

## **RADICALS AND LIBRARIANS: Finding Inspiration in Black History\***

by

W. B. Allen

Michigan State University  
Department of Political Science  
East Lansing, MI 48823  
[allenwi@msu.edu](mailto:allenwi@msu.edu)

© W. B. Allen 2005

In 1732 on this date George Washington was born at Bridges Creek, Virginia, under the New Style calendar. The date was February 11, Old Style. For the following 67 years, until his death in 1799, America and the world witnessed the impressive accomplishments of a man who was essentially self-taught. Washington had some tutoring at home, almost no formal education, and essentially none beyond the earliest years of adolescence, his father having died when he was only eleven years old. We no longer observe public celebrations of Washington's birth. One characteristic of his life, however, is important for the discussion we must have on this occasion – namely, Washington's habit of extensive study and reading. Although Washington was sometimes regarded as not especially intellectual, on account of his lack of education, he in fact provided substantial intellectual leadership as well as moral leadership; still more importantly, he demonstrated early what since that time we have been forced also to acknowledge in several pivotal figures in our history.

My thesis on this occasion is that what has often paved the path to distinction for radicals offering leadership to their society (and Washington was such a radical; he was first in the colonies to speak of taking up arms against Great Britain) has been the discovery of the library, at least metaphorically if not literally. In Washington's case, he steadily built up his own library, in which he read widely, as we can discern from his tacit quotations. But that is no less true for such icons as Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X (the fortieth anniversary of whose death was yesterday), and Eldridge Cleaver. Each in his own way ascended from the most restricted of personal situations to a platform that made possible large contributions to society. What turned them in those directions was nothing less than education, founded mainly in the use made of libraries and librarians.

We begin to appreciate the direct connection between highly developed literacy and the ability to affect the opinions of others by first recalling the value of education itself. In the period following the Civil War in the United States, no persons more meaningfully and directly discussed the value of education than Booker T. Washington and W. B. Du Bois. Their general agreement points toward the factors that lifted Douglass, Malcolm, and Cleaver from obscurity into public prominence.

Booker T. Washington made the argument explicitly in his work on the future of the "American Negro:"

---

\* Black History Month lecture delivered at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, February 22, 2005, and published by Kent State University Libraries and Media Services, 2005.

...those interested in education should the more earnestly consider to what extent the mere acquiring of the ability to read and write, the mere acquisition of a knowledge of literature and science, makes men producers, lovers of labour, independent, honest, unselfish, and above all, good. Call education by what name you please, if it fails to bring about these results among the masses, it falls short of its highest end. The science, the art, the literature, that fails to reach down and bring the humblest up to the enjoyment of the fullest blessings of our government, is weak, no matter how costly the buildings or apparatus used or how modern the methods of instruction employed. The study of arithmetic and all that does not result in making men conscientious in receiving and counting the ballots of their fellow-men is faulty. The study of art that does not result in making the strong less willing to oppress the weak means little. How I wish that from the most cultured and highly endowed university in the great North to the humblest log cabin school-house in Alabama, we could burn, as it were, into the hearts and heads of all that usefulness, that service to our brothers, is the supreme end of education. (18-19)

Although Washington addressed himself to formal education, he clearly intends in his observation education altogether, projecting a moral outcome. That should, at a minimum, lead us to expect a kind of turning or conversion in those who take up education, not previously having manifested any powerful awareness of responsibility to others.

Frederick Douglass is notable for a life in service to others. At no time, it may be said, did he ever manifest a fundamental irresponsibility (and certainly not criminality) in his conduct. But we are warranted to regard someone who lived and learned as a slave to be little suited to the expression of the finest sentiments of civilization. Indeed, it has always been canonical that slavery is a brutish prison that brutalizes human beings. Accordingly, it should take something extraordinary for a slave to emerge from slavery not only not embittered but in fact empowered to serve others. Douglass himself explained the formation of his soul mainly as a struggle to acquire learning, mainly to learn how to read and write:

The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the Bible aloud, for she often read aloud when her husband was absent, awakened my curiosity in respect to his *mystery* of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn... in an incredibly short time, by her kind assistance, I had mastered the alphabet and could spell words of three or four letters. (1993, 56)

Unhappily, this benign intervention lasted only briefly, for Mrs. Auld, Douglass's "mistress," quickly learned from her husband that, not only was it unlawful to instruct a slave, but more importantly to do so would completely unfit him for slavery. "Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave.... If you teach him to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself." (1993, 57) This *humane* observation completely vindicates Douglass's observation that, "For want of knowledge we are killed all the day long." (1955, 307)

The consequence of the "marked disadvantages" under which Douglass labored was that he could acquire learning, effectively, only by stealing it. (1993, 59) "When my

mistress left me in charge of the house I had a grand time. I got Master Tommy's copy-books and a pen and ink, and in the ample spaces between the lines I wrote lines as nearly like his as possible." (1993, 73) Douglass kept up his desire to learn to read, although it made his owner angry to see him "seated in some nook or corner, quietly reading a book or newspaper." (1993, 60-61) He could not be deterred by being caught and having his treasures snatched from his hand. He had created his own library, carrying constantly a copy of *Webster's Spelling-Book* and using whatever play time he could gain to give himself spelling lessons at the hands of his young friends. (1993, 60-61) As he read more and more, he began to snatch up loose Bible leafs lying in the gutter. He washed and dried them and then used them to practice reading, seeking words of wisdom. (1993, 69) He gave literal meaning to the term, "pocket library." And he began avidly to consume chance bits of news from abolition newspapers that denounced slavery. (1993, 68)

From a library of scraps and librarians willing (such as the slave mentor with whom he read the Bible) and unwilling (such as his mistress), Douglass came to characterize the portrait of slaves and ex-slaves that W. E. B. Du Bois projected in his work on black reconstruction. From the moment any slave had the opportunity, Du Bois insisted, they greedily consumed education. To that extent they differed from the white laboring class:

It was only the other part of the laboring class, the black folk, who connected knowledge with power; who believed that education was the stepping-stone to wealth and respect, and that wealth, without education, was crippled. (641)

He agreed with Booker T. Washington, whom he quoted:

Few people who were not right in the midst of the scene can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education... a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn. As fast as any kind of teachers could be secured, not only were day-schools filled, but night-schools as well. The great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died. With this end in view, men and women who were fifty and seventy-five years old, would be found in the night-schools. Sunday-schools were formed soon after freedom but the principal book studied in the Sunday-school was the spelling-book. Day-school, night-school, and Sunday-school were always crowded, and often many had to be turned away for want of room. (641-642)

In the immediate aftermath of slavery the point was made clearly throughout the south; the route up from slavery was through literacy and industry. And the ex-slaves grasped every the least chance to enter into that route so greedily that the Jim Crow counter-reaction to Reconstruction was the only thing that could snatch the prize away from them. After initially detailing the progress in opening schools and spreading literacy, Du Bois then had to relate the devastating effect that resulted from shutting school house and library doors to black folk. The very introduction of general public education throughout the south is primarily owing to the labors of the ex-slaves and their representatives; but while white southerners retained the innovation, they systematically denied or limited access to it for black folk. (638-655) The brief experiment in integrated education in Northern Florida (Fernandina/Jacksonville) was turned back, much as had been the first

integrated army of the United States under George Washington. As the nation did not see another integrated army after the Revolution until after World War II, so did it continue not to see integrated schooling (save in isolated cases in the north) until after 1960.

We may find, then, in the years after slavery no less surely than during the years of slavery, that individuals who were for whatever reason either deprived of or deficient in obtaining education, much changed upon the discovery of reading and the library. Moreover, not only do we find individuals learning to read and becoming spokesmen, but we also find them eventually acquiring a more sensitive and humane understanding of the world in which they lived and their role in it. The two most prominent examples of this process of library-supported mutation are Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver.

It suffices, no doubt, merely to remind that Malcolm's early life was colored by want and abuse, his father dying at the hands of racists (in Lansing, Michigan) while he was yet young, his mother pushed by public social services to the point of insanity, and his youth finally formed at the hands of folk who accounted him capable and worthy of little, despite manifest ability. In many respects one could think that his childhood was no less severely deprived than that of Douglass's life in slavery, and, in fact, he suffered through it far more, with far less equanimity than Douglass. The result for Malcolm was a life of crime and abusive relationships that eventuated in seven years in prison. That is where the change began.

Now, when I try to separate that first year-plus I spent at Charlestown [prison], it runs all together in a memory of nutmeg and the other semi-drugs, of cursing guards, throwing things out of my cell, balking in the lines, dropping my tray in the dining hall, refusing to answer my number... I preferred the solitary that this behavior brought me... The first man I met in prison who made any positive impression on me whatever was a fellow inmate, 'Bimbi...' He would have a cluster of people riveted, often on odd subjects you never would think of. He would prove to us, dipping into the science of human behavior, that the only difference between us and outside people was that we had been caught. He liked to talk about historical events and figures... Bimbi was known as the library's best customer. What fascinated me with him most of all was that he was the first man I had ever seen command total respect. . . with his words... He told me I should take advantage of the prison correspondence courses and the library... So, feeling I had time on my hands, I did begin... (53-154)

A high percentage of the Norfolk Prison Colony inmates went in for 'intellectual' things, group discussions, debates, and such. Instructors for the educational rehabilitation programs came from Harvard, Boston University, and other educational institutions in the area... Norfolk Prison Colony's library was one of its outstanding features... History and religions were [its] special interests... At Norfolk, we could actually go into the library, with permission – walk up and down the shelves, pick books. There were hundreds of old volumes, some of them probably quite rare. I read aimlessly, until I learned to read selectively, with a purpose. (157-158)

Malcolm himself became highly self-conscious of the change in his life caused by his becoming a habitu  of the library. At the same time, of course, or only shortly thereaf-

ter, he became a member of the Nation of Islam, providing an added motivation for his desire to read and write, as we shall see. Malcolm must relate that himself, but let us first be mindful that it all ends with Malcolm, long after leaving prison, breaking with Muhammad's Nation of Islam and arriving at a far more inclusive view of humanity than that first spawned by his studies and professions.

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad... Many who today hear me...will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies... every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese... I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary – to study, to learn some words. (171-172)

I went on – I copied the dictionary's next page... With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history... That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary... as my word base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. (172)

...in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge... *up to then I never had been so truly free in my life.* (173, emphasis added.)

Of course I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In fact, I believe that's the only novel I have ever read since I started serious reading. (176)

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that *reading had changed forever the course of my life*.... Not long ago an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, 'what's your alma mater?' I told him, 'Books'. (179)

Now it will not do to exaggerate the fruitfulness of learning to read and discovering the rich treasures of libraries. Bad people do also read, and sometimes even read good books, not to say great books. The point of these remarks, however, is to observe that it is people whom we often rightfully judge as unlikely to make any serious contribution to mankind, apart from their having become good readers and having learned to revere good books, who demonstrate the fruitfulness of reading. Moreover, it is broad reading, typically, that produces the effect, such as was apparent in the cases of George Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X, who saw the "course of his life" changed forever.

The point, again, is that without the library, whether metaphorically or literally, this experience is altogether foreclosed to men. It is, therefore, rather singular how important it can be that books can seep through even the walls of tyranny, whether in slavery, in a totalitarian state, or in a prison. Since a library, after all, is only a "room for books," and the librarian the "keeper" of the room for books, one could mistakenly imagine that unless one goes into that sacred chamber, one might happily live without ever being touched by its magic. But we learn to read long before we cross the threshold of a library. Learning to read makes the library significant, for once we learn to read, and

love to read, the library becomes a magnetic sphere whose attractive pull we cannot resist. That is why it is possible to say, in the case of our radical examples, that the librarian was their tacit partner in advancing the causes they championed.

This story ought to provide a firmer inspiration in reflecting upon black history, than a room full of tableaux of historic accomplishments by past black persons. For the meaning of this story is that rooms full of such tableaux that are possible for all who will take seriously the invitation to read.

Ponder, finally, the witness of Eldridge Cleaver. Surely, there was seldom a more complicated case. True, Malcolm had become a pimping drug-runner and thief before the opportunities prison afforded arrested him. But he had been an outstanding student through eighth grade, even if he did advance no further, and he managed to avoid visiting the worst forms of violence upon others. Cleaver, on the other hand, not only had become a man of personal violence, his prison sentence was for forcible rape, after all, but his social instincts all ran to the violent. He not only identified with the Nation of Islam but also the Black Panthers. Pursued by the law he escaped to an asylum under Fidel Castro, in Cuba, and from there he sought the liberal influences of the virtually totalitarian regime in Algeria. Still, something that he began in prison pressed him on, chasing from one extremism to the other, until he made so startling and complete a conversion, that he returned to the United States, not only pardoned of any outstanding crimes, but in the end, and at least for a time, a converted adherent of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints!

Now critics may think this particular example ill chosen, inasmuch as Cleaver can easily appear to have been a man of light affections and insubstantial reflections – buffeted rather by winds of fashion than the pains of learning. And to be fair I must acknowledge that I once shared many of the critics' reservations. Placed on a platform with Mr. Cleaver shortly after he became a traveling exhibit for the Church of Latter Day Saints, I experienced great difficulty in accepting, not that he been forgiven prior apostasies, but that he had been lauded with great honor having demonstrated nothing more than the singular agility to change sides without apparent conscience. But I was wrong; for what was truly singular in Cleaver was that once he transformed from a man whose chief thoughts were about himself to a man who reflected habitually upon the human situation, his relation to the world entire was different. Though his contribution was never so coherent as Malcolm's, so far-reaching as Douglass's, nor so awe-inspiring as Washington's, he nonetheless demonstrated that a positive contribution lay just beyond the reach of his advancing understanding. He owed that to the reading regime he pursued most seriously while in prison.

Through reading I was amazed to discover how confused people were. I had thought that, out there beyond the horizon of my own ignorance unanimity existed, that even though I myself didn't know what was happening in the universe, other people certainly did... I decided that the only safe thing for me to do was go for myself. It became clear that it was possible for me to take the initiative: instead of simply *reacting* I could *act*. I could unilaterally – whether anyone agreed with me or not – repudiate all allegiances, morals, values – even while continuing to exist within this society. My mind would be free and no power in the universe could force me to accept something if I didn't want to. (5)

During this period I was concentrating my reading in the field of economics. Having previously dabbled in the theories and writings of Rousseau, Thomas Paine, and Voltaire, I had added a little polish to my iconoclastic stance, without however, bothering too much to understand their affirmative positions. (12)

...I studied world history, Oriental philosophy, Occidental philosophy, comparative religion, and economics... I had evolved a crash program which I would immediately activate whenever I was placed in solitary [confinement]: stock up on books and read, read, read; do calisthenics and forget about the rest of the world. (32-33)

My thesis, I announced at the outset, is that what has often paved the path to distinction for radicals offering leadership to their society (and Washington was such a radical) has been the discovery of the library, at least metaphorically if not literally. Washington, of course, was sufficiently well positioned socially (though far from easy circumstances) that he could purchase a library, without doing which he would not have had much of one and would not have done much reading. While Douglass, learning from mislaid scraps of paper and stolen moments, could barely open the library's door within slavery's tight confines. And Malcolm and Cleaver were retrieved from unforgiving streets by prison libraries. We debate still whether prison rehabilitates the criminal, and it is true that we do not see endless streams of Malcolms and Eldridges exiting our prisons. Yet it is perfectly clear that if one bears only an incipient intellectual virtue, lacking every other grace of life, being placed in a position to exploit the resources of a library may well be the single greatest advantage one can acquire, and actually exploiting it is surely the most important thing one can do in advancing toward mature human virtue. If, therefore, there is inspiration to be drawn from Black History, surely this punctuates it with elegant apostrophe.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Booker T. Washington, *The Future of the American Negro*, Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1900. Chapter II, pp. 18-19.

Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Avenel, NJ: 1993.

Frederick Douglass, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*. New York: International Publishers, 1955[1975]. Philip S. Foner, ed., Volume IV: *Reconstruction and After*.

W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1935.

Malcom X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965[1964].

Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1968.