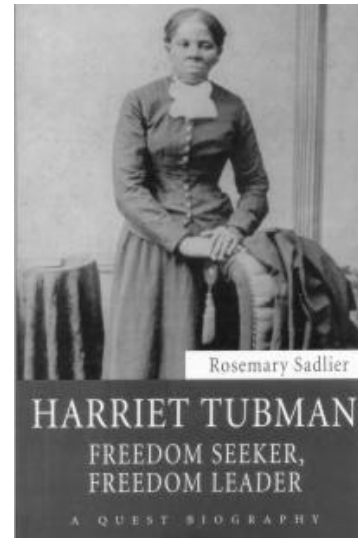


Harriet Tubman: Freedom Seeker, Freedom Leader – A Quest Biography Rosemary Sadlier Dundurn, Toronto, 2012

In *Harriet Tubman: Freedom Seeker, Freedom Leader – A Quest Biography*, Rosemary Sadlier, president of the Ontario Black Historical Society, takes on a topic greatly explored in the past. In her introduction, Sadlier explains that she wishes to deliver the Harriet Tubman story, both American and Canadian, to a wider audience, and by virtue of doing so, bring greater awareness to the history and impact of the Underground Railroad as well. She aims to bring new insights into Tubman’s life through talking with her descendants. Learning more about Tubman is clearly a project that Sadlier has a personal passion for as well.



Though many have heard of the Harriet Tubman story, reviewing *Freedom Seeker, Freedom Leader* provided an opportunity to delve into the substance of her life. As a reader, I share with you the details about the book which struck me most:

Harriet Tubman was an escaped slave who managed to bring over 300 people into Canada over more than 19 trips. Due to necessary secrecy, exact records could not be kept. Every time Tubman helped an enslaved person become a free person she was committing a crime. The reward of \$1,200 for her capture was higher than that for many “escaped” men because of the significant losses she had caused slave holders.

Tubman had many different routes on her “railroad”. Buggy wagons, ferries, even rafts were used to cross into Canada. Running away required that one have knowledge of where to go, physical stamina, and outdoor survival skills. This made her seem an unlikely figure to run, since she was only five feet tall and a woman. Also, Tubman had sudden sleeping attacks from an injury sustained as an enslaved youngster. These attacks might have deterred others, but not Harriet Tubman!

Often she conducted her escapes to start out on a Friday or Saturday night. Enslaved people did not have a stringent routine on Sundays because overseers had the day off, so their absence was less likely to be immediately noticed. Newspapers closed their businesses on

Sunday, and so were not open to print notices alerting the community. Tubman also travelled by night and rested by day to avoid detection.

At times her “passengers” doubted her ability to escort them north in safety. Who would believe a short plain woman could successfully get them to freedom? Tubman was known to pull out her lethal sharpened clam shells and threaten, “Live north or die here!” After a passenger wanted to return to his plantation her response was “If he was weak enough to give out, he’d be weak enough to betray us all, and all who had helped us, and do you think I’d let so many die for one coward man?”

Freedom seekers felt protected in Harriet Tubman’s company. She came to be referred to as “Moses” freeing her people, and earned the respect of whites working in the abolition movement. St. Catharines was a significant centre for the reception of Black people on the Underground Railroad, with an African-Canadian population of over 1,000 out of a total population of 7,000. Canada was not Harriet Tubman’s choice of residence, and she was quoted as saying, “We are in a foreign country among strangers. We would rather stay in our native land [USA] if we could be as free there as we are here.”

Financial assistance, in addition to what Harriet earned as a housekeeper, seamstress, nurse, teacher et cetera, came from many sources including the American Methodist Church, the American Missionary Society, and the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada.

This is a story of a very courageous woman, illiterate and small of stature, who diligently strove to free her people and bring them to safety. She worked all of her life in numerous jobs to support the journeys to bring Black people to a free land; some family, many strangers. *Harriet Tubman: Freedom Seeker, Freedom Leader - A Quest Biography*, is not the first book to be written about Harriet Tubman, nor is it likely to be the last, with such an iconic figure as its subject. She was an amazing woman who deserves to be celebrated as a historical figure.



Judy Book