

### Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America

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## Review

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**Bordewich, Fergus** *Bound For Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. Amistad (HarperCollins), \$27.95 ISBN 60524308

Outside the Lecture Hall

The Underground Railroad and Organized Abolitionism

Fergus Bordewich's engrossing new account of what he calls the greatest movement of civil disobedience since the American Revolution opens on a dark street in Madison, Indiana, where a fugitive slave waits for the signal that has been promised him by the head of the local Underground Railroad network. Significantly, all of the active participants in this story — the fugitive, the men who form an armed guard around him, and the local leader, barber George DeBaptiste — are African American. Bordewich's choice of opening scenes well demonstrates the extent to which our understanding of the racial and political makeup of the antislavery movement has matured beyond the whitecentric narrative offered in the first historical account of the underground escape network, Wilbur Siebert's *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898).

It also represents a departure from the school of thought inaugurated by Larry Gara's revisionist *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961), which contended that the image of a coordinated network of escape routes, conductors, and stationmasters was more a product of the American imagination than American history. Gara's work spurred a decade's worth of regional and local studies undertaken to test his assertion that much of the assistance provided to fugitive slaves came from the black communities they encountered along the way. Bordewich draws heavily upon the stories and individuals brought to light in these studies, but also pushes further to argue that although connections and contacts were often local, they linked into broader regional networks that depended upon thousands of activists to channel riders along shifting yet nonetheless coordinated escape routes.

Much of the book's strength lies in the author's fluid, evocative writing and passionate attention to detail. Unlike most works of synthesis, **Bound for Canaan** does not sacrifice the specific and particular to the desire to provide comprehensive treatment of a subject. Rather, Bordewich shifts effortlessly between multiple simultaneous narratives, intertwining the stories of well-known freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and John Brown with those of operatives who were central to the movement but today are virtually unknown outside the scholarly community. Noting in the introduction that the Underground Railroad was the country's first racially integrated civil rights movement, he argues quite rightly that the day to day realities of assisting fugitives created unprecedented interdependence among activists. Though some whites brought paternalist ideas to their work, life and death dependence upon the knowledge, contacts, and strategies of black co-workers had a way of breaking down racial hierarchies. Bordewich hints at the salience of these encounters, but largely fails to interrogate them for new insight into abolitionist ideas about race, biology and human potential.

**Bound for Canaan** portrays the Underground Railroad as the driving wedge of abolitionism, arguing that without the confrontational activists of the underground, the abolitionist movement might never have become anything more than a vast lecture hall in which right-minded white Americans could comfortably agree that slavery was evil. Peeling back the layers of romanticism that surround the Underground Railroad in popular imagination, he situates assistance to fugitives within the broader framework of the organized movement to end slavery. Though concentrating on vigilance committees, armed rescues of captured fugitives, the creation and support of fugitive communities in Canada, methods of resisting the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and passengers, conductors, and stationmasters, the book also touches upon the creation of the major antislavery organizations, the abolitionist press, abolitionism as a breeding ground for the women's rights movement, and public hostility and violence toward antislavery activists. It links the late 18th century development of a loose network around Philadelphia that in hindsight can be considered the first operating cell of the Underground Railroad with the creation of the nation's first antislavery society, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, in 1789.

Bordewich stresses the ways in which providing assistance to fugitives challenged white abolitionists to back up their convictions with actions, take personal risks, and associate with black co-workers and passengers in

unprecedented ways, arguing that without the practical work of the Underground Railroad, abolitionism would have been a more comfortable and less immediate cause. This point can easily be overstated. Widespread racism and southern equation of any criticism of slavery with treason and political tyranny would have conspired to make abolitionism dangerous and unpopular regardless of its underground activities. Nonetheless, Bordewich is correct in his assertion that much of the real radicalism of the antislavery movement lay in the underground's commitment to civil disobedience and radical transgression of accepted racial boundaries.

In the epilogue, Bordewich observes that abolitionism was also the seedbed of religious activism in American politics, an intriguing claim that deserves more extended analysis than it is accorded in the text. He takes up this point in one of a collection of reflective essays on the Underground Railroad that can be found, along with an illustrated UGRR timeline and blog, on the author's personal website, <http://www.fergusbordewich.com>. One hopes that Bordewich will continue fleshing out some of the book's themes in essay format. **Bound for Canaan** offers a wealth of material for further exploration. Beautifully written, perceptively organized, and insightfully conceptualized, the book deserves a warm welcome from scholars and popular readers alike.

*Jill Ogline is a doctoral candidate in the University of Massachusetts Amherst History Department. Her dissertation explores the campaign for civil rights and equal education in Prince Edward County, Virginia, site of the nation's longest post-Brown v. Board of Education school closing. She is a veteran interpreter, having worked for the National Park Service in the Northeast Regional Office and at Independence NHP, Gettysburg NMP, and Eisenhower NHS.*