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Spring 2003

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Miller, Steven F., "The Civil War Writings of a "Literary Colonel": Review of The Complete Civil War Journals and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Edited by Christopher Looby" (2003). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 353.

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The Civil War Writings of a “Literary Colonel”

Steven F. Miller

The Complete Civil War Journals and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Edited by Christopher Looby. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xix + 393 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-226-33330-2.

A board a steamer en route to Hilton Head, South Carolina, in late November 1862, Thomas Wentworth Higginson mused on the “mysterious land” he was approaching and the “novel & uncertain career” he had undertaken in agreeing to command the First South Carolina Volunteer Infantry, the first black regiment formed under the sanction of the Union War Department during the Civil War: “many persons have said, the first man who organizes & commands a successful black regiment will perform the most important service in the history of the War; & this undertaking will be more easy to me than to almost any one, perhaps, because it falls so remarkably into the line of all my previous preparations” (42).

A month shy of his thirty-ninth birthday, Higginson had reason to see his new career as the culmination of his “previous preparations.” He had been active in the antislavery movement since graduating from divinity school in 1847, becoming increasingly convinced of the need to take direct action against slavery. Putting his principles into practice, he had led the Boston crowd that tried to liberate the captured fugitive slave Anthony Burns in 1854, escorted a party of antislavery emigrants into Kansas in 1856, and helped fund and plan John Brown’s raid in 1859. As war drew nearer after the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Higginson readied himself by practicing military drill and studying tactics in his hometown of Worcester, Massachusetts.¹ He did not join the Union army at the outbreak of hostilities, mainly because of his responsibilities to his near-invalid wife, Mary Channing Higginson. But by late 1861 he had concluded “that antislavery men were leaving the war altogether too much in the hands of Democrats & Irishmen, & that if we expect to control it’s [sic] conduct or settlement, we must take part in it ourselves” (225). He was commissioned a captain in a Massachusetts regiment in August 1862 and three months later received the offer to become colonel of the First South Carolina.

He would command the regiment for seventeen momentous months. Higginson reached South Carolina six weeks before the issue of the final Emancipation Proclamation, at a time when the prospect of the Union enlisting black men into its armies provoked sharp debate among Yankees and raised the specter of servile insurrection among Confederates. Skeptics

¹On Higginson’s life, see Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

doubted the ability of ex-slave men to master soldiering skills and questioned their readiness to fight against their former owners. As Higginson knew, the First South Carolina was an experiment whose progress would be watched by the Northern public and the world. By the following summer, the experiment had concluded successfully, and the Union had committed itself to emancipation and the recruitment of additional black regiments. When Higginson left his command in May 1864, the issue was no longer whether black men would make good soldiers, but what the soldiers' service would mean for themselves, other former slaves, and the nation.

Higginson came to his military career as a man of letters, as well as a militant abolitionist. Before the war, he had earned a reputation as an antislavery lecturer and written pieces for the *Atlantic Monthly* and other journals on topics including natural history, masculine health, and slave insurrections. He took a hiatus from writing for publication during his tenure with the First South Carolina; to do otherwise, he believed, would be "a sort of profaning this experience & mixing incompatible lives" (279). But he kept a journal of his wartime experiences, which he began editing and mining for articles in the *Atlantic* almost immediately after his return to civilian life. These articles, in turn, formed the nucleus of *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, a book originally published in 1870 that has become a classic owing to Higginson's vivid descriptions of people and landscapes, his sympathetic depictions of the former slaves he encountered in his regimental camps and on the plantations along the South Carolina coast, and his keen ear for spoken and sung language (especially the ex-slaves' Gullah speech). Reprinted in many different editions over the years, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* is a powerful narrative and a valuable resource for students of abolitionism, slavery and emancipation, black soldiers in the Civil War, and African American culture in the nineteenth century.²

Much of substance changed, however, during the transformation of Higginson's journal into the book published more than five years later. The author often took passages out of their original chronological sequence and reordered them into topically arranged chapters. More significantly, he revised his wartime prose with a heavy hand and in line with sensibilities shaped by postwar events, particularly his disenchantment with Radical Reconstruction. In a sense, the Higginson who narrates *Army Life in a Black Regiment* was a different man from the abolitionist colonel who wrote the journal on which it is based.³

For that reason, the publication of Higginson's journal is a welcome event. Christopher Looby, a professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles, has edited a volume comprising the journal and a selection of 125 personal letters written during the same period, all but a handful of them from Higginson to either Mary or his mother, Louisa Storrow Higginson. The journal and letters, Looby argues convincingly, were "circumstantially contiguous documents forming a complex intertextual whole" (5). They were intended primarily for an audience of family members, although Higginson very likely envisioned a larger audience for the journal at some later date. The journal is an unusual one, more like a newsletter than a private diary. As he finished the entries, Higginson mailed them to Mary,

²The most recent edition is Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment, and Other Writings*, ed. by R. D. Madison (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

³See Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 321–23.

who brought them to Louisa's home, where his sister, Anna Storow Higginson, prepared copies for safekeeping. Along the way, they were read by others in the circle of Higginson's relatives and friends.

The journal and letters offer slightly different perspectives on the same experience. The journal entries are almost always longer and written in more-finished prose than the letters, although some passages have the feel of hastily drafted notes. They are evidently addressed to no particular person, although they occasionally speak to an unspecified "you" (e.g., "I hope you have not been troubled by the attack on me by 'Conservator' in the Evening Post" [134]). Higginson's persona in them is that of a commander who prefers to discuss military events, his official duties, his relationship with his men and brother officers, and life in camp rather than the minutia of his private life. The letters, predictably enough, are more informal and personal, often touching on his health, finances, and gossip about army colleagues and friends. Writing as a husband and a son, Higginson also reveals occasional glimpses of vulnerability and self-doubt that he seldom admits into the journal.

Despite these differences, the content of the two forms of text overlaps considerably. The letters often refer explicitly to matters discussed in the journal, and ideas and turns of phrase first introduced in one medium often recur in the other. Writing to Mary on 9 May 1863, for example, Higginson complained of the extra work required of officers in black regiments owing to the illiteracy of the men in the ranks.

[T]here is a good deal of vexatious writing not that I shld. dislike that if I had time, for you know how much red-taped I hv. in me but it interferes with other matters, & takes vitality needed for other things. That will be the drawback of these Southern colored regts; I spend hours daily in doing what in white regts wd. be done by a secretary detailed fr. the ranks . . . (277).

He wrote in his journal the next day.

The great drawback of these Southern col'd regt's will always be the severe burden of writing they throw on officers, both field & line. I spend hours daily, & much vitality needed for other things, in doing writing which every Col. of a white reg't has one or more clerks detailed to do . . . (143).

Such recycling and reworking of text, with subtle changes in wording and tone, is commonplace in Higginson's wartime writings.

Looby takes a largely noninterventionist approach to transcription of these texts. The journal entries and letters are transcribed verbatim, save for a few conventional adaptations. Purists might take issue with the decision (whether the editor's or that of the press) to present all datelines in capital and small-capital letters and the salutations of letters in italics, but that is a small quibble. Because the first seven months of Higginson's autograph journal have not survived, Looby resorts to a bit of editorial improvisation, constructing a "hybrid" copy-text using Higginson's original where possible and turning to Anna's copy for the missing section and a few smaller gaps in the original. Fortunately, Looby concludes after comparing texts for which both original and copy survive, Anna Higginson was an accurate and nonintrusive copyist, so any differences between the copy and original are probably few and insubstantial. The resulting text reads seamlessly, while interested readers can track the textual reconstruction via footnotes and the editor's "Note on the Texts."

Higginson's career with the First South Carolina as revealed by his journal and letters was divided into two phases. During the first, between November 1862 and July 1863, he was ini-

tially energized by the novelty of army life, the exoticism of the Southern landscape, the historic mission of making slaves into soldiers, and the insights he gained into the experiences and humanity of his men. A man who prized discipline and order, Higginson took naturally to military regimentation. "I enjoy the method & system of the army," he wrote his mother in February 1863, even if "it by its very nature puts so much power into such poor hands" (263). He delighted in teaching his men military drill and other rudiments of soldiering, and took pride in their growing mastery of them. Fascinated by the stories, songs, prayers, and dances of the slaves-turned-soldiers in his regiment, he recorded them as faithfully as his ears and eyes could recreate them. Likening the regiment to a "large family" (155), he relished the masculine *esprit de corps* that developed among the enlisted men and between them and their white officers. And he itched for the test of combat. After a successful expedition up the St. Mary's River between Georgia and Florida gave the regiment its first taste of battle and put to rest any doubts about his men's ability to fight, Higginson exulted, "Nothing can ever exaggerate the fascination of war" (102).

But war's fascination did not last indefinitely. As Higginson acknowledged somewhat defensively, his regiment's military contribution to Union victory never matched its political significance. After participating in the brief federal occupation of Jacksonville, Florida, in March 1863, the regiment returned to the South Carolina sea islands, where it mainly performed garrison and picket duty. Higginson chafed at the inaction. Moreover, by that time, the Union had committed itself to wholesale recruitment of ex-slave men, transforming what had begun as an experiment into a matter of routine policy. While seeing that shift as a vindication, Higginson also professed relief that the burgeoning number of black regiments made the First South Carolina less important as a test case, thereby "taking a load of personal responsibility off my shoulders" (145). But, having been in the limelight, Higginson betrayed a certain restlessness once out of it.

That restlessness intensified after an abdominal wound suffered during a raid in July 1863 and a subsequent month-long furlough home ended the first phase of his army career. Higginson rejoined a regiment still assigned to garrison duty in what was becoming a military backwater, while Mary pressed him to leave the service and return to her for good. That October, he contracted a debilitating illness (probably malaria) that confined him to his quarters for weeks, reduced his contact with his troops, and forced him to face his future after the army. He performed such duties as his health allowed during his convalescence and remained a strong advocate for his men—among other things, lobbying for them in the successful struggle to increase the pay of black soldiers to that of their white comrades. But his body and heart were no longer in the work as they once were. Still in "a semi-invalid condition" in late January 1864, he wrote Mary that "as to the war I feel that I hv. done my duty entirely & have no more compunctions," even though it would be difficult to leave his men behind. The strictures of military rank now pinched: "there is so much that is disagreeable in the dependence of an army officer on the orders & interests of his superiors, that I often long to be my own master" (351). In May, he left South Carolina for Newport, Rhode Island, to join Mary in a new home and resume a literary career that would continue well into the twentieth century.

Acknowledging that Higginson is usually regarded as little more than "a footnote in American literary history" (13), Christopher Looby makes a case for his deserving a more

prominent place. His wartime journal and letters, Looby contends, represent “among other things, a peculiarly uncensored record of the cultural unconscious of Civil War America,” giving voice to “fundamental assumptions about such aspects of social identity as race, gender, ethnicity and class” (2–3). In a provocative introduction to the volume, Looby focuses on Higginson as a literary figure, sketching out the connections between his reading and his lived experience and probing the conceptions of masculinity, race, and personal identity embodied in his writings.

A voracious reader for whom seemingly every experience conjured up a literary analogy, Higginson drew on a “broad and heterogeneous textual universe” (10) in ordering and interpreting the events of his life. It included the classics of ancient and western literature, anti-slavery tracts, his contemporaries the Transcendentalists and writers of the genteel tradition, travel accounts, popular novels, and contemporary newspapers and magazines. Particularly influential were the novels of Sir Walter Scott and other works in what Looby dubs the “literature of chivalric romance” (8), with its brave heroes embarking on romantic historical adventures. Higginson’s was “a conception of military endeavor deeply informed by textual models” (8), Looby suggests; his literary education “made the command of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers seem like a pre-scripted literary adventure” (7) and shaped his understanding and depiction of army life.

Besides identifying the literary models that conditioned Higginson’s interpretation of his military experience, Looby attempts to unpack themes of race, gender, and the construction of social identity in Higginson’s wartime writings. Higginson, the editor argues, was a keen observer of the ways in which war and military life “dislocated the received system of social distinctions at large in American culture” (21) and enabled—or forced—people to reinvent themselves, assuming new identities in new social circumstances. He appreciated how emancipation destroyed the dichotomy between slave and free that ordered social relations in the South and how, by reducing individuals to interchangeable parts of an army governed by distinctions of rank and command, Union military training and discipline did much to break down the simplistic binary opposition of white and black that structured American notions of race. Aware that in assuming the role of military commander he had recast his own identity, Higginson undertook to transform ex-slaves (who, regardless of age, he typically likened to children) into free men. Looby is on strong ground in emphasizing Higginson’s significance as an observer and critic of shifting racial identities, but he ventures onto more speculative terrain when he suggests that “[t]he disorientations of gender identity in Higginson’s army are almost as numerous as the dislocations of race” (22). His discussion of this theme, based heavily on scattered evidence of masquerade cross-dressing in army camps, seems strained and overdrawn. Nevertheless, Looby’s suggestion that Higginson’s wartime writings belong among the great American “narratives in identity-shifting” (28) is an intriguing one.

In emphasizing the importance of Higginson’s wartime writings as literature, Looby downplays their significance as historical sources. While conceding that the journal and letters “certainly add to the historical record” about black soldiers in the Civil War, he believes that their chief claims on a reader’s interest must be found elsewhere. They are the product of a unique and compelling act of writing; they fulfill Higginson’s literary ambition in composing them, providing ... “real and access to the mission he undertook and the experience he underwent. And they take us inside the mind

and heart of a man struggling morally and physically to do his part to right one of the most egregious wrongs in human history (31).

Even conceding, for argument's sake, the necessity or usefulness of ranking a work's various claims on a reader's interest, this assertion seems questionable. Indeed, in the book's dust-jacket blurb, the historian James McPherson reaches exactly the opposite conclusion, declaring that the volume's "greatest importance lies in the information and insights it offers about the experiment of enlisting black troops in the Civil War"!

Unfortunately, Looby's conceiving of Higginson's journal and letters primarily as literary texts has consequences that limit the usefulness of this edition for students of history. The editor's introduction, while evocatively mapping the literary-cultural terrain Higginson navigated, does not adequately situate him and the First South Carolina in political and military contexts. Looby's explanation that, because "[t]he story of black troops in the Civil War has been ably told by a number of very accomplished historians, therefore there is no need for me to reiterate it here" (31), seems rather cavalier in a book of documents that—whatever else they are about—are about Higginson's tenure as commander of a black regiment. After all, the whole story of black troops in the Civil War does not need to be reiterated, only enough to assist readers in making sense of the documents therein. A detailed chronology at the back of the volume obviates this shortcoming somewhat, but at least some of the information presented there would have served better in the introduction.

A similar unevenness is evident in the annotation of the texts. Whereas even passing literary references are elucidated with substantial footnotes, many references to historical events receive inadequate annotation or none at all. To cite just one example, a footnote to a reference to desertions of black soldiers caused by the government's paying them only ten dollars instead of "what was promised" does not explain what was promised—thirteen dollars per month for privates, the same as their white counterparts, instead of ten dollars minus three dollars for clothing—but merely directs the reader to Higginson's account of the equal pay issue in *Army Life In a Black Regiment* (161). More helpful annotation at that point might also have helped readers make more sense of a derisive song quoted a few pages later:

"Ten dollars a month"!

"Tree ob dat for clothing"!

"Gwine to Washington

"To fight for Linkum's darter"!¹⁷³

Despite these criticisms, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* stands as an important addition to the shelf of documentary editions on the American Civil War era—whether the shelf is in the office of a literary scholar, a historian, or a mythic "intelligent general reader."