

A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation

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Review

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Blight, David W. *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation*. Harcourt, \$25.00 hardcover ISBN 9780151012329

Narratives of Bondage

David W. Blight, author of the award-winning *Race and Reunion* (2001), director of Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, and arguably one of the world's most distinguished—and certainly one of the most insightful—historians of American slavery has given us a gem of a book in *A Slave No More*. In it, Blight reproduces, for the first time, two intensely interesting—riveting is not too strong a word—narratives by former slaves Wallace Turnage and John Washington. From how Blight discovered the two narratives (a good story in itself) to the accounts themselves, *A Slave No More* makes good, if often very sobering, reading.

Blight's remit is simple: he wanted to publish the two narratives, offer an extended essay to help us better understand them, and illuminate anew one of the greatest dramas of the Civil War—the anguished and glorious liberation of four million American slaves from generations of bondage (1-2). John Washington's narrative captures in some stunning detail his experience as an urban slave in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and his escape to Union lines in April 1862. Twenty-four years old at the time of his escape, Washington's account grants us tremendous access to the wartime experiences of an enslaved man, access rarely offered by the still useful but more limited WPA slave narratives collected in the 1930s. Younger still was Wallace Turnage. The seventeen-year old North Carolina ex-slave recounts his background and recounts, in even more detail than Washington (in fact, Turnage's precision is quite remarkable), his multiple attempts to flee a cotton plantation and his final, successful, escape from a slave jail in Mobile, Alabama, to freedom behind Union naval lines in August 1864.

Absorbing stuff, these narratives, told in glorious detail and with sometimes disarming candor. Both unique and representative (4), the narratives remind us that history is unpredictable, anguished, and hidden, but also sometimes patterned, triumphant, and visible in the quiet and turbulent corners of the lives of real people (4).

Blight is a worthy custodian and interpreter of the two narratives. In the first 160 or so pages, he offers a wealth of context—historical and historiographical—to help set the stage. Blight examines the genre of the slave narrative and explains why what Turnage and Washington say is at once typical of postbellum narratives generally but also why they are unusually powerful sources, ones likely pure and unedited in their content. He also performs valued—and difficult—genealogical duty, tracking down the families and later fortunes of both men. Specialists will find much of what Blight says in these pages familiar; they will also find it beautifully crafted. Students and the general reader especially will benefit enormously from Blight's introductory chapters.

Washington and Turnage offer narratives at once manifestly heroic, even action-packed, but also immensely textured and poetic. Both men recount the experiences of being a slave, the importance of family, the nature of work both in the South's urban environments and on the plantation, and both explain how they navigated the unpredictable events of the Civil War to achieve their freedom. More than that, though, both writers capture the full sensory texture of their lives and their accounts are peppered with descriptions not just about how they saw the world but also how the world sounded and smelled. Such attention to sensory context gives the narratives a depth and multivalence that lends them a powerful authenticity. To his credit, Blight is fully aware of this and helpfully alerts readers to instances where both slavery and freedom were mediated through the nonvisual senses, especially in Washington's account.

Above all, though, these new narratives offer unflinching testimony to the meaning of freedom and the lengths to which the enslaved were often willing to go to achieve it. Individual stories though they may be, both narratives also function to illuminate not only the contours of America's greatest war but also how the yearning for liberty affected that conflict in profound and lasting ways.

Mark M. Smith is Carolina Distinguished Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. His most recent book is Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History, published by

the University of California Press.