

Two Outspoken Champions of Freedom: Frederick Douglass and Daniel O'Connell

By Dr. Christine Kinealy

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In August 1845, Frederick Douglass, an abolitionist and former slave, sailed to the United Kingdom. His primary motive was to avoid re-capture and being returned to his previous 'owner,' having escaped from slavery seven years earlier. Douglass was accompanied by James Buffum, a businessman and abolitionist from Lynn in Massachusetts. The two men bonded when Buffum had to intervene to prevent Douglass from being beaten by an anti-abolition mob onboard. Shortly following their arrival in the transatlantic port of Liverpool, Douglass and Buffum sailed to Dublin to oversee an Irish publication of Douglass' narrative" of his life. Douglass remained in Ireland for four months and described that time as "transformative," explaining to his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison:

*I live a new life. The warm and generous co-operation extended to me by the friends of my despised race ... and the entire absence of everything that looked like prejudice against me, on account of the color of my skin--contrasted so strongly with my long and bitter experience in the United States that I look with wonder and amazement on the transition.*¹

What were the steps that brought Douglass to Ireland? Douglass had been born into slavery in Maryland in 1818 and separated from his mother, Harriet Bailey, when he was an infant, seeing her only four or five times prior to her young death. Unusually, Douglass had been taught to read, even though teaching slaves to read had been outlawed, and he would secretly read newspapers to extend his vocabulary and knowledge of the world. He was particularly impressed by the speeches made by Arthur O'Connor in the Irish House of Commons, who had spoken in defense of Catholic Emancipation, the right of Catholics to be members of parliament.²

When Douglass was about 12-years-old and working in a Baltimore shipyard, two Irishmen working in the same shipyard advised him to "run away to the North." Initially, Douglass doubted the apparent sympathy of these "seemingly good men," but their words ignited his desire for freedom.³ Eight years later, Douglass escaped from his servitude. It was a brave decision as he would be in danger of being returned to slavery. His given name had been Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, but upon gaining his freedom, he changed it to Frederick Johnson, and then to Frederick Douglass. Regardless of the danger of capture, Douglass did not hide from public view, initially working in a shipyard in New Bedford, where everything "looked clean, new and, beautiful."⁴ In August 1841, he attended an anti-slavery meeting in Nantucket and was invited to speak. He did so reluctantly, explaining that "I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down."⁵ However, his eloquence and his compelling story led to his invitation to work as a lecturer on behalf of William Lloyd Garrison's Anti-Slavery Movement. He agreed, but, by doing so, he made himself a visible public figure to those who supported slavery. In 1845, to counter accusations of lying, Douglass published his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Within four months of its printing, 5,000 copies had been sold.⁶ The resulting publicity, however, put Douglass in danger of capture, so he was persuaded to travel to the United Kingdom for his safety and to promote the cause of anti-slavery.

Douglass's journey to Liverpool reminded him of his precarious status, even outside of his native land. He was not allowed to travel first-class. However, as the *Cambria* neared its destination, the Captain invited him to lecture on his experiences. A number of pro-slavery passengers objected and threatened to throw Douglass overboard if the lecture should proceed, but the intervention of an unidentified Irishman who threatened to throw the dissenters overboard diffused the situation.⁷ In the press, however, the incident resulted in polarized coverage on both sides of the Atlantic.

Douglass and Buffum stayed in Liverpool for only two days before sailing to Ireland, arriving there on August 31, 1845. Douglass wrote immediately to Garrison, saying "I am now safe in old Ireland, in the beautiful city of Dublin."⁸ Initially, the two men had intended to remain in Ireland for only a few weeks, but this was extended in order to oversee the publication of the Irish edition of the *Narrative* and to enable them to lecture on anti-slavery. Being in Ireland also proved a joyful experience for Douglass:

*One of the most pleasing features of my visit, thus far, has been a total absence of all manifestations of prejudice against me, on account of my color. The change of circumstances, in this, is particularly striking ... I find myself not treated as a colour, but as a man - not as a thing, but as a child of the common Father of us all.*⁹

In Dublin, Douglass and Buffum stayed at the home of Richard Webb. The Webb family were well-respected Quakers and philanthropists, and Richard Webb, a printer, was publishing the *Narrative*. Webb also helped establish the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. By supporting total and immediate abolition, the Hibernian Society were closer to Garrison's approach, rather than that of the more moderate British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which favored a more gradual one.¹⁰

Inevitably, Douglass's presence in Ireland attracted attention in the local press. It was overwhelmingly positive, and his "manly" and "pleasing" appearance was often described in detail:

*Evidently from his colour and conformation, descended from parents of different race, his appearance is singularly pleasing and agreeable ... His voice is well toned and musical, his selection of language most happy, and his manner easy and graceful.*¹¹

The timing of Douglass's visit was inauspicious, as it coincided with the first appearance of a blight in the potato crop. At this early stage, however, nobody knew that this crop failure would mark the onset of prolonged famine in Ireland. Douglass did, on the other hand, comment on Irish poverty, but he drew a distinction between Irish oppression and American slavery, explaining:

*The Irishman is poor, but he is not a slave. He may be in rags, but he is not a slave. He is still the master of his own body ... The Irishman has not only the liberty to emigrate from his country, but he has liberty at home. He can write, and speak, and cooperate for the attainment of his rights and the redress of his wrongs.*¹²

There were many high points in Douglass's stay in Dublin, including meeting with Father Mathew, "the Apostle of Temperance," for Douglass was himself a committee teetotaler, and being invited to dine with the Lord Mayor of Dublin in the Mansion House. Undoubtedly, the most momentous part of his visit was his encounter with Daniel O'Connell, the "Liberator," who had been an outspoken champion of abolition since the 1820s and achieved international fame for winning Catholic Emancipation in 1829. In 1830, when a number of British slavery supporters asked him to be silent on the question, he responded:

*Gentlemen, God knows that I speak for the saddest people the sun sees, but may my right hand forget its cunning and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth before, to help Ireland, I keep silent on the negro question.*¹³

By the 1840s, Daniel O'Connell was the most famous and outspoken abolitionist on both sides of the Atlantic. The American press frequently quoted his impassioned speeches on the topic and these appeared almost weekly in Garrison's influential anti-slavery newspaper, the *Liberator*. In the "Introduction" to the first edition of the *Narrative*, Garrison referred to the Irishman as "Daniel O'Connell, the distinguished advocate of universal emancipation, and the mightiest champion of prostrate but not conquered Ireland."¹⁴ By doing so, Garrison had created a tangible link between the 70-year-old Irish abolitionist and the 27-year-old rising star of American anti-slavery before the two had even met.

O'Connell was at the radical end of the abolition movement, consistently arguing for immediate, not gradual, abolition and insisting that African-American people were the equals of white people, an unpopular view at the time. He also viewed the ending of slavery and his demand for Irish independence as part of a wider struggle for human rights, a view not shared by many abolitionists or nationalists. He averred, "I am the friend of liberty in every clime, class and color. My sympathy with distress is not confined within the narrow bounds of my own green island. No, it extends itself to every corner of the earth."¹⁵ In keeping with this world-wide perspective, he also agitated on behalf of the oppressed Maoris and Aborigines. Douglass, in contrast, claimed upon his arrival in Ireland that he was only concerned with only one issue, the ending of slavery. However, O'Connell's internationalist view on human suffering profoundly impacted Douglass's political development.

Douglass first heard of the great Daniel O'Connell in 1837, when the Irishman caused an international incident by refusing to shake hands with the American Ambassador, Andrew Stevenson, and accused him of being a slave-breeder.¹⁶ Following this incident, Douglass read some of O'Connell's speeches. Inevitably, while in Ireland, Douglass hoped to hear the Irishman in person. To do so, Douglass attended a Repeal meeting for repeal of the union with Britain. Once there, Douglass "observed the denseness of the crowd [and] almost despaired of getting in." However, he remained and was entranced by O'Connell's eloquence:

*I have heard many speakers within the last four years - speakers of the first order; but I confess, I have never heard one, by whom I was more completely captivated than by Mr. O'Connell ... It seems to me that the voice of O'Connell is enough to calm the most violent passion ... There is a sweet persuasiveness in it, beyond any voice I ever heard. His power over an audience is perfect.*¹⁷

Towards the end of the meeting, when the audience was thinning out, Douglass was introduced to O'Connell, who invited Douglass on stage to say a few words. In the course of his short speech, Douglass's admiration for the Irishman was palpable:

*The poor trampled slave of Carolina had heard the name of the Liberator with joy and hope, and he himself had heard the wish that some black O'Connell would yet rise up among his countrymen and cry 'Agitate, agitate, agitate.'*¹⁸

This brief, unplanned meeting greatly influenced Douglass.

The success of his stay in Dublin encouraged Douglass to remain in Ireland. At the beginning of October, he travelled to other parts of the country, lecturing in Wexford, Waterford, Youghal, Limerick, and Belfast. His treatment as an equal continued to surprise him, writing, "I saw no-one that seemed to be shocked or disturbed at my dark presence. No one seemed to feel himself contaminated by contact with me."¹⁹ He was given a pocket bible at his final lecture in Belfast before leaving for Scotland in 1846 and responded by saying, "I shall always remember the people of Belfast, and the kind friends I now see around me, and wherever else I feel myself to be a stranger, I will remember I have a home in Belfast."²⁰ At the same meeting, the Belfast Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society was formed, with Mary-Anne McCracken, sister of Henry Joy, who had been hanged in 1798, as one of its founding members. On the eve of his departure from Ireland, Douglass reflected on his situation:

... as to nation, I belong to none The land of my birth welcomes me to her shores only as a slave, and spurns with contempt the idea of treating me differently. So I am an outcast from the society of my childhood, and an outlaw in the land of my birth.

Nonetheless, he added, "I can truly say, I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country ... the entire absence of everything that looked like prejudice against me, on account of the color of my skin--contrasted so strongly with my long and bitter experience in the United States, that I look with wonder and amazement on the transition."²¹

When Douglass left Ireland, he continued his tour in Britain. While there, a number of women Abolitionists "purchased" his freedom for £150. At this stage, he had been away from his wife and children in America for approximately 20 months. During that time, he had given almost 200 lectures, over 40 of which had been delivered in Ireland. Douglass returned to the United States in April 1847 as a free man. His changed status, however, did not protect him from the discrimination similar to what he had encountered on his journey to Liverpool.²²

Douglass's time away from the U.S., particularly in Ireland, changed him in a number of ways. He now saw the crusade for abolition as part of a much wider struggle for social justice, writing from Ireland:

*I see much here to remind me of my former condition, and I confess I should be ashamed to lift up my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over.*²³

This approach remained pivotal to Douglass' subsequent political activities. Towards the end of his life, Douglass served as Minister to Haiti. In 1893, he paid tribute to the beleaguered country, the first black republic, referencing both Ireland and Daniel O'Connell in his speech:

*It was once said by the great Daniel O'Connell, that the history of Ireland might be traced, like a wounded man through a crowd, by the blood. The same can be said of the history of Haiti as a free state.*²⁴

Douglass died in 1895, and his passing attracted little notice in Ireland. Recent scholarship has rejuvenated interest in Douglass's time there and of the relationship between him and O'Connell. In 2011, President Barack Obama acknowledged the Irishman's role in his own development:

*Douglass drew inspiration from the Irishman's courage and intelligence, ultimately modeling his own struggle for justice on O'Connell's belief that change could be achieved peacefully through rule of law ... the two men shared a universal desire for freedom--one that cannot be contained by language or culture or even the span of an ocean*²⁵

In April 2014, Congressman John Lewis gave the inaugural Frederick Douglass/Daniel O'Connell memorial lecture in Dublin. In it, he explored:

*... the unique relationship between Daniel O'Connell and Frederick Douglass and their common cause of abolitionism and also on the inspiration taken by activists in Northern Ireland from the US civil rights movement in remarks which illuminated his own lifetime devotion to non-violence and reconciliation.*²⁶

Douglass's brief time in Ireland transformed him into a fearless champion of international human rights, and this legacy continues to provide inspiration today.

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The Saddest People the Sun Sees (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), *Private Charity and the Great Hunger. The Kindness of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), and *An Drochshaol* (Dublin: Coisceim, 2016).

Endnotes

¹Douglass, Belfast to Garrison, 1 January 1846, pub. In the *Liberator*, 30 January 1846.

² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, written by himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Society, 1845) chapters i and vi.

³ *Ibid.*, chapter vii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter xi.

⁵ *Narrative*, chapter XI.

⁶ James Matlack, 'The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass', *Phylon*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1st Qtr., 1979), p. 15.

⁷ 'Incident on *Cambria*', the *Liberator*, 28 November 1845.

⁸ Douglass, Dublin, to Garrison, 1 September 1845, reprinted in the *Liberator*, 26 September 1845.

⁹ Douglass, Dublin to Garrison, 16 September 1845, reprinted in the *Liberator*, 10 October 1845.

¹⁰ For more on the Irish abolition movements see Christine Kinealy, 'Daniel O'Connell and the Anti-Slavery Movement, The Saddest People the Sun Sees' (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

'Anti-Slavery Breakfast', *Cork Examiner*, 15 October 1845.

¹² Extract from a Lecture on Slavery, at Rochester, 1 December 1850, quoted in Douglass, *Bondage*, p. 433.

¹³ This story was retold by Wendell Phillips and others, Wendell Phillips, *A Lecture delivered at the Academy of Music, New York, 12 May 1868*, in Wendell Phillips, *Lectures and Speeches* (New York and London: Street and Smith, 1902), pp 188-89.

¹⁴ William Lloyd Garrison, 'Preface', Douglass, *Narrative*.

¹⁵ Speech by O'Connell in Conciliation Hall quoted in letter from Douglass to Garrison, 29 September 1845, reprinted as, 'Letters from Frederick Douglass. no. III', in *The Liberator*, 24 October 1845.

¹⁶ Howard Temperley, 'The O'Connell Stevenson Contretemps: A Reflection of the Anglo-American Slavery Issue', *Journal of Negro History*, 47 (1962), pp 217- 33.

¹⁷ Douglass, Dublin to Garrison, 29 September 1845, reprinted in *Liberator*, 24 October 1845.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Douglass, Dublin, to Garrison, 28 October 1845, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 28 November 1845.

²⁰ Breakfast to Mr. Frederick Douglass, *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 7 January 1846.

²¹ Douglass, Belfast to Garrison, 1 January 1846, *Liberator*, 30 January 1846.

²² Douglass to editor of *London Times*, 6 April 1847.

²³ Frederick Douglass, Scotland, to Garrison, 26 February 1846, reprinted in *Liberator*, 27 March 1846.

²⁴ Lecture on Haiti, World's Fair, 1893, quoted in Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass, Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago Press, 2000), p. 483

²⁵ White House Press Office, Remarks by President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland at a St. Patrick's Day Reception, 17 March 2011: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/17/remarks-president-obama-vice-president-biden-and-prime-minister-enda-ken>

²⁶ Congressman John Lewis on the legacy of the US Civil Rights movement: <https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/our-work/casestudiesarchive/2014/april/john-lewis-iveagh-house-lecture/>