

# For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South

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## Review

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**Rankin, David C.** *Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 052182334X

Fighting for God

The moral mission to end the sin of slavery

In **Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War**, David Rankin introduces readers to Rufus Kinsley, a corporal in the 8th Vermont who became an officer in the 2nd Corps D'Afrique. Just under half the book consists of Rankin's biography of Kinsley, followed by a faithful transcription of the diary Kinsley kept from the day of his enlistment in November 1861 through four years of service in Louisiana and off the Gulf Coast. The book is well annotated with helpful notes that identify key players and provide pertinent context. **Diary of a Christian Soldier** makes several important contributions, including its consideration of the long-term impact of the war even on men who made it safely home, its illumination of the Louisiana and Gulf Coast theaters of the war which often remain dimly lit, and its consideration of what war and emancipation meant on a day-to-day basis. Also, the book gives attention to a type of soldier often neglected: the Union soldier driven by the conviction that slavery constituted sin for which the war was sent as punishment and opportunity for atonement.

The engaging narrative of Kinsley's life reinforces Rankin's central point, articulated on page xv, that soldiers who came home victorious, including those who escaped enemy fire, did not necessarily return unscathed. Born October 9, 1831, Rufus was the fourth of eight children of Ben Alva Kinsley, a struggling stonemason, and Catherine Montague Kinsley, whose rheumatism made her an invalid by the time Rufus reached the age of six. Ben Kinsley's economic difficulties and Catherine Kinsley's illness and death led to the parceling out of the Kinsley children, none of whom received much formal education. Rufus set type for a newspaper in St. Albans, Vermont, before moving to Boston in 1853

to work for newspapers dedicated to temperance and anti-slavery. For a time, Rufus lived in the West End (where 60% of Boston's black population also resided), and served as the Superintendent of Sabbath School at the May Street African Methodist Episcopal Church. In honor of Kinsley's services, church members presented him with a writing desk, which he kept for the rest of his life. In 1857, Kinsley returned to Vermont, where he worked as a farm laborer until his enlistment in November 1861. After the war, Kinsley returned to Vermont weakened by intestinal illness (at one point, Kinsley weighed 80 pounds, half of his pre-war weight) and either rheumatism or fibromyalgia so severe that he could not return to the printing trade because he lacked the dexterity to manipulate type. In 1872, Kinsley married Ella Lenora Bingham, and together the couple struggled to raise seven children on a farm Kinsley purchased from his stepmother. In 1886, Kinsley launched the battle that would, according to Rankin, define the rest of his life: the campaign for a soldier's pension on the grounds that his limited capacity for hard labor stemmed from disabilities (particularly a knee injury and an incapacitating degenerative disease Rankin identifies as fibromyalgia) contracted during the war. Kinsley's limited success in this endeavor, along with indignities he suffered along the way and his persistent poverty, all bolster Rankin's theme that the Civil War altered the lives of all it touched, even those whom it appeared to treat comparatively gently.

Yet Rankin also makes clear that Kinsley proudly regarded the war as the defining episode of his life. In 1904, when Kinsley wrote an autobiographical piece in a local history, he dedicated three-quarters of the sketch to his four years in the Union Army, and particularly to his interactions with former slaves and black soldiers. The diary Kinsley kept during the war (something he evidently did at no other time in his life) consistently stresses his fervent opposition to slavery on moral grounds and his egalitarian beliefs and actions. According to Rankin, re-reading the diary in later years must have brightened Kinsley's otherwise bleak postwar life because it would have brought mostly joy and affirmation to the veteran who would have felt that time had validated his views on the meaning and purpose of the war. Here Rankin is too sanguine, because Kinsley's later years coincided with the nationwide ascendancy of the Lost Cause, not with vindication of the racial egalitarianism espoused by Kinsley. Kinsley died in 1911, just two years before President Woodrow Wilson would segregate the federal government and the reunion of Civil War veterans held at Gettysburg would systematically exclude the black soldiers whom Kinsley regarded as central to Union success. Being reminded of unfulfilled

opportunities created by the war would more likely have dismayed Kinsley, and that disillusionment marks another way in which the war and its aftermath could continue to haunt even the seemingly unharmed.

Next, the book contains Kinsley's diary, which Kinsley entitled *The Slaveholders' Rebellion* and which he composed on the writing desk given to him by black parishioners of Boston's May Street Church. Having read the original diary at the Vermont Historical Society, I find Rankin's transcription to be reliable. The diary fleshes out the unrelentingly earnest (sometimes to the point of pitiless) personality of Kinsley, while also describing what major events like the occupation of New Orleans were like on a daily basis. The portion covering Kinsley's service in the 8th Vermont especially concentrates on Kinsley's work managing a contraband camp bordering Algiers, Louisiana. There, Kinsley ministered to the needs of fugitive slaves with an apparent lack of condescension that one woman honored by naming her newborn Freedom Kinsley. Of most importance to Kinsley himself was his school for former slaves, because, as he noted in September 1862, in the education of the black is centered my hope for the redemption of the race, and the salvation of my country. By discussing his outrage at the breakup of the school when black men and women were sent to work on government plantations as part of a free labor scheme, Kinsley offers insight into how his own moral clarity ran up against less idealistic purposes and the prevailing ambiguity of war.

In the fall of 1863, Kinsley matter-of-factly noted in his diary that he had accepted a commission as Second Lieutenant in the Second Corps D'Afrique, a regiment consisting largely of black Louisianans. For the remainder of the war, Kinsley and his new regiment held Ship Island and Cat Island, barrier islands in the Gulf of Mexico guarding entrance to the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast. The unassuming way in which Kinsley rose to his new position grew not from indifference, but rather because serving in a black regiment struck him as the logical extension of the way in which he had viewed the war from the start. The siege of Fort Morgan in Mobile Bay in August 1864, one of few engagements in which Kinsley took part, mattered to him mainly because black and white soldiers secured victory together. Even on the remotest fringes of the war, Kinsley viewed his work with black soldiers and refugees from slavery as utterly central to the conflict, and one of the greatest values of the diary is its illustration of what war, abolition, and freedom meant to Kinsley in both transcendent and practical senses.

By bringing Kinsley's diary to light, Rankin has provided a necessary reminder that soldiers morally committed to eradicating the sins of slavery existed and helped to shape the war. In attempting to make Kinsley seem extraordinary, Rankin uses Brahmin officers like Robert Gould Shaw as foils, against whose elitism Kinsley's egalitarianism contrasts sharply. This tendency undercuts Kinsley's importance, for while the entire Union Army clearly did not share Kinsley's views, neither was Kinsley alone. Instead, he characterizes the often overlooked category of soldiers who hated slavery and felt that the whole nation's complicity in it necessitated a war to destroy the institution. As James McPherson has noted (and countered), it has been common since Vietnam to assume that if Union soldiers thought about why they fought at all, they probably did so for some combination of material reasons. Such assumptions confuse cynicism with sophistication of analysis because reducing soldiers' views to jaded self-interest oversimplifies the war just as much as undue glorification does. Kinsley's diary insists that we confront a more complicated picture in which idealism crashed up against the terrible moral muddiness of war. Rankin is to be commended for his insightful rendering of this valuable document.

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