
Nothing here but Indians and wild beasts'-Sophia Pooley's Cross-Border Story of Enslavement

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Abstract

Benjamin Drew's *The Refugee*, published in 1856, constitutes one of the most famous sources on fugitive slaves in Canada West. A white abolitionist from Boston, Drew traveled to fourteen places to interview black settlers, presenting over one hundred transcribed statements with the purpose to illuminate the living conditions of fugitives and liberated black people in Canada West. The highly diverse personal accounts of former slaves, fugitives, and free black persons offer a unique view of their lives although Drew's collection has been criticized for its abolitionist impetus. However, these accounts contain insights that were long suppressed in Canada's national narrative, speaking both to the country's supposed status as a safe haven for fugitives and a place of discrimination and prejudice for black people. Certainly one of the most unique stories is that given by Sophia Burthen Pooley, whom Drew spoke to in the Queen's Bush when she was "more than ninety years old." Pooley's story is important in several respects: she represents an unlikely female voice in the male-dominated narrative of slavery, fugitive slaves, and early black life in Canada. Most importantly, she becomes a victim of slavery on Canadian soil through her abduction and enslavement as a child, a fact happily ignored by Canadian historiography until the mid-twentieth century. Pooley was once owned by Six Nations Chief Joseph Brant and thus also speaks to slavery amongst First Nations and Blacks in the eighteenth century. Pooley's particular account challenges both the interviewer's and the readers' expectations, and places her at an early stage of black cross-border migration (forced and voluntary) that has complicated our understanding of the relations between "the slave Republic" and the so-called Canadian Promised Land.

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