

The Idolization of Colonel Robert G. Shaw

“I have changed my mind about the black regiment” (Shaw, 8 Feb. 1863). With these nine words to his future wife on February 8, 1863, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw changed the way in which history viewed him forever. Wanting to “prove that a negro can be made a good soldier” (Shaw, 8 Feb. 1863), Shaw took control of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first all black regiment (save for its officers) in America. He is hailed as a hero for his bravery and courage, not only because he is seen as one of the vital abolitionists who enabled black men to fight in the Civil War, but also for his martyr-like death at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. Shaw never fails to be acknowledged when the 54th is discussed, and yet his soldiers remain in the background of history. While Colonel Robert G. Shaw exhibited tremendous leadership and courage, historical accounts excessively exalt him by overlooking his reluctance to lead, ignoring his prejudices, honoring his heroics over his soldiers’, and inaccurately portraying him in *Glory*.

Although Shaw is hailed as “the most abolitionist hero of the war” (*Where Death and Glory Meet* xiv), he actually rejected the leadership position for the 54th at first. As he wrote in one of his letters, had he accepted the offer, it would “only have been from a sense of duty; for it would have been anything but an agreeable task” (Shaw, 4 Feb. 1863). The ‘sense of duty’ Shaw was most likely referring to was his parents, as both were abolitionists. His mother was particularly involved; it was her “life’s work.” By refusing the governor’s offer, he felt he was letting down his mother (*Blue Eyed Child* 24). After all, he had “always loved her more than any one else in the world” (qtd. In *Where Death and Glory Meet* 46). The crushing blow of disappointing his mother was devastating to Shaw, prompting him to reconsider his decision. This combination of pressure from wanting to please his parents and a feeling of responsibility to answer the call of his country convinced Shaw to change his mind. Though certainly patriotic, it

does not justify the simplistic label bestowed upon him. A true “abolitionist hero” would accept the role out of his own beliefs, not because of pressure from home or patriotic duty. Even in his letter to his future wife, Annie Haggerty, where he informed her of his decision to take the position, his reasoning was that it would be easier to get a furlough as a colonel than a captain, his former position (Shaw, 8 Feb. 1863). Shaw did feel a need to prove that blacks could be good soldiers; nevertheless, he had other, more selfish motives. Although this proves him to be a caring partner and son, it demonstrates that abolition was not his primary concern, whereas historical representations portray it to be. Because of this, it is too simple to depict Shaw as an entirely perfect abolitionist.

Furthermore, Shaw still had his own prejudices against African-Americans (*Blue Eyed Child of Fortune* 18). In fact, he repeatedly used derogatory terms in his letters such as “darkies” and “nigger” to refer to blacks, even going so far as to refer to himself as a “nigger colonel” (Shaw, 21 Nov. 1862; 18 July 1861; 20 Feb. 1863). Even this early in the nation’s history, these were names used to insult blacks, to remind them of their supposed inferiority. Despite the fact that Shaw declared slavery to be a “crime” (Shaw, 13 Nov. 1862), he could not have believed in blacks’ full equality, or else he would not have used such offensive language towards the very people he sought to free and would lead in battle. If this was more well known, perhaps Shaw would not be referred to as “a kind of saint” (Burchard 147), and history would remember a more accurate, complex account of Shaw.

Heroic actions by Shaw aside, the colonel is memorialized far more than the soldiers in his regiment. The Shaw Memorial, finished in 1897, portrays Shaw prominently on a horse in the foreground of his men. The soldiers that can be seen are identical and impossible to identify. Prioritizing Shaw over his courageous soldiers, it “betray[s] a Gilded Age racism” (Powers 436-

37), forcing the viewer to feel that Colonel Shaw's actions were more substantial than any of his soldiers, when many, in fact, exhibited similar bravery. William H. Carney's actions in the Battle of Fort Wagner (the same battle for which Shaw is famous) qualify Carney as a hero. When the soldier carrying the colors dropped, Carney, in the midst of battle, "threw away" his gun and stood guard around the flag at the top of the hill, despite being wounded and witnessing Shaw's death. Carney "did [his] duty; the dear old flag never touched the ground" (Anderson et al. 6) and yet he, a sergeant in the regiment, is not celebrated nearly as much as Shaw. He is rarely recognized; his name does not even appear on the aforementioned memorial (Powers 436-39). Despite later earning the Gillmore Medal and the Medal of Honor (Gooding 39), the majority of history has forgotten about him. This is most likely because of race; memorials, movies and books have been written about his white commander, and yet Carney and his fellow soldiers remain in the indistinguishable background of history. This is further seen in two prints issued to honor the 54th regiment. Both picture Shaw strikingly at the top of the depictions; he is alongside the flag and the only distinct person in the drawings. The black soldiers in the picture are identical and portrayed as insignificant (Currier & Ives). In one of the prints, there is even a heavenly apparition in the sky adjacent to Shaw, guaranteeing that he is the person the viewer will focus on, even ensuring that he is associated with God and angels (Kurz & Allison). Yet again, Shaw is emphasized as the most valuable figure in the picture and, by extension, the entire regiment. Although this could be attributed to the fact that Shaw was the commander and the black men were merely soldiers, Shaw is far more recognized than the black men when they were risking the same, perhaps more, than him. African American soldiers not only endangered their lives, but their freedom as well, as any black soldier captured by the Confederacy would be sold back into slavery. This fate may have been worse than death for some, considering the

conditions many slaves endured, and especially because many had just earned their freedom by escaping to the North. Despite the many dangers that African American soldiers faced, Shaw is still glorified and idolized to a greater extent than his soldiers. Additionally, the importance of the 54th Massachusetts regiment lies in the fact that the soldiers were black. The fact that they, the reason for the regiment's fame, remain largely uncredited indicates the hypocrisy of history.

Because of the appeal a movie presents, the majority of the public learn about Colonel Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment through the 1989 film *Glory*. The film is often seen as a credible source, as it is the only major movie filmed about this subject. However, inaccuracies in the movie contribute to a largely unreliable picture of Robert Shaw. In the beginning of the film, Governor Andrew, alongside Frederick Douglass, offers Shaw the leadership position of the 54th Regiment. Shaw replies "Thank you, Governor. That's a wonderful idea" (*Glory*). Besides the fact that this interaction never happened (Shaw was actually offered the position through a letter from Governor Andrew delivered by his father (*Blue Eyed Child* 21-25)), it provides an inaccurate portrayal of Shaw. Although in the movie Shaw seemed a little hesitant, thinking the offer over before accepting, he never rejected the offer outright. In reality, Shaw refused the position at first before telegraphing his father that he had changed his mind (*Blue Eyed Child* 21-25). This performance, while seemingly insignificant, gives the audience the impression that Shaw had few misgivings about taking the job. Furthermore, Shaw's heroic actions are once again prioritized over his soldiers in the film. There were six main characters in the movie, yet Shaw was the only one who actually existed. Predictably, four of the other five characters were black. These characters were "composite characters or...so loosely based on real soldiers" that even their names were fabricated (Egerton 8). This creates a problem: young children and even adults learn about famous *real* white

soldiers and yet are taught that brave black soldiers are fictional. This contributes to a whitewashing of history and reinforces false and harmful ideas that courage in black men does not exist. Additionally, the movie stops after Shaw is killed, implying that the success of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment ends with the life of their commander, when “a majority of the regiment” continued to fight throughout the war, even “serv[ing] as an occupying force in Charleston until the fall of 1865” (Egerton 8). While certainly dramatic and a cinematic accomplishment, this ending suggests that since Shaw was gone, the importance of the regiment vanished also. Although Shaw’s death might have been slightly more of a shock than the men were expecting, the regiment’s importance did not cease. It was still the first all black regiment in America, and simply because the ‘hero’ was not in the regiment any more does not mean that the soldiers could not continue. Instead of emphasizing this, the film concentrated on Shaw. While many of the mistakes in the movie seem small and inconsequential, they compile to create a larger inaccurate picture of Shaw, where he is distinguished as a celebrity and his soldiers are disregarded.

Colonel Robert Shaw was a celebrated hero of the Civil War, as he is commemorated as both a soldier and an abolitionist. Shaw did indeed display courage and heroism; however, history disproportionately commemorates him by ignoring his reluctance to lead, disregarding his prejudices, overlooking the actions of his brave black soldiers and incorrectly depicting him in the 1989 film *Glory*. While seemingly harmless, this representation in history symbolizes the whitewashing that is present in our culture and history. It presents a harmful image, particularly to young black children, who learn about only white heroes that look nothing like them. The stories of minorities throughout history, like the men of the 54th, need to be told.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Currier & Ives. *The Gallant Charge of the Fifty Fourth Massachusetts (Colored) Regiment*.

1863. Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York. *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American*

History. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Web. 25 Jan. 2017.

<<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/african-americans-and->

[emancipation/resources/african-american-soldiers-battle-fort-wa](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/african-americans-and-)>.

Kurz & Allison. *Storming Fort Wagner*. 1890. Gilder Lehrman Collection, Chicago, Illinois. *The*

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American

History. Web. 25 Jan. 2017. <<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/1341afdb-9ee3->

[4c39-819c-](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/1341afdb-9ee3-)

[400444799327?back=/mweb/search%3Fneedle%3Drobert%2Bshaw%2526fields%3Dall%](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/1341afdb-9ee3-)

[2526era6%3DCivil%2BWar%2Band%2BREconstruction%252C%2B1861-](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/1341afdb-9ee3-)

[1877%2526sortby%3Ds301001610%2526items_per_page%3D20](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/1341afdb-9ee3-)>.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Annie Haggerty. 4 Feb. 1863. *Teaching US History*. Teaching

American History in South Carolina Project, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2017.

<<http://teachingushistory.org/pdfs/ShawFebruary4thLetter.pdf>>.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Annie Haggerty. 8 Feb. 1863. *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The*

Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1992. 285-

86. Print.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Elizabeth "Mimi" Russell Lyman. 20 Feb. 1863. *Blue Eyed Child*

of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Athens, GA: U of

Georgia, 1992. 292-95. Print.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Francis George Shaw. 13 Nov. 1862. *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1992. 255. Print.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Josephine "Effie" Shaw. 21 Nov. 1862. *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1992. 259-60. Print.

Shaw, Robert Gould. Letter to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw. 18 July 1861. *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1992. 114-15. Print.

Secondary Sources

Anderson, Nancy K., Lindsay R. Harris, Renée Ater, and Sarah Greenough. "Seeing What Ought to Be: Photography and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment." *Tell It with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial*. Washington, District of Columbia: National Gallery of Art, 2013. 6-7. Print.

Burchard, Peter. *One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989. Print.

Duncan, Russell. "Introduction: Robert Gould Shaw: A Biographical Essay." *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1999. 18+. Print.

Duncan, Russell. *Where Death and Glory Meet: Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1999. Print.

Egerton, Douglas R. "Prologue." *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America*. New York: Basic, 2016. 8. Print.

Glory. Dir. Edward Zwick. Perf. Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, and Raymond St. Jacques. Tri-Star Pictures, 1989. DVD.

Gooding, James Henry. *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front*. Ed. Virginia M. Adams. Amherst: U of Massachusetts, 1991. Print.

Powers, Richard. "The Robert Gould Shaw and 54th Regiment Monument." *A New Literary History of America*. Ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. 434-40. Print.