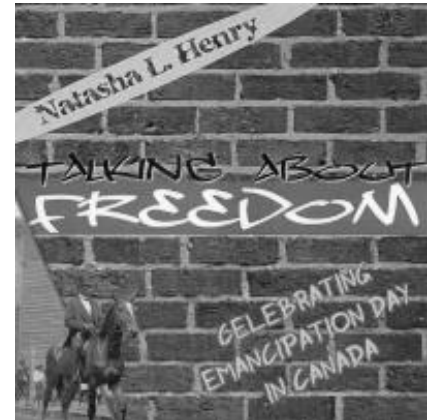


Talking About Freedom: Celebrating Emancipation Day in Canada

Natasha L. Henry

Dundurn Natural Heritage, Toronto, 2012

In this thorough examination of the August First celebration we know as Emancipation Day, Natasha Henry explores what freedom means and how its definition has changed in North America, not only for the slaves freed on August 1, 1834, but for all persons who have ever been oppressed or excluded. Henry illustrates the development of the celebration and how it has changed year to year as different periods in history called for the addressing of different social issues. Most importantly, by focusing on this historical event, she identifies the beginning and development of the African-Canadian cultural connection and the significant role of southwestern Ontario as a forerunner in the progress towards freedom.



Henry presents in detail how Emancipation Day events have been organized and carried out by focusing each chapter on a different aspect of the day, for example; the parades, the influence and participation of the Church, and the importance of organized sports and leisure activities. The substantial effort involved in running the events is documented with carefully selected photos, news articles and legal documents, from archives and Emancipation Day event organizers and participants alike. Henry stresses the fact that in the early years there was no funding or assistance from municipal or provincial governments, and the Emancipation Day tradition has endured simply because it was and has remained so important to those involved.

Early chapters of the book offer a macro view of the global history of slavery and an explanation of how Canada West (now Ontario) became a key area for the movement of African-American slaves who had been freed or escaped from slavery in the south. This migration began after the 1793 *Act to Limit Slavery* made any fugitive slave coming to Upper Canada a freed person. The result was a large Black population in a number of Ontario communities, many of which became “terminals” of the Underground Railway. The promise of freedom (although still very limited compared to today’s definition) made the then-Upper Canada area, as well as parts of Eastern Canada, a very attractive destination for Black families fleeing the United States and the West Indies.

As Henry illustrates through an immense amount of primary source research, many Black immigrants were able to become prominent members in all areas of society including real

estate, politics, law, military, education, religion, business, and medicine. In side bars throughout the text, Henry spotlights different families or individuals who left their mark in history simply because they were given the opportunity to succeed. One of these was Abraham Shadd from Delaware, who settled in Windsor and became the first Black politician in Canada in 1859 (49). Addie Aylestock was another, a Wellington county resident who was the first Black woman to be ordained in the BME church and as church minister in Canada (46).

Success stories like these attracted other Blacks to areas where communities had formed to support fugitives and help them start new lives. By the end of the 1850s, approximately 50,000 slaves had escaped and/or migrated to Canada where they were able to work, go to school and become prominent members of society. Blacks who had reached these levels of personal success in turn wanted to use their positions of power to reinforce abolitionist ideals and provide community resources for other fugitives. As Black populations grew, it became more and more imperative to address continuing issues of racial discrimination as well as to celebrate and expand the freedom they had found in Canada. August First festivities allowed for a public display of Black solidarity. They formed committees and then subcommittees, raising all of the funding necessary to put on Emancipation Day celebrations, which began popping up in communities all over Canada, the majority of which were in present day southwestern Ontario. Many related organizations came together to help fund the celebration as it expanded to include different racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Henry stresses that it would not have been easy for the pioneers of Emancipation Day, and that racial inequality and segregation would still act as a significant social and economic barrier, even in a country considered to be free.

As Henry's detailed chapters show, the Emancipation Day celebration was a chance for Blacks and other minorities to take part in organized activities that they were otherwise excluded from in society, despite their "freedom." Canada, and especially Ontario, became a leading example of the possibilities available not only to Blacks, but to people of any heritage, when given equal rights and opportunities. Today, 19 of the total 23 annual August First celebrations across Canada take place here in Ontario, and many of these festivities began in the 1830s, growing in size and success year after year, challenging discrimination in all forms. *Talking About Freedom* shows that the abolition of slavery in 1834 was just the beginning of a global movement towards full rights for people of African heritage, and that annual August First events have perpetuated the movement for 178 years. Emancipation Day was and still is an effective platform for raising awareness of the injustices suffered by African-Canadians, but it is also a demonstration of North American, and specifically Canadian, unity in the fight for human rights and freedom.



Sarina Ryan

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