

William S. McFeely. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991. 465 pp. Illustrated. \$ 30.00.

*Frederick Douglass* is William S. McFeely's second biography of a major 19th century personality in American history. His biography of Douglass' contemporary and personal acquaintance, general and president Ulysses S. Grant, won a Pulitzer Prize for biography and the Francis Parkman Prize of the Society of American Historians. One of the reasons why McFeely wrote Grant's biography was Grant's role as president during the Reconstruction in shaping the future of African-American people. For McFeely, the step from Grant to Douglass was logical and understandable, since his main interest is in African-American history.

While *Frederick Douglass* is a study of a person who was very controversial in his character and behaviour, this book is also a broad picture of the times and society in which Douglass lived. Frederick Bailey was born as a fatherless slave-child in Maryland ca. 1818, but after he had escaped slavery in 1838 and changed his name to Frederick Douglass, he fought his way to be the most recognized leader of his race during the final decades of the 19th century. During his lifetime Douglass, just like the society in which he lived, went through several critical periods of change. The most critical was his escape from slavery, but almost as crucial was his meeting with John Brown just before the Harper's Ferry incident and Douglass' narrow escape to Canada as a suspect of being implicated in the Brown conspiracy. After being forgiven, Douglass played quite an important role during the Civil War recruiting blacks into the Union Army. When the war was over he never got any really influential job with enough prestige to make visible change in the hierarchy of race relations.

In 1874 he was nominated as the president of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, an interstate bank that was very close to be insolvent. Three years later he was appointed to be the marshal of the District of Columbia by president Hayes. This position gave him the chance to nominate blacks as civil servants on minor governmental positions. These positions with the federal government were the basis of the black middle-class in the capital. Douglass' final governmental appointment was more like a nominal honor, when he was nominated as a minister to Haiti in 1889, a position which he held till 1891. Douglass died in 1895.

McFeely gives a lot of credit for Frederick Douglass' slavery experiences and memories, which pushed him through his life and made him never give up fighting for abolition, and later for equal rights for the African-American people. Douglass made his entry to the northern abolition society in 1841, and soon after his first speech in Nantucket, his reputation as a great black orator spread around New England. His white antislavery friends, William Lloyd Garrison in particular, began to use his abilities to get more attention to their cause, and Douglass was made to travel around in the North as a living proof of all the inhumanities of the institution of slavery. This exploitation of Douglass' abilities is best found in the words of Richard Webb, who was Douglass' British publisher: "I take back nothing I have said of his defects ... but I admire and value him so much for the cause's sake that I would bitterly regret anything occurred to end his usefulness" (McFeely, p. 143). As long as he was willing to work as their apostle, Douglass got new friends everywhere he travelled, but

after he founded his own antislavery newspaper the North Star in 1847 in Rochester, New York, most of his white antislavery friends broke their ties to him.

It was not only his character and strong will to find his own way to success that his white friends found disturbing. The most disturbing thing was the color of his skin. McFeely never underlines this, but one can read it between the lines. Douglass was treated as an equal human being only in Europe during his travels, and he was fully aware of this for the rest of his life. Because of the color of his skin, Douglass never got a job of his capacities. He was never elected to political office, unlike several other African-Americans after the war. His position in the Republican Party after the war was always behind the white leaders, and his job was to maintain the black vote for the Republicans. This treatment made Douglass very bitter during his life, but there was nothing much he could do about it, except to try to fight against it.

If Douglass had a troubled public record, his family record was not much better. After he had escaped from slavery in 1838 to New Bedford, Massachusetts, he got married to Anna Murray. The marriage soon turned out to be a troubled one, since Anna was not willing to help Frederick in his abolitionist crusade. She rather stayed home and raised their children, while Frederick travelled around the Northern States and the British Islands, and this alienated them from each other almost completely. They never got divorced, and the final separation came when Anna died in 1882. Nor was his relationship to his children ever too warm and close, although he was proud of their achievements in their lives. Two years after Anna's death Frederick Douglass got married to Helen Pitts, a white woman.

Douglass had never acted towards white women the way black men were supposed to act. He had several good friends among white women, and since he was very strongly admired by these women, their relationships went far enough to break all the social barriers that were built by the white male society between white women and black men. The marriage with Helen Pitts caused some social turmoil around them, since words like miscegenation and race purity were on every white man's lips during the decades before and after the turn of the century. Douglass' friendships to white men were more superficial, and they never exceeded the level of 'working-together-for-a-good-cause'-line.

McFeely has succeeded well in his story of Frederick Douglass. It is not only the character of Frederick Douglass, but also his relationships to his family, friends, and society that make this story worth writing. Indeed, a story like this should be told time and again, because it is a story of a nation denying an entire race the human dignity by keeping them in bondage, and then, after a brutal war giving them citizenship, but once again denying their rights. There are still several untold stories of major African-American leaders of the 19th-century, which should be told the way *Frederick Douglass* was written.