

### Bound For the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero

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## Review

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**Larson, Kate Clifford** *Bound For the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*. Ballantine Books, \$26.95 ISBN 345456270

Let my people go

The Moses of Civil War America

Out of one of the few surviving photographs of Harriet Tubman, a small black woman in her eighties stares into the camera with a mesmerizing determination. In her purposeful demeanor and her resolute eyes, one can discern the weight of the burdens carried by this Moses of her people; one can sense the inner strength she drew on in resisting injustice with such perseverance throughout her nine decades. Harriet Tubman was a truly extraordinary woman who fully deserves her place in the pantheon of American heroes. But surprisingly, Tubman has never received her due from serious historians. Until the appearance of Kate Clifford Larson's biography, **Bound for the Promised Land** (and the almost simultaneous publication of studies by Catherine Clinton and Jean Humez), Tubman was known mainly through juvenile biographies which, while they enshrined her mythic image, failed to provide a critical understanding of her life.

**Bound for the Promised Land** fills this lacuna very well, not least because its author appears to know more about Harriet Tubman than anyone except Tubman herself. Direct evidence pertaining to Tubman is limited, and this biography contains more than its fair share of might have's and probably's. Yet Larson has researched her subject meticulously, and, thanks to her thorough scrutiny and creative use of a remarkable range of archival and printed sources (citations to which fill almost 1,500 detailed footnotes), she provides a careful reconstruction of Tubman's life.

Born a slave in Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1822, Tubman lived a fairly typical life as an antebellum Upper-South slave, often hiring herself out for pay,

but always living with the fear that either she or her loved ones might take their place in the steady flow of surplus slaves from Upper to Lower South. She was married in 1844 to John Tubman, a free African American, but in 1849, amidst rumors that she might herself be destined for the auction block, she left her husband and escaped to the North and freedom. By itself, fleeing the South was not all that extraordinary. In this regard, Tubman was one among thousands. But she really began to distinguish herself with the perilous missions she undertook in order to lead friends and family from slavery to freedom, making around thirteen trips and bringing back some seventy or eighty people in the decade prior to the Civil War. As a result of these missions, Tubman earned her reputation as an African American Moses. When the Civil War broke out, in a natural continuation of her prewar activities, Tubman went south to aid the Union war effort in various ways: from nursing and cooking to spying, scouting in enemy territory, and actively participating in military operations. After the war, Tubman returned to the North and, in addition to participating in the women's suffrage movement, spent much of her time simply helping friends, family, and other African Americans in their everyday lives. The result of years of effort, the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Infirm Negroes opened in 1908. Tubman herself entered the home three years later, and in 1913 died from pneumonia.

What are we to make of this life? Unfortunately, larger meanings are mostly obscured by the sheer weight of fine detail in **Bound for the Promised Land**. Larson might, for instance, have explored more fully the place of this one life in the larger context of North American slavery. She does, to be sure, make clear how Tubman's experiences were shaped by the particular conditions of slavery in the antebellum Upper South and by the politics of the Fugitive Slave Act. She also, conversely, hints at Tubman's influences on the attitudes of Americans black and white, northern and southern, as the conflict over slavery headed toward its denouement. But Larson might have developed such themes further. As historians are beginning to realize, African Americans' resistance to their enslavement had an enormous impact on the national politics of slavery and the road to war. And none resisted slavery more visibly or more doggedly than this diminutive woman who not only stole herself but also stole thousands of dollars worth of other human property, and inspired in who knows how many others the belief that slavery was wrong and could successfully be resisted. This was a woman who in 1860 in Troy, New York, choked a sheriff's deputy and ferociously fought other officers of the law in rescuing a fugitive slave from

officials who intended to ship him back south. This was General Tubman—a woman whose actions and reputation exemplify African Americans' own influence in the ostensibly political events that led to sectional conflict, war, and emancipation.

We can only reach out to the larger import of Harriet Tubman, though, with a solid basis of knowledge about her life. And such knowledge can readily be obtained in **Bound for the Promised Land**, an invaluable resource for anyone seeking the facts about Tubman. Larson helpfully includes maps, a family tree, and a basic chronology to aid readers in keeping track of the detailed narrative. Future scholars of Tubman and of American slavery more generally will thank Larson for her meticulous recovery of this remarkable life.

*Reviewed by Paul D. H. Quigley, a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who is writing a dissertation on the ideology of southern nationalism, 1848-1865.*