

Abolitionists of Ontario



Fugitives and Freemen

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Fugitive Slaves in Canada

A degree of attention has of late been directed to the condition of the Fugitive Slaves resident in Canada, but comparatively little information concerning them has reached the public. The presence in England of the Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward, who has been delegated by the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada to make the case of these Refugees more generally known, has caused a number of Gentlemen to form a Committee, for the purpose of raising a fund to afford them temporary relief on their arrival in Canada, from the scene of their bondage.

The entire number of Fugitives in Canada may be estimated at from thirty thousand to thirty-five thousand, of whom from three to five thousand have annually escaped since the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law. On their arrival at Toronto, and other places on the Canadian frontier, that is, along a boundary of some seven hundred miles, they are usually destitute of every thing, having generally fled stealthily, and without making much preparation for flight.

They undergo numerous privations on their painful and wearisome journey, being in constant peril by the way, not only through the Slave States, but through the Northern, or nominally free. At any point, if overtaken or discovered, or even suspected, they may be dragged before the

Courts, and, upon a most summary process, sent back to endure a bondage of which the ordinary rigours are always increased in the case of Fugitives, to operate as a warning to others. Hence, during their flight, they are in a constant state of suspense, fear, and excitement; and when they reach the Canadian frontier, usually fall into a condition of bodily and mental prostration, which renders them incapable of immediate efforts, and makes them objects of compassionate interest.

Being strangers, destitute of the commonest necessaries, and in some instances, suffering from temporary illness and over-fatigue, they require a helping hand. The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, and a Ladies' Society of Toronto, provide these Refugees with food, clothing, tools, or whatever they require, until they procure employment and can support themselves. This necessarily entails a very considerable expenditure; which these Societies are not in a position to meet to the extent to which their aid is needed.

It is not only an interesting fact, but one which should be emphatically dwelt upon, that the Refugee Fugitives require only temporary assistance. Labour of every kind is in great demand, and the Society being kept duly informed of the parties who are in want of labourers, they seldom fail to procure employment on advantageous terms. In no instance within the last year and a half has the Society been called upon to extend relief for more than six days, except in cases of sickness.

"Self-reliance is the True Road to Independence"

The fund sought to be raised is therefore not intended to be set aside to maintain able-bodied men in idleness for an indefinite period, but to enable the Canadian Society to respond to the large claims made upon it; to supply the more immediate and pressing demands of the Fugitives on their arrival, and until they have sufficiently recovered from fatigue to avail themselves of the advantages of abundant employment and food, good wages, cheap land, equal liberty, and impartial laws, and the privileges and rights which are common to other classes of Canadians.

Canada being the nearest of the British Colonies to the United States, (the stronghold of Slavery) it is of no small importance to encourage the improvement and elevation of these negro refugees, because of the influence, direct and reflex, which would thereby be brought to bear upon American Slavery.

The black settlers of Canada are nearly all of them fugitives from Slavery. Their improvement would be a triumphant rebuke to those who once held them as chattles, and to those who hold that the slave requires to be prepared for freedom, for they would exhibit the spectacle of a people just escaped from the galling yoke competing as free men, successfull and honourably with other labour.

Further, as there exist in Canada some of the prejudices against colour, and as the progressive improvement of the coloured population is gradually undermining and destroying this

feeling, their improvement affords a practical demonstration, not only of the equal capacity of the negro for self-advancement when he has a proper incentive to labour, but of the unreasonableness of the prejudice against him.

Lastly, his social elevation by his own industry and enterprise, is even now triumphantly proving the fitness of the slaves for freedom, the righteousness and the practicability of immediate emancipation, (insofar as the slaves themselves are concerned,) and the perfect capability of the negro to live and to advance under the same government, and upon terms of political and social equality with the Anglo-Saxon race, or any other of the one great human family.

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