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“The Colored Soldiers” — The Poem You Never Knew Existed

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Abstract

I’m a poetry guy. When I expect to have some free time, I tend to carry a small book of poems somewhere on my person. I also have eclectic tastes, so the subject and the substance of my little pocket anthologies changes. This summer, while at home from Gettysburg National Military Park, I pulled a book off the shelf—*War Poems*, from the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series. I found plenty of what you might expect to find in such a book—Lord Tennyson, Wilfred Owen, Randall Jarrell. The subjects were classic—the “wild charge” of the Light Brigade, the “froth-corrupted lungs” of gassed men on the Western Front, the callous “hose” that washes out the wet scraps of the tragic turret gunner. Most of the poems I had already read before, so I was doubly surprised to find—in an anthology of war poems spread across the *full breadth* of both the Western and Eastern traditions of war verse—Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “The Colored Soldiers,” published posthumously in 1913 [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, War Poems, USCT, slavery

Disciplines

History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“The Colored Soldiers”—The Poem You Never Knew Existed

October 19, 2015

By Matt LaRoche '17

I'm a poetry guy. When I expect to have some free time, I tend to carry a small book of poems somewhere on my person. I also have eclectic tastes, so the subject and the substance of my little pocket anthologies changes. This summer, while at home from Gettysburg National Military Park, I pulled a book off the shelf—*War Poems*, from the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets series. I found plenty of what you might expect to find in such a book—Lord Tennyson, Wilfred Owen, Randall Jarrell. The subjects were classic—the “wild charge” of the Light Brigade, the “froth-corrupted lungs” of gassed men on the Western Front, the callous “hose” that washes out the wet scraps of the tragic turret gunner. Most of the poems I had already read before, so I was doubly surprised to find—in an anthology of war poems spread across the *full breadth* of both the Western and Eastern traditions of war verse—Paul Laurence Dunbar's “The Colored Soldiers,” published posthumously in 1913.



“Dutch Gap, Virginia. Picket station of Colored troops near Dutch Gap canal.” Courtesy of Library of Congress, via the House Divided Project.

What is fascinating about this poem is not just that the USCT seems to be getting some recognition in the literary canon—it's that the poem is clearly part of the efforts of an entire generation of what we would call 'activists' or 'agitators' to preserve the memory of the Civil War as, fundamentally, a war fought over slavery. Dunbar does not reject the bloodletting of the Civil War as a tragic waste, nor does he vindicate it as just another glorious chapter in Mankind's long book of bravely fought conflicts—two of the most common interpretations of war's worth. Instead, he has a specific agenda in portraying the Civil War as the necessary means to an essential end—the end of slavery and the erasure of “Every blot of Slavery's shame.”

He paints the colored soldiers as the saviors of the Union, their contribution to the war effort as absolutely vital to victory. He writes:

*Then distress fell on the nation,
And the flag was drooping low;
Should the dust pollute your banner?
No! the nation shouted, No!
So when War, in savage triumph,
Spread abroad his funeral pall—
Then you called the colored soldiers,
And they answered to your call.*

And he doesn't just hold that the colored soldiers did their duty; Dunbar writes that they held fast,

*where'er the fight was hottest,
Where the bullets fastest fell,
There they pressed unblanched and fearless
At the very mouth of hell.*

Indeed, Dunbar assigns exemplary status to the colored soldiers—he makes his feeling known that,

*None were stronger in the labors,
None were braver in the fight.
From the blazing breach of Wagner
To the plains of Olustee,
They were foremost in the fight
Of the battles of the free.*

However, the colored soldier's exemplary conduct also cost him dearly, and this is where the text gives us a detailed insight into Dunbar's emancipationist understanding of the war. Unlike most other war poetry, “The Colored Soldiers” neither disowns war as senseless, nor does it celebrate it solely as a manly contest—there is something else to the Civil War, something that goes beyond vanity and makes good the unspeakable abuses suffered, the “deeds” committed at Fort Pillow, to give just one example.

Dunbar gives us his answer to the meaning of the war, and the selfless sacrifice of the colored soldiers who found themselves swept up in it under the most remarkable of circumstances. He ends his requiem for the colored soldiers with the only explanation he can give:

*And their deeds shall find a record
In the registry of Fame;
For their blood has cleansed completely
Every blot of Slavery's shame.
So all honor and all glory
To those noble sons of Ham—
The gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!*

It is worth reminding ourselves that, for us who have never seen war, it can be especially difficult to make sense of slaughter. An explanation, like Dunbar's above, can be disconcerting even if we agree with the results of the war. Such an explanation can still seem alien when weighed along with the personal tragedy of hundreds of thousands of lives cut short. But if one wants to understand why Dunbar wrote what he did—if one wants to understand his limitless desire to make sense of the sacrifice by protecting the legacy of emancipation and civil rights that it left—one needs only read Frederick Douglass's 1857 West India Emancipation speech. In it, he delineates a philosophy that would carry him through a lifelong struggle against oppression:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

Want to hear the poem for yourself? Click below to listen to a recording of "The Colored Soldiers." Courtesy of the [Florida Center for Instructional Technology](#).

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/10/19/the-colored-soldiers-the-poem-you-never-knew-existed/>