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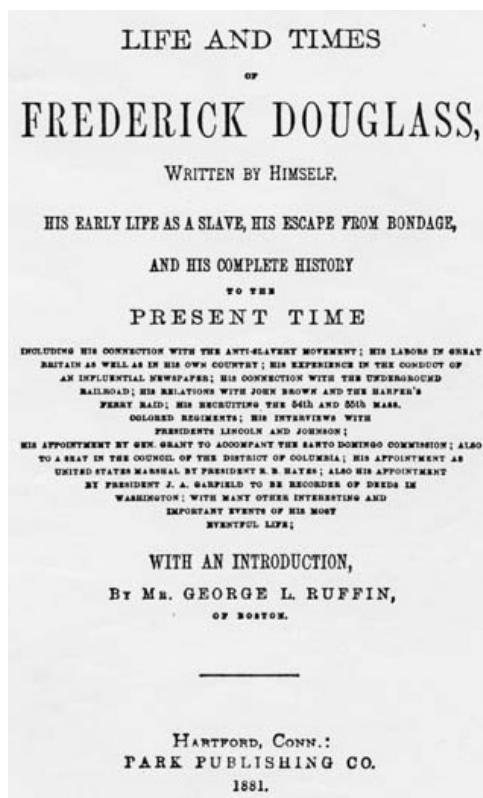
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# INTRODUCTION: REDISCOVERING THE *LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS*

John R. McKivigan



Title page, 1881 edition. Frederick Douglass  
Papers Editorial Office, Indianapolis.

Frederick Douglass (1817–1895) has long been regarded as the ideal in terms of the intellectual, social, and political stature that an African American could

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attain during the turbulent 19th century. Through his oratory, journalism, and written work on behalf of abolition, equal rights, women's rights, temperance, and other reform causes, Douglass catalyzed political and personal revolutions that modified the social landscape of the nation. His lifelong devotion to educating himself in history, literature, philosophy, and political thought, in the face of enormous legal and societal obstacles, remains an inspiring example today.

One noteworthy achievement of Douglass was the publication of three autobiographies over the course of his long public career. The first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, appeared in 1845, and the second, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in 1855. These two works were heavily influenced by Douglass's devotion in those years to the abolitionist movement and each autobiography presented a powerful indictment of the institution of slavery. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, first published in 1881 and revised and republished in 1892, is the final of his three autobiographies. Although *Life and Times* continues to be overshadowed in popularity by the shorter *Narrative*, Douglass clearly deemed this comprehensive treatment of his life his most important autobiography. In it, he revisited the events of the earlier volumes, detailing his life in slavery and his rise in the abolitionist movement, but within a different historical context and with the greater reflection afforded by his intellectual maturity. In *Life and Times*, Douglass disclosed for the first time the details of his own escape from slavery by means of the Underground Railroad. More importantly, Douglass described his extensive career following the height of the abolitionist crusade. Only in this volume did he recount the political crises of the late 1850s, the Civil War, the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the federal government's treatment of freedpeople during Reconstruction, the factional political infighting in the Republican Party during the Gilded Age, the Jim Crow era, and, finally, Caribbean diplomacy in the early years of U.S. imperialism. Because Douglass detailed the criticism he faced from his allies in the abolitionist movement, the African American community, and the women's suffrage campaign during this later period, preserving his version of these events affords readers an insightful portrait of the struggles of African Americans to gain equal rights and treatment in the late 19th century.

Of Douglass's three autobiographies, *Life and Times* has been the least read and studied. However, his final autobiography is the only one of Douglass's writings that provides an opportunity to view his life as a whole; it also reveals the ways in which Douglass hoped to be remembered for his contribution to the events of his time. Ultimately, Douglass's correspondence indicates that the text of *Life and Times* itself never completely satisfied him. He produced at least three editions of this work, two with the Hartford, Connecticut, firm of Park Publishing Company in 1881 and 1882, and an expanded second edition with DeWolfe, Fiske

and Company of Boston in 1892 with an addition of over a hundred pages to recount the preceding decade of his public life.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he remained dissatisfied with both publishers for the volume's offensive illustrations, sloppy typography, and generally cheap binding. Sales figures for each edition fell far below Douglass's expectations.<sup>2</sup>

The critical reception of *Life and Times* also profoundly disappointed Douglass. Few contemporary reviews indicated more than minimal familiarity with material added after the publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855—material that reflected more than half of Douglass's public activity. Several reviewers likened Douglass's life story to fictional works such as Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or chided Douglass for dredging up unpleasant memories of past racial turmoil.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most disappointing to Douglass, the African American newspapers from the 1880s and 1890s seemed to have entirely ignored the autobiography and the lessons Douglass hoped to impart to a younger generation.<sup>4</sup>

A disappointment to its author during his lifetime, *Life and Times* garnered an even worse reception in the 20th century. A number of modern historians and literary scholars dismissed the third autobiography, comparing it unfavorably with Douglass's antebellum narratives. According to literary critic Eric Sundquist,

The preference that a number of recent literary critics have shown for the 1845 *Narrative*, over *My Bondage and My Freedom* and especially the more self-indulgent *Life and Times*, indicates not just a distrust of the patriotic rhetoric, the gothic and sentimental literary conventions, and the myth of self-made success that are more characteristic of the later volumes. It also suggests a problematic historiographical choice to be made between the Douglass closest to, and thus presumably best able to articulate, the experience of slavery and the Douglass who purposely constructed for himself a linguistically more sophisticated "American" identity, with figures such as the framers of the Constitution or Benjamin Franklin as his models.<sup>5</sup>

William Andrews and some other modern scholars view *Life and Times* as the embodiment of a disturbing shift in the character of black autobiographies and of African American literature in general in the late 19th century. They have argued that after emancipation, black autobiographers relinquished their oppositional voice and their focus on asserting black identity against a slaveholding nation, only to replace opposition with accommodation to the values and goals of the white middle class into which they attempted to assimilate.<sup>6</sup> For these critics, the exemplary black autobiography of the era was Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). Washington argued the utility of including African Americans thoroughly in the nation's fabric, albeit in a socially inferior position, and saw little value in the search for and assertion of a distinctive African American identity.<sup>7</sup> In this context, Wilson J. Moses contends that "[w]ith slavery dead, [Douglass] was unable to construct a public role that spoke adequately to the problems of Reconstruction. . . . [T]he enduring popularity of Frederick Douglass derives

far more from the brilliance of his antislavery career than from the clarity of his postbellum vision.”<sup>8</sup> For these scholars, Douglass’s *Life and Times* and African Americans’ autobiographical works in general had lost their noble social missions in the immediate post-Civil War decades.

Yale University Press in the spring of 2013 published a modern critical edition of Douglass’s third and final autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.<sup>9</sup> This volume was prepared by the Frederick Douglass Papers, a unit of the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts at Indianapolis’s Institute for American Thought.<sup>10</sup> The aim of Frederick Douglass Papers’ was to provide scholars, instructors, students, and the general reading public with a truly authoritative scholarly edition of *Life and Times* that recovers Douglass’s own intentions in its text, fully explains the editorial choices made during that recovery process, and exhaustively annotates all historical references.

As it had previously handled Douglass’s speeches and correspondence, the Frederick Douglass Papers project sought to capture to the extent possible what Douglass himself actually said and wrote, and in light of the surviving evidence, how he intended his language and ideas to appear when put into print.<sup>11</sup> The aim was to establish a text of *Life and Times* that embodies more accurately Frederick Douglass’s life story as he intended it to be read and understood—that is, to approximate more closely Douglass’s style and content—than does any other available edition. Employing the textual methods of Sir Walter Greg, Fredson Bowers, and G. Thomas Tanselle, the project’s editors studied all surviving manuscripts, typescripts, and printings of *Life and Times* to restore the text to the prose Douglass desired.<sup>12</sup> The Frederick Douglass Papers edition of the autobiography strips the text of the many layers of stylistic veneer applied by its New England editors in 1881, 1882, and 1892, who believed that they could, and indeed, *should*, enhance and correct Douglass’s prose. However, as with any editorial alterations that affected or substantively changed the meaning of the sentences and paragraphs crafted by Douglass, the loss of that veneer is in fact a gain for those seeking to reconstruct Douglass as he was in his time and as he wrote of his life. The Frederick Douglass Papers volume also renders the book more accessible to modern readers by providing detailed historical and social context through its more than 1,700 historical annotations that identify individuals, landmarks, locations, social and political movements, and contemporary organizations Douglass discusses.

To observe this milestone and to reassess Douglass’s historical significance in the light of the republication of his third autobiography, the Frederick Douglass Papers organized a two-day conference, “Rediscovering the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,” at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, in October 2012. Ten internationally recognized scholars in the disciplines of history, literature, political science, law, and Africana Studies presented original

research on Douglass, utilizing the new edition of *Life and Times*.<sup>13</sup> More than a hundred persons attended one or more of the free public lectures and scholarly sessions devoted to Douglass's *Life and Times*.<sup>14</sup> By bringing together many of the leading Douglass scholars, the Frederick Douglass Papers hoped to transform the academic discussion and understanding of the place of this autobiography in the context of prior studies on Douglass. The essays in this Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History* were drawn from the larger group of scholarly papers presented at that Indianapolis symposium. Like the symposium, these essays are intended to generate a new renaissance in Douglass studies and new understandings of his role in 19th-century American public life.<sup>15</sup>

The first of these essays, Robin L. Condon's "'Finished by the Hand by Which It Was Begun': Who Wrote *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*?" provides the complex printing history of Douglass's third autobiography and the challenges that were presented to its modern-day editors. Condon describes the Douglass Papers edition as "a reconstructed version of *Life and Times* . . . that represents the form and content that Douglass himself was responsible for as the individual author." To achieve that goal required painstaking analysis of the various printings and editions of the book appearing during Douglass's lifetime to determine changes in spelling, punctuation, and even wording that editors, compositors, and others made without his approval and to remove them. Comparing the final product of the textual editing team of the Frederick Douglass Papers to other modern available texts of *Life and Times*, Condon concludes that for the first time readers can be assured "that Frederick Douglass—not his editors, his compositors, or his publishers—was indeed the sole author of his *Life and Times*."

In her essay, "'Mr. Douglass Must Share . . . Our Disappointment': The Commercial and Aesthetic Failure of *Life and Times*," Julie Roy Jeffrey argues that Douglass strove to use *Life and Times* to "highlight racial realities and to clarify the achievements of the antislavery movement before they disappeared 'into the dim deceptive haze of the past.'" Indicated by the book's poor sales, the American public proved largely indifferent. Jeffrey's essay explores reasons for the book's commercial failure despite energetic marketing efforts by the publishers of both its 1881 and 1892 versions. She contends that the book's considerable length, its expense, and its racially offensive illustrations deterred potential buyers. Reviewing reports from the publishers, Jeffrey detects significant public resentment of Douglass's second marriage to white reformer Helen Pitts, turning off many potential African American purchasers. Placing Douglass's work within the context of similar disappointing experiences encountered by other authors of abolitionist autobiographies whose works were published in the 1880s and 1890s, Jeffrey finds that Douglass and these other authors struggled against a political and intellectual climate eager to forget past controversies over slavery and racial injustice.



Robert S. Levine's "Frederick Douglass and Thomas Auld: Reconsidering the Reunion Narrative" presents a revisionist reading of *Life and Times's* account of Douglass's 1877 reunion with his former master Thomas Auld. Past historians have emphasized the spirit of forgiveness, reconciliation, and even "love" that pervaded this meeting of the former runaway slave with his old master, who was practically on his deathbed. Levine demonstrates that this reading is in contrast to the overall depiction of the Douglass-Auld relationship not just in *Life and Times*, but in all other accounts left by Douglass. The essay instead demonstrates that in *Life and Times* Douglass continued to display significant ill will toward the former slave owner. Levine also analyzes the "performative" character of the 1877 visit to his Eastern Shore of Maryland birthplace, through which Douglass sought to demonstrate not a return to old patterns of servility, but the possibility of a new start for race relations.

In my own essay "Stalwart Douglass: *Life and Times* as Political Manifesto," I contend that Douglass's third autobiography was both influenced by and written to influence the politics of the nation during the 1880s and 1890s. Both contemporaries and later historians have ascribed a self-seeking motivation to Douglass's unswerving loyalty to the Republican Party following the Civil War. This essay demonstrates that Douglass consciously used *Life and Times* to defend his political record against critics. He claimed a consistent pattern of advocacy for African American rights in the face of a growing spirit of postwar sectional reconciliation that poorly hid a resurgence of white racial violence. Although Douglass did support the Republican Party against its Democratic rivals, he also worked within his party to advance the influence of the "Stalwart" faction of leaders who had the best record of protecting the freedpeople during this era. By making the case for a return of the Stalwarts to control the Republican Party and ultimately the nation, Douglass's *Life and Times* was foremost a political document vainly striving to turn back the regressive trends of the late 19th century.

In "Seed-Time and Harvest-Time: Natural Law and Rational Hopefulness in Frederick Douglass's *Life and Times*," Peter C. Myers argues that Douglass's autobiography as well as his moral and political philosophy possesses great coherence on account of "his distinctive understanding of the law of nature." Myers shows how Douglass interpreted his life's major events as governed by natural law and how his principal antislavery critique was based on natural and rational, rather than theological or scriptural, arguments. Myers provides insight into Douglass's struggle to reconcile his faith in racial progress, guided by "inevitable" moral law as demonstrated by the achievements of the abolitionist movement and the years of Reconstruction, while confronting the realities of increasing white racial violence during the 1880s and 1890s.

Wilson J. Moses in “‘The Ever-Present Now’: Douglass’s Pragmatic Constitutionalism” analyzes Douglass’s lifelong encounter with the framers of the U.S. Constitution. Moses shows that in *Life and Times*, Douglass recounted the history of his conversion from the position of his earliest Garrisonian abolitionist mentors, who regarded that document as a proslavery instrument, to the camp of political abolitionists who saw slavery as a contradiction to the Constitution’s fundamental principles. Moses compares Douglass to other students of the Constitution—from Roger Taney to today’s Clarence Thomas, Robert Bork, and Antonin Scalia with regards to their methods of interpreting the Constitution—and concludes that Douglass was a “pragmatic opportunist” experimenting with competing schools of thought, but bound to no one doctrine. Instead Douglass “shaped a progressive and evolutionary interpretation of the Constitution that makes the Declaration of Independence almost part of the Constitution” and used that connection to place the expansion of freedom at the center of the American historical experience.

These essays and the symposium where they originated are intended to inspire a more positive assessment of Douglass’s hitherto largely ignored or misunderstood third autobiography. That work chronicles nearly the entire 19th century and almost the entire life of Frederick Douglass, arguably the seminal African American figure in antislavery, equal rights, and several other important reform movements. Rediscovering Douglass’s *Life and Times* can be a means to a fuller appreciation of the achievements of not just one man, but of the crusade to make the American nation fulfill its promise of equal liberty and justice for all.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1881, 1882); and, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske and Co., 1892).

<sup>2</sup>See the article by Julie Roy Jeffrey published in this issue for details.

<sup>3</sup>For example, see *Philadelphia Press*, 26 December 1881, reprinted in *Washington National Republican*, 31 December 1881. *Cleveland Leader*, [n.d.], reprinted in *Trenton Sentinel*, 21 January 1882; *Washington People’s Advocate*, 25 February 1882.

<sup>4</sup>Extant holdings of the African American press archives searched for reviews of *Life and Times* include Coffeyville (KA) *Afro-American Advocate*, September 1892–February 1893; *Cleveland Gazette*, September 1892–February 1893; Huntsville (AL) *Gazette*, August 1881–March 1882, August 1892–March 1893; Indianapolis *Freeman*, August–December 1892; *New York Age*, 19 November 1892; *Detroit Plaindealer*, August 1892–May 1893; *Savannah Tribune*, January–June 1893; *Washington (DC) Bee*, August 1892–April 1893; and *The Weekly Topeka (KA) Call*, January–May 1893. The only newspaper on microfilm for the years 1881–82 was the Huntsville (AL) *Gazette*. Several possibly relevant numbers of the newspapers mentioned have not been located.

<sup>5</sup>Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 4.

<sup>6</sup>William L. Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865–1920,” in *African-American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William L. Andrews (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1993), 77–89. Also see Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave’s Narrative* (New York, 1985), xviii.

<sup>7</sup>Eric J. Sundquist, “Review of Dickson D. Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915* (1989),” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45 (June 1990): 106.



<sup>8</sup>Wilson J. Moses, "Review of Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times* (1994)," *African American Review* 30 (Summer 1996): 302.

<sup>9</sup>Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 2: *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT, 2012) (hereinafter cited as *Life and Times*).

<sup>10</sup>The Frederick Douglass Papers originated in 1973 at Yale University, as a result of consultations among the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and John W. Blassingame, Professor of History at Yale. With Blassingame serving as Editor, the project began work in 1973. After nearly twenty years directing the project at Yale University, Blassingame turned direction of the Papers to John R. McKivigan. From 1992 to 1998, West Virginia University housed the project, and since then the Frederick Douglass Papers has resided at the Institute for American Thought, a unit of the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts at Indianapolis.

<sup>11</sup>Since 1979, the Frederick Douglass Papers has published a five-volume series of Douglass's selected *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*; a three-volume series of his *Autobiographical Writings*; and the first of a four-volume series of his *Correspondence*. In addition to the remainder of the *Correspondence* series, the project is preparing a two-volume series of Douglass's *Other Writings* and a number of special paperback volumes, including a popular edition of Douglass's *Narrative*, a one-volume selection of his most significant speeches, and a modern edition of his 1853 novella "The Heroic Slave."

<sup>12</sup>The textual editing team of the Douglass Papers for this volume included Joseph R. McElreth, Jesse S. Crisler, Robin L. Condon, and James A. Hanna. Although some scholars have adopted a "social text" orientation that views a work as the product of a collaborative process among author, publisher, copy editor, compositor, and book binder, these editors followed the methodological theory of Sir Walter Greg, who argued for the recovery as much as possible of the author's intended text, cleansed of the corruption introduced during the publication process. Sir Walter Greg, "The Rationale of Copy-Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950–51): 19–36. For the social text theory, consult Phillip Gaskell, *From Writer to Reader: Studies in Editorial Method* (Oxford, UK, 1978) and Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago, IL, 1983).

<sup>13</sup>In addition to the articles published in this journal, papers were presented at this symposium by David W. Blight, Paul Finkelman, John W. Stauffer, and Kenneth Warren. Commentary on the papers was provided by L. Diane Barnes, Monroe H. Little, and Jane Schultz.

<sup>14</sup>The symposium was supported by the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute, Indiana Humanities, and various campus organizations.

<sup>15</sup>The editor of this Special Issue received valuable assistance from Rebecca Pattillo, a research assistant at the Frederick Douglass Papers.