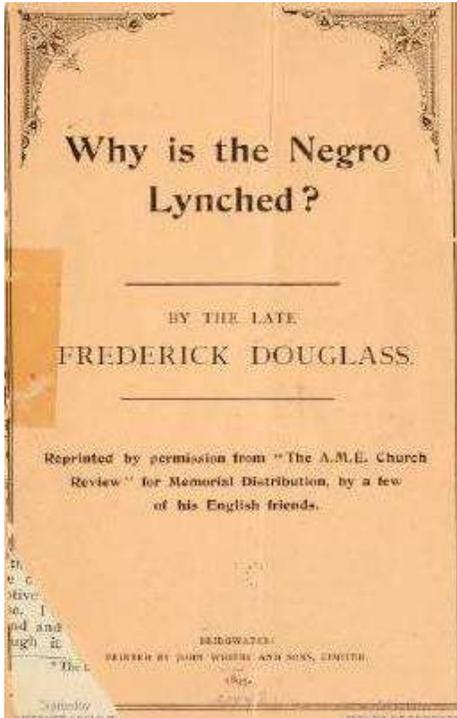


Frederick Douglass's Last Published Work



The message of Frederick Douglass's last essay was as grim as it was eloquent: the end of slavery 30 years before had not ended racial oppression in America. In the two decades before Douglass's death in 1895, the promise of emancipation had shriveled. In the former Confederate states, white southerners systematically took away political, legal and civil rights from the freed slaves, and replaced a slave-labor economy with a sharecropping system that, as Douglass notes in "Why Is the Negro Lynched?", was very close to slavery. The restoration of rigid white-supremacy rule was made possible in part by a series of rulings from the U.S. Supreme Court making constitutional rights supposedly guaranteed for black citizens by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments effectively unenforceable. And in part it was achieved and then enforced through widespread, brutal mob violence. In the last ten years of Frederick Douglass's life, more than 1,000 African Americans were killed by lynch mobs -- that is, one every three or four days. (Lynchings continued to occur at a rate of more than one a week until the early 1920s, and did not drop below one a month until

the mid-1930s.) So it is not surprising that lynching was a central concern for Douglass when he wrote this essay, giving him the title and the primary focus of its first half. In the second half, he turned to the broader landscape of the post-Reconstruction era. The following passages give a sense, but do not nearly do justice to the power of the full essay.

On lynching:

"There is, as we all know, a perfect epidemic of mob law and persecution now prevailing at the South, and the indications of a speedy end are not hopeful. "

"With a few noble exceptions, just enough to prove the rule, the upper classes of the South seem to be in full sympathy with the mob and its deeds. There are but few earnest words ever uttered against either. Press, platform and pulpit are generally either silent or they openly apologise for the mob and its deeds.... The mobocratic murderers are not only permitted to go free, untried and unpunished, but are lauded and applauded as honourable men and good citizens, the high-minded guardians of Southern virtue."

"We claim to be a highly-civilized and Christian country.... [yet] there is nothing in the history of savages to surpass the blood-chilling horrors and fiendish excesses perpetrated against the coloured people of this country, by the so-called enlightened and Christian people of the South. It is commonly thought that only the lowest and most disgusting birds and beasts, such as buzzards, vultures and hyenas, will gloat over and prey upon dead bodies; but the Southern mob, in its rage, feeds its vengeance by shooting, stabbing and burning their victims, when they are dead."

"The special charge by which... mob law is excused and defended even by good men North and South [is] a charge of assaults by Negroes upon white women.... During all the first years of reconstruction, and long after the war... the justification for the murder of Negroes was said to be Negro conspiracies, Negro insurrections, Negro schemes to murder all the white people, Negro plots to burn the town and to commit violence generally.... When these excuses had run their course... [southerners] based their right to kill on the ground that it was necessary to check the domination and supremacy of the Negro and to secure the absolute rule of the Anglo-Saxon race.... Now that Negro insurrection and Negro domination are no longer defensible as an excuse for Negro persecution, there has come in due course another suited to the occasion, and that is the heart-rending cry of the white women and little white children.... This new charge... is in large measure a charge constructively against the coloured people as such. It throws over every man of colour a mantle of odium, and sets upon him a mark of popular hate, more distressing than the mark set upon the first murderer."

Relating lynching to the broader assault on Negro rights:

"This new charge [of assaults on white women] has sprung upon the country simultaneously, in manifest co-operation with a declared purpose and a well-known effort, and I may say a fixed determination to degrade the Negro by judicial decisions, by legislative enactments, by repealing all laws for the protection of the ballot, by drawing the colour line in all railroad cars and stations and in all other public places in the South, thus to pave the way to a final consummation which is nothing less than the Negro's entire disenfranchisement as an American citizen.... It is to this great end that all the charges and complaints against the Negro are directed and are made to converge.... It is a part of a well-devised reactionary movement against the Negro as a citizen."

"When a white man steals, robs or murders, his crime is visited upon his own head alone. But not so with the black man. When he commits a crime, the whole race is made responsible."

On the campaign against Negro suffrage:

"The proposition now is, therefore, to find some way to abridge and limit this right by imposing upon it an educational or some other qualification.... Education is great but manhood is greater. The one is the principle, the other the accident. Man was not made as an attribute to education, but education as an attribute to man. I say to these gentlemen, first protect the man and you will thereby protect education. Do not make illiteracy a bar to the ballot, but make the ballot a bar to illiteracy. Take the ballot from the Negro and you take from him the means and motives that make for education."

"Much thoughtless speech is heard about the ignorance of the Negro in the South. But plainly enough, it is not the ignorance of the Negro but the malevolence of his accusers, which is the real cause of Southern disorder."

"I would not make suffrage more exclusive but more inclusive. I would not have it embrace only the elite, but I would have it include the lowly. I would not only include the men, but

would gladly include the women, and make our government in reality, as in name, a government by the people, of the people, and for the whole people."

On the new form of slavery:

"Landowners... rent their land to the Negro at an exorbitant price per annum and compel him to mortgage his crop in advance to pay this rent.... The landlord keeps books; the Negro does not.... Once in debt he is fastened to the land as by hooks of steel. If he attempts to leave he may be arrested under the order of the law. Another way... is the practice of paying the labourer with orders on the store instead of lawful money. By this means money is kept out of the hands of the Negro, and the Negro is kept entirely in the hands of the landlord.... Thus he is riveted to one place, and is, in some sense, a slave; for a man to whom it can be said, " You shall work for me for what I choose to pay you, and how I shall choose to pay you," is, in fact, a slave, though he may be called a free man."

On the post-Reconstruction climate:

"Do not ask me what will be the final result of the so-called Negro problem. I cannot tell you. I have sometimes thought that the American people are too great to be small, too just and magnanimous to oppress the weak, too brave to yield up the right to the strong, and too grateful for public services ever to forget them or to reward them. I have fondly hoped that this estimate of American character would soon cease to be contradicted or put in doubt. But events have made me doubtful.... The Supreme Court, has, in a measure, surrendered. State sovereignty is essentially restored. The Civil Rights Bill is impaired.... Principles which we all thought to have been firmly and permanently settled by the late war have been boldly assaulted and overthrown by the defeated party. Rebel rule is now nearly complete in many states, and it is gradually capturing the nation's Congress. The cause lost in the war is the cause regained in peace, and the cause gained in war is the cause lost in peace."

"[When] men who glory in the good old times when the slaves were under the lash... assert that the condition of the emancipated slave is wretched and deplorable, they partly tell the truth, and I agree with them. I even concur with them in the statement that the Negro is physically, in certain localities, in a worse condition today than in the time of slavery, but I part with these gentlemen when they ascribe this condition to emancipation. To my mind the blame does not rest upon emancipation, but the defeat of emancipation. It is not the work of the spirit of liberty, but the work of the spirit of bondage. It comes of the determination of slavery to perpetuate itself, if not under one form, then under another. It is due to the folly of endeavouring to put the new wine of liberty in the old bottles of slavery. I concede the evil, but deny the alleged cause."

On solving "the Negro problem":

"What the real problem is, we all ought to know. It is not a Negro problem, but in every sense a great national problem. It involves the question, whether after all our boasted civilization, our Declaration of Independence, our matchless Constitution, our sublime

Christianity, our wise statesmanship, we as a people, possess virtue enough to solve this problem in accordance with wisdom and justice, and to the advantage of both races."

"How can this problem be solved? I will tell you how it cannot be solved. It cannot be solved by keeping the Negro poor, degraded, ignorant and half-starved, as I have shown is now being done in Southern States. It cannot be solved by keeping back the wages of the labourer by fraud, as is now being done by the landlords of the South. It cannot be done by ballot-box stuffing, by falsifying election returns, or by confusing the Negro voter by cunning devices. It cannot be done by repealing all federal laws enacted to secure honest elections. It can, however, be done, and very easily done, for where there is a will there is a way. Let the white people of the North and South conquer their prejudices.... The whole thing can be done simply by no longer violating the amendment of the Constitution of the United States, and no longer evading the claims of justice."

Closing words:

"But, my friends, I must stop. Time and strength are not equal to the task before me. But could I be heard by this great nation, I would call to mind the sublime and glorious truths with which, at its birth, it saluted and startled a listening world. Its voice, then, was as the trump of an archangel, summoning hoary forms of oppression and time honoured tyranny, to judgment. Crowned heads heard it and shrieked. Toiling millions heard it and clapped their hands for joy. It announced the advent of a nation, based upon human brotherhood and the self-evident truths of liberty and equality. Its mission was the redemption of the world from the bondage of ages. Apply these sublime and glorious truths to the situation now before you. Put away your race prejudice. Banish the idea that one class must rule over another. Recognize the fact that the rights of the humblest citizens are as worthy of protection as are those of the highest and your problem will be solved, and — whatever may be in store for you in the future, whether prosperity or adversity, whether you have foes without or foes within, whether there shall be peace or war — based upon the eternal principles of truth, justice and humanity, with no class having cause for complaint or grievance, your Republic will stand and flourish for ever."

-- Frederick Douglass

(Excerpts selected and edited by Arnold R. Isaacs, April 2018)

NOTE TO READERS: The quotations above are not all in the order in which they appear in the original essay.

"Why Is the Negro Lynched" was first published in an A.M.E. Church publication a few months before Douglass's death in February 1895. The full text, as republished by a British Quaker organization soon after he died, is available online at the following links:

PDF <https://ia800204.us.archive.org/31/items/whynegrolynche00doug/whynegrolynche00doug.pdf>

Text https://archive.org/stream/whynegrolynche00doug/whynegrolynche00doug_djvu.txt