

“The Birth Place of *Your Liberty*”: Purchasing Frederick Douglass’s Freedom in 1846

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Following in the footsteps of African Americans who had made radical and politicized journeys across the Atlantic, Frederick Douglass set sail for the British Isles in August 1845. Over the course of nearly two years, he electrified audiences with his blistering exposure of American slavery, the corruption and pollution of Southern Christianity, and the blatant hypocrisies of American freedom and independence. He forged antislavery networks with British and Irish abolitionists who would support him financially and emotionally for the rest of his life, including most famously Julia Griffiths Crofts, Russell L. and Mary Carpenter, and Ellen and Anna Richardson, who were based in Newcastle. After a stay in the Richardson household in 1846, Ellen became determined to secure Douglass’s legal freedom; extended analysis of her letters, though, indicates that throughout the entire process she did not discuss the matter with him. Through Walter Lowrie, a lawyer in New York, she and her sister-in-law Anna made contact with Douglass’s enslaver, Hugh Auld, and organized a bill of sale for £150, or \$750. Eventually, on 12 December 1846, the free papers were signed.¹ While Douglass regarded this as a generous and unselfish act throughout his life, supporters of William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society objected to the purchase, for it seemed to be “property.”² In the pages of the *Boston Liberator*, Garrison himself reiterated his disagreement with compensation, but did recognize the ransom was enacted to secure Douglass’s liberty.³ Militant Garrisonian abolitionists like Henry Clarke Wright, however, viewed the so-called transaction with abhorrence: he wrote that Douglass had now been “shorn” of his strength within the antislavery movement, and it was an unnecessary decision to “ask the sacrilegious villain to set a price” upon his head.⁴

Bristling against the racial paternalism of White abolitionists who had no comprehension of his trauma or fear of being recaptured, Douglass replied to his critics in a public letter and celebrated the actions of his English friends who had paid £150 not to confirm legitimacy upon a “remorseless plunderer” but “to release me from his power, not to establish my *natural right* to freedom, but to release me from all legal liabilities to slavery.”⁵ As Douglass summarized in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, while his “uncompromising friends” failed to see the wisdom in such a ransom, he was fully aware that it was necessary for his return home.⁶ The dialogue revealed on a colossal scale the tensions between Douglass, White abolitionists, and the racism of those who felt he would “lose” the power of his oratory or position within the antislavery movement if the purchase was completed.

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 48–49.

² Catherine Paton to Maria Weston Chapman, 17 November 1846, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

³ William Lloyd Garrison to Elizabeth Pease Nichol, 1 April 1847, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library. See also *Boston Liberator*, 19 March 1847, 2–3; 15 January 1847, 26 March 1847.

⁴ Henry Clarke Wright and Frederick Douglass, *Letter to Frederick Douglass with his Reply* (1846), 1–3, Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection, Cornell University.

⁵ Wright and Douglass, *Letter to Frederick Douglass with his Reply*, 1–2. Douglass also published a letter in the press *Durham Chronicle*, 22 January 1847. See Douglass, *Narrative*, 20–21.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 375–76.

Cross-examining Richardson's letters reveals her motives for the ransom, her trials in contacting the Auld family. Memories of the event often resurfaced when Richardson visited the small fishing villages of Whitley Bay and Cullercoats, a few miles from the city of Newcastle and the very "birth place of *your* liberty" as she described them; Richardson had a second home in Cullercoats, and Douglass had stayed there with her in 1846 and again in 1859, where, according to a local newspaper correspondent, he had given a two hour speech "in a fireside, conversational manner" to some of the local children.⁷ Both places had extraordinary reverence for her, and of course for Douglass.

Writing to Helen Pitts Douglass, Richardson recollected that "a short distance from here I see the spot when the thought first [came to] me that *Frederick must be free!!*" She was often reminded of the events when "Frederick my sister and myself sat opposite Cullercoat sands with the sea rolling on the beach . . . that was one of the best days works I ever did when I look at the result of Frederick's freedom."⁸ As she reminded him, however, she was filled with "*doubt & perplexity*" at the time because of his alignment with the Garrisonian party, as she feared "*you would not allow yourself to be purchased and I was determined you should.*" She neglected at first to tell her sister-in-law Anna, concerned she would disagree, but eventually asked for her help in contacting an American lawyer. Upon reflection, Richardson "felt some compunction" over the notion she had not asked Douglass' permission and perhaps in explaining the full story to him, she wished to partially make amends for her conduct, as age had caused her to reflect on its morality. She remembered with fondness, though, "how *astonished* you were in my drawing room when I told you how the ransom had been effected you leaned back in the arm chair and exclaimed 'well I *never knew this!!* I never knew this before'!"⁹ Although it is unclear whether such an intimate and revealing moment took place in 1847 or 1887 (likely the latter), Richardson strongly believed that it was "the best speculation we ever made and I am sure we have both cause to be very thankful not to say *gratified* that it worked out so well."¹⁰

In his speeches and writings, Douglass always framed the purchase as an act stemming solely from the Richardson's generosity, and did not mention his part within it. In August 1846, he had written to Anna Richardson from London and was clearly aware of her attempts to secure his legal freedom. He longed to see his family and hoped to return to the U.S. that autumn but wanted to ensure his travel did not "interfere in any way with your correspondence with my owner – as whether you succeed or fail good may come of the effort."¹¹ As we have seen from Douglass's own hand, Ellen is perhaps misremembering the particulars. This does not take away from her memories, or the fact that Douglass may not have known all the details surrounding the ransom and those involved within it. Perhaps Ellen does not remember informing him because Anna did so instead; she mentions her sister-in-law's key role, and Anna may have felt uneasy at trying to arrange this without Douglass's permission, advice or acknowledgement. The passage of time and some guilt had weighed on Ellen's shoulders, despite the fact that Anna had taken matters into her own hands and had clearly discussed it with him.

⁷ Ellen Richardson to Frederick Douglass, 1887, FDP Digital Collection, Library of Congress; *The Newcastle Guardian*, 3 March 1860, 5.

⁸ Ellen Richardson to Helen Pitts Douglass, 28 September 1894, FDP Digital Collection, Library of Congress.

⁹ Ellen Richardson to Frederick Douglass, May? 1892, FDP Digital Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ Ellen Richardson to Frederick Douglass, 1 August 1889, FDP Digital Collection, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Douglass, *Narrative*, 50–51.

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Throughout his life, though, Douglass never forgot the Newcastle benefactors who helped him return home safely, but perhaps Richardson herself summarized this relationship best when she once wrote with great love and affection, “*our* interest [in you] never *dies*.”¹²

¹² Ellen Richardson to Frederick Douglass, 30 September 1886, FDP Digital Collection, Library of Congress.