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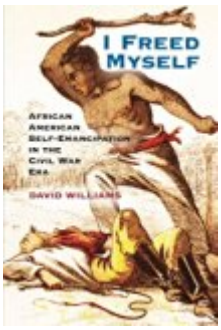

David Williams. *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 274 pp. $27.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-60249-6.

Reviewed by Justin Behrend

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Commissioned by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz (Eastern Illinois University)

In many ways, David Williams's new book revisits the debate between historians James McPherson and Ira Berlin in the mid-1990s over who freed the slaves. In that debate, McPherson argued that President Abraham Lincoln was the most responsible for emancipation, while Berlin contended that "slaves were the prime movers in the emancipation drama."[1] The debate generated some heat at the time, but it quickly grew stale since both sides conceded that slaves had a pivotal role in the emancipation process as did Lincoln. In recent years, historians have moved past this debate to ask not who freed the slaves but how they became free. Williams, however, does not revive the debate so much as he casts his lot firmly on the side of Berlin's position and even more forcefully argues for the singularity of slave initiative in their own emancipation.

For at least the last thirty years, historians of the Civil War era have placed African Americans at the center of the emancipation story. Indeed, this historiographical thread goes back, as is often the case, to W. E. B. Du Bois's ***Black Reconstruction*** (1935). If historians, by and large, accept the view that slaves participated in their own emancipation, this interpretation has yet to sink into the public's consciousness. But it is not clear if ***I Freed Myself*** will help much to change public awareness of this vital history.

Relying almost exclusively on published sources, ***I Freed Myself*** is in many ways a history of the Civil War era from the perspective of African Americans. The first chapter leans heavily on the slave narratives from the Depression-era Federal Writers' Project to describe antebellum slavery and the growing sectional conflict that ultimately led to war. The central point is that slave resistance was pervasive and that this resistance "was the underlying cause" of secession, while abolitionism was only an "excuse" (p. 57). Indeed, the emphasis on "black self-agency" is so strong that the Union army and the Republican Party seem almost incidental in this account (p. 13).

The Civil War years, the heart of the book, are covered in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Basing his discus-

sion mostly on the documents compiled by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, Williams shows how enslaved people escaped bondage, joined the Union army, fought back against racist military officials and civilians, and ultimately "forced the government to react" (p. 77). Although the author celebrates the strivings of ordinary black people, it is not a triumphalist narrative. Rather, Williams includes dozens of accounts of halfway measures, incomplete freedoms, racist paternalism, and violent bigotry. The book is particularly strong in highlighting the strenuous efforts within the Union army and among white Northerners, generally, to keep black people down. He shows how slaves undermined planter power, secretly helped Union forces, renegotiated terms of labor, and reestablished families. Although Williams does address the struggle for more land and more autonomy in the fields, he is far more interested in soldiers and the campaign for black suffrage.

The final chapter covers the Reconstruction years and the Jim Crow era, but here Williams's singular focus on "self-emancipation" leads him to some dubious conclusions. He contends that the Reconstruction Acts and the Civil War Amendments were "nearly worthless," which would have come as a surprise to most African Americans at the time who eagerly embraced them as well as the former Confederates who viciously denounced them (p. 222). Williams is on better ground in asserting that "the freedom war would continue long after the Union war was won," and goes on to describe how black people sought to expand the meaning of freedom beyond just the negation of slavery (p. 208). But he has a hard time explaining the undoing of Reconstruction. In contrast to the definitive book title, Williams is forced to conclude that freedom was not a state but a process. "They kept freeing themselves by degrees," he writes, leaving the impression that for all of their effort and resistance, little had been achieved by the end of the nineteenth century (p. 243).

The role of African Americans in securing freedom and pushing government officials to abolish slavery and extend citizenship rights is an essential component of Civil War history, yet Williams's intense focus on individual actions flattens an otherwise dynamic history. Too often Williams treats all white people (North and South) as equally racist, as when he contends that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats "expressed much sympathy for blacks" or when he states that President Andrew Johnson "was no more committed to civil rights for former slaves than Lincoln had been" (pp. 121, 215). The result of this simplistic racial binary is that Williams has little interpretive space to explain how the actions of slaves and freedpeople altered white Northerners' perceptions. And thus this book fails to explain how much of the Union electorate could embrace abolitionism and citizenship rights for black people.

Some of the best recent scholarship on emancipation, such as books by Glenn David Brasher (*The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* [2012]) and James Oakes (*Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* [2013]), shows how self-emancipation worked in concert with military emancipation and legislative abolition, but the balance and nuance in these accounts is missing from Williams's book. This is unfortunate because recognizing the contributions of the Union army, the Republican Congress, and President Lincoln need not diminish the substantial contributions of enslaved and free African Americans in the destruction of slavery.

Note

[1]. James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Reconstruction* 2, no. 3 (1994): 35-40; and Ira Berlin, "Emancipation and Its Meaning in

American Life," *Reconstruction* 2, no. 3 (1994): 41-44.