Paying Freedom's Price: A History of African Americans in the Civil War

Review Number: 2179

Publish date: Thursday, 19 October, 2017

Author: Paul D. Escott

ISBN: 9781442255746

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £30.00

Pages: 182pp.

Publisher: Rowman and Littlefield

Publisher url: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442255746/Paying-Freedom%27s-Price-A-History-of-African-Americans-in-the-Civil-War>

Place of Publication: New York, NY

Reviewer: Carin Peller-Semmens

Paying Freedom's Price is a slim volume that joins the African American History Series, a coterie of books with the aim of being both historically informative and accessible to a popular audience. It succeeds in being a concise, readable, broad stroke overview of African American engagements and struggles prior, during, and after the Civil War. However, by flattening out African American experiences and creating a uniform story of enslaved and newly emancipated life across the South, the book fails to paint a historically accurate and suitably complex narrative.

This book is geared towards undergraduate classes – particularly survey courses that need to cover a lot of ground within a semester and need a dedicated text on African Americans during the Civil War – and lay readers already interested in the subject. Escott caters well to his focus audience, and that of the series, with the inclusion of the two most useful aspects of the book: a detailed chronology and primary source readings. The chronology, found before the introduction, sets the tone and offers background that contextualizes the events of the war years, while the primary source readings, found after the final chapter, serve as a powerful culmination. The primary source section is the best part of this book and could justify the book's inclusion on survey course syllabi, though quite a number of the documents are easily accessible online. Particularly given the target audience, it is quite pleasing to see the inclusion of primary sources that showcase how African Americans dealt with the panoply of injustices stemming from their military service and desire for equal pay, access to the franchise, access to education, and land ownership. Other sources touch on issues ranging from former slaveholders withholding news of emancipation, white Union soldiers' discussion of black soldiers' valor in combat, racism in the Union army, and Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15. It would have been better, however, if more of the sources utilized were written by or captured the voice and vernacular of formerly enslaved African Americans. Instead, the majority are penned by northern whites commenting on particular aspects of Civil War and post-war life or written in polished prose on behalf of freedpeople. For a book that aims to shed light on how former slaves grappled with the obstacles placed in the way of their full access to freedom, citizenship, and equality, it would have been powerful to highlight their voices.

Jargon free, accessibly written, but concise to its detriment, the book is organized chronologically. The introduction sketches the history of enslavement in the United States, stressing the economic underpinnings of slavery's entrenchment and the complicated relationship between Congress and the expansion of slavery. A brief discussion of slave treatment and northern abolitionism is also found here. Beginning in the mid-1850s, chapter one details the seeds of Confederate secession, the Dred Scott decision, the Second Confiscation Act, Lincoln's inaugural address and the first few months of his wartime presidency, the early emergence and differing viewpoints on the issue of what to do with contrabands, and the launch by black leaders of campaigns for emancipation and black military service. In chapter two, attention is turned to slave experiences in the Confederacy and the myriad ways in which their labor was used by the Confederate army. There is discussion about escapes to Union lines, interactions between slaves and Union soldiers, and Confederacy's safeguarding of slaveholders' interests. Chapter three – the strongest in this work – covers the hostility and discriminatory policies black troops faced in the Union army, the complexities of recruiting black soldiers in the border states, racism in Northern cities and throughout the ranks of the Union army, casualty rates and status of black soldiers, anti-black riots in major Northern cities in 1863, and rampant discrimination faced by freedpeople throughout Union-occupied areas of the South. A major focus of chapter four is the race uplift approach spearheaded by northern black communities, the political machinations surrounding the 1864 election, and the culmination of the Civil War. The first half of the chapter deals with efforts in the North to secure suffrage, the right to vote, overturning northern laws concerning testifying in court, desegregation of public transportation, and access to education. After this discussion of northern resistance to equal political and civil rights for African Americans, Escott turns to the Freedmen's Bureau, efforts led by northern blacks particularly in regards to educating southern blacks, and the challenges faced by the Republican Party. The post-war period is covered in broad strokes by chapter five, touching on violent reactions to black emancipation, political involvement, mobility, the difficulties in black landownership, and the changing political landscape that would impact the options available to African Americans in freedom.

The strengths of this work are found in discussions of black enlistment and military service for the Union army in the Civil War – particularly slaves who ran to Union lines to serve – despite being discriminated, unpaid, and not viewed as equal members of the armed forces. Escott's handling of white racism and the often-violent discrimination meted out to African Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line is a notable plus of this book. Also worth a mention is the fact that Escott addresses and attempts to chart the basic contours of the very complicated relationship Lincoln had with black emancipation, black citizenship, and the positioning of free blacks in America. A few references and explorations are made into Lincoln's hesitation to utilize black men as armed soldiers, his slow arrival at the Emancipation Proclamation, his political machinations that placed voting outcomes over racial equality, and his belief until the eleventh hour in black colonization. Escott does not shy away from including issues of racism by white soldiers and commanders in his sketches of the Union Army and he does hone in on contraband treatment and differences in approach towards their status and care by various commanders. He does hammer home that African Americans fought bravely and boldly and sacrificed their lives for the Union not just for what the Union stood for, but also to secure racial equality. Since much is glossed over in this text, it was heartening to see that the discrimination blacks faced in jobs assigned, lack of pay, lack of medical attention, incredible casualties, the impressment of slaves into Confederate service, and brutal battlefield massacres such as Fort Pillow were called out by name in the body of the work.

The subject matter in this book needs to be presented with all of the nuance, complexity, regional differences and specificities intact, and is incredibly important for curious readers to have the full portrait present in order to comprehend and appreciate the momentous changes that occurred at personal, local, state, and national levels during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The two dimensional narrative presented herein diminishes the impact of this monograph and means that within a classroom and personal setting, it most certainly needs to be supplemented with additional secondary literature. This book also falls short of its goal because it does not utilize, incorporate, or showcase the breadth of new scholarship and instead relies heavily on dated work, in particular the author's own. The footnotes at the end of each chapter are almost

exclusively citing previous Escott works, which only underscores the unsuitability of this as a stand alone starting point for classroom use or for a non-academic audience. Escott's previous works are established historiography and it would be acceptable to cite a few times from them but it is unnecessary and detrimental to only cite his work when there is a rich historiography to incorporate.

Unfortunately, the negative aspects of this book outweigh and overshadow the positives. Critically, it is too broad and generalizing, and thus fails to deliver on its aim of providing an informative and substantial overview text on this important period in American history. Everything is divided neatly into firmly set categories and binaries that lumps together without any distinction whatever the dazzling different local and regional characteristics found in the United States. This lack of distinction between planters, smallholders, and yeomen in the South; urban and rural whites in the North and South; the deep, upper, lower, and border regions of the South, is a disservice and creates rigid boxes that force historical actors and events to fit into a cleanly cut narrative of black versus white, North versus South, slaveholders versus non-slaveholders that is both inaccurate and a disservice to readers. Most examples and descriptions repeatedly focus on a few states, blithely ignoring the rest of the South. He also paints an incredibly unified picture of all African-American behavior, particularly when discussion feelings about enlistment, Union service, and black abolitionism. This overly unified portrayal of black individuals and their hopes, goals, and vision for the future completely flattens out their experience and their humanity. It takes out nearly all of the internal dynamics of communities and individual viewpoints and minimizes the complexities that faced the African-American community throughout the South after emancipation. Not everyone thought that race uplift or the talented tenth approach was best or agreed with these ideas as being the most effective way to fight for equality. By not presenting the myriad viewpoints, community struggles and differing challenges, or regional distinctions and differences, Escott paints a very two-dimensional black community that bears little resemblance to reality. The black community and their experience is presented without nuance, specificity, or dynamics, and that exemption ultimately over shadows this work. Taken together with the generalized and feather-light content of this book, most instructors will skip assigning or adding this book to their syllabi and it will not have the desired impact among the general public.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2179>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/267822>