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# Harriet Tubman: the road to freedom

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**Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom**

Catherine Clinton

New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2004

272 pages, \$17.56 Softcover

Virtually everyone who has even a cursory knowledge of antebellum America and the Civil War period recognizes the name of Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people. This has proven especially true with the rise of the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s followed by a resurgence of feminism. As these movements generated a recovery of the repressed histories of both Afro-Americans and women, so also has emerged an interest in the heroic and almost mythological figure of Harriet Tubman. Plays have been performed, and a number of children's books have appeared on this famous liberator of slaves and leader of the Underground Railroad.

Why then, one might ask, have we not seen a genuinely scholarly work on such a pivotal figure until 2004? Often I asked myself this question due to my desire to include works about Tubman for my course on "Women in Christian History." Until Clinton's study, I spent more time looking for good materials on Tubman than reflecting upon this question. However, as I read this fine biography by Clinton the answer became immediately obvious to me: Tubman was illiterate; she could neither read nor write. Consequently, historians, themselves highly educated, have tended to spend their energies upon matters and persons who provide a wealth of written sources. Some of this, I am convinced, involves the unconscious prejudice of far too many historians that societal elites are the "makers and shakers" of history. In my own Lutheran denomination, for example, one finds numerous books on Luther and his thought with virtually little attention given to the grass-roots upsurge among the general populace both literate and illiterate. Finally, in the last few decades we have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the vital role played by the larger populace and the marginalised in creating history.

Of course, the illiterate woman slave, Harriet Tubman emerges as one such figure who is absolutely fascinating as a person while being also a paradigm of marginalization given her gender, her race and her slave status. Clinton has provided us with a real gift in her Tubman biography in a number of ways. First of all, as mentioned before, hers is the first solidly historical work on this most important figure. Secondly,

Clinton writes in a very engaging style rather than the ponderous meanderings of many other professional historians. Her solid expertise in the field of antebellum slavery provides the foundation for this fine biography. Clinton creates a solid background within the political and social culture of the times that allows the elusive Tubman to come alive. Above all, she uses other material, both written and oral, to recover the words and action of this larger than life conductor of the Underground Railroad and army officer during the Civil War. We come to know Tubman as courageous and resourceful, as a militant for full freedom and equality for blacks and women and as a powerful charismatic prophet and mystic at the very heart of the Christian tradition. Combined with this overall social background and the reconstruction of Tubman's personal journey is a superb and detailed reconstruction of the networks that fed Tubman materially and spiritually, including the well-known historical figures Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, William Seward, John Brown, Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth.

Thanks go to Dr. Catherine Clinton for a solid and inspirational biography of a most seminal figure in the history of American and Christian liberation.

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### **Pulpits of the Past: A Record of Closed Lutheran Churches in Saskatchewan – up to 2003**

Lois Knudson Munholland  
Strasbourg, SK: Three West Two South Books, 2004  
296 pages, \$30.00 Softcover

Unlike most of the books in my library, *Pulpits of the Past* has no immediate bearing upon Biblical research, theology, or the practice of ministry. Yet, when looking for some intriguing distraction from routine, I find myself drawn to it time and again. There is something about these chronicles of congregational life – and institutional death – that holds my fascination. It might be the pathos suggested by the necessarily brief summaries of those Prairie congregations, or the