

### Duty First: Robert Gould Shaw In His Own Words And His Biographer'S

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## Review

### DUTY FIRST

#### Robert Gould Shaw in his own words and his biographer's

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**Duncan, Russell** *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. University of Georgia Press, ISBN 820321745

On May 28, 1863, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored) paraded through Boston on its way to the seat of war. It marched to the Common and the reviewing stands and passed "through the streets of Boston and into glory," as Duncan comments in his biography of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Philips, and John Greenleaf Whittier were part of the largest crowd in Boston's history. The parade and review was not merely an occasion for local pride. It was a public symbol of new things. Black men were going to fight against slavery in a war begun to preserve the Union and now widened into a crusade for freedom.

As the black regiment swung past, the crowds cheered and wept. The 54th Massachusetts was recruited from the free black families of the North, and Frederick Douglass's eldest son Lewis was a sergeant-major in this elite unit. It was the pride of abolitionist Boston and the pride of the free persons of color (to use the contemporary census term) from the East Coast cities to the Great Lakes. The 54th Massachusetts would earn black Americans "the right to citizenship in the United States," Douglass himself explained in his *Monthly* in August 1863. The future, in all its civic variety, seemed to rest upon the courage and discipline of these thousand men, who sang of John Brown and freedom as they marched through Boston.

The colonel of the 54th Massachusetts was young Robert Gould Shaw, already a combat veteran of the 2nd Massachusetts and a scion of Boston's abolitionist and Brahmin aristocracy. Related to Russells, Lowells, Sturgises, and Parkmans, the Shaws had attained wealth and a social position as unchallenged as that of the Charleston, grandees. Shaw enjoyed the perquisites

of wealth and social ease, the years in Europe, time at Harvard, an excellent marriage, a choice of careers. Charming and outgoing, he was described by the Philadelphia abolitionist and teacher Charlotte Forten as "a wonderfully loveable person."

With position comes social responsibilities, and Shaw was raised in an abolitionist and reformist circle that never forgot duty. Inheriting a Unitarian background, Shaw learned a civic responsibility that included personal virtue along with advocacy of general social betterment. The central reform was abolition, and Shaw's family was devoted, above all, to the "great cause" of slavery's extinction. Robert Gould Shaw himself was never a radical abolitionist, but became through his duty and death, as Russell Duncan asserts in his preface, "the most important abolitionist hero of the war."

Colonel Shaw is the focus of two books by Duncan, a professor of history in the English Institute at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. The first of these, **Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune** (the title taken from the speech of William James at the dedication of the Shaw Memorial in 1897), is an edition of Shaw's letters. These have been compiled from the Robert Gould Shaw Papers at Harvard, from collections at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the New York Public Library, and from a privately printed edition of letters in 1864. This volume was first published by the University of Georgia Press in hardcover in 1992 and has been reissued now in softcover.

### **An expansion of Duncan's biographical introduction**

The second book, **Where Death and Glory Meet**, is an expansion of Duncan's biographical introduction on Shaw from **Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune**. It appeared in both hardcover and softcover in 1999. The two books overlap quite substantially in subject matter as well as in the use of Shaw's letters as the key source regarding his life and work.

Russell Duncan's outstanding edition of Shaw's letters is a model for this sort of work. The archival origin of the letters is clearly indicated. The notes inform but do not overwhelm. Where information cannot be found, for example, with respect to the Scottish overseer on a Virginia plantation near Harpers Ferry, described on page 116, Duncan notes that fact. Skirmishes, even those so slight that many at the time did not notice them (such as the action at Bunker Hill, Virginia, on July 15, 1861), appear in the notes. (There is one personal caveat. In

his letter of July 18, 1861, written to his mother from Charleston, Virginia, Shaw noted that he had met a Major Doubleday. The editor's notes identify this officer as Abner Doubleday, "best known for founding the American game of baseball." As a sometime baseball historian I am driven to mention that Abner Doubleday had nothing to do with baseball, which was invented in New York in 1841 by Alexander Cartwright. But this bow to legend amidst the sustained excellence of Duncan's editorial work illustrates the intertwined levels of history and myth always present in historical accounts.)

The editor-author's introduction to the letters and his biography of Robert Gould Shaw explore two salient issues, one concerning Shaw himself, the other about the War and abolition. Duncan has made no attempt to conceal Shaw's intense personal discomfort over his role as colonel of the 54th Massachusetts. In common with virtually all of his contemporaries in white America, Shaw believed in the inferiority of black people, whom he habitually called "darkeys" and worse. Shaw at first rejected the command of the 54th Massachusetts, in spite of the promotion from captain to colonel, in spite of a request via letter from Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew, and in spite of his father's personal delivery of the letter to lend the weight of moral obligation.

Even after he had changed his mind and accepted what he reluctantly believed to be his bounden duty, Shaw had constant doubts about his men. Could they accept the regimen and discipline of military garrison life? He feared the regiment would lack courage under fire. Most of all he dreaded an incident (that never came) that would disgrace the men and discredit both black troops in particular and abolition in general. These doubts and fears dissipated only very slowly, as the men taught him more about black Americans than he did them about war. But Shaw's doubts about his "colored" regiment disappeared completely only when he and they died together at Fort Wagner.

Both versions of Duncan's biographical sketch of Robert Gould Shaw also emphasize the religious nature of abolition and duty in Shaw's family and social circle. Duncan's inclusion of the Puritan/Protestant religious cast to social reform in the middle decades of the 19th century is one of the great strengths of both books. To the Boston abolitionists who paid for his crusade, John Brown was a fiery saint engaged in the socially salvific work of destroying hellish and demonic slavery. The sin of slavery must be burned from the land, and sufferings inflicted upon the South in the process were simply the just and inevitable result of sowing the wind. The godly duty of all people was to serve and perhaps to die

in this conflict of righteousness against sin. Abolitionists clearly saw the hand of God in the new birth of freedom.

Nothing less than religious fervor could explain the Boston response to the heroic death of Robert Gould Shaw on the parapets of Fort Wagner and his subsequent burial "with his niggers," as Duncan relates the Confederates' decision to inter Shaw among the black troops in the sand below the fort. Poems celebrated the "parfit and gentil" knight of freedom. The 54th Massachusetts (Colored), which had done its duty so bravely, was equally celebrated amidst, one can only suppose, private relief that the soldiers had vindicated themselves. After the War, with slavery destroyed but without that other aim of the Boston Brahmin abolitionists -- full citizenship for black Americans -- Shaw was not forgotten.

In 1897, a bas-relief monument by Augustus Saint-Gaudens to Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts was unveiled in the Boston Common. It depicts the march through Boston on that memorable day in May 1863. "Shaw rides with his men. An angel of the Lord glides over them." This description by Duncan on page 125 of **Where Death and Glory Meet** fits the religious connotation of both the ceremony of unveiling and the sacrifice that it commemorates.

Robert Gould Shaw and his men did their duty to themselves, their unit, their families, and their common country. Williams James, who delivered the oration at the unveiling of the monument, wrote to Henry James, Jr., that Robert Gould Shaw has become "a great symbol of deeper things than he ever realized himself."

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