Frederick Douglass in Ireland: The Black O’Connell

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President Obama’s recent visit to Ireland inspired a new wave of interest in the international experiences of formerly enslaved African American Frederick Douglass. He travelled to Britain in 1845 and spent the first few months of his trip gaining support from Irish audiences in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Belfast, to name a few of the cities he visited. In this volume, Laurence Fenton seeks to show Douglass’s impact on Ireland and how it overlapped with the beginning of the Great Famine, as well as highlighting the influence of Daniel O’Connell on a young man about to embark on a life of activism.

Throughout the well-written and researched volume, Fenton excels at providing rich context to Douglass’s time in the major cities. The heavily detailed but highly readable background to slavery in America and the history of the abolitionists is particularly interesting, especially when it is placed in a transatlantic context with activists who were instrumental to the Garrisonian cause in Ireland. The volume has ten chapters, each following Douglass in a specific city in Ireland or focusing on great men such as Daniel O’Connell, the Irish Liberator, and Father Mathew, the infamous temperance advocate. Douglass’s journey coincided with the start of the famine and Fenton chronicles the dire circumstances thousands of Irish men and women faced: by 1845, potatoes were the main food source for at least three million people in Ireland, and this heavy reliance had severe consequences (p.120).

In the first chapter, Fenton gives a detailed overview of the young life of Frederick Douglass and uses long and detailed quotes from his narrative to describe what life was like as a slave.

Born Frederick Bailey in 1818 to a white father and an enslaved mother, he grew up on a plantation in Talbot County, Maryland. Brought up by his grandmother, he was owned by a man named Thomas Auld, who frequently sent him out for work, and eventually he was leased to Thomas’s brother, Hugh, who also owned a plantation in Maryland. Famously, Hugh’s wife Sofia tried to teach Douglass to read but Hugh discovered this and banned any future lessons; Douglass taught himself to read and write in secret. After an infamous encounter with the ‘negro breaker’ Covey, Douglass was ‘broken in body, soul and spirit’ but refused to submit to Covey’s beatings a second time. This resistance ensured Douglass was never beaten by Covey again (pp.19–20). Douglass escaped slavery in 1838 and fled to Massachusetts. Interspersed with this short biography is a history of slavery in the United States, with the arrival of the first slave ship at
Jamestown in 1619.

William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the American Antislavery Society and renowned as a radical abolitionist, noticed Douglass speak at an antislavery meeting and hired Douglass as a lecturer, sending him around Northern cities and the Old Midwest. Douglass was a charismatic, brilliant public speaker and most of all could speak personally about the brutality and reality of American slavery. Many of his audiences would not have seen a fugitive slave before and he broke the stereotype of an ignorant, simple-minded black.

Douglass published his *Narrative* in 1845, chronicling his own experiences of slavery, but he feared for the safety of himself and his family, as the book would undoubtedly bring unwanted attention. The Garrisonians believed it was safer for Douglass to be in Britain, particularly because he could establish and reconnect with abolitionists across the country to denounce American slavery. In the summer of that year, Douglass set sail on the steamship *Cambria* from Boston to Liverpool.

Fenton describes the contributions of the main abolitionists in America (including Garrison) and those in Ireland, focusing on Richard D. Webb of Dublin, an instrumental Garrisonian who wrote newspaper articles, organised lectures, collected donations for the Boston Bazaar and welcomed lecturers (including Douglass) into his home. Fenton also addresses the divisions between transatlantic abolitionists: Webb believed Douglass was ‘the least likeable’ abolitionist he had ever met (p. 71). His wife Hannah labelled Douglass as a ‘savage’ (p. 72) and Fenton refers in some detail to the paternalism of white abolitionists and how they tried to occasionally restrict Douglass’s movements. On the other hand, the Jennings family in Cork were impressed by Douglass’s character, intelligence and eloquence. Douglass divided opinion even amongst abolitionists.

Fenton dedicates a whole chapter to Daniel O'Connell, detailing his life and commitment to Irish liberation and abolition. He engages in a fascinating discussion on the relationship between O’Connell and Douglass, one that Douglass valued for the rest of his life. Douglass first heard of O’Connell in the pages of *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of essays and dialogues that supported social reform and abolition. When he was enslaved, Douglass used the *Orator* to read, write and build his vocabulary over time, as well as learning the important elements of oratory. This included annunciating words correctly and deliberately, and using his arms and hands to reinforce his arguments. Douglass often quoted a passage from the *Orator* where an enslaved man logically argued for his right to freedom, and the dialogue had a distinct and important impact. Rational argument was always a powerful tool in Douglass’s oratorical repertoire. Douglass was mesmerised one night in Ireland by O’Connell’s speech on the ‘plague spot of [American] slavery’ (p. 87) and praised his dedication to freedom. When Douglass finally met the Great Liberator in front of a public audience, the latter rechristened Douglass the ‘black O’Connell’ (p. 97). Irish liberation and abolition were inextricably linked in the hearts of both men, and expressing that solidarity on a public stage proved popular. Douglass was deeply impressed by O’Connell’s powerful oratory and convictions – during his travels across the British Isles, he often referred to O’Connell’s refusal of fellowship with slaveholders and told a famous anecdote where O’Connell declined to shake a gentleman’s hand because he owned slaves in the American South.

Fenton’s chapter on Belfast is again well researched and he focuses on the beginnings of the campaign against the Free Church of Scotland. Thomas Chalmers and his supporters separated from the Established Church in 1843 to form the Free Church of Scotland, and several representatives were sent to America to raise money for the new organisation. Abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic were shocked to learn that these representatives had accepted money from slaveholders in the South. Douglass launched a national campaign against the Free Church of Scotland, and later the Evangelical Alliance, a religious organisation, for upholding fellowship with slaveholders. These campaigns made Douglass a celebrity in Britain.

Fenton does not confine his study to Douglass and antislavery. During his British travels, Douglass engaged in numerous social reform movements including suffrage, Chartism and temperance, and he could not have supported the latter in Ireland without meeting Father Mathew, a man who revolutionised the movement and
was thus nicknamed ‘the apostle of temperance.’ (p. 100) Fenton provides extraordinary statistics for Mathew’s success: as President of the Cork Total Abstinence Society, Mathew increased membership from 2,000 to 20,000 in one year (p. 105) and in two days administered the pledge to over 100,000 people in Limerick in 1839 (p. 107). Fenton describes how Douglass met Mathew in his home, the latter hurrying to greet Douglass and taking him on a tour before administering the pledge to the former slave. Douglass proudly kept his silver badge, but had to rethink his respect for Mayhew when the ‘apostle’ visited America and refused to denounce American slavery, outraging abolitionists in America and Britain.

Although Fenton uses extracts from the press to describe Douglass, a greater discussion of racial perceptions within the newspapers would have enriched the volume. African Americans praised British society for its freedom and lack of discrimination towards black people. Conveniently, they ignored pervasive racial stereotypes, direct racism and the success of minstrel shows. Black men and women lamented the hypocrisy of American freedom whilst at the same time garnering support in Britain via their appeals to British patriotism. Abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic wanted to create a distinct difference between the freedoms of Britain and the tyranny of the United States and hence tried to prove that racism was an American trait. Despite this, whilst audiences were surprised at Douglass’ natural eloquence and civilised bearing, racial stereotypes were still pervasive. For example, The Cork Examiner describes Douglass thus:

Evidently, from his colour and conformation, descended from parents of different races, his appearance is singularly pleasing and agreeable. The hue of his face and hands is rather a yellow brown or bronze, while there is little, if anything, in his features of that peculiar prominence of lower face, thickness of lips, and flatness of nose, which peculiarly characterize the true Negro type.(1)

African Americans such as Douglass and William Wells Brown were seen as the exception rather than the rule. Their mixed racial heritage – the white blood in their veins – was used to explain their talents, and descriptions such as the one above confirm that people sought out the ‘negro’ stereotypes and were surprised if a black person did not meet the expected criteria.

Nevertheless, this volume inspired the reader to think about the legacy of Douglass in Ireland, particularly in the wake of the recent unveiling of a statue in Cork. Fenton also mentions a number of plaques in Ireland that commemorate Douglass’s visit: one plaque was unveiled in September 2012 at the Imperial Hotel in Cork and another at Waterford City Hall in October the following year. Clearly, the links between Douglass and Ireland remain resilient and have perhaps been remembered more strongly than his English travels. Only one plaque to Douglass exists in England; this was unveiled by the Nubian Jak Heritage Trust in February 2013, with the support of the United States Ambassador to Britain. The plaque is situated on the site of abolitionist George Thompson’s house, where Douglass stayed when he lectured in London. This volume should open up debates about a range of issues, from Douglass’ experience with temperance and conflicts about Irish poverty to his legacy in Ireland as a whole. President Obama’s remarks about Douglass remind us not only of the great impact Douglass had on Ireland, but also of the strong relationship between America and Ireland today. It is always important to remember Douglass’s Irish journey as a ‘transformative experience’ (p. 188) and his political identity owes much to his international travels. His confidence and independence grew stronger whilst abroad, and this influenced his persona and writings for the rest of his life. Douglass’ time in Ireland inspired him to become a ‘great humanitarian’ (p. 188) and he championed many reform issues from temperance and suffrage, to feminism and social equality. The importance of Douglass’s Irish experience should not be overlooked, and Fenton neatly ends the volume with an anecdote highlighting O’Connell’s inspiring influence. One day in his home in Anacostia, Washington D.C., Douglass advised a young man to always follow the example of his hero, and ‘Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!’ (p. 206)

Notes