

Frederick Douglass

Justice and Progress Go Together

Geoff Palmer

Frederick Douglass's name when he was born into slavery in 1818 was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. He changed his name to Frederick Douglass after being encouraged by a supporter, Nathan Johnson, to change his surname to Douglas, the name of the freedom fighter and hero of Walter Scott's poem *Lady of the Lake*. Frederick spelt Douglass with a double S to arrive at a name that he thought looked more distinctive than Douglas with one S.¹

Having read the story of how Frederick Douglass arrived at his new surname, I recalled a story about a distinguished Scottish family called Gladstone. John Gladstones was born in Leith, Edinburgh, the son of a merchant. He changed his surname to Gladstone because he believed that it looked and sounded more distinctive without the final S. Frederick Douglass became the most distinguished Black person in the history of chattel slavery in the United States. However, John Gladstones, later Sir John Gladstone, became one of the richest and most notorious slaveowners of the British West Indian chattel slavery empire, and received about £83m compensation in today's money for the 2,508 enslaved people, designated legal property, who were freed in 1838, following their emancipation in 1833–1834.²

Many enslaved people on colonial plantations were given only one name: a Christian name. Surnames of enslaved people were often derived from the name of the slaveowner. Evidence from the Jamaica telephone directory indicates that most of the surnames recall Scottish ancestry. Scotland played a significant part in the management of British chattel slavery in colonies such as Jamaica.

Douglass's path from his birthplace in Easton, Maryland (1818), to speaking at over seventy venues in Scotland in 1846 is one example of Scotland's historical links with slavery in the United States. During the speeches that Douglass gave

Sir Geoff Palmer, DSc, OBE, was born in Jamaica. He joined his mother in London in 1955 and progressed from being designated Educationally Sub-normal to Honorary Consul for Jamaica in Scotland in 2018, human rights activist, research scientist, author, charity worker, and professor. He is a professor emeritus at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh, and was knighted in 2014.

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on his tours in Scotland, he outlined the cruelty of chattel slavery, from which he escaped in 1838 when he was twenty years old, the same year that enslaved apprenticeship was abolished in the British West Indies. Although self-taught, he became a distinguished abolitionist, social reformer, orator, author, statesman, and family man. It was a life that was almost destroyed by chattel slavery when he was a child. This led him to say, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”³ He knew that during slavery “broken men” did not survive for long.

In their important book *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection*, Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor describe in detail the family life of Frederick Douglass. This is important because, in his various writings, Douglass articulated the ravaged family life of enslaved people, who could be sold off on a whim by the slaveholding family. Douglass, in fact, never knew his white father and was separated from his mother when still a child. He lived with his maternal grandmother as a boy, and his mother died when he was seven years old. When he was nine, he was acquired by Lucretia Auld, the wife of slaveowner Thomas Auld. While Lucretia taught Douglass to read and write, Thomas objected because, to him, a slave who could read and write was a dangerous asset. Auld then passed Douglass, when he was sixteen years old, to Edward Covey “to be broken,” to become compliant. Covey whipped Douglass, and Douglass rebelled. Covey hired out Douglass at age seventeen. Douglass escaped from slavery in 1838, at twenty.⁴

Before Douglass escaped from chattel slavery, he met Anna Murray and asked her to join him when he was free.⁵ He married her and she became Mrs. Douglass in 1838. Among relatives sold when Douglass was enslaved was his sister, Sarah Bailey. She was one of fifteen close relatives sold during Douglass’s childhood. Douglass and Anna’s daughter Rosetta was born in 1839. Their sons, Lewis Henry, Frederick Jr., and Charles Remond, were born in 1840, 1842 and 1844, respectively. Their last child, Annie, was born in 1849 but died in 1860.⁶ This was a great distress, but had this happened to Frederick and Anna when they were enslaved, they would not have been permitted to grieve as a family. Douglass’s sons supported and fought with the army in the war to end slavery in the United States. Until she died in 1882, Anna Murray Douglass kept the family together while Douglass pursued the freeing of his people. He was very active in the Black Abolition movement, working with Black abolitionists such as James McCune Smith, the first African American doctor, who graduated from Glasgow University in 1837. Smith’s great admiration of Douglass caused him to name one of his sons Frederick Douglass. Douglass had contacts with white abolitionist John Brown, who was executed in 1859, and discussions with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, two years before slavery was finally abolished in the United States. In 1889 President Benjamin Harrison appointed Douglass as government representative in Haiti and San Domingo.

In 1845 Douglass published his first of three autobiographies. In the same year Thomas Auld, who still ostensibly owned Douglass the escaped slave, sold Douglass to his brother Hugh for \$100. Later Hugh nullified his legal ownership of Douglass for £150. Douglass's links with Scotland began in 1838, when he adopted a Scottish surname.⁷ He was also aware that Scotland had benefitted financially from British slavery in the West Indies, which was abolished in 1838, and he travelled to Britain in 1846 to escape concerns about his capture and return to slavery. Douglass spoke at over seventy venues in Scotland outlining the horrors of chattel slavery and appealing to the Scottish people to help abolish U.S. slavery, with which they had historical connections.⁸ During his time in Scotland he met abolitionists such as Eliza Wigham.⁹

In some quarters, even today, as a result of false national pride, there are some who try to balance the financial benefits that Scotland gained from British–West Indian chattel slavery against the myth that Scotland abolished slavery before British slavery was abolished in 1838. This myth in part derives from Douglass's own perceptions of Scotland. In a speech given in Paisley, Scotland, in 1846, he stated, “The evils stalking abroad in this land are nothing like American slavery. . . . I utterly deny you have the least shadow of it.”¹⁰ Indeed, in 1776, Henry Dundas, the Lord Advocate, said that “there were not now a slave in Britain, nor could there possibly be from its constitution.”¹¹ Substituting the oxymoron “enslaved servant” (as John Cairns writes, “in other words a slave”) for “slave” in the Joseph Knight case functions to sustain the myth that Scotland abolished slavery in 1778, as discussed in detail below.¹² Knight was not property; he was not a slave; he was a servant. This slavery falsehood dishonours the short, “broken” lives of chattel slaves, prolongs racism, and delays reparative justice. British Black chattel slavery has been described as one of the most profitable evils the world has known.¹³ Scotland not only created a Caribbean diaspora from this slavery; this slavery played a major part in transforming Scotland from a poor to a rich country, yet it is glossed over in histories of the period. Tom Devine's *The Scottish Nation, 1700–2007* gives chattel slavery less than one line in 744 pages, while Michael Fry, who elsewhere wrote that slavery “was, in an exotic setting, the normal Scottish quest for self-advancement,” gives it about one page out of 425 in *The Dundas Despotism*.¹⁴ Thankfully, such omissions are challenged by Scottish people who wish to know the truth of their part in this terrible slavery.

In the United States, Douglass was attacked physically for his antislavery activism. In 1846 in Scotland, he was well received but had to deal with pockets of racism.¹⁵ For example, the Reverend John MacNaughtan mocked Douglass by stating that “he was a poor, ignorant, runaway slave who had picked up a few sentences.” Douglass replied, “The man whose pockets are lined with the gold with which I ought to have been educated, stands up charging me with ignorance and poverty. . . . Shame on him.”¹⁶ In Arbroath and Ayr, Douglass

outlined the terrible conditions of chattel slaves. He observed, “I am here to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.” In Falkirk, Douglas decried “the Law that grants no protection to a portion of the human race . . . that places them on a level with beasts of the field . . . because the colour of their skin is black” and stated that “the people who tolerate the existence of the Law . . . will be consumed by the presence of a fearful retribution.”¹⁷ Here Douglass was referring to the racist teleology that Black people were suited to be slaves because they were “framed for the climate” and could tolerate conditions that existed on slave plantations.¹⁸

In Paisley and Dundee, Douglass argued with the Free Church of Scotland about the money it received from slavery in the United States. In 1843, three years before Douglass arrived in Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland was formed by a large withdrawal from the established Church of Scotland.¹⁹ To support the development of this new Church, about £3,000 was raised in the United States. Slaveowners contributed to this blood money. Douglass’s criticism of the Free Church brought additional criticism from MacNaughtan. He criticised Douglass for “creating a false impression regarding one of the noblest institutions in the land.”²⁰ The excuse for the Church taking the money was that “if the money is returned, we must not buy [American] cotton, nor wear it, we must not use their rice nor purchase their tobacco [for] the stamp of slavery is on them all.”²¹ This attempt to use self-interest as an excuse for immorality was not accepted by Douglass, who responded that the Free Church should “Send Back The Money.”²²

The founder of the Free Church, Dr. Thomas Chalmers, defended taking slavery money by stating that “American slave-owners could not just release their slaves, and had to live within the framework of the Law.”²³ The sanctity of the British Slave Laws of Jamaica was also emphasized in the Joseph Knight case (1774–1778) by their Lordships (the judges of the Joseph Knight case) and the Lord Advocate of Scotland, Henry Dundas. Dundas said in 1776 that there were no slaves in Britain, but he also said that by law “every black man is doomed to servitude [slavery] in Jamaica.”²⁴ Dundas, in Parliament in 1792, prolonged the British slave trade by successfully amending “immediate” abolition to “gradual” abolition.²⁵ He compounded his gradual-means-never deception by stating in a letter on February 18, 1796, “I have not the time to write more. It is near five and I must go [to Parliament] to oppose the Proposition for the abolition of the Slave Trade.”²⁶ The famous abolitionist Thomas Clarkson reported in 1808 that Dundas “opposed” the abolition of the slave trade for fifteen years, supported in part by Scottish Members of Parliament he controlled. This opposition caused over six hundred thousand African people to be transported into slavery between 1792 and 1807. Prime minister William Pitt stated in 1792 that Dundas’s “gradual” meant “never.” Charles Fox, Member of Parliament, likened it to “gradual murder.”²⁷ Dundas used this “gradual” period to propose breeding Black slaves

to profit slave owners and to attack San Domingo (later Haiti) to damage the French slavery business and to protect British slavery.²⁸ Dundas's actions as Secretary of State for War caused about forty thousand British troops to lose their lives. Dundas colluded with the House of Lords to prolong the slave trade until he was impeached in 1806 for taking Navy funds. Although freed by the House of Lords, he never held another ministerial post in government, and the slave trade was abolished in 1807.²⁹ Dundas's actions of using the law to maintain chattel slavery in the British West Indies can be traced back to the decision of the judges of the Joseph Knight case. Although agreeing that Knight was free in Scotland, "they admitted, that he [Knight] was a slave in Jamaica."³⁰ Therefore, the Joseph Knight case did not abolish slavery in Scotland in 1778; it *reaffirmed* the legality of Black chattel slavery in British colonies such as Jamaica.

Despite this background of using the law to sustain chattel slavery, in 1846 Douglass rejected Chalmers's self-serving excuse for taking slavery money to pay the bills of the Free Church. Indeed, he saw the manipulation of the law to negate people's rights as an unacceptable misuse of power. Chalmers also asserted that "a distinction must be made between the character of a system (slavery) and the character of a person whom circumstances have implicated therein."³¹ This infuriated Douglass, who replied that such an immoral position would absolve criminals of the consequences of their actions. Indeed, some modern historians have tried to apply such flawed reasoning to the evil actions of Henry Dundas and to racism more broadly, while the Black Lives Matter movement illuminates the terrible, lasting consequences of the enslavement of Black people. In Paisley, Douglass demanded that the Free Church should "Send Back The Money." He added, "The people are with us in Arbroath, Dundee, Aberdeen, Montrose, Greenock, Glasgow—and they will be with us in Edinburgh. . . . [W]e want to have the whole country surrounded with an antislavery wall with words legibly inscribed thereon, *Send Back The Money, Send Back The Money.*"³²

There were racist responses to Douglass's abolitionist activity in Scotland. One such response was "Send Douglass Back."³³ Douglass ignored these attacks, labouring under the assumption that "he was here to plead the cause of the Slave and to arouse the energies and obtain the co-operation of the good people of old Scotland on behalf of what he believed to be a righteous cause."³⁴ This "co-operation" of the people helped to bring about the abolition of U.S. slavery in 1865. In addition to all that took place in 1865, it is recorded that during this year Frederick Douglass's son Lewis Henry was engaged in teaching "women and men whom his father had taught."³⁵ Progress is possible with equality, freedom and education.

On November 15, 2018, a plaque commemorating Frederick Douglass's 1846 antislavery work in Scotland was unveiled at Gilmore Place in Edinburgh. I am a proud descendant of chattel slaves. Therefore, it was a humbling opportunity to witness this great honour to Frederick Douglass, whose contributions to the

world would not have happened if he had not escaped from chattel slavery and educated himself. Frederick Douglass's exceptional life shows that slavery and racism destroy the peace and progress of humanity. We are one humanity, nothing less.

For many years a committee failed to find consensus for the text on a plaque for the 150-foot-tall statue of Henry Dundas in Edinburgh. However, a new narrative has been agreed on. Nearly two centuries after the statue was erected, Dundas's role in delaying the abolition of the slave trade has been recognized and recorded on the plaque. We cannot change the past, but we can change its consequences for the better and, in Douglass's words, "make it useful to the present and the future."³⁶

NOTES

1. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor, *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 3, 6.

2. For further information, see Geoff Palmer, *The Enlightenment Abolished* (London: Henry Publishing, 2007).

3. Unfortunately, while this powerful declaration is widely acknowledged to originate from Douglass, the specific source of the quote has not been recorded.

4. Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 4–6.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

6. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

7. For further information, see Iain Whyte, *Send Back the Money: The Free Church of Scotland and American Slavery* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012), chap. 5; Alasdair Pettinger, *Frederick Douglass and Scotland, 1846: Living an Antislavery Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

8. For further information, see Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, chap. 5; Pettinger, *Frederick Douglass and Scotland*.

9. For further information concerning Douglass's relationships with white Scottish anti-slavery radical reformers, including Wigham, see Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, 80.

10. Frederick Douglass, "International Moral Force Can Destroy Slavery: An Address Delivered in Paisley Scotland, on March 17, 1846," *Renfrewshire Advertiser*, March 28, 1846, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One—Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame, Richard G. Carlson, and Clarence L. Mohr (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 1:183.

11. See the Joseph Knight case (Register House, CS235/K/2/2: 1774–1778); *Caledonian Mercury*, February 17, 1776.

12. John Cairns, Alan Warson Lectures, Edinburgh University, 2019; John Cairns, "Joseph Knight and the End of Slavery in Scotland," June 16, 2020, <https://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2020/06/16/joseph-knight-and-the-end-of-slavery-in-scotland/>.

13. See Palmer, *The Enlightenment Abolished*.

14. Tom M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1707–2007* (London: Penguin, 2006); Michael Fry, "A Commercial Empire," in *Eighteenth-Century Scotland: New Perspectives*, ed. Tom M. Devine and J. R. Young (East Lothian, UK: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 63; Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

15. For further information, see Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, 113.

16. Quoted in Alasdair Pettinger, "Spotlight: Paisley," *Bulldozia: Research Projects in Transatlantic Literature and Culture*, n.d., <https://www.bulldozia.com/douglass-in-scotland/spotlight-paisley/>.

17. Quoted in University of Edinburgh, “Frederick Douglass in Scotland,” *Our Bondage and Our Freedom*, 2018, <https://geo.nls.uk/maps/douglass/scotland.html>.

18. Joseph Knight case (Register House, CS235/K/2/2: 1774–1778); *Caledonian Mercury*, February 17, 1776.

19. For further information, see Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, introduction and chap. 1.

20. Quoted in Hannah-Rose Murray, “Scotland,” *Frederick Douglass in Britain and Ireland*, n.d., <http://frederickdouglassinbritain.com/journey/scotland/>.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Quoted in Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, 76.

23. *Ibid.*, 74.

24. Joseph Knight case; *Caledonian Mercury*, February 17, 1776.

25. For further information, see Palmer, *The Enlightenment Abolished*; Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756–1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), chap. 1.

26. Letter by Henry Dundas to a member of the House of Lords, February 18, 1796, Register House, Edinburgh.

27. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* (London: L. Taylor, 1808).

28. Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980).

29. Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*. Fry writes that Dundas was guilty.

30. *Caledonian Mercury*, January 17, 1778; also see Cairns, Alan Warson Lectures; Cairns, “Joseph Knight and the End of Slavery in Scotland.” Fry has described Dundas’s delay of abolition as a “tiny minor incident”: see Caitlin Logan, “‘Completely Unacceptable’: Historian Michael Fry Slammed by Fellow Plaque Panellist for Slavery Comments in Henry Dundas Statue Debate,” *Source News*, August 14, 2018, <https://sourcenews.scot/completely-unacceptable-historian-michael-fry-slammed-by-fellow-plaque-panellist-for-slavery-comments-in-henry-dundas-statue-debate/>.

31. Quoted in Whyte, *Send Back the Money*, 74.

32. *Ibid.*, 76.

33. *Ibid.*, 79.

34. Frederick Douglass, “The Free Church of Scotland and American Slavery,” Dundee, Scotland, January 30, 1846, available through the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, Yale University, <https://glc.yale.edu/free-church-scotland-and-american-slavery>.

35. For further information, see Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 16.

36. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” speech in Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.