

Historian Relates Strange Story of William Hannibal Thomas, Race Issue

By Joe Wheelan

RALEIGH (AP) - In 1901, William Hannibal Thomas, one-armed Civil War veteran, teacher, Reconstruction judge and legislator and nationally known journalist, committed a shocking act of betrayal against fellow blacks.

After 30 years of battling racism and urging freedmen to reform themselves, Thomas wrote an explosive book titled "The American Negro," in which he declared blacks to be "the waste product of American civilization." He recommended whippings and castrations for black criminals and the "utter extermination, root and branch" of black beliefs and practices.

Published by a major book house, Thomas' diatribe caused a huge stir. White racists regarded it with glee - a black man criticizing blacks. Stunned black leaders lashed out at Thomas. Booker T. Washington called him "a man without a race."

"Never before had a person of color so thoroughly slandered his race," historian John David Smith wrote in his well-told and carefully researched "Black Judas: William Hannibal Thomas and The American Negro" (277 pages, University of Georgia Press).

Part history, part psychological study, Smith's book resurrects the all-but-forgotten "American Negro" and is the first to attempt to study Thomas, an ambitious, tormented man who sabotaged his own success at every turn during a life that spanned 92 years.

"In every instance, he overcame racism and rose to the top, only to self-destruct, blaming racism," Smith said in an interview. "He had what psychologists call an antisocial personality disorder. ... The African-American community had enough to deal with in this horribly hostile world from whites without having to deal with someone from their own race."

Smith, 50, who has taught Southern history at North Carolina State University for 18 years, for 15 years tracked the elusive Thomas, who Smith said purposely covered his tracks to escape creditors and sheriffs. Confusing his search was the fact that at least 19 black men named William H. Thomas appeared in public records during Thomas' life, Smith said.

The fulcrum of Smith's book is the question: Why did Thomas write "American Negro?"

"Latent emotional and physical forces, present since his young adulthood but never fully manifested, exploded in a rage of racial hatred," Smith wrote.

He points to three events in Thomas' life: his enrollment as the only black at Otterbein University in Ohio in 1859 and his departure after enduring physical abuse; his rejection by the Union Army, which was not accepting black enlistees in 1861, but did in 1863; and the amputation of his right arm.

Moreover, Thomas, who grew up in a free black family in Ohio and was light-skinned, never was comfortable with being categorized as black, Smith wrote.

Thomas was wounded with the 5th U.S. Colored Troops in 1865 after exemplary service outside Petersburg and Richmond, Va., and at Fort Fisher, near Wilmington.

After the war, he attended Western Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and was a financial agent at Wilberforce University in Ohio. But he was expelled from the seminary on moral grounds and fired from Wilberforce for "financial irregularities." Later, he was accused of stealing funds while on the faculty at Clark Theological Seminary in Atlanta.

Thomas moved to South Carolina, where he practiced law, became a trial judge and served in the state House of Representatives. Democrats ousted him for fighting for blacks' rights, and he sought a consular appointment. Named consul to West Africa, one of the worst postings, Thomas never went.

"By 1877, Thomas had exhibited clear patterns of aberrant behavior," Smith wrote. "He was corrupt, erratic, secretive and manipulative."

Yet he thrived as a columnist for the National Recorder, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and founded the monthly journal "The Negro" in Boston. He routinely blamed white racism for blacks' plight.

His 1890 book, "Land and Education," urged programs to help blacks buy land and obtain manual training.

But racism and chronic pain from his battle wound were taking a steady toll, said Smith.

In an 1894 article, Thomas wrote that blacks needed to be "thoroughly disciplined under competent white supervision."

Then came "American Negro."

"His pent-up anger over his racial identity erupted in 'The American Negro,'" Smith wrote. "By 1901, after years of identifying with Negroes, he concluded that the race was hopelessly inferior and divorced himself from it."

Thomas catalogued blacks' so-called racial characteristics in the worst light.

"The severity of his language suggested that he was a man in emotional pain crouched in a metaphorical corner, a lexicon in his only hand, crying out to be heard," Smith wrote.

The book, published by Macmillan Co., initially drew favorable reviews from major Eastern newspapers. Then came the avalanche of negative criticism.

"Enemies moved quickly to drive a stake through his troubled soul," Smith wrote.

W.E.B. DuBois, Washington and other black leaders weighed in, aided by black journalists who provided details from Thomas' checkered past. Columnist John Edward Bruce called Thomas "the oncer-amed saddle-colored Judas."

After "American Negro," Thomas opened a law office in Everett, Mass., dabbled in GOP politics and wrote a novel and autobiography, both of which vanished without a trace.

In his old age, Thomas lived in a Columbus, Ohio, hotel, working occasionally as a janitor until his death in 1935.

Blacks "succored and protected him as one of their own in his old age," Smith wrote, describing it as "an interesting twist of fate."

In a further irony, Thomas' death certificate described him as "Negro."

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