besides Bess directing. I left after 2½ hours work—11:30 [a.m.]. Bess said when she returned at 1 [o'clock] that they finished up 600 wipes. She also brought back as one of the bits of gossip that Mrs. J. . . N. . . had signed a card for sugar for preserving & got 25 lbs., then gave a party to her daughter—cake, ice cream & sweets galore, which being noised around she was visited by authority and ordered to show the preserves or the sugar. Not being able to do either [she] was put under a \$300 bond. The sugar allowance after Aug. 1st is reduced from 3 lbs. to 2 lbs. a month per member of family. . . .

July 30th. Tuesday . . . There was no work at the Red Cross room this morning—all Macon having run out of material. . . . The Germans have got safely out of the trap. It was too much to hope they would not—but at least the drive on Paris is balked. . . . Meantime the American force is pouring in. The Germans still proclaim their readiness to make “an honourable peace”—i.e. give them practical victory. The only peace can be made when they return to their own domains and make a reparation for their wanton wrongs.

July 31st. Wednesday . . . The Germans are making their stand and the fighting is very severe. The Rainbow Division in which are many Macon boys, is at Fère-en-Tardenois. James LeConte's son Louis is among those killed in action in today's casualty list.²²

August 3rd. Saturday . . . We had an Extra last night with great headlines showing unexpected advances of the Allies. We went to bed much elated. Wilson will take a hand with the Japs in Siberia helping the Czecho-Slovaks.

August 5th. Monday . . . I returned thanks in the prayer meeting for the victories of the past two weeks. It now looks as if the Germans would retire north of the Aisne. They have also been pressed back on the English line. There was to be a grand cele-

1912 and for U.S. senator in 1914. The *Macon Telegraph*, 16 February 1918, reported a large turnout at the city auditorium for Russell's speech.

¹¹Although the Bolsheviks had been dickered for peace with the Germans, they had forestalled, hoping for a more lenient treaty. The Germans thus resumed the war against the Russians in late February. On 3 March 1918, Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, conceding large segments of territory to Germany.

¹²The Allies had already begun to intervene in Russian affairs, and the Japanese had landed troops at Vladivostok several months earlier.

¹³German military leaders had begun a massive offensive on the Western front on 21 March 1918. Initially successful, German forces pushed the Allies back on a forty-mile front, but Paris itself, while bombarded from a distance, was not severely threatened.

¹⁴Dr. Esther Lovejoy was a physician and officer in the Red Cross.

¹⁵The full effects of Allied propaganda are evident here. The "Huns," epitomized as barbarians and rapists, were by now clearly pictured as the miscreants who had not only started the war but were also, in the face of their probable defeat, already laying plans for a future war.

¹⁶The avenue takes its name from Pio Nono College, an erstwhile Jesuit institution established in 1874 during the reign of Pope Pius IX.

¹⁷"Flu-Flu, the Land of Fun" was an extravaganza that included a cast of some 500 Macon residents. Staged at the Grand Theatre, the patriotic play, sponsored by a local D.A.R. chapter, was intended to raise funds for war benefits.

¹⁸The British Prime Minister had been accused of making false statements regarding military operations, but the charges proved to be a straw in the wind by his political opponents, and Lloyd George was not only exonerated but also won a handsome vote of confidence. Mrs. Furman seems to have disliked George because he selected the Bishop of Hereford from a faction of the Anglican Church to which she was opposed. The prime minister held the power of appointment of bishops and archbishops in the Church of England at the time. As a devout Episcopalian, Mrs. Furman was intensely interested in the matter, and she obviously favored another ecclesiastical group.

¹⁹Captain Henry Lee Jewett Williams, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Georgia, Rhodes Scholar, and Professor of New Testament Greek at the University of the South prior to his commission. His father, Dr. Howard Williams, was a prominent physician in Macon, and his wife was the daughter of David Barrow, Chancellor of the University of Georgia.

²⁰Czech forces, who had seized control of the Trans-Siberian Railway, supported local anti-Bolsheviks in establishing an autonomous Siberian republic.

²¹The report proved to be false, of course, and the field marshal lived on to become President of the Weimar Republic. He died in 1934, at age eighty-seven, after the Nazis had come to power in Germany.

²²Lt. William Louis LeConte, son of James A. LeConte, of Atlanta, was actually killed in action in France on 19 July 1918, but, as the published casualty lists often ran many days late, his death was not made known until this time. He was a cousin of Mrs. Furman.

²³This is probably Saint Marys, the southeastern coastal town in Camden County, Georgia.

²⁴The diary is currently in possession of Mrs. Furman's great-granddaughter, Carolyn Shaw McMillan, of St. Simons Island, Georgia. It first came to my attention through the generosity of the late Mrs. Emma Talley Shaw, to whom I am greatly indebted for permission to publish extracts from it.