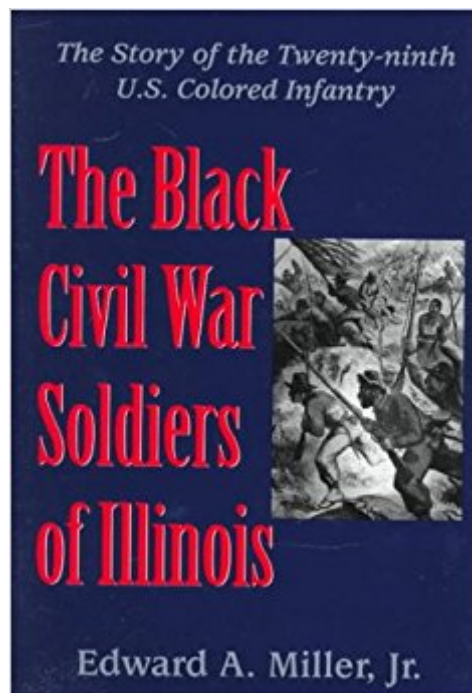




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The Black Civil War Soldiers Of Illinois: The Story Of The Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry



Synopsis

A chronicle of the Civil War experiences of the only African American regiment from Illinois. The author details the formation of the regiment, the prejudice that shaped their service, its involvement in many of the famous Civil War battles and the tragic postwar fate of its officers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Excellent analysis of one black US regiment from Illinois

Walt Whitman once stated that the interior history of the Civil War soldier would never be told. Though Whitman's assessment is generally true, Edward A. Miller offers us an interpretive rapprochement through a new history of the all-black 29th U.S. Colored Infantry, a unit formed in Illinois. Yet, this work is not simply a regimental history, but a deeper study in the lives of black recruits in the Civil War era, and a journey into the hinterlands of an American racial pathos. Throughout this study, Miller explores in detail the biographies of individual soldiers, revealing their often convoluted histories which seem to be cut from the same mold. Yet, Miller has uncovered interesting and valuable demographic and socio-economic data. In addition, Miller explores the culture of the 29th's white officers, men who were unduly pre-judged as incompetent by their fellow Union soldiers. The 29th's only substantial combat experience came at the ill-fated Battle of the Crater, where the employment of black regiments was unfairly blamed for battlefield failures. As such, many in the North wanted to place the responsibility for the disaster upon supposedly inferior

black troops. However, Miller's historiography yields a saner assessment through a very detailed account of the battle. When the war ended, instead of disbanding, the 29th was brought up to full strength and marched to Texas to meet a perceived threat from French encroachment into Mexico. Their life was "difficult, food shortages common, and medical care inadequate." (164), and many died of privation. Broadening the reader's perspectives, Miller highlights the sixty percent of the 29th's officers and men who filed for pensions from their service. Many claims for compensation based upon service-related disabilities were exaggerated or downright fraudulent. No doubt many of these were motivated by extreme poverty, for a high percentage of the black veterans could find work only as day laborers. Regardless, though they completed their military service with "devotion and competence" (206), Miller believes that most black veterans gained little benefit from their wartime service. However, when allowed to participate in combat, they performed with proficiency on a par with their white comrades. But national incredulity would persist with attitudes exemplified by "a mix of pity, paternalism, condescension, and racial superiority." (103) All told, Miller's is a welcomed addition to the growing scholarly literature on the individual experiences of the common soldier.

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