

EYEWITNESS TO AMERICA

*500 Years
of America
in the Words
of Those
Who Saw It
Happen*

EDITED BY

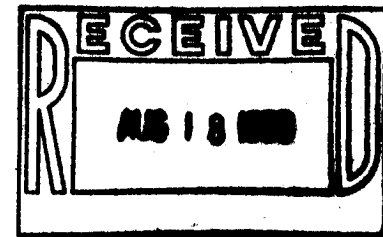
DAVID COLBERT

Published 1997



VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc. New York



kaleidoscope of flickering color. Brief rows of brightness, or slight lights, moved slowly up and down the waters around the island.

"The steel doors closed . . ."

IN THE DEATH HOUSE WITH THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS

June 1932
State Penitentiary, Kilby, Alabama

LANGSTON HUGHES

The nine Scottsboro "boys" were black men aged thirteen to twenty-one who were arrested for raping two white women on a train traveling through Alabama in 1931, crimes they obviously had not committed. But they were quickly convicted anyway, and each received the death penalty. When the appeals reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the Court ruled they had been denied a fair trial and had to be retried. Again an Alabama jury found them guilty, and again the U.S. Supreme Court found that they had been denied a fair trial. The third time around, charges were dropped against four of the defendants, but the other five received long prison terms.

The exceptional gifts of Hughes, a leader of the Harlem Renaissance movement, extended to poetry, short stories, critical essays, and autobiography. In this account he seems to combine them all. (All elisions are his original punctuation.)

The steel doors closed. Locked. Here, too, was Brown America. Like monkeys in tiered cages, hundreds of Negroes barred away from life. Animals of crime. Human zoo for the cast-offs of society. Hunger, ignorance, poverty: civilization's major defects woven into a noose for the unwary. Men in jail, months and months, years and years after the steel doors have closed. Vast monotony of guards and cages. The State Penitentiary at Kilby, Alabama, in the year of our Lord, 1932.

Our Lord . . . Pilate . . . and the thieves on the cross.

For a moment the fear came: even for me, a Sunday morning visitor, the doors might never open again. WHITE guards held the keys. (The judge's chair protected like Pilate's.) And I'm only a nigger. Nigger. Niggers. Hundreds of niggers in Kilby Prison. Black, brown, yellow, near-white niggers. The guards, White. Me—a visiting nigger.

Sunday morning: In the Negro wing. Tier on tier of steel cells. Cell doors are open. Within the wing, men wander about in white trousers and shirts. Sunday clothes. Day of rest. Cards, checkers, dice, story telling from cell to cell. Chapel if they will. One day of rest, in jail. Within the great closed cell of the wing, visiting, laughing, talking, *on Sunday*.

But in the death house, cells are not open. You enter by a solid steel door through which you cannot see. White guard opens the door. White guard closes the door, shuts out the world, remains inside with you.

THE DEATH HOUSE. Dark faces peering from behind bars, like animals when the keeper comes. All Negro faces, men and young men in this death house at Kilby. Among them the eight Scottsboro boys. Sh-s-s-s! Scottsboro boys? SCOTTSBORO boys. SCOTTSBORO BOYS! (Keep silent, world. The State of Alabama washes its hands.) Eight brown boys condemned to death. No proven crime. Farce of a trial. Lies. Laughter. Mob. Music. Eight poor niggers make a country holiday. (Keep silent, Germany, Russia, France, young China, Gorki, Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland, Theodore Dreiser. Pilate washes his hands. Listen Communists, don't send any more cablegrams to the Governor of Alabama. Don't send any more telegrams to the Supreme Court. What's the matter? What's all this excitement about, over eight young niggers? Let the law wash its hands in peace.)

There are only two doors in the death house. One from the world, in. The other from the world, out—to the electric chair. To DEATH. Against this door the guard leans. White guard, watching Brown America in the death house.

Silence. The dark word is silent. Speak! Dark world:

Listen, guard: Let the boys out.

Guard with the keys, let 'em out.

Guard with the law books, let them out.

*Guards in the Supreme Court! Guards in the White House!
Guards of the money bags made from black hands sold in the cotton fields,
sold in mines, sold on Wall Street:
Let them out!*

Daily, I watch the guards washing their hands.

The world remembers for a long time a certain washing of hands.
The world remembers for a long time a certain humble One born in
a manger—straw, manure, and the feet of animals—standing before
Power washing its hands. No proven crime. Farce of a trial. Lies.
Laughter. Mob. Hundreds of years later Brown America sang: *My
Lord! What a morning when the stars began to fall!*

For eight brown boys in Alabama the stars have fallen. In the death
house, I heard no song at all. Only a silence more ominous than song.
All of Brown America locked up there. And no song.

Even as ye do unto the least of these, ye do it unto Me.

White guard.

The door that leads to DEATH.

Electric chair.

No song.

"The cavalry clattered down Pennsylvania Avenue . . ."

GENERAL DOUGLAS MACARTHUR FIRES ON AMERICANS

July 29, 1932
Washington, D.C.

LEE MCCARDELL

The Bonus Expeditionary Force took its name from the American Expeditionary Force that had been sent to Europe in World War I. Its "troops" were veterans of World War I and their families, some twenty-five thousand in all, who demanded early payment of the veterans' bonuses the government was scheduled to pay in 1945.

MacArthur, army chief of staff at the time, was a highly capable but immoderate commander. When President Hoover asked him to evict the bonus marchers camped on Capitol Hill, MacArthur saw an opportunity to roust the main camp living across the Anacostia River. Historian William Manchester noted, "A Veterans Administration survey would later show that 94 percent of the bonus marchers had army or navy records, 67 percent had served overseas, and 20 percent had been disabled. MacArthur refused to believe it. He thought 90 percent of them were fakes. And he never changed his mind."

Hoover knew enough about MacArthur's personality and intentions to send two different officers to the general with duplicates of the same order—not to cross the river and engage the marchers there. MacArthur's aide Dwight Eisenhower later recalled his shock when his boss said he was "too busy" to pay attention to anyone "pretending to bring orders."

Two children were among the dead in the attack.

McCardell reported for the Baltimore Sun.

The bonus army was retreating today—in all directions.

Its billets destroyed, its commissary wrecked, its wives and babies misplaced, its leaders lost in the confusion which followed its rout last night by troops of the Regular Army, the former soldiers tramped the streets of Washington and the roads of Maryland and Virginia, foraging for coffee and cigarettes.

. . . The battle really had ended shortly after midnight, when, from the dusty brow of a low hill behind their camp on the Anacostia flats, the rear guard of the Bonus Expeditionary Force fired a final round of Bronx cheers at the tin-hatted infantrymen moving among the flames of Camp Marks.

The powerful floodlights of Fire Department trucks played over the ruins of the camp. In the shadows behind the trucks four troops of cavalry bivouacked on the bare ground, the reins of their horses hooked under their arms.

The air was still sharply tainted with tear gas.

The fight had begun, as far as the Regular Army was concerned, late yesterday afternoon. The troops had been called out after a veteran of the Bonus Army had been shot and killed by a Washington policeman during a skirmish to drive members of the Bonus Army