

**Herman E. Thomas.** *James W. C. Pennington: African American Churchman and Abolitionist.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. xi + 206 pp. \$20.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8153-1889-7.

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James W. C. Pennington was a nineteenth-century minister whose religion and race led him to work for the abolition of slavery. Above all, he worked for the improvement of the African American people. Although Pennington first told his story in *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1850), it is worth retelling. Herman E. Thomas emphasizes the relevance of Pennington's life and career by placing biographical information into a broader context. The result broadens our collective knowledge of the African American experience and its influence on social reform and of the religious movements of the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Born in 1809, James Pembroke fled from slavery in Maryland to freedom in Pennsylvania at the age of eighteen. Leaving behind his parents and siblings, he traveled the Underground Railroad to free territory. Still a slave but now also a fugitive, Pembroke took the name James William Charles Pennington. He learned to read and acquired religion by 1830, and he eventually became a minister. In 1846, Pennington tried to buy freedom for himself and his parents, but his master asked for more than the \$1,500 Pennington had saved. Pennington instead used the money to get his father and two brothers to Canada. Later, after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, he bought his own freedom for \$150. His mother, however, died in slavery.

As a minister, Pennington served mostly Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations, although his own congregations were predominantly black. After the Civil War, he served an African Methodist Episcopal church at Natchez, Mississippi, and a Presbyterian church in Jacksonville, Florida. He also wrote an autobiography, a history of African Americans (1841), and various religious and abolitionist works. He was the first African American to receive an honorary doctorate, and he helped to desegregate the New York City Sixth Street horse-drawn streetcar line. After an illustrious life, he died in 1870.

The Pennington story has factual gaps, but the author dares to speculate and to draw reasonable conclusions where possible. More importantly, Thomas has taken the Pennington life, significant as it is on its own, and cast it into a man-and-his-times format. There are chapters on nineteenth-century reform movements, on abolitionism, and on religion, both white and black and slave and free. The drawback to this approach is that it generates redundancy, with the same evidence appearing over and over. There is also repetition of the basic theme that Pennington was an exemplar of African American religion and abolitionism. At its best, the book places the public man into context, as when it discusses the range of abolitionist types and fits its subject into the appropriate categories. The approach also works when it discusses the climate of reform and lo-

cates Pennington as a leader in various reform movements. Sometimes, however, Thomas's methodology places Pennington into contexts where the fit is awkward, as when the author attempts to depict Pennington as a nineteenth-century Martin Luther King, or as an intellectual ancestor to both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois. The inclusion of Pennington in Thomas's discussion of the contemporary black church's struggle with institutional racism is inappropriate in a biographical study such as this. Pennington led an uncommon life, was a legitimate pioneer in the civil rights movement, and bequeathed much that remains germane to modern African Americans; there is no need to make more of his life than the facts dictate.

There is much good in this reconstituted dissertation. There are also some stylistic problems which produce needless aggravation. For example, someone forgot to check for such basics as ensuring that all paragraphs begin with an indentation. In addition, there are many annoying typographical errors. Not surprisingly, given its origin as a dissertation, the writing style is somewhat cumbersome.

Despite its problems, the work adds to the literature of African American studies and nineteenth-century reform. Further, Pennington's life and ideas are inherently interesting. The book is worth the effort it requires of the reader.

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