

“Persons with whom I am acquainted”: Frederick Douglass’s Encounters with Americans in Europe in 1887, and Maybe Jack the Ripper

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Frederick Douglass spent much of his life as an itinerant public speaker. From his early days at Garrisonian antislavery rallies, travelling and lecturing across Britain following publication of his *Narrative*, or taking the stump as the public face of Black Republicans following the Civil War, Douglass was no stranger to travel and made fast friends in scattered places. After his marriage to Helen Pitts in 1884, the two postponed their main honeymoon until the fall of 1886 when the couple was able to escape to Europe not for work, but for relaxation and pleasure. They spent nearly a full year travelling across western Europe and down into Greece and Egypt, taking in the sights and observing the cultures (and giving a few speeches along the way).

One interesting aspect of the Douglasses’ time in Europe was the number of encounters they had with old acquaintances and fellow Americans, a relatively unsurprising fact considering the late nineteenth century saw dramatic increases in transatlantic travel. Aided by increased efficiency of travel time and a decrease in cost, hundreds of thousands of Americans ventured to western Europe in the decades before the First World War. Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, Americans flocked to Paris particularly in unprecedented numbers. Europe held special allure for Black Americans for whom that city’s minimal segregation and acceptance of color was a welcome change.¹ Even with this increased tourism, the number and the quality of the encounters the Douglass pair had with fellow Americans abroad on this tour is nonetheless remarkable.

In a 10 June 1887 letter reproduced below to Amy Kirby Post, a former abolitionist ally and friend from his quarter of a century residence in Rochester, New York, Douglass lists some of his recent encounters with compatriots in Europe. Among them were Victoria Woodhull (1838–1927), now Victoria Martin, who had chosen Douglass as her vice-presidential running mate in the election of 1872 in London; the sisters of former Black abolitionist ally Charles Lenox Remond, Sarah (1826–94) and Maritcha (1816–95) in Rome; and suffragist leader, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and her expatriate son Theodore in Paris²

Perhaps the most intriguing reference in this letter to Post, however, is that to “Dr. Tornblity,” which is almost certainly a misspelling of the name of Dr. Francis Tumblety (1833–1903), a notorious and mysterious character in American medical history.³ Douglass mentions meeting the Doctor “a day or two ago” and it is likely that this encounter took place in Liverpool.

¹ Christopher Endy, “Travel and World Power: Americans in Europe, 1890–1917,” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 4 (October 1998), 567–9; David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 333–4; Sirpa Salenius, *An Abolitionist Abroad: Sarah Parker Remond in Cosmopolitan Europe* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 13–15, 19, 110.

² In other letters, Douglass recounted meeting the African American sculptor Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907) in Rome; visiting old abolitionist friend Theodore Tilton in Paris, and locating the grave of Theodore Parker while in Florence. David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet Of Freedom*, (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 666–75; Salenius, *Abolitionist Abroad*, 192.

³ Timothy B. Riordan, *Prince of Quacks: The Notorious Life of Dr. Francis Tumblety, Charlatan and Jack the Ripper Suspect* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009); Francis Tumblety, *Narrative of Dr. Tumblety: How He Was Kidnapped during the American War, His Incarceration and Discharge* (New York, N.Y.: Russells’ American Steam Printing House, 1872).

He further mentions that Dr. Tumblety knew Amy Post and her son Jacob, probably back in Rochester, though to what extent this relationship extended is not known.

Tumblety, if nothing else, was a bombastic figure. Douglass's description of his street side meeting with him humorously captures the man's eccentric personality: "He told me much about himself in a very brief space, for he seemed to have more tongues than ears—I could not get a word in any-where...." In his autobiography published in 1872, he claims a large list of notable friends and acquaintances, including Abraham Lincoln, Horace Greeley, Robert E. Lee, William T. Sherman, Charles Dickens, Napoleon III, and Kiser Wilhelm I,⁴ startling given his humble origins. Tumblety was born in or around Dublin around 1830, spending his formative years there before his family followed an older brother to Rochester, New York, in 1847. While in Rochester, he was informally trained in the little regulated medical field of the nineteenth century and as early as 1856 was styling himself as a doctor in London, Ontario.⁵ Tumblety was mostly known as an "Indian Herb Doctor" and frequently ran into trouble when he styled himself an "M.D." While his methods aided some, others were not impressed. Tumblety either left people feeling charmed and intrigued by his flamboyant practice, or suspicious and wary.

Tumblety spent several years practicing in Canada, frequently getting into trouble for less than positive results of his medical treatment and was repeatedly in and out of court over claims he made in advertising about his education and practice. In 1860, he was brought up on charges of manslaughter in St. John, New Brunswick, by the wife of a former patient who died under his care. Tumblety was convicted but had escaped to Maine by the time of the trial.⁶ This seemed to be his frequent solution: to run away in the face of opposition. Throughout his career, Tumblety made it his modus operandi to simply leave when his reputation began to sour. In 1865, he had been arrested in St. Louis under suspicion of being part of the Lincoln assassination, although no firm charges were ever brought forward, and it seems unlikely that he ever had a connection to that plot.⁷

Although Tumblety appeared frequently in newspaper ads of the nineteenth century and was widely known for his "medical" practice, today he is best remembered for his association with Great Britain's infamous Jack the Ripper case of 1888.⁸ He was on one of his frequent trips to Europe when he met Douglass in 1887 and was there through the Whitechapel Murders of 1888. Tumblety was arrested in November 1888 for homosexual acts and fled to France and then back to America before the trial. At the time, the American press associated this flight with connection to the Whitechapel murders and a letter from an investigator in Scotland Yard confirmed he was a suspect in the case, though no charges were ever brought.⁹

But why was Tumblety considered a suspect? One curious story of the doctor came from Colonel C. A. Dunham in 1888 when Tumblety was still a suspect in the White Chapel cases. Dunham described a dinner he and others had with the doctor. After the meal, Tumblety took his guests to his office and showed them his collection of uteri and "lectured his companions on evils of women." When asked why he has such low esteem for women, Dr. Tumblety related how he had once been married to a woman who he later discovered was a prostitute and from that time had given up on women. It must be admitted that Dunham was known to have had little regard for

⁴ Tumblety, *Narrative of Dr. Tumblety*, 1.

⁵ Riordan, *Prince of Quacks*, 7–19.

⁶ Riordan, *Prince of Quacks*, 63–70.

⁷ "Indian Doctor," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 25 August 1859; "J. H. Blackburn," *Alexandria Gazette*, 9 May 1865.

⁸ "Bogus Physician," *The Daily Dispatch*, 18 August 1860; "Dr. Tumblety's Pimple Banisher," *New York Herald*, 17 August 1861; "Additional Testimonials," *Evening Star*, 5 May 1862.

⁹ Riordan, *Prince of Quacks*, 1, 171–80.

Tumblety.¹⁰ This, and stories like it, caused many others to associate him with the “Ripper,” who was known to dismember victims and seems to have had particular disregard for “fallen women.” While ultimately impossible to say now what his connection with the murders may have been, it is notable that the murders did cease when he left for America.

Though a record of this encounter survives for us to read today, it was surely only one of numerous such meetings abroad that Douglass experienced. By the late nineteenth century, Douglass was among American's most prominent figures and was the figurehead of Black Americans. He was doubtless constantly approached by admirers when on his travels. This peculiar encounter on the streets of Paris can be documented because Douglass recalls it in a letter to Amy Post, whose relationship to Tumblety has disappeared, if, indeed, it ever existed. The incident serves as a prime example of the celebrity Douglass enjoyed at this point in his life, being easily recognized by admirers both at home and abroad, no matter how controversial that person may have been.

Liverpool[,] Eng. 10 June 1887[.]

MY DEAR FRIEND AMY POST—

Some forty years ago I wrote you a letter from England and I do not wish my present tour to end without sending you another—though only to tell that I am well and continue to remember you with gratitude and affection. You were among the first of American women to give me shelter & make me feel at home under your roof—kindness I never forgot. I have now been on this side the Atlantic near nine months—I have travelled far and seen heard and felt much—much that I could talk about if I was seated by your side—but not much that I can now find time to write about. In our travels—(for Helen was with me throughout till a few hours ago.) we have taken in England, France Italy—Switzerland—Greece and Egypt—we have visited—London Paris Naples Rome, Athens, Alexandria—Cairo—and many other famous towns and cities—which when I consider my starting point in life, it is marvellous that I have accomplished so much—but I feel that it has all come too late in life. I should have travelled this when I was younger, and when my ambition for achievement was more vigorous—I came to Liverpool now to see my dear Helen off to America. The condition of the health of her mother has been such of late as to make Helen feel that she ought to go home. It was a sore trial to her to leave me here even for a few weeks—but she is a strong woman and she bore it bravely. She is now well on her way—in a stout ship and I have no doubt will arrive safely—I have something to tell you. I met a man in the street a day or two ago—who introduced himself to me as Dr. Tornblity—He spoke freely of yourself and Jacob. I shall want to know more of him if I shall be spared to see you again. He told me much about himself in a very brief space, for he seemed to have more tongues than ears—I could not get a word in any-where—and you know I am too much in love with my own voice to like being suppressed and overtaken in that way—but enough of Dr. Tornblity—He seemed a good fellow after all.

I must tell you of another I met with whom you have been in other days acquainted to some extent, if not with her, you have been with her history, for she has a history. When in Rome at the Hotel De la Posti—there came to see me a handsome and elegantly dressed Lady—she was refined in her manners and appearance—and made a favorable impression upon all who saw her—she

¹⁰ Riordan, *Prince of Quacks*, 91–95, 163–191; “Dr. Tumblety is Here,” Williamsport *Sunday Grit*, 9 December 1888.

called many names of persons with whom I am acquainted in America—she seemed a thoroughly English lady. She introduced herself as Mrs Martin—said she had seen me before—at a public meeting in Washington—I had recollection of her—and could not imagine who she could be—At last she told me ‘I am she that was Victoria Woodhull’ I am now married to Mr Martin and live in London—The announcement was startling enough for I had no idea of meeting Mrs. Woodhull. I have made some enquiries about her since and find that she is living very quietly in London as the wife [of] a thoroughly respectable Banker such is life. You may have known all this before—but I did not. I also met in Rome three of the sisters of Charles Remond. It was very pleasant to meet so far away from home these dear people. Like Charles they detest prejudice of color and say they would not live in the U. States, if you could or would give them America! I told them I found America a very good country to live in and that popular prejudice was on the wane—A few days ago I saw my old friend Julia Griffiths—she came to London to see us—and though she, like ourselves is older than thirty five years ago—she is still quite lively—In Paris I saw Mrs Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the house of her son—she is at work on her woman’s Bible—and seems more radical than ever—She is a noble and brave woman—and has no snobbery about her—I hope that you are still well and active though that is a good deal to hope and more to expect, but you are an exception to general rules—Do I pray you remember me kindly to dear Mary and Sarah—I love to think of their unceasing friendship—to Jacob—Joseph and William I also wish to be remembered

Always and to the end Yours

FREDK. DOUGLASS

ALS: Amy and Isaac Post Papers, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, N.Y.