

Frederick Douglass, Scotland and the South

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Addressing an audience in Rochester, New York on Burns Night, 1849, Frederick Douglass concluded that 'though I am not a Scotchman, and have a colored skin, I am proud to be among you this evening. And if any think me out of my place on this occasion (pointing to the picture of Burns), I beg that the blame may be laid at the door of him who taught me that "a man's a man for a' that".'

That he might have been thought 'out of his place' should not surprise us given the role 'Scotland' has frequently played in the white American imaginary, from the Confederate battle flag to Tartan Day.

Frederick Douglass, like many other slave autobiographers, commented on the importance placed in the South on ancestry and family connections, while observing wryly that 'genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves', who would inherit the 'condition' of their mothers, not the (sometimes considerable) wealth and power of their white fathers or grandfathers.

But slaves, to some extent, absorbed the values of their masters and mistresses, and thus shared Southern attitudes to kinship even if they escaped to the North and reinvented themselves as free, independent individuals. Nowhere can we see this more clearly than in the way Douglass as an adult renamed himself after the protagonist of *The Lady of the Lake* by Sir Walter Scott, arguably the plantocracy's favourite author. He later exploited the multi-layered symbolism of this choice in the speeches he gave in Scotland in 1845-47.

In doing so, he was not only laying claim to a (fictive) Scottish ancestry but also defiantly insisting on his 'place' in the Southern family which (despite the rhetoric of 'patriarchal' plantation management) was certainly not inclusive. Douglass presents himself as a legitimate descendant of all his ancestors, at a time when the new school of American ethnologists were questioning the long-established Christian doctrine that 'God hath made of one blood all nations.'