

How Frederick Douglass Gained More than His Freedom in Britain

How the great abolitionist's time in the UK transformed his life, by Laurence Fenton

Although President Donald Trump's comments last year about Frederick Douglass having 'done an amazing job' confused matters somewhat, the escaped slave-turned-abolitionist orator is definitely dead, suffering a heart attack in the dining room of his grand Cedar Hills home on the outskirts of Washington, DC on the evening of 20 February 1895, the luxurious surroundings a far cry from the windowless log cabin in which he was born in Maryland in February 1818.

A revered figure for African Americans, the bicentenary of Douglass's birth is being celebrated with events and activities across the United States, including the 'One Million Abolitionists' project that has seen the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives, an organisation run by his descendants, give away a million copies of his famous autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* to schoolchildren. His life, however, and with it the course of African American history, could have been very different had a group of Newcastle Quakers not purchased his freedom in the winter of 1846.

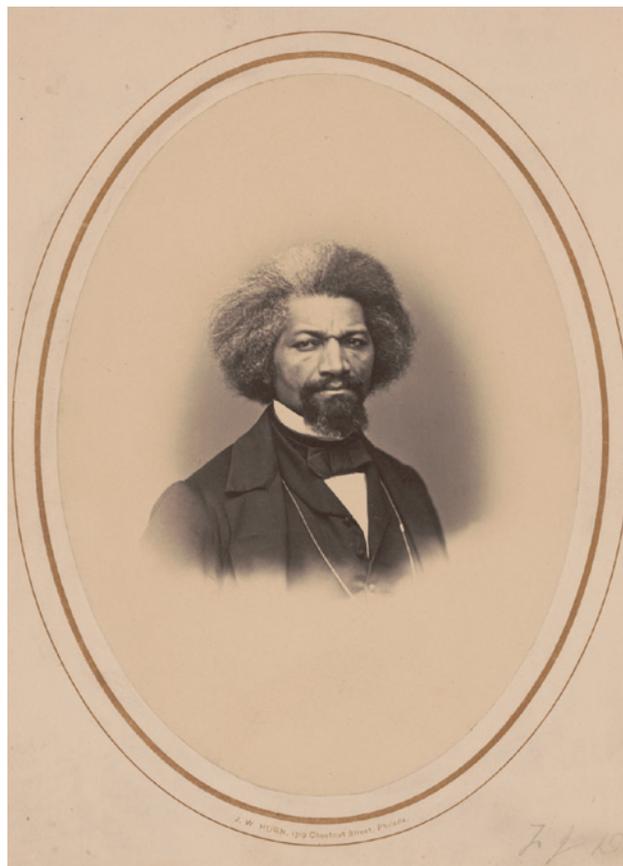
Douglass had travelled to Britain a year earlier, having been advised to leave America until the furore over the publication of his incendiary autobiography died down. He was following a well-worn path, anti-slavery activists on both sides of the Atlantic having long drawn succour and support from each other's lecture tours and travels. Britain held a special place in the minds of American abolitionists, having long led the way in

the movement to abolish the international slave trade, one of the first great milestones of which was the passage of legislation banning British vessels from the trade in 1807. In what was seen as another mighty moral gesture – one that placed the iniquity of America's continued

'As early as I can remember, I have thought of England in connection with freedom,' Douglass told an audience in London in the summer of 1846. The sentiment would have been appreciated, Britain enjoying its position on the moral high ground of international affairs – especially in relation to its increasingly powerful former colony, the United States. What Douglass failed to mention, however, was the incredible extent to which slavery and the slave trade had permeated every facet of British life for more than two centuries, with even the much-vaunted emancipation only coming to pass after a massive compensation package (worth about £17 billion in today's money) was put in place for the West Indies planters, the newly freed people being left to fend for themselves.

In London, Douglass stayed at the South Kensington home of the (now largely-forgotten) Radical MP George Thompson and mixed with political and literary figures like the Chartist agitator William Lovett, the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, who was staying in Clapton with his English translator Mary Howitt. He also travelled to Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester among innumerable other towns and cities across the land, the venues for his speeches ranging from small Quaker meeting houses to the then newly-built Glasgow City Halls.

The tall and striking 28-year-old Douglass was feted by the elite and



slaveholding in ever-starker relief – it had also abolished slavery in the British West Indies in 1833, a move that freed more than 800,000 slaves.

Important figures from Frederick Douglass's time in Britain. Clockwise from far left:

Frederick Douglass, c. 1862; Henry Russell, the English singer who performed at the Farewell Soirée for Douglass in March 1847; Giuseppe Mazzini, the exiled Italian nationalist whom Douglass met in London; John Bright, the politician who befriended Douglass and contributed £50 to the fund to secure his manumission; Hans Christian Andersen, the Swedish author whom Douglass met in London; George Thompson, the Radical MP at whose home Douglass stayed in London; Eliza Wigham, Mary Estlin and Jane Wigham, supporters of Douglass during his tour of Britain. ALL IMAGES COURTESY BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



brought crowds of thousands to their feet with devastating denunciations of slavery, often brandishing a pair of bloody manacles before his astonished audiences as part of the spectacle. Praised in the pages of *The Times* and Charles Dickens's *Daily News*, other talks seemed to presage the still-unresolved question of paying reparations to countries like Jamaica so devastated by slavery. His manumission secured for £150 – \$711.66 – by the Quaker sisters-in-law Anna and Ellen Richardson in Newcastle, he returned to America in the spring of 1847 a celebrity and icon of international standing.

Douglass always considered his time in Britain one of the most transformative periods of his life – but not just because he gained his legal freedom. Revelling in the freedom of movement and mind afforded by being away from the oppressive climate of the United States – where in even the 'free' northern states he was a victim of beatings and racial abuse – the tour fundamentally altered his political outlook, social conscience and sense of self.

At the most basic level, Douglass delighted in walking unimpeded through the streets of Britain and visiting museums, galleries and other public attractions like the Tower of London. There were no shouts or slurs or cries of 'We don't allow n-----s in here.' No 'colour test' kept him out of omnibuses or trains. He even went to the Houses of Parliament, where he watched the Prime Minister of the day Sir Robert Peel address the Commons,

knowing a trip to Congress in Washington would have seen him end up in chains.

Douglass grew much more confident, began to follow his own path, breaking away from the American Anti-Slavery Society, the abolitionist organisation that had arranged his tour, when he returned to the United States and becoming essentially his own movement. Deeply affected by the scenes of poverty that shadowed him all over the British Isles, the changes wrought went further still, for it was during this tour that the great humanitarian Douglass was born. Where previously his focus had been purely on anti-slavery, he increasingly turned his attention to the 'wrongs and sufferings' of the 'great family of man', going on to lend his weighty voice in later years to campaigns for women's rights, free public education, prison reform and the abolition of capital punishment.

'I am not only an American slave, but a man, and as such, am bound to use my powers for the welfare of the whole human brotherhood,' Douglass informed readers of the Boston abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* in a letter sent from Montrose in Scotland in the spring of 1846, coming to view his fight against slavery as part of a larger, global struggle against social injustice. 'I am not going through this land with my eyes shut, ears stopped, or heart steeled!' ★

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