

Frederick Douglass by William S. McFeely. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1991. 544 pp. illustrations. \$24.95.

Ever since Frederick Douglass made his debut as a fugitive slave at a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Nantucket in the summer of 1841, he has been recognized as a singular American phenomenon, though in contradictory regards. He represents a uniquely gifted statesman and, at the same time, Everyman as former slave. Douglass's most popular speech over half a century--"The Self-Made Man"--hinted at his fascination for Americans of many stations: If Douglass had seized his freedom, educated himself, gained the applause and respect of the educated trans-Atlantic community, published his own newspapers and books, held respectable offices, and invested wisely in real estate, any determined man, through honest hard work, might do as well. By the Civil War, he had risen from the very bottom of the American social hierarchy to a respectable, upper-middling point.

Douglass was born Frederick Bailey on the Maryland Eastern Shore and raised by his grandparents. Never sure of his paternity, he wondered whether his master were his father and remained mistaken as to the year of his birth (1818) until well into maturity. He saw his mother, Harriet Bailey, only a few times in his life, as she, a slave, lived and worked on farms that were miles distant from her parents' cabin.

Certain things distinguished Douglass's experience in slavery from that of his millions of enslaved contemporaries: he spent many years in

the city of Baltimore in the 1820s and 1830s, where he learned reading and ship caulking; he lived in a state that was close to the North; and a free black woman, Anna Murray, had money that she was willing to lend him to finance his escape. Douglass and Murray married as soon as they were reunited in freedom in New York City in 1838 and remained married until her death in 1882. One crucial experience Douglass did share with the great majority of African Americans--the irrevocable fact of having been born a slave.

Once free, Douglass quickly became a distinguished personage in the world of antislavery and feminist reform. He spoke and wrote indefatigably. Although nurtured in non-partisan Garrisonian abolitionism, during the late 1840s and early 1850s he came to see political action (for women as well as for men) as the most promising means of abolishing slavery and effecting equal citizenship. The Civil War and Reconstruction reinforced his political convictions, which Douglass clung to in the form of allegiance to the Republican party, even as unconscionable violence destroyed Reconstruction's democracies and freedpeople fled the Deep South in fear of reenslavement.

Douglas's second wife was a strong feminist, but she was also much younger than he and white, which proved controversial. His children disapproved, and among his black colleagues, only Ida B. Wells acted decently about this marriage. Douglass remained a supporter of woman suffrage--though never at the cost of black male suffrage--right up to his death in 1895.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr., and W. E. B. Du Bois, Douglass is unusual among African Americans for having been the subject of several biographies. Douglass himself helped the process along immensely, for as a journalist and widely-quoted lecturer, he spoke and published his views as they evolved. His sense of privacy obscures our view of the inner man, but at least we know what he said and where he was most of the time from 1838 until 1895. We take for granted such knowledge about well-published and well-investigated twentieth-century Americans, but few nineteenth-century African-American public lives are as accessible as Douglass's.

The abundance of Douglass studies relates directly to Douglass's own life-writing, which forms the core of his biographies. During his life in freedom he wrote three influential autobiographies: The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), which established him as a master of the slave narrative; My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), which provides a heart-breaking analysis of the realities of slavery; and The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881), which represents the satisfied reminiscences of a great man. These autobiographies, particularly the first two, related the narrative that most of Douglass's biographers have echoed: self-education in Baltimore, trials back on the Eastern Shore, the triumphant fight with the slave-breaker, Edward Covey, after which Douglass concludes, "I was nothing before: I WAS A MAN NOW."

These biographies unfold the proud chronicle of a self-made man. Douglass suffers the slights of racism, but made of finer fiber than his assailants, he transcends. Little appears to shadow the triumph of from-slavery-to-freedom. And little illuminates Douglass's experiences as a

son, husband, father, and friend. Such biographies of prominent African-Americans, including Douglass, have shared the penchant of their famous subjects to merge individuality with the fate of humanity, which in this case is the Race. The practical outcome of such a conflation is the occlusion of private lives and an emphasis on racist incidents.

This is not the scenario in William McFeely's fine, revealing, feminist biography. McFeely's presentation of Frederick Douglass as a person who lived within families of blood and sentiment makes this the first biography that escapes Douglass's own long reach. Frederick Douglass is absolutely nonpareil.

The Pulitzer-prize-winning biographer of O. O. Howard (the head of the Freedmen's Bureau) and Ulysses S. Grant, and a carpetbagger Professor of History at the University of Georgia, McFeely skillfully manages Frederick Douglass's human context. Many white biographers have been especially tempted to place their black subjects only among whites, a temptation that in Douglass's case is doubly inviting. Throughout his life, Douglass was proud of his ability to sustain partnerships across the color line, and his longest-lived friendships were with intelligent white women: Julia Griffiths, Amy Post, and Ottila Assing. Giving these relationships their due, McFeely also brings Douglass's families into the foreground.

McFeely shows that light-skinned young Frederick matured in a complex, bi-racial family setting in which his mother could not nurture him and his owner/employers figured periodically as substitute parents. After a childhood of fractured and interrupted attachments, Douglass

escaped from slavery and married a dark-skinned woman five years his senior who never learned to read. The Douglasses' five children (one of whom died in childhood) were all darker in color than Frederick, which they felt counted against them in his eyes. Whatever their (or his) feelings, Douglass could not be faulted as a generous father, even though his grandchildren came closer than his children to realizing his expectations.

Beyond the personal dynamics of Douglass's family, McFeely rightly notes that Douglass could not protect his progeny from the greatest obstacle to their succeeding in life, which was American racism in its economic guise. William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass both came from humble beginnings, but their children followed far different trajectories. Frances Garrison's husband was a millionaire; Rosetta Douglass married a hack driver. Francis Jackson Garrison became an editor at a prestigious Boston publishing house; Frederick Douglass, Jr., had to fight for admission into a trade union. Here and throughout, McFeely's analysis is beautifully astute.

McFeely's Frederick Douglass exceeds distinction. This biography--tender and critical, respectful yet observant--presents a character of Frederick Douglass that is more thoroughly human than seemed possible in careful scholarship, all without diminishing a great man's stature.

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