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Milton C. Sernett. *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory,  
and History*

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**Milton C. Sernett. *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. pp. xii + 409.**

In the symbolic landscape of the early twenty-first century United States, Harriet Tubman looms large. The name and likeness of the escaped slave and hero of the Underground Railroad grace innumerable schoolhouses, street signs, and memorials around the country. Books about Tubman—particularly those aimed at a juvenile audience—find wide readership. A cottage industry has sprung up hawking Tubman merchandise and promoting tourism. Men and women of all ages and all races find in Tubman’s life a source of strength, encouragement, and inspiration. In *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*, Milton C. Sernett, Emeritus Professor of African-American Studies and History at Syracuse University, explores and historicizes the place of Tubman in the nation’s consciousness, tracing the halting and circuitous path by which an illiterate former slave achieved mythic status equal to that of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

Sernett’s is not a traditional biography. Though he weaves most of the salient facts and events of Tubman’s long life into his narrative—her Maryland childhood, her escape from slavery, her return trips to the South and her aid to other fugitives, her work with the Union Army during the Civil War, and her long residence in Auburn, New York—Sernett’s real intentions lay elsewhere. As Sernett explains it, his book is “primarily about the remembered Tubman—that is, about the myth that draws on the factual core [of her life] but is often in tension with it.”<sup>(3)</sup> Taking a lead from such works as David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001) and Michael Kammen’s *The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (1991), Sernett explores the myriad ways in which Tubman has been mobilized as an idea, a symbol, and a myth since her appearance on the national scene in the 1850s. Throughout, Sernett remains committed to the

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notion that Tubman's improbable ascension to the pantheon of American heroes tells us as much about shifts in the national mind as it does about Tubman herself.

The breadth and depth of Sernett's research is the book's most impressive feature. Newspaper accounts, abolitionist speeches, biographies, literature, fine art, film, theatrical productions, the built environment, and material culture all make an appearance here, and Sernett handles each with equal aplomb. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the existence of any piece of Tubmaniana that the author has not managed to excavate, interrogate, and present in this volume. In addition, the Duke University Press production boasts no fewer than seventy-nine black-and-white images within the text, as well as nine full-colour plates grouped in the centre of the book. This visual catalogue makes a fine complement to the text. Sernett successfully weaves together these disparate expressions of memorialization, producing a narrative that is, on the whole, coherent, satisfying, and convincing.

With one notable exception—an introductory chapter that explores the way in which Tubman's early years in Maryland have been presented in children's literature since the nineteenth century—Sernett's ten chapters are organized chronologically. Chapters two through five explore manifestations of the Tubman myth that circulated widely during her lifetime, including the guise in which she is best known, that of the "Moses" of the Underground Railroad. Chapter four, which analyzes the central role of Sarah Bradford, Tubman's most influential nineteenth-century biographer, in the construction and popularization of the Tubman myth, is particularly strong. The remaining five chapters offer insight into the many ways in which Tubman has been remembered and misremembered since her death in 1913.

Sernett's notion of the "mediated" Harriet Tubman represents the book's strongest conceptual contribution.<sup>(105)</sup> Largely due to her lifelong illiteracy, Sernett insists, the "real" Harriet Tubman has been rendered effectively invisible, her own voice largely stricken from the historical record. Tubman has long been trapped within concep-

tual frameworks forced upon her by others. The parade of individuals and groups who have felt compelled to tell her story have had free rein to tailor that story to their own particular needs and desires. Successive generations of elaboration, exaggeration, and outright fictionalization have conspired to obscure the real Tubman almost completely. Though Sernett correctly notes that all history is, to a certain extent, mediated by those who tell it, he argues that this phenomenon is particularly acute in Tubman's case, a fact that accounts for the remarkable flexibility of the Tubman myth. Precisely because we know relatively little about the real life of Harriet Tubman, she can be (and has been) all things to all people.

For an author who explores the symbolic landscape of Harriet Tubman, however, Sernett seems surprisingly uncomfortable with the prevalence of myth. History and mythology are often cast as oppositional, with Sernett's sympathies undeniably aligned with the former. Too often, the author lapses into mournful aside, expressing regret at the ease with which the historical Harriet Tubman has been obscured beneath layers of mythology. Even as he analyzes the Tubman myths, therefore, the author sometimes seems to bemoan their very existence. In his last chapter, Sernett notes with satisfaction the beginnings of a renewed interest in Harriet Tubman among professional historians. After generations of academic neglect, three new biographies of Tubman appeared in rapid succession in 2003 and 2004. Sernett's fondest hope, one senses, is that the historical Tubman presented in these works will begin to supplement, if not supplant, the mythic Tubman. The real Tubman, he insists in closing, has the potential to be every bit as powerful and inspiring as her fictionalized predecessors.

If recent trends are any indication, Milton Sernett's *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* will not be the last word in Harriet Tubman scholarship. Nor would its author want it to be. Sernett has written a highly valuable survey of the memory and mythology of Harriet Tubman, one that stands as a fitting complement to the spate of recent biographies. Though there is likely still work to be

done on Harriet Tubman—both the woman and the myth—Sernett's text stands as an impressive opening statement.

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