

WE WILL BE FREE: THE LIFE AND FAITH OF SOJOURNER TRUTH, by Nancy Koester, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023. 270 pages. \$29.99.

We Will Be Free starts with a short vignette about Sojourner Truth from the year 1865. Truth, already in her sixties, was in Washington D.C. contending with the state of American affairs following the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination. She was refused a ride on a streetcar, despite the fact that Lincoln had signed a bill into law forbidding exclusion from any car on account of race. Things escalated and the conductor shoved Truth against the door and dislocated her shoulder. After Truth was treated at the hospital, the police were called, and the conductor was arrested. The Freedmen's Bureau hired a lawyer for Truth and the case went to trial. The conductor was later fired. This was not the first time Truth had taken a white man to court and won, and it serves as a wonderful introduction to this historical figure who spent her life fighting for justice.

Sojourner Truth is one of those larger-than-life figures in American history. She is better known for her activism than her Christian faith, though the two cannot be separated. She was a Methodist preacher, an abolitionist, a women's rights activist, and promoter of temperance and prohibition.

When *We Will Be Free* crossed my desk, I will admit, I had my doubts. There are numerous biographies on Truth, ranging from those targeted to children all the way up to adults. Not to mention, Truth, who could not read or write, produced an autobiography with the help of Olive Gilbert, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Despite that book's age, it is still quite engaging. However, my doubts were unfounded. *We Will Be Free* is an

engaging biography, and a useful addition to the literature on Sojourner Truth. Even if you are familiar with Truth's life and legacy, it is worth reading.

In her Acknowledgements section, Koester writes of how she visited several places where Truth lived: a historian took her on a tour of Truth's probable escape from slavery; Koester saw the courthouse where Truth won custody of her son when she became the first woman in history to successfully sue a white man. I mention these details because a sense of place permeates the book in a way that is unusual in biographies and this sense of place is one of the strengths of this text.

The arrangement of the book is straightforward and traces Truth's life from birth to death. The first chapter also provides a helpful context for readers. Truth (who was given the name Isabella at birth) was born in New York in 1797, a time when slavery was still legal. Koester digs into the history of slavery in New York state including statistics and census data from the time period. She also gets into the complex history of emancipation, a process which lasted decades.

The narrative about Truth's life is engaging and well-written. The reader follows Truth through a number of trials and tribulations including her flight to freedom, her move to New York City, her involvement with a number of religious movements, and her engagement with a

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number of social reform movements. Through it, the reader gets a sense of Truth as a person, not just Truth the legend.

One of the most exciting sections of the book is chapter 4, entitled “The Kingdom of Matthias.” This chapter tells the story of Truth’s involvement in a fringe religious group led by a man who called himself the Prophet Matthias. The group was plagued by scandal (though Truth was not involved in any of the more unsavory aspects), and eventually it all fell apart. While the story is admittedly rather salacious, and fun to read, Koester handles it well. Koester also explores Truth’s associations with the Millerites (an apocalyptic group that believed the end of the world would come in 1843/1844), the Seventh Day Adventists, and Truth’s decision to join an abolitionist commune. Koester writes of these associations with care and respect.

Likely the topic to which most readers will be most drawn is Truth’s association with social reform movements, a topic which is addressed at length. Again, Koester creates a sense of place in the text describing the types of crowds and the dangers that Truth would have felt as she worked as a public speaker. The reader also learns of Truth’s relationships with other prominent activists of the day, and the reader gets a sense of Truth’s skills as an orator.

In addition to the biography, the book contains a number of images and an appendix which includes three different versions of Truth’s most famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?”

The book is part of a larger series put out by Eerdmans entitled the Library of Religious Biography Series (edited by Mark Noll, Kathryn Gin Lum, and Health W. Carter), which includes biographies on individuals such as Charles Finney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Billy Graham. The purpose of the series is to bring important American figures to life “without academic jargon,” and the books are “meant to be read and enjoyed as well as studied.” Indeed, this biography does fit in with the larger goal of the series. *We Will Be Free* is both readable and enjoyable. I would recommend the book to those who are interested in American history, women’s history, the history of reform movements, or those who enjoy a good biography of an incredibly interesting person.

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