

A Shadow on the Household: One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom By Bryan Prince

Adrienne Shadd

Volume 102, numéro 1, spring 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065607ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065607ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Shadd, A. (2010). Compte rendu de [*A Shadow on the Household: One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom* By Bryan Prince]. *Ontario History*, 102(1), 136–137. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065607ar>

*A Shadow on the Household:
One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom*

By Bryan Prince

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2009. 296 pages. \$32.99 hard-cover. ISBN 978-0-7710-7125-6 (www.mcclelland.com)

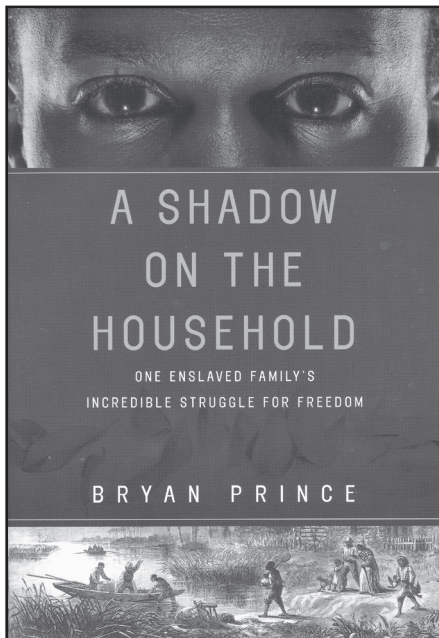
A *Shadow on the Household* is the true story of one family's gripping experience on the Underground Railroad and how an absolutely riveting tale that had reverberations not only in the United States, but also Great Britain, the Caribbean and Canada.

Bryan Prince, a farmer and descendant of slaves, is from North Buxton, Ontario, one of the best-known termini of the Underground Railroad in Canada. He has produced a masterpiece of historical scholarship. The amount of detail that Prince has unearthed in combing through the myriad government documents and archival records, memoirs, letters, old newspapers and so forth, is staggering. However, while the research is impeccable, what is most impressive is Prince's incredible storytelling capability. He reveals that he is a master storyteller, whose true-to-life historical account bears all the hallmarks of a best-selling novel. It is beautifully written and will appeal to a broad cross-section of readers.

The stories of the Underground Railroad that have survived commonly provide much detail about slavery and the escape to freedom. The remainder of the story, particularly in the aftermath of the

American Civil War and emancipation in the United States, is given far less attention, if any at all. Prince, however, has taken the time to trace each and every family member and what became of them onward into the early twentieth century. After many twists and turns, the Weems ended up just outside Chatham, Ontario, near the Kent Bridge. Their daughter, Ann Maria, was living a few miles away at the Dawn Settlement near the present town of Dresden. This was the home of the venerable fugitive slave leader, Josiah Henson. The reader gets to experience the joys of their lives in freedom, and also bear witness to the unbelievable ups and downs of their ongoing saga.

A Shadow on the Household might have benefitted from an introductory chapter explaining that this 'organized' part of the Underground Railroad in which the Weems took part—with 'conductors' and 'passengers,' 'stops' or safe houses, and people working actively on behalf of the fugitives—was just one aspect of the Underground Railroad. The term is also used to refer simply to the system of routes that many used to escape and flee north, with little besides the guidance of the North Star, the Big Dipper and the



Little Dipper. Many fugitive slaves never experienced the more organized Underground Railroad system popularized in the literature and which has so vividly been portrayed in this book. For the historian, and those interested in doing further research, the lack of a bibliography is another drawback. However, McClelland and Stewart have seen fit to keep the footnotes, another component that seems too often to have fallen by the wayside in today's trade publishing industry. Despite these concerns, *A Shadow on the Household* is a fascinating and highly informative chronicle, and well worth reading.

The Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site in Dresden, and the First Baptist Church or Heritage Room at the W.I.S.H. Centre in Chatham provide tours, video presentations, and library resources on the rich Af-

rican Canadian heritage of the area, and on the many families, like the Weems, that settled there. First Baptist is where the famous liberator, John Brown, held his secret convention to plan the raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Fifteen miles south of Chatham is the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, including a historic schoolhouse and a log cabin of one of the early settlers. All of these locations are run by descendants of the original families, bringing to life the stories of the Underground Railroad contained in the pages of *A Shadow on the Household*.

Adrienne Shadd, Toronto

Bibliography:

Carbone, Eliza. *Stealing Freedom*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

*Ontario's African Canadian Heritage:
Collected Writings by Fred Landon, 1918-1967*

Edited by Karolyn Smardz Frost, Bryan Walls, Hilary Bates Neary, and Frederick H. Armstrong

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009. 368 pages. \$28.99 soft-cover. ISBN 978-1-55002-814-0 (www.dundurn.com)

Fred Landon pioneered the study of Black history in Ontario. From 1918 until 1967 he wrote dozens of articles on the Underground Railroad and the experience of the fugitive slaves in the "promised land." With the publication of *Ontario's African-Canadian Heritage*, his most important works are now more readily available to both scholars and general readers interested in this important and interesting aspect of Ontario's history.

This collection contains twenty-six of Landon's most important works. The articles have been well chosen, and deal with a wide range of subjects related to the Underground Railroad. Most originally appeared in either *Ontario History* or *Journal of Negro*

History, but others have been drawn from less obvious sources such as *London Free Press* and *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Historical Society*. The articles are not arranged in the order in which Landon wrote them, but instead chronologically by subject matter, from the first fugitive slaves and abolitionists to Abraham Lincoln, the America Civil War, and the end of need for

