

1991

Review Essay:An "African Prince, Majestic in His Wrath": William S. McFeely's Biography of Frederick Douglass

Willard B. Gatewood



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Gatewood, Willard B. (1991) "Review Essay:An "African Prince, Majestic in His Wrath": William S. McFeely's Biography of Frederick Douglass," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 70 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol70/iss2/7>

REVIEW ESSAY

An "African Prince, Majestic in His Wrath": William S. McFeely's Biography of Frederick Douglass

by WILLARD B. GATEWOOD

Frederick Douglass. By William S. McFeely. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991. xiii, 465 pp. Illustrations, maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, acknowledgments, index. \$24.95.)

On the evening of August 16, 1841, a large crowd gathered in the port city of Nantucket, Massachusetts, to attend an important anti-slavery meeting. Those unable to find places on the floor of the spacious square building known as the Big Shop filled the lofts; some even sat on the rafters. Those stranded on the outside of the building observed the proceedings through its windows. Among the abolitionist luminaries in attendance were William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Parker Pillsbury, and assorted members of the famous Coffin family. Also present was a runaway slave from Maryland's Eastern Shore whom William C. Coffin had invited to speak if, in the Quaker tradition, it seemed right to do so. Although the slave "felt strongly moved to speak," as he later recalled, "the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down."¹

Mustering his courage, Frederick Bailey, who had assumed the name Frederick Douglass after escaping to New England in 1839, rose from his seat to deliver his first major public speech. The moment was of such great importance and extraordinary emotion that Douglass later could not recall "a single connected sentence" of it. But those in the audience were profoundly impressed as they listened to this tall, handsome, twenty-three-year-old black man relate the story of his life in a way that confirmed

Willard B. Gatewood is professor, Department of History, University of Arkansas.

1. Michael Meyer, ed., *Frederick Douglass: The Narrative and Selected Writings* (New York, 1984), 120.

their fears and suspicions regarding the South's "peculiar institution." At the conclusion of Douglass's speech, the audience sprang to its feet amid a thunderous ovation. Few failed to recognize that a powerful and eloquent new voice had been raised in behalf of abolitionism. Marking the real entry of Frederick Douglass into the complex world of the anti-slavery crusade, the Nantucket speech constituted "a triumph so intense, so total, that he would spend his entire life seeking to sustain it" (p. 89). For more than a half century after 1841, he assumed many roles— fugitive, author, newspaper editor, civil servant, diplomat, and lecturer— but above all he was a reformer demanding racial equality in America.

The number of works devoted to Douglass and to diverse aspects of his long career is, by any standard, impressive, ranging from biographies, collections of his writings, articles, and poems, to pieces that defy classification. Douglass himself produced three autobiographies beginning with his brief, straight-forward *The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, published in 1845. Two others, ostensibly designed to bring his story up to date, appeared in 1855 and 1881 with an expanded edition of the latter published in 1892.² The three exhibit significant, if subtle, differences in how he told his story and how he made use of history. Among other primary sources relating to Douglass are several collections of his writings and speeches. The initial volumes in a comprehensive multivolume edition of *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, superbly edited by John Blassingame and others, indicate that upon its completion, the project will provide a rich documentary record of Douglass's life.³

In addition to his own autobiographies and several published selections of his papers, Douglass has been the subject of at least seven previous book-length biographies, including one by Frederic May Holland, an old abolitionist, which appeared in 1891, four years before Douglass's death.⁴ Two others by Charles

2. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855); Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Hartford, 1882); an updated version of the latter appeared under the title *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His early life as a slave, his escape from bondage, and his complete history to the present time* (Boston, 1893).

3. John W. Blassingame, et al., eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 3 vols. to date (New Haven, 1979-1985).

4. See Frederic May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (New York, 1891); Charles W. Chesnutt, *Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1899); Booker T.

W. Chesnutt, the African-American novelist, and by Booker T. Washington were published in 1899 and 1907 respectively. These early biographies focused on the public man and, like Douglass's autobiographies, projected a heroic, mythic image. Not until the publication of Benjamin Quarles's deeply researched and gracefully written biography of Douglass in 1948 was there a serious effort to probe beneath this image to discover the human being who, whatever his shortcomings, was indisputably one of the towering figures of nineteenth-century America.

The quest initiated by Quarles reaches its culmination in the exhaustively researched and beautifully written Frederick Douglass by William S. McFeely, the distinguished Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and biographer of Ulysses S. Grant and Oliver O. Howard. This engaging, provocative biography brings to Douglass's life and career a new level of sophisticated interpretation and analysis, especially psychological analysis. It depicts an imminently human Douglass possessing substantial flaws as well as abundant virtues. An eloquent, brave, and resourceful leader who championed numerous reforms in the name of human liberty and who triumphed over defeats and disillusionment as well as slavery itself, Douglass was vain, arrogant, ambitious (perhaps inordinately so), and quick-tempered. Some perceived him as incredibly haughty, self-possessed, and prone to take offense. For the whole of his life, according to McFeely, Douglass could never be satisfied with appearing as anything less than noble; he had to be "a man more admirable than other men" (p. 91).

Most of what is known about Douglass's early life as a slave is what he chose to reveal in his three unidentical autobiographies. Rather than repeating this information as most previous biographers have done, McFeely uses this data, augmented by that in Dickson Preston's excellent study, *Young Frederick Douglass*, and his own research as a basis for interpreting the forces, individuals; and relationships that shaped Douglass's character and

Washington, *Frederick Douglass* (Philadelphia, 1906; reprint ed., New York, 1968); Shirley Graham, *There Was Once a Slave: The Heroic Story of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1947); Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (Washington, 1948); Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1964); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1980). In 1950 Philip S. Foner published his four-volume *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1950).

personality in his formative years.⁵ The central presence in his early life was neither his father whose identity he never knew nor his mother, but rather his maternal grandmother, Betsy Bailey, an intelligent, physically powerful woman who was an expert in fishing and farming. The degree to which Douglass focused attention on the competence, dignified bearing, and accomplishment of his grandmother, to the exclusion of his grandfather and indeed of other men he knew as a slave, prompts McFeely to conclude that his relationship with Betsy Bailey resulted in his life-long reliance on women as confidants, companions, and sources of strength. Women rather than men, Douglass believed, "could be comprehended and counted on to be able" (p. 9).

That Douglass underwent so many different forms of the slave experience during the first twenty years of his life was critical to the development of his character and personality. Wrenched from a carefree existence in his grandmother's cabin and taken to Wye House, the splendid plantation estate of Colonel Edward Lloyd, he later was shunted back and forth between the rural world of Maryland's Eastern Shore and the urban environment of Baltimore. He was hired out first to Edward Covey, a "well known nigger breaker," on whose farm he experienced slavery in its most brutal form, and then to the more-lenient William Freeland. Douglass, in particular, lingered long and lovingly over the shadow cast on his childhood by Colonel Lloyd and Wye House. "During Douglass's lifetime of imagining (and attaining) a world of grace and elegance," McFeely writes, "Wye House was the lodestar, and in the richest of dreams, Edward Lloyd would have been the father for whom he was ever searching" (pp. 12-13).

No less intriguing was Douglass's relationship with various members of the Auld family. As a slave in the household of the Baltimore branch of the family, Douglass, a ceaselessly curious and unusually bright boy, was taught to read by his mistress. In Baltimore he acquired a copy of *The Columbian Orator* which, as McFeely notes, profoundly shaped his life as a writer and public speaker. Baltimore was, in many respects, a different world in which Douglass sharpened his intellectual powers, acquired skill

5. Dickson J. Preston, Young *Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore, 1980).

as a ship caulker, became powerfully drawn to religion, and demonstrated his physical prowess. Here he determined to make a free man of himself. For his freedom, indeed for his life, Douglass would for the remainder of his days be indebted to Thomas Auld, a white man whom he loved and whom he later had to remember to loathe. His vilification of the Aulds, as the embodiments of the evils of slavery in his speeches and writings, never completely disguised his complex and ambiguous relationship with the family.

In Baltimore Douglass met Anna Murray, a dark-complexioned free black woman, who assisted him in his escape north to freedom. Married in New York, Anna and Frederick Douglass had a long, though not a particularly happy, life together that produced five children. More than any previous biographer, McFeely has presented a significant dimension of the Douglass story by focusing on his wife, family, and domestic arrangements.

Anna Douglass, "a totally domestic woman," was a long-suffering wife who reared the children, supplemented the family income with her sewing, tended the garden, and tolerated Douglass's frequent and lengthy absences from home and his numerous female admirers. An illiterate who could never master either reading or writing, Anna Douglass could do little intellectually to assist her ambitious husband. As her health deteriorated, her smoldering resentment of her much-acclaimed and often-absent spouse grew. The Douglass children, especially the oldest, Rosetta, suffered from their parents' misshapen marriage. The Douglass offspring, who remained financially dependent on their father long after reaching their majority, scarcely lived up to his expectations.

When two years after Anna Douglass's death in 1882 Douglass married a white woman, Helen Pitts, McFeely argues that the marriage "seemed a public confirmation of his children's hitherto private grievance, their sense that they, being darker than he, were of less value" (p. 320). Douglass's second marriage did indeed create strains within the family, but some may wonder whether the interpretation of the children's private grievance may not be an example of the author's inclination to tease more from the evidence than is warranted.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this book, and one likely no doubt to raise some questions, is its excursion into the

treacherous zones of psychological analysis, especially in regard to themes of sexuality. The first overt sexual inference occurs early in the biography during a description of the brutality practiced by Edward Covey to whom Douglass was hired out for a time. In referring to Covey's savage attack on the youthful slave, McFeely concludes that Covey's behavior strongly suggested a "perversion of homosexual attraction into vicious cruelty" (p. 44). Pursuit of sexual themes is more explicit in the analysis of Douglass's relationship with a succession of white females, especially Julia Griffiths, an English reformer, and Ottilia Assing, a German writer. Unlike other biographers, McFeely boldly confronts and deals with the abundant prurient speculation, not always devoid of racism, about the sexual component of Douglass's relationship with white women. He admits that Douglass was a strikingly handsome man who possessed "undeniable sexuality" and even concedes that the path of some of his "friendships may have led to a bed," but he finds it difficult to imagine Douglass "springing upon it in wanton randiness" (p. 125). After all, Douglass was a dignified Victorian gentleman, and his white female confidants were intellectuals "living long before, in the corruption of Darwinism, Western science codified Africans as animals— often imagined as dangerous and compelling" (p. 125). Convinced that something other than his sexual attractiveness drew women to Douglass, McFeely suggests that it was the quest for his own liberation which urged women "on in their repressed quest for their own" (p. 142).

Before Douglass had an opportunity to establish relationships, platonic or otherwise, with Griffiths, Assing, and other white women, he had to be discovered by the New England abolitionists who would become his sponsors. As a runaway slave with a family, he settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. There, he first came to the notice of William Lloyd Garrison who profoundly impressed Douglass with his single-minded devotion to the abolition of slavery through moral suasion. For Garrison, Douglass was a new and highly important disciple whose commitment to the anti-slavery cause was as fervent and focused as his own. Shortly after his Nantucket speech in 1841, Douglass moved officially into Garrison's circle by becoming an agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. From that point on, throughout most of his life, Douglass seemed to go from one speaking tour to another, always proving himself a master manipulator of au-

diences. For the next twenty years he told the story of his life in vivid and eloquent language as one who was a living witness to the barbarities of slavery. Utilizing his well-developed deftness at mimicry and sarcasm, he focused on slavery as the seminal evil, one that bred the poison of racism and pervasively corrupted American society. Nor did he fail to apprise his audiences of the prejudices he encountered in the North. The severe beating that he received at the hands of an angry mob in 1843 in Pendleton, Indiana, was, perhaps, the most dramatic manifestation of such prejudice. Although his relationship with the Garrisonians, especially with Garrison himself, later became jagged and ultimately ended in estrangement, Douglass to the end of his life recognized his profound emotional and professional debt to the abolitionist leader he first heard speak in New Bedford.

In 1845, shortly after his first autobiography appeared, Douglass set sail for the British Isles where at the end of a twenty-month tour he had become a celebrity. His was a triumphal journey in which he walked with the "anti-everythingarians" from abolitionists to anti-vivisectionists, vegetarians, and temperance advocates. He poured out his scorn on the Free Church of Scotland and indeed all other churches which refused to exclude slaveholders from their communion. He joined Garrison in London, and the two made a start at forming the link that Karl Marx always thought was a natural one— between the working classes in Europe, Britain, and the American North, on the one hand, and laborers in the American South on the other. That they failed to follow through on establishing a true international working-class movement was, in McFeely's view, one of the great missed opportunities of Douglass's life and of the history of black Americans. Not the least of the reasons for this failure was Douglass's inclination to reach upward socially rather than outward to laborers.

When Frederick Douglass returned to the United States in 1847, he was "his own man," not merely because he had gained in self-regard and even an air of arrogance readily exposed by the smallest slight, but also because he was legally free. A campaign initiated by Ellen Richardson had raised enough money (\$1,250) to purchase his freedom from Thomas Auld. Another gift from English admirers enabled him to pursue a career as a newspaper editor, a decision he had made prior to his return from Great Britain. Moving his family to Rochester, New York,

Douglass began publication of the *North Star*, a venture in which Julia Griffiths played an important role until gossip about her relationship with Douglass forced her return to England. The launching of the *North Star*, which aroused strong objections from the Garrisonian abolitionists, gave Douglass what he most desired—his own place in public affairs free from oversight and control by white abolitionists. It marked the beginning of his separation from William Lloyd Garrison and the ideology that he represented. In Douglass's view, slavery was indisputably a moral evil, but he no longer thought that Americans could simply be brought to a state of morality that would cause the iniquitous institution to disappear. His determination to unite the disparate components of the anti-slavery movement led him to abandon the Garrisonian opposition to any approach to abolition through politics. Amid the factional struggles within abolitionist ranks during the decade prior to the Civil War, Douglass remained an independent voice, passionate and eloquent, in its condemnation of slavery. He had come to the conclusion that all available leverage must be used to bring about its demise.

For almost a dozen years before the raid on Harper's Ferry, Douglass had been acquainted with John Brown and was privy to the latter's various schemes, including his hopes of an insurrection. At no time did Douglass repudiate Brown's plans or even counsel caution, though he became convinced that the Harper's Ferry enterprise was doomed. He refused Brown's plea to join the attack on Harper's Ferry. When the failure of Brown's raid placed Douglass's life in danger, a previously planned trip to Britain assumed more urgency.

Less than a year after Douglass's return to the United States from another triumphal tour of Britain, the nation was plunged into a civil war. Convinced that it was important for black men to participate in the achievement of their own freedom, he recruited black troops for the Union army, including two of his sons. But McFeely observes that Douglass "displayed no eagerness to lug a rifle across a muddy or bloody field himself" (p. 217). His age and physical condition may well not have disqualified him for duty as a common soldier, but his sense of dignity and self-esteem did. He was keenly aware that white men with no more qualifications and considerably less stature than he regularly received military commissions. For a time in 1863 Douglass believed that he would become the first black commissioned

officer in the United States Army, a prospect that he relished. That the anticipated commission was never offered undoubtedly wounded Douglass's pride. The disappointment, however, left him free to employ his special talents in a wartime role no less significant than that played by others in military combat.

Throughout the war Douglass remained a fixture on the lecture circuit, pleading for a victory that not only would end slavery but also would guarantee equal treatment for African Americans. For him the military conflict should be nothing less than "an Abolition war" ending in "an Abolition peace," with "liberty for all, chains for none" (p. 231). No longer convinced that a morally persuaded citizenry would be adequate to bring about these desired changes, he had come to place responsibility for the demise of slavery and for ensuring the safety and welfare of the freed slaves upon the federal government. Until all racial barriers were removed and blacks were accorded full equality rather than mere charity, Douglass argued, they would be a crippled people, "grateful for crutches to hobble along with" (p. 242). To ensure the achievement of equality he took up the cause of obtaining the vote for blacks almost as soon as the sounds of battle ceased. Although freedmen possessed burdens that suffrage alone would not relieve, Douglass convinced himself that "all his people needed to do was stand tall and free, that everything could be cured by codification of the equality of which he himself seemed the perfect emblem" (p. 265).

Despite these setbacks, as well as mounting family problems, Douglass remained the great figurehead of racial advancement. In addition to ceaseless lecture tours, he campaigned for every Republican presidential candidate from Grant in 1872 to Benjamin Harrison twenty years later. His loyalty to the Republican party ultimately brought him a succession of federal appointments, first as marshal of the District of Columbia in 1877, a position that enabled him to purchase the spacious house in Anacostia known as "Cedar Hill," and later as recorder of deeds in the District and as minister to Haiti. The latter post involved him in complicated, but ultimately unsuccessful, maneuvers by various private interests and public officials to obtain a naval base at Haiti's Môle St. Nicolas. His resignation of the Haitian post in 1891 marked the end of his career as government official.

McFeely chronicles with great skill and sensitivity the changes that occurred in the aging Douglass, the fugitive slave who had

grown relatively wealthy and who resided in comfort at "Cedar Hill." Either unable or unwilling to see that his Republican party was abandoning the freedmen, Douglass tended to take positions on public issues that made him an accomplice, however unwittingly, to the betrayal of promises that ended Reconstruction. For decades he had maintained an excellent equilibrium between his own need to be with whites, not permitting race to determine the boundaries of his existence, and his commitment to the black community to which he belonged and whose interest he had defended so staunchly. But as McFeely suggests, Douglass somehow loosened his hold on that equilibrium in his postwar career. His ambiguous relationship with working-class blacks, prompted by his inability to think of himself as one of them and his unwillingness to accept any suggestion that they were apart from him, prevented him from providing the assistance they needed. Douglass not only condemned efforts to form either racially defined labor unions or political parties, but he also opposed the migration of southern blacks to Kansas, the Exodus, because he saw these Exodusters as a rejection of what his own story stood for. Relieved of slavery and protected by a benevolent government, blacks were expected to rise self-confidently into freedom and become respectable citizens as he himself had done. The failure of both his sense of compassion and his intellectual grasp of new problems facing his people meant that Douglass for the first time in his life found himself hissed and shouted down by black audiences. Increasingly, the "old man" found himself in an America grown strangely alien.

During the last few years of his remarkable life Douglass toured Egypt and Europe with his new wife and updated and revised his autobiography which did not sell well. He occasionally returned to the lecture circuit to deliver orations entitled "The Self-Made Man" and "Lessons of the Hour" and served in 1892 as the Haitian commissioner to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, an experience that demonstrated how far America had fallen short of fulfilling Douglass's persistent demands for a color-blind society committed to equality for people of all races and both sexes. Glimpses of the younger Frederick Douglass whom Elizabeth Cady Stanton remembered as a fearless "African prince, majestic in his wrath" were evident to the end of his life, especially when he was inspired by Ida B. Wells, a crusader against lynching and a representative of a new gener-

ation of African Americans to whom his torch had passed. On February 20, 1895, shortly after returning from a rally for women's rights, a cause that he had supported for more than a half century, Douglass died at "Cedar Hill."

In cutting through the haze of myth and legend that has come to surround Frederick Douglass, McFeely in no way robs his subject of his greatness. By illuminating the diverse causes to which Douglass dedicated his time and energies during his long career as a reformer and by coming to grips with the complex personality behind the public image, including traits that some considered less than admirable, this biography enhances rather than diminishes his stature. As tall as any of the giants of nineteenth-century America, Douglass stood as a proud assertion that neither race nor previous condition of servitude was relevant to his aspirations, either for himself or for others. The sensitive, compelling portrait drawn by McFeely goes far toward achieving the objective of the search for a Douglass shorn of myth begun almost a half century ago by Benjamin Quarles. McFeely's is a tour de force in the art of biography.