

Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom. By David W. Blight (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). Pp. 888. Hardcover, \$37.50.

After writing extensively about the iconic nineteenth-century abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass in 1991, 1993, and 2014, distinguished Yale historian David Blight has once again returned to the preeminent self-made man for his newest book, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*.¹ His reasons go beyond unquenched fascination with the complexities of the subject material. *Prophet of Freedom* uses the recently uncovered treasure trove of Douglass material from the private collection of Walter and Linda Evans, to which Blight was granted access. Much of the new material recovered from the Evans collection allowed him to shed new light on the latter third of Douglass's life, a complicated and dynamic period that is not covered in Douglass's famous autobiographies. Additionally, because of his decades-long research focus on Douglass, Blight boldly deviates from other scholars by expounding upon (at times, even challenging) some of the well-known anecdotes of Douglass's life in a way that dismantles the precedent of most academic writers who only carefully, if at all, dispute Douglass's own accounts in their newer works. In fact, it is Blight's masterful threading of thoroughly researched material and richly detailed narrative prose that makes this book, by far, the most definitive biography of Frederick Douglass to date.

As Blight attests, any writer undertaking a retelling of Douglass must contend with Douglass's own prolific writings, specifically his three autobiographies published in 1845, 1855, and 1881 (with a later revision arriving in 1892). However, Blight's purpose with *Frederick Douglass* is to delve much deeper into the stories already known, and attempt to fill in the many blanks that Douglass himself left out: "In the memoirs he is a self-made hero who leaves a great deal unsaid... But as he sits majestically at the head of the table, it is as if he slips out of the room right when we wish to know more." (xvii) One of the ways Blight succeeds in this endeavor is in his deft analysis of the seemingly contrasting elements between Douglass's private and professional life. Using a wide variety of supplemental materials (the book's endnotes span over 80 pages), Blight broadens the scope of Douglass's most important relationships. He pays special attention to the personal-public disparities as they played out across different relational capacities: romantic (with his two wives, Anna Murray Douglass and Helen Pitts Douglass), intimate/platonic (with Julia Griffiths and Ottilie Assing), maternal (with childhood slaveholding mistress Sophia Auld), advisory (with famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who later became an ideological adversary), and politically symbolic (with Abraham Lincoln).

In fact, it is the inherent complexities of this latter relationship with which Blight chooses to open his book. Rather than starting chronologically with Douglass's birth into enslavement in 1818, Blight instead begins his book almost 60 years later, with Douglass's frank and unromantic portrayal of Lincoln during his 1876 keynote speech in Washington, D.C. at the dedication of The Freedmen's Memorial. Although this was the first national monument to depict an African-American, and Douglass was the first African-American to speak before an

¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave*. Edited by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993); Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Edited by David W. Blight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

audience of such significance (Blight writes it was “composed of all the leadership of the federal government in one place,” a feat he contends would not be repeated until Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009), Douglass refused to give an uncritical or mythologized address on President Lincoln. (5) Instead, Blight underscores that Douglass’s address spoke directly to Lincoln’s shortcomings regarding abolitionism, in hopes that any perceived progresses made under Lincoln’s direction would not be seen as finished works. By opening his book with a snapshot that highlights Douglass’s ability to speak bluntly about the failings of a national hero, Blight also signals to readers his approach for dealing with Douglass’s own complexities throughout the book.

One of Blight’s notable successes throughout *Frederick Douglass* is his use of Douglass’s own words to bolster the rich narrative. By incorporating excerpts of Douglass’s professional speeches and writings, as well as his private correspondences and texts (especially those from the newfound Evans collection), Blight calls his book “the biography of a *voice*.” (xvii) Throughout the telling of Douglass’s eventful life as an enslaved man turned abolitionist orator, bestselling author, international star, and finally political statesman, Blight is mindful of the evolution of Douglass’s voice and the ways that Douglass took artistic license when rendering his own life story—carefully pointing out where Douglass narrated events differently in his autobiographies. Blight also deeply contextualizes the narrative elements of Douglass’s life that can be empirically proven. By doing so, he is able to craft the most complete picture of Douglass to date, while foregoing speculation or sensationalism regarding the parts of Douglass’s life that have remained shrouded in mystery, such as details about his biological father or the exact nature of his relationships with Griffiths and Assing.

Besides Douglass’s relationships with others, Blight also delves into Douglass’s relationship with himself as he navigated one of the most physically dangerous and politically charged eras of U.S. history while identifying as an African American, a runaway slave, a radical abolitionist, and eventually one of the most popular (and most recognizable) individuals of the nineteenth century. Throughout the book, Blight deals with Douglass’s inner turmoil in a variety of situations, such as his early abolitionist calls for moral suasion that developed into more revolutionary calls for war, his alignment (and eventually separation from) Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the suffragette movement surrounding the passage of the 15th Amendment, and his balance of conflicting imperialist ideals as the U.S. Minister to Haiti. Throughout all of these internal negotiations, Blight portrays an impassioned and wildly talented individual working tirelessly toward, as Douglass put it in 1855, “the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race.” (xx)

Another of Blight’s major contributions is his enhanced treatment of Douglass’s first wife, Anna Murray Douglass. The two were married for forty-four years (from 1838 until her death in 1882) and had five children together. However, Douglass said little about Anna in his own writings and historians have not had much to add. Certain aspects of their relationship will always remain a mystery, but Blight does manage to add nuances and anecdotes that elevate her place and agency in their joint story. Blight richly describes her role in providing financial and logistical assistance to Douglass’s 1838 escape from slavery, and he notes her impressive management of their household during Douglass’s extensive traveling schedule. Blight elucidates

the depth of her import in terms both personal and practical, writing of her emotionally anchoring abilities (“Protector, guardian, helpmate, the embodiment of *home* indeed”) and her proficient domiciliary skill set (“Anna’s domesticity had meant her family’s survival”) in equal measure. (631-632) Douglass himself may have famously only made one mention of Anna in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (and not even by name, referring to her only as “my intended wife”), but Blight refuses to follow suit as he keeps her presence and importance woven tightly into Douglass’s story throughout the book.²

Blight’s unparalleled expansion of Anna is just one of the many sterling elements that elevates this premier biography over countless others that deal with Douglass’s complicated and inspiring life story. While the book undoubtedly benefits from recent insights uncovered in the Evans collection, it is Blight’s sophisticated engagement with the new material that results in this authoritative biography: incredibly well-researched, refined in its analysis, and exquisitely written. The finished product is as enthralling as it is magisterial. Blight’s *Frederick Douglass* will remain the definitive work on Douglass for the foreseeable future.

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² Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993).