

Social Revolution: William Wells Brown's Manifesto

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Feature Essay

SOCIAL REVOLUTION

William Wells Brown's manifesto

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Brown, William Wells *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. Ohio University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 082141528X

Social revolution

William Wells Brown's manifesto

Most people think history concerns only the past, but it derives its greatest potency from serving the needs of the present. No one understood this better than William Wells Brown, who had been born a slave in 1814, escaped from his Kentucky master twenty years later, and went on to become an abolitionist, physician, reformer, and author.

When Brown published **The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and Fidelity** in 1867, African Americans stood at a crucial crossroads. The Civil War and the recently ratified 13th Amendment had supposedly destroyed slavery, but former Confederates were pursuing a concerted campaign, backed both by legal means and naked terrorism, to strip blacks of most civil rights and reduce them to the status of permanently subordinated agricultural laborers. President Andrew Johnson, a believer in constitutional literalism and state rights, insisted that white Southerners should be free to handle their black neighbors without outside interference. Fearful that Johnson's lenient Reconstruction policy would undo the North's victory, a growing number of Republican congressmen decided that Southern society would have to be reorganized and reformed by granting adult black males the franchise.

In the first book-length military history of African Americans written by a member of their race, Brown attempted to rally white Northerners in supporting

a Reconstruction policy committed to black political equality. Americans of the 19th century not only considered military service in wartime as the ultimate proof of manhood, but also as the highest form of citizenship. By highlighting black participation in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and especially the Civil War, Brown argued that African Americans deserved to enjoy the same basic rights as their white neighbors. He also warned white Northerners that only the ballot box would allow Southern freedmen to defend themselves from their former masters and keep Dixie loyal.

From a strictly scholarly standpoint, **The Negro in the American Rebellion** was not a great work of history. Brown made no show of objectivity. Although his ostensible purpose was to educate white Americans about black participation in the Civil War, he was mainly interested in advocacy. Brown drew most of his information from Northern newspapers, especially the abolitionist press, whose editorial bent was the same as his own. He copied many of these accounts into his text verbatim, including those that were clearly novelized and possibly even fabricated, and he was not always careful about acknowledging his sources.

Despite Brown's shortcomings as a historian, he succeeded in conveying how African Americans viewed the Civil War. To Brown, the conflict was not a series of Napoleonic-style battles between equally noble foes, but a social revolution destined to broaden the frontiers of American freedom. The slave-owning aristocrats who fomented secession represented the forces of evil, while the Union placed itself on the side of the angels once Abraham Lincoln embraced emancipation. Brown assembled dozens of examples of black heroism to establish that African Americans were the imperiled Union's staunchest allies. He also pledged that blacks would safeguard the Union's interests during Reconstruction--provided they were armed with adequate political power.

Brown's forty-five chapters are arranged mostly in chronological order. In addition to recounting the exploits of black soldiers, Brown also celebrated such prewar martyrs for black freedom as Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and John Brown. He also included examples of songs that were sung by slaves and black soldiers, along with excerpts from abolitionist poetry. His **The Negro in the American Rebellion** stands as a testimonial to what the Civil War meant to the African Americans of that era, as well as a manifesto defining the legacy they expected to claim in a reunited United States. This book has been reprinted at least twice (in 1880 and in 1968) since its original appearance, a clear sign of the continuous relevance of Brown's sentiments to African Americans and their

ongoing struggle for an equal share in the American dream.

For this latest edition from Ohio University Press, John David Smith, the Graduate Alumni Distinguished Professor of History at North Carolina State University, produced a lengthy introduction and five pages of notes to annotate Brown's text. Unfortunately, Smith's contributions are not strong enough to turn this reprint into a truly useful resource for readers who are not already experts on the U.S. Colored Troops and black involvement in the Civil War. Although the introduction contains a competent biography of Brown, most of it merely summarizes the contents of his book. Smith used some of his annotations to correct a few factual errors in Brown's pasted-together narrative, but he failed to identify many others. Other notes provide background information on certain individuals, locations, and events, but Smith is inconsistent in choosing which subjects to illuminate, and readers will have to look elsewhere for full and accurate information on many of the major figures whose deeds are described in these pages.

Students of the Civil War era should turn to **The Negro in the American Rebellion** to appreciate how many African Americans felt about the tumultuous events and changes that they and their country weathered between 1861 and 1865. At the same time, it must be remembered that not all the details contained therein are to be trusted.

Gregory J. W. Urwin is a professor of history and associate director of the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy at Temple University. He has written or edited eight books, the latest of which is Black Flag over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War.