

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

By Fergus M. Bordewich

(New York: HarperCollins, 2005. Pp. xv, 540. Maps, illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$27.95.)

The Underground Railroad operated on the cutting edge of the movement to abolish slavery in the United States and, therefore, provides an especially powerful lens through which to view the growing division between North and South that ultimately produced an emancipatory civil war. Bordewich's sprawling narrative seeks not so much to prove this argument as to embody it. The author densely packs *Bound for Canaan* with vivid stories and biographical vignettes illustrating how a series of improvised escape routes across the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River developed into a dependable yet secretive transportation network. An increasing level of organization and militancy characterized the funneling of southern fugitives northward between 1800 and 1860. But certain constants render problematic the term "Underground Railroad," with its implications of corporate hierarchy and capital-intensive investment. Transporting fugitives depended on flexibility, opacity, and the individual initiative of slaves seeking to permanently cast off their bondage and to rescue family members. The movement relied on free blacks—including former slaves—to guide, conceal, and provide information to fugitives seeking to elude recapture by masters, slave-catchers, and law enforcement officials often in

hot pursuit. The initial core of white participants in the underground was drawn from the Quaker community, but gradually expanded to include evangelically-minded abolitionists, especially after 1830. For the thousands of blacks and whites who risked their personal safety to violate the law of the land, often on behalf of complete strangers, participation in the underground put revulsion toward slavery into action.

The geography of the Underground Railroad indicates some of its other salient features. With dramatic exceptions, only slaves from the Upper South had access to the network of safe-houses, guides, and pathways that channeled them to freedom. Canada was the "Canaan" for a significant proportion of fugitives. There, people such as Marylander Josiah Henson, Kentuckian Henry Bibb, and Pennsylvanian Mary Ann Shadd attempted to build communities to deliver on the promise of American life beyond the reach of laws that made freedom in the northern U.S. a tenuous prospect. Whatever their ultimate destination, many fugitives relied on the assistance of Hoosiers in order to ensure the success of their freedom journeys. Bordewich prominently features the impressive underground activities of Levi Coffin, the white North Carolina-raised Quaker

who lived for two decades in Newport, Indiana, and George DeBaptiste, a black Madison, Indiana, barber who took flight for Detroit after eight years of assisting slaves escaping across the Ohio River.

The covert exodus of thousands of slaves possesses inherent drama, and the book provides numerous compelling examples of their successful escapes as well as episodes of physical confrontation and personal tragedy. Painting details of sectional crises and antislavery politics on a broad canvas means that context sometimes threatens to overwhelm the core subject of the study. Bordewich's effort to describe the underground's resistance as the fulcrum of a victorious antislavery movement leads at times to rhetorical over-reach. Readers seeking a more focused, intensive appraisal of the underground movement's myriad partici-

pants and the relative prevalence of particular methods and routes of escape may not be entirely satisfied. Nonetheless, Bordewich's ambitious narration vividly presents the combination of moral fervor, opportunity, and audacious bravery that offered individuals and the nation alternatives to slavery and racism. While the Underground Railroad could hardly redeem "the soul of America," its role in liberating an estimated 100,000 people from slavery, sometimes one person at a time, was a tangible accomplishment in a society that, especially for African Americans, exhibited far too few attributes of a Promised Land.

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*On Jordan's Banks*  
*Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley*  
 By Darrel E. Bigham

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Pp. x, 428. Maps, appendix, notes, index. \$45.00.)

With *On Jordan's Banks*, Darrel E. Bigham, for many years a productive scholar of southern Indiana history, broadens his geographical scope to focus upon the African American experience in the Ohio River valley during the last half of the nineteenth century. In this heavily footnoted volume, Bigham brings together an

impressive array of secondary sources and supplements these with original research into census materials, tax records, and other primary documents. The work makes a valuable contribution to the scholarly record and represents a worthy addition to the Ohio River Valley Series published by the University Press of Kentucky.