THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ELIZABETH ALLSTON PRINGLE

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Elizabeth Allston Pringle was born in 1845 at Pawleys Island, South Carolina, and spent most of her early life on Chicora Wood plantation, on the Great PeeDee River. Her father, Robert Francis Withers Allston, owned many plantations in the Georgetown-Winyah Bay area, but Chicora Wood was the one the family called home. He was Governor of South Carolina from 1856-1858. The family lived in Charleston, too, alternating their time between city and country as so many other low-country families did during this period before the War. Her youth and girlhood, one would think, did not prepare her for the life she would find herself living. Her writings, however, especially her diaries which span her lifetime, show to us a woman, changing, developing strength, learning fortitude, and growing in courage.

Mrs. Pringle's best known book is probably *A Woman Rice Planter*, which was published in 1913 by Macmillan under the pseudonym of Patience Pennington. This book grew out of letters she published in the New York *Sun* from 1903-1912. She dedicates her first book to the memory of her father "to whose example of self-control and Christian fortitude, I owe the power to live my life independent of externals . . . . " In her family memoir, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, finished just before her death when she was 76 years old, she writes that her father was "the only person in the world in whom I had absolute faith and confidence. I had never seen him unjust or hasty in his judgment of a person . . . . .Never a sign of self-indulgence, or indolence, or selfishness."

Her father died in 1864, and her mother continued to manage the plantations (what **could** be managed and what there was left to manage) from their refuge in Society Hill. Elizabeth Allston was a girl of sixteen at the beginning of the War, and learned, as did many other young Southern girls, to weave, to knit, to make soap, and to live primarily by what they could produce from the land themselves. She continued to keep a diary, and in 1885, the

Charleston *News and Courier* published "Our Women in the War", a series of women's recollections of the War, later brought out in the book form. The excerpts she contributed from her diary give a graphic, detailed, but remarkably controlled description of Yankee troops ravaging her home. At the same time, an equally remarkable self-portrait of a young woman emerges who realizes that she is entering a world full of unknowns, a world that will tax to the limit her strength, her patience, and her faith.

In 1870 Elizabeth Allston married John Julius Pringle, of White House Plantation, a few miles down the PeeDee from Chicora Wood. Their marriage was short-lived: Mr. Pringle died suddenly of malarial fever in 1876 in Charleston. One month after his death, his young widow of 31 writes in her diary: "Many many things have made me feel that my darling has been taken from evil to come- - -he suffered no one can tell how acutely from the circumstances w[hich] surrounded him - - -debt, complications of law questions . . . [h]e felt keenly, and his eagerness to succeed in paying off the debt weighed upon him. His hard labor with a view to that- - -day after day in the scorching sun and then in the evening paying off in the close store surrounded by negroes." Thirty-eight years later, in 1914, she writes to Owen Wister upon the death of his wife, one of her dearest friends: "From the time my husband died, things that I could not stand became easy to me- - -the most impatient, intolerant spirit which had always possessed me, disappeared - - -I was so timid, I had never slept in a room alone, could not do it- - -whenever I tried to, I would wake in terror and make my way into someone else's room til morning- - -I was absolutely dependent on companionship- - -during the week he was away, I moved over into my sister's room, tho' I knew it was a trial to her who had always been brave- - -but at the end of that week when I made the terrible journey to Charleston and stood on tiptoe to look down into the ice-packed coffin where he lay- - -instead of crying out and fainting as they thought I would, my whole being broke into a smile! Then and there I held communion with the great loving heart of the man I loved, and his spirit calmed and filled mine as it had never succeeded in doing before, his brave and faithful soul permeated mine, his

strong courage passed into me, and from that hour my nature was changed- - -I was not afraid of anything . . . ." [15 Jan. 1914]

1885 found Mrs. Pringle, a widow with no children, helping her mother manage Chirora Wood; being in full charge of her brother's two motherless babies; and assuming the management of her husband's home place, White House plantation. That year also found her writing, publishing, and continuing to keep her diary.

Her life was shaped by the strenuous responsibilities she had inherited and assumed; by the constant and relentless battles she had to fight to get the work done on the plantations- - -battles with the laboring hands, and battles with the natural forces of the elements. Cast into a raw and upset world, a world where holding land meant not wealth but increasing poverty from rising taxes, she met this new and troubled world head-on and was indomitable. She was a woman doing a man's work in the man's world of the plantation- - -but without a man's traditional habit of command and unquestioned authority. Because she was committed to the land, and to the people on that land, she acquired and demanded authority and control- - - and she received it. It is sometimes hard to remember that the events in *A Woman Rice Planter* take place from the time she was 58 to 67 years old- - -it reads with the heart, soul, and physicality of a young and vigorous woman.

An entry dated December 8, 1903 reads: "Today Richard Dinny [one of her hired workmen] came to say he would undertake to mend the break in the rice-field bank. As it is about two miles round there in a boat, I had him paddle me through the canal to Long field trunk, and I walked from there on the banks. I hurried along because the time was short before hour for luncheon. I had had the bank hoed just in the middle, so that a sportsman could go through unseen by the ducks in the field. Sometimes it was hard for me to get through with my skirt, but the man found it hard to keep up with me." [WRP,55]

There were quiet times, too, in her life, times when she would

read (which she did voraciously), play the piano, or work on French translations. Her July 4, 1911 letter to the New York *Sun* tells us that she "had dinner at 12 so that the servants could all go and had a most delightful long afternoon. I took my sewing and book and sat down by the river with the dogs. When I found it too dark to see either to read or to sew . . .I came in and lighted the lamps and had my tea."

Her letter of April 9 of this same year has the following account: "The storm which has been travelling about the Gulf and has devastated Cuba seems to have got here at last. It looked so stormy and threatening this morning . . .[that I] put all hands gathering in the corn. As fast as the corn was broken Jim and Goliah brought it in the wagon to the barn. I had many small trials and irritations over the difficulty of getting Bonaparte to carry out my orders, but finally things got working well. I sat in the barn and read the Iliad and tallied corn all day."

But though she rejoiced in and was thankful for such moments of rest as these, Mrs. Pringle was not afraid of work. She believed that hard work dignified and gave one grace. She pitied those who had "never really worked" because [she writes] "they will never reach the point of excellence and development that could have been attained, had he or she learned to put out the whole strength, either of mind or body on something." [WRP,114] She was also not afraid of tackling something new and strange, and was often surprised at what she found she could do.

One January day, she writes: "Sewed nearly all day, which is a great treat to me. The wood we are using burns out so fast, that I have been urging the men to cut enough logs . . . to give each fireplace a back log . . . . Joe Keit said the wood was too hard, might as well try to cut iron, and that it would take all day to cut one log, making it very dear wood. I was provoked, but never having sawed any wood at all, I did not know whether what he said was true or not- - -that always worries me- - -so I put down my sewing and got the big saw about 4½ feet long with one handle . . . and went out to the four splendid live oaks which were killed in the storm . . . . I selected a limb suitable

height for me to work on and began very awkwardly to saw . . . . I was [pleased] to find myself already a little handier and worked with great satisfaction . . . . Jim, who was . . . cutting limbs from a green live oak, which is much less tough, and which I disapprove of entirely . . . came and expressed great anxiety lest I overexert myself and said, 'Let me finish it, Miss Patience, you'll be here till dark,' but I proudly declined, and to his and my amazement I had the back log off in half an hour." [WRP,p286-287]

In another episode, she is putting down a new trunk, which functions something like a gate in the rice fields. When it is raised, the water from the river flows in and floods the seedlings; when it is lowered, the water is kept off the rice. The men she had in charge of putting in this new trunk had quite utterly failed, and Mrs. Pringle writes: "There was no use saying anything, but I decided to go over the next day and use my common sense, if I had no knowledge."

She had had flatloads of mud brought in and great long planks, which had to be floated in on the low tide, and then packed with the mud before the tide came in again. She writes: " . . . the filling up was a perfect race, so much mud to be put in before the tide began to rise, besides the inclination of the bank to cave in . . . . Altogether, the day was one of the most exciting and interesting I ever spent, though I stood six hours on the top of a pile of mud on a small plank, where I had to balance myself with care to look into the gulf and not topple over." She says it was black dark when they finished, and then she says that "though a freshet has come and gone since, 'she' (referring to the new trunk) has not stirred, and the fields drain beautifully." [WRP, 66-67]

Physically, the life she led was ardurous and demanding; many times it called up all the spirit she could muster. Once, faced with a seven-mile row across the rough and windy Waccamaw River, whe sent for old Aaron, who had been a very fine oarsman, but who had not rowed very recently and so felt doubtful about tackling the water under the conditions he saw before him. When she finally persuaded him, Mrs. Pringle gives us the following account of the experience, an account which

shows not only her keen and accurate ear for dialect, and her conscious build-up of dramatic tension- - -but which also shows the psychological control and command that she must always exert- - -always firmly, but often indirectly.

When we got to the mouth of the Waccamaw River it was very rough and Aaron wanted to turn round, but I would not appear to understand his desire. I exclaimed: —

"Now, Aaron, you see why I wanted you to row me. I knew there would be half a gale blowing out here, and I would not have been willing to cross with any but a first-class boatman."

"Miss, you t'ink we kin mek 'em? Dem wave is putty tampsious! You see de win' is ded gen de tide, en we bleege to cross right een de teef uf de win'!"

"Yes, but the tiller ropes are strong, and I can keep her head on the waves and watch my chance to quarter over. The boat is stanch, and I promise you I can keep her out of the trough. You know the river well; tell me the best place to cross, and let us go," for all this time we were dancing about in the mouth of the creek, where it would have been easy to turn—when once we got into the rough water we could not—and I feared that Aaron's caution might prevail.

The river is about a mile wide at that point, and it certainly did look angry. Poor little Goliah was so frightened at the swirling waves that I told him to sit down in the bottom of the boat, which he did, and covered his eyes with his hands so as not to see the raging water. He just shivered when the spray dashed over him. It was a strenuous half hour, but we made it, and when we got into the canal mouth on the other side Aaron laughed aloud with pride and delight; he rested on his oars, and taking out his bandanna, mopped his face streaming with sweat and chortled with joy."

"My Lawd! 'Tis a good t'ing ter travel wid a pussom w'at hab a strong heart. Miss Pashuns, you bring me over dat ribber! I didn't trust fer cum, but you bring me."

"I know you are glad, Aaron."

"Too glad, E mek me feel too good, I got back me y'uth."

Perhaps one of the most dramatic and powerful episodes she gives us in *A Woman Rice Planter* is that of Mr. Z, the white overseer she hired during a time when an overseer who could be trusted was next to impossible to find. Not long after hiring the man she calls 'Mr. Z', he remarks to her:

"I've been a powerful wicked man. I've shot two men an' been shot twice myself and I've stabbed one man nine times and been all cut to pieces myself, but for two years now, since I met this wife, I've quit drinkin' an' I'm tryin' to live a good life."

A couple of weeks later, after dark, Mr. Z came to her at the house to borrow a lantern which she gladly lent to him. The account which follows is a quiet, but dramatic confrontation between opposing powers.

In the course of the conversation Mr. Z says "I've got a fine burn on them piles o' trash."

"I hope it is well out, Mr. Z. There is such a gale [blowing] it is no time for burning trash. I hope you saw the fire entirely out."

"No, Ma'am," he said, "I've got it started good, an' it's burnin' fine."

I said not another word, but flew through the house to the pantry, seized the lantern and . . . ran at full speed to the barnyard, where not 200 feet from the threshing mill (which cost $5,000) and four large barns three bonfires were raging, the flames and sparks whirling and licking out in every direction up to high heaven . . . .

With the help of one servant a youngster of about twelve, she shoveled dirt onto the lightwood posts that Mr. Z had put on "to insure a good burn". Mr. Z would not help in any way, he kept insisting that the wind was blowing in the other direction. Mrs. Pringle knew how quickly gale winds can shift, and that if it did shift, "there would not be a building left on the place. Dwelling-house and all would go."

Finally, when the fire had burned down, and all immediate danger was passed, Mrs. Pringle, wanting to take the lantern in her hand, handed the shovel to Mr. Z saying, "Will you take the shovel, Mr. Z?"

"Fortunately, I had the full light of the lantern on his face, and I was shocked; he did not move. I fixed my eyes full upon him and repeated, 'You did not hear me, Mr. Z; will you take the shovel?' Slowly he put out his hand and took it. I still fixed him with my eye, until he turned and walked toward the house, and I followed him."

A day or two later, Mrs. Pringle was in the smokehouse when Mr. Z passed by. There had been almost no communication between them since the night of the fire- - -Mrs. Pringle thought it was necessary to clear the air: "Good morning, Mr. Z". He took no notice of her and passed on by. She straightened up and said again in a clear voice: "Mr. Z, you did not perhaps hear me; I said 'Good Morning.'" She continued, "He stopped and slowly raised his hat, said good morning and passed on, and I knew I had scored another victory."

A little while later, Mr. Z came back to the smokehouse and asked Mrs. Pringle if she'd meet him in the field, as he had some questions about crops he'd like to talk over with her. She told him that she would be at leisure in a minute and would join him in the field. When she got out into the field, Mr. Z asked her some trivial questions, and said:

"You went too far with me the other night, Mrs. Pennington."

"Indeed?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "You told me I had no sense."

"I certainly didn't tell a story, Mr. Z, if I said so. I thought as I stood there and saw that fire swirling around in that gale that I had never seen any one over three years old do a more foolish thing." We faced each other squarely for a moment. "I saw murder in your eye, but I'm not afraid of wild beasts." Gradually his face relaxed and I saw the demon had fled for the

time, but it was exciting.

Several things important about the episode with Mr. Z are the courage Mrs. Pringle shows, and the psychological superiority she maintains over this self-confessed murderer. Foremost and uppermost in her mind, before her own safety, was the safety of her threshing mill and barns. Without them, her struggles, her labors with the land, and the livelihood of all the plantation workers, would be lost at once forever. To lose those barns and that mill would mean total defeat. She learned well her fellow human beings and she knew her strength of will was superior to most. She knew **instinctively** that to throw the light upon Mr. Z's face and make him look into her eyes, eyes that were unafraid of his evil temper, was to disarm him and to claim the first advantage. But she also knew she was taking a chance, and when she remembers it for us, she makes a statement that is extraordinary in its honest unself-conscious revelation of her character and nature: she tells us ". . . it was exciting."

As a writer, Mrs. Pringle knew in her bone marrow what all good writers know: to write about what you know. Because her work **is** autobiographical- - -because it **is** based on things that actually happened to her in her most unusual and strenuous life, she writes with an authroity from within. She had the factual materials at hand that she knew, because she had lived them. But when she gives them to us in the form of her literary art, she does far more than just set down the facts for the record- - -she breathes vital and passionate life into each episode so that it stands complete in itself. And, as in the case of the encounter with Mr. Z, and the old oarsman, Aaron, the story she writes is moving, and unforgettable.