

Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada By Donald G. Simpson

Maureen Elgersman Lee

Volume 99, numéro 1, spring 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065803ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065803ar>

[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

Elgersman Lee, M. (2007). Compte rendu de [*Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada* By Donald G. Simpson]. *Ontario History*, 99(1), 117–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065803ar>

to the crew of the *Nancy* and other people who took part in the struggle for naval supremacy on Lake Huron. The timeline that appears at the beginning of the book will help readers keep track of a complicated sequence of events. Missing, however, is a good map that identifies points visited by the *Nancy* on Lakes Huron and Erie, and important places on the land surrounding them. We are told that General William Hull led an American force across the St. Clair River, first to invade Canada on 12 July 1812, and then to retreat several weeks later. (pp. 47, 55) Actually, Hull crossed the Detroit River; more careful proofreading would have caught this error.

Through Water, Ice & Fire will be useful to readers who are interested in the Great Lakes fur trade, the rivalry between Great Britain and the United States for the determining and controlling the international border, and the naval and military history of these two nations.

Keith R. Widder
Michigan State University, East Lansing

Bibliography:

Gough, Barry. *Fighting Sail on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay: The War of 1812 and its aftermath*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002.

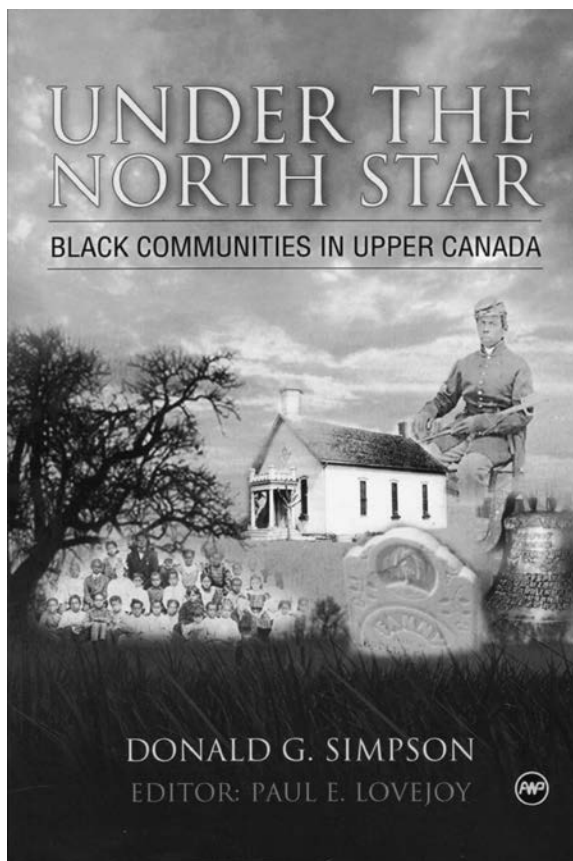
Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada

By Donald G. Simpson. Edited by Paul E. Lovejoy. A Publication of the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, York University, Toronto. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 2005. x + 500 pp. US\$34.95 softcover. ISBN 1-592213-56-1.

During the antebellum period, fugitives from American slavery were advised to follow the North Star and navigate their way to Canada. Since then, the North Star has become synonymous with Black freedom. It is fitting, therefore, for Donald Simpson to call on this historical image for his text. By his own account, Simpson wrote *Under the North Star* to offer a province-wide survey of Black settlements and communities during the early days of Ontario (Upper Canada) history prior to Confederation. Through six chapters of vastly different lengths he not only uncovers the history of Ontario's

Blacks during this period but also uses this history as a catalyst for examining the evolving nature of Canada-U.S. relations, relations that could be particularly strained when the protection of men, women and children of colour was on the line.

Following the foreword by Paul Lovejoy (Director of the Tubman Centre), Simpson opens with brief accounts of Black immigration to and slavery in Canada. He focuses on the Revolutionary era, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the years following the fugitive slave laws of 1793 and 1850. Legislation initiated by Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe in Upper Canada in 1793 helped ensure that slavery, while not comprehensively abolished, would ultimately disappear. Many Blacks were indeed escaping slavery, but notable figures like the Shadds were free people who left the United States because of the continued encroachment on



their freedoms. This cursory chapter covers ground familiar to those acquainted with Black history in British America and the United States, but lacks the necessary substance for readers new to the subject area.

About one-quarter of the book is adroitly given over to the place of religion, the press and welfare in supporting fugitive slaves reaching Canada. Simpson argues that while the African Methodist Episcopal and British Methodist Episcopal churches often allowed Black membership for quasi-political, sectarian reasons, Blacks' own religious spirit motivated their quests for freedom and helped organize their lives as free people. Help probably came from churches al-

ready established in Canada, all of which claimed anti-slavery stances to some degree. The press, both Black- and White-owned, played a further role in helping Blacks find their place in Canadian society. Religious publications ranged from neutral to passively pro-slavery or ardently anti-slavery. Simpson singles out George Brown's Toronto newspaper, *The Globe*, for its condemnation of slavery, its celebration of Black success in Canada, and its monitoring of Canadian-American relations, particularly regarding annexation. Of the era's four Black-owned papers, Simpson emphasizes the educational importance of *Voice of the Fugitive* and *Provincial Freeman* in the 1850s. Black mutual aid societies offered social, moral, political and intellectual improvement. The True Bands, the Black Masons, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, and many local women's organizations and literary societies, both White

and Black, were involved, as were provincial and local anti-slavery societies.

Education and community development comprise the heart of Simpson's study, being the topics on which *Under the North Star* turns. They make up fully two-thirds of the book. Simpson identifies dozens of Black communities throughout Ontario, briefly surveying the history and educational progress in each. For him, learning is not restricted to the classroom, but refers to the "total educational process to which Blacks were exposed. This broad interpretation of education requires an investigation of the role of the churches, the home, the press, private clubs and societies, as well as schools." (p.1) As evidence of Blacks' determination to integrate

themselves into their new communities, a letter from the people of colour in Hamilton to the Governor General in 1843 is instructive. In it they appealed not to fairness or equality but to their financial positions, and demanded public school access as their right as property-owners and taxpayers who had brought money into Canada.

Under the North Star is a formidable, highly-researched text. Simpson pays homage to scholars who pioneered the study of Ontario's Black communities, including Fred Landon, William Riddell, Daniel Hill, and William and Jane Pease. Simpson ably captures relationships among church, press, schools and society at large. However, *Under the North Star* does have significant organizational problems. In Chapter 3 Simpson's survey of Black-owned newspapers in Canada is awkwardly split by three pages focused on American ones that he felt could set an example for the Canadian press to follow. In Chapter 5 Simpson sometimes repeats his overview of slave history in the sections on particular communities, and the educational history of some communities is absent. The organization of the bibliography is somewhat repetitive, and there are glaring gaps, notably Silverman's important text, *Unwelcome Guest*, Rhodes' definitive work on Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and, seemingly, Winks' *The Blacks in Canada*.

Under the North Star is a valuable contribution to the ever-growing field of African Canadian history. Simpson challenges what we thought we knew about settlements in Buxton, Elgin and Oro and expands our appreciation for the sociopolitical challenges that life in early Ontario offered Blacks. For the target audience of teachers and students in Ontario's schools, its value, even more than Simpson's broadly-based interpretation of education, is the

vast inventory of Black communities. The text surveys more than one hundred, from the better known settlements at Dawn and Windsor to the more novel ones in Port Dover, North Cayuga and Ingersoll. *Under the North Star* both challenges and expands what we know about the migration, reception and education of Blacks in nineteenth-century Ontario. It is a significant addition to the historiography of the province.

Maureen Elgersman Lee
University of Southern Maine, Gorham

Bibliography:

- Hill, Daniel G. *The Freedom-seekers: Blacks in Early Canada*. Toronto: Book Society, 1981.
- Landon, Fred. H. *Western Ontario and the American Frontier*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1941.
- Pease, William H., and Jane H. Pease. *Black Utopia, Negro Communal Experiments in America*. Madison, 1963.
- Provincial Freeman*. Toronto and Chatham, C.W.: Samuel R. Ward, and others, eds. 24 March 1853 to 19 September 1857.
- Rhodes, Jane. *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Silverman, Jason. *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865*. Millwood, New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1985.
- Voice of the Fugitive*. Windsor, C.W.: Henry Bibb and J.T. Holly, publisher and editor. 1 January 1851 to 16 December 1852.
- Winks, Robin W. *The Blacks in Canada*. 2nd ed. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. (originally published in 1971).