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“For Something beyond the Battlefield”: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War

David W. Blight

Fellow citizens: I am not indifferent to the claims of a generous forgetfulness, but whatever else I may forget, I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery; between those who fought to save the Republic and those who fought to destroy it.

—Frederick Douglass, “Decoration Day,” 1894

We fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.

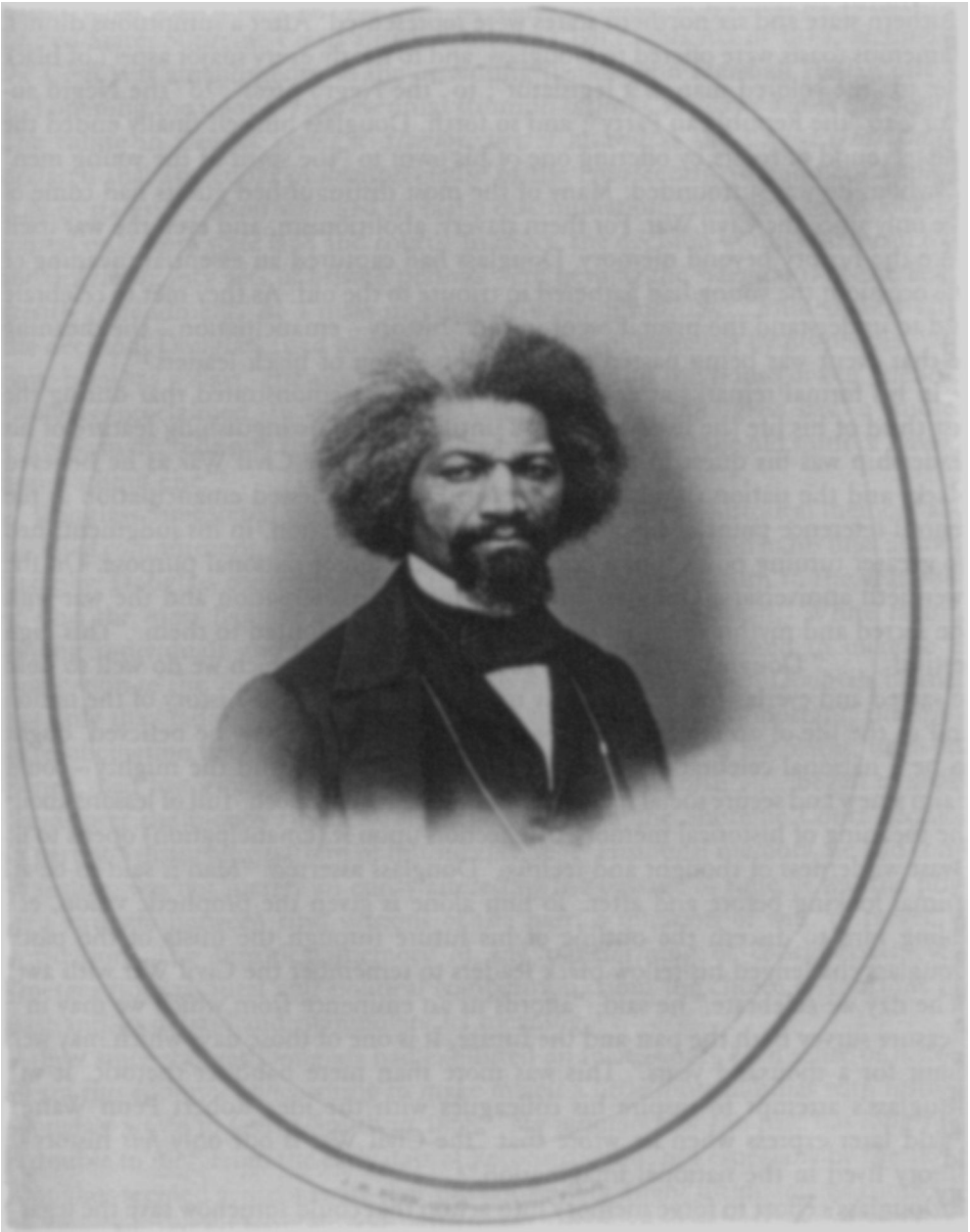
—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 1935

What you have as heritage,
Take now as task;
For thus you will make it your own.

—Goethe, *Faust*, 1808

In the first week of January 1883, on the twentieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, a distinguished group of black leaders held a banquet in Washington, D.C., to honor the nineteenth century’s most prominent Afro-American intellectual, Frederick Douglass. The banquet was an act of veneration for Douglass, an acknowledgment of the aging abolitionist’s indispensable role in the Civil War era, a ritual of collective celebration, and an opportunity to forge historical memory and transmit it across generations. The nearly fifty guests comprised a who’s who of black leadership in the middle and late nineteenth century. For the moment, rivalries and ideological disputes were suppressed. Sen. Blanche K. Bruce chaired the event. Robert Smalls, Edward Blyden, the Reverend Benjamin T. Tanner,

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Frederick Douglass, *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

Professor Richard T. Greener, the young historian George Washington Williams, and the journalist T. Thomas Fortune were just a few of the notables who took part. The celebrants included men from many backgrounds: college professors, congressmen, state politicians, bishops, journalists, and businessmen. Virtually every

southern state and six northern states were represented. After a sumptuous dinner, numerous toasts were offered to Douglass, and to nearly every major aspect of black life: to “the colored man as a legislator”; to “the Negro press”; to “the Negro author”; to “the Republican Party”; and so forth. Douglass himself finally ended the joyous round of toasts by offering one of his own: to “the spirit of the young men” by whom he was surrounded. Many of the most distinguished guests had come of age only since the Civil War. For them slavery, abolitionism, and even the war itself were the history beyond memory. Douglass had captured an essential meaning of the occasion; the young had gathered in tribute to the old. As they met to celebrate and to understand the pivotal event in their history—emancipation—the meaning of that event was being passed to a new generation of black leaders.¹

In his formal remarks at the banquet, Douglass demonstrated that during the last third of his life (he lived from 1818 until 1895), a distinguishing feature of his leadership was his quest to preserve the memory of the Civil War as he believed blacks and the nation should remember it. Douglass viewed emancipation as the central reference point of black history. Likewise the nation, in his judgment, had no greater turning point, nor a better demonstration of national purpose. On the twentieth anniversary, Douglass sought to infuse emancipation and the war with the sacred and mythic qualities that he had always attributed to them. “This high festival . . .,” Douglass declared, “is coupled with a day which we do well to hold in sacred and everlasting honor, a day memorable alike in the history of the nation and in the life of an emancipated people.” Emancipation day, he believed, ought to be a national celebration in which all blacks—the low and the mighty—could claim a new and secure social identity. But it was also an “epoch” full of lessons about the meaning of historical memory. “Reflection upon it (emancipation) opens to us a vast wilderness of thought and feeling,” Douglass asserted. “Man is said to be an animal looking before and after. To him alone is given the prophetic vision, enabling him to discern the outline of his future through the mists of the past.” Douglass challenged his fellow black leaders to remember the Civil War with awe. “The day we celebrate,” he said, “affords us an eminence from which we may in a measure survey both the past and the future. It is one of those days which may well count for a thousand years.” This was more than mere banquet rhetoric. It was Douglass’s attempt to inspire his colleagues with the idea Robert Penn Warren would later express when he wrote that “the Civil War is our only *felt* history—history lived in the national imagination.”²

Douglass’s effort to forge memory into action that could somehow save the legacy of the Civil War for blacks—freedom, citizenship, suffrage, and dignity—came at a time when the nation appeared indifferent or hostile to that legacy. The richly

¹ *People’s Advocate*, Jan. 6, 1883, Leon Gardiner Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia). The banquet was organized by Professor J. M. Gregory of Howard University.

² *Ibid.*; Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 4. Douglass’s imagery here reflects his apocalyptic view of history. On his apocalyptic conception of the Civil War, see David W. Blight, “Frederick Douglass and the American Apocalypse,” *Civil War History*, 31 (Dec. 1985), 309–28.

symbolic emancipation day banquet of 1883 occurred only months before the United States Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, sacrificing the Civil War amendments, as the dissenting Justice John Marshall Harlan put it, and opening the door for the eventual triumph of Jim Crow laws across the South. The ruling in *United States v. Stanley*, better known as the *Civil Rights Cases*, declared that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to states; a person wronged by racial discrimination, therefore, could look for redress only from state laws and courts. In effect, the decision would also mean that the discriminatory acts of private persons were beyond the safeguards of the Fourteenth Amendment. At a mass meeting in Washington, D.C., immediately after the decision, Douglass tried to capture the sense of outrage felt by his people. "We have been, as a class, grievously wounded, wounded in the house of our friends," Douglass proclaimed. In the Supreme Court's decision, Douglass saw "a studied purpose to degrade and stamp out the liberties of a race. It is the old spirit of slavery, and nothing else."³

Douglass interpreted the *Civil Rights Cases* as a failure of historical memory and national commitment. Reflecting on the Supreme Court decision in his final autobiography, Douglass contended that "the future historian will turn to the year 1883 to find the most flagrant example of this national deterioration." White racism, among individuals and in national policy, he remarked, seemed to increase in proportion to the "increasing distance from the time of the war." Douglass blamed not only the "fading and defacing effects of time," but more important, the spirit of reconciliation between North and South. Justice and liberty for blacks, he maintained, had lost ground from "the hour that the loyal North . . . began to shake hands over the bloody chasm."⁴ Thus, Douglass saw the Supreme Court decision as part of a disturbing pattern of historical change. Historical memory, he had come to realize, was not merely an entity altered by the passage of time; it was the prize in a struggle between rival versions of the past, a question of will, of power, of persuasion. The historical memory of any transforming or controversial event emerges from cultural and political competition, from the choice to confront the past and to debate and manipulate its meaning.

Ever since the war Douglass had exhibited an increasingly keen sense of history. "I am this summer endeavoring to make myself a little more familiar with history," Douglass wrote to Gerrit Smith in 1868. "My ignorance of the past has long been a trouble to me." From the early days of Reconstruction, but especially by the 1870s, Douglass seemed acutely aware that the postwar era might ultimately be controlled by those who could best shape interpretations of the war itself. Winning the peace would not only be a matter of power, but also a struggle of moral will and historical

³ Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1965), 114–18; Frederick Douglass, "The Civil Rights Case: Speech at the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting Held at Lincoln Hall, October 22, 1883," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (5 vols., New York, 1950), IV, 393, 402.

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (1892; reprint, New York, 1962), 539.

consciousness. In the successful rise of the Democratic party, Douglass saw evidence that the South was beginning to win that struggle. In 1870 he complained that the American people were “destitute of political memory.” But as he tried to reach out to both black and white readers with his newspaper, Douglass demanded that they not allow the country to “bury dead issues,” as the Democrats wished. “The people cannot and will not forget the issues of the rebellion,” Douglass admonished. “The Democratic party must continue to face the music of the past as well as of the present.”⁵

Some of Douglass’s critics accused him of living in the past. American politics, declared a Liberal Republican newspaper in 1872, would “leave Mr. Douglass behind . . . vociferating the old platitudes as though the world had stopped eight years ago.” To such criticisms Douglass always had a ready answer: he would *not forgive* the South and he would *never forget* the meaning of the war. At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in 1871, on one of the first observances of Memorial Day, Douglass declared where he stood.

We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful struggle, and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life, and those who struck to save it—those who fought for slavery and those who fought for liberty and justice. I am no minister of malice . . . , I would not repel the repentant, but . . . may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget the difference between the parties to that . . . bloody conflict . . . I may say if this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?⁶

Douglass often referred to the preservation of the Union in glowing, nationalistic tones. But in the last third of his life, he demonstrated that the Civil War had also left many bitter elements of memory. Around the pledge to “never forget,” Douglass organized his entire postwar effort to shape and preserve the legacy of the Civil War.

By intellectual predilection and by experience, Douglass was deeply conscious that history mattered. As the author of three autobiographies by the 1880s, he had cultivated deep furrows into his own memory. In a real sense, the Frederick Douglass who endures as an unending subject of literary and historical inquiry—because of the autobiographies—is and was the creature of memory. Moreover, Douglass deeply understood that peoples and nations are shaped and defined by history. He knew that history was a primary source of identity, meaning, and motivation. He seemed acutely aware that history was both burden and inspiration, something to be cherished and overcome. Douglass also understood that winning battles over policy or justice in the present often required an effective use of the past. He came to a realization that in late nineteenth-century America, blacks had a special need for a usable past. “It is not well to forget the past,” Douglass warned in an 1884

⁵ Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, Aug. 24, 1868, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Foner, IV, 210; *New National Era*, Nov. 24, 1870.

⁶ *Golden Age*, quoted in *New National Era*, Aug. 8, 1872; Frederick Douglass, “Address at the Grave of the Unknown Dead,” May 30, 1871, reel 14, Frederick Douglass Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

speech. “Memory was given to man for some wise purpose. The past is . . . the mirror in which we may discern the dim outlines of the future and by which we may make them more symmetrical.”⁷

To all who look to history for meaning, those premises may seem obvious. But in the 1880s, according to Douglass, blacks occupied a special place in America’s historical memory, as participants and as custodians. He understood his people’s psychological need not to dwell on the horrors of slavery. But the slave experience was so immediate and unforgettable, Douglass believed, because it was a history that could “be traced like that of a wounded man through a crowd by the blood.” Douglass urged his fellow blacks to keep *their* history before the consciousness of American society; if necessary, they should serve as a national conscience. “Well the nation may forget,” Douglass said in 1888, “it may shut its eyes to the past, and frown upon any who may do otherwise, but the colored people of this country are bound to keep the past in lively memory till justice shall be done them.” But as Douglass learned, such historical consciousness was as out of date in Gilded Age America as the racial justice he demanded.⁸

In his retrospective thought about the Civil War, Douglass’s intention was to forge enduring historical myths that could help win battles in the present. The deepest cultural myths—ideas and stories drawn from history that, through symbolic power, transcend generations—are the mechanisms of historical memory. Such myths are born of divergent experiences and provide the cultural weapons with which rival memories contest for hegemony. Douglass hoped that Union victory, black emancipation, and the Civil War amendments would be so deeply rooted in recent American experience, so central to any conception of national regeneration, so necessary to the postwar society that they would become sacred values, ritualized in memory. Douglass dearly wanted black freedom and equality—the gift from the Union dead who were memorialized every Decoration Day—to become (as Richard Slotkin puts it) one of those “usable values from history . . . beyond the reach of critical demystification.”⁹ Douglass’s hope that emancipation could attain such in-

⁷ Frederick Douglass, “Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue,” 1884, reel 16, Douglass Papers. On the nature and importance of historical memory, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 26–50; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1983); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, 1984); Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978); Ulric Neisser, ed., *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (San Francisco, 1982); and David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (London, 1985). On the Civil War in the northern memory, see Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York, 1973); Oscar Handlin, “The Civil War as Symbol and as Actuality,” *Massachusetts Review*, 3 (Autumn 1961), 133–43; Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 256–59; Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865–1900* (New York, 1937), 228–309; and James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, 1975), 95–139, 333–38.

⁸ Douglass, “Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue”; Frederick Douglass, “Address delivered on the Twenty-Sixth Anniversary of Abolition in the District of Columbia,” April 16, 1888, reel 16, Douglass Papers.

⁹ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, 1985), 19. My understanding of the structure of cultural myth, and its uses and misuses by historians, is derived from *ibid.*, 3–32; Bruck Kuklik, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, 24 (Oct. 1972), 435–50; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978), xi–xii, 132–220; Clifford Geertz, *The*

delible mythic quality was rooted in his enduring faith in the doctrine of progress and in his moral determinism, a belief that in a society of egalitarian laws good will outweigh evil in the collective action of human beings. Repeatedly, Douglass criticized the claim that emancipation came only by “military necessity” during the war. “The war for the Union came only to execute the moral and humane judgment of the nation,” he asserted in 1883. “It was an instrument of a higher power than itself.” What drew northerners to Memorial Day observances, Douglass maintained in 1878, was the “moral character of the war . . . , the far-reaching . . . , eternal principles in dispute, and for which our sons and brothers encountered . . . danger and death.”¹⁰ By continuing to stress that sacred and ideological legacy of the war, Douglass exposed both his deepest sense of the meaning of the conflict and his fear that such meaning would not successfully compete with rival memories (in both North and South) and could, therefore, be lost.

Douglass’s pledge to “never forget” the meaning of the Civil War stemmed from at least five sources in his thought and experience: his belief that the war had been an ideological struggle and not merely the test of a generation’s loyalty and valor; his sense of refurbished nationalism made possible by emancipation, Union victory, and Radical Reconstruction; his confrontation with the resurgent racism and Lost Cause mythology of the postwar period; his critique of America’s peculiar dilemma of historical amnesia; and his personal psychological stake in preserving an Afro-American and an abolitionist memory of the war. Douglass never softened his claim that the Civil War had been an ideological conflict with deeply moral consequences. He abhorred the nonideological interpretation of the war that was gaining popularity by the 1880s. The spirit of sectional reunion had fostered a celebration of martial heroism, of strenuousness and courage, perhaps best expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and later popularized by Theodore Roosevelt. Holmes experienced and therefore loathed the horror of combat. But to him, the legacy of the Civil War rested not in any moral cause on either side, but in the passion, devotion, and sacrifice of the generation whose “hearts were touched with fire.” To Holmes, the true hero—the deepest memory—of the Civil War was the soldier on either side, thoughtless of ideology, who faced the “experience of battle . . . in those indecisive contests.” War almost always forces people to ask the existential question *why*? Massive organized killing compels the question, but it seldom reveals satisfying answers. Indeed, the very face of battle, suffering, and death can blunt or deny ideology altogether. Teleological conceptions of war are rarely the luxury of individual soldiers; the veteran’s memory rarely focuses on the grand design. Ideology, though always

Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz (New York, 1973), 28–30, 33–141, 213–20; Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 3–32, 221–58; and Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 3–26.

¹⁰ Frederick Douglass, “Speech on Emancipation Day,” September 1883, reel 15, Douglass Papers. For Douglass’s attacks on the idea of “military necessity,” see also [Frederick Douglass], “The Black Man’s Progress on This Continent,” *New National Era*, July 27, 1871. Frederick Douglass, “Speech in Madison Square,” Decoration Day, 1878, reel 15, Douglass Papers.

at the root of war, is left to the interpreters, those who will compete to define the meaning and legacy of the wartime experience. "In the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds," said Holmes, "there is one thing I do not doubt, and that is that the faith is true and adorable which sends a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use." By the 1880s Holmes's memory of the war became deeply rooted in American culture. What mattered most was not the content of the cause on either side but the acts of commitment to either cause, not ideas but the experience born of conflict over those ideas. Whoever was honest in his devotion was *right*.¹¹

Douglass resisted such an outlook and demanded a teleological memory of the war. His Memorial Day addresses were full of tributes to martial heroism, albeit only on the Union side; but more important, they were testaments to the abolitionist conception of the war. The conflict, Douglass insisted in 1878, "was a war of ideas, a battle of principles . . . a war between the old and new, slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization." After Reconstruction Douglass was one of a small band of old abolitionists and reformers who struggled to sustain an ideological interpretation of the Civil War. His speeches were strikingly similar to the writings of the novelist and former carpetbagger, Albion Tourgée. Satirically, Tourgée attempted to answer the Holmesian version of an ideology-free veteran's memory. "We have nothing to do with the struggle that followed" the outbreak of war, wrote Tourgée in 1884. "History hath already recorded it with more or less exactitude. It was long and fierce because two brave peoples fought with the desperation of conviction. . . . It was a wonderful conflict." What people should remember of the war, Tourgée contended, was "*not* the courage, the suffering, the blood, *but only the causes that underlay the struggle and the results that followed from it.*" Like Douglass, Tourgée considered emancipation the great result of the war. He also rejected a core concept of the national reunion: that the South's war effort was honest and, therefore, just as heroic as the Union cause. "Because an opponent is honest," Tourgée asserted, "it does not follow that he is right, nor is it certain that because he was overthrown he was in the wrong." Thinkers like Douglass and Tourgée were not merely trying to "keep alive conflict over issues time was ruthlessly discarding," as Paul H. Buck wrote in 1937.¹² Belligerence was not the primary motive of those who argued for an ideological memory of the Civil War. Theirs was a persuasion under duress by the 1880s, a collective voice nearly drowned out by the chorus of reconciliation. They understood the need for healing in the recently divided nation; they could acknowl-

¹¹ Mark De Wolfe Howe, ed., *The Occasional Speeches of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 4–5, 76. Excellent discussions of Holmes are found in George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York, 1965), 218–21; Cruce Stark, "Brothers At/In War: One Phase of Post-Civil War Reconciliation," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 6 (Fall 1975), 174–81; and Aaron, *Unwritten War*, 161–62.

¹² Albion W. Tourgée, *An Appeal to Caesar* (New York, 1884), 37, 44; Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 242. On Tourgée, see Otto H. Olsen, *Carpetbagger's Crusade: The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgée* (Baltimore, 1965); Richard Nelson Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1988), 367–82, 401–6; and Aaron, *Unwritten War*, 193–205.

edge the validity of veterans' mutual respect. But they distrusted the sentimentalism of both North and South, and they especially feared Holmes's notion of the "collapse of creeds." Most of all, those northerners who stressed ideas in the debate over the memory of the war saw America avoiding—whether benignly or aggressively—the deep significance of race in the verdict of Appomattox.

Douglass's voice was crucial to the late nineteenth-century debate over the legacy of the Civil War. As Edmund Wilson wrote in analyzing the significance of "detached" American writers of the Civil War era: "They also serve who only stand and watch. The men of action make history, but the spectators make most of the histories, and these histories may influence the action." Douglass had acted in history, but now his principal aim was to help shape the histories. Unlike Holmes and many others, Douglass had not served on the battlefield. But he had served in slavery, he had served on the abolitionist platform, and he had served with his pen and voice as few other black leaders had during the war. Douglass's war was an intellectual and spiritual experience; his action had been more of an inner struggle than a physical test. Perhaps his remoteness from the carnage enabled him to sustain an ideological conception of the war throughout his life. Answering the appeal of the veterans' memory, Douglass maintained that the war "was not a fight between rapacious birds and ferocious beasts, a mere display of brute courage and endurance, but it was a war between men of thought, as well as of action, and in dead earnest for something beyond the battlefield."¹³

The second source of Douglass's quest to preserve the memory of the Civil War was his refurbished nationalism. At stake for the former fugitive slave was the sense of American nationhood, the secure social identity that he hoped emancipation and equality would one day offer every black in America. Douglass expressed this connection between nationalism and memory in his famous speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C., in April 1876. The Freedmen's Memorial speech is too easily interpreted as merely eulogistic, as simply Douglass's contribution to the myth of Lincoln as Great Emancipator. Attended by President Ulysses S. Grant, his cabinet, Supreme Court Justices, and numerous senators, the ceremony was as impressive as the bright spring day, which had been declared a holiday by joint resolution of Congress. After a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation and the unveiling of the statue (which Douglass later admitted he disliked because "it showed the Negro on his knees"), Douglass took the podium as the orator of the day. His address included strong doses of the rail-splitter Lincoln image, the "plebeian" who rose through honesty, common sense, and the mysterious hand of God to become the "great liberator." But Douglass understood the significance of the occasion; he knew it was a moment to forge national memory and to practice civil religion. Through most of the speech he spoke to and for blacks; the monument had been commissioned and paid for

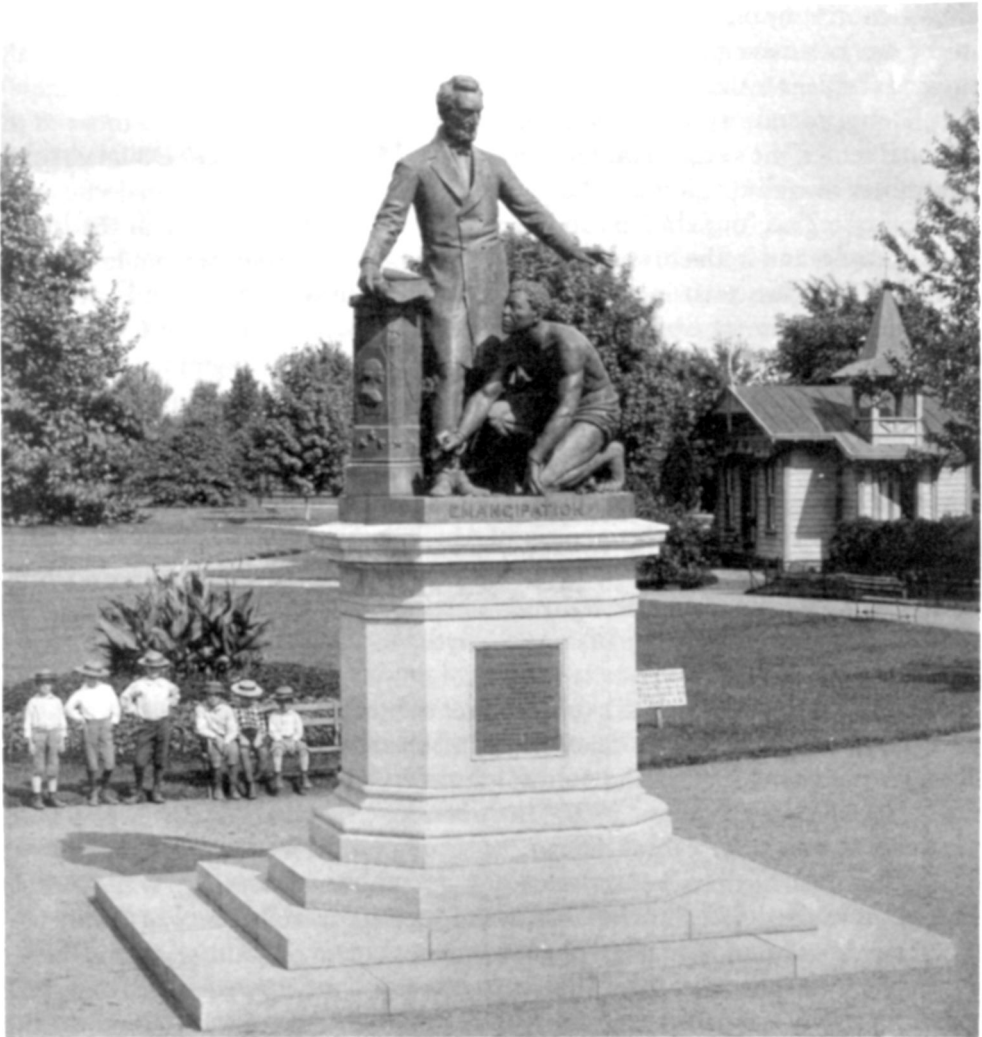
¹³ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (Boston, 1984), 669; Douglass, "Speech in Madison Square." On the conflict between ideological and nonideological conceptions of the war, see Fredrickson, *Inner Civil War*, 196–98, 217–38.

almost entirely by blacks. But the monument was not only to Lincoln; rather, it was to the *fact* of emancipation. The occasion honored Lincoln, but Douglass equally stressed the *events* that transpired “under his rule, and in due time.” Most important, Douglass staked out a claim to nationhood for blacks. “We stand today at the national center,” he said, “to perform something like a national act.” Douglass struck clear notes of civil religion as he described the “stately pillars and majestic dome of the Capital” as “our church” and rejoiced that “for the first time in the history of our people, and in the history of the whole American people, we join in this high worship.” Douglass was, indeed, trying to make Lincoln mythic and, therefore, useful to the cause of black equality. But the primary significance of Douglass’s Freedmen’s Memorial address lies in its concerted attempt to forge a place for blacks in the national memory, to assert their citizenship and nationhood. “When now it shall be said that the colored man is soulless . . .,” Douglass concluded, “when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood, we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln.” What Lincoln himself had once called the “mystic chords of memory” as a source of devotion to the Union, Douglass now claimed as the rightful inheritance of blacks as well. He did so through language, the essence of cultural myth, and the only secure means he possessed.¹⁴

The third cause of Douglass’s concern over the memory of the Civil War was the resurgent racism throughout the country and the rise of the Lost Cause mentality. Since its origins as a literary and political device immediately after the war, the Lost Cause has been an enigmatic phrase in American history. Historians have defined the Lost Cause in at least three different ways: as a public memory, shaped by a web of organizations, institutions, and rituals; as a dimension of southern and American civil religion, rooted in churches and sacred rhetoric as well as secular institutions and thought; and as a literary phenomenon, shaped by journalists and fiction writers from the die-hard Confederate apologists of the immediate postwar years through the gentle romanticism of the “local color” writers of the 1880s to the legion of more mature novelists of the 1890s and early twentieth century who appealed to a national audience eager for reconciliation.¹⁵ Dividing the movement into the “inner” and “national” memories is also useful in making sense of the Lost Cause.

¹⁴ On the Freedmen’s Memorial speech, see Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1968), 276–78. Quarles maintains that the speech was “distinctly not one of [Douglass’s] best.” See also Nathan I. Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1980), 102–3. Frederick Douglass, “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,” April 14, 1876, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Foner, IV, 317–19, 314, 310–11, 319. For the “mystic chords” quotation, see Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953), IV, 271. On black attitudes toward Lincoln during the war, see Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1962).

¹⁵ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913* (New York, 1986), 4–5, 36–46, 104–14; Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens, Ga., 1980), 12–14, 37–78; Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge, 1982), 39–72. See also C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 154–58.



Freedmen's Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln by Thomas Ball.
Courtesy Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

The “inner” Lost Cause, argue Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, represents the die-hard generation that fought the war and experienced defeat and dishonor. Led by Jefferson Davis, and especially by the prototypical unreconstructed rebel, Gen. Jubal Early, these former Confederate leaders created veterans’ organizations, wrote partisan confederate histories, built monuments, made Robert E. Lee into a romantic icon, and desperately sought justification for their cause and explanations for their defeat. The Confederacy, argued the diehards, was never defeated; rather, it was overwhelmed by numbers and betrayed by certain generals at pivotal battles (namely James Longstreet at Gettysburg). The activities of the initial Lost

Cause advocates have been compared to the Ghost Dance of the Plains Indians of the late nineteenth century. As mystics, they remained “captivated by a dream,” writes Gaines Foster, “a dream of a return to an undefeated confederacy.” The “inner” Lost Cause was not, however, merely a band of bitter, aging, mystical soldiers. During the 1870s and 1880s they forged an organized movement in print, oratory, and granite, and their influence persisted until World War I.¹⁶

The “national” Lost Cause took hold during the 1880s primarily as a literary phenomenon propagated by mass market magazines and welcomed by a burgeoning northern readership. Avoiding the defensive tone and self-pity of earlier Lost Cause writers, successful local colorist John Esten Cooke found a vast and vulnerable audience for his stories of the genteel and romantic heritage of old Virginia. Cooke and other writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Sara Pryor did not write about a defeated South or the Confederate cause. They wrote about the Old South, about the chivalry and romance of antebellum plantation life, about black “servants” and a happy, loyal slave culture, remembered as a source of laughter and music. They wrote about colonial Virginia—the Old Dominion—as the source of revolutionary heritage and the birthplace of several American presidents. Northern readers were treated to an exotic South, a premodern, preindustrial model of grace. These writers sought, not to vindicate the Confederacy, but to intrigue Yankee readers. Northern readers were not asked to reconcile Jefferson’s Virginia with the rebel yell at the unveiling of a Confederate monument. They were only asked to recognize the South’s place in national heritage.¹⁷

The conditioning of the northern mind in popular literature had its counterpart in veterans’ reunions, which in the 1880s and 1890s became increasingly inter-sectional. Celebration of manly valor on both sides and the mutual respect of Union and Confederate soldiers fostered a kind of veterans’ culture that gave the Lost Cause a place in national memory. The war became essentially a conflict between white men; both sides fought well, Americans against Americans, and there was glory enough to go around. Celebrating the soldiers’ experience buttressed the nonideological memory of the war. The great issues of the conflict—slavery, secession, emancipation, black equality, even disloyalty and treason—faded from national consciousness as the nation celebrated reunion and ultimately confronted war with Spain in 1898. Many southerners became pragmatic about the memory of the war; they wanted to remember what was best in their past, but most important, they embraced the reunionism implicit in the concept of a “New South” and demanded respect from northerners. To most southerners, the Lost Cause came to represent this crucial double meaning: reunion and respect. Late in life Frederick Douglass rarely found it possible to concede the South both aspects of the national Lost Cause sentiment; at times he could acknowledge neither reunion nor respect on the terms that popular consciousness demanded. Inwardly, Douglass clung to a Victorious Cause of his own, resisting and wishing away Jim Crow, lynching, and the ongoing

¹⁶ Connelly and Bellows, *God and General Longstreet*, 2–38; Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 47, 60.

¹⁷ See Connelly and Bellows, *God and General Longstreet*, 39–72.

betrayal of his people. And Douglass often took his version of the Victorious Cause to the public forum, demanding justice in the present, the arena of competing and rival memories.¹⁸

There were ghosts to be called up on all sides. White southerners were finding a balm for defeat and bereavement, autonomy in their own region, and a new place in the Union. Southern memory of the war had begun the long process of achieving resolution; southern ghosts could be purged. For blacks, however, many ghosts were not purged in the late nineteenth century and, indeed, they remain unpurged even today. Some twentieth-century black writers portray the burden of memory much as Douglass did. In August Wilson's recent play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the hero, Herald Loomis, a former sharecropper who has come north to Pittsburgh in 1911, is haunted by the memory of his seven years' unjust imprisonment on a chain gang. Loomis was kidnapped by a turn-of-the-century slave catcher (Joe Turner) who believed that emancipation was the worst thing that ever happened to the South. As he searches for his wife and a new start in life, Loomis is tormented not only by the memory of chains but also by visions of white bones rising out of the ocean, a clear and powerful image of the slave trade. In the dramatization of Herald Loomis's struggle to reemerge from a second slavery, we can find echoes of Douglass's challenge to America to "never forget" its responsibilities to the freed people. Wilson's use of history on stage transmits black cultural memory as a weapon, a source of spirit that enables people to grapple with their historical ghosts in an ever-sovereign present. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe, a freed-woman living in Ohio during Reconstruction, confronts the return of the living ghost of her daughter, a child she had killed in infancy rather than permit her imminent return to slavery. The ghost, "Beloved," is a metaphor for all the haunting horror of slavery that the freed people have carried with them into their new lives. *Beloved* is memory itself, all-consuming, overwhelming, forcing Sethe to face each "day's serious work of beating back the past." At the end of the book Morrison suggests that to the characters in this wrenching story, "remembering seemed unwise." But she also reminds us as readers—as a people—to beware of the path left by *Beloved* as she vanished: "Down by the stream in back of 124 [Sethe's house] her [Beloved's] footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there."¹⁹ Collective historical memory, like the

¹⁸ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 66–75. On the New South, see Woodward, *Origins*, especially 142–74. On the generational impact of the war in southern memory and on generational change in general, see David Herbert Donald, "A Generation of Defeat," in *From the Old South to the New: Essays in the Transitional South*, ed. Walter J. Fraser and Winfred B. Moore, Jr. (Westport, 1978), 3–20; and Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 208–36.

¹⁹ August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. At this writing there is no published version of the play. It had its world premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre, May 2, 1986. I viewed the play in May 1988 in New York City. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), 274–75. Another excellent example from the recent Afro-American literary tradition showing the power of historical memory over life in the present is David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident* (New York, 1981). On Bradley and black novelists' use of history, see Klaus Ensslen, "Fictionalizing History: David Bradley's 'The Chaneyville Incident,'" *Callaloo*, 11 (Spring 1988), 280–95.

deepest personal memories, can overwhelm and control us as do the ghosts in the work of Wilson and Morrison. But historical memory is also a matter of choice, a question of will. As a culture, we choose which footprints from the past will best help us walk in the present.

In the midst of Reconstruction, Douglass began to realize the potential power of the Lost Cause sentiment. Indignant at the universal amnesty afforded ex-Confederates, and appalled by the national veneration of Robert E. Lee, Douglass attacked the emerging Lost Cause. "The spirit of secession is stronger today than ever . . ." Douglass warned in 1871. "It is now a deeply rooted, devoutly cherished sentiment, inseparably identified with the 'lost cause,' which the half measures of the Government towards the traitors have helped to cultivate and strengthen." He was disgusted by the outpouring of admiration for Lee in the wake of the general's death in 1870. "Is it not about time that this bombastic laudation of the rebel chief should cease?" Douglass wrote. "We can scarcely take up a newspaper . . . that is not filled with *nauseating* flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee." At this early stage in the debate over the memory of the war, Douglass had no interest in honoring the former enemy. "It would seem from this," he asserted, "that the soldier who kills the most men in battle, even in a bad cause, is the greatest Christian, and entitled to the highest place in heaven." Douglass's harsh reactions to the veneration of Lee are a revealing measure of his enduring attitudes toward the South, as well as his conception of the meaning of the war. He seemed to relish the opportunity to lecture his readers about their former enemies. "The South has a past not to be contemplated with pleasure, but with a shudder," Douglass cautioned in 1870. "She has been selling agony, trading in blood and in the souls of men. If her past has any lesson, it is one of repentance and thorough reformation."²⁰

As for proposed monuments to Lee, Douglass considered them an insult to his people and to the Union. He feared that such monument building would only "reawaken the confederacy." Moreover, in a remark that would prove more ironic with time, Douglass declared in 1870 that "monuments to the Lost Cause will prove monuments of folly." As the Lost Cause myth sank deeper into southern and national consciousness, Douglass would find that he was losing ground in the battle for the memory of the Civil War.²¹

Douglass never precisely clarified just how much southern "repentance" or "reformation" he deemed necessary before he could personally extend forgiveness. He merely demanded "justice," based on adherence to the Civil War amendments and to the civil rights acts. Given the strength of his nationalism and his own southern roots, Douglass's vindictiveness toward the South probably would have softened

²⁰ [Frederick Douglass], "Wasted Magnanimity," *New National Era*, Aug. 10, 1871; [Frederick Douglass], "Bombast," *ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1870.

²¹ [Frederick Douglass], "The Survivor's Meeting—A Soldier's Tribute to a Soldier," *ibid.*, Dec. 1, 1870; [Frederick Douglass], "Monuments of Folly," *ibid.* Douglass was also outraged by southerners' attempts to write the Lost Cause outlook into American history textbooks. "They have taken to making rebel schoolbooks and teaching secession and disloyalty in their primary schools," Douglass reported. See [Frederick Douglass], "Still Firing the Southern Heart," *ibid.*, Feb. 23, 1871.

more with time had not the resurgent racism of the 1880s and 1890s fueled the spirit of sectional reunion. "A spirit of evil has been revived," Douglass declared in a eulogy to William Lloyd Garrison in 1879, "doctrines are proclaimed . . . which were, as we thought, all extinguished by the iron logic of cannon balls." In the political victories of the southern Democrats and in the increasing oppression of the freedmen, Douglass saw a "conflict between the semi-barbarous past and the higher civilization which has logically and legally taken its place." He lamented the passing of so many of the old abolitionists like Garrison whose services would be needed in what Douglass called "this second battle for liberty and nation."²²

From his position as a stalwart Republican, Douglass's condemnations of resurgent racism often seemed in stark contradiction to his support of the party that increasingly abandoned blacks. His allegiance to, and criticism of, the Republican party could emerge in bewildering extremes. Campaigning for Alonzo B. Cornell, Republican candidate for governor of New York in 1879, Douglass charged that too many Republicans had caved in to the charms of sectional reunion. The issues of the current election, he asserted, were "precisely those old questions which gave rise to our late civil war." Such rhetoric did not square with the realities of American politics during the Hayes administration. Like an angry revivalist wishing for a reawakening in his fellow party members, Douglass chastised "this tender forbearance, this amazing mercy, and generous oblivion to the past." Yet in an 1880 speech commemorating emancipation, Douglass declared: "Of the Republican party . . . it is the same as during and before the war; the same enlightened, loyal, liberal and progressive party that it was. It is the party of Lincoln, Grant, Wade, Seward, and Sumner; the party to which today we are indebted for the salvation of the country, and today it is well represented in its character and composition by James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur." Over the course of the 1880s his rhetoric shifted to harsher and more realistic assessments as Douglass faced the bitter truth about his party. In an 1888 speech he accused the Republicans of treating the freedman as "a deserted, a defrauded, a swindled outcast; in law, free; in fact, a slave; in law, a citizen; in fact, an alien; in law, a voter; in fact, a disfranchised man." Douglass pleaded with Republicans not to rest on their laurels and demanded that they convert their original values into a creative force for the new era. "I am a Republican, I believe in the Republican party . . .," he asserted. "But . . . I dare to tell that party the truth. In my judgment, it can no longer repose on the history of its grand and magnificent achievements. It must not only stand abreast with the times, but must create the times."²³

²² Frederick Douglass, "Speech on the Death of William Lloyd Garrison," June 2, 1879, reel 15, Douglass Papers. The emergence of the New South in the 1880s caused great uncertainty among old abolitionists. They shared some of the optimism of the new era, but they also lamented the demise of Reconstruction and feared the control an autonomous South could wield over race relations. See McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 107–20; and Woodward, *Origins*, 107–74.

²³ Frederick Douglass, "Campaign Speech on Behalf of Alonzo B. Cornell," 1879, reel 15, Douglass Papers; Frederick Douglass, "Emancipation," Aug. 4, 1880, *ibid.*; Frederick Douglass, "Address Delivered on the Twenty-Sixth Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia," April 16, 1888, reel 16, *ibid.*

Douglass's ambivalence toward the Republicans late in life stemmed from more than two decades of loyalty to the party. The party had been the primary vehicle through which he pursued his political ambitions, developed his political consciousness, and exercised some influence in the federal government. Beginning in 1877, when President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him marshal for the District of Columbia, and through subsequent appointments as recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia (1881–1886) and minister to Haiti (1889–1891), Douglass achieved a place, albeit largely emblematic, in Washington officialdom. But aside from personal ambition, he had always imbued the Republican party with deeper, historical meanings. He saw it as the vessel of progress and as the institutional custodian of the Civil War's legacy. During the Grant years (1869–1877), he had stumped for the Republicans with an almost desperate zeal, as if only through the party could emancipation and the triumphs of Radical Reconstruction be preserved. An element of wish fulfillment no doubt both sustained his support of the Republicans and inspired his later attacks on the party. But Douglass's Republican loyalty is best understood as part of his quest to realize a secure, abolitionist memory of the war. He continued to use the Republican party to demand that the nation confront its recent history, not run from it. What Douglass most wanted was not national reunion; he wanted racial justice, promised in law, demonstrated in practice, and preserved in memory.²⁴

Whatever he thought of the Republican party, though, the aging Douglass never wavered in his critique of racism. "The tide of popular prejudice" against blacks, Douglass said in 1884, had "swollen by a thousand streams" since the war. Everywhere, he lamented, blacks were "stamped" with racist expectations. Douglass expressed the pain of being black in America: wherever a black man aspired to a profession, "the presumption of incompetence confronts him, and he must either run, fight, or fall before it." The alleged rapes by black men of white women were to Douglass manifestations of the South's invention of a new "crime" to replace their old fear of "insurrection." Lynching, therefore, represented a white, southern invention of new means to exercise racial power and oppression. In a speech in 1884, commemorating the rescue of fugitive slaves in the 1850s, Douglass chastised his Syracuse audience for preferring sectional peace over racial justice. "It is weak and foolish to cry PEACE when there is no peace," he cried. "In America, as elsewhere, injustice must cease before peace can prevail."²⁵

The fourth source of Douglass's arguments in the debate over the memory of the Civil War was his conviction that the country had been seduced into "national forgetfulness," a peculiar American condition of historical amnesia. In his numerous retrospective speeches in the 1880s, Douglass discussed the limitations of memory. He knew that memory was fickle and that people must embrace an "ever-changing . . . present." Even his own "slave life," he admitted, had "lost much of its horror,

²⁴ See Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 252–82; and Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 79–91.

²⁵ Douglass, "Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue."

and sleeps in . . . memory like the dim outlines of a half-forgotten dream." But Douglass's greater concern was with collective memory, not merely with personal recollection. Douglass was rowing upstream against a strong current in American thought. As a people, Americans had always tended to reject the past and embrace newness. The overweening force of individualism in an expanding country had ever made Americans a future-oriented people, a culture unburdened with memory and tradition. Douglass was learning to appreciate one of Alexis de Tocqueville's great observations about American society: in America, each generation is a new people, and "no one cares for what occurred before his time." The discovery Tocqueville made in 1831 would ring only more true in the climate of *laissez-faire* government and social Darwinism of the Gilded Age. American individualism, wrote Tocqueville, makes "every man forget his ancestors . . . hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."²⁶ To Douglass, the individualism that bred indifference and the racism that bred oppression were the twin enemies undercutting efforts to preserve an abolitionist memory of the Civil War.

Indeed, one of the ambiguities in Douglass's postwar thought is that while attacking the surging individualistic indifference of northerners who wished to forget the war issues, to forgive ex-Confederates, and to abandon the freed people, he was also an outspoken proponent of *laissez-faire* individualism, a celebrator of "self-made men."²⁷ There was perhaps no other solution for a black leader who had to preach self-reliance to his people while demanding national commitments from the government and from society at large. Moreover, Douglass was one of Tocqueville's Americans, trapped between the country's historic racism and his own embrace of individualism.

Most assuredly, though, Douglass was not one of those Americans who rejected the past. His laments about historical amnesia often echoed Tocqueville's prescience. He believed that individualism could coexist with social justice, that getting on in the world released no one from the weight of history. "Well it may be said that Americans have no memories," Douglass said in 1888. "We look over the House of Representatives and see the Solid South enthroned there; we listen with calmness to eulogies of the South and of traitors and forget Andersonville. . . . We see colored citizens shot down and driven from the ballot box, and forget the services rendered by the colored troops in the late war for the Union." More revealing still was Douglass's contempt for northern sympathy with the Lost Cause. He believed

²⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Thoughts and Recollections of the Antislavery Conflict," undated speech, reel 19, Douglass Papers; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Thomas Bender (New York, 1981), 115, 397. On the significance of Tocqueville in understanding American individualism and the rejection of the past, see Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, 1985), 27–51, 255–307.

²⁷ Frederick Douglass, "Self-Made Men," reel 18, Douglass Papers. Beginning in 1874 or earlier, Douglass delivered this speech during numerous lecture tours. On Douglass's conception of self-made men, see Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 253–78.

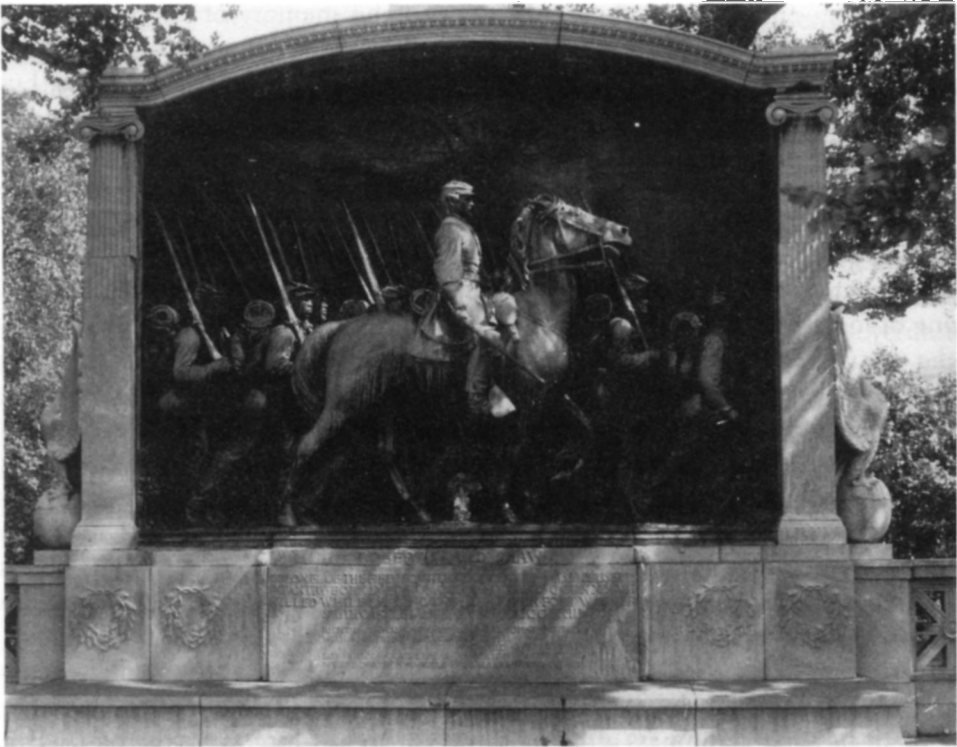
northern forgiveness toward the South shamed the memory of the war. "Rebel graves are decked with loyal flowers," Douglass declared, "though no loyal grave is ever adorned by rebel hands. Loyal men are building homes for rebel soldiers; but where is the home for Union veterans, builded by rebel hands?" Douglass had never really wanted a Carthaginian peace. But he felt left out of the nation's happy reunion; the deep grievances of his people—both historic and current—were no longer to be heard. At the very least, Douglass demanded that the power to forgive should be reserved for those most wronged.²⁸

The debate over the meaning of the war was not merely a question of remembering or forgetting. Douglass worried about historical amnesia because his version of the war, his memory, faltered next to the rival memories that resonated more deeply with the white majority in both North and South. Douglass may never have fully appreciated the complexity of the experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction for whites. The overwhelming number of white northerners who voted against black suffrage shared a bond of white supremacy with southerners who rejected the racial egalitarianism of Radical Reconstruction. The thousands of white Union veterans who remembered the war as a transforming personal experience, but not as the crucible of emancipation for four million slaves, had much in common with white Georgians who had found themselves in the path of Gen. William T. Sherman's march to the sea. There were many rival memories of the war and its aftermath, and there was much need for forgetting and healing. As Friedrich Nietzsche suggested, personal happiness often requires a degree of forgetting the past. "Forgetting is essential to action of any kind," wrote Nietzsche. "Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory . . . but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting . . . there is a degree of the historical sense which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture." Nietzsche captured elements of both truth and danger in human nature. Douglass focused his efforts on the dangers of collective forgetting, not on its personal or cultural necessity. Douglass knew that his people, confined to minority status and living at the margins of society, could rarely afford the luxury of forgetting. Although he may not have thoroughly discriminated between the rival memories he confronted, he became fully aware of their power and their threat. Thus, with ever fewer sympathetic listeners by the late 1880s, Douglass was left with his lament that "slavery has always had a better memory than freedom, and was always a better hater."²⁹

Those were not merely words of nostalgic yearning for a vanished past uttered

²⁸ Douglass, "Address Delivered on the Twenty-Sixth Anniversary of Abolition in the District of Columbia." On Confederate veterans' homes funded by the Grand Army of the Republic, see Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 94.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" [1874], in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1983), 62; Douglass, "Thoughts and Recollections of the Antislavery Conflict." On the concept of historical forgetting, see Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 204–6. On northerners and black suffrage, see C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston, 1964), 173–83.



The Robert G. Shaw-Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Monument was unveiled May 31, 1898, in Boston Common as a memorial to the white commander and black soldiers who died at the Battle of Fort Wagner, South Carolina, July 18, 1863. Douglass's two sons served in the regiment.

Courtesy Boston Athenaeum.

by a man out of touch with changing times. In a sense, Douglass was living in the past during the last part of his life; for him, the Civil War and Reconstruction were the reference points for the black experience in the nineteenth century. All questions of meaning, of a sense of place, of a sense of future for blacks in America drew upon the era of emancipation. Hence, the fifth source of Douglass's pledge to "never forget": a tremendous emotional and psychological investment in his own conception of the legacy of the conflict. As an intellectual, Douglass had grown up with the abolition movement, the war, and its historical transformations. His career and his very personality had been shaped by those events. So, quite literally, Douglass's effort to preserve the memory of the Civil War was a quest to save the freedom of his people and the meaning of his own life.

Douglass embraced his role in preserving an abolitionist memory of the war with a sense of moral duty. In an 1883 speech in his old hometown of Rochester, New York, he was emphatic on that point.

You will already have perceived that I am not of that school of thinkers which teaches us to let bygones be bygones; to let the dead past bury its dead. In my view there are no bygones in the world, and the past is not dead and cannot die. The evil as well as the good that men do lives after them. . . . The duty of keeping in memory the great deeds of the past, and of transmitting the same from generation to generation is implied in the mental and moral constitution of man.³⁰

But what of a society that did not widely share the same sense of history and preferred a different version of the past? Douglass's answer was to resist the Lost Cause by arguing for an opposite and, he hoped, deeper cultural myth—the abolitionist conception of the Civil War, black emancipation as the source of national regeneration.

In trying to forge an alternative to the Lost Cause, Douglass drew on America's reform tradition and constantly appealed to the Constitution and to the rule of law. Moreover, reversing a central tenet of the Lost Cause—the memory of defeat—Douglass emphasized the memory of victory, the sacrifices of the Union dead, and the historical progress he believed inherent in emancipation. This is what Douglass meant in an 1878 Memorial Day speech in Madison Square in New York, when he declared that “there was a right side and a wrong side in the late war which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget.”³¹

In some of his postwar rhetoric Douglass undoubtedly contributed to what Robert Penn Warren has called the myth of the “Treasury of Virtue.” He did sometimes imbue Union victory with an air of righteousness that skewed the facts. His insistence on the “moral” character of the war often neglected the complex, reluctant manner in which emancipation became the goal of the Union war effort. In structuring historical memory, Douglass could be as selective as his Lost Cause adversaries. His persistent defense of the Republican party after Reconstruction caused him to walk a thin line of hypocrisy. Indeed, Douglass's millennialist interpretation of the war forever caused him to see the conflict as a cleansing tragedy, wherein the nation had been redeemed of its evil by lasting grace.³² Douglass knew that black freedom had emerged *from* history more than from policy deliberately created by human agents. Moreover, he knew that emancipation had resulted largely from slaves' own massive self-liberation. But winning the battle over the legacy of the Civil War, Douglass knew, demanded deep cultural myths that would resonate widely in society. He knew that the struggle over memory was always, in part, a debate over

³⁰ Douglass, “Speech on Emancipation Day.”

³¹ Douglass, “Speech in Madison Square.”

³² Warren, *Legacy of the Civil War*, 59–76. Warren illuminates the ambiguities and contradictions in the dual development of the “Lost Cause” and the “Treasury of Virtue.” For Douglass's discussion of “The National Lincoln Monument Association,” see *New National Era*, Oct. 27, 1870. This monument, never constructed as planned, was to be seventy feet high and contain many statues of Civil War military and political personalities and allegorical figures. In his editorial, Douglass seemed flushed with excitement. He saw the monument as “an eternal sentinel guarding the era of emancipation; an immortal herald proclaiming to all the races of men the nation's great civil and moral reforms. . . . In a word, a splendid bronze and granite portraiture of the final triumph of liberty and equality on American soil.” *Ibid.* On later efforts for a monument to black soldiers (also unsuccessful), see John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Chicago, 1987), 171–74.

the present. In his view, emancipation and black equality under law were the great results of the war. Hence, while urging old abolitionists not to give up their labors in 1875, Douglass contended that “every effort should now be made to save the result of this stupendous moral and physical contest.” Moreover, nine years later Douglass warned that unless an abolitionist conception of the war were steadfastly preserved, America would “thus lose to after coming generations a vast motive power and inspiration to high and virtuous endeavor.” Douglass labored to shape the memory of the Civil War, then, as a skillful propagandist, as a black leader confident of the virtue of his cause, and as an individual determined to protect his own identity.³³

In his book *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, Daniel Aaron observes that very few writers in the late nineteenth century “appreciated the Negro’s literal or symbolic role in the war.” Black invisibility in the massive Civil War fictional literature — the absence of fully realized black characters, even in Mark Twain or William Faulkner — is yet another striking illustration that emancipation and the challenge of racial equality overwhelmed the American imagination in the postwar decades. Slavery, the war’s deepest cause, and black freedom, the war’s most fundamental result, remain the most conspicuous missing elements in the American literature inspired by the Civil War. Black invisibility in America’s cultural memory is precisely what Douglass struggled against during the last two decades of his life. Obviously, Douglass was no novelist himself and was not about to write the great Civil War book. But memories and understandings of great events, especially apocalyptic wars, live in our consciousness like monuments in the mind. The aging Douglass’s rhetoric was an eloquent attempt to forge a place on that monument for those he deemed the principal characters in the drama of emancipation: the abolitionist, the black soldier, and the freed people. Perhaps the best reason the Civil War remained, in Aaron’s words, “vivid but ungraspable” to literary imagination was that most American writers avoided, or were confounded by, slavery and race, the deepest moral issues in the conflict.³⁴

The late nineteenth century was an age when white supremacy flourished amid vast industrial and social change. The nation increasingly embraced sectional reunion, sanctioned Jim Crow, dreamed about technology, and defined itself by the assumptions of commerce. Near the end of his monumental work, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois declared himself “aghast” at the way historians had suppressed the significance of slavery and the black quest for freedom in the literature on the Civil War and Reconstruction era. “One is astonished in the study of

³³ Frederick Douglass, “Address at the Centennial Celebration of the Abolition Society of Pennsylvania,” reel 15, Douglass Papers; Douglass, “Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue.”

³⁴ Aaron, *Unwritten War*, 332–33, xviii, 340. On fiction and the Civil War, see also Robert A. Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War: An Unfinished Chapter in the Literary History of the American People* (Chapel Hill, 1957); and Joyce Appleby, “Reconciliation and the Northern Novelist, 1865–1880,” *Civil War History*, 10 (June 1964), 117–29. On black literary activity and memory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Arlene A. Elder, *The “Hindered Hand”: Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction* (Westport, 1978). For the power of war over the imagination, especially in literary forms, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), 310–35.

history," wrote Du Bois, "at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. . . . The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth." As Du Bois acknowledged, it was just such a use of history as "incentive and example" for which Douglass had labored.³⁵

Although his jeremiads against the Lost Cause myth and his efforts to preserve an abolitionist memory of the conflict took on a strained quality, Douglass never lost hope in the regenerative meaning of the Civil War. It was such a great divide, such a compelling reference point, that the nation would, in time, have to face its meaning and consequences. In an 1884 speech, Douglass drew hope from a biblical metaphor of death and rebirth—the story of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. "The assumption that the cause of the Negro is a dead issue," Douglass declared, "is an utter delusion. For the moment he may be buried under the dust and rubbish of endless discussion concerning civil service, tariff and free trade, labor and capital . . . , but our Lazarus is not dead. He only sleeps."³⁶

Douglass's use of such a metaphor was perhaps a recognition of temporary defeat in the struggle for the memory of the Civil War. But it also represented his belief that, though the struggle would outlast his own life, it could still be won. Douglass gave one of his last public addresses on the final Memorial Day of his life (May 1894) at Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, where he would himself be buried some nine months later. The seventy-six-year-old orator angrily disavowed the sectional reconciliation that had swept the country. He feared that Decoration Day would become an event merely of "anachronisms, empty forms and superstitions." One wonders if the largely white audience in Rochester on that pleasant spring afternoon thought of Douglass himself as somewhat of an anachronism. In a country reeling from an economic depression in 1893, worried by massive immigration, the farmers' revolt, and the disorder of growing cities, Douglass's listeners (even in his old hometown) may not have looked beyond the symbolic trappings of the occasion. One wonders how willing they were to cultivate their thirty-year-old memory of the war and all its sacrifice, to face the deeper meanings Douglass demanded. The aged Douglass could still soar to oratorical heights on such occasions. He asked his audience to reflect with him about their "common memory." "I seem even now to hear and feel the effects of the sights and the sounds of that dreadful period," Douglass said. "I see the flags from the windows and housetops fluttering in the breeze. I see and hear the steady tramp of armed men in blue uniforms. . . . I see the recruiting sergeant with drum and fife . . . calling for men, young men and strong, to go to the front and fill up the gaps made by rebel powder and pestilence. I hear the piercing sound of trumpets." These were more than Whitmanesque pictures of bygone peril and glory. In a nation that now acquiesced in the frequent lynching of his people, that shattered their hopes with disfranchisement and segregation, Douglass appealed to history, to what for him was authentic experience, to the recognition

³⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, (New York, 1935), 725, 722, 715.

³⁶ Douglass, "Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue."

scenes that formed personal and national identity. On an ideological level, where Douglass did his best work, he was still fighting the war. By 1894 he was as harsh as ever in his refusal to concede the Confederate dead any equal place in Memorial Day celebrations. "Death has no power to change moral qualities," he argued. "What was bad before the war, and during the war, has not been made good since the war." A tone of desperation entered Douglass's language toward the end of his speech. Again and again he pleaded with his audience not to believe the arguments of the Lost Cause advocates, however alluring their "disguises" might seem. He insisted that slavery had caused the war, that Americans should never forget that the South fought "to bind with chains millions of the human race."³⁷

No amount of nationalism, individualism, or compassion could ever change Douglass's conception of the memory and meaning of the Civil War. His pledge to "never forget" was both a personal and a partisan act. It was an assertion of the power of memory to inform, to inspire, and to compel action. Douglass was one of those nineteenth-century thinkers who by education, by temperament, and especially by experience believed that history was something living and useful. Even in the twilight of his life, there was no greater voice for the old shibboleth that the Civil War had been a struggle for union *and* liberty. "Whatever else I may forget," Douglass told those assembled at Mount Hope Cemetery, "I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery; between those who fought to save the Republic and those who fought to destroy it." The jubilee of black freedom in America had been achieved by heroic action, through forces in history, through a tragic war, and by faith. Among Douglass's final public acts, therefore, was to fight—using the power of language and historical imagination—to preserve that jubilee in memory and in reality. In a Rochester cemetery, he stood with the Union dead, waved the last bloody shirts of a former slave, a black leader, and a Yankee partisan, and anticipated the dulling effects of time and the poet Robert Lowell's vision of "the stone statues of the abstract Union soldier" adorning New England town greens, where "they doze over muskets and muse through their sideburns."³⁸

³⁷"Decoration Day," May 1894, reel 17, Douglass Papers.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 9; Robert Lowell, "For the Union Dead" [1964], in *Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter Edition*, ed. Ronald Gottesman et al. (New York, 1980), 1842.