



The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo (Pulitzer Prize for Biography)

By Tom Reiss

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WINNER OF THE 2013 PULITZER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

General Alex Dumas is a man almost unknown today, yet his story is strikingly familiar—because his son, the novelist Alexandre Dumas, used his larger-than-life feats as inspiration for such classics as *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*.

But, hidden behind General Dumas's swashbuckling adventures was an even more incredible secret: he was the son of a black slave—who rose higher in the white world than any man of his race would before our own time. Born in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Alex Dumas made his way to Paris, where he rose to command armies at the height of the Revolution—until he met an implacable enemy he could not defeat.

The Black Count is simultaneously a riveting adventure story, a lushly textured evocation of 18th-century France, and a window into the modern world's first multi-racial society. *TIME* magazine called *The Black Count* "one of those quintessentially human stories of strength and courage that sheds light on the historical moment that made it possible." But it is also a heartbreaking story of the enduring bonds of love between a father and son.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, September 2012: Generations have been enthralled by Alexandre Dumas' characters, especially the wronged hero in *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the daring swordsmen in *The Three Musketeers*. Yet few realize that these memorable characters were inspired by Dumas' father, General Alex Dumas, the son of a French count and a black Haitian slave. Tom Reiss brings the elder Dumas alive with previously unpublished correspondence and meticulous research, providing the context necessary to understand how exceptional his life as a mulatto general in a slave-owning empire truly was. From single-handedly holding a bridge in the Alps against 20 enemies to spending years held captive in a fortress, Alex Dumas is a fascinating character that not even his son's vivid imagination could have dreamed up. --Malissa Kent

An Essay by Author Tom Reiss



I've always loved exploring history. It's like an uncharted hemisphere, and when you look at it closely, it has a tendency to change everything about your own time. I'm also drawn to outsiders, people who have swum against the tide. I often feel like a kind of detective hired to go find people who have been lost to history, and discover why they were lost. Whodunnit?

In this case, I found solid evidence that, of all people, Napoleon did it: he buried the memory of this great man – Gen. Alexandre Dumas, the son of a black slave who led more than 50,000 men at the height of the French Revolution and then stood up to the megalomaniacal Corsican in the deserts of Egypt. (The "famous" Alexandre Dumas is the general's son – the author of *The Three Musketeers*.) Letters and eyewitness accounts show that Napoleon came to hate Dumas not only for his stubborn defense of principle but for his swagger and stature – over six feet tall and handsome as a matinee idol – and for the fact that he was a black man idolized by the white French army. (I found that Napoleon's destruction of Dumas coincided with his destruction of one of the greatest accomplishments of the French Revolution – racial equality – a legacy he

also did his best to bury.)

I first came across Gen. Dumas's life in the memoir of his son Alexandre, the novelist. And what a life! Alex Dumas, as he preferred to be known, was born in Saint Domingue, later Haiti, the son of a black slave and a good-for-nothing French aristocrat who came to the islands to make a quick killing and instead barely survived. In fact, to get back to France in order to claim an inheritance, he actually "pawned" his black son into slavery, but then he bought him out, brought him to Paris, and enrolled him in the royal fencing academy, and then the story begins to get interesting.

What really stuck with me from reading the memoir was the love that shows through from the son, the writer, for his father, the soldier. I could never forget the novelist describing the day his father died. His mother met him on the stairs in their house, lugging his father's gun over his shoulders, and asked him what he was doing. Little Alexandre replied: "I'm going to heaven to kill God – for killing daddy." When he grew up, he took a greater sort of revenge, infusing his father's life and spirit into fictional characters like Edmond Dantes and D'Artagnan, with shades of Porthos, too. But the image of the angry child stuck with me and drove me onward to discover every scrap of evidence I could about his forgotten father.

And recovering the life of the real man behind these stories was the ultimate historical prospecting journey for me: I learned about Maltese knights and Mameluke warriors, the tricks of 18th-century spycraft and glacier warfare, torchlight duels in the trenches and portable guillotines on the front; I got to know about how Commedia del Arte influenced Voodoo and how a Jacobin sultan influenced the Star-Spangled Banner, about chocolate cures for poisoning and the still brisk trade in Napoleonic hair clippings. I discovered the amazing forgotten civil rights movement of the 18th century – and its unraveling – though the most amazing thing about this story of a black man in a white world was how little race stood in his way: how Alex Dumas's future father-in-law never once questioned his daughter marrying a man of color but only asked that he get promoted to sergeant first (later he lovingly referred to his son-in-law simply as "the General").

Finally, the memoir set me not only on a historical adventure but on an adventure in the present day that was straight out of a Dumas novel. I began by visiting the gray town in northeast France where the general died – where I found a dead museum secretary, a locked safe, and a host of unlikely, inspiring characters to make my journey a far from lonely one.

Review

"Tom Reiss wrings plenty of drama and swashbuckling action out of Dumas' strange and nearly forgotten life, and more: *The Black Count* is one of those quintessentially human stories of strength and courage that also sheds light on the flukey historical moment that made it possible."

--Time

"A remarkable and almost compulsively researched account... The author spent a decade on the case, and it shows."

--Christian Science Monitor

"Fascinating...a richly imaginative biography."

--New York Times Book Review

"It would take an incredibly fertile mind to invent a character as compelling, exciting and unlikely as Gen. Alexandre (Alex) Dumas [hence] you might forget, while reading, that *The Black Count* is a work of nonfiction; author Tom Reiss writes with such narrative urgency and vivid description, you'd think

you were reading a novel...*The Black Count* reminds us of how essential stories, whether true or invented, can be."

--National Public Radio

"Vibrant...Sometimes the best stories are true. This is one of them."

--**Ebony**

"Reiss details the criminal forgetting of Alex Dumas...This remarkable book stands as his monument."

--**Washington Post**

"Superb... as improbable and exciting as [Dumas's] best books... but there is much more to this book than that."

--**Newsweek/The Daily Beast**

"Lush prose and insightful details make *The Black Count* one of the best biographies of 2012...a tale that is as easily engrossing as one of Dumas' page-turning and timeless works."

--**Essence**

"Impressively thorough...Reiss moves the story on at an entertaining pace...fascinating."

--**Wall Street Journal**

"To tell this tale, Reiss must cover the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the rise of Napoleon toward Empire; he does all that with remarkable verve."

--**Boston Globe**

"Fascinating [and] swashbuckling...meticulously evokes the spirit of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France...Dumas comes across as something of a superhero...a monument to the lives of both Dumas and his adoring [novelist] son."

--**The Seattle Times**

"A piece of detective work by a prize-winning author...brilliantly researched."

--**The Daily Mail (U.K.)**

"Sometimes real life does, indeed, trump even the wildest of fiction...With a narrative that is engaging and entertaining, Reiss sets the literary table for one of the most satisfying adventure stories of the autumn. Richly detailed, meticulously researched and beautifully written, this is the unlikely true story of the man behind one of the greatest books in literature."

--**Tucson Citizen**

"Triumphant...Reiss directs a full-scale production that jangles with drawn sabers, trembles with dashing deeds and resonates with the love of a son for a remarkable father."

--**The Herald (U.K.)**

"Fascinating....Reiss argues that Dumas is an important, criminally neglected figure [and] it's difficult to argue with him...A truly amazing story."

--**NPR.org**

"A story that has everything...*The Black Count* has its own moving narrative thread, made compelling by

Reiss's impassioned absorption with the general's fate."

--**The Literary Review**

"A thoroughly researched, lively piece of nonfiction that will be savored by fans of Alexandre Dumas.
But *The Black Count* needs no partner: It is fascinating enough to stand on its own."

--**Bookpage**

"A compelling new work by literary detective Reiss, author of *The Orientalist*, tracks the wildly improbable career of [Count of Monte Cristo author] Alexandre Dumas' mixed-race father...Reiss eloquently argues the General's case."

--**Kirkus Reviews**

"Alex Dumas, an extraordinary man whose sensational life had been largely lost to history solely because of his race, takes the spotlight in this dynamic tale...Reiss capitalizes on his subject's charged personality as well as the revolutionary times in which he lived to create an exciting narrative."

--**Publishers Weekly**

"Thrilling...Reiss makes clear that Alex lived a life as full of adventure, triumph, and tragic loss as any of his son's literary creations...This absorbing biography should redeem its subject from obscurity."

--**Booklist**

"From pike-wielding mobs to prisoners locked in a fortress tower, *The Black Count* is as action-packed as *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Unlike Dumas's famous adventure novel, however, Reiss's incredible tale is true."

– **Candice Millard, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The River of Doubt* and *Destiny of the Republic***

"Tom Reiss has literally drilled into locked safes to create this masterpiece.... His portrait of a man who was arguably our modern age's greatest unknown soldier is remarkable."

– **James Bradley, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Flyboys***

"A masterful biography, richly detailed, highly researched, and completely absorbing. *The Black Count* is a triumph."

– **Amanda Foreman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A World on Fire* and *Georgiana***

"It's hard to imagine a more colorful or engaging subject than the man who inspired *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*. In the wonderful hands of Tom Reiss, Alex Dumas comes to vivid life, illuminating far-flung corners of history and culture. This is a terrific book."

– **Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *American Lion* and *Franklin and Winston***

"*The Black Count* is a dazzling achievement. I learned something new virtually on every page. No one who reads this magnificent biography will be able to read *The Count of Monte Cristo* or any history of slavery in the New World in the same way again."

– **Henry Louis Gates Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University**

"Rousing and thought-provoking, *The Black Count* is an adventure like no other. I marveled at every twist and turn of this remarkable true story, brought to life with the charm and personal touch that has become the trademark of Tom Reiss."

– **Laurence Bergreen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Columbus* and *Over the Edge of the World***

“A riveting, beautifully written and well-researched story of the seemingly impossible. It could never have happened in the United States, and with great skill, Reiss shows how the moment that produced Alex Dumas was lost with the rise of nineteenth-century racism.”

– **Annette Gordon-Reed, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for *The Hemingses of Monticello***

“In the early 1800s, General Alex Dumas was purposefully disappeared by his enemies, and for too long his story has remained silenced. *The Black Count* vividly vindicates the great general, restoring him to his rightful place at the center of the Age of Revolution. Carrying us **from the plantations of the Caribbean to Paris, the Alps, and Egypt**, Reiss tells an engrossing tale of **a life of social struggle, adventure, and courage**—and of the frustrations and joys of a researcher on the trail of a forgotten truth.”

– **Laurent Dubois, author of *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History***

“A tale worthy of Dumas himself—of impossible odds, shrinking before the irresistible forces of **daring, ingenuity and in-your-face talent**.”

– **Ted Widmer, author of *Ark of the Liberties***

“The real-life history of General Alex Dumas is as **poignant and swashbuckling** a tale as any his novelist son could have dreamed. Tom Reiss has the dramatist’s sense of setting and scene, the reporter’s persistence, and the historian’s eye for truth. **Would that the imprisoned Count of Monte Cristo had a copy of this book!“**

– **Darrin M. McMahon, author of *Enemies of the Enlightenment* and *Happiness: A History***

“**Tom Reiss can do it all:** gather startling research and write **inspired** prose; find life’s great stories and then tell them **with real brilliance**. In *The Black Count* the master journalist-storyteller opens the door to the truth behind one of literature’s most exciting stories, and opens it wide enough to show the delicate beauty of the lives within.”

– **Darin Strauss, National Book Critics Circle Award–winning author of *Half a Life***

“Tom Reiss tells this amazing story, largely unknown today, with verve, style, and a nonpareil command of detail.”

– **Luc Sante, author of *Low Life, Evidence, and The Factory of Facts***

“*The Black Count* is a complex work of **political and social history gallantly masquerading as a fantastic adventure story**. As he did in *The Orientalist*, Tom Reiss has traveled far to stalk a forgotten legend, and has recovered for us **a vivid, dramatic tale that delights, moves, and inspires**.”

– **Gideon Lewis-Kraus, author of *A Sense of Direction***

“*The Black Count* is **totally thrilling—a fascinating, beautifully written, and deeply researched biography** that brings to life one of history’s great forgotten characters: the swashbuckling, flamboyant, and romantic mulatto count whose true life belongs in a Hollywood movie or Alexandre Dumas story.”

– **Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Jerusalem: The Biography* and *Young Stalin***

“Tom Reiss tells the incredible story of Alex Dumas with the same excitement about uncovering history that he brought to *The Orientalist*.”

– **Nina Burleigh, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mirage: Napoleon’s Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt***

“We believe we know the glories of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. We believe we understand the horror of slavery and the oppression of Africans. But what is the relationship between the grand goal of liberation and the deep tragedy of racism? As Reiss shows us, answers can be found in the extraordinary life of a forgotten French hero of the great revolutionary campaigns—a hero who was black.”

– **Timothy Snyder, author of *Bloodlands* and *The Red Prince***

“Reiss combines the talent of a thorough English detective with the literary flair of a French novelist to produce a story that is as fresh as today’s headlines but as old as the Greek classics.”

– **Jack Weatherford, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World***

“Colorful and utterly captivating . . . This is history that is vibrant, gripping, and tragic.”

– **William Dietrich, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Napoleon’s Pyramids* and *The Emerald Storm***

More Praise for Tom Reiss

THE ORIENTALIST

“A wondrous tale, beautifully told... mesmerizing, poignant and almost incredible.”

– ***The New York Times***

“Spellbinding history... part detective yarn, part author biography, part travel saga... completely fascinating.”

The Dallas Morning News

“Thrilling, novelistic and rich with the personal and political madness of early twentieth-century Europe.”

--*Entertainment Weekly*

“An elaborate wonder-cabinet... as page–turningly compelling as any fiction.”

–*The Los Angeles Times*

“Exhilarating... an endlessly inventive saga.”

--*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A brainy, nimble, remarkable book.”

--*Chicago Tribune*

About the Author

TOM REISS is the author of the international bestseller *The Orientalist*. He lives in New York City.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Randall Yang:

Nowadays reading books become more and more than want or need but also work as a life style. This

reading addiction give you lot of advantages. The advantages you got of course the knowledge the particular information inside the book in which improve your knowledge and information. The details you get based on what kind of book you read, if you want have more knowledge just go with knowledge books but if you want really feel happy read one together with theme for entertaining for example comic or novel. Often the The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo (Pulitzer Prize for Biography) is kind of reserve which is giving the reader unstable experience.

Otis Kozlowski:

Information is provisions for anyone to get better life, information nowadays can get by anyone from everywhere. The information can be a understanding or any news even a problem. What people must be consider whenever those information which is in the former life are challenging be find than now could be taking seriously which one is suitable to believe or which one the resource are convinced. If you get the unstable resource then you buy it as your main information it will have huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen in you if you take The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo (Pulitzer Prize for Biography) as your daily resource information.

Stuart Rosado:

The reason why? Because this The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo (Pulitzer Prize for Biography) is an unordinary book that the inside of the reserve waiting for you to snap it but latter it will shock you with the secret that inside. Reading this book close to it was fantastic author who also write the book in such awesome way makes the content within easier to understand, entertaining method but still convey the meaning thoroughly. So , it is good for you for not hesitating having this nowadays or you going to regret it. This phenomenal book will give you a lot of positive aspects than the other book include such as help improving your talent and your critical thinking way. So , still want to delay having that book? If I have been you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

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