

A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution

Leigh Fought

Le Moyne College, foughtlk@lemoyne.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Fought, Leigh (2021) "A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/15>

Review

Fought, Lee

Spring 2021

Root, Damon. *A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution*. Potomac Books, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$26.95 ISBN 9781640122352 pp. 200.

Had Damon Root written *A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution* fifty or even forty years ago his work might have been hailed as an interesting take on an important African American of the antebellum era. At that time, few scholarly biographies of Douglass existed, study of the antislavery movement had hardly begun and much of it was confined to white abolitionists, the scholarship on much of the historical context of Douglass's world had yet to be amassed, and Douglass himself was usually seen only through the lens of his experience as a slave. A book proposing to focus upon Douglass's statements about the U.S. Constitution, place him in a classical liberal tradition, and, as Root proclaims on page four of his introduction, "show that Douglass deserves to be ranked alongside Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Abraham Lincoln in the pantheon of American civic philosophers" would, in 1970, seem ahead of its time.

Root, however, seems unaware that many historians and political scientists have already demonstrated this point over the years. Indeed, a quick browse through the footnotes and bibliography indicates that Root consulted very little scholarship on any of these subjects, including Douglass himself, at all. He lists fewer than ten monographs published in the past fifty years and only a single biography of Frederick Douglass.¹ That single biography was not David Blight's 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, but the much older Philip Foner biography published in 1950. Nor does Root refer to Blight's *Keeping Time in Jubilee: Frederick Douglass's Civil War*, which covers much of the same ground as this volume,

¹In the interest of transparency, I confess that one of those books is my own, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*. Along with Philip Foner's biography of Douglass, is one of only two monographs about Frederick Douglass in the bibliography. It seems to have been consulted for two quotes that have nothing to do with the Constitution, one of which refers to an idea that is not my own but synthesizes those of Mia Bay and Paula Giddings on Ida B. Wells, both scholars of color, whom I cited in my footnotes.

but with greater sensitivity to context. Lest anyone think that Root's method of looking only at the primary sources has the purpose of keeping it untainted by the biases of other historians, allowing the documents to speak for themselves, the complete lack of engagement with those historians or relevant scholarship about the history of antislavery or civil rights law, ideology, and movements makes the narrative and argument of *A Glorious Liberty* useless in understanding Douglass or his views on the Constitution.

Root, in fact, appears more interested in proving that the U.S. Constitution, if interpreted correctly, was not a document that would permit racism, especially once abolitionists had prevailed with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The narrative has very little to say about Frederick Douglass, following the highlights of pro- or anti-slavery moments in relation to the Constitution more than the ebb and flow of Douglass's ideas. Douglass appears less as a man with complex thinking processes that developed over time and in response to multiple factors than as an icon supplying optimistic quotes about the Constitution as a document of freedom. Root does not wrestle with Douglass's sometimes contradictory and even pessimistic statements, such as his many varied assessments of Lincoln and the early years of the Civil War or his fury and despair in the 1880s. Root, therefore, leaves out almost all of Douglass's experiences, such as his transformative transatlantic tour in 1845-47, and influences, except those politicians and jurists who wrote explicitly about the Constitution and slavery. As a result, African Americans and women (and especially African American women) have no place in *A Glorious Liberty*, a rather telling exception.

After all, limiting the participants in the debate limits the topic of debate and, in this case, the depth of analysis. By consulting sources only from the leading White abolitionists, members of Congress, senators, Supreme Court justices, and so forth, the underlying problem remains focused on the permissibility of an institution, slavery, in a federal document and, by extension, the nation. If the abolitionist interpretation of the Constitution prevails and becomes enshrined in law through the Thirteenth Amendment, then the problem has been resolved. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment, which seem like afterthoughts in *A Glorious Liberty*, reverse some of the proslavery interpretations of the Constitution such as Dred Scott. Ultimately, the key problem has ended and now the nation can move on with justice served by upholding the Constitution.

Except slavery was not the real problem. It was the most insidious of the many manifestations of the real problem. The real problem was the designation of one group of people

as inferior to another to the point of dehumanization, and then structuring an entire society around that premise. By following Douglass through the Black Convention Movement, by reading his pronouncements on slavery as also condemnations of race, by reading his discussions with other African Americans such as James McCune Smith, Jermain Loguen, Sojourner Truth, Charles Lenox Remond, Martin Delany, Charlotte Forten Grimke', Sarah Parker Remond, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and so on, and by seeing Douglass as a Black man raising a Black family, the problem of race and racism emerges as a lived experience inextricably tied to Black interpretations of American history and the nation's founding documents. For Douglass, ending slavery, stipulating the basis of citizenship, and denying states the ability to refuse suffrage based on race did not reverse history. Legal precedent upon legal precedent decided by people who benefitted from that history or who deferred to state's rights, an idea also enshrined in the Constitution, would not help matters. That problem persisted after the amending of the Constitution, and Root's dismissal of the state's rights arguments that paved the way for Jim Crow as incorrect decisions ignore that they, too, were grounded in the same Constitutional precedent that antislavery arguments drew upon.

Readers who know nothing about Douglass will find far better books from which to learn. Readers who do know something about Douglass will begin to wonder what the purpose of *A Glorious Liberty* might be, if its author seems so incurious about his subject beyond useful quotations. The answer to that question may lie in Damon Root's profession as an editor for *Reason*, a right-leaning and libertarian-tinged online magazine. He has written many columns there, from which *A Glorious Liberty* seems to have been drawn, appropriating Douglass for his own political cause. The lack of research involved in this volume, then, seems deliberate. Much like limiting the voices from the history he covers, Root has eliminated the scholarship that countervail or undercut his own argument. By not addressing them, he does not have to question the flaws in his own research and he can shape Douglass to his own ends. Whatever your political tendencies, this is just bad history.

Leigh Fought is a professor of history at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, and the author of Women in the World of Frederick Douglass (Oxford University Press, 2017).