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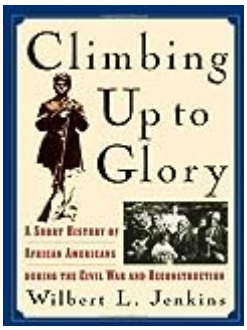
Wilbert L. Jenkins. *Climbing Up to Glory: A Short History of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction.* Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002. xv + 285 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2817-2; $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2816-5.



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Writing Reconstruction from the Bottom Up

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Scholarship on the experiences of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction has proliferated over the last four decades. In a range of local, state, and regional histories, employing the methodologies of social, economic, gender and political history, scholars have traced the ways formerly enslaved African Americans negotiated the South's transition from a slave labor to a free labor economy, developed their own institutions and community life, and participated in postwar politics.[1] In *Climbing up to Glory: A Short History of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Wilbert L. Jenkins sets out to weave this vast body of work into a coherent synthesis. Combining the secondary literature with some of his own primary research, Jenkins discusses African American participation in the Civil War, responses to emancipation, and institutional and political development during the Reconstruction era. Focusing less on the national political debates of the period, and more on the concerns of southern African Americans, Jenkins intends to write a history "from the bottom up," emphasizing "the crucial undertaking of the Reconstruction period: the rebuilding and reinvention of patterns of life and social and economic interaction" (p. xiv).

Jenkins begins *Climbing up to Glory* by examining the difficulties African Americans faced during the Civil War. After a brief overview of the issues surrounding the election of Abraham Lincoln, the secession of the southern states and the creation of the Confederacy, Jenkins goes on to argue that Lincoln was, at best, a "reluctant friend" of African Americans, who endorsed the emancipation of the enslaved black population not on the basis of principles of equality, but instead as a military necessity, and only as a last resort (p. 23). In the second chapter, entitled, "Unwanted Participants," Jenkins continues in this vein, arguing that Union and Confederate opposition to black participation in the war was reflected in the treatment African Americans received during the conflict. Although African Americans enthusiastically offered their support for the Union (and occasionally the Confederacy) immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, authorities at first rejected their services. Once military necessity forced the Union to ac-

cept African American recruits, those African Americans who enlisted received less pay and harsher punishments than their white counterparts, were largely denied the opportunity to become commissioned officers, and were given "no quarter" by Confederate soldiers. Still, Jenkins argues, despite the unequal treatment they received at the hands of Union officials and Confederate foes, over 180,000 African Americans soldiers (as well as countless male and female noncombatant supporters of the Union) consistently "demonstrated resourcefulness and courage" throughout the duration of the war (p. 77). They did so not out of patriotism alone, but out of a desire to fight for freedom and secure their own liberty.

The bulk of *Climbing up to Glory* concerns freedmen and women during the Reconstruction era. Jenkins devotes chapters 3 and 4 to an analysis of freedmen and women's transition from slavery to freedom during and immediately after the war. He begins by discussing southern black attempts to destabilize the Confederacy– from insubordination to outright insurrection– arguing that with the arrival of Federal troops, African Americans eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to engage in the kinds of "retaliatory action" that had long characterized their resistance to slavery (pp. 81-82). He then goes on to examine former slaves efforts to define the meaning of freedom on their own terms after the cessation of hostilities: moving about the countryside, choosing their own forms of dress, celebrating Emancipation Day, and attempting to gain land and economic security. Although these activities often met with stiff southern white resistance, Jenkins reminds us that freedmen and women remained determined to exercise their freedom in the ways they sought fit. The final four chapters of *Climbing up to Glory* focus on African American activism, and institutional and political development during Reconstruction.

Here, Jenkins discusses freedmen and women's efforts to locate family members separated by slavery; establish schools and universities for themselves and their children; found independent, autonomous churches and religious institutions; and participate in local, state and national political life under the auspices of the Republican Party. Ultimately, Jenkins demonstrates that although the black political gains of the Reconstruction era were fleeting, many of the black institutions founded during this period continued to grow and flourish into the Jim Crow era.

Jenkins' objective in *Climbing up to Glory* is twofold. First, he intends to pull together the array of state and community studies of the last four decades to create a concise but comprehensive overview of African American history in this period. Second, Jenkins aims to tell this story from the perspective of African Americans themselves. Rather than focusing on how northern or southern whites viewed and treated African Americans, or how African Americans responded to local whites or federal policies, Jenkins' primary methodological strategy is to place African Americans at the center of this historical period, examining the ways in which they shaped their own lives, communities and destinies. By doing this, Jenkins hopes to depict African Africans as "central actors" rather than "passive objects of white dominated society" (p. xiv).

For the most part, Jenkins is successful in both of these endeavors. Chapters 5, 6, and 7, in particular, demonstrate how an analysis of black institutional development changes the history of Reconstruction from a story of the federal government's failure, to one about the reorganization and development of African American life. In the vast majority of the text, Jenkins brings together the various community studies that emphasize these trends in an extremely accessible and comprehensive fashion. He is careful to connect post-emancipation developments to the customs and patterns of black life under slavery. And in addition, he is attentive to the impact of gender distinctions and debates over women's roles within African American institutions, as well as class distinctions within the freed population.

The weakest portions of *Climbing up to Glory* appear in the first two chapters, when Jenkins strays from his own methodology. Here, African Americans ultimately remain at the margins rather than the center of Jenkins analysis. Jenkins focuses so closely on Lincoln's perspective, changes in federal policy, and the institutionalized racism that shaped the Union army experience, that his discussion of what African Americans were actually doing during the war is often overshadowed. In addition, he generally limits his analysis of the northern black interpretation of the war to the community's reactions to Union policies. Such a tendency is unfortunate, because as several scholars have demonstrated, the northern black discourse about the Civil War was a broad and vibrant one that drew upon the language of black nationalism, American patriotism, equality, Christian millennialism, and ideals about masculinity.[2] Incorporating these issues into his narrative more systematically would have turned the African Americans, described in the first two chapters, into the kind of vibrant and active agents he presents in subsequent chapters.

Despite these criticisms, *Climbing up to Glory* remains a useful addition to the literature on African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction. It is a fine discussion of the African American population's fight to obtain, and then define and act upon, their newfound freedom in the face of extraordinary white opposition. Little in the narrative will be new to scholars of African American history. Undergraduates, general readers, and those unfamiliar with the African American experience in this period, however, will undoubtedly appreciate Jenkins concise and readable synthesis of the subject.

Notes

[1]. Some of the most well-known and groundbreaking works include: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: Americas Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979); Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); and even earlier, W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1990* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935).

[2]. For examples, see James M. McPherson, *The Negros Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); and Jim Cullen " 'I's A Man Now': Gender and African American Men" in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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