Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery

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Recommended Citation

Clavin, Matthew (2014) "Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.1.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss1/17>

Review

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Winter 2014

Blackett, R. J. M. *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*. University of North Carolina Press, \$27.95 ISBN 9781469608778

The Role of Fugitive Slaves in the Workings of the Underground Railroad

Based on a series of lectures at the Ann Richards Civil War Center at Penn State University in 2012, this short study furthers the serious analysis of fugitive slaves in the antebellum United States and the legendary network of abolitionist activists who assisted them. Written with the intention of reevaluating the Underground Railroad, the book underscores several emergent themes in the historiography. First, as Larry Gara argued long ago, fugitive slaves in the antebellum South were rarely aided and abetted by free people opposed to slavery; however, those who did were much more likely to remain free upon escaping to the North, Canada, and other areas free from slavery. Second, the men and women who served as railroad station conductors took incredible risks to assist fugitive slaves. Despite the romanticization of the Underground Railroad today, the work of freeing enslaved people was an extraordinarily “dangerous business” (xi). The army of black and white abolitionists that assisted fugitive slaves—and included a surprising number of postmasters, policemen, and other important public officials—faced serious consequences, including imprisonment and death. Third, by attacking continually the status quo, fugitive slaves and their abolitionist allies had a powerful impact on the growing sectional conflict. The Underground Railroad had “serious political ramifications” (2), this volume argues convincingly, influencing political debate locally, regionally, and nationally.

The book’s core consists of three evidentiary chapters. “Making Their Way to Freedom” describes the heroic efforts of enslaved people who emancipated themselves and then, once safely out of the reach of their owners, worked to liberate the loved ones they had left behind. Often from great distances, these

former slaves became Underground Railroad agents when they corresponded with their friends and family members through an extensive network of communication among free and enslaved black people primarily and the deft use (or as slaveowners would say abuse) of the United States postal service. "The Workings of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law" reveals the impact of the landmark legislation on the fugitive slave phenomenon on the local level. An analysis of the judicial career of Richard McAllister, a hard-nosed pro-slavery federal commissioner in Pennsylvania, demonstrates how the federal law impacted the lives of suspected fugitive slaves and stirred local antislavery activists to action. McAllister's failed attempt to win office shortly after his controversial tenure behind the bench proves a shift of northern public opinion regarding slavery in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law. "Taking Leave: Fugitive Slaves and the Politics of Slavery" is perhaps the most enriching of the main chapters, proving that as the republic inched closer to sectional war in the 1850s, radical abolitionists entered southern cities and towns increasingly in an effort to entice enslaved people away from their owners. Harriet Tubman was only the most famous of a small contingent of free black and white radicals who proved slaveowners' worst fears by crossing the sectional boundary and delivering slaves to freedom. In response, slaveowners formed quasi-political groups and associations and on at least one occasion organized a slaveholders convention in Baltimore to help guard against the foreign menace.

At just over 100 pages in length, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* will leave specialists and other scholars wanting more; nonetheless, both groups will benefit from the volume significantly by using it as a starting point for further investigation of the political impact of the Underground Railroad on the growing sectional divide over slavery. At the same time, the book's brevity makes it an ideal selection for any number of undergraduate courses in American and African American history. It will also appeal to general readers interested in slavery and the Underground Railroad specifically as well as those interested in the major events that preceded and helped produce the Civil War more generally.

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