

The Lives Of Frederick Douglass

Jonathan Lande

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Lande, Jonathan (2016) "The Lives Of Frederick Douglass," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.18

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/13>

Review

Lande, Jonathan

Fall 2016

Levine, Robert S. *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780674055810

Rereading Frederick Douglass

In *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, Robert S. Levine studies Frederick Douglass's autobiographies written from the 1840s to the 1890s to provide a new perspective on Douglass. Looking at the rich body of work Douglass left us, especially but not exclusively Douglass's three autobiographies, Levine weighs the texts against one another. Through his critical analysis of what Levine describes as Douglass's autobiographical project, Levine looks to Douglass's evolving ideas of race, violence, and abolitionism and advances insights into Douglass as a writer and as a social reformer.

Levine focuses on Douglass's autobiographical texts, assessing the performative nature of self-writing. Douglass published three autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, and finally, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881 (which he revised in 1892). Levine begins evaluating the reception and status of Douglass's three autobiographies from the time Douglass wrote them. While Douglass's fame was derived from his oratory in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Levine claims that by the late-twentieth century scholars referenced Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* as the mark of his genius, and the first autobiography has become the most cited and studied. However, in addition to the first, Levine reaffirms the importance of the second two autobiographies to Douglass and our reading of the man, and Levine reexamines Douglass's life by looking at each. Levine expands the number of texts to include the "larger autobiographical project that encompasses a wide range of Douglass's writings" too, incorporating into the collection of Douglass's autobiographies speeches, newspaper articles, and Douglass's 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave* (4).

Levine acknowledges that autobiographies reveal only glimpses into a life and that the writer carefully crafts the interpretations, so to evaluate the texts, Levine develops an approach that treats the works as performances. In particular, Levine recognizes that Douglass practiced self-examination and self-realization in writing and rewriting his story, making the autobiographies sources that cannot be reflexively read. Instead of shying away from the autobiographies because of their limitations though, Levine embraces the autobiographical texts, and he analyzes the arguments Douglass *chose* to deploy. Levine claims that Douglass continuously constructed his public self within the works, therefore allowing Levine to concentrate on the “performative dimension” of the autobiographical texts (28). Pondering the stories Douglass the writer told about Douglass the man, Levine rereads Douglass to present a new biography.

Levine skillfully employs this approach and contributes to the scholarship on Douglass’s life with five chapters that focus on five moments in Douglass’s life as lived in Douglass’s writing. In the first chapter, Levine inspects the construction of the 1845 *Narrative* during Douglass’s time with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, revealing the instrumental role the reform organization played in producing the work. Levine probes Douglass’s expanding intellectual horizon in the second chapter, showing how Douglass reclaimed and recrafted the *Narrative* during his journey to Dublin. In the third chapter, Levine delves into Douglass’s abolitionist philosophy, examining Douglass’s fictional representation of the slave rebellion in *The Heroic Slave*. In chapter four, Levine looks at the well-trod topic of Douglass’s relationship with Abraham Lincoln, and he contends that the Douglass-Lincoln relationship has been misunderstood, suggesting that Douglass embellished on his friendship with Lincoln to gain political capital (182). Levine closes the book surveying how Douglass spoke to and of Thomas Auld, who once claimed to own Douglass. Here Levine challenges prior Douglass biographies, speculating that in his later years “Douglass remained uncertain about Auld’s beneficence” (282).

Throughout the work, Levine presents compelling arguments, and one of the most important contributions he makes is in pointing out the significance of Douglass’s novella, *The Heroic Slave*. *The Heroic Slave* is a novella about Madison Washington and the slave rebellion he led aboard the slave ship *Creole* in 1841. Pivoting from reflections by Robert Stepto and William McFeely on *The Heroic Slave*, Levine reconsiders Douglass’s representation of the rebellion’s leader. In McFeely’s biography of Douglass, McFeely called *The Heroic Slave*, Levine quotes, a “fantasy of his own heroism,” but rather than

treat Douglass's affinity for Washington as mere voyeurism, Levine argues that Douglass identified with Washington (147). In the process of crafting Washington the character, Douglass continued to think about his own rebellion and grappled with his place in the abolitionist movement. Levine demonstrates that as a result Douglass moved toward a different interpretation of his own rebellion and recognized violence as a potential means of ending slavery. Douglass's "imaginative investment" in the *Creole* rebellion, Levine writes, "helps Douglass tell his own autobiographical story about his turn to a militant antislavery politics grounded in black solidarity and community" (157). With this intervention, Levine reveals writing as an essential instigator of Douglass's shifting views, supporting Levine's assertion that Douglass held a deep "faith in writing" as a means of political action and as a method of forging identity (306).

Throughout Levine's work, as in the case of *The Heroic Slave*, Levine fruitfully rereads Douglass's autobiographies. By reexamining Douglass's self-writing attentive to the performative dimension of narrative construction, Levine offers valuable comparisons of moments in Douglass's life, highlighting problems in the historical record and supplying new conclusions, as well as new questions, about Douglass's life. In all, Levine's *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* provides a detailed look at the choices Douglass made when he sat down to write, yielding a clearer picture of the man as a writer and reformer while also evoking questions that invite further scholarship on Douglass. Levine's book will interest those seeking to understand the intellectual life of Douglass and more fully appreciate Douglass's political acumen.

Jonathan Lande is a PhD candidate at Brown University working on "Disciplining Freedom: Union Army Slave Rebels and Emancipation in the Civil War Courts-Martial," which offers a new interpretation of the history of black Union soldiers. His recent article, "Trials of Freedom: African American Deserters during the U.S. Civil War," published in the 2016 Spring issue of the Journal of Social History, delves into a part of this story, examining the trials of black deserters. His writing has also appeared in the African American Intellectual History Society's blog.