

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Journey to freedom

Ex-slaves' crusade to free their 10 children a true epic

By Evadne Anderson, Canwest News Service, January 25, 2009

In *A Shadow on the Household*, Bryan Prince -- Canadian author, historian and director of the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum -- has produced a work with the breadth and depth of a historical epic.

This detailed, well-crafted dramatic narrative will captivate many readers, especially those interested in the Antebellum South and the once-flourishing domestic slave trade in North America.

Spanning the period from the early 1800s to Reconstruction, the core of this text is the graphic depiction of one family's boundless determination to gain freedom. Enslaved in the state of Maryland, the parents John and Arabella Weems are the first to be free. Then, their unceasing efforts over an eight-year period miraculously result in freedom for all of their 10 children.



Author Bryan Prince and his wife Shannon in front of the oldest remaining log cabin from the Elgin Settlement.

Photograph by: Malcolm Taylor, The Ottawa Citizen

Prince, director of the National Historic Site in North Buxton, Ont., is ideally suited to tell their story. The site is a memorial to the Elgin Settlement, which was for many the last stop on the Underground Railroad for slaves fleeing from the United States.

The scope of his book is huge. The action criss-crosses Maryland and Washington, D.C., and ventures deeper into the south to Alabama and New Orleans. It sweeps

across the Atlantic to England, Ireland and Scotland, where abolitionists fervently campaign to raise funds for the Weems family cause.

Once freedom is bought, or taken, the final destinations are safe havens like Jamaica, for one daughter, or Canada. Several family members travel to black communities like the 81-hectare Dawn Settlement, a place for farming and education for self-sufficiency, created in 1841 in Chatham, Ont., by Josiah Henson, the former fugitive slave believed to be the model for Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's incendiary 1852 novel.

Figures like Harriet Tubman and the young lawyer Abraham Lincoln are introduced, adding authenticity to the historical canvas. Numerous Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic work unrelentingly for the cause of emancipation -- people like the wealthy American Lewis Tappan, who established the first credit-rating institution (today known as Dun and Bradstreet) to guarantee that the funds raised were secure, and the British couple Henry and Anna Richardson. The work of many black abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass, William Still and the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, is also highlighted.

This period in U.S. history is rife with paradox. Clearly, in some jurisdictions, not all men were considered equal, endowed with the unalienable rights to life, liberty and happiness!

Human life has an ugly dollar value. Southern gentility is evident, but so too is the chilling reality that a mother and her infant might be sold as "a package" (if they were lucky). We read of a four-year-old child and a two-year-old being used as security on a loan. One old woman in her 70s is valued at \$15 -- \$3 more than the cost of six silver spoons. Human life is on sale to the highest bidders. Yet, on these pages, we see many depictions of enormous courage, heroism and humanity.

It's easy to forget that *A Shadow on the Household* is a work of history, and not fiction. Often, the text has the heightened drama of a detective narrative, with villains and heroes, and people working against the clock, against unimaginable odds.

The reader is caught up in the action, asking questions like: Will 14-year-old Ann Maria Weems escape the auction block? Will her parents be able to buy her out of slavery in time? If she must become a fugitive, what strategy will she use? Will she be betrayed?

An interesting moral predicament surfaces, reminiscent of the central question of Tolstoy's novel *What Then Must We Do?* (1886), in which the author wrestles with the question of how much anyone could do to eradicate the abject poverty of the Russian masses of his day.

With more than \$5,000 raised in Britain and America to free the Weemses, the morality of expending years of effort on one family's cause is debated.

Thousands remained enslaved, and such "bailout efforts" resulted in prices for slaves being bolstered and slavers becoming even richer, knowing that for some, freedom has no price.

Structurally, a work of this nature, spanning so many decades and so many countries, can be confusing. The two genealogical charts at the beginning are indispensable for getting the characters right.

Still, careful reading is sometimes needed to keep track of the many players in this panoramic narration, and even at that, you might find yourself occasionally flipping back a few pages to connect names and situations.

However, the success of *A Shadow on the Household* is largely due to its readable prose and the abundance of archival material that authenticates this family's story. Its 12 chapters and epilogue are documented with copious endnotes, and there are more than nine pages of acknowledgements. This documentation should prove priceless to scholars conducting similar research.

Here, we have a timely, gripping and comprehensive historical investigation that will draw you in and make you think.

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