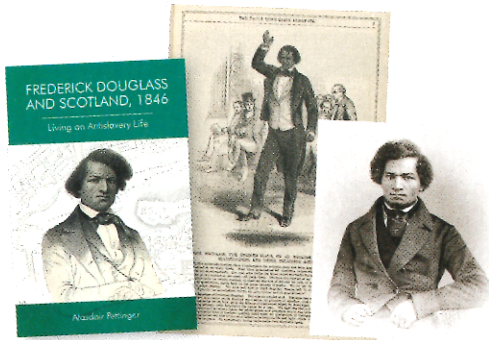




## A life to remember

**Shaun Wallace** reflects on a new assessment of the 1846 visit to Scotland by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass



### *Frederick Douglass and Scotland, 1846: Living an Antislavery Life*

Alasdair Pettinger  
Edinburgh University Press, 2018  
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'I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it'. The opening lines of Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative encapsulate the dehumanising and exploitative foundations of the American slave system: its denial of identity and personhood to enslaved persons. Douglass's interest in knowing when he was born never ceased. In time, the date was revealed by his former master, Captain Auld, to have been around February 1818 (*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881).

The bicentennial of America's most famous formerly-enslaved fugitive's birth was commemorated in 2018-19, with Douglass celebrated as one of the most influential African American abolitionists, orators and writers. Following Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor's *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (2018), a study of the activism of the Douglass family through unseen primary material, comes Alasdair Pettinger's *Frederick Douglass and Scotland, 1846: Living an Antislavery Life* (2018).

*Frederick Douglass and Scotland* is the first comprehensive examination of Douglass's visit to Scotland in 1846. Pettinger skilfully navigates manuscript collections on both sides of the Atlantic as well as abolitionist tracts and speeches, meticulously entwining this material with Douglass's own writings

discussion of Douglass's attitudes towards Victorian visual culture, particularly as regards his relationship with phrenologist George Combe (Part IV), is the weakest section of the book. Pettinger's analysis of racial science and blackface minstrelsy performances offers some insight into the corrupting

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to take the reader on a tour of Scotland alongside the abolitionist. It is a study rich in evidence and supported with a comprehensive bibliography. The surprise omission from the bibliography is Bernier and Taylor's book, although it is presumed *Frederick Douglass and Scotland* had already been sent to print.

The chapter structure of the book might divide readers. It is not organised chronologically, but instead presented in six parts, comprising 29 chapters. This is, in Pettinger's own words, to 'follow his [Douglass's] movements in Scotland, watching him gaining the confidence, mastering the skills and fashioning the distinctive voice and public image that transformed him as a campaigner' (p.24). Pettinger does this – and does it exceptionally well – but the short chapters undermine the fluency of the discussion, which feels disjointed in places.

Part I details Douglass's outward voyage from the United States to Britain, and part V his return trip. There are also especially insightful discussions of Douglass's role in the 'Send the Money Back' campaign (part II), and the influence of Robert Burns and Walter Scott on Douglass's work (part III).

In this reviewer's opinion, the

influences at work on the audiences Douglass encountered. However, it stands out – in the wrong way. An exploration of Douglass's development as a campaigner does need to consider these influences, but could do so much more briefly.

*Frederick Douglass and Scotland* is an ambitious and highly original work that is an exciting new addition to the historiography. It addresses both the need for more recognition of Douglass in Scottish historiography, and also of Scotland in studies of Douglass in the United States. It is thoroughly researched, and the author has done an impressive job of using source material to reveal Douglass's visit to Scotland as a truly transformative episode in the abolitionist's life.

What is even more impressive is that the author does so using Douglass's words, precisely how they were intended, and in the context in which they occurred. In doing so, he presents Douglass as 'someone who can be, and is, invoked, reimagined, recruited by the politics of the present' (p. 299).

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