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FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE BUILDING  
OF A "WALL OF ANTI-SLAVERY FIRE,"  
1845-1846. AN ESSAY REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

by WILLARD B. GATEWOOD, JR.\*

A SMALL but enthusiastic crowd gathered in the Music Hall in Leeds, England, on December 23, 1846, to hear an address by a fugitive slave from the United States whose freedom had been purchased by British abolitionists a few days earlier. The local merchant who presided at the meeting promised the audience that the speaker would demonstrate how the United States could realize its dream of becoming an exemplary land of freedom. Loud and prolonged cheering erupted as the tall, broad-shouldered black man, known as Frederick Douglass, stepped to the platform. Although Douglass had not fully recovered from an illness which prevented him from speaking in Leeds the previous week, his address exhibited the "thrilling and natural eloquence" which audiences had come to expect of him since his arrival in Britain in August 1845. "I want the slave-holder surrounded as by a wall of anti-slavery fire," he declared at one point in his speech, "so that he may see the condemnation of himself and his system glaring down in letters of light" (p. 481). For twenty months he hammered away at this theme in lectures throughout the British Isles in an attempt to rekindle the dormant anti-slavery spirit there and set in motion a "tide of moral indignation" which would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Born a slave in Maryland in 1818, Douglass escaped from bondage at the age of twenty and settled in Massachusetts. For reasons of security he changed his name from Frederick Bailey

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1. *The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews. Volume 1: 1841-46.* Edited by John Blassingame, C. Peter Riley, Lawrence N. Powell, Fiona E. Spiers, and Clarence L. Mohr. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979. cii, 530 pp. Preface, acknowledgments, abbreviations, introduction, editorial method, partial speaking itinerary, notes, appendices, index. \$35.00.)

to Frederick Douglass. His meeting with William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist leader, at an anti-slavery convention on Nantucket Island in 1841 marked the beginning of his long association with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In 1845, shortly after the publication of a brief autobiography, the Society arranged for him to undertake a lecture tour of the British Isles.<sup>2</sup> Douglass apparently realized the potential significance of the tour for his reputation as an anti-slavery crusader. "My words . . .," he observed in a speech at Cork, Ireland, in October 1845, "will wax stronger in proportion to the distance I go from home, as a lever gains power by the distance from the fulcrum" (p. 59). His observation proved to be extraordinarily accurate: as a result of the British tour, Douglass emerged as a major public figure in the United States, one who was often lionized by abolitionists and invariably castigated by pro-slavery apologists and those whose nationalistic nerves were rubbed raw by his portrayal of American institutions as evil.

Douglass's addresses in Britain in 1845-1846, which reflect the beginnings of his intellectual odyssey, constitute the overwhelming majority of the documents in this initial volume of the comprehensive edition of his papers being prepared by Professor John Blassingame and his associates. The papers will be published in three series, the first of which is to include speeches, debates, and interviews. The appearance of the first volume of Series I is a publishing event of major importance. Previous collections of Douglass material, including Philip S. Foner's four-volume, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, though valuable, have been limited in scope and highly selective. Professor Blassingame's enterprise promises to make available for the first time a documentary record of a magnitude commensurate with the place which Douglass occupied in American life and thought. Throughout the editors have not only taken pains to identify persons, places, events, and literary illusions in Douglass's speeches, but they have also called attention to errors, inconsistencies, and exaggerations. In every respect, from the selection of documents to the use of notes, the volume under review

2. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, published in 1845, was the first of three autobiographical accounts which Douglass wrote. The other two were *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

exhibits an admirable sense of proportion and sound judgment as well as editorial craftsmanship of the highest order. Blassingame and his colleagues have functioned superbly as historians and have displayed extraordinary sleuthing skills in ferreting out stenographic and narrative accounts of Douglass's speeches from hundreds of newspapers.

A reformer who believed that the lectern was the primary instrument for advancing the cause of any reform, Douglass was a public speaker of unusual vigor and eloquence. The addresses included in this volume chronicle his metamorphosis from an inexperienced, hesitant speaker in 1841, who, by his own admission, was uncomfortable before white audiences, into a self-confident, polished orator five years later who was at ease on any platform. From the beginning his style stood in sharp contrast to that of most fugitive slaves on the anti-slavery circuit. While their recitations consisted almost exclusively of interesting personal histories delivered in halting, stammering dialect, Douglass used flawless English and referred to personal experiences primarily to illustrate larger points. Endowed with a near photographic memory, an expressive face, and a rich voice capable of great range in intonation and pitch, he utterly commanded any platform and invariably spoke in direct and unadorned language. Nor did Douglass possess only a few stock speeches which he modified slightly as he traveled from one town to another in Britain. In fact, his treatment of the anti-slavery theme was remarkable for its variety, comprehensiveness, and sophistication. Sincerity and humor interspersed with satire, sarcasm, invective, and ridicule were standard ingredients of his platform performances, but more important, as Professor Blassingame observes, was the "touch of poetry" which was present "both in the content and the rhythm of his speeches" (p. xxxiv). After hearing him speak in Leeds, an English woman described his address as "beautiful, sublime, pathetic, and powerful" (p. liv). Implicit even in the barbs of his numerous critics was a grudging acknowledgment of his power as an orator.

Two recurring themes, southern slavery and northern racial prejudice, appear throughout the speeches in this volume. Although Douglass conjured up vivid images of the horrors of slavery by frequent references to "the gag, the thumbscrew, the

whip, and the branding iron" (p. 190), he insisted that slavery was an American rather than a peculiarly southern institution and that its existence in the South was made possible by the complicity of a racist North. Adept at demonstrating the pervasively corrupting influence of slavery, he also leveled telling blows at conventional concepts of Negro inferiority and graphically pointed up the hypocrisy of a people who could, at the same time, subscribe to the tenets of the Scriptures and the Declaration of Independence and tolerate the existence of human bondage. So long as slavery remained respectable, he maintained, so long would it flourish. His objective was to arouse British opinion in a way that would contribute to making American slavery "disreputable." Because of "their peculiar relations" with the United States, the British could, in his opinion, exert a moral influence upon Americans that would go far toward undermining the respectability of the slave system. Firmly committed to the Garrisonian version of abolitionism at this juncture, Douglass described his anti-slavery efforts in terms of a "holy crusade" predicated upon the use of "moral suasion" rather than the sword. As an opponent of war, he "relied on God and truth and humanity for the overthrow of slavery."

Throughout his anti-slavery lectures in Britain, Douglass singled out churches and clergymen for special censure. In few other topics was his masterful use of irony and his articulation of existing paradoxes in American life more evident. Professing his love for the "religion of Jesus," he expressed only contempt for a religion which prostituted "his blessed precepts to the vile purposes of slavery" (p. 35). "Next to being a slave at all," he declared, "I regard the greatest calamity to be that of belonging to a religious slave-holder" (p. 413). Between "a slaveholding religion in the South and a pro-slavery religion in the North," Douglass explained, Americans had come to embrace a perverse form of Christianity which he labeled "a man-trapping, woman-whipping, slave-branding and cradle-robbing Christianity" (p. 51). Anxious for Christians in Britain to exclude from "communion with them all who are slave-holders," he waged a relentless attack on the Free Church of Scotland for accepting funds from slaveholders in the American South. His "Send-back-the Money" lectures not only itemized his indictments of the Free

Church but also included some of his harshest condemnation of those whose "fellowshipping" with slaveowners endowed an unjust, inhumane system with an aura of respectability.

During his lecture tour in Britain, Douglass also spoke in behalf of temperance, a cause which he linked to his anti-slavery campaign. He accused slaveowners of inducing slaves to drink as a means of keeping them docile and preventing "them from devising ways . . . by which to obtain their freedom" (p. 207). Fully aware of the obstacles encountered by free blacks "in becoming virtuous men," he was nonetheless deeply concerned about the prevalence of intemperance among such blacks because it retarded the progress of the anti-slavery movement by furnishing "arguments to the oppressors for oppressing us." Douglass admitted that he had liked to drink until he discovered that he possessed "all those characteristics leading to drunkenness." In his view, addiction to alcohol was a form of slavery which degraded all its victims, white as well as black. "I am a temperance man," he told a British audience, "because I am an anti-slavery man" (p. 209). For him, sobriety was a necessary condition for the achievement of liberty and virtue.

The image of Douglass which emerges from this superbly edited initial volume of his papers suggests that the portrait drawn by Kelly Miller in 1903 was essentially accurate.<sup>3</sup> In an essay comparing Douglass and Booker T. Washington, Miller described the former as "a lion, bold and fearless," whose appeal rested not on any "copyrighted programme for his race" but on the decalogue and the Declaration of Independence. That Douglass told the world what he thought it should hear rather than what he felt it was "disposed to listen to" is abundantly evident in the documents included in the first volume of his papers. Convinced that slavery was a "gigantic system of iniquity, that feeds and lives in darkness" (p. 40), he dedicated himself to "spreading light on the subject" in a manner that allowed no room for compromise or equivocation. His was the role of an eloquent muckraker who, along with other abolitionists, succeeded in encircling the slave system in "a wall of anti-slavery fire."

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3. Kelly Miller, "Washington's Policy," *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 18-19, 1903, reprinted in Hugh Hawkins, *Booker T. Washington and his Critics: The Problem of Negro Leadership* (Boston, 1962), 49-54.