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The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States

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Review

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Berlin, Ira *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States.* Harvard University Press, $22.95 ISBN 9780674286085

The Long Road to Freedom

Emancipation in the United States has generated a remarkably creative wave of scholarship over the last two generations. Historians have explored the long struggle against slavery from its roots in the eighteenth century to its long aftermath in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Debates large and small have helped create new questions and new ways of thinking.

Two recent books provide convenient surveys of that work and two ways to comprehend what we have learned. The acknowledgements at the end of Ira Berlin's book thank Patrick Rael, a former student at the University of Maryland, for swapping manuscripts as they were completing their work, showing that "two books that started from the same premise could be very different" (214). The premise shared by the two authors is that emancipation was not a series of events but an extended process in which African Americans were the primary drivers. The difference between Rael and Berlin lies in the way they understand and portray that process.

The challenge confronting anyone who would understand what Berlin calls "the long emancipation" is that it was a protracted fight that rushed to a sudden and thorough-going conclusion. Despite its deep roots, emancipation came in a rush of unexpected events and sudden twists in the era of the Civil War. A broad international perspective shows that the end of slavery in the United States was both inevitable and yet anomaly and a surprise in its timing, speed, and consequence. The story of slavery's long end can legitimately emphasize either the long tradition of resistance or the crash of events that ended slavery far more rapidly and thoroughly than most of its opponents had dared imagine.

Patrick Rael, who has written important books on the struggle over slavery in the North, offers a helpful context. “Completing the process of abolition in the United States took a long time—far longer than anywhere else in the Atlantic world," he points out. “Of all places in the New World, only the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil followed the United States in ending slavery, and did so with processes that occurred far more rapidly" (1). The struggle took so long in the United States because the delay had been built in from the beginning of the nation. Not only did the three-fifths clause of the Constitution prolong slavery, but so did the federal structure on which the nation rested. Rael reminds us that “the slaveholding states of the South held an amount of political power in the nation utterly disproportionate with their relatively small populations. This preponderance of power in the U.S. plantation complex was what helped it maintain slavery for so long. And it also helps explain why a national bloodbath was required to end slavery once and for all" (3).

This perspective, broad in both space and time, shows how American history was part of larger processes but not reduced to them. Slavery was not unusual in the Atlantic world but the American South was a unique variant of a slave society, for it was neither its own nation nor a dependent colony. That anomalous position explains a great deal about the history of the United States. As much as he emphasizes the atypicality of the American South, however, Rael believes that a process similar to that elsewhere combatted slavery: an antislavery movement generated in the “metropole" overwhelmed slavery in the “periphery." He sees the American North as a metropolitan engine of antislavery, with the example of England looming large in this perception.

Rael’s model does not leave space for the recent body of scholarship that portrays the slave South as deeply invested with the spirit and machinery of capitalism and modernity, nor does it acknowledge the rural roots of the voters of the Republican Party or the strength of the Democrats in the cities of the North. His model echoes modernization theory, in which the impulse for reform radiates from the most advanced form of economy and culture against more archaic forms. In the American case, that does not seem as clear as in the colonial world.

Similarly, Rael follows other historians who see a fairly straight path toward the Civil War from the antislavery crusade. He begins his book with Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided" speech. Rael acknowledges that no one could have predicted in 1858 that “in a scant decade African Americans would be not only

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free, but full citizens of the nation, capable of voting and holding office." But then he follows that statement with a vague if true statement historians often use to connect the long antislavery crusade with the events between 1861 and 1870, when the Fifteenth Amendment passed: “Even before the war, though, many Americans—both northern and southern—had agreed with Lincoln that some kind of crisis over slavery loomed" (xviii). How “some kind of crisis,"—or “tug," as Lincoln called it—became a transformative war remains a mystery to us as it did to Lincoln.

Rael’s larger explanation is a good place to start in untangling that mystery. The end of slavery did not merely happen as a product of circumstance or accident or cynical policy, but was the result of consistent, principled, dangerous effort on the part of a relatively few people, first mainly black and marginalized people and then steadily embracing more white and more powerful people. The challenge to our understanding comes when we realize that the culmination of the struggle across “eighty-eight years" ultimately depended on the actions of millions of other people for whom the end of slavery was not a purpose, goal, or intended outcome. The unwilling, agnostic, or noncommittal people in the United States army and in the Republican party cumulatively created a space in which the committed could advance their clear purpose.

Telling the story as Rael does, pointing to the connections and continuities in the struggle to end slavery, makes it hard not to tell the story so that its outcome seems certain if not predetermined in its shape and form. A resistance to that temptation is the difference Ira Berlin notes between his account and that of Rael. Both books offer useful and compelling accounts of the struggles of one generation after another to end American slavery, and both books emphasize the central roles of African Americans, free and enslaved, in bringing that end, but they do so in different ways.

Rael would agree with Berlin’s argument that “Freedom’s arrival was not the work of a moment but the product of a movement; it was a process, rather than an occasion." Berlin, though, follows that statement with a more bracing statement that challenges Rael’s linear model of development. Taking the long view does not merely show determination over time but is critical to “restoring a sense of contingency and undermining the aura of inevitability that attaches itself to a winning cause" (18). By this, Berlin argues that “the means that were employed to attack slavery did not develop sequentially but functioned simultaneously, as the opponents of slavery warred on all fronts. To a

remarkable degree, antislavery sentiment remained constant over the long haul" (27).

This perspective cuts against the way the antislavery crusade is often understood, and portrayed in Rael's book, as an unfolding, deepening, and broadening crusade that culminates in the Republican party and then in war and then in emancipation. Berlin argues against that perspective because he puts African Americans at the center of the story start to finish, including all the way through the Civil War. Doing so shows that the people in slavery and their free black allies wanted the same things from the beginning—full participation in American life—and did not need to wait for the Republicans to create that vision.

Berlin sees four key elements at work throughout each decade. First, a resolute commitment of a few people, mostly black. Second, a commitment to citizenship after slavery. Third, a determination to combat racial injustice. And fourth, a recognition from the outset that “undoing the violence of enslavement required just as much brutality as the creation of chattel bondage, if not more" (31). Rather than a path of steady progress, Berlin argues, the “struggle for universal freedom" was like a “mighty torrent": “it would sometimes roar ahead; but it often stopped suddenly, as if meeting a logjam and would roll backward, searching for a new channel, which in turn might prove to be a dead end or might allow the stream to flow freely again. The history of emancipation would be characterized by endless complexity, pervasive ambiguity, no small measure of irony, and not a few contradictions, as principle and opportunism met in strange combinations" (51).

Berlin gathers the vast literature on antislavery and recasts it. This brief book, originally three lectures delivered at Harvard University, directs us toward new ways of understanding the great crisis of American history. For historians of the Civil War, his book suggests that we need to find continuity in the conflicts that preceded that war but not too much continuity and certainly not a story unfolding to an inevitable end. The final chapter of the great story of slavery's end was written on the always-shifting landscape of the Civil War.

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