

David blight's "frederick douglass's civil war"

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David Blight's work seeks to expand on the already large and impressive study of Frederick Douglass by presenting an intellectual history-biography of the man Blight refers to as the most important black thinker of the 19th century. While a litany of historians and writers have explored Douglass' life, accomplishments and motivations, Blight follows in the footsteps of Waldo E. Martin in constructing Douglass' importance to Civil War era intellectualism. Underlying Blight's work is his belief that Douglass' ideology was adopted by the race as a whole.

He also feels that Douglass guided blacks intellectually from an era of slavery and bondage into the post-Bellum era where the ability of the Black's to think and articulate became increasingly more important to their own physical survival. Blight's book is structured chronologically, beginning with Douglass' days as an escaped Maryland slave turned abolitionist editor in Rochester in the 1840s to the end of the reconstruction era in the 1870s and beyond. Blight also examines the impact of Douglass' ideas on future black leaders, such as W. E. B. Dubois.

While Dubois notes that blacks had long since struggled to a consciousness of manhood, Douglass for years claimed that the idea of manhood stood for equality and liberty in the laws. Dubois is frequently referenced by Blight as evidence of the immediate impact of Douglass' ideas on his contemporaries. Throughout his book, Blight remains dedicated to his main purpose of describing Douglass intellectual progression. Blight does certainly recant the major events unfolding in Douglass' personal life and in the national landscape around him, but he does this in an almost secondary manner.

In other words, on every page of the book, the focus is clearly on the ebbs and flows of Douglass' ideas and the most important events of Douglass' life and in his day serve to initiate or frame the ebbs and flows. In the course of impending secession and eventual outbreak of Civil War, Douglass' expressed his waning optimism and despair regarding slavery and racism in his papers. The book is heavily researched with numerous references to the Frederick Douglass papers, the Douglass Monthly magazine, published by Douglass in the early 1850s and the Frederick Douglass Paper, published by Douglass throughout the 1850s.

One criticism of the book is the reliance on these three sources as the basis of most of the author's conclusions. While it is logical to rely on the subjects own works when forging an intellectual biography, Blight wants to show that Douglass tread on the moral high-ground throughout the middle of the 19th century, while expressly stating that he is not a Douglass apologist. This would perhaps be best accomplished by relying on sources beyond the words of the Douglass in many instances, especially with such a plethora of other scholarly works and primary documents to consult.

Blight portrays the essence of Douglass' intellectual platform as the need to uplift the image and perception of the black race. By image, he means how blacks regarded themselves and by perception, how they were perceived by others. Douglass could not countenance the notion that blacks were anything but humans and as such entitled to every privilege afforded to all Americans. He encouraged and helped bring about Black troops in the Civil War both as direct means to show the valor, loyalty and value of Blacks, but also to forge a sense of American national identity into the race.

Blight delivers on his intent to illustrate the intellectual history of Frederick Douglass and in so doing, Blight firmly adds to the already formidable Douglass legacy. While often lauded for his actions, and deservedly so, Blight's *Frederick Douglass' Civil War* confirms that Douglass' most significant contribution to his nation and his people was his ability to process and communicate his thoughts and feelings regarding slavery, the War and the ensuing reconstruction.