

**STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA**

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 1867 | Number 2 (1867)pps. 858-862

Fred Douglass

Sanford W. Huff

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

Recommended Citation

The Annals of Iowa, 5(2) (Apr. 1867): 858-862

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

FRED DOUGLASS.

FRED DOUGLASS visited Iowa in March, and lectured at several points in the State. We saw and heard him at Iowa City. His subject—"Sources of danger to the Republic." Respecting the positions taken and arguments used, in the discussion of this subject, we shall make no comment. His audience gave them, we suppose, different degrees of endorsement, according to the colors of the political glasses through which they were examined. But whatever of dissent, if any may have existed, none whatever was visibly manifested. The large audience sat for upwards of two hours in silent, earnest attention, and heard him through.

The same audience has listened, during the lecture course of the season, to several of the great talents of the land—Abbott, Tilton, Greeley, Anna Dickinson, Gough—and never before with more rapt attention than to this dusky orator.

There was evidently a shade of disappointment, upon his first appearance, with the many hundreds who had never before seen him, but who had for so many years been familiar with the sound of his great name. For there is nothing in the presence of Douglass to indicate, or even lead to a suspicion of great ability. A mulatto—tall, thin, with a decidedly negro physiognomy; softened, it is true, in outline, by the absence of the marked flatness of nose and protuberance of lip, peculiar to that race—a softening due to the Caucasian element of structure in those salient points of feature. A mild eye, that expresses nothing—a sloping, narrow forehead—either narrow, or made to appear so, by the peculiarly abundant growth of hair over the temples. He is an old man now, and his step and look, indicate him old beyond his years. In his face he wears a grave and honest expression, that leads to ready confidence in his integrity. In the days of his prime and slavery, that face, with its look of candor and truthfulness, should have rendered the bidding brisk around the auction block, by those desiring domestic or personal servants. In the days of his freedom and asserted

manhood, it is a ready passport to the heart of his hearers, as an index of the genuineness of his expressed convictions. His speech is slow—in the beginning of his discourse, very slow—halting at times, as if to bring up and marshal in appropriate place some laggard thought that had strayed out of column in the forward march of his thoughts. At first the listener tires of waiting for the slow development of the argument—but gradually, as he warms over his topic, the current of his speech grows more steady and animated, and as he passes from point to point, and there is found no failure at any, in bringing out its prominent idea, clear, unequivocal, and cogently, his deliberation of style, is soon forgotten in the interest felt in the subject, and unconsciously accepted as in harmony with the calm current of his thoughts. His voice, a clear, heavy bass, is seldom very loud, but all the time full, round, even and distinct. His language, when once he has entered earnestly upon his subject, flows smoothly and evenly; never hesitating for a word—never repeating a sentence from forgetfulness, or in the vain attempt of improving the first impression. He speaks without memoranda or notes to guide him.

The disappointment felt at first sight of him, is natural, from the conditions under which he is received; for the fame of Fred Douglass, has rung through the land for many years, sounded from metropolitan points. New York, Washington, Boston and Philadelphia, have furnished the forum for his great efforts; and vast and intelligent audiences at those centres of culture, have shouted the plaudits of his greatness, until they have again and again been heard across the continent. This heralded greatness has led to the expectance of the look of greatness in the person. Instead, there stands before the audience a simple, plain, respectable old "gentleman of color," with the expected indications of great abilities wanting. The indefinable look and air of intellectuality, with which imagination had invested him—with which it invests all our unseen giants—is wanting. The look is inexpressive; the eye gives forth no lights which disclose the

great calm soul within; no exponent lines of thought, fullness, or power of will, are penciled upon the face; in short, he does not meet our ideal—"is not what fancy painted him."

We are disappointed, and wonder in what lies the secret of this mans surprising influence—in what, the magic power that has enchained the attention of the tens of thousands that have listened to him, and has given him his wide renown in the past, and which retains him still in the ranks beside the great and eloquent of the country. But while the query is still revolving in our mind, we find ourselves carried along with the speaker, and absorbed with him in his subject—very soon forgetful of the color or quality of the man, or his style of oratory, in the interest which we feel in the subject which he presents—forgetting the manner of presentation in the matter presented—thus yielding a tacit endorsement to the high appreciation of his eulogists, whose judgments we were just about to question.

Douglass is not an orator, in the accepted, popular signification of the word. We have not recently listened to a speaker of any celebrity, who has less claim to it. He possesses, not in any high degree, any single rare gift of a great orator. An explanation of his remarkable success before the people, may be found, we think, in a combination of a number of excellent minor qualities, together with the favorable conditions under which those qualities have been practically brought to bear on the public mind. The simplicity of his method, and the clearness with which he presents his thoughts, direct, pertinent, and free from any shade of ambiguity, without any effort at fine, high talk—is admirable. The earnest words, but still more earnest and eloquent feeling with which he presents his subject, is telling in its effect upon the sensibilities of the audience. Then again, there is an eloquence that speaks directly to the heart, in the manifestation of a calm, determined soul, devoted to a single cause, and bending all its energies, and exhausting its best powers in its advocacy.

There is also the charm of bravery, which tells with

prodigious effect for its possessor, in a good cause. Of this quality, is our sable subject possessed in an eminent degree. Witness the boldness with which he has spoken for his cause, whenever and wherever duty seemed to require—through evil as well as good report—never shrinking from the line of duty, as he understood it—never hesitating to raise his voice for his oppressed race, either amid the tumult of jeers or the howls of malice.

And again, much is due to the *cause*, which, for half a lifetime, he has represented. To it, he is deeply indebted for his fame and influence—the cause of the oppressed—the cause of human rights, and human nature. Eloquence, is said by mental analysts, to belong essentially to the subject and the occasion of presentation. Of such a subject—one which strikes a chord reaching direct to the finer and holier sensibilities of the soul, whatever the defences of policy or expediency with which it may be hedged—has it been Douglass' mission to present to this generation—giving a powerful emphasis, and burning with lasting effect into the hearts of men, his simple, earnest, truthful words.

Lastly, his entire mastery of the *facts* of his subject, has always given him great weight. He is strictly a man of facts—plain, practical, concrete. Imagery—poetry—he has none; but carries his audience, by convincing them, if not of the practicability of his plans, at least of the justice of his cause and the sincerity of his motives. Years ago, when he spoke of slavery, and the quality of that condition, he “knew the things whereof he affirmed”—had seen it, had felt it, had his subject by heart, bore the marks of it on his person. Latterly, as he has, by his reading and intercourse with men, grown in intelligence and widened in understanding, his early habit of the particularization of facts, has been valuable in characterizing his style; and the sound sense which has kept him within the limit of his peculiar vein of knowledge which he knows so thoroughly, in the selection of his topics for public efforts, has done him good service.

Such is Fred Douglass, as we understand and interpret him

by the light of his life-labor, and by a study of him as he stood before us at the maximum of his matured intellectual strength. Long may he live to enjoy his newly acquired citizenship.

IOWA TERRITORIAL BILL—CALHOUN AND STRATEGY.

The following statement, made by a correspondent of the *St. Louis Republican*, develops a work of strategy in securing the passage of the bill organizing the territory of Iowa. Our historical reading had, a long time ago, convinced us that but few important events have transpired, in which women, or a woman, was not in some way concerned, either as instigator or agent. Since the day, when Homer sung the exploits of his heroes around the walls of Troy, of which the fair Helen of Sparta, was the subject of contest—to that day in September, 1864, when the no less fair (we presume) Quakeress, Rebecca Wright, helped Gen. Phil. Sheridan to win the battle of Winchester—history is replete with her participation in the poetry and tragedy of the worlds busy life; but we should never have surmised that so prosaical and cool a business transaction as the legislation on a territorial bill, should require the aid, or furnish the incentive for her dexterous tact or delicate *finesse*. But here is the history of the transaction as given by the *Republican's* correspondent.

“The Hon. Geo. W. Jones, or the General as he is more familiarly known at home, was and is a great ladies' man. Knowing the opposition to his territorial bill on the part of Mr. Calhoun, and that a speech from distinguished statesman would defeat it, he set his wits to work to procure the absence of Mr. C. when the bill would be called up. To accomplish this he paid very marked attention to a lady friend of Mr. Calhoun then at the capital, and was so kind, polite and entertaining, that she feeling under obligations to him for the same, inadvertently expressed the hope that circumstances might throw it in her way to render him some service. This was just what the General wanted, and he immediately said, ‘you can, if you will, do me the greatest favor in the world,’ and went on to explain the ‘Territorial bill,’ and the opposition of Mr. Calhoun thereto. ‘Now,’ said the General, ‘It will come up on such a day, and when I send you my card, call out Mr. C., and on some pretext keep him out an hour or two.’ She consented, and carried out the arrangement, and during that absence the bill was passed, and Mr. Calhoun did not have an opportunity to oppose.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.