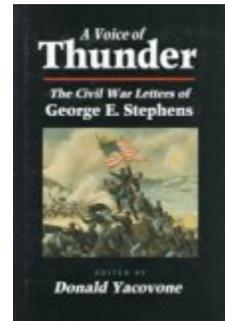


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Donald Yacovone, ed. *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xxi + 350 pp. \$20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06790-7; \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02245-6.

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A View of the Civil War from the Ranks of the 54th Massachusetts

George E. Stephens was a remarkable man. An African-American born in 1832 to a fairly prosperous middle class family living in Philadelphia's free black community, he pursued a veritable potpourri of occupations: cabinetmaker, journalist, sailor, soldier, teacher, and businessman. Widely read and politically astute, he became a leading voice for America's African-American community during the Civil War, first as a war correspondent for a popular black newspaper, then as a soldier in the famed 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry.

Donald Yacovone has collected and edited Stephens' dispatches and letters in *A Voice of Thunder*. In addition to providing a thorough biographical sketch of Stephens, Yacovone supports his subject's letters with copious footnotes and detailed chapter introductions. As a result, *A Voice of Thunder* is one of the best collections of Civil War correspondence I have seen.

For military historians, Stephens offers an account of operations with the Army of Potomac from late 1861 through the Union disaster at Fredericksburg in the winter of 1862. When he enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts in 1863, he became an eyewitness and a participant in that regiment's campaigns until the end of the war. His description of the assault on Fort Wagner is surprisingly brief; in fact, his account of the 54th's post-Fort Wagner experiences is more valuable. Stephens painted a disturbing portrait of a regiment shot through with dissension and internal strife, centered on the federal government's unwillingness to equalize the pay of black and white sol-

diers. For those who might have gotten the impression from the film *Glory* that the unit's history ended with Fort Wagner, Stephens' revelations of racism, mismanagement, and mutiny among the officers and men of the 54th are particularly riveting.

Many of Stephens' observations about everyday life in the Union Army are the usual fare one finds in Civil War correspondence, suggesting that, on some levels, the experience of war knows no color. Stephens complained about bad roads—"no people in the world ... would dignify this meandering quagmire, this tortuous slough of despondency, with the title of road"—bad weather, bad food, and bad generals (p. 137). He grew frustrated at a the lack of information about his foes, writing "we know nothing sure of the number, location or purpose of the enemy" (p. 142). This is pretty standard material for anyone who has read Civil War soldier's memoirs, though Stephens' gift for prose lends his accounts a colorful and sometimes quite amusing tone. Note for example his ode to mud, written in the winter of 1862: "Oh, omnipresent mud! soft, fathomless mud! grey, red, saffron colored. The swine are in ecstasies..." (p. 162).

But Stephens' sensitivity to matters of race and the plight of African-Americans give many of his letters a hard, bright edge lacking in most Civil War correspondence. He was at his poignant best in describing the travails and hopes of the many runaway slaves he encountered. A typical story involved Washington and Diana, "two chattels, personal" belonging to the secession-

ist planter who owned the land upon which the Union army was encamped. The planter fled the area, leaving his slaves destitute. "These poor creatures had nothing to eat," Stephens wrote. "I took Washington with me in my own tent, and engaged him to act as body servant to an officer." When the planter returned to reclaim his "property," both Diana and Washington quickly vanished "like so much thin air" (pp. 133-34). Stephens told many such little stories in his correspondence, putting "appealing human faces on the men and women who desperately wanted—and deserved—freedom," Yacavone writes (p. 160).

Stephens also spared no one in his unflinching description of the abuse and mistreatment meted out by whites on African-Americans. He could be quite cutting in his remarks, and he was given to generalizations overly broad in their severity. Traveling with the Army of the Potomac through Maryland in the fall of 1861, he heaped abuse on the state's white inhabitants. "Take a score of sheep's thieves, extract the essence, then the quintessence of all their meanness, and you have pictured in your mind's eye of a hang-dog Marylander" (p. 143). Sometimes these rough judgments extended even to ex-slaves. Stephens displayed the latent class consciousness of a middle-class Philadelphian, disparaging Southern blacks as "uncivilized" and "unchristian" simpletons (p. 106). Most slaves were, he thought, "infidels," and Virginia blacks were, in his opinion, "stupid, careless, and shiftless" (p. 204).

Such pronouncements are dismaying; but at the same time, Stephens' letters perform the invaluable task of rattling our otherwise comfortable assumptions concerning Americans—white and black—during the Civil War. It

is all too easy to pigeonhole African-Americans as entirely free of prejudice, uniformly loyal to the Union, entirely uncritical of the Lincoln administration, and eager to fight alongside Northern whites. But Stephens' world is messy and complicated, written by a man with conflicting loyalties and facing an uncertain future. Thus he could write, with apparent sincerity, that he would fight for the Confederacy if they freed their slaves: "I shall give my life to him who enfolds the scroll of emancipation, no matter who he may be" (p. 134). He disliked and distrusted the Lincoln administration, and he was ambivalent about the moral character of white Union soldiers, many of whom he observed engaging in drinking sprees and other dissolute behavior.

It is unclear how many African-Americans would have shared Stephens' views in these matters, and this question of his uniqueness or typicality is the one caveat I have concerning the value of *A Voice of Thunder*. Yacavone seems to suggest at times that Stephens is the authentic voice of the black experience during the Civil War. Perhaps. But I could not help but wonder whether, say, a runaway slave from South Carolina would have agreed with many of Stephens' observations. This is less a criticism of Yacavone (or Stephens) than a suggestion that more research is needed into the lives of African-Americans—Northern, Southern, ex-slave, free, rich, and poor—during the Civil War, so we may set Stephens and his correspondence in a proper regional, cultural, and political context.

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