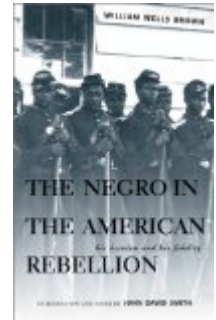


William Wells Brown. *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xlv + 223 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-1528-3.



Reviewed by Thomas J. Ward

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In the past decade there has been increased interest in the experience of African Americans in U.S. wars. Gail Buckley, Gerald Astor, and Robert Edgerton have recently provided broad surveys of blacks in the U.S. military, and a number of other authors have written books on specific black regiments in the U.S. Army. Because of both the large number of African Americans who served in it (approximately 200,000), and its centrality to the African-American experience, the Civil War has inspired a number of works on black military service in the war, including books by James McPherson, Ira Berlin, William Gladstone, and Keith P. Wilson. These current historians all owe a debt of gratitude to the pioneers of African-American military history, like William Wells Brown, who told the story of the nation's black soldiers at a time when most of the country ignored their service.

First published in 1867, William Wells Brown's history of the African-American military experience in the Civil War, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*, still provides readers of both the Civil War and African-American history with valuable insights.

Brown (1814-1884), a runaway slave, emerged a leader in the abolition movement in the 1840s as a speaker and activist, working with the Underground Railroad to assist runaway slaves to freedom. He did not serve in the military during the Civil War, but worked tirelessly as a recruiter for the U.S. Colored Troops. As an author, Brown wrote a number of antislavery tracts, including his autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), and *Clotel* (1853), thought to be the first novel published by an African-American author. *The Negro in the American Rebellion* was Brown's second historical work, following *The Black Man* (1863), a collection of biographical sketches.

In this new edition by Ohio University Press, Professor John David Smith of North Carolina State University provides an excellent introduction to Brown's classic work, illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* for modern readers. Professor Smith gives both a biographical sketch of the author and places the text within its period. He explains that Brown's book "was less a traditional

'history' than a loosely literary and polemical work that interpreted the causes and consequences of the Civil War from the perspective of African Americans" (p. xxxiii). Smith examines previous scholars' criticism of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* as being poorly documented, illogically organized, and overly romanticized, all of which are true; but he also rightfully defends Brown as someone who, without any formal training as a historian, provided an intellectually honest portrayal of the African-American experience in the war. Whatever its weaknesses, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* was certainly no more flawed (or romanticized) than many of the "Lost Cause" accounts of the war, which either grossly misrepresented black attitudes towards the war or left African Americans out completely.

The first history ever written of African Americans in the military, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* begins by chronicling the black military experience in previous wars and in numerous slave uprisings, including Nat Turner's Revolt and John Brown's Raid. Brown also deals with what he viewed as the cause for the war, which he deemed the "Slaveholders' Rebellion" (p. xliii). "Drunk with power," writes Brown, "and dazzled with prosperity, monopolizing cotton, and raising it to the influence of a veritable fetish, the authors of the Rebellion did not admit a doubt of success of their attack on the Federal Government" (p. 29). He is only slightly less critical of the Lincoln administration at the start of the conflict, condemning the president for not making ending slavery a priority at the beginning of the war, and even accusing Lincoln of giving "aid and comfort to the enemy" (p. 38) by annulling John C. Fremont's proclamation of emancipation of all slaves held by rebels in Missouri. Brown's assessment of Lincoln does change as the war progresses, however, as he lauds the president for eventually making the war for freedom; he laments his death, stating, "No nation ever mourned more sincerely the loss of its head than did the people of the United

States that of President Lincoln. We all love his memory still" (p. 188).

The Negro in the American Rebellion focuses on the heroic exploits of African-American troops in the field of battle at places such as Fort Wagner, Port Hudson, and Honey Hill, as well as the injustices faced by these soldiers, including pay discrimination. "'Tis an insult, after promising us a soldier's pay, and calling us to do a soldier's duty," quotes Brown of the men of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts, "to offer us the wages of a laborer, who is not called upon to peril his life for his country" (p. 145). In addition to the discrimination they faced from their own military, Brown also recounts the sometimes brutal treatment that black troops faced at the hands of the rebels. In addition to not being accorded prisoner-of-war status by the Confederacy, Brown chronicles incidents of war crimes committed against black troops, including the infamous massacre at Fort Pillow.

Much of Brown's account of the war is simply the reprinting of often page-long primary documents—mainly newspaper accounts, letters, government documents, even songs—interspersed with his commentary. Brown provided no footnotes, and only a smattering of the accounts give the source; too often Brown relies on unnamed observers. This style, as one might expect, also does not lead to cohesive narrative, which is one of the great weaknesses of the book. The sources he uses, however, are often fascinating to the modern reader, and many would be very useful to historians today. One would have hoped that Professor Smith, in his notes, would have been able to provide at least some of the citations for sources left out by Brown, but he has chosen not to do so. Instead, Smith's (somewhat limited) notes are confined to correcting factual errors in Brown's text, explaining who certain figures are, and providing readers with bibliographic information on those figures. In addition to more extensive notes, readers of this edition, especially researchers, will bemoan the lack of an index.

Once again, this is an area of the book where Professor Smith could have made a great improvement to the original weaknesses of William Wells Brown's work.

Perhaps the greatest asset of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* is that it provides insight into the important issues facing African Americans in the wake of the Civil War. Brown was unyielding in his belief that slavery was the cause of the war, asserting that "Slavery was always the barbarous institution of America; and the rebellion was the result of this incongruity between it and freedom", and he remained critical of the mistreatment of African Americans following the war (p. 30). Writing during the period of Presidential reconstruction, when it seemed that the federal government was going to abandon the desires of the freedmen for land, civil rights, and the franchise, Brown used *The Negro in the American Rebellion* to make a case for black equality. He is intensely critical of President Andrew Johnson, who he describes as "egotistical, without dignity, tyrannical, ungrateful, and fond of flattery" and cites numerous examples of bitter racism against blacks in both the South and North in the aftermath of the war (p. 192). "The negro whipping-post, which the laws of the war swept away," asserts Brown, "has, under Andrew Johnson's reconstruction policy, been again re-instated throughout the South" (p. 198).

By championing the military exploits of African-American men in the Union army, Brown asserted that as soldiers and citizens they deserved equal rights—including voting rights—in the reconstructed Union. "The franchise will be of more service to this despised race than a standing army in the South," writes Brown. "The ballot will be his army" (p. 204). In *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, Brown was therefore not simply writing a history of blacks in the Civil War, he was making a case for full citizenship for African Americans in the new Union.

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