

# Forgotten poems recovered by American Civil War research

October 7 2013

---



Co. E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, Ft. Lincoln, defenses of Washington.” Credit: Library of Congress

American Civil War poetry that sheds light on a neglected chapter of the era's literary history has been recovered and made freely available online after 150 years.

"'Will not these days be by thy poets sung': Poems of the Anglo-African and National Anti-Slavery Standard, 1863-1864' features nearly 140 poems that appeared in two New York-based newspapers during a single tumultuous year of the Civil War.

Until now, access to the National Anti-Slavery Standard and the Anglo-African - and the poems they contain - has been limited to microfilm or subscription-only online resources.

The ground-breaking edition of poems, including many pieces by little-known African American writers, has been published online following extensive research by Dr Rebecca Weir at the University of Cambridge, and Dr Elizabeth Loring at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Drs Weir and Loring found verses by figures previously unknown as poets. Fanny M. Jackson, a former slave who became one of the foremost educators of her age, contributed 'The Black Volunteers' and a mourning poem for a friend's daughter to the Anglo-African. William Slade, a prominent black civil leader in wartime Washington as well as a lead servant in the White House, wrote 'The Slave to His Star' for that title. Ellen Murray, an abolitionist who travelled from New England to South Carolina's occupied Sea Islands to teach freed people there, contributed a cluster of poems to the National Anti-Slavery Standard.

"This is a story about two newspapers, the people who contributed to them and the people who put them together during a crucial period of the war," said Dr Weir. "The writers who sent poems to the Anglo-African and the National Anti-Slavery Standard used their poetry as a means to express their views and participate in public debate.

"The newspapers' editors also reprinted poems from different newspapers, magazines, and books as a matter of course. While reprinted pieces have been all but overlooked by literary critics and historians, they form a vital part of the Civil War's literary record."

The poems in the edition reveal contemporary responses to a host of wartime issues and events: emancipation, African American enlistment, diplomatic relations and civilian duty amongst them. Treating love, loss,

trauma, hope, despair, and politics, as well as more mundane - yet remarkably symbolic - subjects, such as the passage of time and changing seasons, the poems played a vital role in shaping how Americans experienced the war.

The edition puts to rest popular lingering myths about Civil War literature, especially poetry. In particular, *Will not these days* unravels the misguided notion that the Civil War produced only a handful of poems worth remembering and studying. In reality, a perhaps unknowable number of poems were written and circulated during the Civil War, and poetry was central to many people's experience of the war.

*Will not these days* presents the poems alongside images of the [newspaper](#) pages, so that twenty-first century readers can see the poems in their original publication contexts – contexts which Drs Weir and Lorang describe as 'transformative'.

"The poems were created in part by their publication contexts," said Dr Lorang. "Two instances of a poem that share the same words, grammar and syntax printed in two different newspapers aren't necessarily the same text. That's one reason why it's important to think about poems in particular newspapers."

Although literary critics and historians recognise the *Anglo-African* as one of the most important African American serials of the Civil War era, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the poetry it published, or to its relations with its close abolitionist neighbour, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.

"One of the great finds we've made is that it appears there was a previously unacknowledged but remarkable collaboration between the two newspapers," said Dr Lorang. "What's unique about this edition is

the focus on the relationships between two Civil War publications. It's the first edition of its kind."

Ellen Murray's 'The Workingman', published in the National Anti-Slavery Standard in early 1864, is one of several poems in the edition that illuminates the war's transatlantic aspects. Murray celebrated the antislavery principles of Lancashire factory workers who refused to support the Confederacy even though their livelihoods depended upon shipments of cotton:

The working men of Lancashire!  
 Their great self-sacrifice  
 Those, for whose sake 'twas undergone,  
 Will never know or prize;  
 Only when freedmen kneel at dawn  
 And bless their friends in prayer,  
 They bless the noble working men  
 Of England, unaware.

Among Dr Weir's favourite pieces is 'A Voice from the Crowd'—an anonymous parody from a London newspaper that caught the National Anti-Slavery Standard editor's eye in the summer of 1863, presumably because it attacked the London Times' New York correspondent Charles Mackay for his Confederate sympathies:

There's a good time coming, boys,  
 A good time coming;  
 When the Slave Confederacy  
 Recognized by all shall be  
 In the good time coming.  
 Let us aid it all we can,  
 Correspondents—every man,  
 To make the impulse stronger;

We shall well rewarded be  
For our grand apostacy—  
Wait a little longer!

Dr Weir added: "Before the Civil War broke out, Mackay wrote a poem called 'Wait a Little Longer.' It was published in a collection called Voices from the Crowd and, once set to music, it became a hit song. By turning Mackay's own words against him, the anonymous poet who wrote 'A Voice from the Crowd' challenged Mackay's principles, and affirmed that the Times correspondent didn't speak for the British 'crowd'. It's a poetic comeback that helps us to appreciate the cultural significance of the verse in newspaper corners."

**More information:** [www.scholarlyediting.org/2013/ ...  
newspaperpoetry.html](http://www.scholarlyediting.org/2013/...newspaperpoetry.html)

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Forgotten poems recovered by American Civil War research (2013, October 7)  
retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-10-forgotten-poems-recovered-american-civil.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--