

Editorial Reviews of "Bound for Canaan" by Fergus M. Bordewich

From [Publishers Weekly](#)

Though the Underground Railroad is one of the touchstones of American collective memory, there's been no comprehensive, accessible history of the secret movement that delivered more than 100,000 runaway slaves to freedom in the Northern states and Canada. Journalist Bordewich (*Killing the White Man's Indian*) fills this gap with a clear, utterly compelling survey of the Railroad from its earliest days in Revolution-era America through the Civil War and the extension of the vote to African Americans in 1870. Using an impressive array of archival and contemporary sources (letters, autobiographies, tax records and slave narratives, as well as new scholarship), Bordewich reveals the Railroad to be much more complicated--and much more remarkable--than is usually understood. As a progressive movement that integrated people across races and was underwritten by secular political theories but carried out by fervently religious citizens in the midst of a national spiritual awakening, the clandestine network was among the most fascinatingly diverse groups ever to unite behind a common American cause. What makes Bordewich's work transcend the confines of detached social history is his emphasis on the real lives and stories of the Railroad's participants. Religious extremists, left-wing radicals and virulent racists all emerge as fully realized characters, flawed but determined people doing what they believed was right, and every chapter has at least one moment--a detail, a vignette, a description--that will transport readers to the world Bordewich describes. The men and women of this remarkable account will remain with readers for a long time to come. Illus. not seen by *PW*.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In the first years of the nineteenth century, most runaway slaves didn't get very far: "Slave holders sought to impress their slaves with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory," Frederick Douglass wrote, and, given the reach of fugitive slave laws, "the real distance was great enough." Those who did make it almost always had the help of Quakers, free blacks, and other opponents of slavery, who composed what Bordewich calls a "national geography of freedom." This engrossing account of the Underground Railroad describes how scattered "experimental, impulsive" acts (for instance, defending a fugitive from a patrol) became an organized operation involving thousands of stationmasters, conductors, and spies. Some of the less known, and more remarkable, stories here involve the black workers on the Railroad, such as Arnold Gragston, who, while remaining a slave, ferried hundreds of runaways across the Ohio River until 1863, when he became his own last passenger.

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From [The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com](#)

One day not long ago, my daughter came home from school and told me about the Underground Railroad. I remember her disappointment when I explained that it was neither a railroad nor underground. "Then what was it?" she asked.

Good question. Like the Western frontier, Valley Forge or the Montgomery bus boycott, the Underground Railroad has become part of our national mythology, a reassuring story of obstacles overcome and virtue vindicated. As Fergus M. Bordewich writes in *Bound for Canaan*, one of the most controversial movements in American history has been reduced to "a kind of national fairy tale, in which the fugitives themselves [are] cast only as bit players, and abolitionists stripped of their disturbing radicalism."

Only in recent years has the Underground Railroad attracted the sustained investigation it deserves, including a spate of books and documentary films, as well as the opening of a dedicated museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. This new interest springs in part from the politics of the historical profession, with its demand for more inclusive accounts of American history, but it also bespeaks a widespread hunger for stories of progressive activism and interracial collaboration in an age seemingly barren of opportunities for either. Bound for Canaan epitomizes this tradition. Blending historical imagination with a novelist's sense of character, Bordewich, the author of *Killing the White Man's Indian*, brings to life a small group of black and white Americans who defied popular opinion and the authority of the federal government to combat what they regarded as a fundamental moral evil.

No one knows who first coined the term, but by the 1840s the loose networks that had emerged to spirit fugitive slaves to freedom were universally known as the Underground Railroad. Stops along the line were "stations," operatives became "conductors" and fugitives "passengers" or "cars." It was an obvious enough metaphor -- the system's emergence coincided with the first great American surge of railroad construction -- but it was and is somewhat misleading. The Underground Railroad published no maps or timetables. Networks tended to be local and fluid, with little central control or oversight. Secrecy was essential. Frederick Douglass, probably the system's most famous passenger, refused for decades to reveal his escape route lest it compromise the efforts of others. Fugitives, he noted, had no use for an "upperground railroad."

Unfortunately, the qualities that ensured the system's success have impeded historians seeking to reconstruct it. Bordewich comes as close as anyone ever has, marshaling evidence from an array of sources to chart the movements of fugitives. Not surprisingly, he focuses much of his attention on the banks of the Ohio River, the primary crossing point for fleeing slaves and the scene of a decades-long cat-and-mouse game between "conductors" and slave catchers. But he also examines less familiar subjects, from the so-called "Saltwater Underground" (maritime networks used by slaves in the Deep South) to the black expatriate communities emerging in Canada.

The book is organized around individual stories, many of which retain their power to inspire, horrify and humble. The climactic scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* -- Eliza leaping from floe to floe in the frozen Ohio, clutching her infant to her breast -- was not mere melodrama but an account of an actual escape. As it happened, the woman's crossing was witnessed by one of southern Ohio's most notorious slave catchers, who was so moved by the spectacle that he declined to arrest her, instead directing her to a nearby safe house. "Woman, you have won your freedom," he said. The fugitive, whose name is lost to history, returned to Kentucky three years later to liberate the rest of her family.

Though the book's focus is on stories, several overarching arguments emerge. Contrary to the image prevalent today, most operatives were not white but black -- both slaves and free people of color who risked their own freedom and even their lives to assist their brethren. Bordewich also emphasizes the religious motivations of his subjects, or at least the white ones. Many were Quakers; most others were evangelical Protestants. All were products of "a deeply pious era [in which] Judgment Day was an event as real as the annual spring planting and autumn harvest." Persuaded that slavery was sinful, they acted. As one *New Yorker* put it, "We must obey God rather than man."

In the antebellum period, as in our own time, defying the law in deference to one's personal religious convictions was not a popular position. Underground Railroad operatives may be hailed as heroes today, but in their own era they were condemned as fanatics, a lunatic fringe whose reckless self-righteousness jeopardized the republic's survival. As unsettling as it may be to some, the most obvious modern analogue may be the extreme wing of the antiabortion movement, which has used direct action -- even occasional violence -- to prevent abortions, in defiance of law and majority opinion. Bordewich himself acknowledges the parallel but elects not to pursue it, noting only that his subjects' religious zeal was "balanced by generous idealism, and by an uncompromising devotion to the rights of others."

The final question, of course, is whether the Underground Railroad mattered. A New Orleans newspaper editor, writing on the eve of the Civil War, claimed that 1,500 slaves per year were spirited away by Northerners. Bordewich is more generous, estimating that more than 100,000 fugitives were liberated in the 30 years between 1830 and 1860, perhaps a third of whom ended up in Canada. It does not seem an impressive total -- over the same period, the enslaved population in the South increased from 2 million to 4 million -- but numbers alone do not tell the tale. As Bordewich notes, the Underground Railroad transformed anti-slavery politics. "Without the confrontational activists of the underground," he writes, "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." The success of the system, in turn, radicalized Southerners, who -- incensed by Northern complicity in the theft of their property -- demanded ever more draconian fugitive-slave legislation. The end result, of course, was civil war -- a war that killed more than half a million people and liberated more than 4 million others. A complex legacy indeed, not easily reduced to a fairy-tale moral.

Reviewed by James T. Campbell
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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The Underground Railroad was, by its very nature, a silent, loose-limbed organization. This fog of anonymity may explain why, despite its critical role in American history, historians have attempted so few chronicles of it. Bordewich, author of *My Mother's Ghost* (2000) and *Killing the White Man's Indian* (1997), was undeterred by the challenge. If he can't rescue all names from anonymity, he succeeds in laying bare the heroic spirit of the escapees' struggle. He also breaks "the hard sheen of myth" and shows how some of the movement's white leaders embraced racial equality. Critics applaud the thrilling depictions of escapes and the furtive strategies in use along the railroad. Even more, they appreciate how he places the railroad in context as the fountainhead for the abolitionist movement and, further down the road, the civil rights movement.

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From [AudioFile](#)

To many Americans, the movement of slaves from the South to freedom in the North or Canada was an exercise of morality in action. But the true story is far more complex, showing flawed people sometimes doing good things and others acting out of faith doing great things. The author portrays well-known figures, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Rankin, Levi Coffin, and John Brown. But he also describes several less well-known ones who each in their own way made the enterprise work. This personalization of story makes the nonfiction work sound almost like a novel. The author does the narration fairly well, but he sometimes runs out of wind at the end of long or emotional passages. R.C.G. © AudioFile 2005, Portland, Maine-- Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine --This text refers to the [Audio CD](#) edition.

From [Booklist](#)

The Underground Railroad was, in effect, the nation's first civil rights movement. Reflecting on the commitment and sacrifice of both blacks and whites to transport slaves to freedom, Bordewich brings to life the drama and extraordinary personalities involved in the Underground Railroad, challenging the mistaken assumption that it was run exclusively by high-minded whites with blacks playing a dependent role. Bordewich follows the routes from the upper South through Canada, crediting the abolitionist movement with fueling American feminism. But he is most compelling in describing the lives and heroic deeds of those with unfamiliar names associated with the Underground Railroad--George DeBaptiste, Jermain Loguen, Isaac Hopper, and numerous others. Exploring the personalities and motivations of those who helped escaped slaves, Bordewich examines the interplay between the various players--slaves, free blacks, and white abolitionists--who fostered a movement that had significant political and moral consequences on black-white relationships in America. Readers interested in learning about historical figures in the Underground Railroad other than Harriet Tubman will enjoy this work. *Vernon Ford*
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Civil War History Magazine

"Excellent...The first truly comprehensive treatment of the underground railroad."

New York Review of Books

"Bordewich brings to his account [of the Underghround Railroad] the moral seriousness it deserves."

American Heritage

"Riveting. . .Bound for Canaan . . .illuminates the live of the many giants of the Underground Railroad."

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

"An important addition to our history, brilliantly told."

O magazine

"Dramatizes a shining moment in American history-- a book filled with unsung heroes and revolutionary acts of trust."

--**Kate Clifford, Ph.D. author of Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero**

"Bound For Canaan reveals in stunning detail and beautiful prose the inner workings of this clandestine system."

--James McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*

"This fast-paced narrative is the best account we have of the network known as the Underground Railroad."

Wall Street Journal

"An excellent book . . . as close to a definitive history as we're likely to see."

USA Today

"A profoundly American tale."

School Library Journal (starred review)

"A rich, spellbinding, and readable narrative."

Book Description

An important book of epic scope on America's first racially integrated, religiously inspired movement for change

The civil war brought to a climax the country's bitter division. But the beginnings of slavery's denouement can be traced to a courageous band of ordinary Americans, black and white, slave and free, who joined forces to create what would come to be known as the Underground Railroad, a movement that occupies as romantic a place in the nation's imagination as the Lewis and Clark expedition. The true story of the Underground Railroad is much more morally complex and politically divisive than even the myths suggest. Against a backdrop of the country's westward expansion arose a fierce clash of values that was nothing less than a war for the country's soul. Not since the American Revolution had the country engaged in an act of such vast and profound civil disobedience that not only challenged prevailing mores but also subverted federal law.

Bound for Canaan tells the stories of men and women like David Ruggles, who invented the black underground in New York City; bold Quakers like Isaac Hopper and Levi Coffin, who risked their lives to build the Underground Railroad; and the inimitable Harriet Tubman. Interweaving thrilling personal stories with the politics of slavery and abolition, *Bound for Canaan* shows how the Underground Railroad gave birth to this country's first racially integrated, religiously inspired movement for social change.

About the Author

Fergus M. Bordewich has written for the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *American Heritage*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Reader's Digest*, and is the author of *Killing the White Man's Indian* and *My Mother's Ghost*.