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John Brown and the Tradition of Attacking Slavery at the Source

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Abstract

Shortly after his release from prison in 1858 for concealing two fugitive slaves in an apartment which he rented but in which he did not live, William Connelly, a reporter on one of the city newspapers, promised his mostly African American audience a thorough discussion of the workings of the Underground Railroad in and around Cincinnati. The announced lecture raised a few eyebrows concerned as many were that Connelly would divulge secrets about local efforts to undermine slavery that had been closely guarded for many years. But the lecture promised more than it delivered and in the end his audience left reassured that the clandestine activities in which many of them were involved would continue to be kept a secret a conclusion which only complicates the life of the historian interested in the workings of the system.

Connelly made a number of interesting observations, though, which help to shed light on the efforts in Cincinnati and elsewhere along the divide between slavery and freedom to undermine slavery at its source. From his argument it is clear he believed that slaves by taking the initiative to leave represented the principal threat to the continuation of slavery. Among

these efforts were the frequency of group escapes—which local observers usually referred to as stampedes—from adjacent southern counties and the speed with which they got to the safety of Canada. Abolitionists, who he implied were those who preached patience to the slave insisting the system could only be changed by peaceful means, found themselves at cross purposes with those involved with the UGRR who incited the slave “to war for his own liberty.” The majority of the conductors on the UGRR, he declared without providing any evidence, were born in the South. In fact, he insisted many non-slaveholding whites sympathized with the UGRR. Some became involved for the sheer excitement it brought to their lives; others because there was money to be made. “These conductors,” he argued, “hate Slavery, but generally have the vices of their Southern education, and are not always particularly moral.” As if his audience were familiar with these claims, he concluded by pointing to the fact that in some instances whites who had been imprisoned for their involvement returned to the work of the UGRR after their release. [Cincinnati *Gazette*, June 18, 1858]

There is no way to prove, for example, that Connelly’s profile of those who participated in enticing slaves to escape was accurate. After all, he failed to mention any involvement of African Americans. But by and large, his audience would have known from their own experiences and knowledge of the local movement that his assertions were not wide of the mark.

I plan to take a look at some of those we know—the subversives—who went south to storm what William L. Chaplin called the “castle of tyranny.” I don’t want to suggest we can ever get a full picture of all of those involved, but available records do make it possible for us to come to a fuller understanding of the many ways opponents attacked slavery in the South. It may be helpful to point to some of these sources. Local penitentiary records for such Border States as Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, and I would include Tennessee suggest that the assault was not insignificant. It is not always easy to determine if those who were caught were from out of state but some of the evidence points in that direction. Frequent instances of attacks on slavery from outside can be found in the newspapers published on the border between slavery and freedom. I think Stanley Harrold is right: those involved in these attacks were the forerunners of John Brown.