

**Winston James.** *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851.* New York: New York University Press, 2010. xiv + 305 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8147-4314-0.

**Reviewed by** James McGrath Morris ([www.jamesmcgrathmorris.com](http://www.jamesmcgrathmorris.com))

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## **The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer**

Winston James's book, *The Struggle of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851*, is a well-executed and coherent historical rescue mission. The book, which doubles as a biography and as a collection of Russwurm's writings, aims to elevate this little-known figure of the nineteenth-century Pan-African movement to a more deserving spot in history. Russwurm, according to James, is not only undeservingly forgotten but is also the subject of "unwarranted hostility ... in much of the historiography that bothers to mention him" (p. xi). He should be accorded better recognition, according to the author. And after reading his book, most readers will agree with James's assessment that Russwurm's "pioneering efforts, achievements, and example—as educator, abolitionist, editor, government official, staunch emigrationist, and colonizationist—put him at the vanguard of the Pan-African movement (p. 3).

Born in Jamaica in 1799, Russwurm was the product of an unsanctioned union of a black woman, whose name was lost to history, and a white Virginia merchant who eventually settled in Maine. Unlike many such fathers, the elder Russwurm did not conceal his paternity when he re-

turned to Maine and married Susan Blanchard. The couple sent for the child, adopted him, and gave him his surname. But only months after son was reunited with father, Russwurm senior died, leaving it to his wife to raise the young boy. Despite remarrying, Russwurm's stepmother and her new husband lived up to the obligation.

Under their care, John Russwurm enjoyed a loving childhood and was exceedingly well educated. He taught school in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston before eventually going to Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine, becoming in 1826 its first black graduate. Asked to deliver a commencement address, Russwurm displayed the skills and talent that would serve him well as an adult and provided an eloquent defense of the Haitian revolution and independence.

The speech was a reflection of the young man's fascination with Haiti and its revolution. In his talk, he argued that all humans held a belief in liberty, whether living under the African sun or in the cooler climates of the north. "It is in the irresistible course of events that all men, who have been deprived of their liberty," Russwurm told the parents, students, and faculty, "shall recover this previous portion of their indefeasible inheritance"

(p. 22). A reporter present at the graduation was impressed and Russwurm's comments found their way into several major newspapers.

Debating a move to Haiti or to Boston to study medicine, Russwurm did neither. Instead he relocated to New York and became involved in the nascent abolition movement. Prompted by the racism of established New York newspapers, he and Samuel Cornish, a thirty-something-year-old Presbyterian minister, launched an abolitionist newspaper as a counterweight. Not only did *Freedom's Journal* become the first newspaper to be owned by African Americans, but it also played an advocacy and educational role that set the tone for the vibrant black press that followed in its footsteps.

Much of this portion of Russwurm's tale has been adequately told before, especially his role in creating *Freedom's Journal*. What makes James's biographical account valuable is his account of Russwurm's life after this point, which might have been the apex of many a person's life. Rather, James assiduously traces Russwurm's conversion to ideals of colonization and then follows this episode with fascinating portrayal of Russwurm's subsequent life in Africa.

Running *Freedom's Journal* on his own after the departure of his partner, Russwurm increased the amount of news regarding the colonization movement, knowing well that many of his subscribers were opponents. Daringly, he explained his change of heart, which occurred after he concluded that equality in the United States was unattainable for Negroes. It is, he wrote, "mere waste of words, to talk of ever enjoying citizenship in this country: it is utterly impossible in the nature of things; all therefore who pant for th[is], must cast their eyes elsewhere" (p. 44).

In 1829, Russwurm acted upon his new beliefs, leaving the newspaper and immigrating to Liberia, where he worked first as the colonial secretary for the American Colonization Society and then added to his duties that of superintendent of

schools. He also helped launch and edit the *Liberia Herald* and became a partner in a merchant house. This flurry of work, James reports, was not a demonstration of Russwurm's talents, though he had plenty. Rather, it reflected the dearth of educated blacks in Liberia. Keenly aware of the danger this posed to the success of colonization, Russwurm focused his efforts on attracting a cadre of educated African Americans while simultaneously improving the schools in Liberia.

Included in James's absorbing account of Russwurm's challenging work in Liberia is a humanizing description of Russwurm's personal life and his marriage to Sarah McGill, a member of what Liberians regarded as one of the colony's most distinguished families. Born in Maryland, McGill came with her parents to Liberia when she was three years old. Marrying Russwurm while she was still only a teenager and he was in his thirties, she became a devoted nursemaid to him in times of sickness, mother of their five children, and, in time, his confidante and best friend.

In 1836, the Maryland State Colonization Society appointed Russwurm governor of its Liberian colonial holdings. As the first black person to be appointed governor of one of the colonies, Russwurm was a success, despite a continued misportrayal of his achievements by paternalistic white colonists who chafed at seeing a black in a position of leadership. Simply put, writes James, "The period from the late 1840s to Russwurm's death in 1851 was the happiest and most prosperous in the history of Maryland in Liberia" (p. 95). His achievements, adds James, were even more remarkable when one takes into account the severe health problems he battled.

James's documentation of Russwurm's life in Liberia following his conversion to colonization is not without larger purpose. The author is convinced that aside from being a forgotten figure from history, the belief lingers on that Russwurm sold out and was a black Benedict Arnold. But James argues that Russwurm's principled ad-

vocacy of colonization supported by his work in Liberia reveals a selflessness on his part rather than a selling-out for gain. And, from his work with *Freedom's Journal* to his final days as a colonial governor, Russwurm remained a pioneer in the black liberation struggle.

In writing *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm*, James has done Russwurm a good turn but readers may find the book a bit of a slog at times. The author's strength as an indefatigable researcher becomes, at times, a weakness as he insists on sharing and evaluating all of his finds. For example, he will quote a comment and then explain why it is unlikely to be true (pp. 9, 31, 52). The biographical portion of the book would have been more effective had he parsed the evidence and simply told Russwurm's story. In addition, James has a heavy reliance on rhetorical questions such as "So what do these articles tell us about Cornish's views on colonization?" (p. 38) or "What does this mean?" (p. 41). While this takes away from the narrative, Russwurm's fascinating life still shines through.

The collection of writings, which constitutes the second half of the volume, is less successful. James states that his objective in providing more than 120 pages of articles and letters is to make

Russwurm's works more available to readers. The extent of this collection makes one wonder if the publisher aimed to bulk up the biography, which as is would have been too short to publish as a book. In defending his approach, James says that selections, in particular the letters, serve to provide insights into Russwurm's interior life. A more effective approach would have been for the author to have used the material in the biography rather than leaving it for readers to sort through on their own. As presented in the back of the book, the collection seems more like bits and pieces from the cutting floor.

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