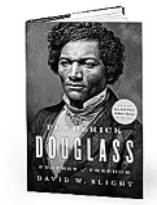
BIOGRAPHY

Frederick Douglass' path from hunted fugitive slave to brilliant elder statesman



Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom
By David W. Blight
Simon & Schuster. 888 pp. $37.50

By Adam Goodheart
WASHINGTON POST

Frederick Douglass died in splendid isolation, at the top of a lonely hill in Southeast Washington. It juts up precipitously among flat blocks of middle-class rowhouses, as steep and incongruous as a pyramid in the desert. At its summit stands his last home, Cedar Hill, a white-columned antebellum mansion. A heart attack struck him down in its front hall, suddenly on a winter evening in 1895.

Like many of the other places that played a role in the famous abolitionist's eventful life, this one feels freighted with symbolic meaning. From one side of the house, he could look out toward the hills of Maryland, the state where he was born into slavery. The other side commanded a fine view of the Capitol and the Mall, emblems of the high federal office he attained much later. And all around spread a neighborhood of ordinary Americans, white and black – near at hand and distant, both at once.

David Blight's extraordinary new biography, "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom," captures the complexities of the man who lived and died at Cedar Hill: a figure both eminent and solitary who gazed across vastly different American landscapes.

Douglass' birthplace is as resonant and revealing as his final home. Unlike Cedar Hill, which is now a National Historic Site, no monument or museum – not even a roadside sign – marks the spot. A flat, muddy field at an out-of-the-way crossroads on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, it's about as nondescript as a place can be. The slave cabin that once stood there, near the edge of a ravine, has long since vanished. When Douglass returned late in life, he scooped up a few handfuls of sandy soil as a relic of his origin.

That remote plantation was an unlikely starting point for one of the least nondescript – in fact, one of the most described – lives in American history. Douglass himself published thousands of pages of memoirs, journalism, polemics, speeches, fiction and poetry, and sat for more photographs than any other celebrity of the 19th century. His personal papers fill more than 50 boxes in the manuscript stacks at the Library of Congress. For decades, he was the most famous living black person in the world, and in our own time, he remains a familiar staple of high school curriculums and Black History Month commemorations. (Let's leave aside the fact that last year President Trump, notoriously, seemed ignorant about whether the abolitionist leader was alive or dead.)

Getty Images

The Frederick Douglass Statue in Emancipation Hall at the Capitol Visitors Center in Washington, D.C.

Yet surprisingly few scholars have chronicled his life. "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom" is the first full biography in a quarter-century. Blight, an eminent Yale historian and author of several other acclaimed works on slavery, race and the Civil War era, has produced one well worth the wait.

It's a well-worn cliche for biographers to bestow exalted epithets on their subjects: Almost every title declares its hero to be the sage of something or the oracle of something else. But Blight thoroughly justifies his claim in a book that is not just a deeply researched birth-to-death chronology but also an extended meditation on what it means to be a prophet.

In his introduction, Blight quotes the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel: "The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. … Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends."

Douglass' prophecy often expressed itself in an uncanny gift for forecasting the future. In 1855, he predicted the coming Civil War and emancipation: "The hour which shall witness the final struggle is on the wing. Already we hear the booming of the bell which shall yet toll the death knell of human slavery." A decade later, with the war won and black freedom a legally established fact, the country's leading abolitionist group met to vote on whether to disband. Douglass warned, again accurately, that the struggle was far from over: White supremacy would continue to bare its fangs, and his comrades "had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume."

But above all, perhaps, being a prophet means living in a realm of language: words of exhortation, of warning, of insight as well as foresight. While it is his books that endure today, in his own time Douglass was better known as an orator, a gift he discovered in his early 20s when, newly escaped from slavery and working in obscurity as a day laborer in New Bedford, Mass., he began preaching occasional sermons in a small African-American church.

In August 1841, at a convention of black and white abolitionists on Nantucket, Douglass was invited to the podium to offer the firsthand testimony of a fugitive – accepting only with "much hesitation" and "embarrassment," a witness remembered. No record survives of his words that day, but their effect was immediate. "Flinty hearts were pierced, and cold ones melted by his eloquence," wrote one listener. "Our best pleaders for the slave held their breath for fear of interrupting him." One of those best pleaders, the mighty abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, recalled simply, "I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment."

Within days, the movement's leaders whisked the young man onto the lecture trail. His oratorical power and intellectual brilliance before the crowds were astonishing, and so was his versatility: an ability to modulate between anger and inspiration, reflection and exhortation, even tragedy and comedy. His career on the circuit – in the U.S. and sometimes overseas – continued unabated for more than half a century; according to Blight, it is likely that more Americans heard him speak than any other figure of his time. His abolitionist lectures throughout Britain in the late 1840s stoked widespread antipathy to American slavery and probably helped keep that nation from siding with the Confederacy.

In a sense, Douglass was not one voice but many – a rhetorical ancestor of future black prophets. The handsome, strapping orator could seem like a 19th-century version of Malcolm X: stalking the stage like a lion, rallying the anti-slavery forces to battle, raining brimstone on the slave masters – sounding, a fellow activist wrote, "like a newly discovered chapter of Ezekiel." He could be Martin Luther King Jr., invoking a future America "purified in its spirit freed from slavery, vastly greater … than it ever was before." He was a reflective autobiographer like Barack Obama; in Blight's words, he "made memory into art, brilliantly and mischievously employing its authority, its elusiveness, its truths, and its charms." Slipping into the affected drawl of a white Southerner, he could become a comedian in the mold of Richard Pryor, savagely and hilariously imitating a hypocritical master preaching the Bible to his slaves.

From his years as a hunted fugitive and then a radical renegade, Douglass lived to become a laureled elder statesman. The young man had announced in the 1840s: "I have no patriotism. I have no country. … I desire to see its overthrow as speedily as possible, and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments." The white-bearded dignitary sought and won federal appointments from Republican presidents in the 1870s and 1880s, including as U.S. minister to Haiti – where he was unwillingly dragooned into trying to advance American imperial ambitions in the Caribbean.

Yet still he spoke and prophesied. In 1893, at the nadir of nascent Jim Crowism and the lynching epidemic, he wrote, "We have but one weapon unimpaired and it is that weapon of speech, and not to use it … is treason to the oppressed."

Born at a time when Thomas Jefferson still held sway at Monticello, Douglass survived almost into the 20th century – long enough to know the future founders of the NAACP and even one or two of the great figures of the Harlem Renaissance. A year before his death, he wrote his impressions of listening to a phonograph for the first time. It "raises the question as to the boundary of the human soul, the dividing line between the finite and the infinite," he reflected.

Douglass himself was apparently never recorded by the phonograph operators. But in Blight's pages, his voice again rings out loud and clear, melancholy and triumphant.

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