

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

Thomas McIlwraith

Volume 99, Number 2, Fall 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065748ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065748ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McIlwraith, T. (2007). Review of [*I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* By Karolyn Smardz Frost]. *Ontario History*, 99(2), 263–265. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065748ar>

those domestic and natural spaces that have influenced and inspired Canadian writers.

Margaret Steffler
Trent University

Bibliography:

Ballstadt, Carl, Elizabeth Hopkins, and Michael A. Peterman, eds. *Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985.

----- *Letters of Love and Duty....* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993.

Givner, Joan. *Mazo de la Roche: The Hidden Life*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Gray, Charlotte. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill*. Toronto: Viking, 1999.

Peterman, Michael A. *Susanna Moodie: A Life*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1999.

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

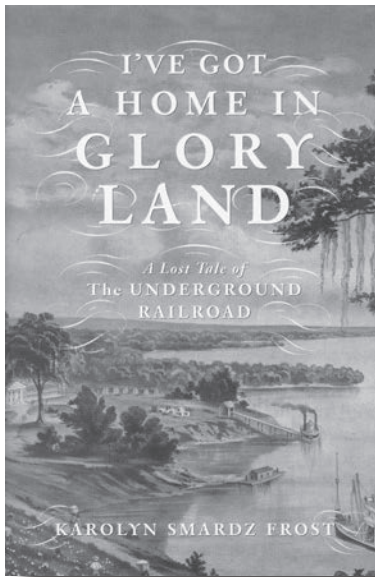
By Karolyn Smardz Frost. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007. xxv + 450 pp. Hardcover \$36.95. ISBN 0-88762-250-X.

There are so many reasons to read this very good book. *Glory Land* tells a simple, engaging, and profound human story. Thornton and Lucie Blackburn were idealistic young adult slaves – chattels – living in the United States about 1830. They craved personal freedom with a persistence that drove them to take risks that seem, to an outsider like me, unimaginably foolhardy. Heart-stopping experiences crossing the Ohio River and escaping custody in Detroit brought them finally to settle into relative anonymity in Toronto where Thornton established a cab service in 1837. For decades Lucie and Thornton freely shared their time and talents assisting fellow refugees. Childless, illiterate and (to our knowledge) never photographed, this accomplished couple died in the 1890s. They are buried in the Toronto Necropolis next to the distinguished anti-slavery crusader, George Brown, publisher of *The Globe*.

Karolyn Smardz Frost has given us a superbly-crafted blend of scholarship and

story-telling. *Glory Land* exudes optimism, as human spirit repeatedly trumps desperation. Here is a model of careful primary research, including archeological, placed squarely within the reach of the thoughtful reading public who are easily put off by academics talking only to each other. *Glory Land* invites a universal readership.

Black history is biographical, fascinating because few black people left direct trace. The concept of person as commodity places the Blackburns alongside horses, wagons, bales of cotton, and fashionable clothing in household inventories. But in those lists repose the lives that Smardz Frost has teased out. Slave auction accounts, court proceedings to recover escaped slaves, the testimony of abolitionists, the fugitive press, transcribed memoirs: all contribute still more. Thornton was a recognized member of the Louisville mercantile community in 1830, and his personal network provided a persistent Smardz Frost with a long list of people with whom he intersected and who left their own records. She covered historical



gaps cautiously: “Sibby’s work would have been terribly hard ...” (p.22), followed immediately by quoting the 1863 memoir of a contemporary. It’s indirect, yet convincing. Throughout nearly 100 pages of annotation and references Smardz Frost demon-

strates that even the weakest spoor can map out an amazing trail. Her care in providing plausible context is exemplary, and rightly establishes historical ‘fiction’ as compatible with good scholarship. Distillation of all this material liberates a compelling story.

That story is continental: a northward migration amid a westward-moving civilization. Canada seemed such an obvious destination, yet only because a treaty in 1815 determined that the United States would not rule over all. In that year the Underground Railroad may be said to have received its symbolic charter, offering freedom-seekers an alternative to Africa. Some indeed went there, but so many more chose the opposite direction, despite Rousseau’s “quelques arpents de neige” disclaimer. Return movement always accompanies forward migration, and former fugitives returning to the United States after Emancipation in 1863 are no exception. This is particularly remarkable because, as the Stephen Foster epigraph “My Old Kentucky Home” reminds us (p. 47), for many slaves sold and resold, home was hard to recognize beyond

a feeling of being with kinfolk, anywhere. Smardz Frost draws attention to these complex movements, offering much to those who read migration literature.

In this spatial biography, place-name maps do their job crisply and cleanly. But I would have drawn the frontispiece map, “Underground Railroad Routes to Canada,” differently. I would have shaded three zones: oppression (the slave South), liberty (“Glory Land”), and an intervening zone of furtiveness, grave danger, and incredible bravery. Out would pop Ohio, the narrowest crossing. Such a mapping explains why Kentucky was a jumping-off point for many besides the Blackburns, and why an ancestor of mine in Painesville, Ohio, was an active abolitionist. She was in the thick of it. The format of the table of contents ably mirrors these three zones: Kentucky, Detroit, Canada. And the titles of the chapters read in an almost scriptural way, making the book itself a symbol of the quest for freedom. That is not unintentional.

I would have mapped the Ohio River boldly – a new-world Jordan River of hope, yet one where treacherous currents or two-faced ships’ masters could “sell one down the River” back into slavery. I would have marked the Appalachians, dark and shadowy, offering an alternate corridor. And, looking back southward from “Glory Land,” it has always interested me how close to the border fugitives stopped. Of course they were weary, but would they not wish to have gone further inland than Amherstburg, St. Catharines or Toronto? Wilberforce (north of London) or Oro (north of Barrie) would seem safer, and were decent farming country too. Perhaps an answer lies on the land itself. How would one passing near Buxton on Via-Rail (today’s overground railroad) recognize that here dwelt refugees, some of whom, Smardz Frost writes, built this very line? Would the

landscape look different from areas of Irish settlement? Imitating the lives and buildings of earlier comers works to disguise the scenes of those who came later. Buxton's plank road and steam sawmill were both thoroughly Ontario-like features in the fugitive slave period. Landscapes of refuge are obscure, and hence perceived as safe; I would welcome Smardz Frost's thoughts on these matters.

Fugitive slave studies commonly focus on the escape more than on life afterwards, so the Blackburns' life in Toronto is a particularly valuable aspect of this biography. What better symbol for serving others than an entrepreneurial, socially-conscious cab-driver? Smardz Frost imagines Thornton may even have given a ride to former slave owners or Confederate Army deserters who had fled north. (p. 316) The Toronto chapters mix gratitude with an undercurrent of muted anger at how even a

liberating place can stumble. Maintaining freedom and self-respect involved confrontations less sudden, perhaps, but hardly less trying than the escape from Louisville.

An archeological site dramatically anchors the Blackburn story, and brings us back to the Introduction – the story of the story. Starting with supervising youngsters digging in Toronto's Sackville Street school-yard in 1985, Smardz Frost moved on to country roads, county courthouses and countless other stops in two countries over two decades, giving face to an often faceless topic. Her introduction relates a personal research journey which is a kind of literary liberation that runs parallel with the human story. Freeing incarcerated stories and experiences is the legacy of this fine book.

Thomas McIlwraith
University of Toronto at Mississauga

Duty Nobly Done

The Official History of the Essex and Kent Scottish Regiment

By Sandy Antal and Kevin R. Shackleton. Windsor: Walkerville Publishing, 2006. 828 pp. \$59.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-9731834-8-9.

With the Canadian Forces active in Afghanistan and growing interest in how to commemorate the passing of the last veterans of the First World War, it has been quite a while since our military has had such national prominence. Thus it seems apt that a volume such as *Duty Nobly Done* has been produced. In their thorough narrative Sandy Antal and Kevin Shackleton trace the development of the military units of Essex and Kent counties from the militias of the French regime through to today's Essex and Kent Scottish Regiment based in Windsor and

Chatham.

Antal, who has written on the War of 1812 in the Detroit River region in *A Wampum Denied*, returns to familiar territory as he covers the development of the local militia up to the end of the Upper Canada Rebellion. The early nineteenth-century militias had important roles during the War of 1812 and the Rebellion, especially at the siege of Fort Meigs in Ohio in 1813 and at the Battle of Windsor in

