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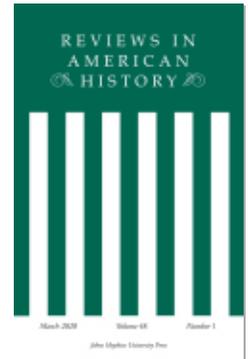
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THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WORLD OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Leslie M. Harris

David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018, xx + 888 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$37.50.

Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, xiv + 401 pp. Figures, appendix, notes, and index. \$29.95.

Frederick Douglass was among the most well-known figures in the nineteenth-century Euro-American world. His own writings—three autobiographies, a number of newspapers, voluminous lectures, editorials, and correspondence—as well as his thousands of miles of international travel as a lecturer against slavery and for racial equality and women’s rights, lectures he delivered right up until the last day of his life in 1895, made him without doubt the most well-known African American personage in the nineteenth century. In addition, as the subtitle of John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier’s recent book of photographs of Douglass states, he was the nineteenth century’s most-photographed American, surpassing even Abraham Lincoln. The body of photographs served as a visual representation of his political writings against racism, as well as the result of his own fascination with the new technology and photographers’ fascination with his visage.¹

Although Douglass’s fame remained high through the end of his life, the racist practices of the historical profession in the first half of the twentieth century dimmed his legacy outside of the black community and the relatively small number of whites who continued to turn to his life as an example against racism. In the 1950s, Philip Foner’s recovery of a large selection of Douglass’s written work in the four-volume *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* began to move Douglass back to the center of historical accounts of the anti-slavery movement at least, but only slowly.² In the 1960s, the recovery of the extent of political activism by the radical abolitionists was largely a segregated one, in which historians examined white and black activists separately, assigning intellectual heft to middle-class whites of the movement and largely ignoring the central role of free-born blacks and fugitives from slavery in shaping the rejection of colonization, the radicalism of immediatism, and calls for racial

and economic equality that were rooted both in their lived experience as well as their political and theological beliefs.

In this literature, blacks were objects of reform, rather than shapers of political movements, with the exception of Benjamin Quarles's *Black Abolitionists* (1969). Not coincidentally, Quarles's 1948 dissertation had been on Frederick Douglass, forming the basis of his 1968 Douglass biography. Quarles's work opened a path to what became by the 1980s two bodies of work on abolitionists, one on black activists and one on whites. The sole black abolitionist who most often appeared in accounts of white abolitionists was Douglass. But his central presence alongside white abolitionists in anti-slavery work was slight when compared to the attention given to William Lloyd Garrison and others.³

Still, changes in the historical profession did bring Douglass to the attention of academic historians: his 1845 *Narrative* was one of the few that was accorded legitimacy before the work of John Blassingame and others in reclaiming black writings as an unparalleled source of information on slavery.⁴ Waldo Martin's *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (1986) provided foundational work on his intellectual range, while William S. McFeely's *Frederick Douglass* (1991) was the most complete biography to date. Douglass's first narrative also became part of the literary canon of the nineteenth century, assigned to students and required reading for scholars; and Douglass himself became considered one of the most important literary figures of the time, his writings an important counterpoint to Harriet Beecher Stowe, and his leadership and public feuding with William Lloyd Garrison portrayed as the central example of the possibilities and fault lines in the radical abolitionists' struggle not only to end slavery but bring about racial equality as well. Indeed, Douglass's towering example and the accessibility of his public writings have overshadowed other black abolitionists of the time. Although white antebellum abolitionists criticized his desires for his own newspaper and some black activists were jealous of being in his shadow, Douglass's extensive paper trail has reinforced his legacy in a way that is unique for antebellum figures of African descent. The Frederick Douglass Papers, begun in 1973, has published twelve of a planned fifteen volumes, as well as Douglass's three narratives in separate volumes, a selection of his oratory, and his novel *The Heroic Slave*.⁵

David Blight's *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* and Leigh Fought's deeply analytical and no less important *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* advance our knowledge of the man and his world. Together, these works provide reams of new information about Douglass, his family and contemporaries, and the nineteenth century.

Blight's *Prophet* gives us the nineteenth century through Frederick Douglass's eyes. Antebellum southern slavery has often been interpreted by historians and others through Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, particularly in the post-World War Two era. Blight demonstrates better than any previous biographer the ways in which Douglass's life is a compelling way to tour much of the nineteenth-century history of the United States. Douglass's seemingly incessant travels through the U.S.—including to the south in the post-Civil War years—as well

as to Great Britain, Santo Domingo, Haiti, and to Egypt by way of continental Europe are one way in which we see the Euro-American world of that time.

Another set of worlds is of course that of politics. We could have no better guide than Douglass to the anti-slavery movement as lived beyond well-known cores of New York and Philadelphia, in small but significant towns like Rochester, New York, where the Douglass family lived for most of the pre-Civil War years; through his stumping life of anti-slavery lectures around the country; and then within the formal political world that opened up to blacks in the Civil War era.

A third route is Douglass's writing life: the worlds he creates in his autobiographies, from his first narrative map of his life of enslavement and escape; his deeper exploration of that map in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and the final autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), written by the elder statesman. But in addition to the autobiographer, there is Douglass the newspaper editor, trying and failing repeatedly and with frustration to make his newspapers financially solvent, but leaving for historians a fascinating set of sources to explore not only Douglass himself but also a range of black voices on slavery, racial equality, respectability, labor, citizenship and more. There is also Douglass the letter-writer. His voluminous correspondence, in a variety of registers, illuminates Douglass's private world of family and friends, a complex set of relationships that are largely hidden in his autobiographies and other published writings, but which the letters, Douglass's children's materials, and letters from others reveal. Most compelling in this regard is Blight's use of the Walter O. Evans Collection, a set of Douglass papers used for the first time in any Douglass biography, which enables *Prophet of Freedom* to stand apart by revealing Douglass as a father and grandfather in a way no other biography has.

The list of awards this book has already received is long, each honor well-deserved: Blight's *Prophet* is a stunning achievement, a beautifully written, passionate, and powerful work. The book is most successful when it links together Douglass's life and writings, juxtaposing his public and private lives more thoroughly than any previous biography. Blight breathes new life into the most familiar part of Douglass's life, his enslavement in Maryland and his escape, interweaving an analysis of the 1845 *Narrative* with the realities of Douglass's life in a seamless and fascinating exploration of the distinctions between the two. In these opening chapters, Blight establishes Douglass and the people who surround him as captivating individuals.

Douglass's movement from slavery to freedom and then to activist and statesman gives us unparalleled access to nineteenth-century life at all levels. Blight is at his best in describing Douglass's extensive U.S. and European speaking tours and detailing his complicated relationships to the white men and women of the radical abolitionist movement in the U.S. and Great Brit-

ain. Much ink has already been spilled on Douglass's relationships with Julia Griffiths and Otilie Assing, single, white European women who were his most intimate intellectual interlocutors. Blight adds only details, not greater clarity, on whether or not these relationships were intimate in other ways. More telling of the racial dynamics of the movement are the range of accusations of egotism, touchiness, and selfishness that Douglass faced from middle-class white activists who seemed unable to understand why he might be uncomfortable or distrustful in all-white settings on his first tour of England or his need to keep some of the money he was making on tour in order to support his family. Some of his white colleagues both disdained and feared him, describing him in racialized terms even as they recognized his extraordinary political and intellectual abilities and popularity on the anti-slavery circuit.

While Blight's account of Douglass's relationship with white abolitionists is well-detailed, his description of Douglass's black activist colleagues is much more limited. Certainly, Douglass's star shone brighter than theirs, not least because many whites thought him to be the most attractive, elegant, educated, and fascinating—if controversial—of the many black activists who emerged on the popular stage in the 1840s and 1850s to tell the tale of slavery and fight against racism and for citizenship for free blacks. Clearly, Blight thinks so too, but this leads him all too often to be dismissive of other black activists.

Douglass participated vigorously in the political conversations within black communities; his newspapers were meant as much to provide a voice and a stage for African Americans as to support the interracial radical abolitionist movement. Douglass's relationship with black institutions and black leaders is curiously under-developed in the book. It is entirely possible that his life in Rochester kept him removed from the larger black communities in Philadelphia, New York (where James McCune Smith, perhaps his closest black interlocutor, lived), and Boston.

We do get a clear sense that some members of his generation resented his high profile in the antebellum era. Douglass differed with Henry Highland Garnet over the 1850s resurgence of the push for emigration to Africa; and again post-Civil War over Douglass's support of President Grant's plan to annex Santo Domingo—the latter is summed up simply as a “public spat” in which black leaders are tearing each other down publicly, rather than a serious conversation between two thoughtful political activists about the meaning and potential path of American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere (pp. 543–45). And as many blacks began to doubt the utility of the Republican party for the achievement of equality, Douglass continued to argue for loyalty despite Republicans' disloyalty to southern blacks. But something more of the texture of his relationship to black communities and institutions is still needed. What does it mean that he gave his first lectures in Rochester's small AME church before he became internationally renowned? Blight does a great

job recovering the deep religiosity in Douglass's oratory; how do his speeches and beliefs compare to those of other black leaders? One missed opportunity is Douglass's ill-fated presidency of the black National Labor Union in the Reconstruction years, which is completely missing from the book. This was a signal moment in the development of class distinctions among blacks and also a transition for Douglass in reckoning with the limits of his leadership within the black community.

Similarly, and even more regrettably, Anna Murray Douglass remains comparatively in shadow in the book. Contrasting what we learn of Julia Griffiths and Ottilie Assing, both of whom leap off the page, Anna Douglass is most embodied in the text at her funeral. Blight appears puzzled by their marriage, as were many nineteenth-century middle-class whites—not least, perhaps, Julia Griffiths, and particularly Ottilie Assing, who repeatedly disparaged Anna and perhaps hoped that Douglass would leave Anna for her. Blight ultimately turns to twentieth-century fictional accounts to imagine Anna Douglass's inner world (pp. 518–19). And yet, at Anna's death, several pages bring forth potential details of political activism, friendships, and the ways in which she and Frederick might have connected despite the increasing gap between their life experiences (pp. 628–34). She was an anti-slavery activist in her own right in Rochester, hosting fugitive slaves (and this when Douglass was on the road more often than not), and keeping their household together, no small feat given Douglass's financial struggles and their hosting and support of multiple guests and family members. Indeed, theirs was not the only nineteenth-century marriage in which husband and wife may have only had comparable experiences together in their own home. Given Anna's role in his escape from slavery, as mother to his children, and in creating a home for him and his various political visitors (including Griffiths and Assing), is it so surprising that they stayed together?

This is not to say that Blight's attention to Douglass's private life is completely unsuccessful. *Prophet of Freedom* does more than any previous biography to illuminate Douglass's home and family life. The details of that life are difficult, perhaps not surprisingly. What does it mean to escape slavery, marry and bear children with a literal price on one's head? How does one recover from the loss of family during slavery, and then the loss of family time during freedom due to a commitment to political activism? One of Douglass's children, Annie, died while he was traveling abroad; his adult children did not manage to become financially independent; and six of his grandchildren died during his lifetime. Blight is skeptical of Douglass's final autobiographical claim that he viewed his life as one in which, Douglass states, "my joys have far exceeded my sorrows" (p. 622). But surely Douglass's movement from slavery into freedom, literacy, and political leadership can be counted as successes even amid the sorrows of nineteenth-century life and the difficulties

Douglass experienced in trying to live a fulfilling life despite white supremacy. Indeed, the touching descriptions of Douglass's time with his grandchildren at Cedar Hill indicate Douglass's ability to access deep wellsprings of joy, as does his final European tour with his second wife, Helen Pitts, an intellectual and political match for him in his final days.

It is possible that Blight deliberately treaded carefully around interpreting Anna Murray Douglass's life in order to allow Leigh Fought interpretive space for her book, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*. Fought's book begins strong, with a stunning opening chapter on the women in Douglass's extended family during slavery and with just enough detail on the white women who were also in his life during that time. Her interpretation of Frederick and Anna's decision to marry is also compelling, rooted in both working-class and late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century marriage ideals that were less about romance than about survival and shared values. These pragmatic ideals no doubt worked to keep them together through their escape from Maryland and the early years of their marriage in New Bedford and Lynn, Massachusetts, and then in Rochester, New York and beyond. She also notes that Douglass opposed the National Woman's Suffrage Association's support for divorce (p 202). Fought is more clear than Blight about the costs to Anna of the move from New Bedford, where Anna had a strong community, to Lynn, where community ties were less strong, to Rochester, where Anna was largely without a black community that would have understood her. As Frederick begins his extensive travels, Fought delineates the difficulties that being apart for long periods of time and Douglass's fugitive status had on their marriage, as opposed to simply assuming that Anna's lack of literacy would be at the heart of tensions in their relationship.

Fought is also strong in her description of their daughter Rosetta's education and the brief period of time she spent as a teacher living apart from the Douglass family. Fought provides fascinating detail into Rosetta's life as the child of two parents ambitious for their family and their race within a white society in upstate New York that resisted accepting Rosetta into its schools on an equal basis. Frederick and Anna seemed to have had more ambition for Rosetta's education than for that of their sons, sending her to private schools and to Oberlin for a year, whereas the boys attended public school and did not go on to college. Their commitment to educating Rosetta to be independent led her to seek teaching positions in Philadelphia and then in Salem, New Jersey, during the early Civil War years. Ultimately, the opportunity for the Douglass men to serve in the U.S. Army led to Rosetta's return home to Rochester to assist her mother. Rosetta's troubled marriage to Nathan Sprague perhaps resulted from her inability to live independently given her duties at home.

The black women in the Dorsey family in Philadelphia and in Perry Wilmer's family in Salem (Wilmer may have been Anna's brother), who allowed Rosetta

to board with them in turn, differed profoundly from the women she met in the Douglass household, including her own mother, in terms of their attitudes towards women's independence and family life. As with Blight's book, a deeper sense of how Frederick Douglass connected to these and other black women who seem to have differed from him in approaching questions of women's rights would have expanded the circle of women in Douglass's world. White women abolitionists played an admittedly important part in Douglass's career, but black women beyond Anna and Rosetta only exist episodically in the book, without explanation as to why: was this the reality of Douglass's life as he traveled throughout the U.S.? Jermain Wesley Loguen and his wife Caroline Storum Loguen are among the family's few black peers in upstate New York, but they are only briefly mentioned during the time when they might have been friends with Anna. Only much later, in a comparison with Rosetta's troubled marriage to Nathan Sprague, do we learn briefly about Caroline Storum's background as a wealthy biracial woman who married Loguen after his escape from slavery. Similarly, William Wells Brown's troubled marriage could have provided a deeper context for Frederick and Anna's marriage. In the final stage of Douglass's life, however, Fought provides a rich account of his professional relationship with Ida B. Wells and their political alliance and work together on the issue of lynching.

Fought's discussion of Douglass's relationship with white women abolitionists and women's rights activists expands our knowledge of the racism that could be troublingly endemic to both of these movements. Fought details the patronizing racism of white women in the abolitionist movement, as well as the fallout over the exclusion of women from the Fifteenth Amendment. Douglass's complex relationship to women's rights in particular is well-drawn and interwoven with his relationships to his wife and daughter. In addition to the close attention to Rosetta's education, Fought notes the inclusion of Anna on deeds and other financial records beginning in 1869, at a time when women throughout the nation struggled with the limits on their financial rights (p. 222). Finally and importantly, Fought provides the most detailed account of Helen Pitts, Douglass's second wife. Born to an abolitionist family and extraordinarily well-educated, Helen was disowned by them all except her sister Jennie, with whom she had attended Mount Holyoke, after her marriage to Douglass. Frederick's marriage to Helen also enflamed tensions between him and Rosetta's husband Nathan, ostensibly on behalf of his sister Louisa, who had taken care of the Douglass household at Cedar Hill during Anna's final illness. None of the children, however, claimed race as the cause for their disappointment in Frederick's remarriage. Certainly, Helen usurped any claim they might have had on the home, and she was to end up as the keeper of his legacy, preserving his papers and Cedar Hill.

It is not surprising that we have these two books on Frederick Douglass, especially as the question of leadership and the meaning of the relationship between intellectual and political work is in turmoil for this nation. If we hit a summit of visible racial equality with Barack Obama's presidency, not to mention a summit in terms of his eloquence, Frederick Douglass is a reminder that Obama was not the first black man to wield language, elegance, and trustworthiness in service of the higher ideals of this nation, even in the face of rejection by a substantial part of it. Both Blight's *Prophet of Justice* and Fought's *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* demonstrate the possibilities of such leadership, and the struggle to support it consistently.

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1. John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (2015).

2. Philip Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*. Volume I: Early Years, 1817–1849; Volume II: Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850–1860. Volume III: The Civil War, 1861–1865; Volume IV: Reconstruction and After (1950, 1952, 1955).

3. Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (1969) and *Frederick Douglass* (1948). Representative radical abolitionist histories that predominantly focused on whites include Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics* (1969); Ronald G. Walters, *The Anti-Slavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (1978) and Lawrence Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (1982). Examples of works that center black activism include Jane Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (1974); Richard Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830–1860* (1983); and C. Peter Ripley, et. al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (5 vols., 1985–1992). Manisha Sinha's *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (2016) provides the most thorough treatment of the interracial movement to date.

4. See for example Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956). On the recovery of slave narratives, John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (1977); Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (1992).

5. "About the Frederick Douglass Papers," at <https://frederickdouglass.infoset.io/about>, retrieved September 29, 2019.