

Introduction

Don Mullan

Journey towards an Irish Memorial to Frederick Douglass

“On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us – its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions... On the other hand... under the flickering light of the north star... stood a doubtful freedom – half frozen – beckoning us to come and share its hospitality.”

– Frederick Douglass

It began in June 1984

It began in June 1984. Desmond Tutu was not yet a Nobel Peace Laureate or Chairman of ‘The Elders’; nor had he reached the historical milestones of being appointed the first black Bishop of Johannesburg and Archbishop of Southern Africa. He was, in fact, Chair of the South African Council of Churches and it was in that capacity he accepted an invitation to speak at Our Lady of Lourdes church, Sean MacDermott Street, in Dublin’s inner-city.

His address that evening was riveting and, for me personally, transformative. Especially a story he told about an encounter with an anonymous young girl in one of Apartheid’s so-called ‘Homelands’ which he described as ‘dumping grounds for the displaced people’.

“I met her,” he said, “coming out of a hut where she lived with her widowed mother and sister. I asked her, ‘What do you do for food?’”

“We borrow it,” the young girl replied.

“Looking around,” he continued, “I wondered who would have enough food to loan. I then asked her, “What do you do when you cannot find food to borrow?”

“We drink water to fill our stomachs,” she answered.

With emotion, in a hushed voice struggling to keep control, the Bishop repeated the words of the young girl before elaborating: “We drink water to fill our stomachs – in a country that is a net exporter of food to the world. People die of starvation in South Africa, not because there is no food, but because of deliberate Government policy!”

At that moment I heard the echo of Ireland's so-called Great Famine (1845-1849) during which food haemorrhaged through Irish ports to Britain while people died of hunger and hunger related diseases. Tutu's story was to be a seed that led me to create AFRi's Great 'Famine' Project and the establishment of the famous Famine Walk from Louisburgh to Doolough, Co. Mayo, in memory of an inhumane march undertaken by hundreds of starving Irish peasants in 1849, in search of food or a ticket of admission to a workhouse.

As part of my research into the Great Hunger I came across a remarkable letter penned from Ireland in February 1846 by an escaped American slave named Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). Written to the American abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass writes with distressing clarity and compassion about the suffering of Ireland's poor. The letter, reproduced in this volume, contains some of the most vivid eyewitness descriptions on record of the suffering of the Famine Irish and culminates with his comparative declaration:

... of all places to witness human misery, ignorance, degradation, filth and wretchedness, an Irish hut is pre-eminent... Men and women, married and single, old and young, lie down together, in much the same degradation as the American slaves. I see much here to remind me of my former condition, and I confess I should be ashamed to lift up my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over...

While moved by Douglass's observations, I did not then grasp the importance of his place in African-American and US history. This was still the pre-Internet and Google search engine era.

National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis

In 1992, however, that changed when I visited the National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee, housed in the former Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

As I entered the Museum one of the first images to greet me was that of Fredrick Douglass. I realised then that Douglass, the man who had compared the plight of Ireland's 19th Century poor with American slavery, enjoyed iconic status in African-American history.

I recall visiting Room 306 where Dr. King was staying and which opened onto the balcony where he was assassinated. There are moments when the human spirit is moved beyond words to a place where colour, ethnicity, birthplace and history become one-and-the-same for all humankind. At that sacred spot I felt an overwhelming connection with the struggle of all who sought liberty, especially

African-Americans whose courage and inspiration gave birth to the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement.

My walk, therefore, through the rooms and corridors of the museum became even more poignant because of Douglass's connection with Ireland. In a very real sense, given his seminal contribution to the ending of slavery and the inspiration he was to those engaged in the American Civil Rights Movement, our own Civil Rights Movement also owed Douglass a debt of gratitude.

Songs that we sang during my adolescence back home in Derry resounded around the Museum – “We Shall Overcome” and “We Shall Not Be Moved”, poignant reminders of bonds that exist between both Civil Rights Movements.

Rosa Parks

I found myself drawn to one exhibit. It was a Montgomery bus inside which sat a wax model of Rosa Parks, the seamstress who reminded me so much of my own mother who worked in Derry's famous shirt factories.

Rosa Parks was one of my heroes. That frail woman who, one evening after a long days labour, got tired of servitude and in an instant set light to the fuse of freedom. Rosa Parks, whom the US Congress would declare: “the first lady of civil rights”, and “the mother of the freedom movement” (US Government, Public Law 106-26). Rosa Parks, whose unflinching in the face of bigotry humbled the mighty and left an indelible mark on human history.

I climbed aboard the bus and quietly sat opposite the wax figure. A few seconds later I was startled by a loud aggressive roar filled with hatred and ordering me to the back of the bus. I jumped to my feet, heart thumping, as I turned to face – there was no one there. It was a ruse, created by the Museum, to help visitors understand the bile of bigotry that African-Americans still had to endure for a century after the ending of slavery.

Six years later, I had the privilege of interviewing Rosa Parks, then 85, in the vestibule of her favourite church, St. Matthew's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Petoskey, Detroit, on Sunday, 7 June 1998.

I had flown from Dublin to JFK. As I shuffled forward on an airport gangway for my flight to Detroit a friendly black female TWA duty manager checked my boarding pass. “Have you business in Detroit Mr. Mullan?” she asked. “Would you believe it,” I blurted out, “I'm going to interview Rosa Parks tomorrow?” I was genuinely beside myself with excitement.

“Are you really?” she responded. She asked me to wait while she returned to the check-in desk. A few minutes later she handed me a first class boarding pass. “If you're seeing Ms. Parks, then we've got to treat you right.”

As the aircraft rose above the Manhattan skyline, Twin Towers still intact, I smiled at the irony of my good fortune. Little did Rosa Parks realise that her refusal to give up her seat to an Alabama white man would, one day, result in a young African-American woman having the power to give a foreign white man a first class seat on a US domestic flight. When I related the story to Ms. Parks the following day she chuckled and gave me the most memorable farseeing smile.

Narrative

After my visit to the National Civil Rights Museum, Frederick Douglass was elevated in my consciousness. Later I found a copy of his *Narrative*, first published in 1845, and read it with deep emotion.

I was particularly moved by Douglass's account of his desire to be free "from my earliest recollection," and how the seed of escaping was nourished by two Irish labourers he encountered on a wharf near Baltimore while a boy. In Chapter VII of his *Narrative* Douglass describes the encounter:

The light broke in upon me by degrees... one day down on the wharf... seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, "Are ye a slave for life?" I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to... understand them... I was afraid... I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to... escape.

I read these words with pride, and also his eloquent preface to his first encounter with Ireland itself: 'The light [of freedom] broke in upon me by degrees...' ¹

¹ Later in his life Douglass would be saddened by elements of Irish-America who also suffered racial and ethnic discrimination by American WASPs. As newly arrived immigrants the Famine Irish had much in common with slaves and free-slaves, not least their lowly ranking in American society, populating the slums of Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Emancipation, however, was seen by some, not as progress but as a peril, threatening to release hundreds of thousands of slaves onto an already crowded labour market where they would compete with the Irish for low-wage jobs. In July 1863 Draft Riots erupted in New York in which the Irish attacked African Americans with hundreds of fatalities. Douglass, his love and respect for Ireland evident even in his criticism, lamented over: "why a people who so nobly loved and cherished

Douglass also records the inspiration he found in a collection of speeches he secretly bought as a teenager called *The Columbian Orator*, with the elaborate subtitle: 'containing a variety of original and selected pieces, together with rules, calculated to improve youth and others in the ornamental and useful art of eloquence'; authored by Caleb Bingham. In his *Narrative* Douglass gives credit to the Dublin born playwright and politician, Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), for a speech in which he says: "I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man."²

On September 3, 1838, aged 20, Douglass did escape to relative freedom in New York, changing his name to Johnson. Twelve days later he married Anna Murray, a free African-American housekeeper he had met the previous year at the East Baltimore debating club. The couple moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Frederick finally changed his name to Douglass, inspired by a character in Sir Walter Scott's poem, 'The Lady of the Lake'. Between 1839 and 1844, Anna gave birth to four children, Rosetta, Lewis Henry, Frederick and Charles Redmond. Their fifth child, Annie, was born in 1849.

In 1841 Douglass gave his first anti-slavery speech at New Bedford, impressing listeners with his eloquence and oratory. In 1845 he published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass – An American Slave*, destined to become one of the most influential testimonies against the inhumanity of slavery. In it Douglass named names and provided compelling testimonies of 'civilised' barbarity. One such story is the murder of his wife Anna's cousin. In Chapter VI of the *Narrative* Douglass writes:

The wife of Mr. Giles Hicks, living but a short distance from where I used to live, murdered my wife's cousin, a young girl between fifteen and sixteen years of age... She had been set... to mind Mrs. Hicks's baby, and during the night she fell asleep, and the baby cried. She, having lost her rest for several nights previous, did not hear the crying. They were both in the room with Mrs. Hicks. Mrs. Hicks, finding the girl slow to move, jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl's nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life.

the thought of liberty at home in Ireland could become, willingly, the oppressors of another race here." ('The Irish in New York in the Early Eighteen-Sixties,' *Irish Historical Studies* 7 (1950): 97-98).

² Scholars are now of the opinion that Douglass was mistaken and that while a speech by Sheridan is published in *The Columbian Orator*, the actual speech that influenced him was 'Part of Mr. O'Connor's Speech in the Irish House of Commons, in Favour of the Bill for emancipating the Roman Catholics, 1795,' (Middlebury, Vermont: William Slade, Jr., 1816), pp. 243-48. Arthur O'Connor (4 July 1763-25 April 1852) was a member of the United Irishmen and a Member of the Irish House of Commons from 1790-1795. He was born near Bandon, Co. Cork.

Such stories caused outrage, but also raised doubts about Douglass's personal safety. He was still a fugitive and was now in real danger of being captured and returned to his owner, or of becoming the target for murderous reprisal.

Ireland and Daniel O'Connell

On advice he decided to embark upon a two year anti-slavery lecture tour of the British and Irish Isles, with Ireland his first major theatre. In the autumn of 1845, as Ireland was descending into the nightmare of the Great Famine Frederick Douglass arrived in Dublin from Liverpool.

Douglass enjoyed the friendship and support of many influential personalities during a four month stay in Ireland, including that of Fr. Matthew, the Apostle of Temperance. He also became acquainted with Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, by then an elder statesman, world renowned for achieving Catholic Emancipation and for his fearless and persistent denunciation of slavery. There is little doubt that O'Connell had an immediate and life-long impact on Douglass's outlook and world view. Douglass came to Ireland to denounce slavery, but left Ireland determined to oppose every hue of injustice and abuse that crossed his path in an equally long and distinguished political and campaigning career as that of O'Connell.

In a letter to Lloyd Garrison, dated September 29th 1845, Douglass describes his first meeting with O'Connell in Conciliation Hall, Dublin, following a 75 minute speech delivered by the Irishman. Douglass was deferential, even overawed at the prospect of meeting such an iconic figure but found O'Connell to be warm, encouraging and hugely respectful. His reportage of elements of O'Connell's speech that evening bore echoes of what he was to write in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison the following February:

Upon the subject of slavery in general, and American slavery in particular... He said, with an earnestness which I shall never forget, 'I have been assailed for attacking the American institution, as it is called,—Negro slavery. I am not ashamed of that attack. I do not shrink from it. I am the advocate of civil and religious liberty, all over the globe, and wherever tyranny exists, I am the foe of the tyrant; wherever oppression shows itself, I am the foe of the oppressor; wherever slavery rears its head, I am the enemy of the system, or the institution, call it by what name you will. I am the friend of liberty in every clime, class and color. My sympathy with distress is not confined within the narrow bounds of my own green island. No—it extends itself to every corner of the earth. My heart walks abroad, and wherever the miserable are to be succoured, or the slave to be set free, there my spirit is at home, and I delight to dwell.'

O'Connell's fraternal affection towards Douglass was such that he introduced him at an anti-slavery rally in Dublin as 'The Black O'Connell of the United States', a moniker that Douglass appeared proud to accept. O'Connell's worldview impacted on the young African-American and made it impossible for Douglass to divorce the cause of ending slavery from the rights of all oppressed human beings. His February 1846 letter, echoing O'Connell's September 1845 speech, reveals the mind of an emerging internationalist:

... though I am more closely connected and identified with one class of outraged, oppressed enslaved people, I cannot allow myself to be insensible to the wrongs and sufferings of any part of the great family of man. I am not only an American slave, but a man, and as such, am bound to use my powers for the welfare of the whole human brotherhood.

Later, in comments directed at the abolitionist movement he argues:

He who really and truly feels for the American slave, cannot steel his heart to the woes of others; and he who thinks himself an abolitionist, yet cannot enter into the wrongs of others, has yet to find a true foundation for his anti-slavery faith.

Douglass's respect and admiration for O'Connell predated his arrival in Ireland and his meeting with *The Liberator* served only to magnify his life-long respect and sense of gratitude to him. References made to O'Connell by Douglass in a speech in Cork (included in this volume) the month after their first meeting drew a thunderous and enthusiastic response from the audience and demonstrates Douglass's own powerful oratory:

I cannot proceed without alluding to a man who did much to abolish slavery [in the British Empire], I mean Daniel O'Connell. (*Tremendous cheers.*) I feel grateful to him, for his voice has made American slavery shake to its centre.—I am determined wherever I go, and whatever position I may fill, to speak with grateful emotions of Mr. O'Connell's labours. (*Cheering.*) I heard his denunciation of slavery, I heard my master curse him, and therefore I loved him. (*Great cheering.*)

Frederick Douglass was then 27-years-old and Daniel O'Connell was in his 70th year. O'Connell died two years later. In January 1893, two years before Douglass's death, he delivered a major address in Chicago on the subject of Haiti, where he had served as a US Diplomat for two years (1889-1891). The 1845 promise Douglass made to his Cork listeners found expression that day when, in his 75th year, Douglass told his Chicago audience: "It was once said by the great Daniel O'Connell, that the history of Ireland might be traced, like a wounded man through a crowd, by the blood. The same may be said of the history of Haiti as a free state."

The influence of O'Connell on Douglass was life long. His Irish sojourn, in large measure thanks of O'Connell, was to prove transformative. One senses

from his letters that while he was not yet equipped with the tools to incisively analyse the political and economic causes of hunger and deprivation endured by a colonised people – “*The immediate*, and it may be the main cause of the extreme poverty and beggary in Ireland, is intemperance...” – his politicisation was, nonetheless, underway.

Shortly before his departure from Ireland, Douglass wrote to Lloyd Garrison from Belfast on New Year’s Day 1846 (included in this volume) acknowledging the positive impact Ireland had on him:

I can truly say, I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country. I seem to have undergone a transformation. I live a new life. The warm and generous co-operation extended to me by the friends of my despised race... contrasted so strongly with my long and bitter experience in the United States...

Instead of the bright blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man...

The Women’s Movement

At the core of Douglass’s being was a quest for truth. His support for the suffragette movement, for example, while not perfect, displayed a progressive and fearless determination to buck the established order. After returning from his visit to Ireland and Britain, Douglass attended the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848. His logic was pure and perceptive and even today, in many parts of the world where women are grossly under represented in local and national government, and denied leadership positions in all major religions, and most Christian denominations, his advocacy at Seneca Falls displays a mind that is still ahead of its time: “In this denial of the right to participate in government, not merely the degradation of woman and the perpetuation of a great injustice happens, but the maiming and repudiation of one-half of the moral and intellectual power of the government of the world.”

Frederick Douglass was a man of multiple talents who harnessed his genius in the pursuit of justice and equality for the downtrodden of the earth. He had a particular love and respect for the people of Haiti, the first black Republic to end slavery.

Haiti

From 1891-93 Douglass accepted the position of US Minister-Resident and Consul-General to the Republic of Haiti, a post from which he would resign over US policies towards Haiti.

I have reproduced the fine speech on Haiti which Douglass delivered in Chicago during the World Fair in 1893. He was by then an elder Statesman whose views commanded national and international respect. The occasion was the 90th anniversary of Haitian Independence and of the cruel and shameful death at Fort-de-Joux, France, of Haiti's revolutionary leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture – the Black Napoleon.

Douglass elevates Haiti to its rightful place amongst the newly emerging nations who had won their independence from their colonial masters. Indeed, Haiti holds the proud distinction of being the first black-led republic in the world after winning its independence from France in 1804.

In an effort to quell Haitian resistance Napoleon Bonaparte sent a fleet with some 50,000 troops. Part of his strategy to neuter the uprising was to abduct the 60 year old charismatic Haitian leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture. Invited to negotiations, L'Ouverture was taken at gunpoint to a waiting frigate that set sail immediately for France. The Emperor had the Haitian leader transported to Fort-de-Joux in the Jura Mountains, close to Geneva. There, kept in solitary confinement for eight months, he died of pneumonia on 7 April 1803.

It is clear from Douglass's speech that he had a profound respect and admiration for the Haitian people and especially Toussaint L'Ouverture whom he acknowledged not just as an African-Caribbean leader, but a world leader.³

My choice of this speech is deliberate. First and foremost it is because the speech eloquently highlights the leadership that Haiti gave to the world and, while honestly critical of Haitian shortcomings, is also full of hope and belief in Haiti's future:

Until [Haiti] spoke the slave ship, followed by hungry sharks, greedy to devour the dead and dying slaves flung overboard to feed them, ploughed in peace the South Atlantic painting the sea with the Negro's blood. Until she spoke, the slave trade was sanctioned by all the Christian nations of the world... Until Haiti spoke, the church was silent, and the pulpit was dumb....

Douglass also highlighted the leading roles Haiti assumed in world history:

³ On 26 February 2011, the author of this introduction travelled to Fort-de-Joux to investigate the whereabouts of Toussaint L'Ouverture's remains. After his death the Haitian leader was buried under the altar of the Fort's chapel. However, I learned that near the end of the 19th Century, as part of additional fortifications, the chapel and an adjacent building were demolished and their foundations, including the grave of Toussaint L'Ouverture, torn up and thrown to one side before being heaped back upon the new fortifications. The desecration and lack of respect by the French Military and, by extension, the French Government, of Toussaint L'Ouverture's grave at Fort-de-Joux must, in time, be addressed. The Pantheon of the Haitian people has been deprived of the sacred remains of the father of their Republic and the world of its right to pay homage at the grave of a great leader.

First things have ever had a peculiar and romantic interest, simply because they are first things. In this, Haiti is fortunate... She has been made the theatre of great events. She was the first of all the cis-Atlantic world, upon which the firm foot of the progressive, aggressive and all-conquering white man was permanently set... She was the first to be invaded by the Christian religion... She was also the first to witness the bitter agonies of the negro bending under the blood-stained lash of Christian slave-holders. Happily too, for her, she was the first of the New World in which the black man asserted his right to be free and was brave enough to fight for his freedom and fortunate enough to gain it.

An additional reason I have for including the Haitian address concerns a major Frederick Douglass Project I am developing in Ireland and the USA. The Project is composed of four elements, including a Haitian humanitarian project:

1. A Frederick Douglass monument, the first in Ireland to honour an African-American, created by the acclaimed UK based sculptor, Andrew Edwards, who is part of the Irish Diaspora in England with ancestral links to County Cork.
2. An annual Frederick Douglass Human Rights lecture at an Irish University in association with an African-American and Irish-American University.
3. Cultural and educational projects that aim to find common cause between the great Diasporas of Africa and Ireland in the USA.
4. A Frederick Douglass – Haiti Project supporting the humanitarian work of Ireland’s Concern Worldwide in Haiti, so that the overall project has a life-giving dimension and reflects Douglass’s commitment to the wellbeing and development of the Haitian people whom he admired and respected – as reflected in his Haitian address.

The ‘Afterword’ to this book, by Concern’s Chief Executive, Tom Arnold, serves as a culmination of what the Frederick Douglass Project hopes to achieve and towards which the royalties of this book will benefit. Haiti is ranked as one of the poorest countries on Earth – the poorest of the western world - with all the attendant challenges severe poverty and destitution cause. At a time when the Haitian people are struggling to recover from the aftermath of the January 2010 magnitude 7.0 earthquake, that left over 200,000 dead and a million people homeless, with Frederick Douglass, we:

... will not... cannot believe that [Haiti’s] star is to go out in darkness, but... rather believe that whatever may happen of peace or war Haiti will remain in the firmament of nations, and, like the star of the north, will shine on and shine on forever.

Haiti does not need charity. It needs human solidarity, founded on justice, within and without. Haiti needs the respectful cooperation of the family of nations, especially those in the northern and western hemispheres who are its immediate neighbours, to help in its reconstruction and development. The Frederick Douglass Haiti Project will, we hope, be part of that cause.

Brief return to Ireland 1886

Frederick Douglass's wife of forty-four years, Anna Murray, died in August 1882 and, despite ridicule, he married his white secretary, the suffragette Helen Pitts, in January 1884. With Helen he made one last visit to Ireland in 1886, a brief transit stop at Queenstown (Cobh), en route to England, mainland Europe and North Africa.

In Chapter 24 of William S. McFeely's seminal work *Frederick Douglass* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1991), one senses a genuine nostalgia in Douglass as he watched from the decks of the *City of Rome* for Irish landfall. McFeely records that when, on September 22, Douglass saw, "the mountain coast of dear old Ireland... come into view", he called Helen to join himself and other passengers at the rail. "Poor, barefooted Ireland!" he said to her, as he gazed "sadly" upon the island he first saw forty-one years before. His life-long affection for Ireland undiminished and his sadness at the suffering endured by her people, poignantly expressed in these few words.

President Barack Obama

On St. Patrick's Day, 2011, I was in Washington DC, lobbying on the Frederick Douglass Memorial Project in the hope that, during his Irish visit in May 2011, President Obama might unveil the monument that the sculptor Andrew Edwards is, at the time of writing, completing. I had the help of a Washington based colleague, Kristin Leary, and four key Congressmen, Joseph Crowley, Richard Neal, Donald Payne and John Lewis, and we were thrilled when the President's remarks at the White House that night included reference to Frederick Douglass and Ireland. "In so many ways," President Obama said, "the Irish and their descendants have set an example for us as a people. But they've also set an example for us as a nation struggling to be more just and more free."

He then spoke of Douglass:

In 1845, Frederick Douglass, the great fighter for freedom here in this country, had just published his *Narrative of a Life of an American Slave*. And even as the book was a bestseller, Douglass began receiving steady streams of threats to his life.

So he decided to embark on a two-year lecture tour of the British Isles until things cooled down. He began by spending four months in Ireland, far from the threat of slave catchers, where he quickly found common ground with the people locked in their struggle against oppression.

As Douglass wrote, "I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country. I seem to have undergone a transformation. I live a new life." It was at a Dublin rally that Douglass met the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell. And soon, the two struck up an unlikely friendship. O'Connell was a fierce opponent of slavery, and he began calling Douglass 'the black O'Connell of the United States'.

For his part, Douglass drew inspiration from the Irishman's courage and intelligence, ultimately modeling his own struggle for justice on O'Connell's belief that change could be achieved peacefully through rule of law. Daniel O'Connell never lived to see another great emancipator named Abraham Lincoln put pen to paper and bring slavery to an end. But the two men shared a universal desire for freedom – one that cannot be contained by language or culture or even the span of an ocean.

And stories like this remind us just how deeply intertwined our two nations are. Nights like this remind us how much we share...

The President's reference to Frederick Douglass reminded me of letters penned to Douglass by two ancestors on the occasion of Obama's inauguration and which I have reproduced in the appendices. I was particularly struck by remarks made by Kenneth B. Morris Jr.:

Dear Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Frederick Douglass:

I have thought more than once about composing a letter to you. There are so many questions I have but, on the occasion of the inauguration of America's first black president, what I'd like to know most is this: what makes a great leader?...

... Perhaps at no time... since the Civil War are we in more need of a great leader than now. Barack Obama appears prepared to meet these challenges, but how would you advise a young president taking office with so much at stake?

I believe you would recommend that he guide with integrity so Americans can believe in their leader; that he place the highest value on inclusiveness so we can depend on each other; that he communicate so we can understand his decisions; that he adapt quickly to a world that changes by the minute; and that he apply creativity to his administration to help return this nation to a position of respect and leadership.

After the White House gathering, Todd Allen invited Kristin and I to join a group that included the speaker of the New York Council, Christine C. Quinn and the Sinn Fein President, Gerry Adams, both of whom had been present when the President made his remarks. There was excitement in the air that America's first African-American President had made the link between Frederick Douglass and Ireland and I felt encouragement that through this project, the great diasporas of Africa and Ireland could find common cause – with Frederick Douglass as the bridge.

Two days later, March 19, I received a text from the former Lord Mayor of Cork, Deputy Dara Murphy, TD, with whom I had been in discussions about the project for over a year. The text stated that the President of University College Cork, Dr. Michael Murphy, had given the green light to the monument project, having sourced an independent donor. With elation I emailed Andrew Edwards with the great news.

This project has since gained the support of others, including Governor Martin O'Malley of Maryland and forty-five members of the New York City Council, as well as the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation. And there are many others who wish to be supportive.

Founder of the Civil Rights Movement in America

After spending St. Patrick's Day in Washington DC, I flew to Rochester, New York, to pay homage at the grave of Frederick Douglass at Mount Hope Cemetery. I followed a map towards Section T through the melancholy terrain of narrow roads and tree shaded drumlins, with their endless assortments of erect, toppling and fallen headstones.

I approached the Douglass family plot with expectation. A large grey slab lay prostrate with copper turquoise coloured letters that declared: 'Frederick Douglass 1818-1895'. Nearby an older memorial stone, erected by his sons, Lewis H & Charles R, gave 1817 as the year of birth, echoing the second sentence of their father's *Narrative*: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it." It was years later that researchers found records from the plantation where he was born, recording the birth in February 1818 of a son named Frederick Augustus to a slave named Harriet. This memorial also recorded the names of Anna, Frederick's first wife, who died in 1882, and their daughter, Annie Douglass, who died in 1860.

Nearby, to the left of the grey slab, was a memorial stone marking the resting place of his second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass, 1838-1903, the founder of the Frederick Douglass Historical and Memorial Association, and the visionary who

preserved Cedar Hill, the Douglass home in Washington, D.C., which is now a National Historic Site.

It was a warm sunny morning and a nearby bench, 'Presented by the children of Lincoln School No. 22-1998', invited me to sit and relax. I was struck by a collection of small stones left on top of Frederick Douglass's tomb, reminiscent of the Jewish 'mound' tradition that speaks of continuity and that we are never finished building the monument of the deceased. A solitary US cent, with the face of Abraham Lincoln, was amongst the stones.

Nearby a woodpecker sent its loud hollow rapping sounds across the hushed landscape where evergreens stood side by side with naked oaks, chestnuts and maples. Here, in this tranquil setting, in the presence of the remains of Frederick, Anna, Annie and Helen Pitts Douglass, I sat for over three hours listening to an audio recording of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass – An American Slave*.

Before departing I invoked their blessings for the Frederick Douglass Memorial Project and especially for the monument being made by Andrew Edwards.

As I exited Section T I photographed a plaque nearby, erected by the University of Rochester & The Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery, that captured, in fifteen words, a momentous life that to this day inspires and encourages us to search, even in the darkest nights, for the north star that will keep us focused on Freedom, Justice and the Human Rights of All:

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
1818-1895
ESCAPED SLAVE, ABOLITIONIST,
SUFFRAGIST, JOURNALIST AND
STATESMAN. FOUNDER OF THE
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN
AMERICA

Don Mullan

Dublin

April 2011

150th Anniversary of the American Civil War

