Frederick Douglass and the "Atlantic Passage"

Readers of Liberating Sojourn are reminded that for Frederick Douglass and people of African descent, prior to the Civil War, the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean from the United States to England constituted a reversal of the notorious Middle Passage. In their introductory remarks, editors Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford describe Douglass' voyage as "a refashioning of the Atlantic crossing from a historically enslaving experience into a literally liberating one" (p. 3). Although the nine essays that make up this anthology provide information useful in interpreting Douglass and his significance regarding the Anglo American reform community, this study is not a "preconceived or uniform strategy. . . for viewing Douglass and the transatlantic community. Rather (the various scholars) take his visit. . . as a point of intellectual departure, an opportunity to reexamine aspects of life, a culture and a racialized world that has too often been analyzed in narrow, compartmentalized form" (p. 9).

The "liberating" aspect of Douglass's journey is twofold. One the one hand, in 1845 when he set sail for the British Isles, Douglass was a fugitive slave, in danger of being captured and returned to bondage. During his travels, Douglass (largely through the efforts of an Englishwoman) raised funds to purchase his freedom. He also acquired sufficient money to start his own newspaper. Conflict over these developments resulted in Douglass' break with the white (Garrisonian) abolitionists who sponsored the trip. Finally, Douglass became, as William McFeely explained, "triumphantly sure of himself," free to act according to his own wishes.

In a study exploring the relationship between Douglass and Unitarians, David Turley argues persuasively that British Unitarians (described by their founder as "Theological Negroes") admired Douglass because he did not follow the dictates of Garrisonians, many of whom were American Unitarians. The intellectual rigor that Douglass displayed in England was another common bond with Unitarians. Both traits demonstrated that Douglass was an autonomous agent, who refused to conform to the new orthodoxy of the "politically correct" abolitionist community.
Others were also liberated by Douglass’ journey – British women abolitionists. Douglass was treated as a celebrity, which, indeed, he was. The response of women was so enthusiastic that some men began to worry. One male reformer wondered how Douglass (who remained the embodiment of propriety) would “bear the sight of his wife, after all the petting he gets from beautiful, elegant and accomplished women” (p. 8). Apparently he found it difficult. After his return to the United States, Douglass’ illiterate African American wife retreated to the kitchen, where she performed and helped supervise domestic chores. She was replaced as hostess by various of Douglass’ English assistants. When his wife died, Douglass married a more suitable companion in regards to intellectual refinement, social skills, and reform interests – a white American woman from a middle class family.

Douglass’s feminist credentials were questioned by two scholars, Anne Goodwyn-Jones and Cynthia S. Hamilton. Instead of contributing to the liberation of women, Jones and Hamilton argue that Douglass benefited from the traditional gender division of labor and perpetuated the reigning female stereotype of the day, the cult of true womanhood or domesticity.

Goodwyn-Jones compared Douglass’s visit and account of his trip to Britain with those of another famous fugitive, Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs was in England at the same time as Douglass (although apparently their paths never crossed). According to Goodwyn-Jones, “Though both were managed and paid by whites... Douglass had become a heroic figure in the public predominantly male world, while Jacobs, despite an equally dramatic escape from slavery and five years seniority to Douglass, remained in the female world of domesticity” (p. 94). While a speaking tour brought Douglass to the British Isles, Jacobs traveled to England as a servant. She was employed by a prominent white widower as a nursemaid for his young daughter. Gender and different circumstances that took them abroad are reflected in their accounts of their travels. Goodwyn-Jones explains, “Douglass emphasizes the importance to him of the world of political connections... By contrast, Jacobs, began her story of her travel to England by telling her readers of her lodgings and supper.”

Most important, Goodwyn-Jones emphasizes that Douglass and Jacobs were both formed by the patriarchal world of the slaveholding South, where white men had the power, and all others, black males and females and white women, were subordinate. Goodwyn-Jones argues, the lives of Douglass and Jacobs "as adults performed scripts of specifically Southern manhood and womanhood. And manhood and womanhood in the South, for black as well as white, slave as well as free, were deeply implicated with meanings of class" (p. 96). Consequently, "Jacobs' representation of the life of a woman in slavery is underscored by her identification with privileged white women," and Douglass's "primary identification as a man was... as a white southern master." With this in mind, Goodwyn-Jones asks, "How could the great antislavery advocate being articulate, politically active white women-possibly as lovers-to live in the house with his dark wife, who stayed in the kitchen while the guests were in the living room and who remained illiterate all her life. How could he live later at Cedar Hill with a white wife in a big house apart from the black community" (p. 104)?

Hamilton examined the various autobiographies Douglass wrote at different times in his life and reached several “incriminating” conclusions. She explained that although depicted as an early champion of women’s rights, Douglass, "gave very slight attention to the subject" in his memoirs (p. 73). Moreover, Douglass’s depiction of women in slavery can be seen "[a]s a necessary correlative of his evolving presentation of himself" as the heroic Victorian male. Ultimately, his refashioning of female relatives "are more in keeping with the conventional image of domesticity" (p. 73).
Jones and Hamilton indicate that Douglass was never liberated from Victorian gender ideological restraints.

The studies of Richard Hardack, who focused on Douglass’s views of the Irish in Ireland and America, and Sarah Meer, who examined the impact of minstrel shows in England during the time of Douglass’s visit, present interesting light on notions of race and ethnicity, as well as religion in England and the U.S. Douglass, like many in the abolitionist community, was critical of the Irish because of their Catholicism. He shared the traditional Anglo Saxon Protestant belief, that the first loyalty of Catholics is to the Vatican. Consequently, Irish Catholics were perceived as potential threats to American society and democratic government.

Douglass’ negative view of the Irish in America was reinforced by the growing tensions between African Americans and Irish Americans. These factors influenced his Anglophilia. Because of his very positive reception in the country, he tended to see England in utopian terms, as a country devoid of racial prejudice. Consequently, Douglass did not identify with the Irish anti-British imperialist position. Hardack also pointed out that he did not relate to the class dimension of the Irish situation.

Douglass’ failure to grasp the significance of class oppression put him at odds with the most prominent movement of the English lower classes of that day, chartism. The issue of class was not a top priority for American abolitionists. Abolitionists in the United States, and to a lesser extent their counterparts in England, did not concentrate on the plight of the white working class. (Douglass’s experiences in America with working class whites, a growing number of whom were of Irish descent also contributed to his failure to identify with their concerns). In England the Chartists responded by criticizing abolitionists because of their failure to recognize the connection between chattel slavery abroad and wage slavery at home.

Whenever he encountered racial prejudice in Britain, Douglass attributed it to importation. From one major perspective he was accurate. At the same time the British people were introduced to Douglass who was probably the most impressive American of African descent of his era, the masses of English people were encountering racial stereotypes perpetrated by minstrel shows. In nineteenth century Britain, the most popular performers were the “Ethiopian Serenaders” (whites in black face). Further complicating the racial/ethnic conflicts, many of the first white performers to “black up” were Irish. The racist dimensions of early minstrel shows were not based solely on the African diaspora, but more generally on the British imperial experience. Throughout this period the British were subjugating non-European people. Racial stereotypes of non-white people in the popular culture helped reinforce the racist rationale for conquest, that is, the inherent racial inferiority of various colonized people.

Alasdair Pettinger points to another aspect of ethnicity raised by Douglass’s visit – the identification of white southerners (many of whom with Celtic ancestry) with Scottish culture. The abolitionist campaign impinged on this when Douglass confronted members of the Free Church of Scotland, regarding donations given by slaveholders. His “Give Back the Money” campaign succeeded in making these Scottish Protestants examine the moral dilemma that loomed. On the one hand, this group was dedicated to the liberation of the slave, with whom they no doubt identified because they also struggled to free themselves.

Two years before Douglass arrived, Scottish evangelicals walked out of the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church of Scotland. The central grievance was the power to control their own affairs, particularly the appointment of ministers. To compensate for the loss of funds, members of the Free Church launched a very successful fundraising campaign in the United States. Many in slaveholding states like Louisiana gave gener-
ously. Pettinger argues that Douglass not only forced these Scottish evangelicals to "give back the money," but he helped forge a new identification of Scotland with American abolitionists, rather than the slaveholding South.

On the whole, *Liberating Sojourn* offers a fruitful discussion of Frederick Douglass and the period. In addition, readers are provided with important insight into gender, race and racism, class, and religion and ethics as debated and played out in the Anglo-American reform community of the nineteenth century. This book, like its central subject -- Frederick Douglass -- as pointed out by William McFeely, is a study for the nineties. The essays liberate Douglass and the complex issues of his era from the "narrow, compartmentalized forms" of the past.

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