

*A Daring Canadian  
Abolitionist*

**Fred Landon**

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*Title:* A Daring Canadian Abolitionist

*Date of first publication:* 1921

*Author:* Fred Landon (1880-1969)

*Date first posted:* 1st May, 2024

*Date last updated:* 1st May, 2024

Faded Page eBook #20240502

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# A DARING CANADIAN ABOLITIONIST

BY FRED LANDON, LIBRARIAN

LONDON, ONTARIO

Michigan History Magazine, Volume V, 1921

**T**here died in the city of Detroit, on October 27, 1897, a man whose services in the abolition movement and during the Civil War were of so self-sacrificing and daring a character that they gained for him the tributes not only of the abolition leaders but of Lincoln himself. Alexander Milton Ross, M.D., Canadian by birth, friend of Garibaldi, Bryant, Emerson, Greeley, and Lincoln, had a career that deserves to be better known. "Thy fifty years have not been idle ones, but crowded with good works," said Whittier in a letter to Dr. Ross, while Wendell Phillips declared, "No higher heroism, courage or tenacity of purpose was ever displayed than by you in your chivalric efforts to help the slaves to freedom." Reading the memoirs of Dr. Ross<sup>[1]</sup> one cannot but feel that here was a modern Knight of the Round Table who lived again the days when

"every morning brought a noble chance  
And every chance brought out a noble knight."

Early influences determined the course of this reformer. Born in the little Ontario town of Belleville on December 13, 1832, of Scottish parentage, he inherited a love of freedom which manifested itself even in his childhood. From his mother he heard of human slavery, and its horrors he learned from the fugitive Negroes who had found safety only when they reached the British Queen's dominions. When he was seventeen he went to New York and there worked as a compositor on the *Evening Post*. Bryant, who was then editor, became interested in him and had considerable influence on the young Canadian in those formative years. Greeley was another early acquaintance. At his suggestion young Ross spent a winter in Washington where he saw the workings of the Government, and saw, too, a good deal that stirred his feelings against slavery. The arrogance of the slave interests in Congress, joined with the spectacle of slave gangs passing the Capitol on their way south, intensified his hatred of the institution and clinched his determination to aid in freeing the

oppressed when the opportunity should come.

Returning to New York young Ross studied medicine. He was recalled to Canada by the illness and death of his mother and, then, returning to the United States, embarked upon his adventurous career as one of the most daring of slave abductors. Through Gerrit Smith he obtained full information regarding the workings of the “underground railroad” and also met the leading spirits of that organization in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. “I was initiated,” he says, “into a knowledge of the relief societies, and the methods adopted to circulate information among the slaves of the South; the routes to be taken by the slaves after reaching the so-called free States; the relief posts, where shelter and aid for transportation could be obtained.” With Gerrit Smith he journeyed to Ohio and Indiana gaining further information and making acquaintances among the “underground” workers.

Dr. Ross’s plan was to go right into the heart of the South and so convey to the slaves the information with regard to routes and friends that would enable them to make their way to Canada. He was not blind to the risk involved. To be detected would probably mean death for himself and danger for others, yet he did not shrink. After making the necessary arrangements with regard to a code for correspondence he crossed the Potomac in April, 1857, and went direct to Richmond to the home of one who was known to be a friend of the slaves. A few weeks were spent in quietly looking over the ground; then, having laid his plans, on a certain Sunday evening he met forty-two slaves at the home of a colored preacher and explained to them the routes from Virginia to Ohio and Pennsylvania, along with the names of friends who would assist them to safety. They were asked to circulate the information quietly among their friends and to meet a week later if they desired to make the break for freedom. On the following Sunday night nine young men declared they would gain their freedom or die in the attempt. To each was given a compass, a knife and a supply of food. The routes were again gone over, with directions to travel only by night and rest in some secure spot by day. A few months later Dr. Ross was rewarded by hearing that all nine had safely reached Canada. The wife of one of them also escaped six months later and joined her husband in Chatham, Ont.

Richmond was no place of safety after this piece of work had been accomplished, so Dr. Ross went the next day to Nashville, Tenn. Here he worked on exactly the same plan, gathering together the most intelligent Negroes, explaining the road to freedom and then asking those determined on the attempt to meet a week later. Seven men, unmarried, set forth for Canada and Ross sent letters to friends in Evansville, Cincinnati and Cleveland, to

keep a sharp lookout for “packages of hardware.” As he was leaving the post-office a small printed bill was thrust into his hand detailing the escape of thirteen slaves from Richmond and offering a reward of \$1,000 for their recovery. Dr. Ross very prudently decided to leave Nashville and accordingly went to Memphis. Here he found the newspapers full of the abduction of slaves at Nashville, offering a reward of \$1,200 for the apprehension of the abolitionist who was said to have aided the runaways. The description of the “abolitionist” was so accurate that Dr. Ross immediately left the hotel where he was staying, went to the home of a Negro where he remained hidden for six hours intending to take the night boat for St. Louis. But he did not leave alone for while he was in hiding he heard a conversation in the adjoining room that changed some of his plans. A woman was begging the Negro host to ask Dr. Ross to take her to Canada whither her husband had gone two years before. She had run away from her master because of cruelty, her back being still raw and seamed with the lash, and was even then a fugitive. Ross determined to help the woman and ordered her to dress in male attire so that she might pass as a valet. He himself had shaven his beard and changed his clothes so that the risk of detection was lessened, yet it was with beating heart that he set out for the wharf and not until it had moved out into the stream, after long delays, did he feel any relief. St. Louis was reached in safety, and from there he went to Chicago and then on to Detroit where the fugitive woman was hidden until an opportunity came to take her over the Detroit River in a small boat under cover of darkness. Her husband was located working in a barber shop in London, Ont., and within a few days they were reunited after a separation of two years.

December of 1857 saw Dr. Ross in New Orleans undertaking yet more dangerous efforts on behalf of the slaves. He had decided to make a journey through the whole of the slave South, scattering the seeds of knowledge of freedom everywhere and believing that the results would be worth all the risk. Accordingly, he went first from New Orleans to Vicksburg where he posed as a naturalist collecting birds. Every favorable opportunity was taken to talk to slaves and the slave owners unwittingly threw opportunity in his way by sending out slaves to assist him in his researches and also by allowing him to roam at will over their plantations. In this way he became acquainted with slaves who spread news of Canada all over the South. From Vicksburg Dr. Ross went to Selma and then to Columbus, Miss., where he had one of his most dangerous adventures. On his trips out from Columbus he was accompanied by a slave who had his master’s initials burned into his back. This man confided to Ross that he had determined to run away and asked advice. Ross encouraged him and gave him the necessary directions. Two or three days later, while seated at the supper table of the hotel, he suddenly

found himself the center of a group of slave-holders and angrily denounced as a “d——d abolitionist” who was assisting slaves to run away. In a twinkling he was manacled. For a moment his life seemed in danger but making the Masonic sign of distress brought a request from a member of the group that he be allowed to speak. His request that he be taken before a magistrate was granted and after a night spent in a filthy cell infested with rats and vermin he was placed on trial. A crowd had gathered and evidence was quickly given that the prisoner had gone out bird-hunting with a slave “Joe” who had failed to return. The epithet “negro thief” was warmly applauded by the crowd. It was a tense moment for Dr. Ross as the judge turned and asked him if he had anything to say, but just at this moment who should enter the court room but “Joe” himself, who explained that he had gone to see his brother but had been detained by spraining his ankle. The judge immediately ordered the release of Dr. Ross. Two years later, in Boston, the latter found “Joe” a waiter in the hotel. He had made his escape within a week after the court episode.

From Columbus Dr. Ross passed on to Iuka, then to Huntsville, Ala., and Augusta, Ga., actively circulating information about Canada among the slaves at each place. At Augusta he resumed his “bird-hunting” operations and inside of two months equipped and sent north a party of eleven slaves, all of whom reached Canada.

“No one, not actually engaged in similar work,” he says, “can clearly appreciate the extreme delicacy of my position. There was not a day, in fact scarcely an hour, that I did not live in expectation of exposure.”

Leaving Augusta Dr. Ross went to Charleston, S.C., then to Raleigh and there took the train for Washington, six months from the time he had landed in New Orleans. A few months later, on his way to Boston, Dr. Ross was having supper at Springfield, Mass., when he noticed an elderly man looking at him earnestly. A moment later the stranger sat down at the table and leaning over said in a whisper, “How is the hardware business?” It was John Brown, of Kansas, whom Ross had met once before this at Cleveland. That evening Brown outlined the campaign that he intended to begin in the mountains of Virginia to create a reign of terror among the slave-owners. He also announced that he planned to hold a convention at Chatham to effect organization for invading the slave States. He asked Dr. Ross to go to Richmond about the time the attack was planned and watch developments from there. Accordingly, as soon as Dr. Ross received word from Brown that the event was coming off he went to the Virginian capitol and was there when the raid took place. As the result showed that nothing could be done, and as the Virginians were in a dangerous mood, Ross returned to Washington. When sentence of death had

been pronounced upon Brown he attempted to see the condemned man but was refused by Governor Wise who ordered him out of Virginia.

“I have been in the presence of many men whom the world called great and distinguished, but never before or since have I met a greater or more remarkable man than Capt. John Brown.” This is the tribute of Ross to the old hero of Harper’s Ferry.

A few months after the curtain had been rung down on the Harper’s Ferry tragedy, Dr. Ross undertook yet another journey into the slave States, Kentucky being his field of labor this time. Here he succeeded in bringing out to liberty a man and woman who had been separated by the sale of the wife. The two fugitives were first united at Cincinnati and after a short stay there were placed in a freight car routed for Cleveland, being billed as one package of “hardware” and one package of “dry goods.” Dr. Ross met them at Cleveland and drove them in a closed carriage to the harbor where a schooner loading for Port Stanley offered the means of getting them to Canada. The next day they had reached the land of freedom.

“I led my two companions on shore and told them that they were now in a land where freedom was guaranteed to all. And we kneeled together on the soil of Canada and thanked the Almighty Father for his aid and protection.”

The fugitives were taken to London where work was secured for both of them and kind friends offered to give them assistance.

In a visit to several of the Western Ontario towns at this time Dr. Ross met no less than fifteen of the people whom he had assisted to freedom. All were industrious and making their own living.

The election of Lincoln and the outbreak of the Civil War made such services as those which Dr. Ross had been accomplishing for the slaves no longer possible. The freedom of the slave was henceforth to be an issue of the sword. But during the Civil War he rendered most valuable services to the Federal Government as a secret agent in Canada watching the operation of Confederate agents there. At the close of the Civil War he offered his services to Juarez in Mexico but the capture of Maximilian and the end of that phase of Mexican history rendered his services unnecessary and he returned to Canada, residing in the city of Toronto for a number of years. Here, after years of exciting adventure, he gave himself up to the study of Canadian natural history, making large collections of specimens and writing several books on the subject. He left Toronto in September, 1897, to go to Chicago to live with a daughter there and was visiting with his son, Dr. Norman G. Ross, 79 Bagg Street, Detroit, when death overtook him. He was then sixty-five years old.

A sketch of Alexander Milton Ross could scarcely conclude better than with the quotation of the lines addressed to him by John G. Whittier:

“For his steadfast strength and courage  
In a dark and evil time,  
When the Golden Rule was treason  
And to feed the hungry, crime.

For the poor slave’s hope and refuge,  
When the hound was on his track  
And saint and sinner, state and church,  
Joined hands to send him back.

Blessings upon him—What he did  
For each sad, suffering one,  
Chained, hunted, scourged and bleeding,  
Unto our Lord was done.”

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[\[1\]](#) *Recollections and Experiences of an Abolitionist*, 1873 and *Memoirs of a Reformer*, Toronto, 1893.



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *A Daring Canadian Abolitionist* by Fred Landon]