



Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad

Fergus M. Bordewich

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An important book of epic scope on America's first racially integrated, religiously inspired movement for change

The civil war brought to a climax the country's bitter division. But the beginnings of slavery's denouement can be traced to a courageous band of ordinary Americans, black and white, slave and free, who joined forces to create what would come to be known as the Underground Railroad, a movement that occupies as romantic a place in the nation's imagination as the Lewis and Clark expedition. The true story of the Underground Railroad is much more morally complex and politically divisive than even the myths suggest. Against a backdrop of the country's westward expansion arose a fierce clash of values that was nothing less than a war for the country's soul. Not since the American Revolution had the country engaged in an act of such vast and profound civil disobedience that not only challenged prevailing mores but also subverted federal law.

Bound for Canaan tells the stories of men and women like David Ruggles, who invented the black underground in New York City; bold Quakers like Isaac Hopper and Levi Coffin, who risked their lives to build the Underground Railroad; and the inimitable Harriet Tubman. Interweaving thrilling personal stories with the politics of slavery and abolition, *Bound for Canaan* shows how the Underground Railroad gave birth to this country's first racially integrated, religiously inspired movement for social change.

Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad Details

Date : Published March 17th 2009 by HarperCollins e-books (first published January 1st 2005)

ISBN :

Author : Fergus M. Bordewich

Format : Kindle Edition 576 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Military History, Civil War, Cultural, African American

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From Reader Review Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad for online ebook

Dave Johanson says

I really enjoyed this book. When I first chose it as my next read, I wanted to learn more in depth about something I had only a superficial knowledge of - the Underground Railroad. I often found myself absolutely riveted by the individual stories of fugitive slaves and abolitionists who together formed the informal networks that became the primary conduit for slaves escaping to points north, including in many cases Canada. One of the things this book really drives home is the utterly tenuous nature of a fugitive slave's newfound freedom once in a free state. The combination of forces against the fugitive - ruthless slave hunters, federal marshals enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act, scheming whites looking for a bounty reward - boggles the mind. It is difficult to try and put yourself in the shoes of someone who was born into bondage yet whose inner drive to gain true freedom was so intense that it led them to venture into worlds (and wildernesses) totally foreign to them and their small plantation universes. Bordewich does a good job attempting to place the reader in their shoes as best he can, and my overwhelming feeling after reading this book is one of immense respect for the personal courage demonstrated by so many slaves who undertook the arduous and extremely risky journey to potential, but by no means guaranteed, freedom. Another thing this book drives home is the varying degrees of commitment among abolitionists of the time. On the one hand, there was a contingent of high-minded, largely intellectual folks who said all the right words in opposition to slavery but did relatively little of substance to combat the institution. On the other, there existed a core group of devout abolitionists, many of them Quakers, who made it a sacred mission in their lives to do everything in their power to help along the logistical machinery of the underground by supplying places to stay, food to eat, clothing to wear, and critical contacts along the way further north. Again, theirs is a story of supreme courage, of facing ostracism and threats of physical violence in their communities, especially during the early years of the underground, while continuing to live out true Christian values by tangibly aiding the most vulnerable among them. I came away from this book with a profound appreciation of those in any era who buck the tide, choosing to be guided by a moral compass that isn't swayed by the prevailing public opinion of the time. The people profiled in this book - both the slaves who escaped to freedom and made lives for themselves from scratch and the abolitionists who sacrificed so much to support those thousands of journeys to freedom - are the truly unsung heroes of American history and it was a pleasure to get to know their stories for the first time.

Lene Jaqua says

This was an excellent, detailed read that seeks to document carefully the Underground Railroad from its humble beginnings to its final days as the Civil War begins.

I was not up enough on African American history to recognize many of the characters (of course I had John Brown, Harriet Tubman, Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass -- the ones everyone knew), so at times I did get a bit lost in the many names. (My fault). It was a compelling read that discussed not only how the railroad worked, the successes and the failures of the railroad and also the different leaning views within the abolition movement, and differing views amongst the people in the slaveholding South. (It never occurred to me till I read this book that there really was no railroad per se -- of the physical kind with tracks and steam engines -- when the underground railroad started).

I appreciated this story, not only because its documentary style detail was fantastic and added much historical detail to my understanding of the years leading up to the civil war, but also because the compelling stories, one by one, helped me sympathize with the desperate plight of so many, helped me see the impossible choices many of them made (between family and freedom). The book also documented the legal issues surrounding the Fugitive Slave Act and its effect on the northern states.

When it came to Uncle Tom's Cabin, I knew it was invective and I knew it was carefully crafted to stir the hearts of whites in the north, but I did not notice (in my reading of it years ago) that it is mostly white men who are the heroes and blacks more so the passive recipients of their charity. Nor did I know that the book was disliked by Harriet Tubman and other blacks then, already.

A worthy read -- an education in more detailed history of the fugitive slaves in the early to mid 1800s. An indictment of America's Original Sin: Slavery, of how it is woven into the Constitution with the 3/5 population rule and an indictment of the necessary power given to the Southern states so they would join the Union.

One last thing I had always wondered had to do with the motivation of the abolitionists. I don't discount that some people were in the movement for ideological reasons. Many blacks were in the movement because they got out and they wanted to help their own loved ones, dear friends, and frankly just fellow sufferers get out. But I did not understand till I read this that a large part of the Northern motivation (or at least some of the motivation) had to do with labor and labor costs. With the influx of so many Europeans to the United States, Europeans who needed jobs and who needed to be paid a decent wage, with slavery spreading to the west through Kansas, white men could not compete, could not get jobs, if slavery were allowed, since slavery was a lot cheaper to run, once the slaves were owned. That last one helped me understand how some, or rather larger numbers of people got on board, since it seems to me that men do not as a majority tend to fight any system that they exist in on purely ideological or religious grounds. There is usually some monetary reasons for their behavior if they decide to do so.

Moirra says

So I guess this is middle age. I've begun to be interested in history, in genealogy, in the abolitionist struggle. ...Oh no. Am I another white lady imagining her basement was a station on the underground railroad?

(Nonetheless: a well-written and at times compelling overview of the network of largely black or Quaker men and women who did the bulk of the dangerous work of guiding, hiding, financing, and assisting slaves who escaped to freedom. I was especially fascinated by the chapters on the free black communities that formed in Canada north of Detroit, and by the stories of the Rankin family and their beacon of a house in Ripley, Ohio.)

K.C. says

A truly, truly amazing read. A page-turner yet full of fascinating information. Best of all it debunks the idea that Blacks were passive victims during slavery who made no attempts to free themselves. If you are

interested in this country and the people who created it, White and Black, read this book.

Kim M-M says

I give this an excellent for ease of reading. Fergus unfolds history like an epic story, which is all the better because it was true. Harriet emerges a heroine, and many others who found the courage to fight the system. This is what history books should read like. Moving and expertly told, you get an immediate sense of what challenges the underground railroad was up against, and find yourself rooting fervently for the slaves bound for freedom.

Bob Schmitz says

Great book. Meticulously researched from original sources. Quoting from newspapers, letters and other documents you really get the feel for what people were thinking and experiencing during the time. Besides the sweep of the story of the system to conduct runaway slaves from the south to the northern states or Canada you learn detailed snippets of history:

-In NC I believe a white man bought a slave and set him free and then bought the slaves son and gave the son to the father so that the father would have the required \$250 (the son being valued at \$400) to keep his freedom. A law required free blacks to have \$250 in property or they could be re-enslaved.

-A prominent Methodist minister, a member of the underground, was brought before a grand jury in Ohio by a southern slave holder for helping escaped slaves. When asked if he helped slaves he responded to the jury (many of whom were quiet abolitionist) "I have helped some people who said they were slaves but since a black person's testimony is inadmissible in a trial of a white man I couldn't really say." The jury found in his favor.

- In a letter to a former slave who had escaped to the north 20 years previously his previous owners widow tells the slaves that his escaping and the stealing of one of her horses cost tremendous financial hardship for her resulting in her having to sell the fugitive's brother and sister and sell some land. She requests that he pay her \$1000 so that she can buyback the land. Otherwise she said she would sell him and assured him that times would change and he would be enslaved again.

I did not realize the central roll that the abolitionist movement and the UG Railroad had in turning the live and let live attitude of many in the north to fervent, vehement anti-slavery.

Uncle Tom's cabin, based on real-life stories, was widely read in the north, banned in the south, and was responsible for wakening many northerners about the horrors of slavery. Lincoln thanked HBS for turning the North against slavery.

The fugitive slave act around 1850 required that federal troops help in the capture and returning of slaves to their southern masters masters and required citizens to help in those recaptures with penalties fines and even jail if they did not assist. This brought home to many the horribleness of returning fugitive slaves to slavery

Jefferson Davis was the United States Secretary of War!

I know it may seem silly to many but the depictions of the vast, almost empty wilderness that the slaves in the early 1800's on the UG railroad had to travel through in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, NC etc made me realize that the slaves not only worked on plantations, they cleared virgin forests and swamps etc to make all that cropland. I know Duh! They then built the the lovely plantations that we can now go visit on home tours in the south. 60% of US exports in the 1850's was cotton. Slaves built much of this country. When you pass a field in the south today growing something you like to eat realize the debt we all have to African men and women.

John Dozer says

While I had been previously familiar with some of the primary characters involved in the Underground Railroad, I realized reading Bordewich's history that my knowledge of this heroic effort hardly scratched the surface of its scope and magnitude. Starting in roughly 1800, and going up to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and the start of the Civil War, Bordewich presents a dark period of American history, the evils of which are difficult to comprehend in our distance from them, and from which many slaves sought to escape by crossing our northern border into Canada. Bordewich successfully casts America as a nation diseased at its inception, afflicted with its addiction to a malignant institution and the pervasively racist sentiments that result from it, and manages to keep the reader's eye focused on this national scale while introducing us to the individual heroes and heroines whose defiance and determination helped to undermine this accursed frame, and saved many from its horrors in the process. While I was previously familiar with many of the political actors and more prominent names that have been canonized in American history textbooks, I commend Bordewich for introducing many whose names have unfortunately fallen through the cracks of our historical consciousness, and whose stories deserve to be retold as essential aspects of our national identity. Highly recommended for anyone interested in this era of American history or in the phenomena of the Underground Railroad that it produced.

Tom says

Unlike with a few other authors, I probably won't seek out other books by Mr. Bordewich. I found his writing style awkward. Not overly academic or disjointed or conversational, just maybe disorganized. This particular book however very clearly earns the title "definitive" and I plan to hang on to it because it covers the subject as thoroughly (in my opinion) as one book can, it has a large bibliography, it contains many micro-biographies of key individuals involved in the underground railroad, recounts many escape stories, describes the general attitudes about race in the northern states and Canada and it puts the history of the underground railroad in perspective. In addition the author recommends a few other books with a more specific focus on particular aspects of the subject. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to know more on this subject.

Bookmarks Magazine says

The Underground Railroad was, by its very nature, a silent, loose-limbed organization. This fog of anonymity may explain why, despite its critical role in American history, historians have attempted so few chronicles of it. Bordewich, author of *My Mother's Ghost* (2000) and *Killing the White Man's Indian* (1997), was undeterred by the challenge. If he can't rescue all names from anonymity, he succeeds in laying bare the heroic spirit of the escapees' struggle. He also breaks "the hard sheen of myth" and shows how some of the movement's white leaders embraced racial equality. Critics applaud the thrilling depictions of escapes and the furtive strategies in use along the railroad. Even more, they appreciate how he places the railroad in context as the fountainhead for the abolitionist movement and, further down the road, the civil rights movement.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Jeff says

It's a moving history of the resistance towards institutionalized slavery in America. To consider the amount of illegal activity against slavery, activity that today we see as the moral answer to that evil (a generally accepted evil both north and south), might give us pause. But it was the willingness of so many to work fervently against that evil, at great personal risk, some of whom doing so for decades without remedy in sight, that opened up our language of freedom, not just based on race, but on gender and, to some extent, economics.

The story of the underground railroad was clouded by the storm of racism following the civil war generation. It applies today for everyone who wants to make positive cultural change in America.

Chris says

Very readable history, though a bit light on the women.

Tony Diaz says

A primary source for Colson Whitehead's visionary novel, *The Underground Railroad*, Bound for Canaan tells the even more gripping story of the US' original civil disobedience movement. Bordewich's carefully-sourced history breathes new life into the men and women who risked their own lives, freedoms, and more to defy US chattel slavery. He revives the names of forgotten abolitionists who dismantled the institution where they could, aided runaways, opened secret routes out of slave states and refuges across the Northeast. The author vividly and movingly recreates the escalating violence produced by federal Fugitive Slave Laws passed to appease slaves owners, and the valiant self-defense efforts of runaway communities from Pennsylvania to the Canadian border. Harriet Tubman emerges from this account as a unique inspiration: daring, determined, defiant, ingenious, and armed, she returns again and again behind enemy lines to free family and friends. And all them, let's be clear, were outlaws: rebels against a White Republic whose wealth--North and South-- derived fundamentally from slave labor. We should all know this history.

Alex says

I wanted a book about the Underground Railroad; here's the book my research led me to, and I'm glad it did. I had a pretty murky understanding of what the whole thing was about - like, Harriet Tubman and a bunch of underground tunnels? Now I know better.

Here are all the stories you know: Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup (the Twelve Years a Slave guy), John Brown. The slave escape that inspired Uncle Tom's Cabin and the story that inspired Beloved.

Here also are important figures I didn't know about:

- Isaac Hopper, who with other Quakers in the early 1800s "became what can fairly be described as the first operating cell of the abolitionist underground."
- Levi Coffin, another Quaker (there were lots of Quakers! Go Quakers!) known as "The President of the Underground Railroad";
- Josiah Henson, an escaped slave who founded a Canadian settlement for other escapees;
- Anthony Benezet, who started a black school in 1750 and 'helped convert Benjamin Franklin and others to abolitionism, by demonstrating that his students were capable of the same level of achievement as whites.'
- Jermain Loguen, an escaped slave who became a popular preacher
- William Lloyd Garrison, whose fierce Boston-based paper the Liberator was an important abolitionist resource

There are a ton of exciting stories about the Railroad - of course there are - and an awful lot of them are in this book. I totally dug reading it - even with its fairly frequent lapses into breathless, purpleish prose - and I learned everything I wanted to.

Random other quotes

"The British colonies of North America and the United States imported only about 6 percent of the between 10 and 11 million slaves that were brought from Africa."

"From the earliest days of settlement, at least some colonists had equivocal feelings about slavery. In 1641 Massachusetts forbade slavery."

Philadelphia was the early center of the underground railroad, and Quakers were early pioneers: around 1800, "in the cobbled lanes of Philadelphia, fugitive slaves, free blacks, and white Quakers were discovering one another, and recognizing one another as allies in the struggle that was to come."

Other books this one led me to

I've read slave narratives by Northup, Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. This book also pointed me in the direction of Olaudah Equiano, Henry Bibb and Moses Roper.

William Wells Brown was the country's first African-American novelist.

Nicole says

4.5 stars - this was a solid, well-written, clearly well-researched history of an important and fascinating part of American history. Most people have heard of the Underground Railroad, but what do you really *know* about it? Prior to this book, my answer would have been "honestly, not much." I'm glad that this book gave me a chance to rectify that.

Some standout points for me: the connections between the Underground Railroad and the beginnings of the women's rights movement; the importance of Canada as the final destination for many of the Railroad's passengers; and the Railroad's influence as both a landmark of progressive politics and an example of civil disobedience by deeply religious people against secular laws.

Jaime Payne says

I thought this book was fabulous. It was meticulously researched and the stories of both known and unknown participants were told in a very compelling way. Some of the reviews I saw saw here complained about the stories starting off and then being picked up later. I loved that about this book, because instead of profiling each of the participants separately, like a series of unrelated short stories within the book, they were weaved together in a chronological order. We got to see the whole picture. While this was happening over here, that was going on over there. We got to see it all. I borrowed it from the library, but I plan to buy a copy because it was the most complete book on the UGRR that I have read.
