

Leslie A. Schwalm. *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii + 394 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02259-3.

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Until recently, the story of African-American participation in the Civil War largely recounted the military exploits of black soldiers, while the tale of freedpeople's lives during Reconstruction focused on the efforts of Southern blacks to advance politically, socially, and economically, irrespective of gender. Happily, many historians of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction are beginning to examine more closely the ways in which black men and women experienced life and labor depending on their gender roles. Scholars are also exploring how the sexual divide complicated reactions to and participation in the ordinary and extraordinary events that made up daily life for African Americans in the pre-and post-war South. Leslie A. Schwalm tackles the era of emancipation by placing gender at the center of her analysis.

In *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, Schwalm focuses on the lives of black women on large rice plantations in lowcountry South Carolina to show the influence that gender exerted on the experiences of slavery, the war, and freedom.

Schwalm argues that gender made a difference, and that contrary to conventional wisdom, a black woman's "femininity" did not preordain a passive role in either slavery or freedom. The war and Reconstruction also brought African-American women into greater contact with governmental authorities, and Schwalm claims that these encounters "reveal how gender and race informed the articulation of power, the development of postbellum social and economic policy in particular, and the material consequences of that policy" (p. 3). In short, Schwalm aims to remove black women from the periphery of Civil War and Reconstruction history and position them as central actors in the march to freedom. She also seeks to demonstrate the ways in which they claimed their voices in both the public and private spheres.

Schwalm divides her narrative into three sections. Part One contains a general description of slave women's lives on lowcountry rice plantations, including their work in the fields, in the big house, and in their own houses. Schwalm demonstrates that black women's sex rarely spared them from physically demanding productive labor for

their masters and their own families. Part Two covers the Civil War period in South Carolina, examining the changing conditions on the plantations as a result of the war and recounting how black women participated in the war effort, both voluntarily and involuntarily. Schwalm argues that while black women suffered many of the same wartime hardships as did whites on the Confederate homefront, their race and sex made them targets of abuse by Confederate and Union troops. Black military enlistment, furthermore, accorded women both the privileges and prejudices associated with being the wives of black Union soldiers. Part Three explores the ways in which freedwomen attempted to "survive the peace" physically (p. 149) and to define their freedom by actively shaping the nature of their labor, their domestic environments, and their relationships with white Southerners and government officials. It was in the postwar period that black women in South Carolina encountered their hardest fights in the battle for self-determination.

A Hard Fight for We contains much to recommend. Schwalm's argument as to the importance of gender and its influence on contact between black women and the government is both compelling for the example of lowcountry South Carolina and applicable to other areas in the Confederacy. I found striking similarities between the experiences of black women in South Carolina and the women in Virginia whom I discussed in my doctoral dissertation.[1] Afro-Virginian women engaged in many of the same wartime activities as those described by Schwalm, attempted to take control of their postwar lives, and found numerous avenues through which to interact with "the State" during and after the war.

Schwalm's conclusions about the experiences of African-American women in South Carolina during the emancipation era are perceptive, and she draws on a wealth of primary and secondary material to illustrate her ideas. She also highlights the diversity of responses among black women

faced with similar circumstances. True to human nature, the women in *A Hard Fight for We* do not all follow the same path to freedom. Finally, despite using gender as a tool of analysis, Schwalm resists lacing the narrative with feminist theory and jargon. Her prose is highly readable, and, with a few exceptions, she relegates historiographical discussions to the endnotes.

A Hard Fight for We also suffers from a few flaws. While Schwalm's focus on large rice plantations in the lowcountry resonates with similar environments elsewhere in the South, Schwalm does not speculate on how the transition in South Carolina might have been different for free black women, upcountry slave women, or those who worked with different crops. While this does not mar the book, a brief discussion of black women in other areas of South Carolina would have put the lowcountry into a fuller context. Surprisingly, Harriet Tubman and Susie King Taylor are each mentioned only once in the narrative. Given her interest in the intersection of race, gender, and the military during the war, Schwalm might have explored further the significance of Tubman's limited military role and Taylor's experiences as a nurse and laundress with the United States Colored Troops (USCT).

More problematic for the work as a whole, however, is Schwalm's tendency to cut short her analysis before an idea has been fully articulated. The section encompassing the Civil War serves as a case in point. Addressing the issue of slave escapes during the war, Schwalm mentions that some slaves returned to the plantations to spirit their families to freedom (p. 97). Yet she provides no further information as to the sex of these slaves and does not speculate on the influence that physically collecting one's family might have had in terms of power relations within the black family. In discussing wartime incidences of sexual abuse of black women by white Union troops, Schwalm notes that the soldiers treated white women more deferentially (p. 120). Her evidence

is compelling that black women did suffer exploitation, but she does not confront the racial prejudices motivating the soldiers' behavior. The racial component may be obvious, but it still requires some explanation. Equally problematic is that Schwalm discusses slaves and freedpeople so generally in substantial sections of the narrative that the story of black women becomes seemingly tangential. While this material is certainly instructive about the African-American experience in South Carolina, the transition made specifically by black women from slavery to freedom becomes difficult to evaluate.

Overall, however, *A Hard Fight for We* is an exciting addition to the historiography of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and African-American history. It includes a variety of themes of importance to black women in the Civil War era and serves as a good overview of the subject. Leslie Schwalm's work also adds to the growing body of literature confirming that gender made a perceptible difference during and after the Civil War and that black women were active participants in the events transpiring around them.[2] Hopefully, historians of this period in American history will cease to allow the word "freedmen" to represent all African Americans and will be more cognizant of the wealth of differences between a "freedman" and a "freedwoman."

Notes

[1]. Michelle A. Krowl, "Dixie's Other Daughters: African-American Women in Virginia, 1861-1868" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998).

[2]. Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago, 1997); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997); Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997).

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