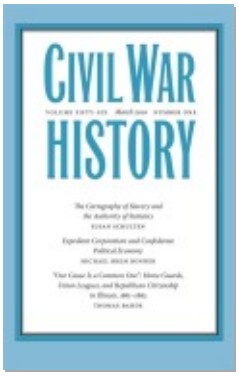
A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escape to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation (review)



Amber Moulton-Wiseman

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William T. Sherman and Philip A. Sheridan—took center stage in the last part of the war. Their campaigns diminished and finally obliterated the South's major field armies. A remarkable team, Lincoln and Grant weathered severe criticism as losses mounted during the campaigns of spring and summer 1864. For a while, it looked like Lincoln was going to lose the critical election of that year. Success on the battlefield and the overwhelmingly favorable soldier's vote returned him to the White House with a large majority.

Throughout the narrative, McPherson reminds readers that "Lincoln could never ignore the political context in which decisions about military strategy were made" (7). Indeed, military strategy represented the most obvious, and bloody, component of a national strategy resolutely focused on restoring the Union. "Here was the core of Lincoln's concept of his war power as commander in chief," declares McPherson. "His supreme constitutional obligation was to preserve the nation by winning the war" (30). Readers unfamiliar with the details of Lincoln's complex and often troublesome relationship with his generals will find *Tried by War* richly rewarding. Even students more familiar with the literature will appreciate the analytical and descriptive skill evident in McPherson's narrative. They will also be reminded again of the daunting obstacles Lincoln faced and overcame in presiding over the most serious threat yet to the American nation.

JOAN WAUGH
UCLA

A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escape to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation. By David W. Blight. (New York: Harcourt, 2007. Pp. 320. Cloth, $25.00.)

In *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escape to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation,* David Blight reveals the narratives of Wallace Turnage and John Washington, men who escaped slavery during the Civil War and recorded their emancipation experiences later in life. Part of a growing body of rediscovered nineteenth-century African American writings, they straddle a line between antebellum narratives published under the auspices of white abolitionist organizations, and postbellum memoirs like Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery,* which celebrate the journey "from slave cabin to the pulpit," and other sagas of post-emancipation uplift (14). Blight's annotations illustrate that the narratives are remarkably verifiable Civil War–era source material, and he provides a detailed four-chapter introduction offering

them as evidence of two important points: enslaved people's own actions were critical to emancipation, and freedom was not easy, rather, that it could be joyous but also fraught with sorrow and perseverance against incalculable odds (132, 148). While these contentions are not groundbreaking, Blight presents them with unusual strength, thanks to meticulous research and the power of Turnage's and Washington's own words.

Notably, there is no one story of emancipation here. Hired out as an urban slave in Richmond and Fredericksburg, Virginia, Washington developed youthful independence, rebelling against his mistress's religious instruction, falling in love with his future wife, Annie Gordon, and in 1861 hiring himself out in Fredericksburg to be closer to Annie and the advancing Union army he knew could offer refuge. He entered the lines of the 30th New York Volunteers, and within weeks was serving as cook for Gen. Rufus King's headquarters staff. Although his narrative does not discuss the postwar period, Blight reveals that John and Annie Washington and their children became respected members of Washington, D.C.'s black community.

Turnage's story belies some of the bootstraps optimism Washington's inspires. Sold from North Carolina to Richmond and thence to Alabama while just a teenager, much of his tale fits the "road narrative" genre, serial escapes culminating in eventual freedom (65). It was not until his fifth escape attempt and a death-defying sea crossing that Turnage reached a Union garrison at Fort Powell. Like Washington, he served as a cook for the Union army and raised a family after the war, even locating his long-lost mother and removing her from the Jim Crow South. He lived variously in Baltimore, Manhattan, and Jersey City, where he struggled to shake the linked handicaps of race and working poverty that would contribute to four of his children's deaths and compel his surviving son and daughter to pass for white.

These narratives lend evidentiary strength to innumerable historiographical debates, but a few stand out. Both men were cast into the domestic slave trade and system of hiring-out, as described so vividly in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999), Jonathan D. Martin's *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (2004), and Steven Deyle's *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (2005). In the mist of this tumultuous ordeal, each would orchestrate his escape by taking advantage of the anonymity and comparative independence of urban enslavement detailed in Midori Takaki's *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865* (2002), and local slave communities' intricate social networks recently receiving recognition in such works as Anthony Kaye's

Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (2007). *A Slave No More* will be of interest to all scholars of African American history and the evolving bounds of United States citizenship in the Civil War era.

AMBER MOULTON-WISEMAN
Harvard University

Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History. By Milton C. Sernett. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 424. Cloth, $89.95; paper, $24.95.)

Milton Sernett begins his book by revealing the results of a 1986 study that revealed that most American eleventh grade students could not identify Winston Churchill but knew that Harriet Tubman was a conductor on the underground railroad. How and why, Sernett asks, did Tubman achieve this kind of popular recognition? His study seeks to answer this question by exploring the process by which Tubman became a cultural icon, a "myth . . . [drawing] on the factual core but . . . often in tension with it" (3). While Sernett also promises to uncover the "historical" Tubman, his greatest interest lies with the "remembered Tubman," perhaps, he suggests, "America's most malleable icon" (3). Over time, he shows, her image has been successfully exploited by groups ranging from feminists to educators.

The book first examines how various stages of Tubman's life took on mythic qualities while she was still alive. Since few nineteenth-century sources depicted Tubman's childhood, the first chapter focuses on twentieth-century juvenile literature. As Sernett makes clear, authors have used incidents, whether true or not, to teach a variety of lessons to children. Today the youthful Tubman serves the needs of multiculturalism (40). Tubman was illiterate, but her vivid stories created her identity as a black Moses, a view that abolitionists popularized for their own antislavery purposes. Very quickly her exploits were amplified: the numbers of rescue trips made and fugitives rescued ballooned. More complex images of Tubman as the militant "General Tubman," brave scout, spy, and nurse emerged from her activities before and during the Civil War. This complexity has allowed those "with contrasting political views and agendas [to] . . . extract useful inspirational capital" by privileging some aspects of her exploits over others (104). Finally, in the postwar years, when she retired to Auburn, New York, emphasis on her piety and seerlike powers emerged. Later, her death led to a resurrection of sorts. Her funeral and the subsequent erection of a memorial to her brought forth eulogies of her as both Black Moses and "American Patriot" (178).