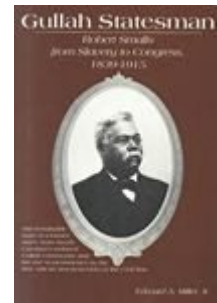


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward A. Miller, Jr. *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994. xiv + 294 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-002-4.

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This book by Edward A. Miller, Jr., chronicles the life and times of former South Carolina slave Robert Smalls from his birth on April 5, 1839 until his death on February 23, 1915. Smalls's initial rise to fame stemmed from his successful commandeering and piloting of the Confederate ship Planter out of Charleston Harbor and turning the ship and supplies over to the Union forces in 1862. He would make the best of this event throughout his career. Following the Civil War he became involved in every aspect of Republican Party politics, and was practically the boss of Beaufort County until his death. Smalls was active in local, state and federal politics. He was elected as a delegate to the state constitutional convention which framed the Constitution of 1868, would subsequently be elected to the South Carolina General Assembly, and to five terms as a United States Representative serving the people of the state's Fifth District, later redistricted as the Seventh District. Following a successful congressional career Smalls's party loyalty earned him Republican presidents Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley's appointments as port collector in Beaufort, a position he held, respectively, 1889 to 1894 and 1898 to 1913.

Smalls, unlike some of his black political contemporaries, such as Richard H. Cain, William Whipper, and Francis Cardoza, was not formally educated, though he may have periodically hired the services of a tutor. He spoke with a strong and distinct Gullah accent which he exaggerated when speaking to the less educated, but toned down when conversing with the more affluent. Smalls was a practical man who made practical decisions. This sometimes placed him at odds with more radical black Carolinians who felt he should place commitment to members of the race first at all times. Smalls was genuinely concerned about the opportunities for freedmen,

but also for poor whites. Throughout his career he promoted education reform, and was a founder of the first public school in Beaufort County. He was a supporter of public works, internal improvements, relief for individual constituents, and agricultural innovations. Smalls further championed suffrage for women and recruitment of blacks in the federal and state militias (reaching the rank of Major General of the Second Division in the South Carolina National Guard).

Gullah Statesman provides cursory examination of Smalls parentage and family life. While there are disputes regarding who his father was, "there is no doubt that he was white". (p. 7) Though limited, the reader is introduced to Smalls's childhood environment, his first marriage to Hannah Jones, and after her death a second marriage to Annie Elizabeth Wigg. His first marriage produced three children: Elizabeth Lydia, Robert Jr., and Sarah Voorhees. A son, William Wigg Small, was the sole offspring of the second marriage. In his later life, Smalls suffered from a variety of ailments, including phlebitis, diabetes, "recurring" malaria, and rheumatism.

The strength of *Gullah Statesman* is the author's attention to political detail. Miller provides valuable examination of the South Carolina political situation during Radical Reconstruction, Conservative Redemption, and Democratic Supremacy. His descriptions of Wade Hampton and the Red Shirts movement, George Tillman (brother of Benjamin Tillman) and the Edgefield Plan, and the subsequent statewide disfranchisement of black voters is particularly well done. By the same token, weaknesses are the cursory treatment of Smalls's early life as a slave, and the significance of his Gullah background. For example, coverage of Smalls's life from 1839

to 1862, before his historic runaway from slavery and the Planter incidence, is contained on less than three pages (pp. 7-9). Likewise, his Gullah background is not introduced as a factor until almost midway into the text (p. 104). Another weakness is lack of attention to social history. Were there other siblings, and if so, what was Smalls's relationship with them? How did relatives of his owner and alleged father react to him? What kind of husband and father was he? What role did religion play in his life? What accounted for the failed attempt to publish a newspaper, Southern Standard, from 1872-1873? Were the Loyal League, Lincoln Brotherhood, and Union League factors in Beaufort and South Carolina politics? If so, was Smalls active in such organizations? These are some questions, the answers to

which would have added greatly to the significance of the study.

In sum, *Gullah Statesman* is well-researched, and the author has benefited from a tremendous body of primary and archival information. This examination of Smalls is both critical and complimentary of a significant political contributor to South Carolina in the late nineteenth century. After completing the book, the reader will have gained a tremendous respect for Robert Smalls, his ability not merely to survive but to thrive in a constantly changing political arena, and his undying loyalty to the regular Republican Party. In fact, an equally descriptive title for the book might be "Robert Smalls: Straightout Republican." The book is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on blacks in the post-Reconstruction era.

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