

Hilary Russell

Frederick Douglass in Toronto

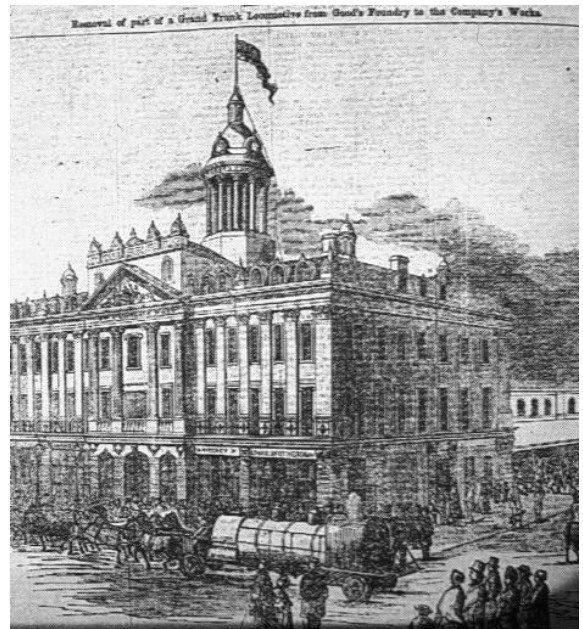
Drawing of St. Lawrence Hall published in the Toronto newspaper, Daily Colonist, in 1855. During the decade, the building was one of the main sites of anti-slavery activism in Toronto. Drawing courtesy Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library.

St. Lawrence Hall, King Street, Toronto, constructed in 1850 and restored to its original splendour in 1967. Frederick Douglass gave two addresses here during the 1850s, at the invitation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. Photo by J. P. Jerome, Parks Canada.

Notwithstanding his international stature and importance, very little attention has been paid to the topic of Frederick Douglass in Canada. Otherwise comprehensive and brilliant biographical treatments of Douglass contain few or no indexed references to Canada; on this side of the border, scant mention of Douglass is found in works on 19th-century African-Canadian history.

One such reference in Robin Winks' seminal *The Blacks in Canada: A History* leaves the impression that the subject is a non-starter: "Even so astute a Negro as Frederick Douglass thought that Canada was where 'the wild goose and the swan repaired at the end of winter' and not 'the home of man'." *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume II Canada 1830-1865* offers a slightly wider perspective on Douglass' knowledge and experiences of Canada, but this is gained only by piecing together scattered information from indexed entries; the editors attempt no overview. *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario 1833-1877* by Allen P. Stouffer details Douglass' first public appearance at St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto in 1851, but does not say much about his subsequent speeches in the town or the province, nor that he became entangled in Canadian controversies.

This article focuses on Douglass' visits to Toronto and his speeches in St. Lawrence Hall, a



magnificent 1849 public building that has been a national historic site since 1967. These are used as a window to a broader understanding of the workings in Canada West (now Ontario) of the abolitionist movement and the underground railroad.

The First Speech: the Context

By the time Frederick Douglass addressed a large anti-slavery audience in Toronto on April 3, 1851, he was the most famous African American in the abolition movement. He had authored the most widely read and acclaimed personal memoir of American slavery, he was a sensation on the lecture circuit (especially in Great Britain), and he was the publisher and editor of an important weekly newspaper. Even so, Douglass was not the star of a week-long series of abolitionist lectures, the first and the most ambitious public events hosted by the nascent Anti-Slavery Society of Canada (ASC), formed only about six weeks earlier.

The speaker who inaugurated the series was British Garrisonian and Member of Parliament George Thompson, an international celebrity whose public record as an abolitionist was lengthier than Douglass' and who had crossed the Atlantic the previous fall to embark upon a hectic eight-month speaking tour. In his April 1 speech, in the grand ballroom of St. Lawrence Hall, Thompson recognized those ASC activists who had been his colleagues in earlier British campaigns against West Indian slavery. Among them was the Society's President, the Reverend Dr. Michael Willis, Principal of Knox Theological College, who had relocated to Toronto in 1847 from Scotland, where he, like Douglass, had vigorously opposed the Free Church's fellowship and transactions with the churches of southern slaveholders.



Thompson and Douglass were also very well known to one another. They had first shared a lecture platform in Scotland in 1846, and had done so again in upstate New York in February and March, just prior to coming to Toronto. An apparently warm and admiring relationship between the two activists would begin to erode by the following month, when Douglass openly broke with Garrisonian doctrine on the U.S. Constitution. Perhaps a hint of the later enmity between them became evident during closed-door discussions that Douglass reported as “brisk on both sides and at times warm,” which served to enlighten leaders of the new Toronto organization about the perilous course that it needed to steer between the fierce animosities of the major U.S. anti-slavery organizations. Though the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law meant the need for cross-border cooperation had never been more acute, it was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

The third out-of-town abolitionist to appear with Douglass and Thompson at St. Lawrence Hall somehow managed to side-step the prevailing internecine strife. Though he was much less of a celebrity, Samuel J. May Jr., a Boston-born and Harvard-educated Unitarian clergyman stationed in Syracuse, had been an indefatigable opponent of slavery since the 1830s. Like Douglass, he was a champion of women’s rights and a stalwart of the underground railroad movement who helped refugees from slavery to reach Canada West. Those who heard May’s entreaty in St. Lawrence were probably not surprised to learn in the fall of 1851 that he had been a participant in the “Jerry Rescue,” a dramatic community action in Syracuse that successfully challenged the application of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Another kind of violent anti-slavery action was recommended by Douglass to an assembly of refugees from slavery in Toronto on Wednesday evening, April 2. The venue is uncertain: only a few attended, reportedly due to an “imperfect notice, and some offence received at its form,” and the resulting confusion about the meeting’s place, time and “the conditions governing admission.” Those who managed to get there may have been further disquieted to hear Douglass voice opposition to their presence in Canada. African Americans were needed at home, he said, to oppose the Fugitive Slave Law. One effective method of doing this was to make it dangerous for slavecatchers to do their work: the spilling of their blood was not much different from spilling that of bloodhounds.

The following evening, when Douglass spoke at St. Lawrence Hall (probably to a predominantly white audience), he did not argue against emigration to Canada, though he did return very briefly to

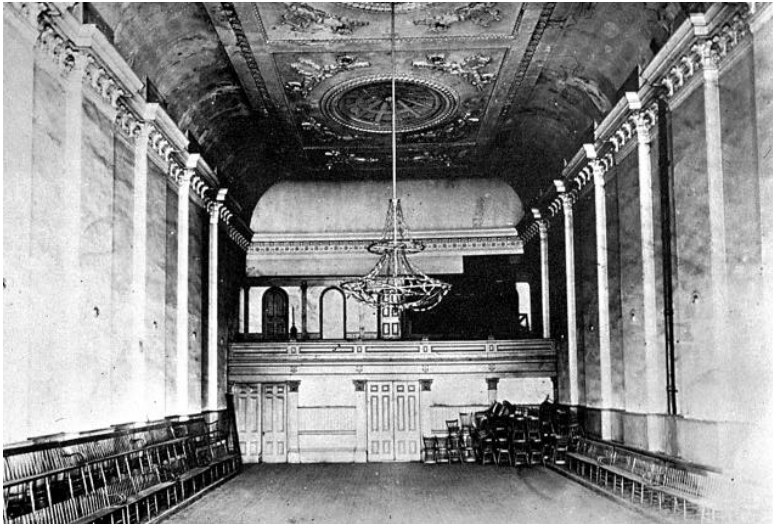
the subject of a violent end being merited by those attempting to “hunt down slaves.” (This statement is conveyed in the *Toronto Globe’s* report, but not in the transcript of the speech in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Vol. 2.*) Historian Allen Stouffer recounts a hysterical response by the Church, a vehicle of high Anglicanism in Toronto that had formerly attacked slavery and discrimination against black refugees. In its view, “anti-Christian rantings” that branded the slaveholder as “an insatiable blood-hound,” and “...advocated treating him as a “beast of prey [to be] done to death like a wolf,” as Douglass had called for, ...were a disgrace, transforming noble Britannia, the symbol of ‘virtuous liberty’ into a ‘savage gore-soaked thug.’”

Toronto and St. Lawrence Hall, 1851

Douglass evidently did not encounter such hostility at St. Lawrence Hall on April 3. A cheering crowd of 1,200 filled the grand ballroom, and listened with rapt attention for more than two hours as he expounded on the cruel evils of American slavery, referenced some personal experiences, and spelled out the control this institution exerted over the U.S. Government and the complicity of Northerners and the Church in its maintenance. In the main, his “Appeal to Canada” could have been delivered anywhere; only fleeting references were made to his locale. Douglass argued that slavery corrupted not only “the nation in which it existed” but the “nations by which it was surrounded.”

He had come to Canada to counteract lies told abroad by slaveholders and to represent “three millions in chains” who “cannot come here.” Because “the moral power of the world around us” was needed to “strike down slavery,” he asked his audience “...for the influence which you can exert for freedom in your intercourse with the people of the United States.”

In his speech, George Thompson had remarked that Toronto was a “beautiful, improving and important city.” Its grand new place of public assembly on King Street testified to this. The construction of St. Lawrence Hall had been completed only four months earlier, but the building was well on its way to becoming Toronto’s “chief social and cultural centre.” Designed by local architect William Thomas, its lower levels accommodated retail and offices, while its third-floor grand ballroom or Great Hall, beautifully decorated and chandeliered, hosted assemblies, lectures, balls, and concerts. According to an 1858 guide to Toronto, this room was 100’ long, 38’ 6” wide, and 36’ high, with a gallery “at the entrance end.” Further, it was “easily filled by the voice,” and produced “no echo to mar the performance.” The grand ballroom was evidently an ideal location for



The Great Hall, seen before its restoration. In 1851 and 1854, Torontonians crowded into this large third-floor assembly and ball room, the *raison d'être* of St. Lawrence Hall, to listen to Frederick Douglass. From St. Lawrence Hall, 1969.

the April 1851 lectures, the first to be held in the building.

By 1851, the population of Toronto was about 30,000; between 500 and 1,000 were of African descent. Though the latter encountered racial hostilities and discrimination, during that decade they seem to have met with less segregation and fewer incidents of violence than were reported in other centres in the province. The efforts of the *Globe* probably contributed to this atmosphere, as did the vigilance of prosperous local blacks like Wilson Ruffin Abbott, Dr. Alexander T. Augusta, Thomas Smallwood, and John T. Fisher.

Aftermath

St. Lawrence Hall maintained its early association with the anti-slavery cause. It became the site of the annual meetings of the ASC, along with fund-raisers and other assemblies that forwarded the cause of abolition and racial uplift.

The lecture series in which Douglass participated in April 1851 may have left the impression that the ASC was working hand-in-glove with the most prominent abolitionists in the United States and Britain, and was on the threshold of achieving great importance in the world. The Society did not live up to this promise, though its leaders were spurred to consequential action in the province from time to time—most notably to prevent the rendition to slavery of John Anderson during an extradition case in 1860 that riveted abolitionists and governments in three countries, and, like no other, focused Canadian attention on the runaways from slavery in their midst.

Still, the ASC's hosting of these famous visitors in 1851 probably helped to forge links across the border for the abolitionist cause. Opportunities to make use of these connections were presented in the fall of that year, after two spectacularly unsuccessful attempts to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. In September, William Parker, the hero of the Christiana Rebellion in Pennsylvania, arrived at

Douglass' home in Rochester, and was sent on (via Kingston, Canada West) to Toronto. There, Parker reported that the ASC had supplied him with some aid, and Dr. Willis had provided a loan and a letter of introduction to the Reverend William King in Buxton. In October, Samuel Ringgold Ward, under indictment for his role in the Jerry Rescue, arrived in Toronto with letters of introduction from Samuel May. For the next two years, Ward served as an agent of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society and its most important activist.

Other contacts that Douglass incubated during the April 1851 visit probably included the Toronto Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Coloured Refugees, an independent body formed in May by women with close family ties to ASC leaders. In early June 1854, this Association's fund-raising efforts on behalf of *The Frederick Douglass Papers* would trigger the sharp criticism of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, publisher and editor of the Toronto-based *Provincial Freeman*, a black newspaper founded in Canada West in 1853.

A Grand League of Freedom?

In June 1854, the editor of the *Provincial Freeman* was infuriated to discover that a fund raiser planned for her financially strapped weekly had to compete with a bazaar at St. Lawrence Hall to benefit Douglass' Rochester paper, one she considered to be much better supported by subscriptions, annual bazaars, and private patronage. Her editorial heaped scorn on "Miss Julia Griffiths ... an English lady...and assistant in the office of Frederick Douglass' Paper," and pointedly asked: "How is it that the wire workers of a paper opposed to emigration to Canada are making arrangements to hold a Bazaar for its support in the country? Are the abolitionists of Canada, or rather of the Toronto Society, opposed to free colored people coming into the Province to settle? And are these the initiatory steps to a public endorsement of Anti-emigrationist views?"

Douglass declined to express his anti-emigrationist convictions when he crowned the Toronto bazaar and the ASC's annual meeting with his presence, delivering two more speeches at St. Lawrence Hall on June 21 and 22, 1854. Instead, he expounded on the theme "Bound Together in a Grand League of Freedom" to a "large and enthusiastic" gathering on June 21. They cheered his introductory remarks on Canadians as "a free people" who were not implicated "in any way" in slavery, and who had made "the great principles of the Anti-Slavery movement" part of their institutions, their thoughts, and their literature. Douglass went on to explain in fairly familiar terms why he was calling upon the citizens of Toronto and "the subjects of a monarchy" to "meddle with the question"

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Escape to Canada

While Douglass argued against African-American emigration, from his home in Rochester, New York, he helped dozens threatened with prison and enslavement to cross the Canadian border. Harriet Tubman, Jermain Loguen, and Hiram Wilson were among his main collaborators in this cause in the 1850s. At one time or another, all lived in St. Catharines, Canada West, a town not far from Niagara Falls and about 80 miles from Rochester.

Douglass was very unpleasantly surprised, in October 1859, to find that he had to make use of clandestine routes and Canadian contacts to make his own escape across the border because he was under threat of indictment for treason for his supposed role in John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. He briefly returned to Toronto during this period of forced exile, the *Toronto Globe* noting his presence on November 8:

Mr. Frederick Douglass, of Rochester, passed through Toronto yesterday on his way to Quebec, from which place he sails for England on Saturday in the *Nova Scotian*. He has been engaged to go to England for some time, and his present visit, therefore, is not the result of the late Harpers Ferry insurrection. It is a fact, however, that United States officials visited Rochester for the purpose of arresting him, and it is, perhaps, just as well that he will be absent for a time. The friends of the slave in Canada will wish him God speed wherever he goes.

Diligent *Globe* readers already knew that Douglass was in the province: his "Open Letter from Canada West," dated October 31, had been published in the paper on November 4, and confirmed a November 2 *Globe* report which contained other details:

FREDERICK DOUGLASS.—The whereabouts of this individual has been a matter of talk since the Harpers Ferry insurrection. We are assured that he was in Canada, near Suspension Bridge [Niagara Falls] a day or two since, and there intimated to a Rochester gentleman that he thought it was best for him to remain where he was for the present. We do not believe that any attempt will be made to take Douglass out of the State of New York, to answer for anything he may have done in relation to the late insurrection.

The name "F. Douglas" appeared in the *Globe's* list of cabin passengers embarking for Liverpool, England on November 12 from the port of Quebec, Canada East, on the Royal Mail steamer *Nova Scotian*. Most of his first-class travelling companions were from Quebec City; five came from Toronto, one from Ottawa, and a family of six from Hamilton. "From Clifton" appeared beside Douglass' name. This was also the provenance that Douglass penned on a letter he wrote to Rochester on October 27. Clifton has been misconstrued by some Douglass biographers as Clifton, New Brunswick, not far from Bathurst and about

PASSENGERS

Per steamship *Nova-Scotian*, Robt Borland, master, 5th voyage from Quebec for Liverpool, Nov. 12th :—From Quebec—Capt Reeve, Lieut Allan, Dr Sewell, Miss O Sewell, Miss J Sewell, Mr Berrill, Alex McFarlane, W T Cresp, Mrs Cresp, Mrs H Ireland. From Montreal—Mr Wm Brown, Mr R Balmer, Mr M Newton, Mrs Harris, Miss Hill, Mr Brandin, Mrs Brandin and child, Mr Hester, Mrs Hester. From Toronto—Mrs Horne, Mr H Duncan, Mrs Duncan and infant, Mr Taburner. From Clifton—F Douglas. From Hamilton—Mr J B Watts, Mrs Watts and 4 children. From Ottawa—Mr O O Henderson—30 cabin and 42 steerage, 50 soldiers of 100th Regt, 2 do 39th, and 1 do 17th Regt—Total 128 passengers.

800 miles from Rochester. Did he have to flee as far away as this to stay out of the clutches of U.S. authorities?

In fact, he did not. Clifton is the former name of what is now Niagara Falls, Ontario. Even under indictment for treason and easily recognizable, Douglass initially appears to have gone no farther from the border than a mile or two from the Suspension Bridge. The reach of the slave power may not have been as long as many think.

Hilary Russell

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Toronto, Nov. 4. 1859.

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of American slavery, and ended with a warning about the slave power's ambition to subjugate the entire continent.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary was not impressed. She opined in her paper on June 24 that Douglass' oratorical effort had not met the crowd's high expectations nor the standard of his last speech in Toronto. She went on to generalize about speakers who lived in the United States who were unable to adapt their remarks to "a Canadian or British audience." In this circumstance, she thought "great genius" was required to "determine the subjects most suitable to dwell upon"; in its absence, "residence and observation are imperatively necessary."

On the platform with Douglass at St. Lawrence Hall were two white residents of the province whom he had encountered elsewhere. One was the Reverend William King, denounced by Douglass during his 1845 campaign against the Free Church in Edinburgh because he was a slaveholder (through his American wife). Since then, the Presbyterian divine had become an emancipator and the founder of the much applauded Elgin Settlement in Buxton, a refuge for runaways from slavery. The other familiar face on the platform belonged to John Scoble, the former Secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in England, who had met Douglass at the Liberty Party Convention in Buffalo in 1851, if not in Britain. Scoble had moved to Canada West in 1852, where he had taken charge of Dawn, another utopian black settlement not far from Buxton, but one mired in bitter controversy.

That evening, Scoble and King may have invited Douglass to visit their communities, some 175 miles southwest of Toronto, during their upcoming British Emancipation celebrations. Douglass may have taken some convincing, since he did not generally approve of separate black communities and institutions, and a busy Ohio trip was looming. He could not have anticipated the bad press that would result from his visit to Dawn and his later article about it, nor could he have suspected that the wily Scoble wanted to make use of one of the greatest African Americans of the time for his own malignant ends.

An Insoluble Conundrum

The *Provincial Freeman's* critique of him notwithstanding, Douglass followed his visit to Toronto with a June 30 article in his paper entitled "The Coloured People of Canada." Mary Ann Shadd Cary responded editorially, expressing deep offence at the article's presumption and tone, aiming sarcastic barbs at "would-be leaders of Canadians, living in the United States," and referring to "...the law, as recently promulgated from the tripod by a high priest—whose energy we admire,

though our conscience will not assent to his measures, that is, to look through his spectacles to see our people in Canada and the U.S. through his interests."

In August, Douglass became more deeply enmeshed in Canadian issues. He attempted to defuse criticism of Scoble during an acrimonious meeting at Dawn, made what Victor Ullman described as a "public apology" to King in St. Andrew's Church in Buxton, and offered "Advice to My Canadian Brothers and Sisters" to a large racially mixed audience in the Court House in Chatham. On his return to Rochester, he published an article about Dawn that praised Scoble.

These actions triggered even more vehement criticisms in the columns of the *Provincial Freeman*. One of Scoble's main antagonists raged against Douglass for having "the impudence" to enter the controversy, and for trying to help Scoble neutralize his opposition. The writer went so far as to suggest that Douglass was "...a foreigner who knows nothing of our grievances in this matter, only as so far as he is informed by designing parties, who desire to enlist him in a crusade against the colored people in this country, and he seems willing enough to do their dirty work for filthy lucre's sake."

Douglass may have later regretted his naive support for the misanthropic and unpopular Scoble, who was later charged with mismanagement and successfully sued by Dawn trustees. In any event, though Douglass returned to the province to lecture, he was probably more reticent about intervening in burning issues that were peculiar to the African-Canadian experience.

Arguably, what he saw and heard in Canada West posed insoluble conundrums for Douglass. He could not wholeheartedly share in and celebrate the successes and dreams of black refugees in Canada, given the fact that he did not want them to be there at all. If they prospered, this would encourage others to cross the border, thus tightening the grip of slavery and proscription on those left behind and furthering the aims of colonizationists. On the other hand, Douglass did not want the refugees to do badly. Not only were they his "brothers and sisters," but they needed to thrive in Canada to sustain his cherished beliefs in the Yankee origins of prejudice against black people and in the redemptive and empowering consequences of freedom and equality under the law.

Hilary Russell will soon be leaving her position of historian at Parks Canada, which she has held since 1970. Her research interests will remain black history, women's history, architectural history, and material history.