

JOSHUA MCCARTER SIMPSON

AWAY TO CANADA

Joshua McCarter Simpson (1820?-1876) was born in Windsor, Ohio. Although he was a free person, he was initially “bound out” and worked for a “hard master until twenty-one years old.” After his release, he attended Oberlin Collegiate Institute (now Oberlin College) from 1844 to 1848. He also published a collection of poems, *Original Anti-Slavery Songs* (1852), which was one of the first collections ever published by an African-American poet. In his introduction, he explained that these poems were sung at the informal gatherings that took place along the Underground Railroad and that they were written to the tune of popular minstrel songs in order to “kill [their] degrading influence.” The following song, written to the tune of Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susanna” (1848), was first published in Simpson’s collection. It was then reprinted in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, and a revised version appeared in *The Voice of the Fugitive*—the first black newspaper in Canada. It was also published in the January 1926 issue with the following preface by Fred Landon: “Slave property could never be secure as long as the Canadian provinces would admit and shelter runaways. The Fugitive Slave Law might be operative on one side of the Detroit river, but it did not apply on the other side of the river. Those constant references in slave songs to the crossing of Jordan may have more than a spiritual significance. Anyone who will examine the collection of negro songs used by the Fisk Jubilee Singers will be struck by the numerous references to the crossing of rivers, stealing through woods, facing travel difficulties of every kind. . . . In slave days these crude songs may have been one of the means by which knowledge of the land of freedom to the North was extended.”

I'm on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The dire effects of slavery
I can no longer stand.
My soul is vexed within me
To think that I'm a slave,
I've now resolved to strike the blow
For freedom or the grave.

O Righteous Father,
Wilt thou not pity me,
And aid me on to Canada,
Where coloured men are free?

I heard the Queen of England say
If we would all forsake
Our native land of slavery
And come across the Lake,
That she was standing on the shore
With arms extended wide
To give us all a peaceful home
Beyond the rolling tide.

Farewell, old master,
That is enough for me—
I'm going straight to Canada
Where coloured men are free.

I've served my master all my days
Without a dime's reward,
And now I'm forced to run away
To flee the lash abhorred.
The hounds are baying on my track—
The master's just behind,
Resolved that he will bring me back
Before I cross the line.

Farewell, old master,
Don't come after me,
I'm on my way to Canada
Where coloured men are free.

Grieve not, my wife, grieve not for me;
Oh, do not break my heart;
For nought but cruel slavery
Would cause me to depart.
If I should stay to quell your grief,
Your grief I would augment;
For no one knows the day that we
Asunder may be rent.

Oh, Susannah,
Don't you cry for me,
I'm going up to Canada
Where coloured men are free.