



Giant's Causeway: Frederick Douglass's Irish Odyssey and the Making of an American Visionary

Tom Chaffin

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In 1845, seven years after fleeing bondage in Maryland, Frederick Douglass was in his late twenties and already a celebrated lecturer across the northern United States. The recent publication of his groundbreaking *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* had incited threats to his life, however, and to place himself out of harm's way he embarked on a lecture tour of the British Isles, a journey that would span seventeen months and change him as a man and a leader in the struggle for equality.

In the first major narrative account of a transformational episode in the life of this extraordinary American, Tom Chaffin chronicles Douglass's 1845-47 lecture tour of Ireland, Scotland, and England. It was, however, the Emerald Isle, above all, that affected Douglass--from its wild landscape ("I have travelled almost from the hill of 'Howth' to the Giant's Causeway") to the plight of its people, with which he found parallels to that of African Americans. Writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, critic David Kipen has called Chaffin a "thorough and uncommonly graceful historian." Possessed of an epic, transatlantic scope, Chaffin's new book makes Douglass's historic journey vivid for the modern reader and reveals how the former slave's growing awareness of intersections between Irish, American, and African history shaped the rest of his life.

The experience accelerated Douglass's transformation from a teller of his own life story into a commentator on contemporary issues--a transition discouraged during his early lecturing days by white colleagues at the American Anti-Slavery Society. ("Give us the facts," he had been instructed, "we will take care of the philosophy.") As the tour progressed, newspaper coverage of his passage through Ireland and Great Britain enhanced his stature dramatically. When he finally returned to America he had the platform of an international celebrity.

Drawn from hundreds of letters, diaries, and other primary-source documents--many heretofore unpublished--this far-reaching tale includes vivid portraits of personages who shaped Douglass and his world, including the Irish nationalists Daniel O'Connell and John Mitchel, British prime minister Robert Peel, abolitionist John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln.

Giant's Causeway--which includes an account of Douglass's final, bittersweet, visit to Ireland in 1887--shows how experiences under foreign skies helped him hone habits of independence, discretion, compromise, self-reliance, and political dexterity. Along the way, it chronicles Douglass's transformation from activist foot soldier to moral visionary.

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