Prologue

COMMERCIAL WARF

Banish the notion, snapped the steamship company manager. It was Boston, August 1845, and James Needham Buffum, his Quaker temperament being put to the test, was in the office of Samuel Shaw Lewis, in Commercial Wharf, a long, five-story Greek Revival–style edifice of gray Massachusetts granite on the busy North End waterfront.

Lewis, forty-six, was a handsome, clean-shaven man of aristocratic bearing. He was a native of nearby Plymouth, and his development of land, wharves, railroads, and other fixtures of this port had made him rich. Typifying that Midas touch, five years ago, he had brought to Boston the steamship company he was today representing. And so, today, in Lewis's enclave amid Commercial Wharf's warren of offices, stores, workshops, and warehouses, he was repeating that company's rules; and company policy, he insisted, was company policy.

Buffum, a thirty-eight-year-old, square-faced man in a dark suit, was also prosperous, albeit not wealthy. In Lynn, Massachusetts, he had started out as a carpenter and quickly demonstrated a peerless work ethic; "He got up early in the morning, and kept his eyes open all day," noted a contemporary. Before he was thirty, Buffum was a lumber-mill owner and real estate trader. Lynn's citizens would later make him mayor.

But if Buffum thought money or reputation were to make any difference today, he was mistaken. He was welcome, said Lewis, to purchase a steamship ticket aboard the RMS Cambria for his friend Frederick Douglass. But Douglass would have to settle for steerage. Because of Douglass's race, a cabin for him was out of the question—company policy.

Yes, the line's owner, the British and North Atlantic Royal Mail Steamships, was British. And yes, by then, reformers lauded Britain as a champion of black rights. In 1834, it had ended slavery in most of its global empire. But in deference to the company's American customers—many from the American South with proslavery views—on this ship and others, it banned black passengers from its ship's cabins and dining saloons.1

For Buffum, Lewis's obstinacy bore a familiar small-mindedness. Buffum was white. His friend Douglass was of mixed parentage—his mother, black; and, his father—he presumed throughout his life—white.

During Douglass's travels, racial concerns rarely strayed far. In recent years, across the North's free states, he had given hundreds of lectures. And, in an organization—the American Anti-Slavery Society—that put many gifted speakers on the road, Douglass stood out. With his rich baritone, rapier intelligence, and gifts for drama, he was a virtuoso.

In later years, called upon to lecture, Douglass often read word for word from a prepared—in many cases, already published—text. But during those early years, he extemporized orations—his only reliance on pen and paper being the odd peek at a scribbled list of topics.

Moreover, Douglass knew that his rhetorical gifts surpassed those of his competitors. In 1844, recalling a meeting where he followed a rival, he disparaged his competition for adhering "bolted and barred" to words prepared in advance: "His text was before him, he did not stray from it, nor it from him." As it happened, the lecturer, Charles Lenox Remond, had covered the same themes Douglass had planned to address. Afterward, taking the lectern, Douglass effortlessly shifted gears and "pursued a somewhat different course, and I think reached another class of minds present."

Always accompanying Douglass on his early tours was another man from the Anti-Slavery Society. That man, a "fixer" in modern parlance, was, in most cases, white. Like Douglass, he was an agent for the Anti-Slavery Society and often joined him on lecture platforms. More importantly, he tended to arrangements and otherwise saw to it that Douglass got safely in and out of each town. Even ostensibly enlightened states presented problems for a traveling black man.

For instance, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, where Douglass, Buffum, and their families lived, had banned slavery in 1783. Even so, in 1845, a half century later, several public rail lines there still required black passengers to sit in separate cars; indeed, one of the earliest usages of "Jim Crow" as a term for racially segregated facilities arises from those blacks-only train cars of New England. In 1841, Douglass, traveling from Massachusetts to New Hampshire with Buffum and two other white abolitionists, had been forcibly removed from a whites-only car. Afterward, two of the abolitionists reboarded the train and continued their journey. Buffum, however, in solidarity with his friend,

declined to reboard. But then again, on that day and others when similar incidents intruded, there had been other means of reaching the intended destination.

Ireland and Britain, however, presented a greater challenge. That summer, Douglass and Buffum would be sailing together—and a life-or-death urgency propelled their voyage. For the newly famous Douglass, then in his late twenties, fame had proven a double-edged sword. Two months earlier, he had published his first book—Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave—a memoir that stirred fresh hostilities against him. Threats arrived. To avoid physical harm or being forcibly returned to bondage, it was decided that, until things cooled down, he would leave the United States for a while—and there was no walking from Boston to Liverpool, their first port of call. No trains, or horses and carriages either. Therefore, this stubborn steamship company manager confronting Buffum represented their only option.

After landing in Liverpool, Douglass and Buffum were to ferry across the Irish Sea to Dublin. There they would commence a lecture tour by Douglass, of undetermined duration, of Ireland, Scotland, and England. While in Ireland, Douglass would also work with a Dublin printer to publish a British Isles edition of the Narrative.

Still other motivations compelled Douglass's journey—personal desires left unspoken in public comments made before he sailed. By traveling to the British Isles, Douglass aspired "to increase my stock of information, and my opportunities of self-improvement, by a visit to the land of my paternal ancestors."

The journey would transform the young man. Its impact upon him, particularly in Ireland, would be dramatic, lasting, and, in the end, liberating. Put another way, in Ireland, Douglass found his own voice. "I can truly say," he wrote home as he completed his travels there, "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."8 In Ireland, Douglass also met individuals who made deep impressions on him—notably the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell and the temperance leader Father Theobald Mathew.

As the tour progressed, Douglass anticipated—correctly, as it turned out—that newspaper coverage of his passage through Ireland and Great Britain would increase his stature as an international celebrity; and that publicity in foreign newspapers, refracted by the U.S. press, would exponentially increase his

renown in America: "My words, feeble as they are when spoken at home," he told an Irish audience, "will wax stronger in proportion to the distance I go from home, as a lever gains power by its distance from the fulcrum." But little did Douglass calculate how that lever of publicity—by increasing the domestic renown that he had traveled to Europe to allow to wane—would, for him, soon nourish still greater worries over personal harm.

The tour of Ireland, Douglass's first sojourn abroad, tested and transformed the young man's still emerging identity: his private and public convictions; his self-reliance; his fealty to his wife, friends, and colleagues; the depth of his courage; the mettle of his integrity; and the limits of his compassion for the world's downtrodden. As Douglass toured Ireland, a potato crop failure was shadowing the already impoverished island, a ruined harvest that would soon transmogrify into a catastrophe of unparalleled suffering, ruin, death, disease, and diaspora. Confronting Ireland's chronic poverty, Douglass found "much here to remind me of my former condition." But he also found his compassion often undercut by repulsion before the island's "human misery, ignorance, degradation, filth and wretchedness."

In a country largely uncrossed by railroads, Douglass conducted an alternately exhilarating and wearying forced march of successive public performances. Yawning between each town or city were long, cold, bone-rattling horse-and-carriage trips through wind- and rain-slashed coastal mountains and other damp landscapes. Their tedium gave Douglass time to privately wrestle with inner conflicts between moral and worldly ambitions, as well as temptations nourished by loneliness and his growing fame. He also contemplated ever-deepening questions concerning his loyalty to a benefactor who, though still an eminence of the abolitionist movement, was increasingly viewed by other antislavery activists as a purveyor of antiquated strategies.

Anticipating a subsequent preoccupation with "self-made men"—the title of a later lecture that ranked among the most popular of his career—the trip also commenced his career as entrepreneur. Increasingly over the years, Douglass sought both to do good and to do well—to serve humanity as well as his ardor for fame and fortune, dual pursuits that, on occasion, proved awkward to reconcile.

In Ireland and Britain, no longer employed by others, Douglass fended for himself, organized his own itinerary, and, to help finance the tour, sold copies of a book he had written, until then an impossibility due to a simple fact: most earlier tours had been conducted before the publication of his first book. The Narrative, as it happened, had been published two months before Douglass's British Isles tour. In

Ireland, as planned, he would oversee the publication of a British Isles edition of the book; afterward, he did more than stay abreast of accounts and sell the new edition. He also tended to the logistics of transporting the books or otherwise arranging for them to be sent from his Dublin publisher to each stop. Robust sales often rendered the latter an urgent task. "Well all my Books went last night at one blow," he pleaded from Belfast. "I want more[.] I want more."

Equally important, the tour accelerated Douglass's transformation from more than a teller of his own life story into a commentator on contemporary issues—a transition discouraged during his early lecturing days by white colleagues at the American Anti-Slavery Society: "Give us the facts," he was instructed, "we will take care of the philosophy." "Be yourself," he was also told. Even so, lest Douglass, in diction and manner, seemed too refined during those years, he was also advised, "Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not, 'tis not best that you seem too learned."

Upon his return to the United States, Douglass's growing independence and desire to write would take him to Rochester, New York. There, far from Boston and his former sponsors at the American Anti-Slavery Society, with funds raised during the tour, he established the North Star, the first of the four periodicals that he edited and published during his lifetime.

By the era in which Douglass arrived in Ireland, fewer than half of Ireland's population were exclusively speakers of Irish. A Gaelic language once dominant across Ireland, Irish by then was largely confined to poor, rural areas of the island where illiteracy was widespread. During his Irish travels, however, Douglass's hosts and those who attended his lectures were English-speakers, and his hosts numbered among the island's more prosperous residents.

In Ireland, Douglass confronted a Pandora's box of contentious issues, some of immediate relevance to him, others unique to the island; with the latter, he often possessed only a general familiarity. Ireland's ever-present tensions between Catholics and Protestants proved especially difficult to navigate. As recounted by a local newspaper, during one lecture, responding to an accusation by a Protestant attendee that at another lecture in that same city, Douglass had maligned Protestants, he answered, "It was not to be expected he could tell a Roman Catholic from Methodist by looking him in the face."

Attempting to win favor with particular audiences—each dominated variously by Catholics, Protestants, Irish nationalists, or United Kingdom loyalists—Douglass often strayed into controversies

removed from the antislavery message that he had come to Ireland to impart. But eventually, he disciplined himself to avoid fights not his own and to focus on his campaign to end American slavery. "I only claim," he confided to an associate midway through the tour, "to be a man of one idea." Indeed, challenged during a lecture to explain why Ireland's subordination to England might also warrant use of the epithet slavery, he answered that "if slavery existed here, it ought to be put down." But, he insisted, "there was nothing like American slavery on the soil on which he now stood."

During the tour, Douglass honed habits of independence, discretion, compromise, self-reliance, and practical politics that served him well over the coming decades. Those habits eventually empowered him to play his career's most defining role on the stage of world history: providing counsel for and assisting President Lincoln's elevation of the U.S. military's actions during the American Civil war from a political quest to preserve the Union to a moral cause devoted to vanquishing American slavery.

James Buffum, before leaving Samuel Lewis's office at Commercial Wharf on that late summer day of 1845, finally plunked down money for two steamship tickets. Although Buffum was prosperous, a wealthy mutual friend of him and Douglass had likely provided most of the money for Douglass's ticket. Buffum bought the steerage ticket prescribed for Douglass and another ticket for himself. But—in solidarity with his friend and true to past form—Buffum told Lewis that his own ticket should also be for steerage passage. Total cost for the two tickets—$140.