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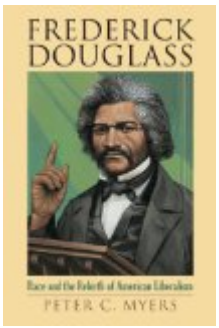

Peter C. Myers. *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xiii + 265 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1572-8.

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As America's most famous former slave, Frederick Douglass has long captured the interest of scholars and readers around the globe. He is widely hailed as one of the strongest and most eloquent critics of slavery in the nineteenth century. The first of his three autobiographies, ***The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass***, is an enduring volume in the American lexicon, and provides vivid testimony to the daily realities of slave life in the United States.[1] Although Douglass's thoughts on slavery and antebellum race matters are considered important, he is given much less credit by more recent scholars as an important thinker and guide for his race.

Peter C. Myers, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, succeeds in providing a corrective in ***Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism***. Myers argues that scholars are wrong to brush Douglass aside as less central to the American debate over racial equality in the post-emancipation era. Many scholars and members of the African American community have rated Douglass as too committed to integration, too willing to accept interracialism, and even too American. Expanding on an argument put forth originally by Philip S. Foner, Myers contends that close examination of Douglass's words demonstrates that he was a champion of principled natural rights liberalism.[2] In the conclusion to his multi-volume collection of Douglass's writings, Foner maintained that despite some failings in his later years, Douglass "unflinchingly raised the cry for equality."[3] Myers's scrutiny similarly leads him to conclude that Douglass's words retained their relevance to the racial debate in the period after the Civil War and that they remain relevant even today.

As he did in his earlier book, ***Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality*** (1999), Myers uses the lens of political philosophy to view Douglass and his place within the tradition of African American activism. He finds that Douglass "endures as that tradition's greatest representative, unequaled in his articulation of the first principles of natural rights liberalism in their application to racial justice in America" (p. 7). The five chapters that form the center of

the study trace the evolution of Douglass's use and application of natural rights thought. Making important use of Douglass's three autobiographies and numerous printed editorials and speeches, Myers's exploration of his subject is more thematic than chronological. In the opening chapter, he finds Douglass's discussion of slavery comparable to "classic discussion of tyranny and despotism by Aristotle and Montesquieu, and it surpasses both in its terrible vividness" (p. 17). Focus shifts from a narrative condemnation of slavery toward the development of Douglass's oppositional perspective and argument that slavery is wrong based on the philosophy of natural rights. But Myers moves beyond the issue of slavery so familiar to Douglass readers. Later chapters explore Douglass's thoughts on civil government and the U.S. constitutional order, the role and responsibility of federal and state governments in post-emancipation race relations, and finally his desire to create a fully integrated America.

According to Myers, Douglass was "right in finding the natural rights principles of the Declaration of Independence a necessary and sufficient theoretical basis for addressing the nation's racial problems" (p. 12). The hopefulness and optimism Douglass often expressed has been dismissed by some scholars and black activists as evidence that he was out of touch with the problems of his race. In the post-emancipation years, when Douglass was appointed to several minor political positions, his optimism was sometimes equated with blatant pandering to the white leaders of the Republican Party to which Douglass remained loyal throughout his life. The critical reexamination of these issues is the most important aspect of Myers's book. Indeed, Myers convincingly measures Douglass's words against his actions and concludes that Douglass acted and spoke out of a firm commitment to the eventual triumph of the natural rights doctrine that would ultimately lead to racial justice in the United States.

While Myers offers insightful analysis of Douglass's commitment to natural rights liberalism, the book does have a few minor inaccuracies. In the introduction the author notes that in his escape from slavery Douglass "made his way via the Underground Railroad" (p. 8). In actuality, Douglass borrowed the papers of a free African American sailor and took the train to New York on his own, where he was assisted by David Ruggles in meeting up with his future wife, Anna Murray.[4] Another minor error, which to be fair to Myers, appears in a number of secondary sources, is the statement that Douglass "developed his oratorical powers as a minister at the African Methodist Episcopal Church," in New Bedford, Massachusetts (p. 8). Douglass attended the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church in that city, not the AME Church, and his role has not been verified. He may have been a lay preacher, but was not an ordained minister as some sources have indicated.[5]

Despite these minor quibbles, Myers offers a thought-provoking reexamination of Douglass's thoughts on race and American liberalism. The thematic arrangement of the book allows the reader to understand the consistency of the current of natural rights principles running through Douglass's thought and writing long after slavery was abolished. The work is a welcome addition to the shelf of the Frederick Douglass scholar.

Notes

[1]. For the Center for Scholarly Edition-approved issue of this work, see John Blassingame et al., eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings, Volume 1, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2]. See Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers), 147-154.

[3]. Ibid., 148.

[4]. Douglass provides the first full account of his escape from slavery in his third autobiography. See Frederick Douglass, ***Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*** (1892; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1962), 197-201.

[5]. The best evidence for Douglass's involvement in the AMEZ church is found in William L. Andrews, "Frederick Douglass, Preacher," ***American Literature*** 54 (1982): 592-597.