

1-1-1980

Frederick Douglass: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Benjamin Quarles

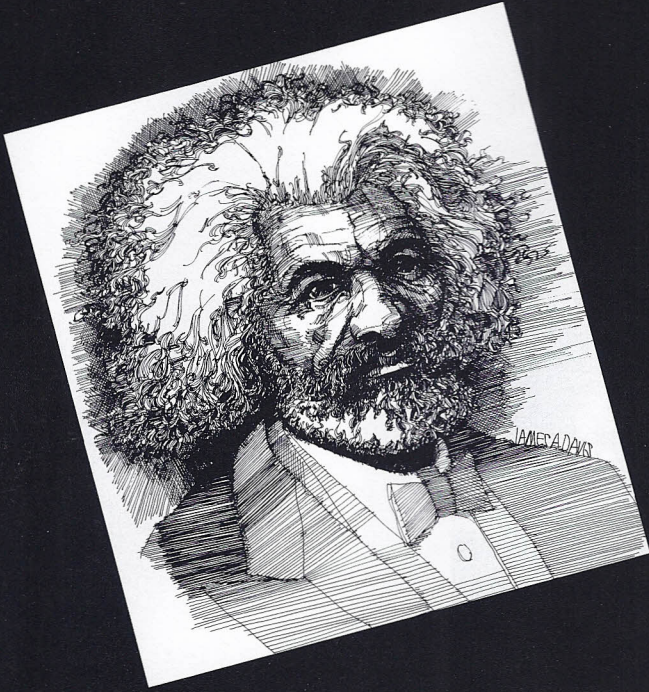
Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Quarles, Benjamin (1980) "Frederick Douglass: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *New Directions*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol7/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.



Frederick Douglass

Historical & Contemporary Perspectives

By Benjamin Quarles

This essay will focus on two themes — Frederick Douglass in his era and as he is viewed in our day. These two categories are not mutually exclusive in the case of Douglass. He belongs in the class of those timeless figures in whom the past and the present are often indistinguishable. Hence even as we view Douglass from this or that perspective, we are—willy-nilly—showing him to be a hardy perennial, a figure transcending a given hour, ascending beyond a given day.

In focussing attention on Douglass, we are simply keeping abreast of the times.

A student of American politics once made the observation that if one proposed to run for public office in this country, the first thing he or she had to do was to “get right with Abraham Lincoln.” Like Lincoln, if to a lesser and somewhat different degree, Douglass has taken on the proportions of a figure with whom we “must get right with.”

Note, for example, the honors showered upon him in recent years:

In 1962, Cedar Hill, the Anacostia Heights home of Douglass, was purchased by the federal government and designated as a national shrine under the National Parks Service.

Three years later, a bridge in the District of Columbia was dedicated as the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge, a symbolic gesture to one who was a bridge-builder in human relations.

On February 14, 1967, the U.S. Post Office issued a 25-cent Frederick Douglass stamp in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of his birth.

In 1972, the Frederick Douglass Papers were transferred from the Anacostia Heights home to the Library of Congress.

In viewing Douglass as he appeared to his contemporaries, we might begin by quoting from a *Washington Post* edito-

rial at the time of his death. “He died,” said the paper, “in an epoch which he did more than any other to create.” If this evaluation seems somewhat overblown, it nevertheless provides a clue to the image of Douglass in the mind of his 19th century contemporaries. To his legion of admirers [of both races] he was a figure of heroic proportions; to his detractors [of both races] he was a force that had to be taken into account.

From the mid-1840s, when the autobiography “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” was published, its author became an increasingly conspicuous public figure. Down to the Civil War, however, there was one section of the country, the South, which studiously took no notice of his existence. During slavery, the white Southerners had to ignore such Blacks as Douglass. To have done otherwise would have been to unhinge a cardinal tenet of Southern faith—the docile and contented slave and the shiftless and improvident free Black.

It is instructive to note that in Ira Berlin’s recently published full-length study of free Blacks in the antebellum South, “Slaves Without Masters,” there is only one reference, a minor one, to Douglass.

In the North, those whites who had opinions about Douglass were less reticent in expressing them. The most denunciatory of these appraisals came during the antebellum period when Douglass thundered against slavery with all the literary and oratorical power he could muster. Abolitionists as a class were accustomed to bitter verbal attacks; Black abolitionists were exposed to double jeopardy.

Whites who were pro-Douglass included those who opposed slavery and those who viewed him as a Black prototype of a Horatio Alger hero, a case study in American upward mobility and all the more dramatic because its central figure was non-white. White abolitionists showered Douglass with praises. N.P. Rogers, editor of an antislavery weekly, called him “an extraordinary man,” and said that the South was lucky he had

escaped. “It would not have been safe for her if he had remained . . . a year or two longer.”

Law Olmsted, who traveled extensively in the slave states, wrote of Douglass in 1854: “All the statesmanship and kind mastership of the South has done less, in fifty years, to elevate and dignify the African race, than he in ten.”

Favorable white appraisals of Douglass after the Civil War tended to focus on his character and his enduring significance. Among those who expressed themselves on his personal qualities was Mark Twain. In a letter to President-elect James A. Garfield on January 12, 1881, urging him to reappoint Douglass as Marshal of the District of Columbia, Twain wrote:

“I offer this petition with peculiar pleasure and strong desire because I honor this man’s high and blemishless character and so admire his brave, long crusade for the liberties and elevation of his race.”

‘If a man’s capacity be measured by what he has achieved, Frederick Douglass must be ranked among the great men of a great day...’

A somewhat broader view was expressed by Governor Theodore Roosevelt when he went to Rochester, New York, on June 10, 1899, to speak at the unveiling of a monument to Douglass.

“I am proud,” said Roosevelt, “to be able to do my part in paying respect to a man who was a worthy representative of his race because he was a worthy representative of the American nation.” An appraisal even more inclusive was voiced by Albion W. Tourgée, judge and author and a personal friend. “If a man’s capacity be measured by what he has achieved, Frederick Douglass must be ranked among the great men of a great day; if by the obstacles overcome, he

must be accounted among the greatest of any time."

As was the case with whites who held opinions about Douglass, his contemporary Black appraisers were divided into detractors and admirers. These Black critics of Douglass included his competitors for leadership. In the Black community, power was so limited that there was bound to be a bitter struggle for the few openings at the top. Hence Douglass's prominence made him a natural target for ambitious Blacks. As one writer put it, there was "a certain set of Negroes who believe the only way to fame or favor is to 'criticize Fred Douglass.'"

Some Blacks took issue with Douglass's viewpoints. John Edward Bruce denounced Douglass for his advocacy of racial assimilation. "It is bad advice," wrote the journalist; "it is one of Mr. Douglass's dreams which he nor his posterity will hardly live to see realized."

When Douglass made some remarks critical of the Black press, Bruce reminded him that "he owes much of his popularity to the colored fool editors who have made him something less than a god by keeping his name continually in their columns, and in endeavoring to convince ordinary mortals that when God created Frederick Douglass He finished His work with the exception of the sun, moon and stars to reflect their rays upon him as he walked up and down the land."

Some church-going Blacks resented Douglass's criticism of the "emotional, shouting and thoughtless religion" in many Black congregations. And Douglass's second marriage to Helen Pitts, a white woman, brought expressions of Black disapproval.

The contemporary Black critics of Douglass made little headway. The reason for their failure was obvious — in his day, his followers needed the Douglass image. During the 19th century, the leadership idea permeated American thinking. Americans eagerly applauded and readily followed those who stood out

from the crowd; they viewed history as a recital of the activities of outstanding individuals instead of the moves made by the masses.

Black Americans shared this homage to men of mark. And their heroes and heroines took on an especial significance. Scorned and belittled by most whites, they were determined to establish a heroic image of themselves. Thus they showered praises upon those individuals who had won public acclaim or attention, hailing them as role-models. In their quest for self-identity, in their assertion of racial self-worth, they found hope and inspiration in their achievers.

What contemporary Black could lay a better claim to fame than Frederick Douglass? What other Black notable had as many attributes of leadership? What other Black was a better personification of the hero in history, a better illustration of the hero-as-history?

From the antebellum period, here are two examples of such tributes to Douglass: Writing in 1855, J. McCune Smith, a civic-minded physician, named Douglass as being among America's "most distinguished men," those who were "the movers of public opinion." In Smith's words, "To no man did the people more widely nor more earnestly say, 'Tell me thy thought!'"

Smith's laudatory tones were echoed by William G. Allen, professor of rhetoric and belles lettres at Central College in McGrawville, New York, who said, during a lecture, that he knew of no one who could approach Douglass "in versatility of oratorical power." He noted that Douglass was "the pride of the colored man and the terror of slaveholders and their abettors."

From the end of the Civil War down to his death in 1895, Douglass was by far the major figure to whom the masses looked for leadership. Regarding him as their mentor, advocate and champion, they bestowed upon him the title, the "Sage of Anacostia."

If, however, the Black rank and file could not adequately express their

sentiments toward Douglass, they had only to turn to their clergymen and educators. The Presbyterian minister, Francis J. Grimké, who had officiated at Douglass's second marriage, held that Douglass was "cast in a great mould, physically, intellectually, and morally." Physically, said Grimké, "his presence affected me like some of the passages of rugged grandeur in Milton, or as the sight of Mt. Blanc, rising from vale of Chamouni, affected Coleridge." Intellectually, continued Grimké, "he possessed a mind of remarkable acuteness and penetration," and morally "he was lofty in sentiment, pure in thought, and exalted in character."

The clergyman-educator William J. Simmons, author of the widely-read "Men of Mark," published in 1887, viewed the life of Douglass as "an epitome of the efforts of a noble soul to be what God intended, despite the laws, customs, and prejudices."

That Douglass had been a slave was viewed more calmly by another contemporary who was acquainted with him, the novelist Charles W. Chestnutt. "It was, after all, no misfortune for humanity that Frederick Douglass felt the iron hand of slavery," he wrote, "for his genius changed the drawbacks of color and condition into levers by which he raised himself and his people."

The last of the Black contemporaries of Douglass whose opinions of him may be noted are three men who stood on the threshold of their careers when Douglass died in 1895: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois.

As an aspiring young poet in the early 1890s, Dunbar had been encouraged by Douglass, and in a letter dated December 30, 1893, Dunbar expressed his thanks, adding that "if haply it should be my lot to write some songs that posterity shall sing, the name of Douglass shall not be forgotten in my numbers."

Dunbar made good his promise, composing two eulogies to Douglass, one at his death and the other seven years later.

Both are moving; both are examples of the non-dialectical Dunbar. Composed in sonnet form the second of these opens with a summons: "Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days," and closes with an exhortation:

*Oh, for the voice high-sounding o'er
the storm,
For thy strong arm to guide the
shivering bark,
The blast-defying power of thy form,
To give us comfort through the lonely
dark.*

As in the case of Dunbar, Frederick Douglass came into the personal orbit of Booker T. Washington in 1892. In that year, Douglass delivered the Commencement Day address at Tuskegee Institute. His topic, "Self-Made Men," was quite in keeping with the philosophy of the school's founder and leader. In 1894, in thanking Douglass for forwarding a donation, Washington commended him for the "grand and unselfish way in which you are giving your self to the cause of our race." Washington's subsequent references to Douglass, made after the latter's death, were equally laudatory. Douglass was, said Washington, a figure "of sainted memory."

In his later years, however, Washington did express one reservation about Douglass, namely that his leadership qualities were more attuned to the abolitionist era than to the Reconstruction period. "The long and bitter political struggle in which he had engaged against slavery had not prepared Mr. Douglass to take up the equally difficult task of fitting the Negro for the opportunities and responsibilities of freedom," wrote Washington in 1910. Washington had voiced a similar appraisal in his biography of Douglass, published in 1906 and put together by one of his several ghost-writers.

Historian Rayford W. Logan, in his appraisal of the biography by Washington, criticized Washington for his "ambivalent interpretation of Douglass."

But for an accident of fate, W. E. B. Du

Bois, rather than Washington, would have received the assignment of writing a biography of Douglass. Late in 1903, a publisher's representative asked Du Bois to write a life of Douglass for *The American Crisis Biographies Series*, and Du Bois had given his consent. A month later, however, Du Bois was informed that the assignment had to be cancelled — explaining that they had originally offered it to Washington and, not having heard from him, they had turned to Du Bois.

Upon Washington's belated acceptance, however, the publishers felt that they had to withdraw their offer to Du Bois. They did, however, promise to find another assignment for Du Bois, which they did — a biography of John Brown.

To his lifelong regret, Du Bois never met Douglass. But as a trained historian and an admirer of the militant spirit, Du Bois had a thorough knowledge of Douglass. The voluminous Du Bois writings are studded with references to Douglass, and with lines from his speeches and writings. Du Bois rated the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" as "an epoch-making autobiography."

**'Douglass was the
pre-eminent philosopher and
organizer of the great
Abolitionist movement.'**

During the 19th century, the commentators on Douglass represented a wide spectrum of backgrounds, including journalists, clergymen, reformers, educators and politicians, among others. In the 20th century, especially during the last two decades, the most perceptive of the Douglass appraisals have come from the professional historians.

The severest criticism of Douglass comes from Nell Irvin Painter in her book, "Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction." According to Painter, the opinions held by Douglass in the 1870s "were unswervingly conservative and often anti-Black." Painter had in

mind Douglass's attitude toward the Black migration to Kansas. "Many Blacks," she writes, "disowned Douglass's latter-day views, notably his shrill denunciations of the Exodus."

The prolific historian, Philip S. Foner, is also critical of the Douglass of the Reconstruction period. Foner charges Douglass with not having allied himself sufficiently with the emerging labor movement, and with not having done enough "to mobilize opposition to the Republican party's betrayal of the Negro freedmen and of democracy." Foner is quick to add, however, that whatever his shortcomings, Douglass was cast in a heroic mold. "He was," writes Foner, "not only a great Negro and a passionate fighter against every injustice heaped upon his people, but a far-sighted statesman enlisted in the 'cause of humanity' the world over, and one who saw his people's liberation movement as part of the democratic advance of all Americans."

Herbert Aptheker — like Foner a Marxist-oriented historian who has written extensively on the Black past — sees Douglass as a significant figure, although his most glowing phrases are reserved for the antebellum Douglass. Aptheker holds that Douglass "was the pre-eminent philosopher and organizer of the great Abolitionist movement," a leader without peer in this country in "his knowledge of what to do and how to do it." In his treatment of Douglass on the abolitionist circuit, Aptheker becomes almost lyrical:

Where Douglass went, there went the conscience of America, and he gave it no pause. Every village North of the Mason and Dixon line saw this man and heard his message. Was there no hall available? Very well, he walked the streets clanging a bell and announcing his presence. Was there no one to offer him food? He would go hungry, but remain vocal. Was he to be mobbed? He would resist, until with arm broken and head bloody, he would be left for dead. But he would

arise, wash away the blood, bandage the arm, and continue to bear witness for those in chains.

If expressed with less exuberance, the evaluation of Douglass as abolitionist by Carter G. Woodson was likewise favorable. Other anti-slavery orators, Woodson said, paled "into insignificance on the approach of the 'eloquent fugitive' from Maryland, for the people preferred to hear Douglass. And well might they desire to see and hear this man. He was tall and well made with a fully-developed forehead. He was dignified in appearance, polished in his language and gentlemanly in his manner."

When in 1926 Woodson launched the observance of Negro History Week, he scheduled it for the second week in February because the birthdays of Douglass and Abraham Lincoln fell therein.

Historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., regards Douglass as "one of the great men of the nineteenth century and one of the greatest of all Americans." While viewing Douglass as an American, Bennett lays particular stress upon his Afro-Americanness, holding that "Douglass embodied the agonizing issues confronting the nation." Writes Bennett:

Did someone say that the black man was a savage, impervious to education and the higher flights of logic? Douglass' words, Douglass' acts, Douglass' life contradicted him. Did someone say that the black man did not want freedom, that he was content to raise corn and cotton and wait tables forever? Douglass stood athwart the proposition. He was a living refutation of every thing most Americans believed and said about black Americans.

James M. McPherson, of the Princeton University history faculty, saw Douglass as a prime example of an "inner-directed" personality, one who owed nothing to birth or inherited wealth but who "nevertheless achieved knowledge, usefulness, position, and fame." In 1968, McPherson characterized Douglass as a

protest figure whose career furnished clues to the racial confrontations then current. Douglass's insistence on "freedom now," said McPherson, found its parallel in the "black power" agitation of the 1960s, with Douglass's life offering a key to an understanding of "the growing militance of the contemporary civil rights revolution." McPherson's book, "The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction," has 57 references to Douglass.

To August Meier, a highly acclaimed scholar in the field of historical studies on the Black American, we are indebted for a systematic and chronological tracing of Douglass's ideas and programs for racial advancement. During the antebellum period, writes Meier, Douglass's views "roughly paralleled the ascendant ideologies among the free people of color." During the Reconstruction era, Douglass emphasized self-help and the gospel of wealth, revealing a basically middle-class orientation toward the solution of racial problems. During his final decade, Douglass — in Meier's words — "stressed assimilation and amalgamation as the solution to the race problem, and he constantly asserted that it was not a Negro problem . . . but the problem of the nation and the whites who had created the situation."

Meier is not a hero-worshipper. In his balanced objective approach to Douglass, he takes note of Douglass's ideological shifts and changes in priorities from one period to another. As with anyone in the public eye for half a century, Douglass can sometimes be quoted against himself. But Meier also sees Douglass as a towering figure, calling him "the most distinguished Negro in nineteenth century America," and viewing him as "the greatest living symbol of the protest tradition during the 1880s and early 1890s."

Similar objective evaluations of Douglass by 20th century historians have touched upon Douglass's blind spots. A rock-ribbed Republican, it was Douglass

who gave us that gem of political literature, "The Republican Party is the deck; all else is the sea." Douglass's economic beliefs had a similarly restricted scope. He was an ardent advocate of the cash nexus, making money, and he urged his fellow Blacks to think twice before following the biblical admonition not to lay up for themselves treasures on earth. Himself well off, he reflected something of the acquisitive spirit typical of America's gilded age.

Douglass also tended to view race relations almost exclusively in moralistic terms. His faith in the power of reason and his belief in the American Creed led him to underestimate the tenacity of race and color prejudice. Douglass did not perceive the full dimensions of race prejudice as a form of cultural taboo, as the deep-seated psychological need for an out-group. Hence, he did not fully weigh the barriers Blacks would have to scale. Instead, he quoted to them Shakespeare's lines about the fault, dear Brutus, lying not in our stars but in ourselves, if we are underlings.

Such criticisms of Douglass, however, must be measured against the high place almost universally accorded him by historians and by scholars in other fields. In part, these academicians may be unconsciously pro-Douglass because he left for their use such an abundance of written sources. For the research-minded, the writings of Frederick Douglass comprise a storehouse of good things, as the publication of his papers will increasingly reveal. His writings have two great assets — accuracy and readability.

Douglass never wrote an article or gave a speech without first doing his homework carefully. For example: At Finsbury Chapel, Moorfields, England, on May 22, 1846, while Douglass was delivering a lecture on slavery, a heckler interrupted him, challenging him to cite his sources. Douglass replied, "The laws referred to may be found by consulting *Brevard's Digest*; *Haywood's Manual*; *Virginia Revised Code*; *Prince's Digest*;

Missouri Laws; Mississippi Revised Code."

Later, in preparing a speech to be delivered at Western Reserve College in May 1854, on the topic, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," Douglass spent several months of research, consulting sources suggested by the president and one of the faculty members at the University of Rochester.

A highly significant confirmation of Douglass's respect for the facts and his retention of them comes from Dickson Preston, who has meticulously examined Douglass's first autobiography, published in 1845 and of necessity written in large part from unaided memory. Obviously, a slave narrative such as that of Douglass would be lacking in formal documentation, having been put together without benefit of diary, letters, plantation records, county archives, or a revisit to the old homestead for an on-the-spot checking. Thus, investigator Preston set out to answer the question: How credible is the story Douglass tells of his years as a slave? "The conclusion is unmistakable that from boyhood on, Douglass was an intelligent and accurate observer," wrote Preston.

Douglass's remarkable facility with the language is a second contributing factor to his ongoing appeal to a wide spectrum of readers. The Douglass writings are models of clarity and good literary form. Douglass would often write a passage over and over again, striving for the precise word, for the telling phrase — no teacher of English need remind him that the secret of good writing is rewriting.

Douglass's writings have the qualities of cogency and pith that make them quite quotable. With due acknowledgment, public figures have borrowed from his works, including politician A. Clayton Powell, Jr., labor organizer A. Philip Randolph and John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Twentieth century Black protest literature is studded with passages which begin with the phrase, "As Frederick Douglass said . . ."

Thus by word, as by deed, the influence of Douglass is an ongoing phenomenon. "In the lengthening perspective of the Negro's history in America," writes Alain Locke, "the career and character of Frederick Douglass takes on more and more the stature and significance of the epical." How true.

'Nothing educates like the vision of greatness . . . nothing can take its place.'

Learned Hand, a federal judge, made the observation that "the use of history is to tell us what we are, for at birth we are but empty vessels and we become what our traditions pour into us." This prompts the query, "What is the use of Frederick Douglass?" The scientist-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggests one possibility. "Nothing educates like the vision of greatness," wrote Whitehead, "and nothing can take its place." In Frederick Douglass these two aphorisms complement each other, his life telling us something of what we were and at the same time giving us a vision of what we could become.

It is on this latter, futuristic note that I end this essay, appropriating a few passages from poet Robert E. Hayden's, "Frederick Douglass," perhaps the most moving and certainly the most lyrical expression in all of the Douglass literature. Hayden's tribute is in free verse, a circumstance that would have doubly endeared it to Douglass. It, reads, in part:

*When it is finally ours, this freedom,
this liberty, this beautiful and
terrible thing . . .
when it is finally won . . .
this man, this Douglass, this former
slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning
a world
where none is lonely, none hunted,
alien,
this man, superb in love and logic,
this man
shall be remembered — . . .* □

Benjamin Quarles, Ph.D., a prominent historian, is Emeritus Professor, Morgan State University. This essay was excerpted from a presentation he made at the Frederick Douglass International Scholars Colloquium, October 22, hosted by the Department of History, Howard University.