

The Promised Land: History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond ed. by Boulou de B'beri, Nina Reid-Maroney, and Handel Kashope Wright

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Book Reviews

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The Promised Land

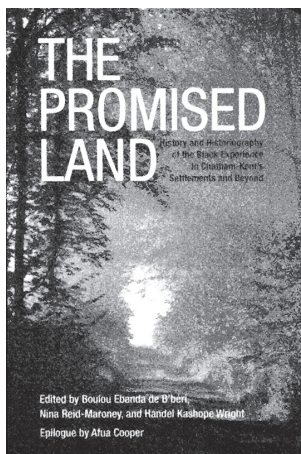
History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond

Ed. by Boulou de B'beri, Nina Reid-Maroney, and Handel Kashope Wright

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 248 pages. \$60.00 hardcover, ISBN 978-1-44264-717-6. \$24.95 paperback, ISBN 978-1-44261-533-5. \$24.95 eBook, ISBN 978-1-44266-746-4. (www.utppublishing.com)

Interest in the historical Black experience in North America has been increasing steadily over the past several decades and has now moved beyond Academia and into the public sphere. This illuminating volume is a product of that maturation. *The Promised Land*—a metaphor for the terminus of the ante-bellum Underground Railroad from the United States to Canada—is similar to a published collection of essays from conference proceedings. Herein lies its strengths: the varied topics and perspectives al-

lows for wide-ranging readership potential. The Promised Land Project [PLP] of the Community University Research Alliance brought together academic scholars, community researchers, and students who have focused research on the historical experience of Black communities and individuals in southwestern Ontario. Research subjects included those which were part of a larger transnational experience during the nineteenth century and which give this collection of essays its broader meaning and importance



to Canadian and American scholars

The PLP has a simple mission—to resurrect long lost histories of people of colour and other marginalized communities and to weave them into a re-envisioned national historical narrative. A simple idea but one that faces many obstacles, including entrenched racism that has obscured the lives and contributions of people of colour over time, loss of historical memory within these communities—selective “historical amnesia”—and the persistence of a homogeneous national historical narrative that prevails over a more inclusive heterogeneous one. This volume, then, is an attempt at bridging some of those barriers and sins by resurrecting the histories of the communities and lives of early black immigrants and settlers to this region. PLP’s themes “explore the interplay between past and present, history and memory, local and global concerns” (3). By virtue of the nature of black settlement in the region during the nineteenth century, a transnational element also infuses this work—the great majority of Blacks settling in this region had escaped bondage in America, or had fled as free people seeking a better life in a less restricted environment, where opportunity appeared greater than what they left behind.

The Promised Land essays are grouped into a three sections. Part One includes essays written by the three editors, de B’beri, Reid-Maroney, and Wright, and they are distinctly academic in their orientation, and are situated more comfortably in cultural studies geared toward college and graduate students rather than in the context of historical interpretation for a more general audience. While this is a small complaint, it initially overshadows one of the primary goals of the project—“build bridges among academics, community scholars, and students at all levels” (3).

The first essay, by de B’beri describes the founding of the Research Alliance and the PLP, from his first introduction

to Chatham-Kent community history to broader discussions of the varied historiographical foundations from which research could be undertaken and expanded—the physical geography and topography of the area, on the one hand, and the intangible and nonphysical on the other. The project collected the biographies of individuals and communities, as well as examining the racial, familial, social, economic, and political (Canadian and American) relationships that shaped and influenced life in the region. The PLP sought to gather that information and interpret regional history more inclusive of Black lives and contributions. The second essay, by Handel Kashope Wright, focuses on the “temporal and special scope” (40) of the PLP research. The project “started out seeking *the* truth,” Wright argues, “but our findings could be said to reveal... several related and even competing truths” (49). In the end, Wright observes, the use and inclusion of family histories, genealogy, geography and historical mapping have contributed to reconstructing Canadian history *and* extended American history, blurring “the boundaries between two supposedly distinct national histories” (53). The third essay, by Nina Reid-Maroney, focuses more narrowly on the specific projects covered in this volume. Her research into the movements of a former fugitive from slavery, abolitionist, author, and founder of the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper, activist Samuel Ringgold Ward, pulls together some of the larger themes and interpretive models that tie this volume of essays together—the migration and settlement of people, the destruction and retention of historical truths and memories, and the much needed questions that such investigations bring forth such as how and why historical amnesia has obfuscated the past and substituted only the celebratory parts (like the Underground Railroad and metaphors like Promised Land.)

The next three essays in Part Two focus on biographies of specific individuals, their families, and associates. Marie Carter uncovers the lost history of successful African-American business entrepreneur William Whipper's cross-border land acquisitions and settlement building in Dresden, Ontario, in what is known as the Dawn Settlement. Carter examines Whipper's land purchases within the larger transnational context of abolition and the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania, where Whipper and his family and businesses were located, to the Dawn Settlement where Whipper hoped to help build a thriving town center. This research reveals that Dresden and the Dawn Settlement were far more complex than earlier histories had suggested. Long believed to be a settlement for fugitive slaves from the American South, this research reveals wealthier and free African-Americans also settled here, building new lives away from the turmoil of a deeply divided America. Claudine Bonner's essay on Nina Mae Alexander, a black school teacher in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Amherstburg, Ontario, contemplates the interpretive potential of a fragment of a diary—in this case, four months of Alexander's daily recordings during the early part of 1907. The descendant of one and possibly two formerly enslaved people, Alexander represents the newer generation of young African-Canadians who benefitted from the economic independence achieved by their parents and grandparents, specifically from more widespread educational and professional options. Bonner assumes that Alexander and her family are exceptional, though without more broad demographic research this is difficult to determine.

The third essay in this section, by Reid-Maroney, explores the interactions of Black intellectuals in the pre-Civil War Philadelphia area. Focusing on Parker T. Smith and his family, the influence of the Banneker Institute—a black literary, philosophical,

and debating society founded in 1855 in Philadelphia—and other Black intellectuals of the period, Reid-Maroney investigates the events, interactions, and experiences that shaped Smith's evolution as an activist and his decision to move to Canada to flee race prejudice in Philadelphia. The "Promised Land," Reid-Maroney discovered, was "a deeply disappointing place," for an urban intellectual like Smith. Though he tried to recreate educational, social, and intellectual institutions like the Banneker Institute in rural Canada, he found himself adrift and unsuited for life there.

Part Three focuses on the transnational aspects of Black history and the long reach of abolitionist, kinship, and economic relationships beyond the Underground Railroad. Olivette Otelle's essay on the slave trade and the rise of abolition is a good foundation for context for this entire volume—in fact it would have been a good introductory essay to the entire volume. Its placement here in the book reflects the editors' decision to bring the reader from the local story to a broader and more complex national and international experience, revealing the influences—including race, national identity and imperial ambition, and Christianity—and interactions that molded, fortified, and determined the nature of abolition in the Atlantic world. Otelle focuses on the founding and growth of the British and Foreign Anti-slavery Society, the establishment of Canadian anti-slavery societies, and their similarities with American societies. She determines that Black abolitionists played a key role in a swaying a racially prejudiced public that was turning a blind eye to the horrors of slavery and the cause of abolition. Peter Dalleo's essay takes the reader from Delaware to Canada and to Liberia. Focusing on the Shadd and Anderson families, Dalleo deftly reveals the powerful kinship and "cross generational nature" of abolition networks between Delaware, Ontario, and Liberia.

Free Blacks in Delaware had long been using the courts to address grievances and conduct business, but by the mid nineteenth century, many were becoming increasingly frustrated with lack of opportunity, justice and unrelenting prejudice. At first hesitant to abandon their homeland, some free black families moved to Pennsylvania to access educational and economic opportunities denied them in Delaware. Moving to a free state allowed them to participate more openly in anti-slavery and Underground Railroad activities. When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, some families, like the Shadds, felt compelled to move to Canada and supported other emigres to join them. Unlike the Shadds, the Andersons supported the Colonization Movement, believing there was only one place where Blacks could feel secure and totally free, and moved to Liberia. The last essay—and second one by Marie Carter—in Part Three brings the reader back to the Dawn Settlement in the Chatham-Kent region, mapping out the distinct places that scholars and the public have long conflated. For anyone researching the history in this region, this essay is well worth reading. The volume ends with a fine epilogue by historian Afua Cooper, whose call for action should motivate many professional scholars and local researchers to continue uncovering this important history, to replace the “feel good” history of the Underground Railroad with the reality of Black life on both

sides of the border.

The interplay between the essays in the first part of the collection and those in the second and third parts show some disconnect between academia and local, avocational researchers and writers. But the strength of the second and third sets of essays highlight the history of individuals and settlements, bringing forth more historical data and adding more depth and nuance to the region's history, as well as adding dimensions beyond local and national borders. The examination of African-Canadian and African-American kinship, social, and economic networks deeply informed the nature of abolition in Canada, America, and across the Atlantic. These essays also make it clear that the interpretation of the Black experience in this region has been influenced by a web of cultural, historical, and social dynamics and points of view, leading to multiple outcomes. The “Promised Land” was a complex place.

This history, the survival strategies and strategies for freedom practiced and experienced by people of colour within the highly oppressive and segregated eras of slavery and beyond, should be fully integrated into national histories.

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Governing Toronto *Bringing Back the City That Worked*

By Alan Redway

Toronto: the author (using Friesen Press, Victoria), 2014. 305 pages. \$47.36
hardcover. ISBN 978-1-46025-199-7. \$31.53 paperback. ISBN 978-1-46025-200-
0. \$3.79 eBook. ISBN 978-1-46025-201-7. www.friesenpress.com)

When first reading the sub-title of Alan Redway's book, one might think that the focus of this work would be on de-amal-

gamation of the Megacity. Such is not the case. For twelve of the fourteen chapters, Redway masterfully weaves personal experi-