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**Christian G. Samito**. *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 320 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4846-1.

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## Soldiers and Citizens

In *Becoming American Under Fire*, Christian G. Samito brings together two groups typically portrayed by nineteenth-century historians as oppositional: African Americans and Irish Americans. Rather than seeing their stories as antagonistic, however, Samito argues that together, African Americans and Irish Americans paved parallel and sometimes complementary paths that expanded ideas of American citizenship in the Civil War era.

Samito begins his challenge to the field of "whiteness" studies and its emphasis on racial hostility between blacks and Irish in the tumultuous 1850s, when, he argues, a "crisis of citizenship" united the two groups in common cause.[1] An era of great social transformation, including the nation's westward expansion, increasing industrialization and urbanization, and growing sectional hostility over slavery, the 1850s witnessed many contests over who exactly comprised "the people" of the United States. While nativists sought to restrict citizenship to native-born white men, African Americans (most notably Dred Scott) rejected the idea that citizenship was defined by race. Likewise, according to Samito, Irish Americans fought against anti-Catholicism and pushed to have the status of naturalized citizens recognized as equal to that of native-born citizens. Both groups, Samito explains, used republican rhetoric, and most important, narratives of military service to establish their claims to citizenship and counter nativist charges that they were cowardly, disloyal, or otherwise unfit to be included in the body politic. Radical black abolitionists like William C. Nell, whose book *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) established a revolutionary lineage for African Americans based on the contributions of such men as Crispus Attucks and other Revolutionary War heroes, heralded the military sacrifices of black men on behalf of a country that continued to enslave and alienate them. Similarly, Irish Americans reminded the country of their service in the Mexican War as a way to demonstrate their fealty to the American nation and not to the pope or the queen.

The Civil War created yet another–and much greater–opportunity for African Americans and Irish Americans to demonstrate their loyalty. Repeating a familiar tune in the history of emancipation, Samito recounts how the army became a vehicle for liberation for African Americans, providing them valuable political skills that would serve them well after the war ended. Not only did blacks display the requisite martial prowess that impressed white soldiers and officers, not to mention lawmakers in Washington, but, Samito argues, their experiences with military justice also proved to be a most effective school for learning how to *act* like citizens in courts of law. Irish Americans, too, gained "a new appreciation for the United States as a beacon of republicanism and a belief that its perpetuation would help Ireland and the entire world" (p. 133). After the war, veterans of both groups would lead the way in expanding the legal and cultural components of American citizenship to include their respective members.

The book is well organized and readable. Its main premise, that military service in the Civil War enabled African Americans and Irish Americans to make claims as citizens and thus insert themselves into the body politic as loyal and deserving members, is uncontroversial. Unfortunately, *Becoming American Under Fire* suf-

fers from some conceptual and historiographical shortcomings that diminish its potential contributions to the study of American citizenship.

The first criticism concerns chapter 4, in which Samito lays out his argument about the formative nature of black soldiers' encounters with military courts. The idea that black men first encountered the law and learned to master the legality of citizenship through Civil War court martials is untenable. A large body of legal history scholarship on African Americans' antebellum encounters with the legal system and their complex understanding of how to bring suits, testify, and petition state legislatures and other legal authorities firmly establishes blacks' long-standing knowledge of and experience with the law.[2] Thus, the military may have taught black soldiers many things, but how to work the legal system was not one of them.

This leads to a more problematic issue: the celebratory narrative that dominates the history of the black military experience. Apart from seeing the military as a vehicle for black liberation, historians of emancipation rarely consider the effects of impressment, physical punishments like whipping, and as Samito notes, even executions, on black soldiers and their families. Recruiting among contrabands in the Union-occupied South typically involved coercion and violence, leaving women, children, and the elderly without the support of able-bodied men. The inequitable–and at times even nonexistent–pay given to black soldiers compounded the vulnerability of black families at home.[3] By Samito's own account, the same black soldiers whom he insists were discovering the power of citizenship in military tribunals more often than not met their fate at the end of a hangman's rope (p. 91).

Army life replicated many forms of violence and coercion ostensibly left behind with the destruction of slavery. Furthermore, arming slaves did not necessitate making them equal citizens. In some ways, military service was as much a tool for disciplining a worrisome population that was neither slave nor free and that posed serious economic, social, and political problems for the government. The American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission said as much in their 1863 report "on the condition and management of emancipated refugees." Giving freedmen uniforms and allowing them to march to work in formation, the report explained, would make them more diligent and enthusiastic workers. Combat also provided an opportunity to alleviate the burdens emancipation posed. As one white colonel admitted, "When this war is over & we summed up the entire loss of life … I shall not have any regrets if it is found that a part of the dead are *niggers* and that *all* are not white men."[4] It is little wonder, then, that the legal rewards black soldiers managed to gain were so quickly rolled back after Reconstruction.

This leaves us with some crucial yet unanswered questions about the nature of American citizenship in the wake of the Civil War. Samito views citizenship as the ever-increasing accumulation of individual rights, namely, political and civil rights, such as the right to own property, vote, and run for public office. Not surprisingly, this was the same way many black veterans understood citizenship. Yet as Samito stresses in the book's beginning, there were many different ways to define citizenship in the nineteenth century, not all of which were limited to the possession of individual political rights. The labor movement, for instance, advocated a vision of economic citizenship that does not appear in Samito's text, although Irish laborers comprise a large portion of his focus. Those visions of economic citizenship rarely, if ever, included black workers, a fact that makes Samito's contention that Irish American and African American citizenship struggles were not antagonistic doubtful. The fact that they shared similar language in speaking of their rights earned as soldiers of the Republic means little in the face of continued racial hostility between black and white working classes in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, women's rights activists organized against the masculinist vision of martial citizenship that Samito implies was a boon to all Americans. In fact, the same soldiers Samito credits with expanding American citizenship also were pivotal in the violent conquest and subordination of Native Americans in the West, as well as their "little brown brothers" in Latin America and the Philippines later in the century.[5] What, then, can be said of the kind of citizenship they embodied?

Despite this book's noble endeavor to unravel some of the complexities of citizenship in the mid-nineteenth century, it remains a tangled subject fraught with serious gendered and racial implications. As Rogers Smith reminds us, there have been "multiple traditions" of American citizenship that have blended "liberal, democratic republican, and inegalitarian ascriptive elements in various combinations designed to be politically popular."[6] In other words, it is a history that cannot be told simply as a story of expansion and inclusion. Samito's attempt to dislodge the history of Irish Americans and African Americans from the skeptical clutches of whiteness studies ultimately fails. The Civil War and its nationalizing impulse may have momentarily broadened the meaning

of citizenship for black and Irish men, but it also limited its meaning for working people, women, Native Americans, and other racial minorities, including blacks themselves. Racial, class, and gender identity remained important sites of struggle over the meaning of citizenship in ways that belie the reassuring story Samito wants to tell.

Notes

[1]. On whiteness and the pitting of Irish Americans against African Americans, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2007); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (1996; repr., New York: Routledge, 2008); and Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2]. See, among others, Loren Schweninger's documentary history of petitions in the antebellum South, *The Southern Debate over Slavery*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001-2008); Laura Edwards, "Status without Rights: African Americans and the Tangled History of Law and Governance in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (April 2007): 365-393; Laura Edwards, *The People and Their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Ariela Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); and Edlie Wong, *Neither Fugitive Nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits, and the Legal Culture of Travel* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[3]. For a reconsideration of the black military experience and the pain and suffering it inflicted on black families, see Jim Downs, "The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and Their Children during and after the Civil War," in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78-103. There is also much documentary evidence to support the widespread use of impressment and other coercive methods to recruit among Southern blacks, as well as the brutal treatment of black soldiers by their comrades in arms. For instance, see the reminiscences of Northern missionaries, such as Elizabeth Ware Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal, 1863-1868* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); and Henry L. Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966). See also Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York: Collier, 1969). The most important source on this topic is Ira Berlin, et. al. eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, series 2, *The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[4]. Samuel J. Kirkwood to Gen. Henry W. Halleck, Aug. 5, 1862, reprinted in Berlin, *The Black Military Experience*, 85; and American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, *Preliminary Report Touching Upon the Condition and Management of Emancipated Refugees*, June 30, 1863, U.S. Serial Set, Number 1176, Ex. Doc. 53.

[5]. On economic citizenship, see, for instance, David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and, more recently, Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). On race and labor, see Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford, 1991); and Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a critique of "martial masculinity" and the citizen-soldier ideal, see Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Cecelia O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998). On the Indian Wars and U.S. imperialism, see Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*; and O'Leary, *To Die For*.

[6]. Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.

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