

Douglass: In His Own Time

Leigh Fought

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Fought, Leigh (2015) "Douglass: In His Own Time," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/7>

Review

Fought, Leigh

Spring 2015

Ernest, John *Douglass: In His Own Time*. University of Iowa Press, \$37.50
ISBN 9781609382803

Frederick Douglass through the Eyes of His Contemporaries

With *Douglass in His Own Time*, editor and scholar of African American literature John Ernest intends to provide an "introduction to Douglass the man by those who knew him" (p. ix). Attempting to avoid selections that reiterate Douglass's own accounts of his life, Ernest chooses fifty-two documents dated from between 1841 and 1914 that emphasize themes of race, politics, and religion. For lay readers with little knowledge of Douglass's life, this volume will likely accomplish its intended task, although anyone hoping for the title's promises of "recollections, interviews, and memoirs" from family will be wholly disappointed. Those who do know something of Douglass's life, however, may be perplexed by the selection of these particular documents and the omission of those that might better illustrate many of the points addressed in Ernest's introduction.

A collection such as this could serve as a valuable compliment to the volumes of The Frederick Douglass Papers Project, which publishes only Douglass's writings and correspondence and intentionally excludes epistolary conversations about the great man by third parties. Ernest's interest lies with those latter discussions as they illuminate Douglass and add depth and dimension to the events of his life. Unfortunately, Ernest operates under the premise that "Douglass's life was played out in the pages of newspapers and books, in editorials exchanges and short, sharp notices in newspapers both friendly and antagonistic to his interests" (p. xxvi). This is both inaccurate and an unfair statement to make of any person's life, much less of Frederick Douglass's, but it would be a logical conclusion if a scholar only approached his subject through printed accounts.

Although Ernest insists that “*Douglass in His Own Time* includes a broad range of writing -- some intended for public viewing and some private correspondence,” all but two documents included in this collection were originally intended for public consumption (p. xxiv). The private record of Douglass’s life does have gaps, yet enough material exists not only to accomplish Ernest’s purpose of portraying “Douglass the man” (p. ix) but to do so with greater nuance than in this volume. Indeed, if Ernest is truly intent on breaking free of Douglass’s own *Narrative* and probing beyond the veneer of the public man, as he asserts in his introduction, then that private correspondence would be the means to that end.

For instance, Ernest twice refers to a gossipy letter from Susan B. Anthony during the “Great Controversy,” his designation of the quarrel ensuing from Douglass’s diversion from the Garrisonian program. Yet, the letter itself does appear. Maria Weston Chapman exchanged a series of letters with both Abby Kelley, who toured with Douglass in the 1840s, and Richard Webb, who hosted him in Dublin in 1845 that demonstrated Douglass’s sense of self and their limited expectations of him within the movement at a moment when he had begun to envision a role in the movement beyond that of exhibit and lecturer. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton clashed over Stanton’s wish to defend Douglass’s second marriage to a white woman, an exchange that both exposes the place they held for him in the woman’s suffrage movement and, taken with Anthony’s earlier letter, undermines the popular depiction of her friendship with Douglass.

The decision to choose only published documents also silences the voices of many of the important women in Douglass’s life. Although they are represented through pieces by Jane Marsh Parker, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Cordelia Ray, with Ray being the only African American woman, print tended to be the province of men. Even then, Mary Ann Shadd Cary would have been a logical and welcome addition both as a woman of color and a fellow journalist. Otherwise, the scholarship of the last thirty years has shown that women tended to operate through organizations and that their work ensured that speakers and newspapers like Douglass and the *North Star* received funding. Their discussions did not take place in editorial exchanges but rather in semi-private correspondence. As such, letters from Kelly, Chapman, Isabel Jennings, Mary Estlin, the Richardsons, Amy Post, and especially Julia Griffiths offer much more honest observations and provide an interesting contrast to Douglass’s interactions with men. Although Ernest mentions Griffiths in the introduction as

the focal point for Garrisonian attacks on Douglass, he seems unaware of the significance of her work in supporting Douglass and the antislavery movement in Western New York, nor that she was one of the “two white British women” accompanying the black abolitionist when he was attacked in New York in 1849 (p. xxiii). The inclusion of her exchanges with Gerrit Smith would have added more context to Douglass’s division with the Garrisonians, demonstrating that the *ad hominem* attacks also had a financial and racial context.

Women, in fact, seem only to concern Ernest as tangential stories tinged with scandal. If, as Ernest states, “rumors of his [Douglass’s] infidelity were not uncommon” (p. xxiii), then examples of such rumors might be a natural inclusion in this collection and perhaps expose the overwhelming lack of real evidence for such stories. Ernest offers up Otilia Assing in the introduction but, as with Griffiths, does not include any of her writings about Douglass, which were intended to present him to a foreign audience. The absence of any mention of the woman’s rights movement is an omission that should be addressed in the introduction, particularly given that woman’s suffrage encompassed both of the themes of race and politics.

Likewise, family accounts appear nowhere in this volume although they are mentioned in the sub-title. The Parker selection offers some insight into Douglass’s home life, but she observed the Douglasses as a small child in the late 1840s. Rosetta Douglass Sprague, Frederick’s daughter, included her father in her memoir of her mother, and Sprague’s daughter, Fredericka Sprague Perry, wrote a charming reminiscence of Douglass as a grandfather. The Douglass sons also wrote recollections of the Douglass family life, and taken together, these family memoirs indicate a story of the Douglasses’ values that no outsider could give. Douglass’s family was both affected by his public life and formed a significant part of his sense of himself as a free man. Thus, their exclusion in this respect seems to hearken to age of biography now decades gone.

Indeed, the editorial rationale behind these particular documents is entirely unclear. Not only does Ernest seem unaware that he has included almost exclusively previously published material and therefore offers no explanation for that decision, but he also provides little background for those accounts appearing in the collection. Introductory statements for each document include biographical information about the writers, but without sources or explanation of the author’s relationship to Douglass. Nor does Ernest contextualize these documents. These are particularly crucial points in regard to authors writing after Douglass’s death

and in historically specific circumstances regarding race in Civil War commemorations. Yet, even earlier documents require some rhetorical analysis explaining their intended audiences and purposes. A gap of the fifteen years between 1855 and 1870 also goes unexplained, despite those being particularly juicy years for alliances and divisions among abolitionists, black activists, and politicians. The woodcuts and cartoons, clumped together between the introduction and a chronology, seem to form a visual essay. Yet, they neither illustrate the documents nor receive any attention beyond descriptive captions. At least three sections of documents include exchanges in which Douglass participated and, while suggesting his method of debate, they seem misplaced in a work meant to focus on the ways others viewed him.

Perhaps judging a book for what it could have been rather than for what it tried to become is an unfair standard of evaluation. After all, Ernest's selections do correct the general marginalization of black men in Douglass's life, a significant problem with the last major biography of Douglass by William McFeely. African Americans such as William Wells Brown, Francis Grimké, and James McCune Smith appear in equal numbers with white men, and their inclusion exposes the intricacies facing black men in an interracial movement to liberate their own race.

Nevertheless, this collection seems to emerge from an earlier period of scholarship. The notes for the introduction include no studies more recent than Maria Diedrich's *Love Across Color Lines*, a deeply flawed interpretation now sixteen years old, and no biographies of Douglass himself. Ernest insists that Douglass's is "the story that keeps us from looking further" at antebellum slavery, citing the argument of a 1993 source while seeming to ignore a massive body of scholarship on human bondage (p. xii). The archives, many available online, remain entirely unmined, and the editorial choices leave readers with a rather flattened figure confined to polished depictions. As a result, Ernest only reinforces the problem that he had hoped to correct of Douglass as an "elusive" figure, "shadowed by the fame that enters every room before him" (p. ix).

Leigh Fought is an Assistant Professor of History at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York. She was an associate editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers: Correspondence, 1842-1852, volume 1, is the author of Southern Womanhood and Slavery: a Biography of Louisa S. McCord and Mystic, Connecticut: From Pequot Village to Tourist Town, and is currently completing a book on Frederick Douglass and women for Oxford University Press.

