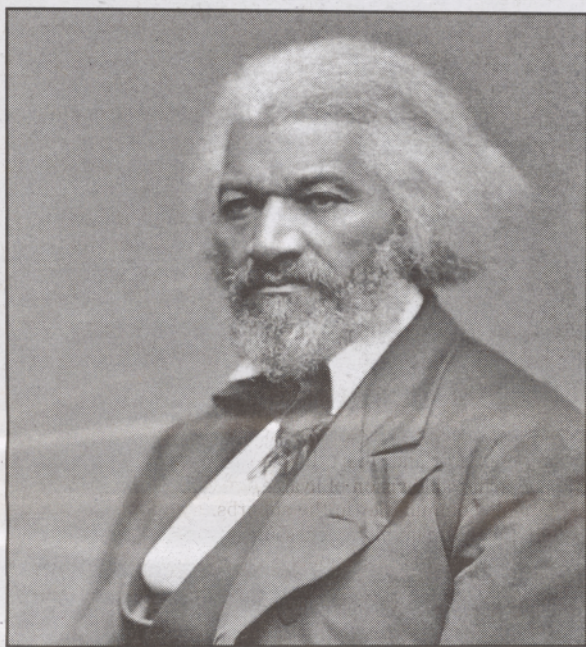


Abolitionist and the Emerald Isle

BY JOE MARTIN
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Frederick Douglass is a colossal presence on America's 19th-century stage. An impressive black man, his electrifying oratory excoriated the injustice of slavery polluting this nation's avowed aspirations to democracy.

A master's wife taught Douglass the rudiments of reading before the master put an abrupt end to the lessons – for power comes with discerning the alphabet. Undeterred,



Douglass steadily pursued the printed word. After escaping slavery,

Douglass joined abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's crusade and became an eloquent speaker. Garrison suggested that Douglass pen what would become "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," published in June 1845.

In "Giant's Causeway," historian and author Tom Chaffin follows Douglass' journey to Ireland, where he "found his own voice." Chaffin writes that the "Narrative increased Douglas's fame and thereby swelled the already formidable risks for his physical safety." Douglass had been scheduled to give 24 lectures in July of 1845, but decided he should leave the United States for a while with Garrison to give the "hoopla surrounding his book time to subside." He would commence a tour of England, Scotland and most importantly Ireland. The journey marked an evolution for Douglass, who was explicit about Ireland's influence: "I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country. I seem to have undergone a transformation. I live a new life."

Ireland had already made two contributions to Douglass' life before he fled enslavement. He was young when two Irish workmen expressed concern: "They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free." A book he purchased at age 12 contained a speech arguing for Catholic Emancipation throughout Ireland and the British Empire. Douglass read it many times finding parallels with the treatment of American slaves.

Before stepping onto the British steamship, Douglass learned he would be restricted to steerage below the main deck. Though Britain abolished slavery in 1834, many ships banned black passengers from the ship's cabins and dining areas "in deference to the company's American customers – many from the American South with proslavery views." His traveling companion, white Quaker James Buffum, decided he would also travel in steerage. In mid-August, Douglass,

Buffum and their fellow abolitionists, the Hutchison Family Singers, set off from Boston Harbor.

Many fellow passengers treated Douglass with respect. He was invited to give a lecture. Some objected. Unruffled amid interruptions, Douglass proceeded to expatiate on the horrors of slavery. His drunken adversaries persisted. One suggested that Douglass be thrown overboard. An Irishman defended Douglass. The stand-off was quelled when the ship's captain threatened the troublemakers with leg irons and chains, ending the lecture.

In Ireland, Douglass met the great Daniel O'Connell, known as "the Liberator" for championing the rights of Ireland's oppressed Catholics. An impassioned speaker, O'Connell's opposition to slavery was unequivocal: "I have been assailed for attacking the American institution, as it is called – negro slavery. I am not ashamed of that attack. I do not shrink from it. I am the advocate of civil and religious liberty, all over the globe, and wherever tyranny exists, I am the foe of the tyrant."

Until O'Connell's successful campaign, the population of Irish Catholics had been disenfranchised. Still misery and poverty were ubiquitous. Douglass witnessed shocking scenes of destitution. He had arrived as the disastrous Potato Famine was unfolding. But as a visitor, Douglass refrained publicly from references to national issues. His orations kept to abolitionist and temperance themes.

Though in Ireland he received affirmation and acclaim, in America Douglass was often dismayed by the attitudes of Irish-Americans regarding black emancipation. O'Connell urged the Irish in the United States to unite with blacks in a struggle for freedom and justice. It didn't happen. In the

midst of the Civil War, Chaffin writes: "Ethnic and class resentments amid Irish American communities and the white working class in general were further stoked by passage, in February 1863, of a national conscription law ... The provision enabled affluent draft-eligible men to hire less-well-off men, often Irish immigrant men and their sons, to serve in their place. Combined, the Emancipation Proclamation and the new draft law sparked anti-black fury, including race riots, in northern cities."

Though Douglass retained fond memories of his Irish sojourn and continued to invoke O'Connell, he harbored, says Chaffin, "lifelong ambivalences toward Ireland and the Irish people – particularly Irish Americans." In 1883, Douglass spoke against the Supreme Court's overturning of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. In that speech he decried all manner of racial, class and religious bigotry. He expressed frustration with Irish America: "Perhaps no class of our fellow-citizens has carried this prejudice against color to a point more extreme and dangerous than have our Catholic Irish fellow-citizens, and yet no people on the face of the earth have been more relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion, than the Irish people."

Douglass never lost hope that America could one day manifest authentic and abiding fairness and decency to all. His legacy resonates powerfully as America continues to be confronted by exigent issues of race and class. Chaffin's book is a marvelous tour of a little known facet of a towering American's extraordinary life.

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