

Rhythm of Dewees

I.

Timicau lay on the edge of the sea,
for thousands of years, only sand and reed
that came and went on the ocean's whim,
an island now wide and then again slim
and mostly flat as the waves rolled in,
yet the dunes built up and some grass held fast;
then oak, pine and yaupon, palmetto and myrtle. . . .
Birds, deer and 'possum, and the eggs of the turtle,
shellfish and berries and the wily raccoon
attracted the Sewee from across the lagoon;
they came in canoes over Copahee Sound
to an island where blue crabs and wood ducks abound,
where oysters and clams could always be found;
Timicau became their hunting ground.

II.

People from Europe came out of the east:
first the explorers—Spanish, English and French,
followed by settlers from all different parts,
most of them English and French Huguenots.
Sad to say, all these colonists bore
a host of viruses—germs galore—
that led to diseases like smallpox and flu
to which the carriers were mostly immune
but the Sewee were not, and soon were no more. . . .
Some colonists farmed, some were hunters or fishers;
others built ships in Europe's traditions
or indulged in other commercial ambitions—
to grow and sell indigo, cotton and rice,
all crops that in Europe would bring a good price;
money crops need cheap labor,
turning planters to slavers
bringing workers in shackles from distant Africa,
launching the next dismal historical chapter.

III.

Among the early settlers who came o'er the seas
to Britain's mid-Atlantic colonies
in the sixteen hundred and sixties
was a family from Holland by the name of Dewees,
and near a century later one of these,
a personage known as Cornelius Dewees,
shipped south down the coast about nine degrees,
purchased Timicau Island (thence known as Dewees),
planted crops and also made use of its trees
to build ships designed to sail the high seas. . . .
In seventeen hundred and seventy-five,
when Carolina was poised to break free of the Crown
and Britain sent ships to put them down,
a new fort was needed to protect Charles Town;
Colonel Moultrie sought out logs of palmetto,
a soft wood to absorb cannon balls better,
and on nearby Dewees Island Cornelius Dewees
found another suitable use for his trees. . . .
“One if by land, two if by sea—
the British are coming” Revere said up east,
but down south when Admiral Parker arrived with his fleet
warning went out from the men on Dewees. . . .
As the fleet weighed anchor to leave Dewees Inlet,
to challenge Fort Moultrie's Deweesian logs,
their ship *Glasgow* grounded on Dewees Inlet's bar;
Cornelius Dewees and his son and some others
rowed out and boarded and captured the *Glasgow*
and set her afire after seizing her cargo. . . .
The other ships sailed to Charles Town's port,
set their guns and bombarded the fort,
the Palmetto logs held and the Brits were repelled. . . .
After years of strife the colony broke free,
And the center of the State flag today is that tree.

IV.

When the Brits came again in eighteen thirteen,
the era of Cornelius Dewees long sundered,
the island then owned by Elizabeth Deleisseline,
lacked defenses and was sacked and plundered. . . .

In eighteen-sixty South Carolina left the Union;
Fort Sumter fell to Beauregard's Confederate lead
but years of war still lay ahead,
and before it was over many were dead;
there were union blockades and blockade runners,
ships went to the bottom in record numbers:
the *Georgiana*, *Housatonic* and *H.L. Hunley*. . . .
Sherman spared Charleston from his vengeful fire
but in practical terms the "Old South" expired.

V.

On Dewees a half century of farming ensued—
George Washington Roberts, Edward Jamison Jones—
owners and their families, their barns and homes,
their livestock and sheds and plows and mules
ebbed and flowed like the waters in the creeks and lagoons.
Murphy's sharecroppers—Cribb, Moore, Milligan and Todd
gathered oysters and clams and raised goats and hogs;
little is known of those hard plain lives
or what befell those simple strivers
when in nineteen hundred and twenty-five
the island was purchased by Coulter Huyler.

VI.

Dewees Island lay between Isle of Palms and Capers,
its sandy southeast beachside exposed to the breakers,
to the northwest were marshes and tidal creeks snaking
and a mile or so on across Copahee Sound
on the mainland Porcher's Bluff dock could be found.
Huyler's father made a fortune in New York,
enough so Coulter could dispense with that work
and free his family from a life in the city
where the traffic was noisy and the sidewalks gritty;
so he bought two islands, Capers and Dewees,
chose Dewees for a home facing Horse Bend Creek,
built a dock, some roads, a boardwalk to the beach;
Mother Huyler came with a whole entourage—
four children, governess, tutor and nanny;
they procured maids, laborers, boats and handlers,
eventually even a car on a barge. . . .

The house that they built was both cozy and spacious,
with seven bedrooms, two baths and five fireplaces,
and even a gun room to store all the gun stuff
they brought to the island from Porcher's Bluff
to hunt for their dinners of turkey or duck
or to hold off fierce critters like bobcats and boars
and keep the alligators and snakes out of doors.

VII.

The Huyler times passed, for the years were few
before the children had scattered and World War II
was upon the nation
and everything changed for the duration.
German U-boats launched an operation
in the channels to Charleston's naval station,
torpedoed ships were a complication
begging for a confrontation,
so a tower was built on the island's north reaches
to send warnings of U-boats lurking out past the beaches;
the tower became the island's most prominent feature;
a remarkable structure, that rusting installation
still stood long after the millennial celebration.

VIII.

After Coulter Huyler died,
in nineteen hundred and fifty-five,
R. S. Reynolds, aluminum maker,
bought Dewees (and also Capers),
and used the Huyler's former place
as a hunting lodge and fishing base. . . .
Then in nineteen seventy-two,
Reynolds sold the islands to a local crew
led by the Royall brothers, Ed and Bob,
a lawyer and banker who
as children played and fished in the waters around
Dewees and Capers and Copahee Sound. . . .
The investment group entitled "Seewed"
paid two million five for the two islands' deeds.
State officials demanded conservation,
dedication of the islands for natural preservation;

Seewed sold the State Capers for two million five
with a conservation easement on Dewees;
so Seewed wound up with just one island,
but they had gotten that wonderful island for free.

IX.

The Royalls built houses and docks on Dewees Inlet
and Bobby Kennedy built between them later;
then the beach was breached at Lake Timicau
by a tidal surge from Hurricane David;
a channel split the island completely in two
causing tidal erosion that steadily grew;
fishing boats started to come and go
from the central beach to the Capers shore,
but in nineteen hundred and eighty-four
a permit was granted to close that flow;
the fishermen sued to stop the closure,
claiming navigable waters were open to all,
but the judge turned ‘em down, ruled the lake had been private,
so Dewees had a right to make repairs from the storm;
a levee was built across the channel that formed,
restoring Lake Timicau to its pre-storm norm.

X.

But that norm lasted only a few years time
for at the fall equinox of eighty-nine
Hurricane Hugo struck, with winds of one fifty
and a tidal surge of fifteen to twenty
rolled over the island and left it near empty,
taking the pine trees, myrtles, hollies and cedars
(and for a time eliminating ticks and mosquitoes);
many live oaks were felled or sheared of their limbs,
and most that was left eventually burned;
much maritime forest, long tangled and dense,
became open savanna, the views were immense. . . .
The Royall and Kennedy homes on the inlet,
built high on their pilings for just such event,
survived Hugo’s water and winds, but their docks went
and the old Huyler home, the hunting lodge,

not raised on stilts but set on a slab,
could not survive when the surge rolled past.

XI.

After Hugo the Royall group was close to despair,
for the free island they'd gotten near two decades before
was now costing a bundle to repair and restore—
debts were mounting as interest rates soared
and development efforts had failed to take hold,
what with nature's exactions and regulator's limitations
and objections by conservation organizations. . . .
Into the breach stepped one John L. Knott,
a planner and developer whose vision was not
to fight nature's ways or conservationist stances.
"If you can't beat 'em join 'em" was John Knott's mantra,
sustainable building that works in the wild
and an island charter and owner commitment
to keep it always that way, not just for a while.

XII.

New investors came in, a development group formed
"Island Preservation Partnership" (note the name:
not to develop but to keep it the same);
no paved roads or golf course, no hunting of game,
no automobiles burning gasoline,
with the homes to be nested far from the ocean
and their occupants pitching in with lasting devotion
to support the conservation easement
(which after all is what Dewees meant),
a commitment to keep the island green.
Knott's vision (or some would say "scheme")
found far-reaching favor with the press mainstream
and with idealistic people in search of a place
that was not Hilton Head or Myrtle Beach rat race,
that was pristine when they bought in and would stay that way;
they saw value in that, not in mortar and bricks;
so though Knott is long gone the idea persists—
whether Knott's stated vision was a scheme or a dream,
the vision's intact with those who came after;
for them it's a dream and that's all that matters. . . .

They came to Dewees from far and wide,
they watched the sunset and moonrise and tide,
they feasted their senses on the smells and the breeze
and felt the spreading comfort of the live oak trees;
they came from Charlotte, Columbia, Asheville,
they came from Kentucky and Tennessee.
they designed their homes for shade and breeze
and submitted their plans to the ARB. . . .
And even today for most of the year
When you walk on the beach you're the only one there;
on Big Bend Dock if you cast your line
there is no one watching and that's just fine;
that priceless item known as peace
is what we envisioned when we came to Dewees.

= CJS/JMS =

*[Verses penned in contemplation
of the Silver Anniversary Celebration
of the Dewees Island Property Owners Association,
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Bibliography

James Cochrane, *Dewees: The Island and Its People*, Charleston, S.C., The History Press, 2007.

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