

William Wells Brown: An African American Life

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Review

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Greenspan, Ezra *William Wells Brown: An African American Life*. W.W. Norton, \$35.00 ISBN 9780393240900

The Multiple Identities of William Wells Brown

Ezra Greenspan, who is the Edmund J. and Louis W. Kahn Professor of English at Southern Methodist University, and editor of *William Wells Brown: A Reader*, may in fact know William Wells Brown as well as anyone can one hundred and thirty-one years after the writer and anti-slavery advocate's death. Most recently, Greenspan explores every aspect of Brown's personality and life's work in a full-length biography that is both powerful as a narrative and impressive as a work of scholarship.

William Wells Brown: An African American Life represents the best of several academic areas of inquiry. As history, Greenspan delves into and sorts through an impressive array of primary and secondary sources. As narrative, Greenspan brings Brown to life and dares to respectfully, but quite thoughtfully, bring us close into Brown's inner world to the extent that the available information allows it to be done. As zeitgeist, Greenspan captures and shares with readers the remarkable soap opera that pitted American slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century against its many critics; more specifically, the breadth, scope, and feel of the complicated but dynamic anti-slavery movement in America and abroad.

Brown broke the template for the standard fugitive slave turned speaker-activist stereotype. On the one hand he was what others like Frederick Douglass were: passionate, eloquent, and committed to the cause of abolition. On the other, he was also quite unique and complex: trapped in a failed marriage; sometimes self-serving; quirky and gifted in unusual talents; and able more than others to merge his own personal experience with almost every other narrative thread he encountered in the wider anti-slavery story.

Brown is a compelling and difficult subject to tackle in biography, as he even “struggled how to take himself” (p. 2). Greenspan brings an academic, but entertaining approach to bear on his complicated subject. The result is a biographical work that will be useful to students of American Slavery and the Abolition Movement, but also fascinating as a human interest story.

Brown struggled in managing his own personal identities, often adopting the identity of those he was around at any given time. Greenspan emphasizes repeatedly that Brown’s movement back and forth across color lines was fairly unique for that historical period, and very consistent with more contemporary research like that of sociologist Erving Goffman who studied stigmatized identities in the 1960s. To paraphrase from Goffman, the masks that Brown wore often did indeed become his actual face; he was truly a “problem” for his contemporaries to deal with, who usually admired him, but also did not know exactly how to react to him; he remains a challenge for the biographer.

In spite of this, Greenspan’s research makes it clear that Brown was as impactful as any other individual figure in shaping the anti-slavery landscape, and more so than most. Although he was also a father, a creative writer, a talented researcher, a world traveler, a river man, and many other amazing things, his primary legacy remains that of adamant opponent of slavery.

Writing about Brown, as already noted, presents significant scholarly challenges, and Greenspan openly acknowledges this challenge throughout his work. In Brown’s case, “Autobiography becomes history and history becomes autobiography” (p. 2), and throughout the text the reader is never certain that Brown is being totally forthright in his accounts, or exaggerating for the sake of hyperbole. The scholar runs the risk of distorting a truth that is already bent. Greenspan counters this with a combination of exhaustive scholarship, and a narrative transparency and general neutrality that is unusual for biography. Brown is a protagonist the reader can respect, to be sure, but certainly not a marble man.

Greenspan is circumspect about the task he has taken on; his accomplishment is far from a “fool’s errand” (p. 517) and instead is a very valuable contribution as innovative biography, a useful addition to the American Slavery narrative, and a compelling story of an incredibly multifaceted, flawed, but significant man who helped forward the ant-slavery movement.

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