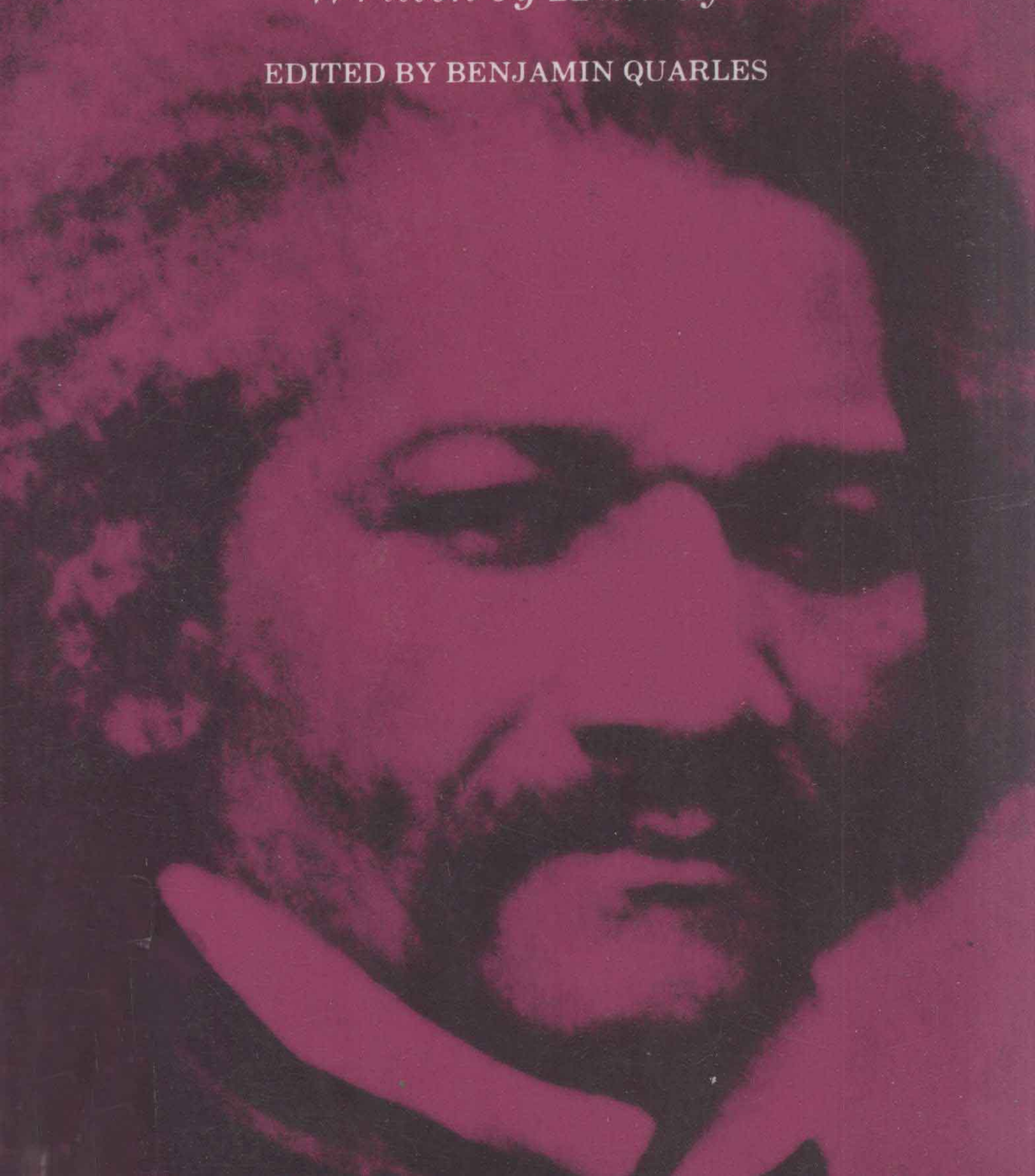


Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass

An American Slave

Written by Himself

EDITED BY BENJAMIN QUARLES



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INTRODUCTION

The publication in 1845 of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was a passport to prominence for a twenty-seven-year-old Negro. Up to that year most of his life had been spent in obscurity. Born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Douglass escaped from slavery in 1838, going to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Here for four years he turned his hand to odd jobs, his early hardships as a free man being lessened by the thriftiness of his wife. In August 1841, while attending an abolitionist meeting at Nantucket, he was prevailed upon to talk about his recollections of slavery. His sentences were halting but he spoke with feeling, whereupon the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society lost no time in engaging him as a full-time lecturer. For the following four years the young ex-slave was one of the prize speakers of the Society, often traveling the reform circuit in company with the high priests of New England abolitionism, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips.

The publication of the *Narrative* brought to Douglass widespread publicity in America and in the British Isles. This was all he needed; henceforth his own considerable abilities and the temper of the times would fully suffice to

keep him in the limelight. His was among the most eventful of American personal histories.

Favorably endowed in physique, Douglass had the initial advantage of looking like a person destined for prominence. There was a dramatic quality in his very appearance — his imposing figure, his deep-set, flashing eyes and well-formed nose, and the mass of hair crowning his head. An exceptional platform speaker, he had a voice created for public address in premicrophone America. In speaking he was capable of various degrees of light and shade, his powerful tones hinting at a readiness to overcome faulty acoustics. His rich baritone gave an emotional vitality to every sentence. “In listening to him,” wrote a contemporary, “your whole soul is fired, every nerve strung — every faculty you possess ready to perform at a moment’s bidding.” Douglass’ famed oratorical powers account in part for the large crowds that gathered to hear him over the span of half a century.

If nature equipped Douglass for a historic role, nineteenth-century America furnished an appropriate setting. Douglass came to manhood in a reform-conscious age, from which he was not slow to take his cue. Following the publication of his *Narrative* he went to the British Isles. There for two years he denounced American slavery before large and sympathetic audiences. The visits of Douglass and other ex-slaves contributed much to the anti-Confederate sentiment of the British masses during the Civil War.

Returning to America in 1847 Douglass moved to Roches-

ter, where he launched an abolitionist weekly which he published for sixteen years, a longevity most unusual in abolitionist journalism. Douglass' printing establishment cost nearly \$1,000 and was the first in America owned by a Negro. Douglass was a careful editor, insisting on high standards from office assistants and the contributors of weekly newsletters.

In addition to speaking and writing, Douglass took part in another of the organized forms of action against slavery — the underground railroad. Himself a runaway, he was strongly in sympathy with those who made the dash for freedom. Once, in a heated controversy over the wisdom of giving the Bible to slaves, he asserted that it would be "infinitely better to send them a pocket compass and a pistol." The fees from many of his lectures went to aid fugitives; at abolitionist meetings he passed the hat for funds to assist runaways to "get Canada under their feet." He was superintendent of the Rochester terminus of the underground railroad; his house was its headquarters. One of his newspaper employees related that it was no unusual thing for him, as he came to work early in the morning, to find fugitives sitting on the steps of the printing shop, waiting for Douglass.

To aid further in the destruction of slavery, Douglass in 1850 became a political abolitionist. Hitherto he had been a moral-suasionist, shunning political action. But after three years in Rochester among the voting abolitionists, Douglass

announced himself ready to employ "the terse rhetoric of the ballot box," and his weekly became the official organ of the Liberty party. The fitful career of this party was then almost run, most of its followers having gone over to the Free Soil group. When in 1856 the small remnant of Liberty party diehards decided to merge into the Radical Abolitionist party, Douglass was one of the signers of the call. In 1860 he was again one of the policy-makers of the Radical Abolitionists. The insignificant vote polled by that party in the national election is unrecorded, but by 1860 the abolitionists were nearer to their goal than they could discern.

Douglass was a confidant of the man who became the North's Civil War martyr, John Brown. In November 1848, eleven years before Harpers Ferry, Douglass visited Brown at Springfield at his invitation. The two reformers were friends from that time on. Ten years later, in February 1858, Brown was a house guest for three weeks at Douglass' home; here it was that Brown drafted his blueprint for America, a "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." When Brown was arrested on October 16, 1859, for attempting to seize the government arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Douglass sped to Canada lest he be taken into custody as an accomplice.

The coming of the war had a bracing effect on Douglass; to him the conflict was a crusade for freedom. Because in his thinking the purpose of the war was the emancipation of the slaves, he was anxious that the Negro himself strike

a blow. When President Lincoln called for volunteers immediately after the firing on Fort Sumter, Douglass urged colored men to form militia companies. He advised the President "How to End the War": "Let the slaves and the free colored people be called into service and formed into a liberating army, to march into the South and raise the banner of Emancipation among the slaves."

When it became clear that Lincoln could not be rushed, Douglass' criticisms became severe. His tone grew less impatient, however, when "the slow coach at Washington" finally began to move. Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation somewhat mollified Douglass, and he was nearly won over after exposure to Lincoln's charm at two White House visits.

Too old to bear arms himself, he served as a recruiting agent, traveling through the North exhorting Negroes to sign up. His first enrollee was his son Charles; another son soon followed suit. Douglass' success as a recruiting agent led him to expect a military commission as an assistant adjutant general under General Lorenzo Thomas. Douglass had talked with Secretary of War Stanton and had gone away believing the commission had been promised. But it never came.

After the war Douglass became a staunch supporter of the Republican party. His quadrennial delivery of the Negro vote did not go unrewarded; three G.O.P. presidents had political plums for him: Marshal of the District of

Columbia, Recorder of Deeds for the District, and Minister to Haiti.

During these last twenty years of Douglass' life he was the figure to whom the mass of Negroes chiefly looked for leadership. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois were ready in the wings, but neither was prepared to step to the center of the stage until 1895, the year Douglass died. In the seventies and eighties the colored people looked to Douglass for counsel on the correct line to take on such matters as the annexation of Santo Domingo and the Negro exodus from the South. He had no choice but to assume such responsibilities as commending Clara Barton for opening an establishment in Washington to give employment to Negro women, explaining the causes for the mounting number of lynchings, and urging Negroes not to take too literally the Biblical injunction to refrain from laying up treasures on earth.

The championing of the cause of the downtrodden points toward Douglass' major contribution to American democracy — that of holding a mirror up to it. He gave us no new political ideas; his were borrowed from Rousseau and Jefferson. But America had no more vigilant critic, and none more loving. "The Star Spangled Banner" was one of the airs he often played on his violin; he envisioned the freedom-possessed America of patriotic song and story. Until it emerged, there would always be work to do: "In a word,

until truth and humanity shall cease to be living ideas, this struggle will go on."

* * *

Douglass was a prolific writer; speeches, personal letters, formal lectures, editorials, and magazine articles literally poured from his pen. Most of this output has been brought together in a massive four-volume work by Philip Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1950-55). Not included in Foner's collection, because of their length, are Douglass' most sustained literary efforts, his three autobiographies. The *Narrative* in 1845 was the first of these; we may note its distribution, reserving for a moment comment on its general nature and its influence.

The *Narrative's* initial edition of 5,000 copies was sold in four months. Within a year four more editions of 2,000 copies each were brought out. An additional republication occurred in 1848 and another in 1849. In the British Isles five editions appeared, two in Ireland in 1846 and three in England in 1846 and 1847. Four of these Irish-English printings were editions of 2,000 and one was of 5,000 copies. By 1850 a total of some 30,000 copies of the *Narrative* had been published in America and the British Isles. To these may be added an 1848 French edition, paperbound, translated by S. K. Parkes. The present text reproduces exactly that of the first edition, published in Boston in 1845.

The sales of the *Narrative* were boosted by good press notices. The book could count on laudatory statements from the reformist sheets, but it also got a column-and-a-half front-page review in the New York *Tribune*, lavish in its praise: "Considered merely as narrative, we have never read one more simple, true, coherent and warm with genuine feeling" (June 10, 1845). Across the Atlantic the response was likewise encouraging. The influential *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* praised the *Narrative*: it "bears all the appearance of truth, and must, we conceive, help considerably to disseminate correct ideas respecting slavery and its attendant evils" (January 24, 1846). An American periodical, *Littell's Living Age*, pointing out that the autobiography had received many notices in the public press abroad, gave an estimate of its reach: "Taking all together, not less than one million of persons in Great Britain and Ireland have been excited by the book and its commentators" (April, May, June 1846).

In 1855 Douglass published his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In this work of 462 pages, well over three times the length of the *Narrative*, Douglass expands on his life as a freeman, and includes a fifty-eight page appendix comprising extracts from his speeches. *My Bondage* was reprinted in 1856 and again in 1857, its total publication running to 18,000 copies. In 1860 it was translated into German by Ottilie Assing, who subsequently became a treasured friend of the Negro reformer.

The final autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1881. In it Douglass had to reduce the space given to his slavery experiences in order to narrate his Civil War and postwar activities. As in *My Bondage*, however, he included excerpts from his speeches. *Life and Times* did not sell well. On July 19, 1889, its publishers regretfully informed Douglass that although they had "pushed and repushed" the book, it had become evident that "interest in the days of slavery was not as great as we expected." Another Boston publisher brought out the autobiography in 1892, hoping that Douglass' appointment as Haitian minister had made the reading public eager to take a fresh look at his career. A revised edition was issued in 1893, but its sale was "a disappointment to us," wrote DeWolfe, Fiske and Company on March 9, 1896, to Douglass' widow.

Life and Times was published in England in 1882 with an introduction by the well-known John Bright. A year later a French edition was brought out by the house of E. Plon and Company, and in 1895 at Stockholm a Swedish edition was issued. To these may be added a twentieth-century printing; in 1941 the Pathway Press republished *Life and Times* "in preparation for the one hundredth anniversary of Douglass' first appearance in the cause of emancipation."

Neither *Life and Times* nor *My Bondage* equaled the *Narrative* in sales or in influence. The last named had many advantages over its successors. As its title suggests, it

was more storytelling in tone. It was cohesive whereas the others were not. Moreover, the *Narrative* was confined to slavery experiences, and lent itself very well to abolitionist propaganda. A closer look at this slim volume may suggest the sources of its influence.

To begin with, it belongs to the "heroic fugitive" school of American literature. Slave narratives enjoyed a great popularity in the ante-bellum North. "Romantic and thrilling, they interested by the sheer horror of their revelations, and they satisfied in the reading public a craving for the sensational," writes John Herbert Nelson. Most of the narratives were overdrawn in incident and bitterly indignant in tone, but these very excesses made for greater sales.

Among the hundred or more of these slave-told stories, Douglass' has special points of merit. The title page of the *Narrative* carries the words, "Written By Himself." So it was. "Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative," said Garrison in the Preface, "rather than to employ some one else." The Douglass volume is therefore unusual among slave autobiographies, most of which were ghostwritten by abolitionist hacks. The *Narrative* has a freshness and a forcefulness that come only when a document written in the first person has in fact been written by that person.

Except for the length of a few sentences and paragraphs, the Douglass autobiography would come out well in any modern readability analysis. It is written in simple and di-

rect prose, free of literary allusions, and is almost without quoted passages, except for a stanza from "the slave's poet, Whittier," two lines from *Hamlet*, and one from Cowper. The details are always concrete, an element of style established in the opening line.

The *Narrative* is absorbing in its sensitive descriptions of persons and places; even an unsympathetic reader must be stirred by its vividness if he is unmoved by its passion. It is not easy to make real people come to life, and the *Narrative* is too brief and episodic to develop any character in the round. But it presents a series of sharply etched portraits, and in slave-breaker Edward Covey we have one of the more believable prototypes of Simon Legree.

Contributing to the literary effectiveness of the *Narrative* is its pathos. Douglass scorned pity, but his pages are evocative of sympathy, as he meant them to be. Deeply affecting is the paragraph on his nearest of kin, creating its mood with the opening sentence: "I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night."

Perhaps the most striking quality of the *Narrative* is Douglass' ability to mingle incident with argument. He writes as a partisan, but his indignation is always under control. One of the most moving passages in the book is that in which he tells about the slaves who were selected to go to the home plantation to get the monthly food allowance for the slaves on their farm. Douglass describes the manner

in which these black journeyers sang on the way, and tells us what those "rude and incoherent" songs really meant. He concludes, "If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, — and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.'"

Aside from its literary merit, Douglass' autobiography was in many respects symbolic of the Negro's role in American life. Its central theme is struggle. The *Narrative* is a clear and passionate utterance both of the Negro's protest and of his aspiration. The book was written, as Douglass states in the closing sentence, in the hope that it would do something toward "hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds."

The *Narrative* marked its author as the personification not only of struggle but of performance. "I can't write to much advantage, having never had a day's schooling in my life," stated Douglass in 1842 (*The Liberator*, November 18, 1842). Yet three years later this unschooled person had penned his autobiography. Such an achievement furnished an object lesson; it hinted at the infinite potentialities of man in whatever station of life, suggesting powers to be elicited.

The *Narrative* stamped Douglass as the foremost Negro

in American reform. With the publication of this autobiographical work he became the first colored man who could command an audience that extended beyond local boundaries or racial ties. From the day his volume saw print Douglass became a folk hero, a figure in whom Negroes had pride. His writings took on a scriptural significance as his accomplishments came to be shared imaginatively by his fellows.

But if Douglass emerged as the leading Negro among Negroes, this is not to say that the man was himself a racist, or that he glorified all things black. Never given to blinking unpleasant facts, Douglass did not hesitate to mention the frailties of the Negroes, as in the case of the quarrels between the slaves of Colonel Lloyd and those of Jacob Jepson over the importance of their respective masters. Douglass did not dislike whites — his close association with reformers in the abolitionist and woman's rights movements, his many friends across the color line, and the choice he made for his second wife indicate that he was without a trace of anti-Caucasianism. The point is worth stressing. For Douglass addressed his appeal less to Negroes than to whites — it was the latter he sought to influence. He did not propose to speak to Negroes exclusively; he wanted all America, if not all the world, for his sounding board.

A product of its age, the *Narrative* is an American book in theme, in tone, and in spirit. Pre-Civil-War America was characterized by reformist movements — woman's rights,

peace, temperance, prison improvements, among others. In the front rank of these programs for human betterment stood the abolitionist cause. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, antislavery sentiment was widespread in the Western world, but in the United States more distinctively than anywhere else the abolitionists took the role of championing civil liberties. Thus they identified themselves with the great American tradition of freedom, which they proposed to translate into a universal American birthright. Moreover, the abolitionist movement shaped this country's history as did no other reform. It was destined to overshadow all other contemporary crusades, halting their progress almost completely for four years while the American people engaged in a civil war caused in large part by sectional animosities involving slavery.

The *Narrative* swept Douglass into the mainstream of the antislavery movement. It was a noteworthy addition to the campaign literature of abolitionism; a forceful book by an ex-slave was a weapon of no small caliber. Naturally the *Narrative* was a bitter indictment of slavery. The abolitionists did not think much of the technique of friendly persuasion; it was not light that was needed, said Douglass on one occasion, but fire. The Garrison-Phillips wing did not subscribe to a policy of soft words, and Douglass' volume indicated that he had not been a slow learner.

Naturally the *Narrative* does not bother to take up the difficulties inherent in abolishing slavery. These Douglass