

Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Soldier

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Review

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Gould IV, William B. *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Soldier*. Stanford University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 804747083

Political and military activist

The journal of a former slave's fight on the sea and in print

Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Soldier will pique the interest of many readers. It tells the story of an extraordinary African American the author's great-grandfather, William Benjamin Gould (1837-1923) who joined forces against the Confederacy and against slavery.

William B. Gould [WBG] is an exceptional ancestor. He was one of the escaped slaves or contraband who served in the United States military during the Civil War, and one of the very few who left a diary of those years. When we meet WBG it is September 21, 1862 and he is making his way toward freedom down the Cape Fear River in Wilmington, North Carolina. Picked up by the U.S.S. *Cambridge* the next day, WBG began his career in the Navy as First Class Boy, on this ship, part of the Union's North Atlantic Blockade. He writes in his diary faithfully for the next three years, chronicling his life in the navy and occasionally remarking on the larger questions raised by the war.

Just as compelling as WBG's military career, is his involvement in black abolitionist circles. During a leave from the *Cambridge* WBG visits the New York offices of *The Anglo-African*, one of the most influential black abolitionist newspapers, and there he is drawn into the ranks of the black press. After the war, WBG moves to Massachusetts where his wife, Cornelia Williams Read, has taken refuge after her escape from slavery. Cornelia is also well established in abolitionist circles û her aunt is married to Henry Highland Garnet, who, along with Nantucket minister James E. Crawford, helped arrange for her freedom.

The first three chapters of the book are an introduction to WBG and his diary. There are some tantalizing stories in these pages: a fascinating account of Gould's escape from slavery, a provocative if disjointed comparison of the two cities WBG would call home, Wilmington, North Carolina and Dedham, Massachusetts, and a brief mention of black minstrelsy on board Gould's ship. I found the fourth chapter, a selection of WBG's other writings, especially compelling. For a time, Gould wrote columns for *The Anglo-African* under the pen name of Oley, and these are some of WBG's most eloquent passages. His description of Wilmington, North Carolina after the war, for example, stirs the imagination: Her streets entirely deserted. Her wharves that used to groan under a million of barrels and thousands of bales are entirely bare.

Unfortunately, these early chapters are marred by a lack of historical context and the inclusion of personal reminiscences. There are awkward references to the present (which, in this case, means the 1990s) in chapters devoted to the telling of WBG's past. For example, in the second chapter, which compares Wilmington and Dedham, we learn the name of the gated community where former Vice President Al Gore sometimes stayed on vacation.

The diary itself, however, is a fascinating account of WBG's life at sea on the U.S.S. *Cambridge* and the U.S.S. *Niagara* during the war. We are introduced to other escaped slaves, to deserters, to the difficulties of intercepting Confederate ships, to men put in the Brig for drunkenness, to all sorts of inclement weather, and to the tedious chores of being a sailor. WBG crosses the Atlantic on the *Niagara*, a swift frigate authorized by the government in 1854, and his ports of call included Antwerp, Lisbon, Liverpool and Cadiz. The notes that accompany Gould's diary are excellent and provide additional information about the events in the diary and descriptions from the contemporary American and British press.

There is much to recommend about this book. It provides a sweeping account of an African American who straddled slavery and freedom during the tumultuous years of war. Through one man's life, we can see how black abolitionists wore many hats: that of a navy man, a reporter, a father, and a husband. One yearns to know more about the personal side of WBG, a frustration shared by his great grandson, the author, William B. Gould IV. Overall, this book is a valuable addition to the literature in African American history and the Civil War era.

Lynn M. Hudson is a member of the history department at California Polytechnic State University. She is the author of a biography of Mary Ellen Pleasant, a black abolitionist and supporter of John Brown, 'The Making of Mammy Pleasant': A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (University of Illinois Press, 2003).