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PROPHET of FREEDOM
DAVID W. BLIGHT

Additional Praise for Frederick Douglass

"In this stunning biography, David Blight takes on the question that Frederick Douglass sought to answer all his life: How did a runaway slave transform himself into an internationally famous abolitionist, orator, journalist, and diplomat? Astonishing in its breadth and depth, and told with exceptional sensitivity, this account of an epic life that intersected with black freedom and violent white backlash is also a story of rage and forgiveness, loneliness and charisma, bitter discouragement and fervent faith. All the way through this soaring, page-turning book, the piercing wisdom of the extraordinary Douglass echoes and endures into our own troubled century."

—Martha Hodes, author of *Mourning Lincoln*

"David Blight's magnificent book bares the radical fury and inner dilemmas that drove one of the greatest American lives. No scholar has known Frederick Douglass better, or written about him with such emotional as well as historical acuity. It is a biography truly worthy of its eloquent, conflicted, elusive, and heroic subject."

—Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History, Princeton University, and author of *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*

"David Blight's career-long fascination with Frederick Douglass has finally given historians the definitive biography of one of America's leading prophets of freedom. Blight's work not only humanizes Douglass, it also reframes our understanding of the nineteenth century through the lens of the life of Frederick Douglass."

—Lonnie G. Bunch III, Director, National Museum of African American History and Culture

"David Blight's beautifully written *Frederick Douglass* uses previously unplumbed archives to give us the deepest portrait yet of one of America's greatest intellectuals. The radical thinker and revolutionary is revealed here in all his complexity by a gifted and learned historian with an ear for Douglass's oracular voice and an eye for the tragedies of nineteenth-century America. This is a biography worthy of the man."

—Wendy Warren, author of New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early

America

"Good historians make the best biographers. David Blight, one of our finest historians, has skillfully placed Frederick Douglass into his time and place and given us a psychologically penetrating portrait enriched by new details grounded in thorough research. This is the best biography of Douglass ever written, the one Douglass has long deserved."

—James Oakes, author of *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*

"Never before has Frederick Douglass's life been portrayed with such scope and authority. The whole arc is here—his endurance of and escape from slavery, his experience of quasifreedom in the North, his shifting views of how abolition might be achieved, and, after the war was won, his keen awareness that the struggle for full freedom was far from over. David Blight's probing biography will be indispensable for anyone hoping to understand this towering figure in the central drama of American history."

—Andrew Delbanco, Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies, Columbia University, and author of *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War*

"There is hardly a more important and symbolic figure in America's *never*-ending struggle to get the universal rights we proclaimed at our founding. With his characteristic brilliance, David Blight brings Frederick Douglass to life; no longer is he merely a player

in the drama of Afro-American	liberation,	but the	e avatar	of all	of o	our as	pirations	and
dreams for a truly equal society."								

—Ken Burns

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DOUGLASS

PROPHET of FREEDOM

DAVID W. BLIGHT

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To Walter O. Evans and Linda J. Evans and to Jeffrey Brown Ferguson, 1964–2018

There is a prophet within us, forever whispering that behind the seen lies the immeasurable unseen.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1862

INTRODUCTION

Behold, I have put my words in your mouth . . . to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

—JEREMIAH 1:9–10

In his speech at the dedication of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, September 24, 2016, President Barack Obama delivered what he termed a "clear-eyed view" of a tragic and triumphant history of black Americans in the United States. He spoke of a history that is central to the larger American story, one that is both contradictory and extraordinary. He likened the African American experience to the infinite depths of Shakespeare and Scripture. The "embrace of truth as best we can know it," said the president, is "where real patriotism lies." Naming some of the major pivots of the country's past, Obama wrapped his central theme in a remarkable sentence about the Civil War era: "We've buttoned up our Union blues to join the fight for our freedom, we've railed against injustice for decade upon decade, a lifetime of struggle and progress and enlightenment that we see etched in Frederick Douglass's mighty leonine gaze."1

How Americans react to Douglass's gaze, indeed how we gaze back at his visage, and more important, how we read him, appropriate him, or engage his legacies, informs how we use our past to determine who we are. Douglass's life and writing emerge from nearly the full scope of the nineteenth century, representative of the best and the worst in the American spirit. Douglass constantly probed the ironies of America's contradictions over

slavery and race; few Americans used Shakespeare and the Bible to comprehend his story and that of his people as much as Douglass; and there may be no better example of an American radical patriot than the slave who became a lyrical prophet of freedom, natural rights, and human equality. Obama channeled Douglass in his dedication speech; knowingly or not, so do many people today.

Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, a slave, in Talbot County, Maryland, in February 1818, the future Frederick Douglass was the son of Harriet Bailey, one of five daughters of Betsy Bailey, and with some likelihood his mother's white owner. He saw his mother for the last time in 1825, though he hardly knew her. She died the following year. Douglass lived twenty years as a slave and nearly nine years as a fugitive slave subject to recapture. From the 1840s to his death in 1895 he attained international fame as an abolitionist, editor, orator of almost unparalleled stature, and the author of three autobiographies that are classics of the genre. As a public man he began his abolitionist career two decades before America would divide and fight a civil war over slavery that he openly welcomed. Douglass was born in a backwater of the slave society of the South just as steamboats appeared in bays and on American rivers, and before the telegraph, the railroad, and the rotary press changed human mobility and consciousness. He died after the emergence of electric lights, the telephone, and the invention of the phonograph. The renowned orator and traveler loved and used most of these elements of modernity and technology.

Douglass was the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, explained in this book and especially by the intrepid research of three other scholars I rely upon.² Although it can never really be measured, he may also have been, along with Mark Twain, the most widely traveled American public figure of his century. By the 1890s, in sheer miles and countless numbers of speeches, he had few rivals as a lecturer in the golden age of oratory. It is likely that more Americans heard Douglass speak than any other public figure of his times. Indeed, to see or hear Douglass became a kind of wonder of the American world. He struggled as well, with the pleasures and perils of fame as much as anyone else in his century, with the possible exceptions of General Ulysses S. Grant or P. T. Barnum. Douglass's dilemma with fame was a matter of decades, not merely of moments, and fraught with racism.

The orator and writer lived to see and interpret black emancipation, to work actively for women's rights long before they were achieved, to realize the civil rights triumphs and tragedies of Reconstruction, and to witness and contribute to America's economic and international expansion in the Gilded Age. He lived to the age of lynching and Jim Crow laws, when America collapsed into retreat from the very victories and revolutions in race relations he had helped to win. He played a pivotal role in America's Second Founding out of the apocalypse of the Civil War, and he very much wished to see himself as a founder and a defender of the Second American Republic.

In one lifetime of antislavery, literary, and political activism Douglass was many things, and this set of apparent paradoxes make his story so attractive to biographers, as well as to so many constituencies today. He was a radical thinker and a proponent of classic nineteenth-century political liberalism; at different times he hated and loved his country; he was a ferocious critic of the United States and all of its hypocrisies, but also, after emancipation, became a government bureaucrat, a diplomat, and a voice for territorial expansion; he strongly believed in self-reliance and demanded an activist-interventionist government at all levels to free slaves, defeat the Confederacy, and protect black citizens against terror and discrimination. Douglass was a serious constitutional thinker, and few Americans have ever analyzed race with more poignancy and nuance than this mostly selftaught genius with words. He was a radical editor, writer, and activist, informed by a hard-earned pragmatism. Douglass was Jim-Crowed more times than he could count, but loved the Declaration of Independence, the natural-rights tradition, and especially the reinvented US Constitution fashioned in Reconstruction. He fought against mob violence, but believed in certain kinds of revolutionary violence. In his own career he heroically tried to forge a livelihood with his voice and pen, but fundamentally was not a self-made man, an image and symbol he touted in a famous speech, and through which modern conservatives have adopted him as a proponent of individualism. He truly believed women were equal and ought to have all fundamental rights, but he conducted his personal life sometimes as a patriarch in a difficult marriage and while overseeing a large, often dysfunctional extended family.

Context and timing are often all. As James Baldwin wrote in 1948, casting sentiment and celebration aside, "Frederick Douglass was first of all a man—honest within the limitations of his character and his time, quite frequently misguided, sometimes

pompous, gifted but not always a hero, and no saint at all." Baldwin's unabashed bluntness is a good place for a biographer to begin to make judgments from the sources. But so are the interpretations of a very different writer, the former neoconservative turned neoliberal journalist and political theorist Michael Lind. In 1995 Lind rejected both a leftist multiculturalism and a conservative self-help individualism and called for a "new nationalism," which he termed a "multiracial/mixed race Trans-America," with Douglass as the model. Telescoping the orator though time, Lind called Douglass "the greatest American of all time."

Indeed the old fugitive slave has become in the early twenty-first century a malleable figure adopted by all elements in the political spectrum, not least by current Republicans, who have claimed Douglass—quite ahistorically—as their own by elevating a single feature of his thought, black self-reliance, at the expense of his enduring radicalism. At the unveiling ceremony of the statue of Douglass in the US Capitol in 2013, chosen by the District of Columbia as one of the two representatives to which each state, and the District, are entitled, congressional Republicans walked around proudly sporting large buttons that read FREDERICK DOUGLASS WAS A REPUBLICAN.³ Douglass descendants present, as well as some of us scholars with, shall we say, different training and research, smiled and endured. Whose Douglass? is a modern question rife with meaning.

This book seeks Douglass's complexity in all its forms, but never sidesteps his essential radicalism in a search for heroes we can hold dear and in common. Douglass was and is a hero; he has been all but adopted as a national figure in Ireland, Scotland, and Britain. His *Narrative* is read all over the world. He has appeared in countless murals, satirical political cartoons, twenty-first-century works of fiction, in paintings, and in a great deal of poetry. The sheer complexity of his thought and life makes him an icon held in some degree of commonality. He was brilliant, courageous, and possessed a truly uncommon endurance. He wrote many words that will last forever. His literary genius ranks with that of many of America's greatest writers of his century. But he was also vain, arrogant at times, and hypersensitive to slights. He did not take well to rivals who challenged his position as the greatest spokesman of his race, although he also mentored many younger black writers and leaders. He liked being on a pedestal and did not intend to get knocked off. Douglass was thoroughly and beautifully human.

Above all, Douglass is remembered most for telling his personal story—the slave who willed his own freedom, mastered the master's language, saw to the core of the meaning of slavery, both for individuals and for the nation, and then captured the multiple meanings of freedom—as idea and reality, of mind and body—as perhaps no one else ever has in America.

• • •

This book exists because of my lifetime interest in Douglass. But I would not have written it had I not encountered the extraordinary private collection of Douglass material owned by Walter O. Evans of Savannah, Georgia. The Evans collection, cited so many times in my notes, makes possible many new insights into the final third of Douglass's life. The younger Douglass—the heroic escaped slave and emerging abolitionist—is better known, in part because of the author's first two autobiographies. The older Douglass, from Reconstruction to the end of his life in 1895, has never been so accessible or rendered so fascinating and complicated as in the Evans collection. This biography is, I hope, the fullest account ever written of the last third of Douglass's complex and epic life.

Several primary themes inform and give texture to my portrait of Douglass. Douglass was a man of *words*; spoken and written language was the only major weapon of protest, persuasion, or power that he ever possessed. Throughout I try to demonstrate the origins and growth of this man's amazing facility to find the words to explain America's racial condition as well as the human condition. In one way, this book is the biography of a *voice*.

The autobiographies are themselves a major theme of the book. Douglass wrote and rewrote his life in three remarkable autobiographies; all Douglass scholars are deeply dependent upon them. But the first major problem in writing Douglass's biography is that the subject himself is in the way. The three narratives, over twelve hundred pages in all, are infinitely rich as sources of his traumatic youth and his public life of more than fifty years. In the memoirs he is a self-made hero who leaves a great deal unsaid, hidden from his readers and his biographers. Douglass invited us into his life over and over, and it is a rich literary and historical feast to read the music of Douglass's words. But as he sits majestically at the head of the table, it is as if he slips out of the room right when we so

wish to know more—anything—about his more private thoughts, motivations, and memories of the many conflicts in his personal life. Confronting the autobiographer in Douglass is both a pleasure and a peril as his biographer.

Another guiding theme is Douglass's deep grounding in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. From his earliest speeches on the abolition circuit, through his political emergence in the 1850s, in his stunning orations and editorials about the Civil War as an apocalyptic break in history somehow under God's intervention, to his nearly endless postwar lecture tours, Douglass rooted his own story and especially the story of African Americans in the oldest and most powerful stories of the Hebrew prophets. In America the people had turned from or never embraced their creeds or their God; the American Jerusalem, its temples and its horrid system of slavery, had to be destroyed; the nation had to face exile or extinction and bloody retribution; and only then could the people and the nation experience renewal, reinvention, and a possible new history. Douglass was a living prophet of an American destruction, exile, war for its existence, and redemption. Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as other prophets, were his guides; they gave him story, metaphor, resolve, and ancient wisdom in order to deliver his ferocious critique of slavery and his country before emancipation, and then his strained but hopeful narrative of its future after 1865.

It is easy to call Douglass a prophet; this book attempts to show how he merits that lofty title. "The prophet is human," wrote the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, "yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is neither 'a singing saint' nor 'a moralizing poet,' but an assaulter of the mind. Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends." Careful readers of Douglass will at times stop on passages that make them shudder or melt in recognition, as their minds are assaulted or perhaps uplifted. This book attempts to demonstrate how Douglass came by his King James cadences, as well as how he used biblical story to break down and rebuild, as Jeremiah recollected his own charge, an American world. Douglass succeeded and failed, as did the prophets of old.

From the middle of his turbulent life on, a primary theme of the book is how Douglass moved along crooked paths from a radical outsider, through time and transcendent events, to a political insider. During the greatest pivot of American history—the Civil War era—this man of language reaped great change to transform from a

radical abolitionist into a Republican Party functionary. These changes are historical, inextricably linked to events and time, not merely a matter of moral growth or decline; and they provide a model for many other leaders, particularly African American, who have undergone the same process in the 150 years since. The outsider-to-insider story especially animates the second half of the book, and it caused one of Douglass's most challenging psychic dilemmas. He repeatedly faced the question of how uncompromising radicalism could mix with a learned pragmatism to try to influence real power, to determine how to condemn the princes and their laws but also influence and eventually join them.

Another theme that drives this book is the turbulent relationship of Douglass's public and private lives. Throughout I try to keep a balance between these two registers of any person's story. In Douglass's case, he married twice, first to Anna Murray Douglass, a black woman born free in Maryland who remained largely illiterate but the center of his home life through many dislocations for forty-four years, and second to Helen Pitts Douglass, a highly educated white woman twenty years his junior and a remarkably compatible companion during his final decade. Douglass sustained important friendships with two white European women, Julia Griffiths from England and Ottilie Assing from Germany, both of whom became extremely important influences of differing kinds in his life. Most important, though, Douglass and Anna had five children, four of whom lived into adulthood. Among them they produced twenty-one grandchildren for the Douglasses. During the last quarter or so of the famous man's life, this extended family, which came to include even some fictive kin and a variety of protégés, became financially and often emotionally dependent on the patriarch of a clan often in conflict with itself. Douglass sustained backbreaking and health-threatening lecture tours in his older years in part to support this extended family and a big house on a hill in Washington, DC, near the centers of Gilded Age power that he could only partially penetrate. This story is at once Douglass's own unique saga and very modern. He experienced at least two emotional breakdowns in his life, and both can be explained in great part by the treacherous character of this public-private divide.

And finally, this book probes how Douglass was a many-sided intellectual, an editor, a writer in numerous genres—memoir, short-form editorials, extended speeches, and one work of fiction. He wrote and spoke millions of words; his trove of commentary contains

beauty, brilliant storytelling, sermons, political stump speeches, and assaults on the mind that are his legacy and the essential reason we know him. In roughly the last forty years Douglass has more and more been treated by scholars as a political philosopher, a constitutional and legal analyst, an author capable of prose poetry, a proponent of the natural-rights tradition, a self-conscious voice of and about the nature of memory, a religious and theological thinker, a journalist, and an advocate of broader public education. Today Douglass is taught and examined in law schools, in history, English, art, political science, and philosophy departments, in high schools, graduate schools, and community reading groups. In this book I try at all times to balance as best I can the narrative of his life with analyses of his evolving mind, to give his ideas a central place in his unforgettable story.

• • •

It is Douglass's story, though, that lasts and gives and instructs. There is no greater voice of America's terrible transformation from slavery to freedom than Douglass's. For all who wish to escape from outward or inward captivity, they would do well to feel the pulses of this life, and to read the words of this voice. And then go act in the world. In the final lines of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, as the politics of the slavery crisis embroiled the nation, Douglass wrote that he would never forget his "own humble origins" nor cease "while Heaven lends me ability, to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race." 5 As we look upon Douglass's leonine gaze in our own time, we may recognize that such universal work continues.

Chapter 1

FIRST THINGS

Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1855

Throughout the spring morning of April 14, 1876, a huge crowd, largely African American, began to assemble in the vicinity of Seventh and K Streets in Washington, DC. It had been eleven Aprils since the end of the Civil War, and eleven years to the day since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. A parade involving nearly every African American organization in the city was about to step off at noon en route to the unveiling of an extraordinary monument to Lincoln. The city had witnessed many remarkable parades since the end of the war, but this one would be different.

The day was declared a public holiday in Washington, and flags above the Capitol as well as other government buildings flew at half-mast. At the head of the procession rode a contingent of twenty-seven mounted police, followed by three companies of black militia troops, headed by the Philharmonic Band of Georgetown. Numerous other cornet bands, marching drum corps, youth clubs in colorful uniforms, and fraternal orders from both Washington and Baltimore filled in the long line with pride and pomp. The Knights of St. Augustine carried a large banner with a painting of the martyred Lincoln. Horse-drawn carriages carried, among others, the black, Virginia freeborn professor, and dean of the Howard University law school, John Mercer Langston, who would perform as master