

PORTSIDE

Books: *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* by David W. Blight

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Any biography of Frederick Douglass will find its toughest competition coming from Douglass himself. His passionate memoirs vividly bring to life the anguish of slavery and testify to Douglass's humanity and intelligence. Yet, in the bicentennial year of Frederick Douglass's birth, preeminent Douglass scholar David W. Blight rose to the challenge with the release of "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom," likely to become the definitive biography of one of America's most important public figures.

Born two hundred years ago, Frederick Bailey didn't know the exact date of his birth, so he chose February 14th because his mother, who died when he was around eight years-old, called him her "little valentine." After escaping from slavery twenty years later, he became Frederick Douglass.

Thanks in part to Douglass's autobiographies, many are familiar with his escape from slavery and self-education. Those books chronicling his journey out of slavery brought him tremendous fame. He was likely the most-photographed nineteenth-century American and, thanks to his popularity on an overseas speaking circuit, he may have been the most well-traveled nineteenth-century American as well.

Despite such fame and the resulting mythology that comes with it, readers may know far less about Douglass's later life during the Civil War, campaigns for political civil rights, fights for suffrage, and personal relationships. Blight deftly and succinctly addresses Douglass's early slave life and escape in the first 100 pages but spends the remaining 660 pages delving into Douglass's later years. Here we really see Blight's mastery at work.

Blight casts Douglass as an American prophet akin to the Old Testament's Jeremiah or Isaiah. As the "prophet of freedom," Douglass never gave up hope of freedom for black Americans. Blight's Douglass is an unapologetic radical: "It is precisely because the prophet engages his society over its most central and fundamental values that he is radical. They are not 'reasonable'...they do not abide 'compromise' and their role in the world is that of a sacred 'extremist.'"

Yet like many Biblical prophets, Douglass struggled to escape persecution and never fully escaped racism even within abolitionist circles. When he disagreed with "Liberator" William

Lloyd Garrison's policy of combating slavery with "suasion" as opposed to more direct political activism, Garrison suggested that slaves lacked the sophistication to understand the "philosophy" of the antislavery cause. An anguished Douglass replied, "Who will doubt hereafter the natural inferiority of the Negro, when the great champion of the Negroes' rights thus broadly concedes all that is claimed respecting the Negroes' inferiority...?"

The voice of this undervalued, "sacred extremist" seems particularly relevant in our current political climate. It should come as no surprise, then, that both the Right and Left seek to claim the Douglass mantle. As historian David Donald referred to Abraham Lincoln as "everybody's grandfather," so too has Douglass emerged as an American figure many groups and constituencies identify with and seek to appropriate.

Another new Douglass biography out this year from the Cato Institute by Timothy Sandefur, "Self-Made Man," casts Douglass as a Constitutionalist and argues he left a legacy of liberty, individualism and private property, and free enterprise. Earlier in 2013, at a Douglass statue dedication in Washington, D.C., several Democratic leaders, including Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and Majority Leader Reid, used the occasion to call for D.C. statehood and cited Douglass's participation in Washington municipal government.

Blight avoids pigeonholing Douglass into these modern ideological camps and instead portrays him as a deep human being with contradictions. Douglass strongly supported women's suffrage and rights, but also willingly supported the Fifteenth Amendment despite it restricting the vote to men. At different times he hated and loved America; he fiercely criticized the government and its hypocrisies with race and slavery but also became a government official, diplomat, and advocate for American expansion. These complexities and paradoxes help make him an attractive subject to both historians and the public at large.

David Blight's book delivers the new Frederick Douglass standard-bearer for years to come. In our own troubled times the "prophet of freedom" can indeed offer wisdom, but we must be cognizant of the pitfalls of forcing him into modern controversies. We should acknowledge his compelling radicalism without sidestepping his essential complexity.