

Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory

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Review

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McCaskill, Barbara *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory*. University of Georgia Press, \$22.95 ISBN 9780820347240

Better Understanding a Well Known, but Little-Documented African American Couple

Recent years have seen a wave of biographies of prominent African American figures from the early republic, antebellum and Civil War eras. These studies – which examine the lives and activism of women and men like Richard Allen, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, David Ruggles and James McCune Smith among others – have added immensely to our understanding of the experiences of these specific black individuals, their families, and the nineteenth-century communities in which they lived.

Barbara McCaskill's *Love, Liberation and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* is a valuable addition to this growing body of African American biography. In this slender volume, McCaskill explores the history and memory of William and Ellen Craft: two fugitives whose daring 1848 escape from slavery (with the fair-skinned Ellen disguised as a wealthy young white man and her brown-skinned husband playing the role of her valet) made them icons of the abolitionist movement and continuing subjects of fascination for American and British audiences well into the twentieth century. Using a range of sources – including media accounts of their public appearances, advertisements of their published narrative, personal correspondence by white abolitionists, speeches, and memoirs as well as theatrical dramas based on their escape – McCaskill peels back the layers of sensationalism that surrounded the Crafts' public personae to reveal the contradictions and complexities that shaped their quest for freedom and its subsequent representation by antislavery activists, playwrights and twentieth-century scholars.

Organized around four key moments in the Crafts' lives, McCaskill begins *Love, Liberation and Escaping Slavery* by outlining the Crafts' circumstances as a relatively privileged, skilled enslaved couple with the means to both acquire the funds and conceal the disguises they would ultimately use to travel by train from Macon to Philadelphia. Following the Crafts to Boston, where they would settle in 1849, McCaskill explores the ways the couple "maneuvered between the good intentions of northern abolitionists" and "their own willfulness and determination to chart their own direction in life." (42) As members of Boston's free black community, the Crafts "began night school together to procure their long-delayed educations" (36). And with the help of white and black abolitionists, they transformed their escape from bondage into an appealing story for the abolitionist lecture circuit. After tracing the Crafts' flight to England in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, McCaskill offers insight into the subsequent publication and reception of their 1860 narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Arguing that the text emphasized "connection, collaboration and partnership," McCaskill links the Crafts' ongoing efforts to locate and reunite their extended family before and after the Civil War with their narrative's role in affirming a transnational antislavery community (58). McCaskill concludes *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery* with a chapter and epilogue that underscore the ways that African Americans like the Crafts continued to fight for freedom after the Civil War. After returning to Georgia in 1870, they attempted, with the help of their old abolitionist allies, to establish a school for rural freedpeople. And although this effort ended unsuccessfully, they ultimately bequeathed a legacy of activism that would be taken up by their children and grandchildren in the twentieth century.

Because the Crafts left little written evidence beyond their published memoir, McCaskill must contend with the many silences that make researching and writing biographies of antebellum African Americans so difficult for scholars. Throughout *Love, Liberation and Escaping Slavery*, McCaskill negotiates these gaps in the historical record by noting the inconsistencies in competing versions of the Crafts' tale and raising thoughtful questions about what might have been. McCaskill also carefully analyzes the paratext of their story, interpreting the various ways that the Crafts' relationship and escape was understood by their antislavery contemporaries, and ultimately told and retold in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the process, McCaskill reveals how easily the experiences of fugitives like the Crafts could be compressed into a series of popular melodramatic, middle-class tropes that often obscured much

more than they revealed about the lives and experiences of their subjects.

McCaskill has written a text that will be appealing to students and essential to specialists in African American and abolitionist history and literature. She infuses her account of William and Ellen Craft with the nuance and humanity necessary to move the pair out of the realm of abolitionist lore into their rightful place amongst a transnational community of black and white antislavery activists. The Crafts certainly served as popular symbols for the abolitionist movement. But they were, as McCaskill reminds us, also a married couple with ambitions, children and political commitments of their own.

Erica L. Ball is Professor of American Studies and Chair of African American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She is the author of To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class. She is currently co-editing with Kellie Carter Jackson a collection of essays entitled, Reconsidering Roots: The Phenomenon that Changed the Way We Understood American Slavery.