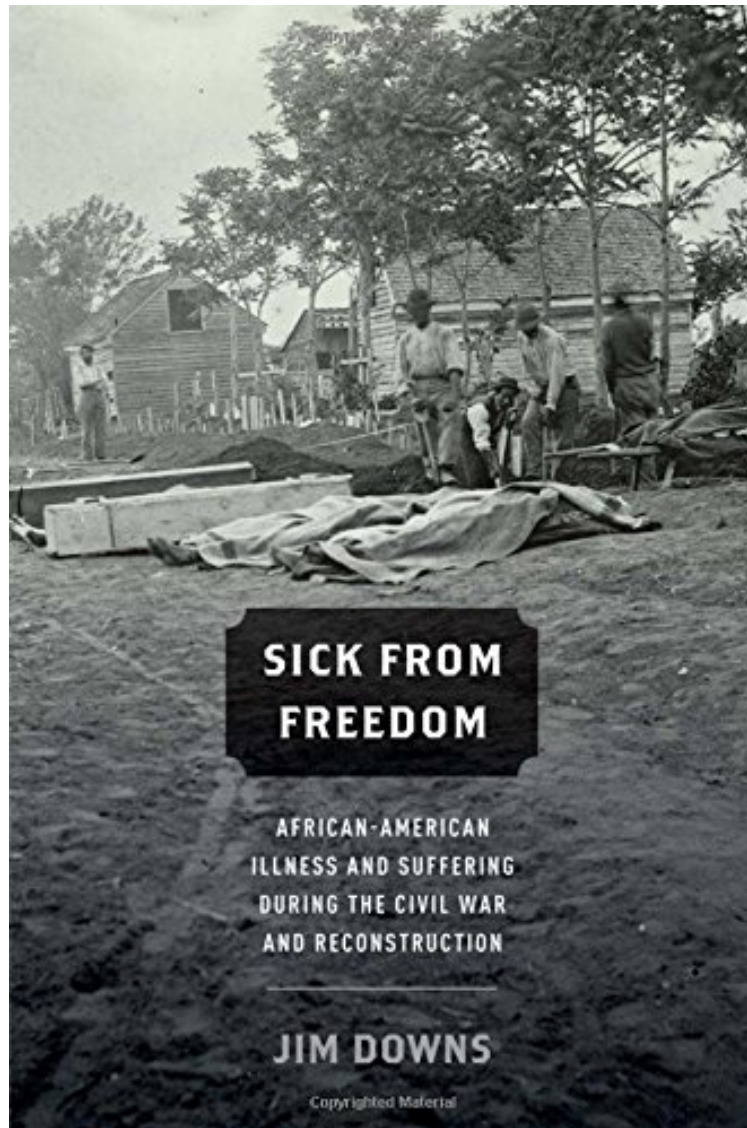


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## **Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction**

*Jim Downs*

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**Jim Downs : Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Little Known Part of the Reconstruction Narrative is Revealed. By Lionel S. Taylor This book challenges the traditional held view of Reconstruction and reveals a aspect of it that is not talked about. usually what we learn in in school is what Reconstruction is and that the Freedman's Bureau, the first federal relief agency of its type provided clothing, food and education to the freedmen as they tried to get back on their feet. The health conditions of the Freedmen and how that was addressed is never talked about and that is the main topic of this book. Despite the revolutionary change in the status of a major part of the American populations that author argues that this can also be seen as a major public health event in which the systems and structures that were once used to maintain the health and well being of the slaves collapsed with the rest of the slave system. The author goes on to show that the Freedman's Bureau was in no way prepared to address this situation. What results is a series of piece meal solutions that are never fully implemented by an agency. The author provides ample, one could even say exhaustive evidence, showing this fact and then goes on to show how it played out on the ground. The evidence used in the early part of the book may come off as being a little repetitive but the author is presenting evidence for her case most of which is drawn from the primary sources themselves. This book is great reference source for someone doing research on Reconstruction or the issue of slave health. This was a full blown health crisis that the federal government was not prepared to deal with and that would occur again with the native american just a decade later and would be mishandled in similar fashion as the author points out in the end of the book. While this is not the most engaging read it is full of information and sheds light on a little know part of American history.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Glory or Misery? By Aaron Jim Downs seems to have set out to spoil the conception most of us have of The Civil War and Reconstruction. We thought it was a good time for African-Americans, as they were liberated from slavery and acquired the rights of citizenship (albeit, in most of the South, temporarily). Downs shows us that for the ex-slaves emancipation also meant destitution, malnutrition, disease, and death. In the introduction Downs says that tens of thousands of excess deaths can be attributed to the effects of emancipation. In Op-Ed pieces, he raises the number to hundreds of thousands. Escaping from slavery involved the loss of a means of livelihood, the loss of the medical care masters had provided, often the loss of shelter. The Union government was unprepared to deal with this crisis, and, as Downs tells it, wasn't much inclined to do so. During the war the army herded many freed slaves into filthy "contraband" camps that were sometimes literal death camps on a par with Andersonville and Elmira. After the war the freedpersons faced enormous challenges in trying to adjust to the new free labor economy. Partly because of race prejudice, partly because of the 19th century's aversion to the poor being maintained at government expense, the federal authorities made little effort to provide relief. The Freedmen's Bureau did make a serious effort to provide education, but this was a long term solution, and a short term one was needed. Again and again, Downs records instances of malign neglect of freedperson's needs on the part of the government. Although he regards the Freedmen's Bureau's Medical Division as a historic innovation--the federal government's first incursion into health care--he still gives the Division poor marks for how it did its job. About the only Yankees who come off well in this book are the non-governmental philanthropic associations, which did their best, but didn't have the resources needed to handle the crisis. Downs says that his book is intended as a corrective to the "triumphant" narrative of emancipation. Such a corrective may be needed, but at times he writes as though emancipation was an almost entirely negative experience, although perhaps that isn't the intended message. I think he is overly critical of the Union for its policy of putting freed slaves to work on plantations. It was essential to procure employment for the freedpersons, and most of them had no skills but farming. There were abuses, but I think the policy goal was sound. The thing I most want to address is Downs contention that "hundreds of thousands" of African-Americans died as a result of emancipation. If true, it casts serious doubt on the morality of emancipation and the war. But I think there are grounds for challenging it. The mortality in the contraband camps was dire, ranging from a low of 5-6 percent to a high of 25 percent. But since less than a quarter of a million passed through the camps, this toll could not mean hundreds of thousands of deaths.

1 As for the ex-slaves who remained outside of the camps,--the vast majority-- it is impossible to say if their mortality was greater than it would have been without emancipation. Downs actually acknowledges this on pg. 54. But almost everywhere else, he attributes nearly all deaths to the war and emancipation. The Bureau's Medical Division may have been inefficient, but nothing like it had existed before. It may have saved some lives that would have been lost if slavery had continued. Despite the dollar value of their slaves, many masters provided them medical care that was sub par even by mid-19th century standards. Conditions in some slave hospitals were worse than anything Downs reports for the Bureau's hospitals.

2 Also on pg. 54, Downs cites an account of ex-slaves reduced to sleeping on a bare floor. They might not have had it better before; on the plantation where Frederick Douglass was born, the slaves habitually slept on the earth floor. Downs reckons as part of the cost of the war the smallpox epidemic of 1862-67, whose 50,000 dead were overwhelmingly African-American. He attributes much of the mortality to the federal government's failure to take serious preventive measures, because it did not regard the epidemic as a threat to white people. But would an independent Confederate government have behaved any differently? It probably would have left the health situation to individual masters to deal with, and they could not have coped. It may be that in the long run the war saved more African-American lives than it cost, or even more than the it cost among white and black civilians together. There was a substantial reduction in African-American mortality in 1900-1940. I have doubts as to whether the improvement

would have been as marked if those people had remained in slavery, or had only recently been freed. Despite these objections, I would strongly recommend this book. 1. "Camp Life of Contrabands and Freedmen", Joel W. Shinault, digitalcommons.auctr.edu James Oakes, Freedom National, pg. 421 2. Todd L. Savitt, Medicine and Slavery, Diseases and Healthcare of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia, pg. 219-226, Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, pg. 317-3181 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A pathbreaking work on the study of emancipation By CustomerHistorian Jim Downs offers compelling new insights into an understudied historical theme: the health of freedpeople during the transition from slavery to freedom. Sick From Freedom asks the critical question -- "was freedom enough?" -- and leaves readers to face the darker truths of the passages to freedom, which were marred by illness, suffering, and death. Powerfully and poignantly written, deeply researched, and persuasively argued, Sick From Freedom combines social, medical, and labor history and contributes the defining statement to a rich new field in the study of the history of emancipation.

Bondspeople who fled from slavery during and after the Civil War did not expect that their flight toward freedom would lead to sickness, disease, suffering, and death. But the war produced the largest biological crisis of the nineteenth century, and as historian Jim Downs reveals in this groundbreaking volume, it had deadly consequences for hundreds of thousands of freed people. In Sick from Freedom, Downs recovers the untold story of one of the bitterest ironies in American history--that the emancipation of the slaves, seen as one of the great turning points in U.S. history, had devastating consequences for innumerable freed people. Drawing on massive new research into the records of the Medical Division of the Freedmen's Bureau--a nascent national health system that cared for more than one million freed slaves--he shows how the collapse of the plantation economy released a plague of lethal diseases. With emancipation, African Americans seized the chance to move, migrating as never before. But in their journey to freedom, they also encountered yellow fever, smallpox, cholera, dysentery, malnutrition, and exposure. To address this crisis, the Medical Division hired more than 120 physicians, establishing some forty underfinanced and understaffed hospitals scattered throughout the South, largely in response to medical emergencies. Downs shows that the goal of the Medical Division was to promote a healthy workforce, an aim which often excluded a wide range of freedpeople, including women, the elderly, the physically disabled, and children. Downs concludes by tracing how the Reconstruction policy was then implemented in the American West, where it was disastrously applied to Native Americans. The widespread medical calamity sparked by emancipation is an overlooked episode of the Civil War and its aftermath, poignantly revealed in Sick from Freedom.

"An important challenge to our understanding of an event that scholars and laypeople alike have preferred to see as an uplifting story of newly liberated people vigorously claiming their long-denied rights." - The New York Times "Downs has written a scholarly book about emancipation that should open a whole new discussion about how it was achieved. If there is any doubt about his assertions, he has included 56 pages of footnotes." -- The Washington Post "Jim Downs' exceptional research has resulted in a major study ... Highly recommended." --Civil War News "As Jim Downs makes clear in this carefully documented work, the Union leadership, domestic and military, was wholly unprepared to deal with the breakdown of the system of slavery that followed the Union army with every foray into southern soil. ... However one may 'spin' the story, one comes away from this book with no doubt that the path out of slavery was a minefield of death and disease that needs its proper acknowledgment in histories of reconstruction." -- Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences "James Downs' Sick from Freedom is a signal contribution to the vastly understudied question of freedpeople's health and a formidable challenge to the dominant analytical framework that has heretofore framed our understanding both of the transition from slavery to freedom in the American South and the meaning of death and dying in the era of the Civil War. It, quite simply, remaps a field. Against an archival record of statistics--of so many bodies sick or dying and denied access to local and state hospitals and asylums--Downs gives us the story of a people, of individual men, women and children 'dying to be free.'" -- Thavolia Glymph, Duke University "A fresh and ambitious account of the Civil War era that not only interrogates the transition from slavery to freedom in new and unsettling ways but also invites us to rethink the geographical dimensions of Reconstruction." --Steven Hahn, University of Pennsylvania "Jim Downs's Sick from Freedom charts new, darker, and profoundly revealing paths into the history of the American emancipation in the Civil War. In a work of medical, social, labor, and military history all at once, Downs shows that achieving freedom for American slaves was a signal triumph, but only through a horrible passage of disease, suffering and death. A 'new' history of emancipation is emerging, and Downs is one of its most talented and innovative craftsmen. This book demonstrates that emancipation is real history and not mere sentimental celebration." --David W. Blight, author of American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era "In Sick from Freedom, Jim Downs paints a startling and little known portrait of African American emancipation in which struggles for health and survival must be factored alongside the political and economic history of the period." --Sharla Fett, Occidental College "Sick from Freedom by Jim Downs traces a shrouded chapter of American history: the mass death and medical devastation that visited African Americans in the immediate wake of legal emancipation. Downs compellingly reveals how the confluence of racial slander, government indifference, and medical maligned neglect

proved widely fatal, and in doing so he paints a detailed and disheartening portrait of man's inhumanity to man." -- Harriet Washington, author of *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* About the Author Jim Downs is Associate Professor of History and American Studies at Connecticut College. He is the editor of *Taking Back the Academy: History of Activism, History as Activism and Why We Write: The Politics and Practice of Writing for Social Change*.