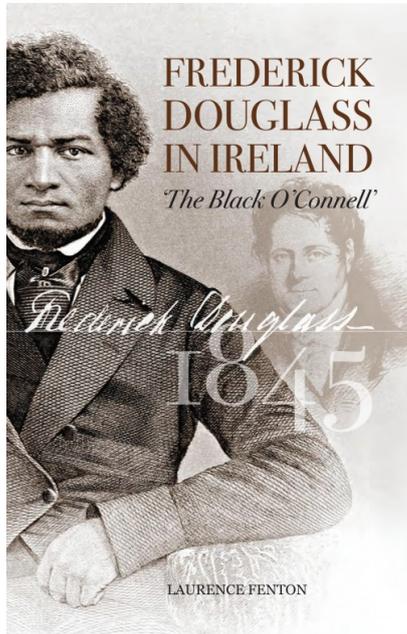


Review: Lawrence Fenton, *Frederick Douglass in Ireland: The Black O'Connell*

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Lawrence Fenton, *Frederick Douglass in Ireland: The Black O'Connell* 2014 The Collins Press, €10.39

Frederick Douglass, the great African-American Abolitionist, visited Ireland in 1845. Douglass, an ex slave himself, who had experienced all the brutality of chattel slavery, described his experiences in two autobiographies and lectured widely to mass Abolitionist audiences throughout the Northern States of the US. In August 1845, Douglass travelled to Ireland and England on a speaking tour organised by Irish and English abolitionists.

In a highly readable and engrossing account, Lawrence Fenton describes Douglass's experience in Ireland and the profound affect that the poverty of the rural and urban Irish he witnessed during his travels had on him.

Fenton provides a short account of Douglass's life based on his autobiography.

Douglass was born in Talbot County,

Maryland sometime in February 1818. He was never sure of the exact date as this information was withheld by slave masters from their slaves. Douglass barely knew his mother as slave owners would often split up slave families so as to break any familial bonds. Douglass's father was more than likely his owner, Aaron Anthony. Such non-consensual relationships between slave owners and slave women were very common.

Douglass was raised by his grandmother until the age of six in a tiny windowless hovel where his bed consisted of planks thrown over the rafters. His food consisted mainly of a cornmeal mush consumed with an oyster shell as a spoon. Douglass's grandmother had to deliver him to Anthony's house and left before Douglass was aware of his new predicament.

Slaves who attempted to make contact with their children or engage in any other human relationship not sanctioned by their master were severely punished. Douglass saw his own 15 year old Aunt Hester's naked back being bloodily whipped by his master Aaron Anthony. Hester's crime was to reject Anthony's unwelcome advances and sneak out at night to meet up with a slave boy her own age. Douglass himself was to receive several such whippings leaving permanent scars on his back. Eventually he escaped to freedom and joined the Abolition movement in the North where he became one of its most famous agitators.

Fenton's book also poses questions about Ireland's complex relationship with the Atlantic slave trade. It is true that thousands of the indigenous Catholic Irish were deported to the West Indies and North America as slaves and indentured

labourers to work on sugar plantations as their land was cleared for settlement by English and Scottish colonists.¹ It is a rather cruel and bitter irony that the term lynching may originate from Charles Lynch. Lynch was a Virginia planter and slave owner whose own father had come to America from Ireland as an indentured servant. Irish surnames are quite common on the island of Montserrat as mixed relationships were frequent between African and Irish slaves. They are not usually remembered when the Irish Diaspora are mentioned as they do not quite fit the rags to riches stereotype of the supposedly typical emigrant. . However, there were also Irish merchant capitalists who benefited from the Slave Trade. In the 18th century, Cork and Limerick emerged as major trading ports as Irish merchants exported salted Irish beef, ham and butter to the West Indies to feed both the slave owning colonists and the slave population. The Cork traders became known as the Merchant Princes and built fine mansions on Montenotte overlooking the city. Likewise, the Catholic Roches of Limerick traded extensively in the Caribbean². Linen manufactured in Belfast was used as clothing and footwear for slaves.

Douglass was very much moved by the appalling poverty that he saw in both rural and urban Ireland and provided vivid descriptions of it in his letters to American friends.

The overwhelming majority of the population lived in the countryside as peasant farmers and labourers, the former paying rent to Anglo Irish or absentee English landlords. A government report of 1836 concluded that the number of labourers who were unemployed for more than 30

weeks of the year was over 585,000, whose dependents were estimated at a further 1.8 million³

There was occasional agrarian unrest in the 18th and 19th centuries. Both Catholic and Protestant peasants were obliged to pay tithes, a tax for the upkeep of the Established Church of Ireland. Secret societies such as the Ribbonmen and Whiteboys attacked property of the Protestant clergy by night, setting fire to their houses and leaving an unsubtle message about their opposition to payment of an unjust tax. Catholic clergy were also on occasion targeted as the Catholic Church also demanded tithes for its upkeep. These secret societies were mainly composed of the poorer tenant farmers and farm labourers who were to be the main victims of the Famine.

The population grew exponentially during the 18th and early 19th centuries to 9 million by 1845. This was mainly due to the successful cultivation of the potato crop which could cheaply feed a large family. The potato was brought to Europe from South America in the 17th century. However, whereas native South Americans cultivated a wide variety of potatoes, this was not the case in Europe where a much narrower range was planted. The cultivation of the potato was an early example of capitalist monoculture with all its attendant pitfalls. Genetic uniformity meant that disease could quickly spread and wipe out a whole years' harvest. When potato blight affected the potato crop, it was to have catastrophic effects. However, when Douglass visited in 1845, the worst effects of the Famine had still not been felt. A second crop failure the following Autumn transformed the situation from hunger to

¹See Sean O'Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados, The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland*, Brandon Books, 2001

²See Nini Rodger, 'Ireland and the Black Atlantic in the Eighteenth Century', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 126 (Nov., 2000), pp. 174-192.

³Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848*.

starvation. British free market economic policy ensured that the wealthier farmers were able to export grain out of the country while the poor starved.

Those worst affected were the poorer tenant farmers and labourers as the potato was their main diet. While Douglass did not witness the worst of the Famine, he did observe the conditions of the Irish poor and remarked on some similarities with the conditions of African American slaves. While these similarities should not be overstated - chattel slavery probably has no equal in cruelty as a form of class domination - it is nevertheless telling the impression that the squalor of the Irish poor had on Douglass that he could draw such comparisons. However, while having sympathy with the plight of the Irish poor, Douglass also attributed their poverty to a weakness of character rather than asking any questions about the consequences of British colonial rule and the underlying class structures that caused that poverty. Indeed, when the situation of the majority of ex slaves hadn't improved after the Civil War, Douglass similarly blamed it on their moral character and a supposed lack of willingness on their part to improve their lot. Like other abolitionists such as William Garrison, his opposition was to a specific form of class domination, namely slavery, rather than to class society in all its forms⁴.

Douglass's hosts in Ireland were mainly Protestant Quakers such as the Webbs and Shackletons who like their American brethren were the backbone of the Abolitionist movement. Fenton provides an interesting account of the Quakers in Ireland and their prominent role the Abolitionist movement. The Quakers were also prominent in Famine relief. However, while their concern for the poor was genuine, it was also rooted in a paternalist mentality that

did not fundamentally question the systemic causes of poverty. Their patronage of Abolitionism and Douglass in particular also betrayed a paternalist condescension. Hannah Webb for example described Douglass as 'a child - a savage'.

Curiously, one Irish politician that emerges with some honour in the struggle against slavery is Daniel O'Connell. James Connolly quite rightly excoriated O'Connell for his contempt for the Irish working class in *Labour and Irish History*. Nevertheless, O'Connell was at least principled in his opposition to slavery, so much so that he was prepared to risk losing valuable Irish American funding for the Repeal Movement. O'Connell's stance against slavery left a deep impression on Douglass who would quote lines from O'Connell's speeches in later life. O'Connell shared platforms with Douglass when the latter spoke in Dublin.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of others such as the Young Irelander, John Mitchell, nor the Temperance leader, Father Theobald Mathew. Mitchell was a zealous advocate of slavery who wanted to own his own slave plantation and later supported the South in the Civil War, losing two sons to the Confederate cause.

Father Mathew persuaded tens of thousands of Irish people to take the Temperance pledge to swear that they would never touch a drop of alcohol again. Even Douglass took the pledge when he met Mathew in Ireland on his travels though he was already a non drinker. However, Douglass would later break with Father Mathew when the latter later toured the US and refused to condemn slavery for fear of alienating his Irish American supporters. One cannot help but see parallels with Irish politicians from Fine Gael to Sinn Féin who travel to the US to solicit Irish American support and investment but re-

⁴See Kelly, *No Easy Way Through, Race Leadership and Black Workers at the Nadir*, p.82

main silent on their hosts' reactionary attitudes on race and other contentious issues.

Douglass received an enthusiastic response wherever he travelled throughout Ireland. Over three thousand came to hear Douglass speak in the Music Hall on Lower Abbey Street. In Cork alone, he delivered twelve public addresses. Douglass was a brilliant orator and captivated his audiences with vivid descriptions of the barbarism of American slavery. The audiences were a mix of the Protestant middle classes and Catholic poor. Fenton cites the *Cork Examiner* as noting how the 'suffering poor' were 'thronging' to hear him speak. When Douglass spoke in the Independent Chapel in Limerick, the *Limerick Reporter* wrote that it was 'crowded in all parts ... by all classes and parties'.

In Cork, Douglass described the various punishments for minor transgressions quoting from *American Slavery As It Is* by Theodore Dwight Weld: 'If more than seven slaves are found together in any road, without a white person - twenty lashes apiece. For visiting a plantation without a written pass - ten lashes. For letting a boat loose from where it is made fast - thirty-nine lashes; and for the second offence, shall have his ear cut off'.

Douglass was unsparing in his denunciation of the various Protestant denominations that provided a religious justification for slavery even if it made some of his listeners uncomfortable. While Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists all endorsed slavery in America, their brethren on this side of the ocean condemned slavery though this was due to the fact that Britain had abolished slavery as a result of slave revolts in the Caribbean and slavery no longer serving the needs of British capitalism. The same Churches as well as the Catholic Church had conveniently provided theological justification for it until Abolition.

Douglass finished his tour in Britain and eventually returned to the US in 1846. He maintained correspondence with his Irish friends throughout his life. While Douglass's critique of slavery never developed into a full blown attack on class society as a whole, he quite rightly deserves a reputation as a principled and uncompromising fighter against racial oppression.

Frederick Douglass in Ireland shows that even in the midst of extreme poverty, large numbers of Irish people were willing to extend solidarity with the plight of African American slaves over three thousand miles away and the solidarity was reciprocated. Douglass, in spite of his Anglophile sympathies, supported Irish resistance to British rule. In a speech he gave in 1883, he praised the struggle for Irish freedom when he said: 'Poor, ragged, hungry, starving and oppressed as she is, she is strong enough to be a standing menace to the power and glory of England'. It is appropriate that the Right 2 Water Campaign in Ireland should quote from Douglass on its Facebook page as he still remains an inspirational figure for people fighting oppression across the world.

It is a tragedy of history that poor Irish emigrants were easily manipulated by the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party during the Civil War and after to perceive freed African Americans as their economic competitors. Douglass himself noted this irony in the same speech quoted above: 'Perhaps no class of our fellow citizens has carried this prejudice against color to a point more extreme and dangerous than have our Catholic Irish fellow citizens, and yet no people on the face of the earth have been more relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion, than the Irish people' Douglass's friendly reception in Ireland suggests, however, that this racial animosity was not innate but was manufactured from

above.

Fenton's account of Douglass's travels in Ireland is well written and is compelling

reading, throwing new light on important aspects of both Irish and American history.