Throughout his life, as a fugitive slave, abolitionist lecturer, prolific historian, novelist, songwriter, playwright, physician and civil rights activist, William Wells Brown resolved “not to be a spectator, but a soldier — a soldier in this moral warfare against the most cruel system of oppression that ever blackened the character or hardened the heart of man.”

In “William Wells Brown: An African American Life,” Ezra Greenspan, a professor of English at Southern Methodist University and the editor of “William Wells Brown: A Reader,” provides an informative and often moving account of the individual who has been called “America’s first Negro man of letters.”
Writing a biography of a subject “lacking a central archive,” whose legacy is now “practically unknown,” except to a handful of scholars, Greenspan acknowledges, can be “a fool’s errand.” He has, however, supplemented the information in Brown’s autobiographies and his works of fiction and nonfiction with census, court and probate records, deeds of sale, newspaper articles, and the letters and diaries of Brown’s contemporaries. The result is an occasionally speculative biography that uses Brown’s life and his piecemeal, episodic and at times invented or plagiarized treatment of events that were “still entirely in process” to re-create the lived experiences of African Americans in the 19th century.

Brown was born around 1814 in Lexington, Ky. His father was a white planter, his mother a slave. He spent much of his youth in St. Louis and was hired out to work on steamboats on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. In 1834, he escaped, and took the name of Wells Brown, a Quaker who provided him food, clothes, shelter and some money. Brown made his way to Buffalo, N.Y., where he became active in antislavery societies and the Underground Railroad and made his living on the lecture circuit. In one eight-month period, he addressed 167 gatherings.

Because Brown was a highly visible fugitive slave, Greenspan reminds us, he was always at risk of being captured by bounty hunters. Lecturing in England (despite the refusal of the State Department to issue a passport to him or any other African American who was not traveling in service to a white employer) when the Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law in 1850, he chose to stay put. Brown did not return to the United States until 1854, when friends and supporters purchased his freedom, an action he had often opposed because, in a sense, it recognized — and rewarded — the owners of slaves.

Although he reads into the record a number of Brown’s personal peccadilloes, Greenspan clearly admires his subject. Talented, resourceful, brave and generally modest, Brown comported himself well, even in the face of attacks by rivals in the antislavery movement. His oft-repeated assertions that African Americans should not trust whites to write “our history” and, instead, take on the task themselves, Greenspan suggests, were ahead of their time. Shrugging off the recent assessment of African American poet-critic Robert F. Reid-Pharr that because he failed to establish authorial control over his material, “the first Black American novelist ... must be the worst Black American novelist,” Greenspan insists that the anecdotal approach of a bona fide fugitive slave on the lecture circuit and in print helped, “more than any abstract
argument could,” to galvanize white men and women in the North to oppose slavery.

“Accustomed to the fluidity of texts in the computer age and the practice of sampling, and to appreciate the improvisatory performance art, mastered in earlier times and under different circumstances,” a generation of postmodern readers, Greenspan adds, perhaps with more hope than conviction, may be ready for a writer who collects facts and stories and “pours out his sack’s contents.”

Although, in all likelihood, Brown will remain in the shadow of Frederick Douglass, the iconic black abolitionist, his willingness and ability to reinvent himself, again and again, may also enhance his appeal to 21st century audiences. Brown changed his name, of course. He adapted to the sale of his mother, Greenspan indicates, who had “provided his grounding in a shifting, dangerous world.” With the help of his wife, he learned how to read and write. He survived, and for a time thrived, in England as well as the United States, by writing and self-publishing songbooks, travelogues and plays. And when lecture fees diminished after the Civil War, he made a living as a doctor, with no formal complaint, “as far as is known, ever made against him.”

Virtually all of his words and deeds, Ezra Greenspan concludes, were part of a “pioneering quest ... the goal of which was always more or less clear: to make a home in the world.” Brown deserves our admiration; thanks to this biography he may get it.

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William Wells Brown

An African American Life

By Ezra Greenspan

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