

**“The Most Wonderful Man that America Has Ever Produced”:  
Frederick Douglass and His Contemporary Biographers**

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It is almost a truism among students of Frederick Douglass, the iconic nineteenth-century African American, that he was obsessed with self-presentation. This trait is probably best displayed in his careful management of the details he divulged about his life when he fashioned his three different autobiographies. Douglass did the same in shorter autobiographical presentations in other writings and numerous speeches, and in how he fashioned his visual representations through self-conscious posing for hundreds of photographs taken in his lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

One facet of this careful image management that has not received adequate scholarly examination is Douglass’s interactions with his foremost contemporary biographers, Fredric May Holland and James M. Gregory, as well as several authors of shorter biographical sketches like Lydia Maria Child, William Wells Brown, and Irvine Garland Penn. In Douglass’s correspondence and writings, there is revealing information about how most of these authors approached Douglass in advance and, given that opportunity, how he advised and in some cases assisted their research by sending them a highly selective sampling of pertinent materials in his possession. Just as Douglass conscientiously guarded his contemporary political capital and ultimate historical legacy in his autobiographical writings, he appears to have attempted to do likewise in the ways that he guided biographers during his lifetime.

The earliest Douglass biography<sup>2</sup> appeared in 1865 in *The Freedmen’s Book*, a compilation of short stories, essays, poems, and biographical sketches, edited by Lydia Maria Child. A veteran writer on behalf of abolitionist, women’s rights, and other reform causes, Child sought to showcase the accomplishments of African American men and women in this book intended as a primer for newly liberated slaves of all ages who attended schools set up by the various freedmen’s aid societies and the newly created federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better remembered as the Freedmen’s Bureau. Modern scholars have observed that much of Child’s book was “firmly grounded in the well-meaning tenets of Romantic education,” yet fault it for “at times infantilizing African-American adults.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The best recent treatment of this facet of Douglass’s personality is found in Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1–6, 25–30. For photographs, see Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, and Zoe Trodd, eds., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth-Century’s Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright, 2015) and Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson, eds. *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass, 1818–2018* (Liverpool, Eng.: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> A case might be made that James McCune Smith’s introduction to Douglass’s second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), had many elements of a biographical sketch. He supplied some details on Douglass’s abolitionist career not discussed in the autobiography and assessed his speaking and writing style. John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 2: Autobiographical Writings*, 3 vols (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999–2011), 2:19.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman of the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 496–502; Deborah Pickman Clifford, *Crusader for Freedom: A Life of Lydia Maria Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 272–74; Jessica Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865–1911* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 52; Lesley Ginsberg, “Race and Romantic Pedagogies in the Works of Lydia Maria Child,”

Child wrote Douglass for permission to include a sketch of his life in her volume, which he readily granted, stating, “I have always read with grateful pleasure what you have from time to time written on the question of slavery.”<sup>4</sup> This statement was diplomatically phrased because Child was a follower of William Lloyd Garrison, whose abolitionist organization had acrimoniously banished Douglass from their camp when he endorsed antislavery political action in the early 1850s. Some of that hostility had ebbed during the Civil War, when abolitionists of all factions had rallied behind the Union cause, but Douglass could not be certain of Child’s opinion of him. Douglass’s longtime friend James McCune Smith, the New York physician, also had called out Child while editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in the 1840s for her condescending attitude toward free Blacks.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible to measure the impact of Douglass’s ingratiation upon the contents of Child’s twenty-page sketch of Douglass’s life, which focused mainly on his slave youth and initial response to becoming free. Child seems to have relied largely on Douglass’s first autobiography, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), and, like that book, gave only cursory attention to his abolitionist career after escaping slavery in September 1839. By her emphasis, Child diplomatically avoided discussing the dispute over tactics that had separated Douglass from the Garrisonians. Child did praise Douglass as an eloquent speaker and his *Narrative* as “ably written.” She also published in her primer a short statement of unknown derivation by Douglass that touted the accomplishments of African Americans while complaining that few Whites seemed prepared to acknowledge them.<sup>6</sup>

Douglass’s second noteworthy biographer was William Wells Brown. Born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky, Brown spent much of his youth near St. Louis, Missouri, before fleeing slavery in 1834. He had been employed as a lecturer for the Western New York and Massachusetts Anti-Slavery societies between 1843 and 1849, and been active in many reform movements, advocating temperance, women’s rights, and prison reform, as well as abolition. Brown published a number of historical books concerning Blacks and slavery, beginning in 1847 with his autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*. His first history, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, appeared in 1863 and ran through ten editions in three years. His best-known literary production was the novel *Clotel*, written while touring Great Britain in the early 1850s.<sup>7</sup>

Brown had entered the abolitionist ranks in the early 1840s, at nearly the same moment as Douglass, but his reputation rose more slowly. The two men had occasionally shared the same platforms, and Douglass had praised Brown in his newspaper columns. Although Brown remained a faithful Garrisonian in the 1850s, personal rather than ideological issues drove a deep wedge between him and Douglass. Brown publicly charged that Douglass had disparaged him in correspondence with his English antislavery friends, and the two men were estranged until 1862,

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in *Romantic Education in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: National and Transatlantic Contexts*, ed. Monika M. Elbert and Lesley Ginsberg (New York: Routledge, 2014), 139, 148–49.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass to Lydia Maria Child, 30 July 1865, in John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 3: *Correspondence*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009–), 2:491–93.

<sup>5</sup> Karcher, *First Woman*, 278–79, 527; James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), 104–06.

<sup>6</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865; Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1869), 156–76, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); R. J. M. Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers: The Lives of Six Nineteenth-Century Afro-Americans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 45, 48, 95–96, 101–02; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks’ Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 35, 42, 50–51.

when they came together to pressure the Lincoln administration to adopt emancipation as a Civil War goal.<sup>8</sup>

Brown portrayed Douglass first in his *The Black Man*, technically earning him, rather than Child, the accolade of Douglass’s first biographer. Douglass praised Brown’s book effusively in *Douglass’ Monthly*, arguing, “It should find its way into every school library—and indeed, every home in the land—especially should every colored man possess it.”<sup>9</sup> Brown substantially redrafted his biographical sketch of Douglass for his longer history of African Americans, *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Achievements of the Colored Race* (1874). Brown’s later account of Douglass’s life was included in a section at that book’s conclusion, entitled “Representative Men and Women,” which contained short biographies of eighty-one African Americans. Only Benjamin Banneker was accorded more space than Douglass by Brown.<sup>10</sup>

Speaking from shared personal experience, Brown began his piece with the declaration “Born and brought up under the institution of slavery, which denied its victims the right of developing those natural powers that adorn the children of men, and distinguish them from the beasts of the forest,—an institution that gave a premium to ignorance, and made intelligence a crime, when the possessor was a negro,—Frederick Douglass is, indeed, the most wonderful man that America has ever produced, white or black”<sup>11</sup>

While Child had mildly praised Douglass’s *Narrative*, Brown observed that the book had given “a new impetus to the black man’s literature. All other stories of fugitive slaves faded away before the beautifully written, highly-descriptive, and thrilling memoir of Frederick Douglass.”<sup>12</sup> As an abolitionist lecturer, Brown contended that Douglass “made more persons angry, and pleased more, than any other man. He was praised, and he was censured. He made them laugh, he made them weep, and he made them swear. . . . He awakened an interest in the hearts of thousands who before were dead to the slave and his condition.”<sup>13</sup> Brown described Douglass as “one of the best mimics of the age, and possessing great dramatic powers; had he taken up the sock and buskin, instead of becoming a lecturer, he would have made as fine a Coriolanus as ever trod the stage.”<sup>14</sup>

One new facet of Douglass’s career that had not been a subject of Child’s biographical sketch was his achievements as a journalist. This was perhaps because Douglass’s founding of his own newspaper had been a precipitant of his eventual ideological break from Child’s Garrisonian faction. Brown, to the contrary, regarded this as an important landmark. In his sketch of Douglass, he added an effusive assessment of Douglass as a journalist:

The commencement of the publication of the ‘North Star’ was the beginning of a new era in the black man’s literature. Mr. Douglass’s well-earned fame gave his paper at once a place with the first journals in the country; and he drew around him a corps of contributors and correspondents from Europe, as well as all parts of America and the West Indies, that made its columns rich with the current news of the world. . . . Of all his labors . . . we regard Mr. Douglass’s efforts as publisher and editor as most useful to his race. For sixteen years,

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<sup>8</sup> Greenspan, *William Wells Brown*, 112, 123, 161, 194–95, 318–20, 336–38.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Greenspan, *William Wells Brown*, 388.

<sup>10</sup> William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: R. F. Wallcut, 1863), 180–87; William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son: The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (1873; Boston: A. G. Brown & Company, 1882), 435–40.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Rising Son*, 435–36.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Black Man*, 180; Brown, *Rising Son*, 436.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Black Man*, 182; Brown, *Rising Son*, 437.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Black Man*, 182–83; Brown, *Rising Son*, 438.

against much opposition, single-handed and alone, he demonstrated the fact that the American colored man was equal to the white in conducting a useful and popular journal.<sup>15</sup>

The reconciliation between the two African American abolitionists during the Civil War and the praise that Douglass gave to *The Black Man* probably influenced Brown to offer such a high appraisal of his subject's abilities and achievements in *The Rising Son*.<sup>16</sup>

Douglass's next biographer was the Black educator Irvine Garland Penn, who published *The Afro-American Press, and Its Editors* in 1891 to promote the welfare of African American journalism. Born in 1867, Penn grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia, and dropped out of high school to begin writing for a number of Black newspapers. He returned to school and eventually earned his master's degree from Rust College. Penn then settled in Lynchburg and became a teacher and eventually a high school principal there. He continued his interest in journalism, leading him to write the *Afro-American Press*, published by Willey and Company in 1891.<sup>17</sup>

The first part of Penn's book contained short histories of newspapers and magazines edited by African Americans, beginning with the pioneer *Freedom's Journal* in the 1820s and continuing to those still in print in the 1880s. Most of Penn's work was devoted to biographical sketches of active African newspaper editors and journalists, but because Douglass had formally retired from that field, Penn described him in an introductory section of the book focused on the pre-Civil War era.<sup>18</sup>

About Douglass and his first newspaper, Penn wrote, "The North Star was conducted on a much higher plane than any of the preceding publications. Mr. Douglass had by his eloquent appeals on behalf of the Abolition cause, created a wide-spread sentiment, and he was known as an orator. While much of his time was spent on the rostrum in behalf of Abolition, yet many say his best and most effective work for freedom was as editor, in the publication of the North Star at Rochester, New York."<sup>19</sup>

Penn portrayed Douglass as possessing a wide array of talents: "Mr. Douglass was what is hard to find in any one man,—a good speaker, as well as effective, able, and logical writer. There is no man to-day who is a Douglass with the quill and upon the rostrum."<sup>20</sup> Penn reproduced almost a full page from Brown's *Rising Son* sketch of Douglass, concluding with the claim that "Frederick Douglass' ability as an editor and publisher has done more for the freedom and elevation of his race than all his platform appeals."<sup>21</sup>

No correspondence has survived between Douglass and Penn prior to publication of the *Afro-American Press*. However, the two men had been in contact because Penn had received and published in his book Douglass's answers to a series of question regarding the current health of the Black press. After the first printing of the *Afro-American Press*, Douglass had prepared a two-page endorsement to be added to later editions, which declared that the book "shows that, whatever else may be said of the colored race in the United States, they are guilty of no mental indifference, inactivity, or moral stagnation." Perhaps embarrassed by Penn's ebullient praise, Douglass chided

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Rising Son*, 439–40.

<sup>16</sup> Notably, Douglass omitted Brown from his discussion of other prominent Blacks in the abolitionist movement in his final autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

<sup>17</sup> Joanne K. Harrison and Grant Harrison, *The Life and Times of Irvine Garland Penn* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Harrison and Harrison, *Irvine Garland Penn*, 15–55, 231.

<sup>19</sup> Irvine Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, Mass.: Willey & Company, 1891), 68.

<sup>20</sup> Penn, *Afro-American Press*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> Penn, *Afro-American Press*, 69; Brown, *Rising Son*, 439.

the still only twenty-four-year-old Penn: “It is due to the author to say that his work would perhaps have been a little more complete and much more useful had he dealt less in indiscriminate praise. All his geese are swans!” In particular, Douglass felt Penn afforded equal attention to short-lived Black-edited newspapers as to those (such as his own) “which [had] battled for existence for a dozen years and at last achieved a well won success.”<sup>22</sup>

After publication of his positive appraisal of Douglass in his book, Penn became a political ally and friend of the ageing leader. Penn would contribute a chapter to the iconic protest *Why the Colored Man Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893), edited by Douglass and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells.<sup>23</sup> Penn felt confident enough in Douglass's friendship that he privately asked for a one-hundred-dollar loan in 1894 when he experienced a temporary financial reverse.<sup>24</sup>

Douglass's next biographer, Frederic May Holland, was a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister turned free thinker, greatly influenced by Theodore Parker. Holland gave up the pulpit after short stays in churches in various small Midwestern cities and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, to become a writer. A hard worker, he produced a long list of books and articles on literary and philosophical topics.<sup>25</sup> The biography of Frederick Douglass was far from Holland's usual topics. William Carlos Martyn, himself a minister turned biographer of Garrison and a dozen other nineteenth-century figures, recruited Holland for a biography series published by Funk & Wagnalls. Martyn placed Holland under a rushed schedule to complete his manuscript.<sup>26</sup> The timing of the project was not fortuitous; Douglass had just accepted an appointment from Republican president Benjamin Harrison to serve as United States minister plenipotentiary to the Republic of Haiti. Holland first contacted Douglass in July 1889 and the latter was scheduled to depart for Port-au-Prince in September.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, no copy of the first exchange of correspondence between Holland and Douglass has survived. The oldest extant letter records Holland replying enthusiastically to Douglass: “Of course I shall need all the help you will give.” He requested that Douglass provide him copies of his lectures on woman suffrage and Abraham Lincoln, both topics of interest to future readers. Douglass appeared to have advised Holland to consult a copy of the 1881 edition of his third autobiography, *Life and Times*, and then sent him pamphlets of several of his speeches, which Holland promised “shall be carefully used and faithfully returned.”<sup>28</sup>

A few days later, Holland wrote again, relating that he had acquired *Life and Times* and found it very useful for details on Douglass's slave days. Holland indicated that he had questions

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<sup>22</sup> Two drafts of this endorsement exist in manuscript form in the Library of Congress collection of Douglass's papers, but no printing of the book including that statement has been located. Miscellany File, reel 16, frames 445–47, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>23</sup> Ida B. Wells et al, *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Ida B. Wells et al, 1893), 40–61.

<sup>24</sup> Penn to Douglass, 29 January, 15 May 1894, General Correspondence File, reel 7, frames 543–44, 774–75, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>25</sup> Some of Holland's other titles included, *The Reign of the Stoics* (New York: C. P. Somerby, 1879), *Stories from Robert Browning* (London: G. Bell, 1882), and *The Rise of Intellectual Liberty from Thales to Copernicus* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1885); *Boston Christian Register*, 28 May 1908.

<sup>26</sup> Frederic May Holland to Douglass, 2 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 4, frames 007–008, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>27</sup> Due to trouble in arranging transportation with the U.S. Navy, Douglass did not depart for Haiti until 1 October 1889. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 336–39.

<sup>28</sup> Frederic May Holland to Douglass, 28 July 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 496–98, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

for Douglass on antislavery politics and the controversy that occurred in the 1850s over a proposed industrial college for Blacks.<sup>29</sup> The very next day, Holland wrote again, regretting that his health would not permit him to visit Washington to interview Douglass in person, which he claimed would “deliver you from being asked many questions, which I shall be able in time to answer without troubling you.”<sup>30</sup> He agreed with Douglass’s observation, made in a lost letter, that “my main attention will be given to your career as an anti-slavery orator.”<sup>31</sup> Holland said that his “main reliance” would be on the pamphlet texts of speeches Douglass had already sent and the manuscripts of other unpublished lectures that he hoped to receive. Obviously a quick study, Holland included a list of proposed chapter titles.<sup>32</sup>

In one of the few surviving letters from Douglass to Holland, the subject expressed regret to the biographer that he could not supply any manuscript speech texts: “It will take some time to have them revised and corrected from the newspaper reports, and even from my own manuscript, and as my going abroad involves considerable correspondence, I cannot give all the time to the matter I propose to send you.”<sup>33</sup> Douglass promised to send as many as he could: “You shall have any lecture on Self Made Men, with such other papers as I think may serve you.”<sup>34</sup> The subject, obviously, was intent on retaining a significant level of control over what he desired the biographer to examine. Douglass then supplied answers to many of the questions that Holland had previously posed to him. A few weeks later, Douglass departed for his diplomatic post in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

What followed was a nearly year-long break in correspondence (8 August 1889–30 July 1890). While Douglass was overseas, Holland worked prodigiously on the biography. Not only did he go through the materials Douglass supplied him, quoting copiously, but Holland solicited positive comments about Douglass from his old abolitionist associates. Only two weeks after Douglass returned to his home in the United States capital on a vacation to escape the heat of the Caribbean summer, Holland wrote to welcome him home. He promised Douglass the prompt return of all the materials the latter had supplied him. “I am sorry,” Holland wrote, “to let them go, though I should not use them further for the book. That I finished some months ago, having enjoyed the work greatly and much improved my knowledge of American history.”<sup>35</sup> Holland also said he could attempt to get the manuscript back from Funk & Wagnalls: “I should be glad to have you see it, if you wish.”<sup>36</sup> He obtained a letter from his editor, Carlos Martyn, stating that the book would be published that fall following manuscripts of biographies of Wendell Phillips, Horace

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<sup>29</sup> Holland to Douglass, 1 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 505–07, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>30</sup> Holland to Douglass, 2 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 4, frames 007–008, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup> Holland to Douglass, 2 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 4, frames 007–008, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup> Holland to Douglass, 2 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 4, frames 007–008, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>33</sup> Douglass to Holland, 8 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 514–16, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>34</sup> Douglass to Holland, 8 August 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 514–16, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>35</sup> Holland to Douglass, 30 July 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 723–24, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup> Holland to Douglass, 30 July 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 723–24, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

Greeley, and William E. Dodge from the series “ahead of it.”<sup>37</sup> J. F. Dillont, an editor at Funk & Wagnalls, encouraged Holland to “take advantage of Mr. Douglass’ supervision” in revising the manuscript before publication “for the holiday season, that is December.”<sup>38</sup> While still endeavoring to get the manuscript for Douglass to review, Holland wrote that he hoped his subject would not find evidence that it had been “badly hurried.”<sup>39</sup>

In a lost letter sent sometime in August 1890, Douglass expressed his confidence in Holland’s work, apparently without having examined it. Holland then requested a statement by Douglass to add to the manuscript still not set in type: “The life would be much more valuable if I could bring it down to date, by quoting your denial of the statement, still current in New York, that you that you were not cordially received by the Haytian government. Not to deny this is to admit it.”<sup>40</sup> After laboring over several drafts, Douglass sent Holland a four-page account of his first year of diplomatic interaction with the Haitian government, which he characterized as “entirely cordial.” Douglass blamed “certain papers in New York City and elsewhere for creating false rumors because they believed only a white man capable of representing the United States as an ambassador.”<sup>41</sup>

In a letter dated 27 September 1890, Holland assured Douglass that he would be pleased by the forthcoming biography: “It is of course a biographer’s duty to get all the information he can but not to put it all into print. I have not applied to any one who does not feel kindly and respectfully towards you; and I have heard nothing which seems prompted by prejudice or malice.”<sup>42</sup> Holland referred to an address by Douglass at a recent abolitionist reunion in Boston that he had attended, possibly the only occasion that the biographer had seen his subject in the flesh.<sup>43</sup>

First published in late fall 1890, Holland’s biography displayed evidence of thorough research into its subject’s life. The originally projected twelve chapters had expanded to fifteen, with the emphasis heavily on Douglass’s abolitionist career through the conclusion of the Civil War. Entitled *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator*, the volume quotes at considerable length from a wide range of Douglass’s public speeches; Holland had heavily utilized the pamphlet and manuscript texts of addresses supplied to him by Douglass.<sup>44</sup> Holland also quoted frequently from all three of Douglass’s autobiographies<sup>45</sup> and from letters Douglass wrote him while the biography was being written, including direct answers to the author’s queries about specific issues.<sup>46</sup> Holland allowed more voices to speak in the volume. He researched and found numerous reports regarding

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<sup>37</sup> Carlos Martyn to Holland, 5 August 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frame 738, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>38</sup> J. F. Dillont to Holland, 5 August 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frame 737, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>39</sup> Holland to Douglass, 1 September 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frames 745–46, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>40</sup> Holland to Douglass, 1 September 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 9, frames 068–069, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>41</sup> Frederic May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891), 385–89; Douglass to Holland, 10 September 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 9, frames 063–067, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>42</sup> Holland to Douglass, 27 September 1890, General Correspondence File, reel 9, frames 069–070, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>43</sup> Holland quoted from that address on 22 September 1890 in Tremont Temple in his biography. Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 390.

<sup>44</sup> Holland, 191–94, 194–98, 207–10, 233–39, 250–55, 257–61, 268–69, 270–71, 290–94, 297–98, 320–23, 330–31, 335–38, 381.

<sup>45</sup> Holland, 84–85, 103–06, 112–13, 130–32, 201, 262–64, 301–06, 338.

<sup>46</sup> Holland, 201–02, 385–89.

Douglass in copies of Garrison's *Boston Liberator*.<sup>47</sup> Garrison's letters, compiled and published by his sons, also are quoted by Holland.<sup>48</sup> As promised, Holland had tracked down two of the dwindling ranks of abolitionists, Sally Holley and Lucy N. Coleman, for testimonials to Douglass's abilities.<sup>49</sup> Conspicuously absent from Holland's work are quotations from any of Douglass's newspapers or his 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave*.<sup>50</sup>

The biography by Holland offers only scattered interpretations of its subject. Holland observed that the young Douglass had been exposed to "some of the best, as well as the worst, aspects of slavery."<sup>51</sup> At Douglass's coaching, Holland adopted a critical view of the Garrisonians' nonresistant tactics and a positive one toward political abolitionists. On the politics of emancipation during the Civil War, Holland relied mainly on Douglass's *Life and Times*, which expressed a more favorable attitude toward Abraham Lincoln than Douglass voiced at other periods.<sup>52</sup> In his interpretation of post-Civil War years, Holland often seemed oblivious to the problems created for African Americans by the failure of Reconstruction: "The twenty-five years since April 1865, occupy but three chapters; for this last period is by no means as rich as its predecessor in great events. It has been one of those happy times, when but little takes place which is intensely interesting, and Douglass has had but little chance to make history, though he has done much to make presidents."<sup>53</sup> While Holland does briefly quote Douglass's speeches attacking the rise of lynching in the 1880s and 1890s,<sup>54</sup> he also injected his own more regressive opinion that the South's "memory of the misrule of the carpet-baggers will grow fainter; and she finally will be able to see that even the illiterate voter is not so dangerous a citizen in a republic as the man who has not this reason to interest himself in its welfare."<sup>55</sup>

While that latter remark certainly would not have pleased Douglass, on the whole, he strongly approved of Holland's work. In 20 April 1891, Holland responded to a now lost letter from Douglass. Holland declared, "I am delighted to find that you and Mrs. Douglass like the book. My great anxiety has been [that] I should fail to make proper return for your aid and hospitality. I have never said so much about that as I really feel."<sup>56</sup> In correspondence with his daughter Rosetta, Douglass described the new biography as "the best written sketch of my life yet written by any outsider and says things of me that I never could had said myself, although they may be true. He has done me right . . . about my differences with the Garrisonians and for that he is entitled to my thanks."<sup>57</sup> Douglass purchased and distributed the volume widely. Holland's

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<sup>47</sup> Holland, 113, 115–16, 119–20, 279, 313.

<sup>48</sup> Holland, 154–57, 163–64.

<sup>49</sup> Holland, 93–94, 221–24, 226–29, 318–20.

<sup>50</sup> These works are mentioned only in passing, perhaps because Douglass was unable to supply Holland with access to them. Holland, 220.

<sup>51</sup> Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> Holland, 303–06. For Douglass's shifting appraisal of Lincoln, see Levine, *Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 179–239.

<sup>53</sup> Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 399.

<sup>54</sup> Holland, 358, 374–79.

<sup>55</sup> Holland, 381–82. Holland's conservatism on this issue increased after Douglass's death. In 1900, he wrote in a new book—ironically entitled *Liberty*—that the North had made a mistake in enfranchising uneducated freedmen and expressed "deep regret that emancipation was not gained peaceably and gradually." Frederic May Holland, *Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899), 124.

<sup>56</sup> Holland to Douglass, 20 April 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 78–80, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>57</sup> Douglass to Rosetta Douglass Sprague, 4 April 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 32, frames 187–88, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress. Also see Douglass to Lewis H. Douglass, 30 March 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 32, frames 185–86, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.



biography also inspired Douglass to revise his *Life and Times* in 1892 after he finished his service as ambassador to Haiti.<sup>58</sup> In the expanded second edition of *Life and Times*, Douglass praised the “scrupulous justice done me” in Holland’s biography, but acknowledged his desire to make an additional “recital of my life.” In an observation that Robert Levine also has highlighted, Douglass confessed that “like most men who give the world their autobiographies I wish my story to be told as favorably towards myself as it can be with a due regard to truth.”<sup>59</sup>

Holland's background as a retired White minister turned writer stands in considerable contrast to that of Douglass’s final contemporary biographer, James Monroe Gregory, a politically active African American and Howard University professor. Gregory was born in Lexington, Virginia, in 1851 to free Black parents who removed their family to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1859. Growing up and being educated in a number of Midwestern communities, Gregory then attended the Preparatory Department of Oberlin College for two years while also volunteering as a teacher of freedmen during the summers. General O. O. Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, persuaded the still teenaged Gregory to become an instructor at the preparatory school attached to the newly launched Howard University while simultaneously finishing his bachelor’s degree there. Graduating in 1872, Gregory remained on at Howard, first as a faculty member teaching Latin and then as dean of the collegiate department. Douglass was a trustee of Howard during these years and certainly took note of the aspiring young African American academic.<sup>60</sup> Douglass hosted an informal Sunday afternoon salon at his Cedar Hill home that Gregory and many other Black Howard instructors regularly attended.<sup>61</sup> Both men also attended services at the First Congregational Church in Washington, presided over by the Reverend Jeremiah E. Rankin, who became Howard’s president in 1890.<sup>62</sup>

Although of different generations, Douglass and Gregory were both prominent leaders in the African American community of the District of Columbia; Gregory appeared on the same stage as Douglass at many events.<sup>63</sup> Most noteworthy, Gregory had introduced the elder leader at the famous 1883 public meeting where Douglass had denounced the U.S. Supreme Court for its overturning of the 1875 Civil Rights Act.<sup>64</sup> At that gathering, Gregory had described Douglass as “the one leader to whom the colored people had always looked in every emergency, and who had always been found equal to every emergency.”<sup>65</sup>

It has not been possible to confirm when Gregory launched his biography of Douglass. His publisher was the small firm of Willey & Company, based in Springfield, Massachusetts. The company was operated by English immigrant printer John Stephen Willey along with his wife,

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<sup>58</sup> I agree with Robert Levine that the success of Holland's book helped inspire Douglass to undertake the 1892 revision of his *Life and Times*. Levine, *Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 303. Also see Douglass to Rosetta Douglass Sprague, 4 April 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 32, frames 187–88, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>59</sup> John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 2: *Autobiographical Writings*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999–2012), 3:379, 377; Levine, *Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 303.

<sup>60</sup> John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 1: *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, 5 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 5:170; Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 36, 38, 77–79, 92, 110–11.

<sup>61</sup> James Monroe Gregory, *Frederick Douglass, the Orator* (Springfield, Mass.: Willey & Company, 1893), 209; John Muller, *Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.: Lion of Anacostia* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2012), 111.

<sup>62</sup> Logan, *Howard University*, 110–11.

<sup>63</sup> Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:52, 170, 213

<sup>64</sup> Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:110.

<sup>65</sup> *Proceedings of the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting Held at Lincoln Hall, October 22, 1883; Speeches of Hon. Frederick Douglass and Robert G. Ingersoll* (Washington, D.C.: C. P. Farrell, 1883), 45.

Catherine. Mainly a publisher of religious volumes, Willey & Company had also printed Penn's *Afro-American Press* and Alexander Crummell's *Africa and America: Address and Discourses*, both in 1891. Although small, the firm advertised itself in the 1890s as the publisher of "great Race Books."<sup>66</sup>

Douglass had resigned his diplomatic post in Haiti in July 1891 and returned to his Cedar Hill home in the Anacostia neighborhood of the District of Columbia. He traveled very little for the remainder of that year. In 1892, by contrast, Douglass conducted a speaking tour of the Northeast in March and of Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama in May; attended the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis in June; and campaigned for Harrison's reelection in New York in October.<sup>67</sup> Despite the increased travelling by Douglass, Gregory would have had numerous opportunities to meet and interview his subject at various locations in Washington. This fact probably accounts for the dearth of Gregory–Douglass correspondence compared to the large body exchanged between Holland and Douglass.

The one surviving letter was written on 6 March 1893, shortly before Douglass relocated to Chicago for a year-long residence there as commissioner of the Haitian government's pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition. This letter reveals that Gregory had shown the biography manuscript to Douglass before submitting it to Willey and offered to "make any corrections you may suggest."<sup>68</sup>

Other clues about Douglass's direct influence on Gregory's work can be inferred from the book itself. The volume had an introduction written by William S. Scarborough, professor at Wilberforce College. When the biography was first announced, Scarborough noted that "all became expectant, and felt that a worthier chronicler or a worthier sire could not be found."<sup>69</sup> Scarborough and Douglass were political allies and the former man's statement hints that while composing the biography Gregory was subjected to social pressure from Douglass's wide circle of admirers to make his appraisal positive. Scarborough reinforced the book's emphasis on Douglass's skill as an orator, comparing him favorably to classical Greeks like Themistocles, Pericles, and Demosthenes, and to great American speakers such as Charles Sumner, James G. Blaine, Roscoe Conkling, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips.<sup>70</sup> Another relevant clue in the book is found in Gregory's short preface, where he declared that Douglass's "speeches and lectures have been carefully examined, and the best selections from these incorporated in the biography."<sup>71</sup> Most likely, Douglass had supplied Gregory with the same carefully selected and edited materials returned to him by the conscientious Holland.

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<sup>66</sup> Penn to Douglass, 14 September 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 667–69, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; Harrison and Harrison, *Irvine Garland Penn*, 39; 1860 U.S. Census, New York, Oneida County, 80; 1905 New York State Census, New York County, 25; 1910 U.S. Census, New York, New York County, 147; *The National Corporation Reporter: A Weekly Journal Devoted to the Interests of Business and Municipal Corporations, Finance and Commerce* (Chicago: The United States Corporation Bureau, 1893–1894), 249; *Massachusetts Birth Records, 1840–1915*, Ancestry.com; *U.S. City Directories, 1822–1995*, Ancestry.com; *New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829–1940*, FamilySearch.org; *New York, New York City Municipal Deaths, 1795–1949*, FamilySearch.org; FindAGrave.com.

<sup>67</sup> Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:xxvi–xxviii.

<sup>68</sup> James M. Gregory to Douglass, 6 March 1893, General Correspondence File, reel 9, frame 092, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>69</sup> Gregory, *Frederick Douglass*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Gregory, n.p.

<sup>71</sup> Gregory, n.p. For Scarborough's friendship with Douglass, see William S. Scarborough to Douglass, 21 May 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 108–09, Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

Gregory’s book was much shorter and less analytical than Holland’s. More than half of Gregory’s work was composed of direct quotations from Douglass’s speeches, autobiographies, and journalism; some of Douglass’s shorter works are quoted in their entirety. Many of these selections also had been featured in Holland’s book, but interesting new additions by Gregory included a long lecture by Douglass on his travels in Europe and Egypt in 1886–87, excerpts from several of his District of Columbia Emancipation Day orations in the 1880s, a memorial service for Ulysses S. Grant, and Douglass’s address to the 1883 National Convention of Colored Men in Louisville, Kentucky.

While Holland strove to examine the full range of Douglass’s public career, Gregory’s biography seems explicitly focused on assessing his subject’s abilities as a public speaker. Gregory observed the significant change in Douglass’s speaking style after the Civil War, when he shifted from mainly speaking extemporaneously to reading from prepared manuscripts. Gregory conceded a diminishment in Douglass’s eloquence, but observed that the new technique led him “to investigate more extensively the subjects on which he wrote, and to take more time for preparation; and thus made his speeches more complete.”<sup>72</sup> Gregory compared the later speeches by Douglass to those of Webster and Burke. Like those “great masters,” Douglass’s orations had “so much beauty of expression, elegance of diction, dignity of thought, and elevation of moral feeling that the most happy and lasting effect is produced upon the mind of the reader.”<sup>73</sup>

One area in which Gregory’s biography exceeded Holland’s was in its intimacy with its subject. Gregory’s biography contained interesting chapters on Douglass’s children, most of whom he knew personally, and on his subject’s home life in Cedar Hill. Gregory also offered readers more insight than had Holland on Douglass’s personality. Among Gregory’s observations was that Douglass was “of a bright and buoyant disposition at home as well as in the public [ . . . ] a man of temperate habits and strict in his business engagements [ . . . ] frank and fearless in expressing his views even though they bring him into sharp antagonism with those who hold different opinions.”<sup>74</sup> Gregory adopted Douglass’s oft-repeated paean to self-made men and showed how it fit its author, a former slave, better than most others, concluding, “If Mr. Douglass had enjoyed the same advantages enjoyed by his white contemporaries, and if the same opportunities for advancement had been open to him, what public position in this country might he not have filled, not even excluding the presidency?”<sup>75</sup> Combining his two emphases on Douglass as a speaker and as an exemplary leader, Gregory concluded the biography with the declaration “He will always be an inspiration to the struggling youth who are ambitious to win distinction, and he will always be regarded as a model of true eloquence.”<sup>76</sup> Almost without question, Gregory was one of those ambitious young African Americans inspired by Douglass. A financial scandal unfortunately cut short Gregory’s career at Howard only two years after Douglass’s death in 1895. He eventually resumed teaching in Bordentown, New Jersey, but never authored a second book or wielded political influence.

There are two significant conclusions that can be reached from this brief survey of Douglass’s relations with his five contemporary biographers. We know that Douglass was very concerned about his historical legacy, and in every case except Brown’s we have evidence that Douglass worked to guide these biographers’ assessment of his life. He did so by corresponding

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<sup>72</sup> Gregory, *Frederick Douglass*, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Gregory, 95.

<sup>74</sup> Gregory, 211–12.

<sup>75</sup> Gregory, 214.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory, 215.

cordially with most of them, by answering their questions about facets of his past life, and, most importantly, by supplying those authors with what he felt were his best speeches and writings. By this strategy, Douglass helped ensure that his image in contemporary biographies was in line with that in his own autobiographical writing.

The second conclusion is that Douglass's handling of his later biographers, Holland and Gregory, through retaining control over their access to his documentary record, caused a probably unintended shift in the assessment of his contribution to the abolitionist and civil rights movements. Douglass's first biographers, Child, Brown, and Penn, all had given greater credit to their subject's achievements as an autobiographer and journalist than as an orator. With Holland and Gregory, the focus shifted dramatically to Douglass's oratorical accomplishments. It was not that Douglass deprecated his own achievements as a journalist; in *Life and Times*, he declared, "If I have at any time said or written that which is worth remembering or repeating," it was in his newspapers.<sup>77</sup> Instead, there was a practical reason for the shift in biographical emphasis to his oratory. As a consequence of an arson fire in 1872 that destroyed the copies of his three Rochester-based newspapers, Douglass could not supply Holland and Gregory with samples of his editorial works as he did his speeches. Even in his last autobiography, Douglass quoted principally from his speeches because they were most readily available to him. The next generation of Douglass biographers in the early decades of the twentieth century, Charles Chesnut, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Dubois, all picked up that theme, and Douglass's oratory becomes the talent they most heavily praised.<sup>78</sup> This emphasis on Douglass as an unmatched abolitionist public speaker would dominate scholarship for the next half-century or longer. Douglass's obsession with shaping his historical legacy ironically contributed to some of his greatest accomplishments, those as a writer and journalist, being significantly undervalued until the rediscovery of his *Narrative* in the 1960s.

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<sup>77</sup> McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:207.

<sup>78</sup> Levine, *Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 16–25.