24 Bound for Canaan: Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Underground Railroad

FERGUS M. BORDEWICH

The fabled Underground Railroad consisted of secret routes that runaway slaves took to the North and freedom. Though one historian has argued that the Underground Railroad was never so highly organized as legend claims, the system did exist, and its conductors were brave men and women who stole into slave territory and escorted bands of slaves to the North, relying on black and white homesteads, called "stations," to hide and feed them along the way. Harriet Beecher Stowe said that she and her husband hid fugitives in their barn while they were living in Cincinnati, Ohio; and her great novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, *drew on a real-life story in describing how Eliza Harris and her child escaped north on the Underground Railroad.*

For African Americans of the antebellum period, as Fergus M. Bordewich says in the following selection, the Underground Railroad was the most effective means of undermining the slave system and the white-coined myth of the slaves as submissive Sambos who were happy with their lot. But since most of the northern states had black laws that discriminated against African Americans, denying them the right to vote, run for political office, sit on juries, attend public schools, marry whites, work at skilled jobs, and even be buried in white cemeteries, many fugitives went on to Canada, with the full approval of the Canadian government, where they could work as skilled laborers and enjoy a greater degree of freedom than they could in the United States. After the passage of the stringent new federal fugitive slave law in 1850, more runaways than ever sought refuge in Canada.

Harriet Tubman was the Underground Railroad's most famous conductor. Born a slave on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Tubman "stole" herself in 1849 by escaping to Philadelphia. In the years that followed, she slipped back into slaveholding Maryland, rifle in hand, at least thirteen times and escorted over one hundred slaves, including her own parents, to freedom. In his marvelous book, Pioneers in Protest, *Lerone Bennett Jr. describes how Tubman operated once she was in slave territory:*

> *She made her way to selected plantations where slaves were informed of her presence by code songs, prayers, or some other stratagem. Selected slaves were then apprised of the rendezvous area and the time of departure. Once the slaves were assembled, Harriet sized them up, searching them closely with her eyes. Satisfied, she placed the group under strict military discipline. During the trip, she was in absolute and total control and no one could question her orders. William Still, the black rebel who operated the key Philadelphia station of the Underground Railroad, said she "had a very short and pointed rule of law of her own which implied death to anyone who talked of giving out and going back." Once a slave committed himself to a Tubman escape, he was committed to freedom or death. On several occasions, slaves collapsed and said they were tired, sick, scared. Harriet always cocked her [rifle] and said: "You go on or die. Dead Negros tell no tales." Faced with a determined Harriet Tubman, slaves always found new strength and determination. During ten years of guerrilla action, the great commando leader never lost a slave through capture or return.*

The following selection, excerpted from Fergus Bordewich's acclaimed book Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America *(2005), is in two parts.*

The first part offers a warm and sympathetic portrait of Harriet Tubman, whose real name was Araminta "Minty" Ross. Bordewich gently pulls back the legends that surround her to show us what she was like as a human being. Not quite five feet tall and illiterate, with hair that "stood out like a bushel basket," she grew up "neglected like a weed" and fighting the hogs for food. Nevertheless, as Bordewich observes, she had a "quiet dignity" and the toughness to brandish a gun when a "whimpering" runaway threatened to turn back for home. Harriet Tubman compared her own escape from slavery to a journey to heaven. This slight and deeply religious woman then proceeded to bring many others out of the South so that they, too, could experience the joy of freedom.

The second part of this selection is about Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, *and their connection with the Underground Railroad. It has its own italicized introduction.*

GLOSSARY

BROWN, JOHN A militant white abolitionist who believed that slavery was too entrenched in the American South ever to be removed except by violent means, Brown was responsible for the killing of five proslavery men in "Bleeding Kansas," an act that ignited a guerrilla war in that territory. In 1859, he led a raid against the federal arsenal and armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to seize the guns there. His goal was to destroy slavery by invading the South and inciting a vast uprising or, failing that, to polarize the sections and provoke a violent upheaval in which slavery would be wiped out. Robert E. Lee helped capture Brown, who was tried for treason and eventually hanged in Virginia (see selection 25).

COMPROMISE OF 1850 See glossary in selection 22.

DOUGLASS, ANNA Born to free parents on Maryland's Eastern Shore, she met her future husband when she was working as a domestic in Baltimore. Frederick and Anna Douglass raised three children during their forty-four-year marriage.

DOUGLASS, FREDERICK See glossary in selection 8.

DREW, BENJAMIN A Boston educator, journalist, and abolitionist, he interviewed hundreds of former slaves who had fled to Canada. Living in refugee communities, safe from the fugitive slave act, they "spoke with as much eloquence about their experience of freedom as they did of their years of bondage."

RANKIN, JOHN A Presbyterian minister, he was a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. On a bitterly cold night in 1838, a runaway slave carrying a child fled across the Ohio River to the safety of the Rankin home. Over a decade later, Harriet Beecher Stowe used this story in her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

SMITH, GERRIT A New York abolitionist and philanthropist, Smith and five others formed the Secret Committee of Six that raised funds for John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.

TUBMAN, JOHN A free black, he had been married to Harriet for five years when she fled from Maryland to freedom in the North. When she returned two years later, John had remarried.

When that old chariot comes,
I'm going to leave you
I'm boun' for the promised land.

—CODED HYMN, MARYLAND, CIRCA 1850

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HARRIET TUBMAN

Kessiah Bowley—"Kissy," to her owners—her infant daughter, Araminta; and her six-year-old son, James, attracted a crowd when they were put up for sale in front of the doors of the county courthouse in Cambridge, Maryland, on a

December morning in 1850. Two blocks down High Street, beyond the Episcopal church and Bradshaw's Hotel, where slave traders stayed, and the pillared homes of the town's elite, the sails of trading sloops and oyster boats could be seen on the Choptank River, the town's outlet to Chesapeake Bay. Slave sales were not to be missed. In small towns, they were like country fairs. Rural people came to watch them as they would to a cattle show. Men with nothing else to do mingled with serious buyers to follow the bidding, friends convivially swapped cigars and good stories, liquor flowed freely, and by the middle of the afternoon streets and stores were usually well speckled with drunks. Bowley was a young, healthy woman, a good investment, though married to a free black man, a possible source of annoyance to an owner who wanted the complete loyalty of his human property. It is impossible to say how much she knew about what was supposed to happen. Perhaps everything, perhaps nothing. But undoubtedly she looked out with trepidation at the arc of white faces, faces that were sizing up her physique and her fitness for labor, and perhaps for sex. She knew that her entire life would be abruptly changed whatever the outcome.

Somewhere in the crowd, Kessiah's husband John Bowley, a ship's carpenter, was bidding. (In Maryland, unlike some slave states, there was no law against a man buying his family out of slavery.) He must have sworn that he would save her somehow. But how could she trust such a promise? There was no way that a black man, free or not, could count on keeping that kind of promise to his slave wife. But John Bowley kept on without hesitation, as if he had a purse full of money, until every other bidder fell silent. He had won. Although the exact figure is now lost, it was probably around five hundred dollars, the equivalent of about eighteen thousand dollars in current dollars, a hefty sum for a seagoing man.

Kessiah was now told to stand aside somewhere while the auctioneer took his dinner. When he returned, John Bowley was nowhere to be found. His bid, it seemed after all, was just a black man's pathetic ploy to keep hold of his wife. The bidding was restarted. "*Serious buyers only this time!*" Again the numbers climbed. There was a whispered word to the auctioneer. The bidding abruptly stopped. The news rippled through the incredulous crowd. Not only John Bowley, but Kessiah and her children had disappeared.

While the agents of Kessiah's owner, and presumably the local constables, scoured the town for her, she and her husband lay hidden in the house of a woman who lived just minutes' walk from the courthouse. That evening the Bowleys made their way under cover of darkness to the Choptank River. There John Bowley, now a criminal liable to arrest for stealing his own wife and children, placed them in a small boat and set out to sail them to Baltimore, seventy-five miles away. The danger was extreme. Down the Choptank he sailed, then north up Chesapeake Bay past Tilghman, Romancoke, Annapolis, Sparrow's Point. Hundreds of African-American fishermen, oystermen, and crab pluckers worked on the bay, but few of them were sailing a woman and children across it in an open boat. The bay could be a treacherous place in winter. The weather and the winds could change suddenly, and without warning. But luck was with them.

In Baltimore the Bowleys faded into the teeming and varied world that was the black community. Baltimore's thirty-six thousand blacks, twenty-nine thousand of them free men and women, enjoyed a considerable amount of independence. By 1850 they supported an alternative universe of churches, schools, and benevolent societies at least partly beyond the prowling eyes of watchful whites. Frederick Douglass, writing of his days as a slave in Maryland, considered Baltimore "the very place, of all others, short of a free state, where I most desired to live." But the Bowleys were still far from safe.

The Bowleys probably found shelter with friends who lived in the black enclave of Fell's Point, where narrow houses jammed together in cobbled lanes that trickled back from the docks. According to plan, they met there with Kessiah's aunt Minty, or Harriet as she had begun calling herself. Harriet and John Bowley had planned the daring rescue

together. They must have had a good laugh over its stunning success. It wasn't often that slaves managed to make public fools of their masters, and get away with it. Harriet had herself escaped overland to Pennsylvania in 1849. She could have remained safe in the North, but at great risk to herself, she had slipped back into Maryland when she heard news of Kessiah's impending auction. Her job now was to guide the Bowleys to Philadelphia. It was the beginning of one of the most extraordinary careers in American history.

There were others, almost all of them men except for Harriet, who served as the long distance tentacles of the ever-expanding Underground Railroad, traveling repeatedly into the slave states to pluck away slaves from the belly of the beast. . . . But there was no one quite like this incredibly single-minded, mystical, diminutive woman (she was barely five feet tall) who defied every antebellum notion about what women were supposed to be.

Although her speech was "uncouth," and she referred to herself casually as merely "a poor nigger," there was a quiet dignity about her that made her indifferent to her surroundings, whether she was dining at Peterboro [New York] with Gerrit Smith, or in a kitchen with white help who complained about having to sit down with a black woman. She was strongly muscled from years of hard outdoor physical labor, which had burned her skin a dark chestnut color, and made her look decades older than she was. At thirty, she was mistaken, even by whites who knew her, for a woman twice her age. John Brown, who got to know her only after his bloody days in Kansas, admiringly called her "*General* Tubman." More than that of any other actual participant, her story would shape the legend, and the myth, of the Underground Railroad. She eventually became a kind of metaphor for the entire underground, endowed—a remarkable individual by any measure—with virtually superhuman personal qualities, while her uniquely brilliant work evolved into a template for the entire diverse system. Illiterate her entire life, she kept no record of her many rescue expeditions into Maryland, and had no clear memory of their sequence or dates. Her story survived only in the memories and impressions of others, and can only be assembled from fragments, like a shattered mosaic.

Library of Congress

Harriet Tubman was known as "the Moses of her people" because of her heroic work on the Underground Railroad. "I grew up like a neglected weed—ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it." Eventually she would "steal" herself to the North, where she became a conductor who led over one hundred slaves to freedom.

The fifth of at least nine children, Araminta "Minty" Ross was born in 1822, near Tobacco Stick on Maryland's Eastern Shore, a flat, watery country of wide vistas, marshy creeks, sodden woodlands, and lonely stands of lofty loblolly pines. Her childhood on the Brodess plantation had a feral, almost anarchic quality. "I grew up neglected like a weed, ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it," she told the abolitionist Benjamin Drew, who interviewed her in Canada, in 1855. Her hair was never combed and

"stood out like a bushel basket" from her head. When she needed to eat, she sometimes fought the hogs for their mash. Discipline was swift and harsh. There were days when she received as many as six or seven beatings. Scars from them remained visible all her life. The threat of sale worried her constantly after she saw two of her sisters taken off in a chain gang. She told Drew, "Every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away."

She was eleven or twelve years old when something happened that permanently marked her not only physically but in some obscure way spiritually, adding a dimension of pronounced strangeness to what had been an otherwise unremarkable girl. She was in a general store when a white overseer ran in, chasing a slave who had walked away from his work. Furious at seeing the man he was searching for, the overseer grabbed a two-pound lead weight from the counter and hurled it at him. He missed the man, but hit Tubman in the head so hard that it drove a piece of the shawl she was wearing into her skull, and knocked her unconscious. Not considered worth a doctor's attention, she was allowed only a day and a half to rest before being sent back to work in the fields, with blood rolling down her face. For the rest of her life, she suffered from what was probably a form of epilepsy that produced headaches, seizures, and "fits of somnolency," causing her to suddenly fall unconscious for minutes at a time, and pushing a mind already fertilized by evangelical religion into a feverish mysticism that awed those who came in contact with her. In a prepsychological age steeped ina culture of spiritualism, middle-class abolitionists were fascinated by her powers that seemed to defy explanation, like the "fluttering" that seemed to foretell imminent danger, and her ability to know what happened around her during her sleeping fits. As one awestruck Yankee friend put it, "There is a whole region of the marvelous in her nature."

Slavery in Maryland was in steady decline during the years of Ross's youth. It was undermined less by any moral revolution than by changing economic conditions which put a higher premium on mobile free labor. Between 1790 and 1850, as Dorchester County's slave population shrank by almost 20 percent, to just over 4,000, the number of free blacks swelled from 528 to nearly 4,000. Ross adapted readily to the changing environment, revealing a natural independence that would become even more pronounced during her years of clandestine work. While still in her twenties, she negotiated a work-for-hire arrangement with her master that allowed her to rent out her labor as she wished, paying him a set annual fee of fifty or sixty dollars. Despite her size and infirmity, she was a prodigious worker, driving teams, packing and hauling grain on the wharves at Tobacco Stick, dragging heavy sleds laden with produce "like an ox," and hauling timber for her father, who had purchased his freedom in 1840, and who oversaw the cutting and hauling of lumber for the Baltimore shipyards.

In 1844 she married John Tubman, a free man of mixed race. About the same time, she changed her first name to Harriet, perhaps as a gesture of affection for her mother, also named Harriet. In the spring of 1849, she learned that she and several of her brothers were likely to be sold. They had never heard of any free states except New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and they had no clear idea how to get there. But they decided to set off anyway. What Harriet told her husband, and what he might have thought about it, she never confided to anyone. In any event, the attempted escape was a fiasco. The three fugitives tried to follow the north star. They argued about directions, and finally gave up and returned in defeat. If Harriet drew any lesson from this dismal experience, it was that the odds against escaping without help were close to insurmountable. She would not make the same mistake again.

In the months that followed, Tubman's mind was overcharged with prophetic visions. She saw horsemen coming for her, like the riders of the apocalypse; she heard the terrifying screams of women and children. She dreamed of flying over fields and towns, rivers and mountains, and looking down upon them like a bird, until she reached at last a great fence, which she feared she hadn't the power to fly over. But just as she was sinking down, and losing her

strength, ladies dressed in white would stretch out their arms and pull her across. She found release only in incessant prayer, praying for her sins to be washed away when she went to the horse trough for a drink, praying for them to be swept away whenever she plied a broom.

Characteristically, she did not leave her salvation to chance. In the late autumn of 1849 she fled on her own. Although she was vague on the details, she later described her hundred-mile overland trek through eastern Maryland, and probably Delaware, as having been accompanied [symbolically] by a pillar of cloud during the day, and a pillar of fire by night. She also sought, and received, concrete help from a white woman, almost certainly a mill owner's wife named Hannah Leverton, who was part of a fragile network that linked Dorchester County [Maryland] Quakers with those farther north in Camden, Delaware, and beyond. The white woman wrote two names on a piece of paper, which she gave to Tubman. That night, the woman's husband carried her concealed in his wagon to the outskirts of a town, where he directed her to the home of one of the people whose names had been given to her. She was passed on in this fashion from hand to hand until she eventually reached Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania, in Tubman's mind, was not only a physical or political landscape, but a profoundly spiritual one. "When I found I had crossed that line," she said, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven. I had crossed the line." But she felt an utterly unexpected sense of loss and desolation. In Maryland she was a slave, but she had family. She was now alone in a way that she had never been before. "I was *free,* but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land." What was she without family? she wondered. "I was free, and *they* should be free," she thought. For the next decade, the rescue of her family became the focus of her life, a private crusade that bordered on obsession. She was convinced that she was a chosen agent of God, who guided her every act, and he was now sending her back to the Eastern Shore. When friends in the underground cautioned her "against too much adventure & peril," she replied, "The Lord who told me to take care of my people meant me to do it just so long as I live, and so I do what he told me to do."

Emboldened by her success in rescuing Kessiah Bowley and her children, she returned to Baltimore a few months later, and brought north her brother Moses and two other men. In the fall of 1851, she returned to Dorchester County to bring out her husband, John. Tubman was a free man and could have left on his own. That he did not might have given Harriet pause. With her customary single-mindedness, however, she saved money from her kitchen work in Philadelphia to finance another trip south, and to buy a new suit of clothes for John. She had not seen him for two years, and she had much to tell him. But bitter disappointment awaited her. From a hiding place somewhere near her old home, she sent John word that she had come. He replied, through an intermediary, that he had taken another wife, a free woman, and had no intention of leaving. In her fury, Harriet's first instinct was to invade John's house and make as much trouble for him as she could. Perhaps it was at this moment, amid rage, hurt, and betrayal, that the indomitable, iron-willed Harriet Tubman of legend was born. If the rescue of family was at the heart of her quest, John Tubman was perhaps its crux, the only person whom she believed had belonged to her alone. How she must now have hated the sight of the clothes that she had brought for him! But a cold instinct for self-preservation, and her growing sense of a greater mission ordained for her by God, won out. If Tubman had ever been a sentimentalist (an almost unimaginable luxury for a slave), she certainly no longer was now. She collected a group of willing fugitives from the neighborhood, gave one of them John's new clothes, and led them north.

Before the year was out, she had brought out eleven additional slaves, including another of her brothers and his wife. These she accompanied all the

way to Canada, traveling from Philadelphia to New York City, Albany, and Rochester, where they stayed in Frederick Douglass's barn, the largest number that he ever had in his home at one time. "I had some difficulty in providing so many with food and shelter, but, as may well be imagined, they were not very fastidious in either direction," Douglass remarked, a little snobbishly. In all, in the course of thirteen journeys back to the Eastern Shore, Tubman would lead at least seventy African Americans out of slavery in Maryland, and indirectly enable perhaps fifty others to escape to freedom on their own. (Her first biographer, Sarah Bradford, inflated these numbers for dramatic effect to nineteen trips and three hundred passengers.) . . .

She preferred to do her underground work in the winter, when the long nights provided more hours for travel. She usually collected her passengers somewhere far from their homes, to lessen the chance of someone recognizing her, and often in a cemetery, where groups of apparent "mourners" would go unnoticed. To move around as widely as she did in Maryland and Delaware, Tubman must have carried convincing documentation. She may have acquired forged free papers from certain black market women in Baltimore, who were linked to the Philadelphia underground, and kept a stock of forged free papers that they circulated and renewed at regular intervals. She paid for shelter and transportation for her passengers when it was available; once, when she had no money to give, she paid a helpful family with her underclothing. Thanks to her years of work in lumber camps, she could find her way through the woods as skillfully as any of the old Nanticokes who had once roamed the land. When circumstances called for it, she could also slither through tall grass like a snake, flat on her stomach, using only her arms and the serpentine motion of her body to propel herself forward.

She was a consummate actress. A friend later wrote of her that "she seems to have command over her face, and can banish all expression from her features, and look so stupid that nobody would suspect her of knowing enough to be dangerous." She often disguised herself as an elderly woman or man, or carried a book that, although she was illiterate, she used to deflect the attention of pursuers who were looking for a fugitive field hand. Well aware that blacks were liable at any time to be stopped and questioned by whites, she sometimes carried a pair of chickens as a deliberate ruse, which at least once she was obliged to put into effect. Coming face to face with her own master on a street in Cambridge, she pinched the chickens so that they ran loose, and in the confusion of chasing them, she went unnoticed. She also used familiar hymns to communicate with her passengers in a kind of simple code. She would, for example, pass along the road to see if the coast was clear. If it was, she would sing, in a powerful, full-throated voice

Hail, oh hail, ye happy spirits,
Death no more shall make you fear.

And if there was danger, she would sing, in warning

Oh go down, Moses
Way down into Egypt's land.

Tubman expected her passengers to have nerves as steely as her own. She permitted no "whimpering," and made it clear that she was willing to kill anyone who faltered. "That several who were rather weekkneed and faint-hearted were greatly invigorated by Harriet's blunt and positive manner and threat of extreme measures, there could be no doubt," wrote one of her close collaborators. During one trip, when she was compelled to keep her party hidden in a swamp for a day and a night without food, one of the men declared in disgust that he was going home. Tubman stepped up to him and aimed a revolver at his head, saying, "Move or die." He went on with the rest to Canada. A live runaway could do great harm by going back, she knew, but a dead one could tell no secrets. When there were babies to be carried, she dosed them with paregoric to prevent them from crying, and put them in a bag that she slung around her waist. . . .

Harriet Tubman lived to witness the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. She continued the noble struggle to set her people free through service in the Civil War as a nurse, scout, and spy. As an African American woman, she faced discrimination based on both race and gender. Her commitment to women's rights, like her journeys on the Underground Railroad, displayed courage and an unrelenting desire for equality. In 1913, at the age of ninety-eight, she died.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Before you read the second of this two-part selection by Fergus M. Bordewich, let us tell you about Harriet Beecher Stowe—how she learned of the Underground Railroad and included stories about it in Uncle Tom's Cabin *(1852). Before writing her "blockbuster" book, Stowe lived for eighteen years in the roaring river port of Cincinnati, Ohio, just across the water from the slave state of Kentucky. A tiny, dark-haired housewife and mother, she felt pinned down with the responsibilities of raising children and running a home. She suffered from excruciating headaches, blinding pain in her eyes, and bouts of weakness that could immobilize her for months. Sometimes all she could do was sit at a table and cry.*

In the 1830s the abolitionists came to Cincinnati. They had spirited meetings, published newspapers, and handed out tracts that told lurid stories about the evils of slavery that horrified Stowe. What could a Christian woman do in the face of such evil? Should she become an abolitionist? All of her older brothers had joined the movement. But Stowe never became an abolitionist except in sympathy. She had little taste for crusades; her duty, she told herself, was to her children and her husband, not the platform.

If the abolitionists helped arouse Stowe's conscience, it was the stories she heard about slavery and the Underground Railroad that fired her imagination and stirred her heart in sympathy with those in bondage. One story in particular captured her interest. While attending a church assembly in Ripley, Ohio, she listened, transfixed, as a minister related a true story of a young slave named Eliza Harris who had escaped from Kentucky with her infant son in her arms. She had crossed the half-frozen Ohio River by leaping over ice floes running in its waters. A sympathetic white man had then helped her and the child to a "stationmaster" on the Underground Railroad, and he sent them on to other agents until they were united at last with her husband, George. Then they left for Canada.

Inspired by that story, Stowe herself hid a young fugitive woman whose master was in Cincinnati looking for her. At Stowe's urging, her husband and brother helped the woman escape to safety in a daring night ride. Thereafter, Stowe liked to boast that the Underground Railroad ran through her barn.

In 1850 the Stowes moved to Brunswick, Maine, where Harriet gave birth to her seventh and last child. A month later, as part of the Compromise of 1850, the national government enacted the harsh new fugitive slave act. Stowe, tending her baby in Brunswick, was on fire with indignation at this new wrong inflicted on slaves. She wished to God she could do something to help them. She wrote her brother that she wept at night when she thought of "the wrongs and sorrows of those oppressed ones."

Encouraged by a sister-in-law, Stowe set to work on a sketch about the ability of blacks to care for themselves. By the new year 1851, her sketch was leading to something else, something more direct and profound. Soon she was away on the wings of her imagination, writing the novel that became her masterpiece. She began it with the story of Eliza Harris's harrowing escape from the Ohio River and the help she received. "From page one," Stowe said, "the story was not so much written as imposed on me." Later she said that she was certain that it had been divinely inspired. "God wrote it," she insisted. "I was but the instrument in his hand."

As Bordewich asserts, no one did more "to shape the enduring image of slavery and the Underground Railroad" than this pious little New England woman. Her Uncle Tom's Cabin *introduced millions of readers to the Underground Railroad and the unforgettable stories of those who served or escaped on it. "The single most memorable passage in the novel," Bordewich says, "and one that inspired countless previously neutral Americans to embrace the cause of abolitionism, recounted the flight of the fugitive mother 'Eliza' across the frozen Ohio." As the author notes, "Virtually every literate American knew Eliza's story," either*

from the novel or from stage productions in which white actors played the slave parts.

In addition to enlightening readers about the Underground Railroad and the horrors of slavery, Stowe's novel made the abolitionist movement itself "not only respectable, but romantic." Uncle Tom's Cabin, *Bordewich observes, "enabled countless white Americans to identify emotionally with African Americans for the first time." What is more, the abolitionist organizations provided an opportunity for women to join in a cause or even lead it, even though they frequently faced discrimination from male reformers. But Tubman and Stowe persisted and paved the way for other women to break new ground and participate in the American dream.*

Women had always done much of the Underground Railroad's unsung work of feeding, sheltering, and nursing fugitives. When they arrived travelworn and hungry at the Douglass home in Rochester, it was . . . Anna Douglass who made their beds and cooked their meals. Many women did much more than that. In one Michigan community, women were responsible for giving the alarm if slave catchers appeared, and in Cleveland four of the nine members of that city's very active, all-black Vigilance Committee were women. White women as well as black women sometimes served as conductors. . . .

Ironically, no one did more to shape the enduring image of slavery and the Underground Railroad than a woman who opposed giving females the vote and harbored a not-so-secret envy for the genteel manners of Southern aristocrats. The daughter of a prominent New England theologian and the wife of a seminary teacher, Harriet Beecher Stowe seemed to see herself as a sort of literary missionary . . . Though often emotionally overwrought and steeped in Victorian sentimentality, her blockbuster novel of 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly,* distilled the nation's moral crisis over slavery so that it finally and overpoweringly penetrated the hearts of ordinary Americans in a way that a generation of abolitionist lecturing and the provocation of the Compromise of 1850 had not. Stowe canonized kindly, selfless Quakers as the quintessential heroes of the underground, leaving no room for African American activists, or for working-class whites. . . . But she accomplished something truly extraordinary. She made abolitionism not only respectable, but romantic, and turned the underground from a vague rumor into a Homeric endeavor that was part Christian drama of self-sacrifice, part frontier saga ripped from the pages of James Fenimore Cooper.

Uncle Tom's Cabin left readers by the millions seething with anger and shame. A decade later, as armies

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin *was the first to include African Americans as central characters. Published in 1852, it breathed life into antislavery sentiments in the North. When Stowe visited the White House, Lincoln supposedly jested: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."*

surged across the farmland of Virginia, Abraham Lincoln welcomed Stowe to the White House, where he is said to have greeted her as "the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war." Although the remark may be apocryphal, the Northern armies were filled with men who as boys had wept over the fate of Uncle Tom. Stowe based her eponymous composite hero partly on Josiah Henson, whose story had appeared in print in 1849. She portrayed Tom as a martyr who believed, as Henson had during his years in slavery, that if he accepted his fate in the spirit of Christ-like martyrdom, his earthly sufferings would be repaid with an eternity of divine love in the hereafter. Tom's character in the novel troubled few if any of the leading African Americans of the day, nearly all of whom shared Stowe's religious beliefs, and recognized the book's importance as propaganda.

The single most memorable passage in the novel, indeed in all nineteenth-century American literature to readers of the day, and one that inspired countless previously neutral Americans to embrace the cause of abolitionism, recounted the flight of the fugitive mother "Eliza" across the frozen Ohio River. Stowe learned the story directly from Reverend John Rankin, to whose home in Ripley, Ohio, just such a mother had come one winter's night in 1838. Although she might never know it, her flight that night was to achieve the dimensions of myth. Rankin's son John was a student of Stowe's husband at Lane Seminary, in Cincinnati, and the families were well acquainted. "One Sunday afternoon," John Rankin Jr. recalled, "father and I called upon Prof. Stowe, in the presence of Harriet. Father told of the flight of the slave mother and child crossing the river on the ice. Stowe was greatly moved by the narrative, exclaiming from time to time, "'Terrible! How terrible!'"

In Stowe's rendering, Eliza races toward the banks of the frozen Ohio with a slave trader and his minions in close pursuit: "Right on behind her they came; and, nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, onto the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap,—impossible to anything but madness and despair . . . The green fragment of ice on which she originally alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she stayed there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake;—stumbling,—leaping,—slipping,—springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone,—her stockings cut from her feet,—while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, til dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side."

Virtually every literate American (and many who weren't literate) knew Eliza's story, if not from reading the novel itself, then from the numerous dramatic versions that remained staples of the popular stage well into the twentieth century. Unlike the stocky, very dark woman who found her way to Rankin's house, Stowe's Eliza was a fine-mannered, light-skinned mulatto and her son a virtually white child, the offspring of a rape by her master—a potent combination of sentimentality, sexuality, racial coding, and moral outrage that was intended to wrench the heartstrings of nineteenth-century readers in the most violent possible way. In her martyred innocence, Eliza epitomized the tragedy of slavery as evangelical abolitionists saw it. . . . [As] characters in the novel, Tom and Eliza were radical inventions with powerful ramifications, for they enabled countless white Americans to identify emotionally with African Americans for the first time. . . .

Harriet Tubman was unimpressed [with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*]. She could not read the actual book, of course. But she was once invited to attend a stage performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Philadelphia, where she was working as a domestic, but she declined. "I haint got no heart to go and see the sufferings of my people played out on de stage," she said. "I've seen de *real ting*, and I don't want to see it on no stage or in no teater."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why does Bordewich compare a slave sale in a small town to a "county fair"? Describe the atmosphere of such a town during a slave auction. How did John

Bowley spoil the impending sale of his wife and children and make "public fools of their masters"?

2 Describe Harriet Tubman's early years as a slave when she was known as Araminta "Minty" Ross. How had those hard times molded her character and her physique? Why did Tubman suffer from epileptic seizures that many attributed to mysticism and spiritualism?

3 Describe Tubman's mixed emotions when she escaped from slavery and arrived in the free state of Pennsylvania. How many trips did she make into the South as a conductor on the Underground Railroad? How did Tubman remain undetected and avoid capture during her many rescue missions into the South? Why was her husband not one of the more than seventy souls whom she helped escape into the North?

4 Once passengers started their journey to freedom on the Underground Railroad, why was it important to complete it? How did Tubman encourage the faint of heart to keep moving toward their ultimate destination?

5 What does Bordewich regard as "the single most memorable passage in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one that "inspired countless previously neutral Americans to embrace the cause of abolitionism"? Where did Stowe get the story she tells in that passage? What made *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so engrossing that it provided the country with its "first popular story of the Underground Railroad"?

6 Why were the characters Tom and Eliza "radical inventions" that reflected the horrors of slavery? How did Stowe transform the abolitionist movement into a "respectable" force for reform? Within the African American community of the twenty-first century, what is the definition of a person who is an "Uncle Tom"? Would Stowe support that modern-day definition?