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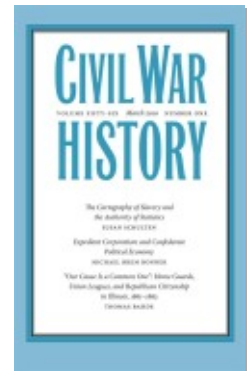
Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History (review)

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Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (2007). *A Slave No More* will be of interest to all scholars of African American history and the evolving bounds of United States citizenship in the Civil War era.

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Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History. By Milton C. Sernett. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 424. Cloth, \$89.95; paper, \$24.95.)

Milton Sernett begins his book by revealing the results of a 1986 study that revealed that most American eleventh grade students could not identify Winston Churchill but knew that Harriet Tubman was a conductor on the underground railroad. How and why, Sernett asks, did Tubman achieve this kind of popular recognition? His study seeks to answer this question by exploring the process by which Tubman became a cultural icon, a “myth . . . [drawing] on the factual core but . . . often in tension with it” (3). While Sernett also promises to uncover the “historical” Tubman, his greatest interest lies with the “remembered Tubman,” perhaps, he suggests, “America’s most malleable icon” (3). Over time, he shows, her image has been successfully exploited by groups ranging from feminists to educators.

The book first examines how various stages of Tubman’s life took on mythic qualities while she was still alive. Since few nineteenth-century sources depicted Tubman’s childhood, the first chapter focuses on twentieth-century juvenile literature. As Sernett makes clear, authors have used incidents, whether true or not, to teach a variety of lessons to children. Today the youthful Tubman serves the needs of multiculturalism (40). Tubman was illiterate, but her vivid stories created her identity as a black Moses, a view that abolitionists popularized for their own antislavery purposes. Very quickly her exploits were amplified: the numbers of rescue trips made and fugitives rescued ballooned. More complex images of Tubman as the militant “General Tubman,” brave scout, spy, and nurse emerged from her activities before and during the Civil War. This complexity has allowed those “with contrasting political views and agendas [to] . . . extract useful inspirational capital” by privileging some aspects of her exploits over others (104). Finally, in the postwar years, when she retired to Auburn, New York, emphasis on her piety and seerlike powers emerged. Later, her death led to a resurrection of sorts. Her funeral and the subsequent erection of a memorial to her brought forth eulogies of her as both Black Moses and “American Patriot” (178).

Like other scholars dealing with the creation of memory, Sernett is sensitive to the many ways memory is made. His book includes a rich program of illustrations, ranging from book covers to sculpture as well as chapters on the preservation of Tubman sites and the media's representation of Tubman. Unfortunately, he does little analysis of the visual materials to exploit what they reveal about image-making.

Sernett is aware of the limitations and power of text to influence collective memory. Three chapters analyze the most important published depictions of Tubman. While Sarah Bradford interviewed Tubman for her 1869 and 1886 books, she (and perhaps Tubman herself) emphasized Tubman as a hero. Bradford was responsible for exaggerating numbers of rescues and fugitives, for example, and these and other errors passed into many subsequent portraits of Tubman. For his 1943 book, Earl Conrad returned to primary sources and examined previous treatments with a critical eye. Still, his political views led to a portrait of her as a radical hero and symbolic opponent of racism. Finally, Sernett discusses three contemporary historians who have attempted to strip away the myths to discover the historic Tubman with varying degrees of success. As Sernett concludes, "the symbolic Tubman will [not] readily . . . be replaced by the historic person" (315).

Sernett's book sheds light on the mythologizing process that has resulted in Tubman's modern reputation. She has, indeed, been a malleable icon. But a considerable amount of repetition and the inclusion of far too many details impede his narrative. Most important, the "historic" Tubman remains shadowy, partly because Sernett chooses not to discuss in any detail the most reputable modern treatments of her. While he reveals factual errors historians have uncovered, the person and her accomplishments never come into clear focus. Such a focus would provide a useful contrast to the myths Sernett so deftly explores.

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