

# H-Net Reviews

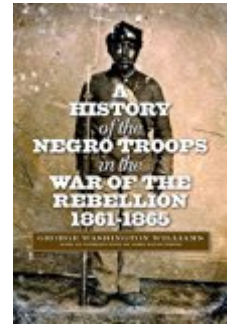
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George Washington Williams. *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of Rebellion, 1861-1865*. Foreword by John David Smith. The North's Civil War Series. 1887; repr., New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. xl + 257 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3385-4.

Reviewed by Adam Rock (University of Central Florida)

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## From the Battlefield to the History Books: George Washington Williams and the Fight over Civil War Memory

To modern historians, the influential role that African Americans played in preserving the Union and fighting for their own emancipation during the Civil War is undeniable. However, this was not always the historical consensus. African Americans' contributions to the war were, not surprisingly, a controversial topic in the decades following Reconstruction. Separating himself from the literature of the postwar period, George Washington Williams attempted to address this scholarly neglect of African Americans' influence in the Civil War. When first published in 1887, Williams's study, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865*, was one of only three works that investigated this understudied element of the Union army. Williams tried to identify the quality of black troops, determine whether or not they had served with valor, and show how they compared to their white comrades during the war. The product of Williams's inquiry was a groundbreaking revisionist study that forcefully and eloquently thrust the African American contribution into the larger historical discourse of the war.

Throughout his book, Williams concisely and methodically identified the influential contributions of black soldiers not only during the Civil War, but also throughout history. Beginning with a discussion of ancient Egypt, Williams established a long history of proficient and courageous black soldiers spanning thousands of years. While he supported his argument with compelling secondary literature, his effort to prove the fighting qual-

ities of Africans over the centuries tends to be overly positive. Williams continued his historical narrative by demonstrating the agency and valor of black troops in the American as well as Haitian revolutions in much more detail than his previous chapter, focusing on the important role that they played in deciding both conflicts. Following his evaluation of black soldiers in the years leading up to the Civil War, Williams placed the debate over whether or not to allow African Americans to serve in the Union army into a larger context of antebellum racial ideologies. He lambasted Abraham Lincoln for not acting sooner in allowing the enlistment of black troops. At the same time, he lauded the commitment of African Americans to fighting for the Union. In addition to documenting the battlefield exploits of black troops during the war, Williams examined several factors that influenced the effectiveness of the U.S. Colored Troops as a whole. These factors included the dispute over unequal pay given to black soldiers; a predisposition to use the Colored Troops in fatigue duty consisting of manual labor; and racial stereotypes among military leadership, limiting the use of black units in combat roles throughout the South.

The most influential aspect of Williams's study dealt with his geographic and chronological examination of the combat experiences of black troops. These five chapters were crucial in supporting his thesis concerning the combat effectiveness and reliability of African American units. Unsurprisingly, the author offered a rather celebratory depiction of black troops in the war that was de-

void of criticism and chose to blame any failures on their white commanders or poor planning. Williams successfully supported key themes of his study through his analysis of several military engagements. Examples of this approach can be seen in the author's portrayal of Federal defeats at Fort Wagner and Olustee, where, Williams concluded, it was ultimately poor planning and reckless fighting that doomed the Federals from the onset, regardless of the heroic actions of selfless black soldiers. Similarly, he illuminated black troops' selfless devotion to preserving the government in his depiction of Confederate atrocities with the slaughter of what the author referred to as "Negro Spartans" at Fort Pillow. The author concluded with a fragmented chapter reaffirming the influence of African American soldiers not only in securing a Union victory, but also in facilitating their own emancipation with blood and sacrifice.

Initially, Williams's work was received with varying degrees of acclaim. The African American community joyfully embraced his study as it highlighted the actions of the Colored Troops during the war. Williams successfully included African Americans in the historical narrative, which had initially excluded them almost entirely. The contemporary, and predominately white-only, academic community received his work positively but not uncritically. Early critics applauded the book for highlighting the actions of black troops in the war, but often in a condescending manner. Reviewers from *The Literary World* were repeatedly surprised at the quality of the work and its depth of research considering a person of color had written it. In addition to racially influenced remarks, critics from *The Dial* took aim at Williams's condemnation of Lincoln and the Federal government, labeling it "natural impatience" (p. xxvii). Reviewers from *The Boston Post* frequently referred to Williams's lack of historical training, leading to a somewhat "disappointing" work of history (p. xxviii). The first modern historian of the U.S. Colored Troops, Dudley Taylor Cornish, who published *The Sable Arm; Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (1956), considered Williams's book the best of the three works hitherto written on the topic and the one least poisoned by the racial stereotypes of the age. Understandably, Cornish agreed that the work was weak in organization, poorly documented, and clearly lacking in objectivity when held to the standards of modern scholarship, but he agreed it was undoubtedly the definitive standard work in the field until the publication of his study in 1956. While historians have largely varied on their criticism of Williams's seminal work, the study must be contextualized within its own time.

Considering that Williams lacked professional training as a historian, his military and social history of black soldiers was exemplary for its era. The author recognized his potential bias as a veteran of the U.S. Colored Troops, and he attempted to remove his personal experiences from the narrative. Not surprisingly, Williams had clear difficulties achieving this end throughout his work, but through the infusion of a large number of varying sources, including oral histories, newspaper accounts, and official government documents, he supported his conclusions. Some of the notable primary documents that he examined were the *Official Records of the War of Rebellion*, and official records in the departments of state and war, and the Library of Congress. These collections are commonplace for any modern scholar conducting research on the Civil War, but this was not so in the period in which Williams completed his study. This inclusion of new and varying sources greatly strengthened his final product and set it apart from other works battling over the memory of the war.

This conflict over memory is an additional aspect of Williams's study, as it does much to explain the author's tendency to portray the actions and motivations of African American soldiers in an overly positive manner. During the postwar period, a "battle for memory" took place between whites and blacks, as well as Northerners and Southerners. This conflict largely omitted the contribution of black soldiers during the war, and it portrayed them in an insignificant role. The desire to combat this falsified portrayal led to Williams's celebratory depiction of black troops in the war. However, understanding the biased dialogue of the era in which it was produced and the objective of the author, one must sympathize with his methods.

The most recent publication of *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion* includes a detailed foreword from accomplished Civil War historian, John David Smith, that is sure to add much to the reader's understanding and appreciation of Williams's study within the larger historical context. Smith provides a detailed history of Williams's accomplishments, and analyzes how different generations of historians have viewed his seminal work on the exploits of African American soldiers during the Civil War. Overall, not only is Williams's study a detailed historical account of the influence of black soldiers during the war, but it also survives as a historical artifact to the battle for postwar memory and black agency in the decades following the conflict. *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion*, with the addition of Smith's new foreword, should appeal to professional and

amateur historians alike, but could be particularly useful to an undergraduate audience interested in the Civil War, the influence of the U.S. Colored Troops, or the fight over postwar memory.

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