

Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle Against Slavery

Ethan J. Kytle

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Review

Kytle, Ethan J.

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Soike, Lowell J. *Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery.* University Press of Iowa, \$24.95 ISBN 978-1-60938-193-6

The Underground Railroad in an Important Juncture State

Last month, at a Fourth of July barbeque, a bright teenager asked me a familiar question about my forthcoming book on American abolitionism. "Do you discuss the Underground Railroad?" he wondered. Although my monograph only addresses this topic in passing, his query did not come as a surprise. I have heard it countless times, for the Underground Railroad looms large in our nation's historical imagination. Fueled by romantic and often fanciful tales of hidden passageways, subterranean tunnels, and secret codes woven into "freedom quilts," the Underground Railroad has been a staple subject in social studies classrooms for decades. Students today can read about the heroic exploits of Harriet Tubman in countless juvenile biographies or pretend that they are an enslaved fourteen-year-old girl named Lucy on the run from slave catchers in the role-playing video game *Mission U.S.: Flight to Freedom*. Even the popular "American Girl" doll series turns to the Underground Railroad to dramatize the Civil War era, with their fugitive slave doll, Addy Walker.

Until recently, academic historians have not evinced the same interest in the Underground Railroad. Unsure about its extent and effectiveness and wary of the self-serving stories spun by northern whites claiming to have been railroad "conductors," most scholars of the antebellum struggle over slavery have focused on other topics. Over the last decade, however, historians such as Stanley Harrold, Kate Clifford Larson, Graham Russell Gao Hodges, David W. Blight, and R.J.M. Blackett have begun to reexamine the Underground Railroad in the light of broader scholarly conversations about abolitionism, the Civil War, and the memory of both. Lowell J. Soike's *Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery* is a welcome contribution

to this burgeoning field of historical inquiry.

The “first full-scale history of Iowa’s Underground Railroad operations,” *Necessary Courage* is the outgrowth of Soike’s work as director of Iowa’s Freedom Trail project, a federally funded attempt to document and commemorate sites in the state associated with runaway slaves and their exploits (2). At first blush, it might seem curious to focus on the Underground Railroad in Iowa, which was far removed from abolitionist hotbeds such as Rochester and Boston as well as the vast majority of American slaves. Yet, in the decades leading up to the Civil War, the Hawkeye State became a key battleground in the fight over slavery because of its proximity to both the Kansas territory and slaveholding Missouri, which, according to the 1860 census, lost more fugitive slaves than any other state. Although many Missouri runaways made their way into Iowa, Soike was disappointed to discover that few physical remnants of these journeys have survived today. *Necessary Courage*, then, is his attempt to construct a written monument that can serve as a supplement to Iowa’s surviving Underground Railroad depots.

As his title suggests, Soike has deep admiration for the “courageous” Iowans who braved the wrath of southern slaveholders, slave hunters, and their northern allies to come to the aid of black runaways (212). Still, he does not echo the hoary legends of the Underground Railroad that emerged in the late nineteenth century and persist to this day. Soike dismisses “popular myths” about heroic white “conductors” transporting helpless slaves through networks of “hidden in caves or tunnels” as well as “tales of quilts containing secret codes for the journey to freedom” (22). Instead, he frames the Underground Railroad as an informal, yet remarkable campaign by which bondspeople, with the assistance of black and white supporters, seized their freedom and, in the process, transformed the sectional crisis over slavery. This is not, to be sure, a novel interpretation; it is a case that has been made before and made more convincingly, albeit not with eye solely on developments in Iowa. Indeed, even the historiographic position that Soike stakes out in his introduction—somewhere between emphasizing the Underground Railroad’s “great role in bringing on the Civil War and destroying slavery,” on the one hand, and “judging it relatively inconsequential to those battles,” on the other—fades away over the course of the book (2). *Necessary Courage*, in other words, is first and foremost an exercise in historical recovery rather than critical analysis.

Still, Soike's book bears important fruit. It is a thoroughly researched and engagingly written narrative that reconstructs the largely forgotten role that Iowa played in the antebellum conflict over slavery. Using newspaper accounts, court records, early histories, and personal reminiscences, Soike traces the state's transformation from "a strongly Democratic, proslavery state" in the late 1840s into a Republican stronghold, which played host to "major stations along the Underground Railroad" and sent "money, arms, and men to fight in the...battle over whether Kansas would be a free state or a slave state" a decade later (21). Following in the footsteps of Stanley Harrold's recent and excellent *Border War*, Soike portrays the Iowa/Missouri boundary as rife with legal and extralegal clashes between supporters and opponents of slavery. These conflicts increased in intensity and frequency in the 1850s as the debate over the expansion of slavery into western territories polarized the nation and northern abolitionists—many with ties to evangelical and other Protestant churches—settled frontier towns across southern Iowa.

Soike, however, is careful not to lose sight of the central protagonists in the Underground Railroad drama: "the slaves who risked everything to be free" (4). With narrative flair and a careful eye for detail, he recounts the harrowing stories of runaway slaves—many of whose names are lost to history—who made their way to Iowa settlements, including Grinnell, Tabor, Keokuk, and Civil Bend. Soike also offers a fresh portrait of John Brown by focusing not on the grizzled militant's more famous exploits in Kansas and Virginia but rather on his multiple trips to Iowa and the support he and his band of abolitionists enjoyed there. After liberating eleven slaves in Missouri in late 1858, for instance, Brown and company fled to Iowa. Although the residents of the town of Tabor surprised and disappointed Brown by formally denouncing his Missouri raid, he was more warmly received in Grinnell, whose citizens, according to Brown, "loudly cheered, and fully indorsed" him (152). The following year, in the wake of Brown's failed raid at Harpers Ferry, antislavery sympathizers in Iowa, including Governor Samuel Kirkwood, helped Barclay Coppoc—one of Brown's fellow raiders and an Iowa native—avoid extradition to Virginia for trial.

Soike concludes his book by following Iowa's Underground Railroad story through secession and the Civil War and into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when it became part of the sectional struggle over how slavery and the Civil War would be remembered. Although abolitionists worked hard to remind the nation of their efforts, the memory of the Underground Railroad—like the idea that slavery had been the "root cause" of the Civil

War—ultimately “dwindled before an irresistible postwar desire for national reconciliation” (207). Soike uses this familiar narrative of post-war reconciliation to explain the disappearance in Iowa of “entire town sites associated with Underground Railroad operations” (209). His final section would have been stronger, however, if Soike had balanced his discussion of the destruction of the physical remnants of the battle over slavery in Iowa with an exploration of how Iowans—and northerners more generally—constructed their own sectional myths in the wake of the Civil War. After all, the legends of the Underground Railroad—which continue to pop up in museums and public schools today—have proven just as enduring as the myths of the Lost Cause.

Despite such shortcomings, *Necessary Courage* is an important book. By recovering the history of the Underground Railroad in Iowa, Lowell Soike joins a new wave of scholarship that, one can only hope, will reshape the way Americans understand this fascinating, popular, and frequently misunderstood chapter of our past.

Ethan J. Kytle, the author of the forthcoming book Romantic Reformers and the Antislavery Struggle in the Civil War Era (Cambridge University Press, August 2014), is an associate professor of history at California State University, Fresno. He is currently writing a book on the memory of slavery in Charleston, South Carolina, with his colleague Blain Roberts. He can be reached at ekytle@csufresno.edu.