



Douglas Egerton. *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America*. New York: Basic Books, 2016. 448 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-09664-0.

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A Tale of Two Halves

As I read Douglas Egerton's *Thunder at the Gates*, which was recently named a co-winner of the 2017 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize, I could not help but feel as if I were reading two halves of a story. This does not appear to be a deliberate strategy by the author; instead it is a happy coincidence that came with the careful construction of his study of the African American fighting units of Massachusetts, spearheaded, of course, by the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. It is refreshing to see that he decided to examine *all* the Massachusetts units, the 54th, 55th, and 5th Cavalry, as opposed to only the one that made the famous initial charge on Fort Wagner.[1]

In the first half of the book, Egerton's account stands as a corrective to the largely misunderstood nature of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the same group depicted famously, if not necessarily accurately, in the movie *Glory* (1989), which starred Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, Cary Elwes, and Morgan Freeman. The author is quick to remind us that yes, the 54th Massachusetts did have the honor of leading the charge on Fort Wagner, but the story of these men did not end, as the movie did, on the sands of Morris Island, South Carolina. Moreover, that past accounts of the unit centered on the indomitable historical character of Col. Robert Gould Shaw; indeed, Shaw's letters, which authors such as Egerton and others have relied upon, remain widely accessible, especially since the publication in 1992 of *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. When Egerton undertook this study, he opted for a more complete picture of

the unit by examining it at the grassroots level. Thus, social-political history enters the discussion, but in this study, it takes a back seat to the stories of the men who fought in the Massachusetts units for many reasons: for honor, racial uplift, and social ascendency, including but not limited to the quest for citizenship; and for the preservation, and transformation of the United States. They were former slaves, including runaways, free black men, and white men of privilege.

Amongst the white men of privilege was Shaw. In a sense, there is no way that Egerton can avoid arguably the most famous member of the 54th Massachusetts, but getting around his historical persona and at the heart of what drove the average African American fighting man proves difficult. Indeed, the work is entitled *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America*. The line "thunder at the gates" is a riff on a line from a poem, though written by a black member of the 55th, about, well, Robert Gould Shaw. I mention this because Egerton, I believe, sought to advance the historical narrative not only beyond the story largely depicted in *Glory*, but beyond the overshadowing image of Shaw. In the first part of the work, he sometimes succeeds in doing so, such as when he introduces the "travelers," who included various African American members of the unit such as Nicholas Said, a gifted linguist and global traveler; James Monroe Trotter; Henry Jarvis, Stephen Swails; Lewis Douglass, the son of noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass; and William Carney, to name but a few. Other "Brahmins," the class of white men

that produced Shaw and hailed from the socialite circles of the Bostonian elite, also appear, and redirect some attention away; here, I specifically think of the brothers Hallowell: Edward Needles (Ned) and Norwood Penrose (Pen), whose relationship with the Massachusetts units is equally fascinating and daring and mirrors, and ultimately supersedes, that of Shaw. At other times, though, and this is perhaps more a reflection of the availability of material on the colonel, Shaw's character receives a tremendous share of the spotlight as the first part of the book races to intermission; it is all there, the twisting, contradictory nature of Shaw, who rejected, then rethought, and ultimately accepted command of the all-black unit. The man who could easily slip in and out of racist language and cultural beliefs of the era. The same man who had repeated premonitions of his untimely demise. Warts and all, he appears center stage.

Egerton depicts, in spirited writing, the moment the unit and Shaw is most remembered for: its initial bloody and costly assault on Fort Wagner. In many ways, this is a fitting breakaway point, as it steeped in imagery: a largely African American unit, albeit led by white officers of privilege, charging in the sands and surf of a southern island against the bulwark of slavery that Wagner becomes in the mind of the audience. It is the audacity of hope in action. It is a fitting end to the first half of the book.

Too often, the *after* of war is not depicted. In *Glory*, we get a small glimpse of it as the corpses of Shaw (Broderick) and African American personnel are buried in the sands of Morris Island—ironically, in an integrated fashion by those that resented the very idea of racial equality. But then the movie ends and the story of 54th largely trails off into the ashes of time. Not so with Egerton's work. It is here that the second half of the book begins and we see *Thunder at the Gates* at its very best.

The cost of waging war is always high and the 54th Massachusetts lined up to a man and paid the bounty, from the loss of its beloved commander, Shaw, on the battlefield to that of Charles Reason, a mixed-blood runaway slave, who passed on under the thoughtful and watchful care of Dr. Esther Hill Hawks. Those that survived the crucible of Wagner found themselves recovering in Union Army hospitals. There are some wounds, though, that do not heal easily. For some, they never heal at all. But not just for the soldiers. Family, friends, and loved ones also suffer under the awesome weight of war and the wreckage that accompanies it.

As the book plunges ahead, issues such as unequal pay, the further activity of the 54th, along with the 55th

and 5th Cavalry, in the southern theater of the war, most notably during the Battle of Olustee in Florida, the hazards of occupation duty, and other moments ranging from the personal to the professional that are often overlooked or overshadowed by the assault on Wagner appear and do so in a fashion that adds to the overall story. As noted above, it is all here, warts and all.

Thunder at the Gates provides the most complete picture of the 54th, 55th, and 5th Cavalry that we have. It should be considered the standard on the subject, an achievement that will help shape further understanding of African American personnel at war during the Civil War. Whether these men "redeemed America" or not is an issue that will likely be debated for years to come, especially considering the awful treatment black soldiers faced for the hundred years that followed the end of the war, let alone the continuing prejudice we see in our own era toward the African American community. Certainly, though, the 54th Massachusetts, along with other African American units, became a point of pride for the black community, so much so that emerging leaders of the civil rights movement often looked back on these men with great pride, using their service, and the service of their contemporaries, as a rallying cry for equality throughout the twentieth century. In that sentiment, perhaps, Egerton is right after all. These men did redeem America—if only for a time.

Note

[1]. Especially considering that there were other notable African American units, such as 1st Kansas Colored, 1st South Carolina Volunteers, and the Louisiana Native Guards that also contributed to the war effort in meaningful ways. The careful reader will note they appear throughout Egerton's work. For recent monographs on these units see John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); James G. Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Robert W. Lull, *Civil War General and Indian Fighter James M. Williams: Leader of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry and the 9th U.S. Cavalry* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013); Ian Michael Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, The Civil War's First African American Combat Unit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014); and C. P. Weaver, ed., *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

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