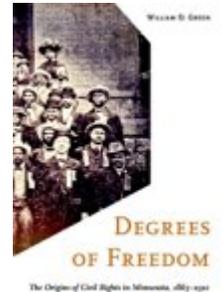


William D. Green. *Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865-1912.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 384 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-9346-7.



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Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York)

With this book, historian William D. Green advances the narrative from his 2007 book, *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota*. As Green mentions in his preface to the present volume, that first book ended “on a high note when black Minnesotans gained the right to vote, a chance for a better education for their children, and the opportunity to participate in public service” (p. xi). The present volume brings the story into the early twentieth century, showing that “despite having the political franchise,... genuine opportunity and social and interracial acceptance remained largely elusive” (p. xii). This, of course, will not surprise scholars of race in the nineteenth century.

The first of the book’s three sections takes the reader from the 1840s through the early 1870s. This section would have benefited from more discussion of the Civil War, and how emancipation, political partisanship, the press, and first-hand experiences affected racial views. What were Minnesotans at home and on the frontlines reading and writing about emancipation, freed people,

and black soldiers? How many black Minnesotans, those who arrived during and after the war, were former slaves? How many saw some form of military service? How did this affect their civil rights activism?

The second section takes up the relationship between local civil rights activism, race advocacy, and state-level partisan politics from the 1870s through the 1890s. Green is at his best in this section when he discusses in rich detail how Reconstruction unfolded in a state with a traditionally tolerant racial milieu. Green shows that Minnesota largely avoided the virulent racism of Democratic partisanship in other parts of the country, and both Republicans and Democrats sought black votes. Although racial discrimination—especially in public accommodations—was certainly present, there does not seem to have been much organized anti-black resistance. Indeed, from the late 1870s to the 1890s, Green’s entrepreneurs, as race leaders and members of a small but influen-

tial black middle class, often found themselves as much at odds with other blacks as with whites.

The third section brings the story into the early twentieth century, with a particular focus on the emergence of a relatively successful distinctive black politics, and the rise of a more sophisticated national black civil rights movement. The most valuable insight in this section is the observation that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by sophisticated black civil rights activism, even in a state known to be tolerant. Indeed, as Green shows, it was partially due to the ambitious work of black activists that Minnesota developed this reputation.

The book is firmly grounded in historical narrative, with several key personalities providing focal points throughout the book: St. Paul barber Maurice Jernigan, Minneapolis attorney Frank Wheaton, and St. Paul attorney Fredrick McGhee, in particular. Green also uses Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington to do the important work of tying Minnesota's story into larger national narratives of the post-Civil War era. With interesting and notable personalities to focus the narrative, Green moves from political to legal to social history with relative ease, and his integration of these frameworks provides a rich and nuanced narrative.

Green's delightfully detailed narrative gaze is firmly fixed on Minnesota, and he might have done more to situate his Minnesotans within the Midwest and the nation. He does this effectively at the historical level, but more reflection on the historiographical stakes of this perspective would have been valuable both to frame the narrative and to point the way for future scholars. Even without this framing, however, this work clearly belongs within an emerging body of scholarship on the midwestern experience with race during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and helps create an essential foundation for a richer understanding of how midwesterners experienced the Civil War era and its long-term consequences.

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