

## FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND IRELAND

Upon arriving in Ireland from America, Frederick Douglass, the fugitive slave and world-renowned abolitionist, recognized significant differences between the two lands. “Eleven and a half days gone and I have crossed three thousand miles of the perilous deep. Instead of a



democratic government, I am under a monarchical government. Instead of the bright blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft, grey fog of the Emerald Isle (Ireland). I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man. I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as his slave, or offer me an insult. I employ a cab—I am seated beside white people—I reach the hotel—I enter the same door—I am shown into the same parlour—I dine at the same table—and no one is offended ... I find myself regarded and treated at every turn with the kindness and deference paid to white people. When I go to church, I am met by no upturned nose and scornful lip to tell me, “We don’t allow \*\*\*\*\* in here!” from *My Bondage and My Freedom Part I, Life as a Slave Part II, Life as a Freeman*, by Frederick Douglass.

In fact, Douglass’ work in the anti-slavery movement in America had brought him to Ireland in 1845. He had been invited to Ireland and England to try to increase support for the worldwide anti-slavery movement. He was a protégé of William Lloyd Garrison, America’s foremost anti-slavery advocate. Garrison’s movement was indirectly responsible for Douglass’ escape to freedom. Born into slavery in Maryland, Douglass found employment in a Baltimore shipyard and eventually slipped aboard a ship bound for New Bedford and freedom.

Douglass was born of a White father and Black mother. In the world of slavery, separation of babies from their mothers was common practice, perhaps to deprive the babies born into slavery of the emotional bondage between mother and child. There were no documents created to register births of slaves. Douglass estimated his age from overheard chatter, estimating that he was seventeen in 1835 and twenty-seven when he travelled to Ireland in 1845. Although he was not harshly treated in his slave chores, he had witnessed deprivation, whipping and even murder on the plantation. Lacking fathers, the slaves had instead masters and overseers as the male figures in their lives.

A fortunate change in the direction of Douglass’ life came about when he was released from the plantation to be sent to a home in Baltimore. In Baltimore a Mrs. Auld, wife of the slave owner, tutored him in his A, B, Cs and spelling giving him the literacy which led him to international acclaim. His book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was then and is now a classic in



the world of the emancipation movement. Its publication, however, jeopardized Douglass' freedom. He became so well known that he was always in threat of being seized as a fugitive slave. Even when Douglass was resident in non-slave states, slaves were subject to seizure and return to the slave owner. Escaping to Ireland, Douglass became, as he said above, not a chattel but a man. Unfortunately, Mrs. Auld's husband insisted she stop tutoring Douglass, who was at that time of school age. Mr. Auld said that a slave would become unmanageable and of no use to his master if he could read. Douglass then became his own tutor and sought every opportunity to advance, such as making friends with the white boys in the streets. Learning from them, they becoming Douglass' teachers. By age twelve, Douglass read everything he could find, including *The Columbian Orator* in which he first learned about Catholic emancipation. Douglass met Daniel O'Connell several times while in Ireland in 1845 and credited The Liberator with expanding his human rights work beyond slavery to include the broader problem of



discrimination around the world, the Irish Catholics being one group being deprived of full citizenship in the United Kingdom. Irish citizens like O'Connell could not take their seats in Parliament unless they swore an oath which Catholics would not take. The Catholic Emancipator worked to have discriminatory laws repealed. O'Connell said of himself, "I am the advocate of civil and religious liberty all over the world." He fought for the rights of Jews in Europe, peasants in India, Māori's in New Zealand, aborigines in Australia, and against slavery in America. Douglass, a gifted orator himself, attended one of O'Connell's speeches and said, "I have never heard [a speaker] by whom I was completely captivated than by Mr. O'Connell." Douglass expressed the wish that among the poor trampled slaves in Carolina "some Black O'Connell would yet rise up and cry "*Agitate, agitate,*

*agitate!*" After one of Douglass' speeches, O'Connell raised Douglass' hand and called him "the Black O'Connell.!" Mutual admiration! Influenced by O'Connell, Douglass became in his later years a fighter for human rights as well as abolition.

Upon his return to America from Europe, Douglass was a free man. He was manumitted [released from slavery] by fellow abolitionists who purchased Douglass' freedom, fearing his return to slavery upon his return to America. Douglass continued his human rights initiatives through North Star, the newspaper he founded in Rochester, NY. He was active in the recruiting of Black soldiers for the Union Army and served as consul general to Haiti in its human rights struggles. Douglass died in 1895. Perhaps Wes Moore, a Black man elected in 2022 as governor of Maryland, is another achievement of Frederick Douglass.

On May 14, 2021 Frederick Douglass Way was dedicated in Dublin to allow Dubliners and visitors to follow the footsteps of Douglass and retrace his 1845 visit to Dublin. There is an annual Douglass Week in Cork built around creating a Douglass Irish curriculum.

(Written by John Walsh)