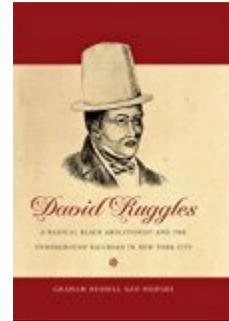


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Graham Russell Gao Hodges. *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*. The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 264 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3326-1.

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Reconstructing the Life of David Ruggles

In this fine biography, Graham Russell Gao Hodges takes on the challenge of reconstructing the life of a remarkably courageous man who literally wore himself out in the cause of freedom. David Ruggles was born free in 1810 in Connecticut as that state was divesting itself of slavery. However, as Hodges makes clear, like so many northern states, Connecticut was abolishing slavery gradually and without any deep commitment to racial equality.

Leaving home in his mid-teens, most likely to ease the burden on his parents as the size of the family grew and there were more mouths to feed, Ruggles went to sea for a year or two before settling in New York City. It seemed for a time that he would join the ranks of the aspiring African American middle class, for he somehow managed to scrape together enough money to open a small grocery store. Keeping a grocery store did not satisfy Ruggles for long, though. Articulate, politically aware, and intellectually inclined, he soon immersed himself in the work of antislavery. In short order, he became an agent for the *Emancipator* and the *Liberator*, and then a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society. He transformed his grocery store into a bookstore—as Hodges points out, the first black-owned bookstore in the nation.

Amid the rising tide of violence against black people and their white allies, Ruggles refused to curb his activities. He continued selling antislavery publications, even

after his first bookstore was torched. He played a leading role in fostering black intellectual and educational societies in New York, and he was ready to take on all comers when it came to articulating the need for a swift and complete end to slavery and racial oppression throughout the nation.

One remarkable characteristic of Ruggles that Hodges highlights was his empathy toward women. He applauded northern white women for their antislavery stance and urged them to go further by shunning southern white women who acquiesced in the sexual exploitation of female slaves. His message to African American women was that it was right and proper for them to educate themselves and speak out on behalf of their community. Despite his enlightened attitude regarding the role of women in the work of reform, Ruggles never married. Indeed, as Hodges notes, his existence in New York was a curiously lonely one. He had acquaintances of both sexes, but apparently no deep attachments. Possibly the role he took on, namely, that of outspoken activist, left little time and energy for ties of marriage or abiding friendships.

Ruggles is best known to modern students of antislavery for his involvement with the New York Vigilance Committee. There was widespread kidnapping in New York City, often with the connivance of local officials. Some of those seized were fugitives, but others

were legally free. Ruggles set out to protect fugitive and freeborn alike, and he did so forcefully and openly, naming names and facing down slaveholders and officers of the law. Vigilance Committee work was expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous. It took a toll on Ruggles's health, and on several occasions nearly cost him his own freedom. It also embroiled him in bitter controversy.

As Hodges explains, the year 1838 was a momentous one in Ruggles's life. He engaged in a second round of pamphlet warfare with pro-slavery writer Dr. Reese. (His earlier battle had attracted considerable attention.) He began publishing the *Mirror of Liberty*, the nation's first black-owned and black-edited magazine. He also welcomed into his home a young fugitive from Maryland, Frederick Augustus Bailey, the future Frederick Douglass. It was Ruggles, Hodges notes, who sheltered the frightened and friendless young man, arranged for his marriage to Anna Murray, and then sent the newlyweds on their way to New Bedford. Almost at the same time that Ruggles was helping Douglass make the transition from bondage to freedom, he almost lost his own liberty when he was jailed for his role in a convoluted affair that involved allegations that he and two white allies had conspired with another fugitive to steal money from the man's master.

Ruggles was soon released from jail, thanks largely to the intervention of some of his white coworkers from the Vigilance Committee, but more legal woes followed. He was sued for libel by a man he had publicly condemned as a kidnapper. Ruggles had published his denunciation of the man in the *Colored American*, and its editor, Samuel E. Cornish, turned on Ruggles and the Vigilance Committee. Ruggles and Cornish had once been close—as close as Ruggles was to anyone—but Cornish not unnaturally feared the lawsuit would bankrupt his newspaper, and a poisonous quarrel ensued, centering on Ruggles's handling of Vigilance Committee funds entrusted to him.

Amid charge and countercharge, it became clear that Cornish was not the only prominent black New Yorker who found Ruggles annoying and abrasive. At least one of his critics voiced his belief that Ruggles was more concerned about promoting himself than promoting the anti-slavery cause. Ruggles's Vigilance Committee bookkeeping was sloppy, and money was unaccounted for. His enemies—and the list of them was growing—maintained that some of the committee's money had found its way into his pocket. Ruggles was outraged. Desperate people had come to him begging for help. He had disbursed funds—a few pennies for food or clothes, a dollar or two to

get a fugitive out of town on to a place of refuge—and he had not always kept a meticulous account of where each cent went. One need only look at how frugally he lived to see he had not grown rich by misappropriating Vigilance Committee funds. Hurt and angry, Ruggles endeavored to vindicate himself at public meetings and in print. In disentangling this bitter round of name calling and re-cremations, Hodges speculates about personalities, and also about perceptions. Ruggles, he maintains, was bold and courageous, and not an advocate of institution building. He was a maverick. Many of his opponents pursued the same goals, but they did so through less confrontational (and they would argue ultimately more effective) means.

Forced to resign from the Vigilance Committee, and virtually ostracized in New York, Ruggles looked to the supporters he knew he had in New England. His fame had spread there, and he was fairly well known in both Boston and New Bedford. He relocated. And he proved in his new setting that he was anything but a spent force, despite the fact that he was suffering from any number of maladies.

A central theme in Hodges's book, and a very poignant one, is Ruggles's battle not only with his critics in the African American community and with the white forces of proslavery but also with his own body. He was beset by one ailment after another. Before he was thirty he was virtually blind. Hodges attributes his problems to intestinal parasites. One also wonders about diabetes, given the descriptions of some of his symptoms. Stress undoubtedly exacerbated his sufferings. Nothing that conventional medicine offered could, it seemed, bring Ruggles more than temporary relief. He would rally, only to suffer a setback.

Eventually Ruggles took refuge in an unlikely setting, the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a utopian community not far from Worcester, Massachusetts. He also found what he fondly hoped would prove to be a cure for all his ills. He began experimenting with hydropathy. Convinced after a few months that it had helped him (although he never did regain his sight), he began offering his water cure to others. He did so at first informally, but then in a more structured environment. Eventually he opened his own clinic. His success induced white physicians to consult with him about their own patients. William Lloyd Garrison turned up to try the cure, although he disobeyed Ruggles by writing letters when he was supposed to be recuperating. Ruggles sternly reminded the editor that patients were supposed

to refrain from that kind of mental activity.

Another of Ruggles's patients was Sojourner Truth, who was skeptical about the water cure until her health started to improve. As Hodges explains, it was as a result of his influence and encouragement that Truth began to tell her remarkable life story. Ruggles relished the equality he perceived as the hallmark of the Northampton association. His presence brought other black people to the Worcester area and they established an enclave. Frederick Douglass visited—although apparently he did not partake in the water cure—and Northampton, already a center of abolitionist activity, became a nexus for antislavery speakers and the coordinating of aid to runaways.

The sudden and precipitous decline of Ruggles's health, and his death toward the end of 1849, stunned his allies. Warm praise for his work as both an abolitionist and a physician came from many quarters. His quarrels with Cornish and others, the hurtful charges that he had helped himself to funds meant for the antislavery cause, the name calling—all that was forgotten, and Ruggles was eulogized as a martyr in the struggle for freedom.

Given the drama of Ruggles's life, one is left wondering why no scholar before Hodges tackled his story. Yes, there is Dorothy Porter's pioneering 1943 article, "David Ruggles: An Apostle of Human Rights," published in the *Journal of Negro History*. Ruggles's name crops up in

discussions of the antislavery movement and studies of New York's antebellum black community, but there is very little else. Why did Ruggles have to wait so long for a biographer? The answer, I would argue, lies in the very complexity of his life, and it is that complexity that Hodges "unpacks" with such skill. One can take issue with Hodges's analysis of the cause (or causes) of Ruggles's medical problems. Inevitably the historian is on dangerous ground in attempting a postmortem when the subject is long dead. That said, Hodges homes in on the indisputable fact that here was a man who knew what it was to suffer from prolonged and debilitating illness. There are other minor points on which one might challenge Hodges. His use of handwriting analysis to determine Ruggles's character is intriguing, but I would caution that the analysis has to take into account Ruggles's visual impairment—something about which I can speak with some authority—and the impact that may have had on his handwriting.

Minor quibbles apart, this is an immensely well-researched biography. Hodges has dug deep into the available sources and crafted a remarkably nuanced portrait of a crusader who refused to back down, regardless of the overwhelming odds he faced. For far too long Ruggles has been relegated to the footnotes or at best given a paragraph or two in studies of other individuals in the antislavery struggle. In Hodges he has at last found a biographer who has truly given him his due.

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