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Review

DEEP WOUNDS

Scarred by racism and war injury, a black veteran condemns his race

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Smith, John David *Black Judas: William Hannibal Thomas and 'The American Negro'*. University of Georgia Press, ISBN 820321303

In early 1865, the 5th United States Colored Troops, fresh from victory at Fort Fisher, moved north toward Wilmington, North Carolina, and attacked a Confederate force blocking its path. During the battle, a musket ball tore into the arm of Sergeant William Hannibal Thomas. The shot ended Thomas's career as a soldier, cost him the lower third of his arm, and, according to his biographer John David Smith in **Black Judas**, shaped the rest of his life.

After recovering in army hospitals, Thomas returned to his native Ohio and then enrolled in the Western Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where shortly before graduation he was expelled when it was learned that he had had sex with his wife before he married her. Next Thomas worked as a fundraiser for Wilberforce University, but had to quit after being charged with financial irregularities. Throughout the remainder of his life, Smith demonstrates, Thomas would work hard, achieve some success, only to lose it after sexual or financial misdeeds. Thomas next went south where, first in Georgia and then in South Carolina, he pursued educational and religious causes and became active in Republican Party politics. New charges of corruption and the end of Reconstruction eventually forced him to return north. After that, Thomas moved around, took various jobs, and wrote often about his fellow African Americans.

While in the army, the northern-born Thomas had become very critical of southern blacks, but in the late 1880s and early 1890s, he expressed a more positive view and worked in behalf of land reform and industrial education for blacks. In the late 1890s, his views changed yet again; in 1901 he published *The American Negro*, which condemned black women as sexually licentious, denounced black men as beasts, and portrayed all blacks, in Smith's words, "in

the harshest and crudest of terms as physiologically, intellectually, morally, and culturally inferior to whites." The book advocated a restriction on the political rights of blacks, physical force to restrict their behavior, and orphanages to reeducate their children. The central theme of *The American Negro*, however, was "that behavior and character, not color, determined whether or not a person should be designated a 'Negro.'"

Not surprisingly, *The American Negro* appalled other African Americans, who denounced Thomas as a race traitor, a "Black Judas." Smith does an excellent job of recounting the resulting controversy and putting Thomas's thought in the context of its time. Smith has also performed a herculean job of research in locating other of Thomas's writings and in reconstructing his life. Smith is at times justifiably scathing in his evaluations of Thomas but, to his credit, always takes Thomas seriously and strives to understand his motives.

Thomas's condemnation of his fellow African Americans resulted from the interaction of the effects of white racism and his Civil War wound, Smith concludes. Thomas encountered racial discrimination in college and, at the beginning of the Civil War, the army refused to let him enlist because he was black. Deeply scarred by these affronts, frustrated by years of battling on behalf of blacks, and faced with rampant, rabid racism in the 1890s, Thomas tried to re-invent himself. By making character, not color, the basis of whether or not someone was a "Negro," Thomas -- a light-skinned man of mixed racial ancestry -- sought an identity for himself as something other than a "Negro." Through a careful reading of Thomas's writings, Smith makes a convincing case for the way in which white racism led Thomas to his own racial calumny.

Smith has much less concrete evidence to draw upon in explaining the role of Thomas's war wound. Thomas suffered, Smith maintains, from post-traumatic stress disorder and a "repetition compulsion" related to his amputation. Both contributed to his personal failings as well as to his tendency to project those failings onto others, as he did on the black population of the South in *The American Negro*. Persisting pain from his amputation, Smith adds, also contributed to Thomas's attacks on the African Americans after 1894. Smith's case for the continuing influence of Thomas's disability is intriguing, plausible, yet not fully convincing. Nevertheless, anyone interested in the impact of Civil War combat on its veterans should read **Black Judas**. So, too, should anyone interested in race relations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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