



J. C. Calhoun

CALHOUN AS SECRETARY OF WAR

From the portrait by John Wesley Jarvis in the Department
of the Army, Washington, D. C.

John C. Calhoun

AMERICAN PORTRAIT

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With a new introduction by Clyde N. Wilson

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Carolina hill-country was surrendered to the British forces—Patriot against Tory, Carolinian against Carolinian, women and children 'slain in cold blood'⁷ by their own neighbors. Death had walked the hills . . . a hushed knock against a doorway . . . broken voices in the night and the hard breathing of hunted men . . . a 'Brown Bess' . . . a few shreds of a buckskin jacket or a broken powder-horn to show that once a man had lived and died . . . the entire District of Ninety-Six* under siege.⁸ Stories of Cowpens and Camden and King's Mountain; of Francis Marion, 'the Swamp Fox,' and the gay-faced Quaker boy, Nathanael Greene; of John's own family, his old Scottish grandmother, slaughtered by Indians in the grim winter of 1760; of the uncle who fell at Cowpens with thirty saber wounds, and of the uncle who rotted in a hell-ship off St. Augustine; of that Major John Caldwell, for whom he had been named, cut down by the 'Bloody Scout' in his own back yard.⁹

It was not history yet. It was too near and too real. Nearby at Hopewell stood Treaty Oak, where only three years after John was born, the tribes had gathered for a ten-day parley; there to surrender, to a Calhoun cousin, General Francis Pickens, lands west of the Blue Ridge, encompassing a third of Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. And there, too, had been surrendered and returned John's cousin, Anna, seized in the Long Cane Massacre, twenty-five years before.

It must have been hard for John to see in his aging father, the surveyor and county judge, one of the wildest and most ruthless Indian fighters in the entire Southern back-country, a scout who only a few years before, had headed a group of mountain rangers, patrolling the South Carolina-Georgia border in a ceaseless watch for enemy Indians.

For Patrick Calhoun was a fighter. The whole life of this Scotch-Irishman from Donegal was a battle, political or military. He was a prayer and a killer, and he could kill and pray with equal fervor, even with dedication. Grim, rough-hewn, there was little that was lovable about him. He was tough in mind and tough in body, devoid either of humor or of imagination. He was stubborn and wrong-headed, the kind of man who could unfailingly mistake a prejudice for a conviction;¹⁰ but hardened for conflict as he was, he was the ideal leader of a frontier community.

Pat Calhoun had grown up in the wilderness. He was only five in 1733 when his family stepped off a dank waterlogged sailing vessel at the port of Philadelphia.¹¹ Along the borders of the frontier the Calhouns had moved, to the drumbeat of Indian warfare; from old Fort Duquesne to the valley of the Shenandoah, on down through the lush farmlands of Wythe County, Virginia, to the Waxhaws 'where the Carolinas meet,' and the hunters told of the land beyond the Catawba where the buffalo ran and the rich black soil had never known the touch of a plow.¹²

* Legal name for the Long Cane section.

→ In 1756 the Calhouns had moved once more, beyond the pine barrens and the sand hills to the District of Ninety-Six, the Long Cane country, where the vast brakes grew five to thirty feet in height, and the hills were tangled in peavine, high as a horse's back. There, on the right bank of a stream, Pat Calhoun framed the house to which he brought his third wife, Martha Caldwell, in 1770, and where his five children were born. And there in the wilderness he organized a church, the Long Cane congregation; and for a generation, with his few neighbors, held off attack from the Indian frontier.

He had survived the Long Cane Massacre of February, 1760, and returning to bury the twenty victims had looked down on the body of his brother, James, and his old mother, 'most inhumanly butchered.'¹³ Aided by only thirteen neighbors, he had held forty Cherokees at bay for uncounted hours, retreating only when seven of his comrades had been slain and twenty-three Indians lay dead on the ground.¹⁴

There on the wall hung his old hat, with four bullet holes through the crown—memento of the long hours when he, behind a log and a chief behind a tree, had waited to kill each other. Weary of shooting at the hat, as Calhoun again and again lifted it up on a ramrod, the Indian at last peered out. Instantly Calhoun shot him through the shoulder.¹⁵

This was John's heritage: stories of Tory atrocities, of Redskin barbarities. Small wonder that a boy, brought up on these tales of heroism and suffering, had fibers of bitter sternness running through his gentle nature.

And always at the fireside was talk of politics. For it had been Pat Calhoun who had led the battle for political representation for the Carolina up-country. Nearly half the population of the state was scattered through the hills, but so far as Charleston was concerned, the up-countryman might have lived in another world. Horse-thieves, cattle rustlers, gunmen, all the riffraff of civilization swept the region with terror—in orgies of pillaging, arson and rape—against which the outraged settlers had no legal redress at all.

So before the assembled dignitaries of the Provincial Assembly, an uninvited guest named Patrick Calhoun appeared to plead for courts, churches, roads, schools, and, above all, for political representation. His demands went unheeded. And in 1769, his coonskin cap on his head, his rifle over his shoulder, Calhoun led his neighbors two hundred miles on foot down to the voting booths, within twenty-three miles of Charleston. There, at the point of the gun, they seized and cast their ballots and voted their leader into the State Legislature.¹⁶ The battle for up-country representation was over.

With Patrick Calhoun, as later with his son, the potential success of a cause had nothing whatever to do with its abstract merits. Among the gentlemen from St. John and Prince George Parishes, the up-country legislator distinguished himself by his vote against adoption of the Federal

Bonaparte. The 'Terror' that had ended in France was rising in Europe; in Egypt, at the naval battle in Aboukir Bay at the mouth of the Nile, the genius of a frail, hollow-eyed Vice-Admiral of the King's Navy, not yet forty, had destroyed the French fleet, and in England the name of Horatio Nelson was already a legend. An era and a century were ending.

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Meanwhile, young John Caldwell was living the arduous and withdrawn life of the Southern frontier. Probably none of our American statesmen, not even Abraham Lincoln, spent his formative years in such utter solitude. While Calhoun was growing up in the empty Long Cane country, young Daniel Webster was struggling with Latin and table manners at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, and Henry Clay was learning the ways of men and the wiles of women at the race-tracks and dancing assemblies of Lexington, Kentucky. But what the South Carolina boy learned, he had to learn for himself, slowly, painfully, with infinite groping and self-questioning. He lived entirely within himself, was thrown back always on his own resources and his own decisions. By temperament the student, his character was far more that 'of the lonely, thoughtful, meditative boy . . . than the careless, happy, healthy comrade of other boys.'³⁰ A solitary walk through the woods in the fall, carrying a rifle; a hot afternoon at the side of the creek, his long hands tensed on the rod, and the Negro, Sawney, asleep at his side—moments like these were all he asked of happiness. Physically he was 'active and energetic'; he 'shot and angled with skill';³¹ but these were solitary sports; and he was too young to join the farmers of the neighborhood in political discussions at the polling booths or around the tavern firesides. There was no time for visits to the town or rides to the cabins of the neighbors. There was too much work to be done. For this was the farming South, not the plantation South; there were no house-parties or barbecues; the horses were for plowing, not for visiting; and wagons, not carriages, stood in the stables.

For John Calhoun childhood was already over. He had a man's burdens now, and he bore them manfully. The institution of the overseer had not yet been invented; and upon his and his mother's shoulders fell the responsibility of the five farms and all the Negroes. Nor was mere management all. There was plenty of hard physical work to be done, and of this the frail boy of fourteen did his full share. Not yet had Southerners discovered that black bodies alone were able to endure the fierce heat of the cotton field. Years later, John's playmate, Sawney, basking in reflected glory, would gleefully recall: 'We worked in the field, and many's the time in the brilin' sun me and Marse John has plowed together.'³²

The days were not long enough for all that had to be done. All his life, sleep was over for Calhoun at the first glow of dawn, a habit which can be traced back to his farming boyhood. Out of bed in an instant, he would pull on shirt, breeches, and moccasins, then hurry out to the barn where the sheep and cattle were waiting. Feeding and milking over, he could

ness trails would come upon him, and flung down upon the top of a wind-swept hill he would know a soaring freedom. He knew the pure unearthly feeling of the early morning; the depths of blue shadows streaked along the logs of the barn and the corn crib; the deceptiveness of the noontime shade and a water bucket that were never so cool as they looked from the cotton row. There were moments when he could give himself up to dreaming, to plumbing the depths of his own nature, contemplating rather than working, like all who live alone and within.³⁵ He could rest his horse and his back for a moment and scoop up one of those tiny cross-shaped stones the angels had dropped when they brought the story of the Crucifixion to America; or, like the psalmist, lift his eyes to the hills. He was content. Knowing no life other than the one into which he had been born, taught that duty, not happiness, was the chief end of man, he was only surprised at how much happiness he actually found. Perhaps for the only time in his life he was at peace with himself, in utter harmony with the world around him. He loved the land, not with any mystic idolatry, but with the physical love of a man who has worked the soil with his own hands and found it good. For Calhoun, the love of the land was fundamental. It was a part of his emotional and physical being. Everything that he said or did in later life can be traced back to this love and understanding of the earth from which he sprang. To him, agriculture was not a means to an end, but a life, complete and satisfying in itself. All his years, even at the summit of his fame, he would find his greatest happiness in the few months when he could be the planter that he had always wanted to be.

He was a born farmer. Several years after this period he is said to have taken charge of his brother's property, 'made the largest crop ever made, and saved him from bankruptcy.'³⁶

Much of his proficiency, however, he owed to his mother. Little, pitifully little, is known of this 'tall, stately' mother of John Calhoun. She is said to have been a woman of some 'culture,' and hers was now the task of tempering the rugged heritage Patrick Calhoun had left his son. Her gentle influence and association with the few Huguenots of Abbeville, whose race was to become a synonym for 'Southern aristocracy,' gave Calhoun the grace of manner, the aura of Old-World courtliness, intermingled with frontier reserve, that was to characterize him in Washington society.³⁷ Society, too, in Calhoun's youth was wont to trace his dark Irish beauty to his mother, although it was tempered with no small degree of the physical and mental austerity, inherited from old Patrick.

The boy inherited more than grace and good looks from his mother. She left him ardency and enthusiasm, emotional intensity,³⁸ balanced by a shrewd business head, unusual in a woman, but essential to a man with a plantation to direct, to say nothing of the affairs of government. 'She was a great manager,' wrote a contemporary, and in teaching her son the management of a plantation she was giving him more than even he knew.

No better training for a future leader of men could have been devised. 'A well-governed plantation was a well-ordered little independent state.'³⁹ There was a whole economy to be controlled, a whole community to be governed. From this school, before the rise of the overseer had absorbed personal responsibility, rose a whole generation of Southern spokesmen to whom command, duty, and personal responsibility were as automatic as breathing.

→ There was much else that Martha Caldwell taught her son. From her he learned to reverence the Bible as sacred, and, although never religious in the orthodox sense, he was always devout. She taught him to revere God, to honor his parents, and to do justice. And these were lessons that remained with him, just as his father's theories of government became a part of his being.

Furthermore, she was a good listener. During the long hours behind the plow, John had time to mull over the ideas that he had gleaned from the books in Moses Waddel's library and to make them a part of his own fine-spun thinking. He had absorbed with delight, and he remembered 'an accumulation of facts to be slowly digested into mental substance during the coming years.'⁴⁰ More and more he was thinking for himself, and what he said was flavored with his own originality. Already, he is said to have become something of a conversationalist—with his mother as his audience.

Once, in all these years, he obtained a single copy of a newspaper. There was no postoffice in Abbeville then; few newspapers ever made their way to the up-country. To Calhoun his one issue of the *South Carolina Gazette* was as precious as a book, and he treasured it all his life. It was his first political textbook, and his faded pencil marks still remain, underlining an account of the proceedings of Congress for April 11 and 13, 1798, including a debate on relations with France, a public meeting at Charleston, and an address by President John Adams.⁴¹

In the evening, after watering and feeding the stock, locking the barn for the night, and hanging the keys beside the fireplace, the lanky, bushy-haired boy of sixteen lit a home-made tallow candle and studied his newspaper. There is no evidence that he had developed any political ambition. He was not dissatisfied with his lonely, hard-working life, but had merely a healthy interest in those scant items from the world outside. He had pitifully little reading material; and almost as difficult as getting the books to read would have been finding the time to read them. But Calhoun's ingenuity was successful. A contemporary account tells of a farmer who rode by the Calhoun lands, and there saw John, hard at work in a field, whistling cheerfully, with a book 'tied to the plow.'⁴²

Neighbors in the tavern now had something to talk about for the rest of the summer. Books and education—these were not matters to be taken lightly. Probably most boys in the neighborhood were far more concerned over the next coon hunt than over their lack of schooling, but with their

fathers it was not so. Scant as education was in the hills, to those unlettered but ambitious men it remained the highest of human ideals. If not for them . . . perhaps for their children.

Obviously, Pat Calhoun's son was a 'young man of worth and promise.' He was too bright and quick a youth to be a farmer for the rest of his life. He 'ought to be educated.'⁴³

→ The neighborhood clamor at first left Mrs. Calhoun unmoved. She needed her son on the farm. But 'so frequently and urgently' was 'the feeling of the people . . . pressed upon her' that at last in the summer of 1800 she sent for her two older sons.

It was these two brothers, shop clerks in Augusta and Charleston, who, as instruments of Providence or of history, diverted their stubborn, somber-eyed younger brother from his peaceful existence to the rocky road of politics. Had not James and William returned to the family farms while John was still young enough for formal education, he might have only been remembered as a neighborhood individualist.

Already he had become set in his habits of living. This was no child that James and William had to deal with, but a man who had found his place in the world and was content. This was the self-assured master of the plantation, his lips, above a square cleft chin, set with a firmness startling in one so young. Tentatively, the two brothers approached the question. Moses Waddel had reopened his school. John should go back there for a few months, to fit him to practice law.

John shook his head. He could not think of leaving his mother, he said, and he did not want to be a lawyer. He had determined to be a planter; a planter he would remain. To convince him of the necessity of his own education was even more difficult than winning over his mother had been. But his brothers persisted. They put a far higher estimate upon his abilities than he did himself.

At last John gave way. Yes, if his mother gave her free consent, he would return to school. But he would not be contented with a few months. He faced the family council with an ultimatum.

'To . . . a partial education I answer decidedly, no; but if you are willing and able to give me a complete education, I give my consent.'

'What is your idea of a complete education?'

'The best school, college, and legal education to be had in the United States,' John replied.

'In that case we would be obliged to send you to a New England college and maintain you there for several years.'

'True, but I will accept nothing less.'

'How long will you require for the accomplishment of such an education?'

'About seven years.'⁴⁴

John himself chose Yale College.

his unusual diffidence, rendered his prospects of eminence as a speaker quite unflattering.'⁶ Probably this difficulty lowered his self-esteem, for until he entered Yale he had no realization of his superior abilities.⁷

It would have been hard, too, for Calhoun at this period not to have given way to discouragement. The greatest sorrow of his life, thus far, had broken over him. On the fourteenth of May, 1801, he went home for a visit and found that his mother had been ill. She seemed to be 'in no danger,' and in the evening he returned to school. The next day the news came that his mother was dead. It was well into September before he was sufficiently recovered from 'a severe spell of the fever,' with which he battled throughout the summer, to write the tragic news to a friend. 'How can I express my feelings when it was announced to me?' he wrote.⁸ But he owed himself a reckoning, himself and the memory of the mother who had believed in him. He resumed his studies. There was nothing left to do but to go on. . . .

Schools of the kind he was leaving were revolutionizing Southern thought, in theology and politics as well as education. It is not at all remarkable that Calhoun and the leaders of his generation led an only too willing South toward the ideal of a Greek Republic.⁹ Nor is it remarkable that Calhoun himself, for all his underlying gentleness, could never, despite momentary lapses, entirely escape the Puritan heritage of his youth. He emerged from Waddel's classroom, disciplined, controlled, his intellect broadened, but with all the sterner side of his nature intensified. Under the easy manner of the Southern 'gentleman,' the 'lean, eager' young man who entered Yale in the fall of 1802 was as rigid and fatalistic as the New England Puritans with whom he was thrown.

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The Yale College that Calhoun knew has vanished so completely in the rebuilding energies of a hundred years that it is now useless to look for it. Of that mellowed 'Brick Row' under the elms, which to Calhoun would symbolize Yale, Connecticut Hall alone remains. And even it, quaintly hip-roofed, as it was built in 1750—engulfed on three sides by the grim brownstone of the eighteen-eighties—is very different from the square four-storied structure of Calhoun's day. On the Green three steeples reach into clouds that still hang so low over the New Haven rooftops, but the stately brick churches are not the old meeting-houses where Calhoun sat, his head bowed in prayer; and successively a Greek temple and a frame 'Gothic' church have replaced the little brick State House where 'Old Pope Dwight,' as the irreverent secretly called him, toasted the Phi Beta Kappa students with 'rational conviviality.'

Only the street names are the same: College, fronting the Green, the