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**George Hendrick, Willene Hendrick, eds.** *Fleeing for Freedom: Stories of the Underground Railroad.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2004. xi + 209 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-545-5; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-546-2.

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**Flight of Fancy**

When it comes to the Underground Railroad, historians may never separate fact from fiction. The very nature of the story seems to conspire against discovery. The most recent addition to the subject, though useful for younger audiences, will bring us no closer to the facts.

Independent scholars George and Willene Hendrick have abridged the nearly twelve-hundred pages of two colossal collections, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (1880) and William Still's *The Underground Railroad* (1872), into a single compact volume. George Hendrick, formerly Professor of English at the University of Illinois, has previously edited works by Carl Sandburg and James Jones, and more recently has collaborated with Willene Hendrick on stories relating to slavery. The Hendricks edited *Two Slave Rebellions at Sea* and wrote last year's *Creole Mutiny: A Tale of Revolt Aboard a Slave Ship*.

In their current book, the Hendricks revive two nineteenth-century accounts of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) by judiciously selecting "representative stories from their works, which we hope will make them more readily available to a modern audience" (p. xi). Levi Coffin (1798-1877) was a Quaker who operated "stations" of the underground in Indiana and Ohio. By his own testimony, Coffin was "the reputed President of the Underground Railroad." Late in life, he published his many diary entries relating to the two thousand or more fugitives who, according to the title page of *Reminiscences*, "gained their freedom through his instrumentality." William Still (1821-1902) was the self-taught son of ex-slaves. His mother, a runaway, headed the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. He also served as the clerk of the Philadelphia Society for the Abolition of Slavery and later turned his files into the classic source for fugitive slave testimony, *The Underground Railroad*.

Of the two works, Coffin's is the more personal and readable. After a brief record of his conversion to abolitionism and the establishment of the underground system, the author recounted an assortment of slave escapes mixed with his own observations and commentary. Unfortunately, some of Coffin's "reminiscences" became distorted with the passage of time, as in the tale of Eliza Harris. That fascinating and heroic narrative, the Hendrickses themselves acknowledge, "seems to have been influenced by [Harriet Beecher] Stowe's novel" (p. 13). Nonetheless, there is much to be gleaned from these remarkable stories. In the story of "A Slave-Hunter Outwitted," we learn that the Underground Railroad "was a Southern institution; that it had its origins in the slave states. For the sake of money, people in the South would help slaves to escape" (p. 68). Coffin paid particular attention to John Fairfield, a southern abolitionist who was "always ready to make money from his services," but, if the slaves had no money, "he helped them all the same" (p. 81). The Coffin selection ended with the tragic story of Margaret Garner who, in 1856, "killed her child rather than see it taken back to slavery" (p. 91).

From William Still's exhaustive compilation of fugitive narratives, letters, and corroborating newspaper articles, the Hendricks chose the most notable and exciting, many of which are well known. Given the sheer mass of the original collection, it is appropriate that Still makes up the larger portion of *Fleeing for Freedom*. Many of the stories from the UGRR were intentionally vague so as to protect the identity of the fugitives and their route to freedom. Consequently, readers might be frustrated to learn that "dressed in male attire, Clarissa [Davis] left the miserable coop where she had been almost without light or air for two and a half months" (p. 102). No detail is provided on the clothing, the coop, or method of sustenance during her mysterious captivity. We learn slightly more about Henry "Box" Brown, who famously shipped himself to himself in a two-by-two-by-three-foot box, armed with only a "bladder of water and a few small biscuits [and] mechanical implement to meet the death-struggle for fresh air" (pp. 108-109). The final selection from Still

retells the amazing saga of William and Ellen Craft. Ellen was "fair enough to pass for white," enabling her to become a young, lame, deaf, rheumatic, planter with a "bold air of superiority" that cleverly camouflaged the distance she kept from others as her now "slave" William respectfully attended to the details of their voyage to freedom (pp. 191-192).

Two chapters, about a third of the Still section of the book, relate the fascinating slave-hunting tragedy of Lancaster County in 1851, dubbed the "Treason at Christiana." After escaped slaves shot and killed the slave-hunter who pursued them, federal officials failed to coerce local Quaker residents to assist in the hunt. Eventually, posses were raised, newspapers assailed abolitionists and fugitives as insurrectionists, three whites and twenty-seven blacks were put in prison under the charge of treason, many more were accused, and a trial that included Thaddeus Stevens for the defense was conducted. According to Still, "it was, doubtless, the most important trial that ever took place in this country relative to the Underground Railroad passengers, and in its results more good was brought out of evil that can easily be estimated. The proslavery theories of treason were utterly demolished" and no hope was left that slave-hunters would ever again be safe (pp. 189-190). Whether or not "Underground Railroad stock arose rapidly," a victory as complete as this seems to deserve the attention Still and the Hendricks have given it.

William Still collected an enormous assortment of newspaper articles and advertisements offering rewards for some of the fugitives he assisted. Though this material provides interesting evidence in support of the corresponding narratives, many are difficult to digest fully without editorial comment. One such piece, from the November 4, 1857 *Cambridge Democrat*, refers to three clearly significant legislative acts about which no annotation is provided. The reader utters a persistent cry for explanatory information that the Hendricks failed to provide.

The introduction to *Fleeing for Freedom* offers scant insight as to how the narratives were chosen, but of greater concern is the fact that the Underground Railroad is romanticized rather than clarified. The substance of the UGRR is hotly contested, much more so than one would surmise from the Hendricks. Of the various scholarship cited in the introduction and notes, two texts represent the extremes in UGRR scholarship. Wilbur Siebert's *Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898) highlighted the role of white abolitionists. Perhaps the most celebrated component of his book was an elaborate map of the United States, covered with thin red veins slivering in all directions. These were the supposed escape routes that filled Harvard Historian A. B. Hart with glee, witness his introduction to the book: "How useful a section of Mr. Siebert's map would have been to the slave-catchers in the '50s when so many strange negroes were appearing and disappearing in the free states!"[1]

Contrast that view with Larry Gara's revisionist study, *The Liberty Line* (1961), which insisted that the "evidence for a nationwide conspiratorial network of underground railroad lines is completely lacking."[2] Gara downplayed the image of "conductors" and instead stressed the centrality and courage of fugitives. He emphasized that, "for the abolitionists, the use of the fugitive issue in their propaganda assumed a more important role than the actual assistance given to the fugitives.... Much that has previously been accepted as fact is in truth no more than a repetition of one variety or another of partisan polemic" (p. 18). That point deserves repeating: fugitive tragedy was good publicity for the abolitionist cause. Consequently, as Gara made plain, "although the underground railroad was a reality, much of the material relating to it belongs in the realm of folklore rather than history" (p. 2). The effort to assist fugitives did not cause the Civil War, as has been suggested by some, and neither was it the source of slavery's demise. Perhaps the greatest twist in the underground rail was that, in transporting fugitives to Canada and Mexico, it became an instrument of colonization, anathema for most abolitionists.

By incorporating more of Still than Coffin, *Fleeing for Freedom* certainly underscores the accomplishment of escaped slaves. Nevertheless, by merely passing on tales that have long been available, there is little here to advance our understanding of this mythologized institution. The Hendricks inform us that the "network of Underground Railroad conductors grew over the years," and that Coffin and Still "wrote realistic stories about the Liberty Line to freedom" (pp. 9-10). In their unorthodox notes, more a brisk bibliographical essay really, the Hendricks point to Wilbur Siebert as their source regarding the "secret codes" used by fugitive slaves. Although Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line* "deserves careful reading," the editors seem not to accept his conclusion that the UGRR was more legend than reality.

Slaves did indeed flee for freedom, most on their own steam. However, running from slavery was a very dangerous business, for slaves and their accomplices. The forces stacked against them were completely overwhelming. Idealistic representations of the UGRR exaggerate the succor fugitives actually received, and the over-

whelming circumstances that surrounded the majority of slaves. We want to believe that a systematic effort existed to assist bondsmen in their quest for freedom. And yet, the very lack of such a system was one reason so few slaves took flight, and that fewer still succeeded.

High school students and undergraduates will find *Fleeing for Freedom* a friendlier read than either of the texts from which it was taken, but the thoughtful among them will be left with more questions than answers. After the practical queries about the number of actual escapees or accomplices, there are some important philosophical matters to address. How has America chosen to remember slavery? By celebrating the brave few who resisted the "peculiar institution," do we divert attention from the blemish and injustice that slavery brought forth? Let us reach for a candid appraisal of the past. We might begin by remembering that the line to liberty was covered with thorns.

Notes

[1]. Wilbur Sibert, *The Underground Railroad*, (New York: MacMillan, 1898), p. xi.

[2]. Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The legend of the Underground Railroad*, (University of Kentucky Press, 1961), p. 18.

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