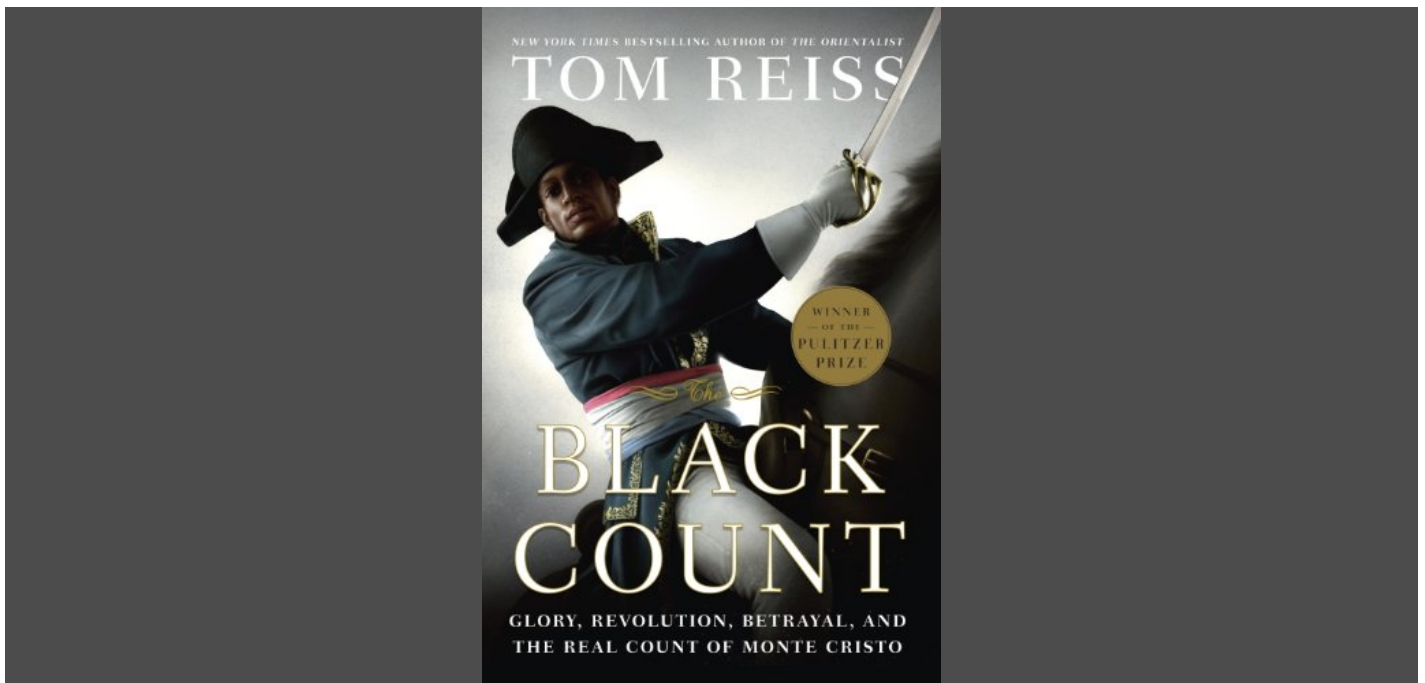


PDF | The Black Count: Glory,
Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real
Count of Monte Cristo (Pulitzer Prize
for Biography)

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.

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 Tom Reiss brings the elder Dumas alive with previously unpublished correspondence and meticulous research, providing the context necessary to understand how exceptional his life as a mulatto general in a slave-owning empire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.

Product Description

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