Vol. 41 No. 15 · 1 August 2019

Leave them weeping

Colin Grant

Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom
by David Blight (https://www.lrb.co.uk/search-results?search=David%20Blight) .
Simon and Schuster, 892 pp., £30, November 2018, 978 1 4165 9031 6

One of the peace walls near the Falls Road in Belfast is decorated with a mural featuring several famous figures – among them, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. At its centre, though, five times the size of the others, is a stern-looking man with bushy, neatly parted grey hair, wearing a frock-coat and necktie. Two hundred years after his birth into slavery, Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist and writer once described as 'an ornament to society and a blessing to his race', looms munificently over the city he visited during a speaking tour of Ireland in 1845. The image on the mural is based on one of the 160 photographs taken of Douglass: a total that helped make him one of the most famous and recognisable Americans of the 19th century. Broad-shouldered, intense and handsome, he looks like a statesman – the antithesis, purposefully so, of the stock image of the degraded slave.

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Maryland in 1818, to a white man (probably a slaveholder) and an enslaved woman, Harriet Bailey. As he put it in his 1845 memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, his mother, 'like many other slave women, had *many children*, but NO FAMILY'. Hired out to a plantation 12 miles away, she was unable to visit her children and return in time for the overseer's horn the next morning. Despite whisperings about his parentage, Douglass was never able to discover his father's identity. His mother died when he was seven. He was close to his grandmother, but not to any of his siblings, displaced as they were around the plantation.

As a young boy he was stoical and resourceful. He had a habit of singing outside the window of Lucretia Auld, his owner's daughter – a ploy she 'very soon came to understand as a petition for a piece of

bread'. He was exposed to countless acts of brutality: a river dyed red with the blood of a runaway slave shot in the back; a young woman stripped near naked, her hands tied and suspended from a hook, toes barely touching the ground, whipped intermittently on the master's whim. He was hungry, and sometimes so cold at night that he would bury himself in a bag used for carrying corn – head in, feet out. His feet, Douglass wrote, had been 'so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes'. And yet the only pieces of advice adult slaves would give him were: don't look up in the presence of your overseer and avert your gaze from the suffering of others.

When he was eight Douglass was sent to Baltimore, to another branch of his master's family. There, a Miss Sophia gave him rudimentary reading lessons until her husband objected, arguing that it would 'forever unfit him for the duties of a slave'. But Douglass continued to read furtively in the house, and openly in the street, bartering words for bread with a group of Irish American children whom he would corner as they sat on the kerb – Webster's spelling book in hand – to demand lessons. His excitement about what reading could lead to peaked when he acquired a copy of the *Columbian Orator*, a compendium of famous speeches and essays on liberation, including a 'Dialogue Between a Master and a Slave' which he treasured all his life. He spent only a few years in Baltimore: after the death of the family patriarch all slaves were returned to the plantation to be shared out between the dead man's relatives.

In 1834, Douglass's new master, Thomas Auld, a mean 'object of contempt', believing his authority was being challenged by his insolent teenage slave, handed him over 'to be broken' by an overseer called Edward Covey. 'Mr Covey succeeded in breaking me,' Douglass

wrote, 'in body, soul and spirit.' He was reduced to a beastlike stupor – but then one day he fought back, unnerving Covey, who didn't want to admit that the 16-year-old still had the capacity to resist him.

His ability to read and write gave him status in the eyes of his fellow slaves, a handful of whom attended a Bible study group he set up. It was hardly inevitable, even so, that Douglass would think of escape. For every slave who attempted to flee, thousands of others saw the folly of doing so: the severity of punishments for those who were caught, especially the possibility of being sold 'down river' to the cotton plantations of the deep South, was sufficient to discourage thoughts of freedom. Douglass took the risk, but his first attempt failed, leading to his and his accomplices' immediate arrest. That misfortune, however, was followed by a piece of astounding good luck. In a decision that is still difficult to fathom, instead of punishing him the authorities sent him back to Baltimore.

In the *Narrative*, Douglass says that he often found himself wishing he were dead. He envied slaves who did not spend their time thinking about their condition. But suicide was only one way to escape bondage, and within two years he'd hatched another plan. In Baltimore he'd fallen in love with Anna Murray, a free black woman. She provided funds, documents that enabled him to travel ('free papers' lent by a retired black sailor) and naval costume – and Douglass took a series of trains north. On 4 September 1838 he arrived in New York: 'I was a FREEMAN, and the voice of peace and joy thrilled my heart!'

Crossing the Mason-Dixon Line meant freedom from bondage, symbolised by Douglass's decision to drop his given surname, Bailey, in favour of one he chose himself. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793

a ‘runaway’ could legally be recaptured and sent back to the plantations: fugitive slaves couldn’t afford to let down their guard. But in New York Douglass and Anna (who followed him north and soon married him) found support from free blacks, other fugitive slaves, and members of the congregation at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where Douglass’s account of his escape was first publicly aired. He quickly joined forces with the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), editions of whose abolitionist paper, the *Liberator*, he carried everywhere, along with his copy of the *Columbian Orator*.

After hearing Douglass speak for the first time, William Lloyd Garrison, the *Liberator*’s editor, wrote that he was ‘one in intellect richly endowed – in natural eloquence a prodigy – in soul manifestly “created but a little lower than the angels”’. Overnight he became a poster boy for the movement, striking a deal with the AASS for a three-month trial on the speaking circuit. His own body could serve as proxy for the suffering of all slaves, a present example of the way ‘the overseer had written his character on the living parchment of most of their backs.’ Audiences were startled by his youth and erudition; according to the abolitionist Edmund Quincy, ‘some of the people were amazed that a nigger could talk so well.’ The talks were often delivered without notes; sometimes they lasted three hours.

Douglass pilloried the abolitionists who had told him it was ‘better [to] have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; ’tis not best that you seem too learned.’ He was always scornful of anything that smacked of minstrelsy. Earlier slave narratives, popular with white readers for their blend of romance and gothic horror, were often dictated to and accompanied by a note from a white amanuensis attesting to their veracity (a ‘black message inside a

white envelope'). Douglass's more sophisticated autobiography had an important addendum to its title, 'Written by Himself'. Its popularity – five thousand copies were sold within four months – reflected his extraordinary talent for making viscerally real what was for many readers the abstraction of slavery. As David Blight puts it in his excellent new biography, he 'learned how to leave them weeping'.

But the *Narrative*'s publication also threatened Douglass's safety. He was still a slave who could legally be recaptured – easily, since the book identified him and his former masters by name. It was partly for this reason that he now, at the age of 27, set out across the Atlantic. In Ireland he came under 'exoticised scrutiny'; his great success there was in contrast to the thuggish reception he had received at the hands of Irish Americans at home. He urged his audiences in Ireland and Britain to recognise American slaveholders as state-sanctioned criminals who had effectively held to ransom millions of their compatriots. While he was in England his supporters raised sufficient funds to pay his ransom note, buying his freedom and eliminating the threat of re-enslavement. Julia Griffiths, a white Englishwoman, followed Douglass back to America to assist with the *North Star*, the abolitionist paper he launched in 1847. For more than a decade, as editor and publisher, Douglass used it as a platform for disseminating his politics and philosophy while simultaneously solidifying his position as America's most prominent black figure.

Blight painstakingly examines the story Douglass tells in the *Narrative*, and in his later autobiographical works, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). How reliable a witness was he? Blight seeks to demonstrate that Douglass's three books differ in the telling not by accident but by design: they are revisions which meet both Douglass's need to project an

appropriate version of himself and his determination for his story to serve as an encapsulation of America's toxic history.

Though Douglass prided himself on his memory, Blight suggests that his recollections of his mother are mostly invented. This wouldn't be surprising. In the *Narrative*, Douglass wrote that 'I never saw my mother … more than four or five times … and at night,' and continued: 'I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should probably have felt at the death of a stranger.' A decade later, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he wrote: 'I shall never forget the indescribable expression of her countenance when I told her that I had had no food since morning.' In the *Narrative*, Douglass wrote that 'My father was my master.' Ten years later he said his father might have been a mulatto. In other words, as Henry Louis Gates put it, Douglass 'completely diminished the whiteness and the masterness of his father over ten years'. In his 1854 essay 'The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered', Douglass stated baldly that 'intellect is uniformly derived from the maternal side.'

Blight also highlights Douglass's account in the *Narrative* of his two-hour battle with the 'slave breaker' Edward Covey as the most significant example of his self-mythologising. On Covey's dilapidated farmstead, Blight writes, 'Ishmael found his Ahab, the ultimate tyrant whose obsessions could never be tamed.' But in trying to break the slave, Covey himself was broken. 'I felt as I never felt before,' Douglass wrote.

> It was a glorious resurrection from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed for ever when I could be a slave in fact … the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

Blight sees this section in the book as representing the height of Douglass's literary brilliance, constructing a story 'he would one day make almost as immortal as Herman Melville's whaling ship'. Slavery set out to emasculate the black man and here Douglass restored himself to manhood.

This was part and parcel with his larger project, which was to confound the stereotypes held by white Americans about their black compatriots. Even Abraham Lincoln agreed that 'not a single man of [the black] race is made the equal of a single man of ours.' The daguerreotypes of the statesman-like Douglass played a crucial role in complicating such views. But in years to come observers might see different things in that noble face: a wise pacifist reminiscent of Uncle Tom, the Christ-like protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel; a rebel leader like Nat Turner, whose 1831 insurrection had terrified white America.

Blight says that when Douglass looked in the mirror he saw a descendant of the Old Testament prophets, 'exiled in a new Babylon'. The American Colonisation Society, supported by some slaveholders, had revived the old idea of repatriating black people to Africa. Douglass saw its expediency: 'Men do not love those who remind them of their sins … and the mulatto child's face is a standing accusation against him who is master and father to the child.' Even

when proposed in good faith, by Lincoln among others, colonisation was, in Douglass's mind, a diabolical idea, a cowardly avoidance of America's original sin.

The Constitution had classified a black man as three-fifths of a person. Like John Brown, with whom he corresponded, Douglass believed that this could only be atoned for, and abolition achieved, by the use of force. But he drew back when Brown encouraged him to join the doomed and bloody anti-slavery raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Nevertheless, in one of the most vivid sequences of his biography, Blight shows how close Douglass came to the gallows: after Brown's assault on the US arsenal, Douglass's name appeared in newspapers as one of the co-conspirators. When he learned that a warrant had been issued for his arrest he fled to Canada, only hours before federal marshals arrived at his house. He went on to England, returning home in April 1860 – his legal fate still uncertain – after his daughter died. He was eventually cleared following a Senate investigation into the events at Harpers Ferry. Although he disagreed with Brown's tactics, Douglass defended him years later in *Life and Times*: 'The horrors wrought by his iron hand cannot be contemplated without a shudder, but it is the shudder which one feels at the execution of a murderer … necessity is the full justification of it to reason.'

In the years immediately preceding the Civil War, Douglass continued to advocate a violent response to the Fugitive Slave Act and to slavery itself, skewering pacifist abolitionists and their futile ambition to 'frown slave holders down'. Blight argues persuasively that Douglass's manicheanism was personal and emotional – deriving from a deeply felt need for purgation, to be achieved by revenge on the slave-owning class. He hoped for an apocalyptic civil

war and feared that a compromise would be reached with the Southern secessionists before the bloodletting could begin. Once the war began, with neither side at first gaining an advantage, Douglass argued that the stalemate could be broken and victory achieved if the Union enlisted black soldiers. When that logic was finally embraced, Douglass became the Union's most enthusiastic recruiter – his own sons were signed up. He hailed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863 as the 'greatest event of the century'.

After the death of Anna Murray, in 1882, he married Helen Pitts, a white woman twenty years his junior. Some black critics attributed his new marriage to self-loathing. (Blight's admiration for his subject is tempered only when he notes that Douglass argued the case for black enfranchisement by contrasting blacks' virtues with the unworthiness of the drunken Irish American electorate; he thought blacks far more deserving of acceptance than Native Americans.) Douglass courted and campaigned for the Republican Party, hoping to secure a position in future administrations, and was rewarded with posts as US marshal of the District of Columbia and then as US minister to Haiti. Into his late seventies, Douglass continued with speaking commitments that would have taxed a much younger man. His final tours, his voice cracking under the strain, were fuelled by vanity, but also by the necessity of providing financial assistance to members of his extended family.

In old age he returned to his former plantation. Calling on his former slave master, who was close to death, Douglass found himself holding Auld's hand 'and in friendly conversation with him in a sort of final settlement'. But he remained vehemently opposed to the romanticism of the 'lost cause' and the myth of the South as an antebellum Eden. To the assertion recently made by John Kelly,

Trump's former chief of staff, that Robert E. Lee was an 'honourable man', and the Civil War a gentlemen's disagreement, Douglass would counter that the 'bombastic laudation' and the 'nauseating flatteries' of the 'rebel chief' cannot distract from the fact that Lee 'was a traitor and can be made nothing else.'