Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Men of Color to Arms! Black Soldiers, Indian Wars and the Quest for Equality

Review Number:
1032
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 February, 2011
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ISBN:
9780393060393
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£21.00
Pages:
315pp.
Publisher:
W. W. Norton
Place of Publication:
New York, NY
Reviewer:
Robert Cook

In the late 1980s, a promising young African-American actor named Denzel Washington was asked to take a leading role in the movie, *Glory*. Directed by Edward Zwick, a white liberal, *Glory* told the story of a relatively minor action in the American Civil War. The attack on Battery Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863 was an unsuccessful attempt by the black Union troops of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, led by their elite white commander, Robert Gould Shaw, to storm a strongly-defended Confederate fort in the defensive line around Charleston. The news that blacks had fought in the Civil War came to Washington as a complete revelation. Like most African-Americans of his generation, he had assumed that his forebears were slaves until the Civil War liberated them from bondage. However, as Elizabeth Leonard makes clear at the beginning of her perceptive account of blacks in the late 19th-century United States Army, this was not the case. Around 200,000 African-Americans, the majority of them ex-slaves, fought in the North?s increasingly sanguinary campaigns to defeat the pro-slavery Confederacy. The mass recruitment of blacks into segregated regiments, supported by race leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, began in earnest in the months after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. Their patriotic courage at places like Fort Wagner and in several important actions during the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864 and 1865, not only contributed to the North?s dearly won triumph but also convinced many northern whites that the liberated bondsmen were entitled to equal citizenship. By 1870, after

ratification of the 15th Amendment, African-American males were constitutionally entitled to vote. For a short time during the post-war reconstruction period, it appeared that the nearly 37,000 black troops who perished in the Civil War had not died in vain.

But even before reconstruction began, there were intimations that blacks in the military were not going to get a fair deal from the United States government. No African-American troops were permitted to march in the great victory parade which took place in Washington in March 1865 and white volunteers were demobilized at a much faster rate than blacks. This meant that more than 100,000 armed black men were still stationed in the southern states that summer, a fact which occasioned widespread and sometimes violent resentment on the part not only of embittered Rebels in the defeated Confederacy but also of white Unionists in notionally loyal states like Kentucky where slavery was not abolished until ratification of the 13th Amendment in late 1865.

Although conservative Democrats were eager to expel African-Americans from the country?s armed forces, even the most moderate congressional Republican was determined to ensure that the government should reward black loyalty to the Union. During the spring of 1866 the country?s dominant party passed a rash of federal legislation to promote greater equality and security for the former slaves. Republicans at the Capitol also oversaw a reorganisation of the military, mandating a 54,000-strong army of which two cavalry and four (from 1869, two) infantry regiments were set aside for blacks. While this policy replicated the segregated pattern of the Civil War, Leonard argues convincingly that this primitive form of affirmative action was the only way of guaranteeing blacks a significant role in the country?s armed forces. Desegregation at this juncture in American history would almost certainly have resulted in the expulsion of blacks from the military, for relatively few whites were willing to serve alongside African-Americans. A number of high-profile officers, George Armstrong Custer among them, refused point blank to take command of ?coloured? troops.

Leonard makes a few nods to the experiences of African-American soldiers in the reconstruction South but she is concerned principally with the experience of black regulars in the Far West in the 1870s and 1880s. Here she is forced to maintain a difficult balance between detailing ? in generally positive terms ? black military service on the frontier and acknowledging that her subjects were being employed by the government to subjugate another oppressed race. Black troops fought in all the major Indian conflicts of the period including the 1874-5 Red River War against several different tribes and the final campaigns against the Apache in the following decade. She maintains that balance reasonably successfully by demonstrating that both blacks and Indians were victims (not always passive ones it must be stressed) of white racism. African-American soldiers confronted racial prejudice every day of their lives in post-bellum America. Out west they had to endure not only sweltering heat, execrable food, and unsanitary quarters, but also harsh military discipline unequally administered by some white officers. Among the latter was Captain Lee Humfreville, a particularly sadistic captain, who handcuffed several of his black troopers to a wagon and then dragged them several hundred miles across Texas.

Even when blacks came to the rescue of white soldiers, they received only limited thanks for their efforts. In September 1868 black soldiers from the Tenth Cavalry relieved a detachment of white troopers who had spent eight harrowing days besieged on an island in the Arikaree River by hundreds of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. Matters had grown so desperate at what soon became known as the Battle of Beecher?s Island that the white servicemen were forced to drink the blood of dead horses and their own urine to stay alive. The skin colour of their rescuers did not staunch their relief at being saved. One former slave belonging to the Tenth Cavalry recalled the whites? delirious response: ?[W]e all cried together as we helped them out of their starving condition? (p. 91). Those same white cavalrymen, however, soon expunged the heroism of their black rescuers from the record. In his published account of Beecher?s Island written 20 years later Major George Forsyth failed to acknowledge that the men who relieved his embattled troop had been African-Americans ? a response that mirrored the wider, ongoing effort by white Americans to write out blacks from the country?s historical memory.

The few black men who attempted to train as officers at the United States Military Academy at West Point

were subjected to alternating harassment and social ostracism by white cadets. A Georgian, Henry Ossian Flipper, did manage to graduate in 1877 but even he was eventually dismissed from the army for mishandling funds at his post at Fort Davis, Texas. The fact that no African-American graduated from West Point for half a century after 1889 tells its own story about the racism of the military establishment and nothing about the determination of black soldiers to prove their worth as men and patriots. By the 1890s African-Americans, their Civil War loyalty and frontier service notwithstanding, were being lynched by the hundreds and experiencing wholesale loss of their constitutional rights with the connivance of the very government that sought their military assistance.

While Leonard recounts the efforts of white paternalists to disseminate information about the work of black troops on the frontier, she rightly stresses the damage that well-intentioned whites did to the Indians who were being corralled steadily onto reservations by the army. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, formerly a white officer in the black Tenth Cavalry, thought that with proper discipline and sustained acculturation Indians could be assimilated into white ?civilisation? in the same manner as African-Americans. His practical contribution to the civilising process was to set up the Carlisle Indian School at an old military base in Pennsylvania in 1879. Intended to provide vocational training for Indians, this was modelled on General Samuel Chapman Armstrong?s Hampton Institute in Virginia where Pratt had launched his educational career by setting up an Indian adjunct. Even though the school represented a more humane response to ?the Indian problem? than the murderous solutions propounded by many settlers and some military personnel, one can certainly argue, as Leonard suggests, ?that Carlisle embodied a vision of assimilation that amounted to nothing more than cultural genocide or ?education for extinction?? (p. 151).

Although it is hard not to be impressed and, indeed, moved by the experiences of African-Americans in the United States Army during the late 19th century, one might wish that Leonard?s awareness of the black troopers? ambiguous function as citizen-soldiers and racial oppressors had led her to attempt some meaningful comparisons between the United States? use of blacks in the military with the way imperial powers like Britain and France deployed non-whites in their contemporaneous colonial wars. It seems clear that in all three instances governments were prepared to utilise black manpower when it served their interests and that in some circumstances subaltern peoples could be co-opted by the state even when the rewards accruing from co-optation were minimal. On this evidence loyalty to the Union in the Civil War gave black Americans few, if any, advantages over the non-white troops who fought to extend the reach of the British and French empires in Africa and Asia.

Although historians must pay close attention to the political and cultural context in which the frontier regulars operated, there is no getting away from the fact that African-Americans in the United States military were witting agents of an aggrandizing state and that indigenous people of colour suffered appalling hardships because of their actions. How, then, did black frontier regulars explain their military service and what did the Indians themselves make of their African-American oppressors?

Leonard?s account provides numerous clues relating to the first of these questions. Blacks joined the post-war United States Army for many reasons, not least the prospect of swapping the drudgery of sharecropping for an occupation that provided them with regular wages, the possibility of excitement, and a means of putting their new-found citizenship into action. Although black politicians like Frederick Douglass recognised the common humanity of the Indians, most African-Americans embraced the hegemonic notion that the country?s indigenous peoples were savages who needed to be tamed for the good of the republic (if not of themselves as well). Having exhibited their loyalty to the Union during the Civil War, it was no surprise that they should have thought in this way, particularly when so many of them shared the outlook of native-born Protestants (here Leonard might have made more of nineteenth-century African-Americans? frequent efforts to draw a distinction between their patriotic selves and allegedly unpatriotic foreigners). But if any black frontier regulars altered their views of the Indians as a result of their military service in the West, there is no evidence in this book to prove it. As for what the Indians thought about black troops, the record here too is largely silent. In this respect *Men of Color to Arms!* reflects the fact that the book is not a research-based monograph. Leonard makes adept use of printed primary materials such as courts martial records, personal memoirs and newspapers but writing for a trade press necessitates a degree of intellectual

concession. Relatively few manuscript collections or oral history sources, for example, are cited in the endnotes. The Indian side of this complex story of racial interaction within a broadly imperial framework therefore remains untold ? but this does not mean that it cannot be related at all.

The Army is now the most integrated institution in the United States, a fact that most Americans would regard as a cause for celebration. But, better rewarded though they may be than their 19th-century predecessors, black United States troops today continue to serve the geopolitical interests of an imperial state which remains at best indifferent to the plight of large numbers of African-Americans at home. Elizabeth Leonard offers no thoughts in this commendably accessible and nuanced text about the ironies embedded in modern black military service but there is no reason, even in the wake of Denzel Washington?s ascent to stardom and the election of a black president, for readers not to reflect on their unsettling persistence.

The author is grateful for Dr. Cook's generous review of her book, and offers no further comment.

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