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GIVE WOMEN FAIR PLAY

[An address delivered in Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1888]

FREDERICK DOUGLASS


The International Council of Women met in Washington, D.C., between 25 March and 1 April 1888 with representatives attending from the United States, France, England, Ireland, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and India. Divided into sixteen different sessions with some eighty speakers, the major activities of the convention occurred at Albaugh's Grand Opera House. Douglass sat on the platform during many of the sessions and occasionally made brief remarks to the audience. The text that follows is his principal address, delivered on 31 March 1888, at a morning meeting designated “Pioneers' Day.” Susan B. Anthony called that meeting to order. The audience observed a moment of silence in memory of Lucretia Mott and then sang John G. Whittier's hymn, “The Reformers.” The session's first speaker was Elizabeth Cady Stanton who reminisced about the pioneers in the woman suffrage movement. After John W. Hutchinson sang an original song, “Greeting to the Pioneers,” Anthony introduced Douglass. Lucy Stone, Henry B. Blackwell, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Robert Purvis, Mary Grew, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Samuel C. Pomeroy, and May Wright Sewall followed Douglass. When Anthony asked Amy Post to stand and described her relation to Douglass, he added his own brief words of praise for the old friend of Rochester days. The meeting concluded with Anthony reading letters received from those unable to attend the celebration and the singing of “Auld Lang Syne” by the audience. The Washington Post commented favorably on the meeting and called the
presence of Douglass and Purvis there “poetic justice,” on account of the
earlier aid of many women to the abolitionist movement. Susan B. Anthony to
Douglass, 6 February 1888, Douglass to [Caroline F.] Putnam, 16 April 1888,
General Correspondence File, reel 4, frames 712–21, 764–65, FD Papers,
DLC; Washington Post, 27 March, 1 April 1888; Washington National Repub-
lican, 1, 4 April 1888; Boston Woman’s Journal, 7 April 1888; Stanton et al.,

Mrs. President,1 Ladies and Gentlemen: I come to this platform with
unusual diffidence. Although I have long been identified with the Woman’s
Suffrage movement, and have often spoken in its favor, I am somewhat at a
loss to know what to say on this really great and uncommon occasion, where
so much has been said.

When I look around on this assembly, and see the many able and eloquent
women, full of the subject, ready to speak, and who only need the opportu-
nity to impress this audience with their views and thrill them with “thoughts
that breathe and words that burn,”2 I do not feel like taking up more than a
very small space of your time and attention, and shall not. I would not, even
now, presume to speak, but for the circumstance of my early connection
with the cause, and of having been called upon to do so by one whose voice
in this Council we all gladly obey.3 Men have very little business here as
speakers, anyhow; and if they come here at all they should take back benches
and wrap themselves in silence. For this is an International Council, not of
men, but of women, and woman should have all the say in it. This is her day
in court.

I do not mean to exalt the intellect of woman above man’s; but I have
heard many men speak on this subject, some of them the most eloquent to
be found anywhere in the country; and I believe no man, however gifted
with thought and speech, can voice the wrongs and present the demands of
women with the skill and effect, with the power and authority of woman
herself. The man struck is the man to cry out. Woman knows and feels her
wrongs as man cannot know and feel them, and she also knows as well as he
knows what measures are needed to redress them. I grant all the claims
at this point. She is her own best representative. We can neither speak for
her, nor vote for her, nor act for her, nor be responsible for her; and the
thing for men to do in the premises is just to get out of her way and give her the
full opportunity to exercise all the powers inherent in her individual
personality, and allow her to do it as she herself shall elect to exercise them.
Her right to be and to do is as full, complete and perfect as the right of any
man on earth. I say of her, as I say of the colored people, “Give her fair play,
and hands off.”

There was a time when, perhaps, we men could help a little. It was when
this woman suffrage cause was in its cradle, when it was not big enough to go
down, when it had to be taken by the arms of its mother from Seneca Falls,
N.Y., to Rochester, N.Y., for baptism. I then went along with it and offered
my services to help it, for then it needed help; but now it can afford to
dispense with me and all of my sex. Then its friends were few—now its friends are many. Then it was wrapped in obscurity—now it is lifted in sight of the whole civilized world, and people of all lands and languages give it their hearty support. Truly the change is vast and wonderful.

I thought my eye of faith was tolerably clear when I attended those meetings in Seneca Falls and Rochester, but it was far too dim to see at the end of forty years a result so imposing as this International Council, and to see yourself and Miss Anthony alive and active in its proceedings. Of course, I expected to be alive myself, and am not surprised to find myself so; for such is, perhaps, the presumption and arrogance common to my sex. Nevertheless, I am very glad to see you here to-day, and to see this grand assembly of women. I am glad that you are its president. No manufactured "boom," or political contrivance, such as make presidents elsewhere, has made you president of this assembly of women in this Capital of the Nation. You hold your place by reason of eminent fitness, and I give you joy that your life and labors in the cause of woman are thus crowned with honor and glory. This I say in spite of the warning given us by Miss Anthony's friend against mutual admiration.

There may be some well-meaning people in this audience who have never attended a woman suffrage convention, never heard a woman suffrage speech, never read a woman suffrage newspaper, and they may be surprised that those who speak here do not argue the question. It may be kind to tell them that our cause has passed beyond the period of arguing. The demand of the hour is not argument, but assertion, firm and inflexible assertion, assertion which has more than the force of an argument. If there is any argument to be made, it must be made by the opponents, not by the friends of woman suffrage. Let those who want argument examine the ground upon which they base their claim to the right to vote. They will find that there is not one reason, not one consideration, which they can urge in support of man's claim to vote, which does not equally support the right of woman to vote.

There is to-day, however, a special reason for omitting argument. This is the end of the fourth decade of the woman suffrage movement, a kind of jubilee which naturally turns our minds to the past.

Ever since this Council has been in session, my thoughts have been reverting to the past. I have been thinking more or less, of the scene presented forty years ago in the little Methodist Church at Seneca Falls, the manger in which this organized suffrage movement was born. It was a very small thing then. It was not then big enough to be abused, or loud enough to make itself heard outside, and only a few of those who saw it had any notion that the little thing would live. I have been thinking, too, of the strong conviction, the noble courage, the sublime faith in God and man it required at that time to get this suffrage ball in motion. The history of the world has given to us many sublime undertakings, but none more sublime than this. It was a great thing for the friends of peace to organize in opposition to war; it
was a great thing for the friends of temperance to organize against intemperance; it was a great thing for humane people to organize in opposition to slavery; but it was a much greater thing, in view of all the circumstances, for woman to organize herself in opposition to her exclusion from participation in government. The reason is obvious. War, intemperance and slavery are open, undisguised, palpable evils. The best feelings of human nature revolt at them. We could easily make men see the misery, the debasement, the terrible suffering caused by intemperance; we could easily make men see the desolation wrought by war and the hell-black horrors of chattel slavery; but the case was different in the movement for woman suffrage. Men took for granted all that could be said against intemperance, war and slavery. But no such advantage was found in the beginning of the cause of suffrage for women. On the contrary, everything in her condition was supposed to be lovely, just as it should be. She had no rights denied, no wrongs to redress. She herself had no suspicion but that all was going well with her. She floated along on the tide of life as her mother and grandmother had done before her, as in a dream of Paradise. Her wrongs, if she had any, were too occult to be seen, and too light to be felt. It required a daring voice and a determined hand to awake her from this delightful dream and call the nation to account for the rights and opportunities of which it was depriving her. It was well understood at the beginning that woman would not thank us for disturbing her by this call to duty, and it was known that man would denounce and scorn us for such a daring innovation upon the established order of things. But this did not appall or delay the word and work.

At this distance of time from that convention at Rochester, and in view of the present position of the question, it is hard to realize the moral courage it required to launch this unwelcome movement. Any man can be brave when the danger is over, go to the front door when there is no resistance, rejoice when the battle is fought and the victory is won; but it is not so easy to venture upon a field untried with one-half the whole world against you, as these women did.

Then who were we, for I count myself in, who did this thing? We were few in numbers, moderate in resources, and very little known in the world. The most that we had to commend us was a firm conviction that we were in the right, and a firm faith that the right must ultimately prevail. But the case was well considered. Let no man imagine that the step was taken recklessly and thoughtlessly. Mrs. Stanton had dwelt upon it at least six years before she declared it in the Rochester convention. Walking with her from the house of Joseph and Thankful Southwick, two of the noblest people I ever knew, Mrs. Stanton, with an earnestness that I shall never forget, unfolded her views on this woman question precisely as she has in this Council. This was six and forty years ago, and it was not until six years after, that she ventured to make her formal, pronounced and startling demand for the ballot. She had, as I have said, considered well, and knew something of what would be the cost of the reform she was inaugurating. She knew the ridicule, the
Give Women Fair Play

rivalry, the criticism and the bitter aspersions which she and her co-laborers would have to meet and to endure. But she saw more clearly than most of us that the vital point to be made prominent, and the one that included all others, was the ballot, and she bravely said the word. It was not only necessary to break the silence of woman and make her voice heard, but she must have a clear, palpable and comprehensive measure set before her, one worthy of her highest ambition and her best exertions, and hence the ballot was brought to the front.

There are few facts in my humble history to which I look back with more satisfaction than to the fact, recorded in the history of the Woman Suffrage Movement, that I was sufficiently enlightened at that early day, and when only a few years from slavery, to support your resolution for woman suffrage. I have done very little in this world in which to glory except this one act—and I certainly glory in that. When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of woman, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act.

In estimating the forces with which this suffrage cause had to contend during these forty years, the fact should be remembered that relations of long standing beget a character in the parties to them in favor of their continuance. Time itself is a conservative power—a very conservative power. One shake of his hoary locks will sometimes paralyze the hand and palsy the tongue of the reformer. The relation of man to woman has the advantage of all the ages behind it. Those who oppose a readjustment of this relation tell us that what is always was and always will be, world without end. But we have heard this old argument before, and if we live very long we shall hear it again. When any aged error shall be assailed, and any old abuse is to be removed, we shall meet this same old argument. Man has been so long the king and woman the subject—man has been so long accustomed to command and woman to obey—that both parties to the relation have been hardened into their respective places, and thus has been piled up a mountain of iron against woman’s enfranchisement.

The same thing confronted us in our conflicts with slavery. Long years ago Henry Clay said, on the floor of the American Senate, “I know there is a visionary dogma that man cannot hold property in man,” and, with a brow of defiance, he said, “That is property which the law makes property. Two hundred years of legislation has sanctioned and sanctified negro slaves as property.” But neither the power of time nor the might of legislation has been able to keep life in that stupendous barbarism.

The universality of man’s rule over woman is another factor in the resistance to the woman suffrage movement. We are pointed to the fact that men have not only always ruled over women, but that they do so rule everywhere, and they easily think that a thing that is done everywhere must be right. Though the fallacy of this reasoning is too transparent to need refutation, it still exerts a powerful influence. Even our good Brother Jasper yet believes,
with the ancient church, that the sun "do move," notwithstanding all the astronomers of the world are against him. One year ago I stood on the Pincio in Rome and witnessed the unveiling of the statue of Galileo. It was an imposing sight. At no time before had Rome been free enough to permit such a statue to be placed within her walls. It is now there, not with the approval of the Vatican. No priest took part in the ceremonies. It was all the work of laymen. One or two priests passed the statue with averted eyes, but the great truths of the solar system were not angry at the sight, and the same will be true when woman shall be clothed, as she will yet be, with all the rights of American citizenship.

All good causes are mutually helpful. The benefits accruing from this movement for the equal rights of woman are not confined or limited to woman only. They will be shared by every effort to promote the progress and welfare of mankind everywhere and in all ages. It was an example and a prophecy of what can be accomplished against strongly opposing forces, against time-hallowed abuses, against deeply entrenched error, against world-wide usage, and against the settled judgment of mankind, by a few earnest women, clad only in the panoply of truth, and determined to live and die in what they considered a righteous cause.

I do not forget the thoughtful remark of our president in the opening address to this International Council, reminding us of the incompleteness of our work. The remark was wise and timely. Nevertheless, no man can compare the present with the past, the obstacles that then opposed us, and the influences that now favor us, the meeting in the little Methodist chapel forty years ago, and the Council in this vast theatre to-day, without admitting that woman's cause is already a brilliant success. But, however this may be, and whatever the future may have in store for us, one thing is certain—this new revolution in human thought will never go backward. When a great truth once gets abroad in the world, no power on earth can imprison it, or prescribe its limits, or suppress it. It is bound to go on till it becomes the thought of the world. Such a truth is woman's right to equal liberty with man. She was born with it. It was hers before she comprehended it. It is inscribed upon all the powers and faculties of her soul, and no custom, law nor usage can ever destroy it. Now that it has got fairly fixed in the minds of the few, it is bound to become fixed in the minds of the many, and be supported at last by a great cloud of witnesses, which no man can number and no power can withstand.

The women who have thus far carried on this agitation have already embodied and illustrated Theodore Parker's three grades of human greatness. The first is greatness in executive and administrative ability; second, greatness in the ability to organize; and thirdly, in the ability to discover truth. Wherever these three elements of power are combined in any movement, there is a reasonable ground to believe in its final success; and these elements of power have been manifest in the women who have had the movement in hand from the beginning. They are seen in the order which
has characterized the proceedings of this Council. They are seen in the depth and comprehensiveness of the discussions had upon them in this Council. They are seen in the fervid eloquence and downright earnestness with which women advocate their cause. They are seen in the profound attention with which woman is heard in her own behalf. They are seen in the steady growth and onward march of the movement, and they will be seen in the final triumph of woman's cause, not only in this country, but throughout the world.


Mr. DOUGLASS—I only want to say that all that Miss Anthony has said of Amy Post, and more than all she said, and more than all that anybody can say in her praise, will not be too much. Her home, her house, her shelter, as it has been well said, has been the shelter of the poor castout. The Indian, the African, the despised of every class, have been with Isaac Post and Amy Post. They have found shelter with them, and I rejoice to see her here to-day, because she was the first in whose eyes I found sympathy and from whose lips I heard a word of cheer after I escaped the chains of slavery.

NOTES

1. The International Council of Women chose Elizabeth Cady Stanton to be the president of its Washington meeting. Susan B. Anthony however, presided over the Pioneers' Day session of the council and Douglass might be referring to either woman. Boston Woman's Journal, 14 April 1888.


3. Susan B. Anthony had written to Douglass the preceding month to invite him to speak at the Pioneers' Day ceremonies at the meeting of the International Council of Women and she called upon him at that session to speak. Susan B. Anthony to Douglass, 6 February 1888, reel 4, frames 712–21. General Correspondence File, FD Papers, DLC; Boston Woman's Journal, 14 April 1888.

4. Douglass attended the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, on 19–20 July 1848 and thirteen days later attended a second one held in Rochester, New York. NS, 28 July, 11 August 1848.

5. Born in South Danvers, Massachusetts, Joseph Southwick (1791–1861) was a prominent Quaker abolitionist and merchant. He resided for a time in Maine but settled in Boston around the early 1830s and participated in numerous business enterprises. He was one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 and a longtime officer of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In 1835, he and his wife Thankful Southwick gave refuge to British abolitionist George Thompson during the violent Boston riot. The Southwick home on Sumner Street was a frequent gathering place for Garrisonian abolitionists, including Douglass. Although Southwick was openly critical of disunionism, William Lloyd Garrison still spoke respectfully of him at his funeral. NASS, 2 February 1867; Douglass, Life and Times, 520; Garrison and Garrison, Garri-
6. The precise date of this meeting cannot be confirmed although both Douglass and Stanton recalled the incident in later years. In 1843 Stanton moved to Boston where her husband, Henry B. Stanton, had established a law practice the previous year. She was a frequent visitor at that time to the home of Joseph and Thankful Southwick, a Quaker couple long active in Boston Garrisonian circles. Stanton attended several antislavery meetings while in Boston and at one of them heard Douglass for the first time and soon after revealed to him in a conversation her desire to hold a women’s rights convention. Douglass, Life and Times, 521; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897 (1898; New York, 1971), 126: Alma Lutz, Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1815–1902 (New York: 1940), 38–39; Lois W. Banner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Woman’s Rights (Boston, 1980), 126.


9. In his travel diary, Douglass recalls attending the dedication of a granite monument to Galileo on 21 April 1887 on the Pincian Hill in Rome. He also noted that “there was neither prayer nor priests implored in its unveiling[,] for the monument is an honor to science and not to superstition.” FD Diary, reel 1, frame 37, FD Papers, DLC.

10. Douglass alludes to the welcoming address by Elizabeth Cady Stanton to the first formal session of the International Council of Women on the morning of 26 March 1888. Boston Woman’s Journal, 31 March 1888.


13. Amy Kirby Post (1802–89) was born in Jericho, New York and married Isaac Post, the husband of her deceased sister, in 1828. Originally Hicksite Quakers, the Posts left that denomination in 1845 because they felt their membership in it impeded their abolitionist activities. Three years later, Margaret Fox converted both to spiritualism. A mainstay of many Rochester reform efforts, Amy Post also served as a vice president of the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society in the 1850s and 1860s. Douglass first met the Posts during a lecture tour of the West in 1843 and their friendship was one of the factors that led him to choose Rochester as the site for his newspaper. Douglass to Amy Post, 28 April 1846, 28 October 1847, 22 April 1849, 26 January 1868, 15 January 1877, 14 July 1882, Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, NRU; Nancy A. Hewitt, Woman’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1872 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), 143, 184, 188, 190, 258; Douglass, Life and Times, 255–56, 293, 505; DAB, 15: 117.