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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE LONG EMANCIPATION: THE DEMISE OF SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES

Berlin, Ira

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Interview with Ira Berlin, Distinguished University Professor of History at the University of Maryland

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is happy to speak with Ira Berlin, Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Maryland. Professor Berlin previously authored, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*; *Generations of Captivity: A History of Slaves in the United States*; as well as *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in Mainland North America*. Today we get to talk about his most recent book, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of slavery in the United States*. Professor Berlin, thank you for chatting with us today.

Ira Berlin (IB): I'm delighted to be joining you.

CWBR: Readers familiar with your previous works will find this book a natural fit, but I still want to start out by asking what drew you to this project, and how you decided to approach it?

IB: Several things specifically drew me to this project, like most history it's about arguments and I found myself in arguments. First most unfortunately for me, with Steven Spielberg who of course had millions of viewers of what I found is a really wonderful movie, in the technical sense, that his movie, *Lincoln*, where he focuses on one event and sees this as critical to emancipation and while this made great theatre I felt it made very bad history. So that started me off. And then I read an essay by a Portuguese scholar, Joao Marques, who made the case

that the prime cause of abolition could be found not in the quarters of slaves, but in the drawing rooms of white Europeans and Anglo-Americans. And that I found even more appalling since it was a historians take on things. And Marques' essay was surrounded by commentary by other historians, many of whom I had great respect for, who seemed to go along with Marques. So eventually I felt I had to answer this and I had the opportunity to do that in the Nathan I. Huggins lectures at Harvard. That I felt was kind of an interesting exercise because I wrote what I had to say, and then I had to kind of deflate it into bite-size lectures since apparently nobody can sit still for more than a half an hour or so. Then I was told that Harvard wanted to pump it up to a book, so what I deflated had to be pumped up as well. So what you have in *The Long Emancipation* is something which has a long tale.

CWBR: I'm interested in your take on the recent historiography or maybe it's presence in the wider public because it is very clear that though there might be good scholarship out there, it doesn't really seem to compete with voices like *Lincoln*, which you mentioned. So part of what your addressing here is would it be safe to call that these things like *Lincoln* create a "great man" history of emancipation, and why is that type of approach problematic when we're talking about slavery and emancipation?

IB: I think it's always problematic. These two genres of the cinema and the book are just so radically different. The cinema focuses on a moment, and it brings to bear on that moment enormous visibility by great actors, people who if they were reading the telephone book would make us pay attention. But if we take a look at the text that they have and take a look at the screen play I'm always amazed by how few words are actually involved. On the other hand our work is the work of words and there are lots of words and words give us a way of telling not a moment but a longer story. Much more detail to talk about nuance, to talk about contradictions and the like. So I think there are probably always going to be some natural conflicts. On this one of course, as Spielberg rightly understood, he was coming into a great buzzsaw of conflict that Americans have had for a long, long time over the question of who freed the slaves. A conflict which is larded with ideas about how history progresses, larded by racial divisions and so on and so forth.

CWBR: So slavery dies as a result of a process, not an act. But I was impressed with how, while keeping sight of all these nuances that you mention, the larger context never really escapes. And how do you manage to balance that?

You made this project quite a bit smaller and then you had to make it larger again but it's still not a tremendously large book and you've managed to walk a line there that it seems that perhaps in film people have been unable to do.

IB: I think it's also very difficult to do in writing history. It's always easier to write long than to write short. I tell that to my students when I assign a ten page paper and they're utterly appalled at the prospect of writing ten pages. I say if I was *really* going to punish you I'd assign a one page paper and demand that you stay within those bounds. I think the answer is to have some kind of more general framework that you're writing in. That enables you to define and to stay within those bounds. The question that seem to appeal to me in speaking both at the lectures and then writing the book, was to say if we're going to conceive of emancipation as a near hundred-year event between the Revolution and the 13th Amendment, than what are the defining markers, the defining ideas which always shape emancipation during these years? I think once I defined those and went back and forth in my mind of were there three, or were there five, and so on? Once I defined those then in some ways the job became a lot simpler. It was how as you cut into this long history of emancipation this near 100-year history did you find black people in positions of leadership or centrality. Once you raise the question of emancipation the question of exactly what the status of the slave was going to be once freedom came and you go on down the list and look at each of those subjects at various critical points in the near hundred years.

CWBR: When I was struck by how often in this sort of longer view there are these critical points where not only does the [theatrical], more popular focus on white abolitionist allies really they're not there but they *couldn't* be there because the moment wasn't right. And of course you note that white abolitionist allies helped, they were important, they certainly hastened slavery's end, but they were often divided and struggled to maintain focus on slaves and equality. Why do you think they were so much more divided than the people of the center of all this?

IB: I would put the question the other way, why were black people so focused? And I think the answer is, for them this was always going to be a central question. A question that could not be compromised. For whites, perhaps all but a few like Garrison who maybe understood better as a surrogate black man, but for all but a few whites you can imagine a compromise, you can imagine all of those compromises that are continually pushed forward from the gradual post-nati abolition to colonization, to the endless other forms of gradualism which white abolitionists are willing to accept, but are clearly just out of the question for

black people. And of course they were right of everything that we know about gradualism is that it extends and extends and extends and certainly would have extended the emancipation period well into the twentieth Century given the power of the slave holding class and their ability to use the courts and to delay and the legislatures and delay in various ways.

CWBR: Well that's what was interesting to me is that slavery's white defenders did not seem at all beset by the same level of disorganization that it's white detractors experienced.

IB: I think that's true.

CWBR: But then of course black communities both slave and free, it's very remarkable how organized they were especially considering the barriers that they faced. You mentioned shifting histories, I think you called it, and justifications for slavery. How do you think those fostered solidarity within these two opposing forces while the folks that we often focus on were sort of vacillating in the middle?

IB: Well this is a long period played out over not simply a continent but the larger Atlantic world of people who are often living apart and barely connected by newspapers and other epistolary connections. Not really until the end of the period, do we have telegraphs and other forms of communication which move information. So it seems to me that it's only natural that these kinds of differences take a variety of regional forms within the anti-slavery community. There's a Philadelphia community, and a Boston community, a Chicago community and people who are slugging it out still in various places in southern Illinois and along the various other borderlands. It seems to me that we're always going to have those kinds of differences and part of them can be accounted for the structure of information flow. But beyond that there are real differences that emerge once a proposal is put on the table and then the implications of that have to be sorted out.

CWBR: I want to get into some of the details, for one you mentioned, regional variations and it was fascinating to read of the specific challenges that communities faced perhaps in the borderlands that is free black communities faced in the borderlands versus places in the North or even southern cities. And it was surprising, I think a lot of the assumptions readers might have, such as that unilaterally things would be easier in the North did not always hold true. I was

wondering if you could just talk about some of the variations that you did run into taking this longer view?

IB: Of course a central variation if we're going to look at free blacks as a critical agent in the emancipatory process, is North and South. The simple fact is that if you lived in the South the chances of prosperity were perhaps greater than in the North, where labor was valued and denied to black people, whereas labor in the South was defined as negro work, and you could actually make a considerable amount of money. But you were deprived of all those kinds of rights of citizens and political rights whereas in the North, largely impoverished black communities could petition, could protest, could march, could publish newspapers and pamphlets and the like. So you have this one fundamental difference, and then of course you have differences that grow out *within* the North which grow out of very different kind of experiences. The New England one clearly one where free blacks have a much longer tradition of political and social rights. They have created a public sphere, which is much more fragile in the middle states, and of course in the western states or what was then called the old Northwest, is more fragile still because slavery hangs on for so much longer, well into the 1830s and 40s. It's a viable institution despite the Northwest Ordinance, kept alive through various surrogate forms.

CWBR: And then of course it's not just the free black communities that are assaulting slavery and eroding slavery with their organizations outside of the slave system, there's also the slaves themselves. I think a lot of readers are probably familiar with some of the ways that slaves could resist slavery such as breaking tools or, obviously, escaping but what are some of the strategies over this long period of time that slaves used that historians have been slower to integrate into the narrative of slavery's slow demise?

IB: I think the crucial one is, the one which is central and which can't be emphasized enough, is how these various forms of resistance played out within a northern public, within a white northern public. Some of these are simple fact that if there was no resistance then the assumption that slaveholders projected about slavery, that slaves were happy, than had to have certain relevance and certain truth. So that there *was* resistance, the first thing, contradicted that truth. A second thing which I think is really crucial is that a substantial portion of the northern free black population carried the heritage of slavery into the North, meaning that runaways, the first generation of people who were free who say enter the North in the third decade of the nineteenth century, who are going to

have children who are a first generation of born free in the North. And all of them carry the experience of slavery, so the direct experience of slavery is there in the North and it has enormous power. It's not simply these matters of running away or breaking tools or setting fire to the barn or pissing in the soup or however we want to define various kinds of resistance, it's the *active* presence of slavery and hence the people who cannot forget the elemental violence of human rights that slavery does. What it takes away from people, the physical marks it leaves on people and so on. All of these can be mobilized as the Civil War comes closer, whether it's in resistance to the fugitive slave law or whether it's the kinds of mobilization that will come with the creation of militias in that last decade before the war.

CWBR: Well even once the war begins, that was one of my favorite sections of how that process from the beginning of the war through 1863 or so became a microcosm for the longer process because it really wasn't just the act of enlisting black soldiers, it was this slow realization that the northern white soldiers and their officers had because of sudden exposure to slavery and contact with former slaves right?

IB: That's absolutely correct. Again once we've established these four events or four processes that we've seen played out during the American Revolution and then we've seen played out during the struggle for emancipation in the North and that we've seen played out in the various post-Garrisonian struggles, we see that played out again in the years between 1861 and 1865. Which I think is what gives it a kind of validity at least in my own mind.

CWBR: Another theme or dynamic rather that struck me was how time and time again we see in this book tremendous efforts that black communities and leaders had to maintain, at great risk, just to loosen the stranglehold of slavery. And that always was a major contrast with the relative ease, over most of this period, with which slavery supporters could assault black rights or increase violence with really just the stroke of a pen with things like the Fugitive Slave Act. And we often talk about slavery[s end] as being either "from the bottom-up" or "top-down," but this story to me really seemed to come out almost as a history of "bottom-up" vs. "top down." Would that be a fair characterization?

IB: I would think that that would be a fair characterization. It strikes me that one of the things the anti-slavery movement is, and makes it so relevant, makes it such a powerful force it really is *the* model for movement for social liberation.

Everything from Jeffersonian democracy to gay rights, and often movements which seem to be in contradiction to each other like pro-choice and pro-life. Again and again they adopt the ideals of the abolition movement, the rhetoric of the abolition movement, the modes of organization, their tactics, their strategies so that antislavery always seems to have great relevance for us as Americans and I think other so with other liberation movements around the world.

CWBR: These major themes that you highlight---black agency in demanding freedom, black agency in defining that freedom, and the citizenship, demanding equality and of course the violence that had to accompany all these processes. These are far from finished playing out by 1865, and I was just wondering how do you decide where, if not this story, where this book has to end? Were you tempted to press this narrative into Reconstruction beyond?

IB: There's always that temptation because so much of Reconstruction is a playing out of the slave experience in various ways. But emancipation, the 13th Amendment, the end of slavery is a sharp breaking point at least for me, and I think for most slaves. They understood these former slaves, these freed people, they understood of course that they were not free as they would like to be. They understood that they did not have the rights of white people and they would not be given the rights of white people despite the Civil War amendments. But they understood also that things had changed in a dramatic way. They could live and sleep in the same house as their children and had responsibility for their parents, they could no longer be driven as with an overseer, they would, by right, work for wages and be able to keep those wages and invest them as they wished, they could become property owners. All of these things were radically different than being a piece of property yourself. So I always think that emancipation is a place where we have to recalibrate and reload and rethink the experience of both the black and white in a slave society.

CWBR: Another good reason to focus on the people actually experiencing this then.

IB: I would say

CWBR: Well Professor Berlin, I appreciate you taking the time to discuss with us your most recent work, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States*.

IB: Thank you very much.