

In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson

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Review

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Brandt, Nat and Brandt, Yanna Kroyt. *In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson.* University of South Carolina Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9781570036873

A Slave Rescue

In the Shadow of the Civil War is a narrative of a slave escape in antebellum Philadelphia and the resulting legal proceedings against an abolitionist who aided in the escape. In 1855 Jane Johnson and her children accompanied their owner, John Hill Wheeler of North Carolina, on a trip that took them through Philadelphia on the way to New York. From New York, Wheeler planned to travel with them to Central America, where Wheeler served as American minister to Nicaragua. Johnson, however, used this sojourn into free territory to liberate herself and her family from Wheeler. Through a network of free blacks in Philadelphia, she contacted the Pennsylvania Vigilance Committee, an arm of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society, about her wishes. William Still, the famed Underground Railroad organizer who coordinated the committee's activities, engaged Passmore Williamson, a fellow member of the committee and lawyer who often worked on antislavery cases, to aid Johnson in her escape. Brandt's book chronicles the successful liberation of Johnson and the legal conflict that erupted in its aftermath, as federal officials in Philadelphia jailed Williamson for aiding Johnson in her flight and refusing to produce her in federal court under a writ of *habeus corpus*. Central to the story is the conflict between federal law, which guaranteed the rights of slave owners to retrieve fugitives from slavery and Pennsylvania's personal liberty law, which attempted to provide protection for free blacks in the North.

Brandt's work is made up of sixteen chapters, which can be divided roughly into two categories. Biographical and geographical entries that focus on bringing the settings and characters of the drama to life dominate the first part of the book. Brandt does this well, humanizing the conflict and giving a sense of the

world within which the event took place. In addition to the characters of Passmore Williamson, Jane Johnson, and William Still, he fleshes out the backgrounds of slaveowner John Hill Wheeler, and the federal judge who tried the case, John Kintzing Kane. A chapter on Philadelphia gives the general feel of the city, and one on Moyamensing Prison, where Passmore Williamson served time, gives a sense of his experience there. In each of these chapters Brandt uses his sketches of the people and places involved as a jumping-off point to educate the reader on the basic history of antebellum Philadelphia, the sectional conflict leading to the Civil War, the specifics of the antebellum controversy over fugitive slaves, and the workings of the antislavery movement.

The latter half of the book focuses on a narrative of the legal wrangling over Williamson's arrest and imprisonment. While this section is somewhat bogged down in details, Brandt does an admirable job of illuminating the conflict between state law and federal law that was at the center of the story, and indeed was at the center of much of the controversy over federal fugitive slave policy in general. These chapters also highlight the way in which such controversies over fugitive slaves helped to strengthen antislavery sentiment in the northern states.

Brandt has written about fugitive slaves before. His 1991 book, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, chronicles the Oberlin Rescue of 1858 in Ohio. He also has written several other narrative histories and two novels. Brandt, a journalist who has served as an editor for the *New York Times*, *American Heritage*, and *Publishers Weekly* and worked as a writer for CBS news, leans towards works aimed at a general rather than an academic audience. *In the Shadow of the Civil War* fits into this category. He provides a general context for the slave escape in Philadelphia, giving the reader a sense of the basic issues involved, and then zooms in on the specifics of the legal controversies surrounding the escape. Historiographically, there is not much new here, and Brandt really does not engage with the historical scholarship on fugitive slaves. The book should prove interesting and illuminating, however, to a general audience. Educators might find the book valuable in the secondary or undergraduate classroom, as Brandt adeptly ties the narrative of the Johnson escape to so many larger issues in antebellum history and does so in such an engaging manner. Historians looking for specifics on the Williamson case would also find the book useful. In general, Brandt successfully shows the way in which this single event dramatized many of the issues that led to the Civil War, pitting a free state not only against the federal government but also against a law that slave states considered sacrosanct (xii).

Angela F. Murphy is assistant professor of history at Texas State University in San Marcos. She is the author of 'It Outlaws Me and I Outlaw It!': Resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law in Syracuse, New York, in African Americans in New York Life and History and of 'Daniel O'Connell and the American Eagle' in 1845: Slavery, Diplomacy, Nativism, and the Collapse of America's First Irish Nationalist Movement, in the Journal of American Ethnic History. She currently is working on a book on the interactions between abolitionists and Irish nationalists in the 1840s.