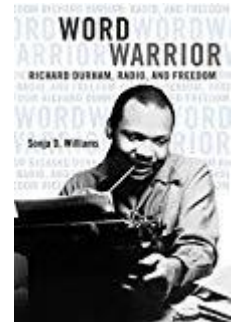


Sonja D. Williams. *Word Warrior: Richard Durham, Radio, and Freedom.* New Black Studies Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Illustrations. 264 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08139-2.



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Published on Jhistory (September, 2016)

Commissioned by Robert A. Rabe

The Revolution Will Be an Audiophile

Early black radio broadcasts in the community were an essential staple of modern communication. Often the disc jockeys were local people with flair and appeal. These men and few women did their best to celebrate their heritage and hometown culture over the airwaves. The era of syndication muted local radio disc jockeys, as they were increasingly replaced by nationally known celebrity personalities. Initially, after the rise and domination of the black press, black radio provided common ground for intergenerational discourse, played our music, and/or served as a virtual platform for aspiring and established preachers, singers, and dramatists. Sonja D. Williams rightly situates the late Richard Durham within the tradition of black communication and black radio, reaching back to his antecedents who assumed the significant cultural role of the griot-educator-activist.

Williams entered the world of Isadore Richard Durham in 1994 while working on a Smithsonian

documentary radio project *Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was*. Here she encountered the recordings from *Destination Freedom* broadcasts. Williams writes that this “African American writer [Durham] created this series in 1948 and served as its sole scriptwriter. A master storyteller, [he] seductively conjured aural magic, inventively dramatizing the lives of black history makers” (p. xvii). Astounded that a full-length book about Durham and his crusade did not exist, Williams committed to articulating his life’s story and journey to the airwaves.

Word Warrior is an apt telling of the life and times of Durham organized into twelve neat chapters with a prologue, epilogue, and appendix. The appendix is a detailed two-year radio log of *Destination Freedom* broadcasts. Williams informs the reader that forty-two original broadcasts are available online via the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection while others are available at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture. This in-

formation is a delight for a generation of scholars who never experienced the sounds of local black radio hosts. Each chapter opens with a unique writing by Durham, at times a poem or a radio transcript. This method places the reader within ear shot of an intriguing exchange between Durham and Williams. The second chapter provides a glimpse into the origins of an unusual African American family whose enslaved ancestors within one generation became landowners, of some eighty acres, in Mississippi. Their landed wealth propelled them into the northern migration ending in Chicago. Durham's life is teased out of national and local issues in concert with the lives of his parents, siblings, future spouse, and notable personalities of the day. His life is woven throughout the rich tapestry of American history. Williams uses his own words to capture and situate remarkable moments in Durham's life. He opens with Durham's observation: "Somewhere in this ocean of Negro life, with its crosscurrents and undercurrents, lies the very soul of America.... It lies there because the real-life story of a single Negro in Alabama walking into a voting booth across a Ku Klux Klan line has more drama and world implications than all the stereotypes Hollywood or radio can turn out in a thousand years" (p. ix). These are more than mere words; Durham experienced this reality directly or vicariously through research. He intended to utilize those stories of success, survival, and overcoming as ammunition.

In journalistic style, *Word Warrior* begins with the funeral of Durham on May 2, 1984. The description places the reader in the midst of a large, crowded, and diverse array of attendees. "Some ... came straight from work in their best business attire. Others dressed more casually, wearing light sweaters, jackets, and shawls in Chicago's mild, near-sixty-degree weather.... City officials and congressmen, educators and social workers, labor leaders and artists, journalists and other writers were just a few of the hundreds who came to remember—and to say goodbye" (pp. 1, 2).

A modicum of sadness radiated through the service because Durham had died expectedly of a heart attack. His widow Clarice Durham recruited friends and family to share their recollections about him. Their forty-two years of marriage welcomed children and a constellation of friends whose recollections stoked memories of good times, a great man, and a lasting legacy.

The legacy of Isadore "Izzy" Richard Durham began on September 6, 1917, in Raymond in Hinds County, Mississippi, on eighty acres of farmland. He was the fifth of seven children born to Curtis George Durham and Chanie Tillman Durham, hardworking providers for their children. Curtis owned land and provided opportunities for two families as tenant farmers. Chanie was a school teacher in Hinds County's Negro schoolhouse, produced soap, and styled hair to supplement the family income. Chanie's thirst for education and Curtis's two years at Alcorn University infused their children with an understanding that education was a needed companion to hard work and integrity.

Mississippi became a poetic memory for Durham, when the family moved to Chicago when he was five years old. Durham poetically described Chicago as "a baked brick desert, with oases of parks, a necklace of streets" (p. 18). Chicago became the soil in which the seed of writer-broadcaster Richard nicknamed Izzy would be planted. Here he flourished and participated in a variety of activities, from amateur boxing to poetry to labor union organizing. Novelist Richard Wright influenced Durham, while Langston Hughes offered suggestions to Durham's unsolicited poems. According to the text, "Durham welcomed Hughes' advice. Building on this initial correspondence, the two men established a friendship that would last more than two decades. He liked the way I wrote, and the way I organized writing particularly" (p. 33). Hughes contributed to Durham's selection of the pen name Richard Durham.

Williams's *Word Warrior* is an engrossing, at times poetic excavation of one man's dealing with life and learning as an African American man. Durham answered the call to arms through the artistry of storytelling, advocacy, agency, and learning. He swirled those elements together throughout his inquisitive life. He shared his historical findings through his radio broadcast, *Destination Freedom*, as well as published short stories and poems. He pursued a variety of ghost writ-

ing jobs for money, despite the exhausting nature of his work. Inwardly, he harbored a private desire to write about Aesop, whom Durham believed was an African diplomat who moved between nations, making agreements by employing his extraordinary wit as method of getting his point across. In this sense, Durham was an heir of Aesop, an activist using the airwaves as his medium to broadcast the revolution while stirring the people to consciousness.

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Citation: Ida E. Jones. Review of Williams, Sonja D. *Word Warrior: Richard Durham, Radio, and Freedom*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. September, 2016.

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