

I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Williams, David *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era*. Cambridge University Press, \$27.99 ISBN 9781107602496

Agency and Survival over Slavery and Oppression

This is an important, inspiring, and at times a rather sad book about African American fights for freedom in the Civil War era. Williams makes a vital historiographical contribution to his field and uses a vast array of primary sources to make the point that enslaved people ultimately freed themselves. Situating black people's fight for freedom within a long-run context of resistance to oppression, Williams argues for survival as a form of resistance, that black people fought for freedom by degrees, and for continuities in racial oppression running through slavery, the Civil War and subsequent emancipation. William's introduction usefully sets out the main historiographical context of the book in a lively and accessible style for a non-specialist, and Williams' details how his work provides an alternative to a more dominant, populist narrative that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. Instead, enslaved people engaged in 'self-emancipation' as they fought, in various ways, to rid themselves of bondage. As such, this work resonates with other recent works that consider the conflict as a large-scale slave rebellion, but Williams' findings also highlights a disjuncture between recent Civil War scholarship and that of antebellum slavery, where more contemporary authors have tended to question the extent to which enslaved people displayed 'agency' and were able to both resist and fight against the regime. Williams treads a careful line here by making the valid point that sometimes even simple survival, the ability just to 'carry on', constituted forms of resistance and throughout this book Williams argues passionately for African Americans' refusal to accept the many forms of racial oppression directed against them, whether enslaved or free. Indeed, this book takes a very holistic approach towards notions of freedom, convincingly claiming on page 17 that freedom constituted more than the 'absence of slavery'. For example, Northern African Americans also engaged in their own fight about racial oppression and

discrimination.

The subsequent chapters of *I Freed Myself* follow a chronological format running from antebellum times through to the era of Jim Crow segregation. Chapter one considers various fights for freedom before the Civil War, including escape from slavery, women's battles against sexual violence, and abolitionism, all of which developed in a climate of rising tensions and violence as hostilities between North and South escalated. The second chapter then focuses on the earlier part of the Civil War and the flocking of enslaved people to Union camps in the South, while at the same time Northern black leaders protested against various initiatives including colonization plans. Chapter three continues to utilise a broad geographical perspective that includes both North and South, to argue that African Americans took ownership of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 by enlisting with Union forces for personal rather than patriotic reasons. Their mistreatment by the Union army is well-documented here, including the threat of rape for black women and the fact that black families often had to support themselves. Indeed the continued prevalence of racism and racial prejudice, discrimination that all African Americans fought against, stands at the heart of this book.

The latter stages of the conflict form the basis of the book's penultimate chapter. Here, Williams conveys how slaveholders could simply not control their slaves, but governmental moves towards a more general emancipation were hindered by the fact that land black people tended was now frequently leased or sold by the government, forcing people into an unproductive system of sharecropping that Williams terms "debt slavery." In the North, African American activism continued through various conventions, protests, and the work of the Equal Rights League. The final, fifth chapter considers African Americans' continued struggles for freedom in the post-Civil War, era where, Williams argues, the trappings of bondage remained, including black codes, convict labor, tenancy, segregation, political suppression, and racial violence. However, formerly enslaved people continued their fights for freedom, especially to partake in religious worship and educational initiatives. Williams then concludes, bleakly, that the Reconstruction Acts and their accompanying amendments were nearly worthless for African Americans who were largely left to fend for themselves.

Throughout this book, Williams draws upon a wide range of primary evidence from both black and white sources, including newspaper reports,

plantation record books, organizations' minutes, Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with former slaves, letters, diaries and memoirs. His arguments are convincing although a more detailed methodological section in the introduction would give readers a clearer sense of the sources used here and how they have been utilized. I also felt some of the sections on women were a little under-developed and would have benefitted from more depth of analysis. Men and women fought for freedom in different ways, and their respective paths to freedom were also different. Sharecropping, for example, although unproductive, offered some personal benefits to black women anxious to move away from 'big houses' and to balance their own labor with the demands of their children.

Nevertheless, on balance *I Freed Myself* is nicely presented, and contains some helpful illustrations throughout. I was surprised, however, not to see a bibliography included, as this provides an easy way for readers to follow up on further reading from both primary and secondary sources. That said, I agree that this significant work provides an important counter-narrative, especially for more general readers of the Civil War era.

Emily West is an associate professor of American history at the University of Reading in England. She is the author of Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina (2004) and Family or Freedom: People of Color in the Antebellum South (2012). e.r.west@reading.ac.uk