

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

A Big New Biography Treats Frederick Douglass as Man, Not Myth

By Jennifer Szalai

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Time has a way of sanding off the rough edges of historical memory, turning even the most convulsive, contentious lives into opportunities for national triumphalism and self-congratulation. With “Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom,” the historian David W. Blight wants to enrich our understanding of an American in full who, for more than half his life, wasn’t even legally recognized as such. Now that Douglass is enshrined on his pedestal, shorn of what made him “thoroughly and beautifully human,” Blight notes how the “old fugitive slave” has been “adopted by all elements in the political spectrum,” eager to claim him as their own.

Plenty has been written about Douglass in the 200 years since he was born, not least by Douglass himself, who recounted his life story in three autobiographies — a paper trail of memoirs that Blight deems “both a pleasure and peril” for the biographer. In tracing an arc from bondage to freedom, Douglass cast himself as a “self-made hero,” Blight writes, while leaving “a great deal unsaid.” A number of other books have filled in the gaps — exploring Douglass’s relationships with the women in his life, for instance, as well as his fraught and transformative friendship with Abraham Lincoln — but Blight’s is the first major biography of Douglass in nearly three decades, making ample use of materials in the private collection of a retired doctor named Walter O. Evans to illuminate Douglass’s later years, after the Civil War.

Blight, who has edited and annotated volumes of Douglass’s autobiographies, undertakes this project with the requisite authority and gravity. The result is comprehensive, scholarly, sober; Blight is careful to tell us what cannot be known,

including the persistent mystery of Douglass's father (who was most likely white, and may have been Frederick's mother's owner). On the stuff that's known, Blight is an attentive if sometimes fastidious guide, poring over speeches and texts with the critical equivalent of a magnifying glass. Douglass, Blight says, was a "man of words," making this book "the biography of a voice."

That voice took shape and sharpened over time, but it would return again and again to the banks of the Tuckahoe River on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born in 1818. Twenty years a slave, then almost nine years a fugitive; as Douglass himself described it in his autobiographies (having adopted his new surname from a Sir Walter Scott poem), the first decades of his life were both thrilling and terrifying. Until his abolitionist allies helped to purchase his freedom in 1846, everything he did felt provisional; he lived with the incessant fear of someone who could be plunged back into captivity at any moment.



David W. Blight
Huntington Library, San Marino, California

He didn't bear that awful burden alone, though. What Douglass didn't emphasize in his memoirs but Blight rightly does is the steadfast presence of Anna Murray, a free woman Douglass met in Baltimore, while he was still a slave; she aided in his escape, and soon became his wife.

Anna had five children with Douglass, managing the household and mending shoes for money until her husband was able to support the family. She never learned how to read or write; Douglass barely mentioned her in his autobiographies (either taking her for granted or else paying heed to the customary discretion of the era). Blight has to rely instead on the recorded observations of others, including the jaundiced — and, he makes clear, unreliable — sniping of Ottilie Assing, a German radical who befriended Douglass and would stay in the family home for months at a time.

Blight handles all of this as delicately as he can. Assing, whose hyperbole could be as extreme as her politics, described herself in the most inflated terms as Douglass's true companion. Despite her "grandiosity," Blight thinks it probable that Assing and Douglass were lovers, even if her devotion wasn't fully reciprocated. (After Anna's death in 1882, Douglass married a white activist named Helen Pitts.)

While keeping his eye trained on personal intrigues, Blight still has plenty of room to delve into Douglass's public and political life. The chapters recounting the run up to the Civil War proceed with the inexorability of fate. Blight describes how Douglass moved away from the moral suasion he promoted in his early years on the abolitionist lecture circuit toward his full-throated calls for war. Slavery was too monstrous for what Douglass decried as the "whines of compromise." Once the fighting started, President Lincoln, initially prone to "hesitating, doubting, shrinking," had to destroy the old system once and for all; without that, Douglass warned, the Civil War would be "little better than a gigantic enterprise for shedding human blood."

If the path to war was clarifying for Douglass, what followed turned out to be less so. Blight's book really comes into its own in the later chapters, as it conveys Douglass's trajectory through Reconstruction, his support for (and split from) the women's suffrage movement, and beyond. Once a determined outsider, Douglass had become a political insider, obtaining federal appointments and supporting President Ulysses Grant's failed attempts to annex Santo Domingo (now known as the Dominican Republic). "It is never easy to be a good imperialist," Blight writes, in an unusually wry aside, "but the old abolitionist did his best."

Blight isn't looking to overturn our understanding of Douglass, whose courage and achievements were unequivocal, but to complicate it — a measure by which this ambitious and empathetic biography resoundingly succeeds. When Douglass died suddenly of a heart attack in 1895, his life had spanned the upheavals of the 19th century. Death may have marked one kind of ending, but as Blight shows, the voice lived on. “Douglass,” he writes, “was not gone.”

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Frederick Douglass

Prophet of Freedom

By David W. Blight

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