H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Douglas Egerton. *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. 448 pp. $29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-09664-0.

Reviewed by Scott Ackerman (The Graduate Center, CUNY)

Published on H-Slavery (March, 2017)

Commissioned by Claus K. Meyer (Mahidol University International College)

With *Thunder at the Gates*, Douglas Egerton, a professor of history at Le Moyne College, provides the first full-length history of three white-officered black regiments: the Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts Infantry and the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry. Egerton traces the lives of fourteen enlisted men and officers, using their collective biographies as a lens on the wartime experiences of the regiments as a whole. All three regiments have been treated by numerous journal articles, essays in edited volumes, and museum exhbitions. Additionally, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts has been the subject of the award-winning film *Glory* (1989) and of two monographs. Egerton does not explicitly identify these books, but suggests that both works focus on Colonel Robert Gould Shaw "at the expense of the black men who served under him" and that neither work mentions anything "about the volunteers who later transferred into or enlisted in its sister infantry and cavalry regiments" (p. 8). Seeking to fill this gap, Egerton builds his work on a vast array of primary sourcesâincluding letters, diaries, pension files, regimental descriptive books, newspaper articles, and official battle reportsâand produces a beautifully written, richly detailed history that will likely become the standard work on the three regiments. Although Egertonâs narrative confirms rather than challenging or modifying existing scholarship, he makes a valuable contribution to the literature by providing new details about the lives, campaigns, and experiences of the soldiers in these regiments.

Notwithstanding the many fine qualities of *Thunder at the Gates*, this reviewer questions Egerton's analysis of the historiography of black soldiers as well as some of his conclusions surrounding the Lincoln administration's commitment to the recruiting of these soldiers. Egerton's assessment of the broader historiography on Civil War soldiers is outdated. In his introduction, he suggests that "many other works have chronicled why soldiers fought in [the Civil War], but they invariably focus on the white combatants" (p. 8). This criticism may have been correct a generation ago, but it no longer holds true today. Indeed we now have an abundance of fine works by scholars such as Ira Berlin, Joseph Glatthaar, John David Smith, William Dobak, Steven V. Ash, and Noah Andre Trudeau that focus on numerous facets of the black military experience. Unfortunately, Egerton does not identify the specific authors his criticism targets so that it is difficult fully to assess his claims about the historiography. However, even the works this reviewer suspects Egerton has in mind when making his critique, such as Reid Mitchell's *Civil War Soldiers* (1988), James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* (1997), and Earl Hess's *The Union Soldier in Battle* (1997), all devote at least some attention to the experience of black soldiers.

Having set up this straw man, Egerton proceeds to blow it away repeatedly. Two opening chapters introduce us to the historical actors who comprise the focus of his narrative. Some, such as the dyspeptic and acerbic Charles Francis Adams of the Fifth Massachusetts and the introspective Robert Gould Shaw of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, will be familiar to many readers. Others will likely be known to specialists only. Examples include Nicholas Said, a manservant who served masters in Tripoli, Russia, and Canada before winding up in the United States in January, 1861, and Stephen

Swails, a journeyman from upstate New York who would later serve in the South Carolina Senate during Reconstruction. Egerton then tells the largely familiar story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, beginning with the recruiting by men such as George L. Stearns and John Mercer Langston, continuing with the training camp at Readville, Massachusetts, and with the first deployment and engagements of the regiment on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, and ending with the fighting at Battery Wagner in Charleston harbor. There is little in these chapters to differentiate Egertonâs broader analysis from that of Glatthaarâs *Forged in Battle* (1990) or Trudeau's *Like Men of* War (1998). Few would dispute, for instance, that much of the Northern public was initially skeptical or downright hostile to the idea of black soldiers; or that the issue of black soldiers being paid less than white soldiers continuously grated on the men of the Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth; or even that black soldiers had to struggle with a "cultural gulf" that divided working-class men from those with better education within their ranks (p. 86). On the other hand, the details that Egerton provides are extraordinarily valuable. In particular, the book includes some of the clearest, crispest, and most concise battle narratives of the engagements on James Island and at Battery Wagner, of the siege of Charleston, and of the Battle of Olustee to appear in yearsânarratives that in themselves constitute a valuable addition to the literature.

By contrast, the chronology of the Civil War is not compatible with Egerton's view that "immediate, dramatic changes" in the recruiting of black troops resulted from the Fifty-Fourth's performance during the failed charge at Battery Wagner on July 18, 1863 (p. 145). After reeling off a series of quotations to demonstrate how the regiment's valor helped secure Northern support for black soldiers, Egerton goes on to claim that "Lincoln required no further persuasion. By early August, Lincoln announced plans to enlist 'at least a hundred thousand' black soldiers" (p. 145). Egerton clearly implies that it was the Fifty-Fourth's performance that cemented Lincoln's determination to expand the recruiting of black soldiers. However, Lincoln's words and actions during the spring of 1863 clearly indicate that the federal government had already committed to a massive recruiting of black troops by the time of the fight at Battery Wagner. In late March 1863, Lincoln made clear the scope of this committment in a letter to Tennessee governor Andrew Johnson, telling him the "bare sight of 50,000 armed and drilled black soldiers upon the banks of the Mississipi would end the rebellion at once."[1] Moreover, just as Lincoln wrote these words, the War Department ordered Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to the Mississipi River Valley to superintend the recruiting and enlisting of black troops. This chronology is consistent with Stephen V. Ash's conclusion in *Firebrand of Liberty* (2008) that it was the performance of the First and Second South Carolina in Florida during March 1863 that convinced the Lincoln administration to scale up the recruiting of black soldiers.

While the assault on Battery Wagner unquestionably helped secure the support of the Northern public for black soldiers, it did little to alleviate discrimination in army assignments and pay. In some of the bookâs most compelling passages Egerton details how the Fifty-Fourthâalong with the newly recruited and deployed Fifty-Fifthâfaced down enemies on the battlefield and on the home front simultaneously. During the siege of Charleston in late summer 1863, both Massachusetts regiments were detailed to perform "most of the hard, dangerous work of moving and placing guns," and were only "rarely assisted" by white soldiers (p. 197). At the same time, these soldiers were peppered with letters from home reminding them that the tangible impact of refusing their unequal pay was often their families' "descent into poverty" (p. 172). In response, officers and enlisted men alike undertook a massive letter-writing campaign targeting newspapers, public officials, and even President Lincoln in the hope of rectifying the issue. When Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew convinced the state legislature to pay the men the difference, they refused because accepting the offer would have meant admitting "a right on the part of the United States to draw a distinction between them and other soldiers from Massachusetts" (p. 208). As Egerton dryly observes, â[the Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts's] efforts to redeem America were not the work of a day,â and only in mid-June 1864 did Congress begin to correct the inequality in pay (p. 191).

One odd structural feature of Egerton's narrative deserves comment. The Fifth Massachusetts cavalry only enters the story about two-thirds of the way through the book and is allotted just 23 pages of narrative space in a 350-page book. In one sense this is unavoidable: the regiment was only mustered into service during the winter and spring of 1864, and thus their term of service was much shorter than those of the other two regiments. Nevertheless, the effect of this structure is that their story feels somewhat sealed off from the rest of the narrative. As a result, Egerton's attempt to weave the stories of all three regiments together feels forced.