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I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad

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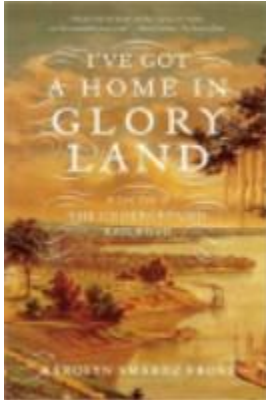
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Book Review



Karolyn Smardz Frost. *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007, xxv + 450 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-16481-2.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Deb Rotman, Ph.D., RPA, University of Notre Dame.

Karolyn Smardz Frost combines historical and archaeological data to tell the story of Thornton and Lucie (Ruthie) Blackburn. Through the lives of these two individuals, she illuminates many dimensions of the African-American/Canadian experience in the nineteenth century -- from slavery to escape to emancipation to continuing struggles as free people.

The book is divided into three sections that are arranged geographically -- Kentucky, Detroit, and Canada -- each representing an important chapter in the Blackburns' lives. The first section, Kentucky, focuses on the early years of Thornton and Ruthie, who were born into slavery. Thornton's childhood in Maysville, Kentucky provides important historical background for the institution of slavery as well as the laws and customs that shaped the social relations of the enslaved condition. The emphasis is on the brutality of enslavement as well as the economic, urban, and familial milieus of southern plantations. This first section provides an incredibly detailed, nuanced, and multidimensional context not only for slavery, but for the nineteenth century more generally. The section also describes the way in which Thornton and Lucie escaped from slavery by disguising themselves as free blacks. Ruthie's master had died and, with his estate bankrupt, she had been sold "down the river." Using forged papers, the couple made their way from Louisville, up the Ohio River and eventually to Detroit.

Once in Detroit, the Blackburns settled into a new community of free blacks. Being "free," however, was not without its dangers. The Fugitive Slave Law mandated "that any white suspecting a black person of being a fugitive was required to report it" (p. 161). In 1830, Thornton was recognized by Thomas Rogers, a clerk who had supervised his work in a warehouse in Louisville. Rogers reported the encounter, which led to Thornton and Ruthie's arrest. While awaiting trial, a group of their supporters helped them to escape from jail -- first Ruthie, then Thornton. They were whisked to safety in Canada. This incident became known as the Blackburn Riots of 1833, believed to be the first racial uprising in the United States. While previously African-Americans had frequently been the victims of urban riots, in this instance the community arose to protect two of its members.

Upon arriving in Canada, Ruthie changed her name to Lucie -- a new identity for her new life. They again received refuge, but were not safe. Canadian law was poorly equipped to handle questions of extradition under the Fugitive Slave Law. The Blackburns were central to a landmark legal case in which it was ultimately determined that escaped slaves could

not be extradited to the United States. This judicial finding made Canada a truly "free land," although it strained relations between the two countries for many years afterward. The balance of the book explicates the lives of Thornton and Lucie in Toronto specifically and more generally the activity of the Underground Railroad in the mid-nineteenth century, the Civil War, and the post-Emancipation era.

The details of Thornton and Lucie Blackburns' lives were well documented in historic records specifically because they were figures central to the riots in Detroit and legal proceedings in Canada. This incredible visibility in archival records provides a rare opportunity to extrapolate the lives of other individuals who endured slavery and sought freedom as the Blackburns did.

Frost's work humanizes the experiences of enslaved Africans -- experiences that are often depicted and understood in anonymous and general terms. In addition, she stresses the ways in which the Blackburns were active agents in their own seeking of freedom. While the Quakers and other groups were also involved with the Underground Railroad, Frost focuses on the ways in which the African-American community was empowered, skilled, and resourceful in assisting fugitive slaves to freedom in Canada.

By necessity, Frost uses creative license to fill some historical gaps. Her occasional speculation in the book is consistently plausible and rooted in her thorough knowledge of the time period and context which she explores. The result is a very rich telling of a powerful story.

The book will naturally be of interest to general readers seeking to learn more about African-American history, the Underground Railroad, and the nineteenth-century. Academics in History and American Studies might use this work as supplementary reading in a course that explores these areas. The detailed and holistic approach that Frost uses in the volume makes it ideally suited for such a classroom setting.

My only critique with the volume is that the archaeological research is not as integral to the story as it might be. The archaeology is often presented as an after-thought. In discussing dietary practices, for example, Frost states "They exploited the natural sources of food in the vicinity, for bones of wild fish and game were discovered in the ashes of the kitchen hearth" (p. 166). No additional discussion of the particular species of fish and game, indications of processing and cooking or how those bones in the kitchen ash were part of the Blackburns worldview or cultural context was provided. Similarly, later she recounts "Their simple dishes and glassware, silver-plated spoons, and bits of glass and corroded metal together paint a picture of day-to-day living from 1834 through the 1890s" (ibid). Yet without additional elaboration, the reader must imagine the details of that daily life for themselves, because no interpretation is provided.

Importantly, however, it was the archaeological investigation of the couple's small home that opened the window to this extraordinary tale. It is for that reason that the archaeology at the Blackburn residential site is significant. Nevertheless, without more detail of the archaeology, artifacts, and interpretation, this book does not contribute to a richer

understanding of the material aspects of African-American or African-Canadian life. Perhaps such a purpose is beyond the author's vision for this work.

***I've Got a Home in Glory Land* is well researched, detailed, and thorough in its investigation of the experiences of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn as viewed through historical and documentary evidence. Their lives serve as a lens through which to view a critically important chapter of American and Canadian history and our collective pasts.**