Chapter 5
'Douglass has blawn sic a flame'

Can we haud be it? Naw. Douglass has blawn sic a flame
That we winna hae peace till that siller's sent hame
Popular contemporary parody in verse

Self-liberated and strong

On 15 January 1846, under a week after arriving in Scotland, Frederick Douglass made his first speech in Scotland. The meeting in Glasgow was organised by his sponsors, the Glasgow Emancipation Society. Although he was not the first African American to address a public meeting in Scotland, as a self-liberated slave he commanded considerable attention from audiences sympathetic to the cause. In a early letter home he wrote to the Francis Jackson, President of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 'it is quite an advantage to be a nigger here. I find I am hardly black enough for British taste, but by keeping my hair as woolly as possible I make out to pass for at least half a negro at any rate'.[1]

Douglass was born on a plantation in Maryland around 1817. His mother Harriet was a slave and his father was almost certainly the plantation owner, hence his mixed race appearance. At the age of twelve he was sold to another master, suffering the familiar tearing apart of the family, normal in chattel slavery. In 1838, by now a skilled worker, he escaped from the brutal treatment of overseers and made contact with the strong circle of abolitionists in the Boston area. Although earning a living as a ship's caulker in New Bedford, his skills of oratory were recognised by the Massachusetts abolitionists who engaged him as a lecturer. By this time he had a wife and four children, but the threat of recapture was always present, and the Anti-Slavery Society sent him in August 1845 on a two year speaking tour of Ireland, Scotland and England. From Ireland where he had much success, he arrived in Scotland in January 1846. For most of the time he was accompanied by James Buffum, a Massachusetts carpenter, but Buffum was very much the supporting speaker.

Douglass was widely read and entirely self-taught in the years

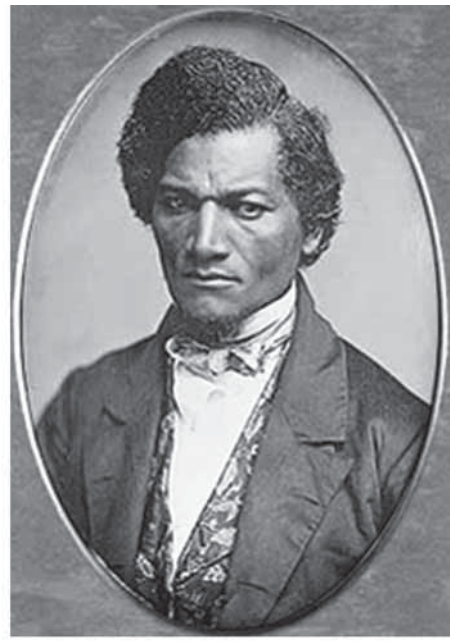
since he fled from slavery. He rejected the name 'Bailey', given him by his master, and having a somewhat romantic view of Scotland based on Sir Walter Scott, but veering towards 'Braveheart', he saw the Douglas's as the standard bearers of freedom and decided to adopt the name, albeit with a slight amendment. He wrote back to the States about 'the free hills of old Scotland where . . . scarcely a stream but has been poured into song, or a hill that is not associated with some fierce and bloody conflict between liberty and slavery'.[2]

Although well instructed in the Free Church controversy, Douglass did not immediately address it. In his first, and well publicised, speech he took time to acquaint his audience, from direct personal experience, with the reality of American slavery. To cries of 'shame' and applause from the audience, he detailed the dire punishments handed out to slaves who dared to read the Bible or teach the Lord's Prayer to their children. Douglass skilfully drew the distinction between chattel slavery and the so called slave conditions of workers in Britain, then turned to underscore the responsibility of the churches for maintaining the system. 'Would you', he asked his audience, 'belong to a church that held fellowship with slaveholders . . . with the man-stealing, cradle-robbing, woman-beating American slave-holder?' [3]

Douglass knew exactly how to measure his words. He was aware that, as in the West Indies, so in the Southern States, those who depended on the system were keen to sanitise it by promoting the slave-owners as benevolent, and the cruelties as rare aberrations. In his personal story he showed that the theft and sale of human beings, physical degradation and torture, and the breaking up of families were integral to the whole operation of slavery. From Glasgow he went to Dundee, hosted by sympathetic ministers, including the celebrated literary figure and local Secessionist minister, Rev. George Gilfillan. Gilfillan two years later gave a published lecture, *The debasing and demoralising influence of slavery on all and everything connected with it.* He was keen to show that no amount of kindness or any number of 'good' masters would mitigate the horrors of slavery, but equally to demonstrate that slavery could not break the human spirit of the slaves. 'You have seen in Frederick Douglass', he stated, 'a man whom slavery has not nipped, but developed'. Gilfillan was a kindred spirit with Douglass. It was in Dundee that the 'Send Back the Money' campaign was set alight.

In the first of four public meetings in the city at the end of January 1846, Douglass broached the Free Church question. He was at pains to say that he offered no criticism of the Free Church in its break with the Church of Scotland, and he would not comment on the rights or wrongs of the Disruption. He recognised that some might

Frederick Douglass



wish to present the American abolitionists (he and Buffen had been joined by Henry C. Wright) as the paid servants of other churches wishing to destroy the Free Church. His business however was solely on slavery, and he wished to quote from the Old Testament. 'I should find it impossible', he said, 'to draw a more graphic picture of the state of the churches in the United States than is drawn from the holy prophet Isaiah', when he tells Israel 'your hands are full of blood'.

Send Back the Money

From the wide polemical sweep Douglass then turned to the Free Church's arguments to justify continued fellowship with the American churches. He was well briefed that George Lewis, by no means the least critical of slavery in the United States, but part of the Free Church delegation, was a prominent minister in the city. At first he simply asked where Lewis had been in the South, and what he had been allowed to see, even challenging him to a debate on the subject, one that Lewis rejected. But at a meeting on 10 March at George Gilfillan's Chapel, he turned up the heat by making a series of charges against the Free Church – 'accepting money from well known thieves to build her churches and pay her ministers', 'following the bidding of slaveholders and their guilty abettors, whilst they turn a deaf ear to the bleeding and whip-scored slave', and 'having adopted the name of "Free Church", while they are doing the work of a slave church'. Douglass then turned to imagine the scene if 'brother Lewis' had called on his old master to ask for a subscription. Mr Auld would be moved by the plight of the Free Church in its struggle for Gospel freedom in Scotland, and would have sold one of his young slaves, such as Douglass, to release funds

for his own donation. 'Brother Lewis prays' continued Douglass 'and reads "blessed are those who give to the poor", as Auld ties the slave to his carriage and takes him off for auction.

Just as a mixture of applause and ironic laughter was heard from his audience, Douglass, with great debating skill, moved to his peroration, and for the first time the repeated refrain of 'Send back the Money' became a catch phrase, cheered at every mention. 'When the Free Church says did not Abraham hold slaves?' thundered Douglass:

> The reply should be, Send back that money! When they ask did not Paul send back Onesimus? I answer, Send you back that money! That is the only answer Which should be given to their sophisticated arguments, and it is one that they cannot get over. In order to justify their conduct they endeavour to forget that they are a church and speak as if they were a manufacturing corporation. They forget that a church is not for making money, but for spreading the Gospel. We are guilty, say they, but these merchants are guilty and some other parties are guilty also. I say, send back that money. There is music in the sound. There is poetry in it.

Although Douglass must have been aware of the veneration in which Thomas Chalmers was held, the Free Church leader's attempt to justify accepting the money and remaining in fellowship with the American church, led to some of the abolitionist orator's most passionate broadsides. The argument made by Chalmers that American slave-owners could not just release their slaves, and had to live within the framework of the law, was greeted with scorn by Douglass. 'If the law were to say that we were to worship Vishnu or any heathen deity', he asked, 'would that be right because it was the law?' And he went on to recall the familiar Old Testament heroes Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who faced death by fire, rather than submit to the Babylonian decree to stop worshipping God. 'Had these doctors (Chalmers, Cunningham and Candlish) lived in these days they would have bowed down to the golden image', said Douglas to the Dundee audience. 'What I would advise, says Dr Chalmers, is to submit to the powers that be . . . worship only in form but not in heart; you may be lifting up your hearts to the Lord, and thus save your lives and your principles also'. The audience responded with 'great cheering and laughter'.[4]

This charge of trimming for convenience was one which Douglass repeated as he moved further up the east coast to Arbroath. Nothing riled him more than Chalmers's assertion that 'a distinction must be

made between the character of a system (slavery) and the character of a person whom circumstances have implicated therein'. For Douglas this gave licence to absolve murderers, adulterers, and thieves from the consequences of their actions. 'Oh the artful Dodger!' he described Chalmers, and continued:

> What an excellent outlet for sinners! Let slave-owners rejoice! Let a fiendish glee run round and round through hell! Dr. Chalmers, the eloquent Scotch divine, has, by long study and deep research, found that . . . while slavery be a heinous sin, the slave-owner may be a good Christian, the representative of the blessed Saviour on earth, an heir of heaven and eternal glory, for such is what is implied by Christian fellowship.[5]

Such direct attacks of course inevitably led to enmity towards Douglass. A Dundee newspaper, *The Northern Warder*, accused him of being in the pay of the Church of Scotland and many churches in Arbroath were closed to him. In Paisley, in March, he returned to the theme of George Lewis collecting money from those, like his former master, who gave generously from the proceeds of slave sales, and the 'send back the money' phrase was a familiar one at the close of his speeches. But he returned to the broad theme of educating his audience in the true horrors of American slavery. In Ayr at the end of March, Douglass expressed pleasure in meeting 'those who in sympathising affection, assemble to consider the wrongs of their race'. 'I am here tonight', he continued:

> To let you know the wrongs, the miseries, and the stripes of three millions of human beings for whom the Saviour died; and though time would fail me to give all the details of the horrid system by which they are held, I yet hope to place before you sufficient facts to enlist your sympathies in their behalf.

Douglass was careful to pay tribute to those in Britain who had been pioneers in the campaign to abolish the slave trade and West Indian slavery. At a soiree (evening social gathering) in honour of himself and James Buffum in Paisley, he commended the pioneering work of Granville Sharp and the Quaker stirrings against the slave-trade in the late eighteenth-century. At the mention of William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson there was huge cheering, although the absence of prominent Scottish abolitionists such as William Dickson, James Stephen and Zachary Macaulay, indicated a gap in his knowledge of that time. Inspired by that heritage he called for what he termed 'an International Moral Force' to destroy slavery, and he ended another address to 1200 citizens of Paisley in April 1846 with this rallying cry:

> Dr Chalmers has said that it would be most unjustifiable to deny the slaveholder Christian fellowship. Scotland and the slaveholder at one! Shall it be so? [Shouts of No! No!] The people are with us in Arbroath, Dundee, Aberdeen, Montrose, Greenock, Glasgow – and they will be with us in Edinburgh [loud applause] We wish to have Scotland, England, Ireland, Canada, Mexico, even the Red Indians with us and against slavery. We want to have the whole country surrounded with an anti-slavery wall, with the words legibly inscribed thereon, Send Back the Money, Send Back the Money [Long continued cheering].[6]

Temperance and Opposition

Douglass skilfully tapped another popular cause to make the link with slavery. Drink and its social effects had long been a public concern in Scotland and the Temperance movement (effectively the call for abstinence) by this time attracted great support, especially amongst the middle classes who could drink quietly at home. Buffum and Douglass attended a large gathering in Glasgow's City Hall in February 1846, attended by temperance enthusiasts from Scotland and the north of England. Buffum spoke on 'the rise, progress, and results of the temperance movement in America', and after several hours of what the *Glasgow Examiner* termed 'unremitting oratory', Douglass rose to his feet. 'Slavery', he said, 'is a poor school for rearing moralists or reformers of any kind', but he wished to link it with drink in a very practical application. He explained how in Maryland, where he was brought up, it was common for masters to give slaves drink on a Saturday night 'to keep them during the Sabbath in a state of stupidity'. Drink was for Douglass a tool to dull the senses and avoid the risk of the slave, in his leisure time, thinking of freedom. To cheers from the crowd he thundered 'This intemperance enslaves – this intemperance paralyses – this intemperance binds with bonds stronger than iron, and makes man the willing subject of its brute control'.

Most of those who were hostile to Douglass, either voted with their feet or refused to have him in their churches. There was occasional dissent at meetings, such as some hissing in Dundee when he criticised George Lewis. One who voiced his opposition and defended the Free Church in a pamphlet, was Rev. John Macnaughton of Paisley.[7] In a speech on 21 April 1846 Macnaughton termed Douglass an 'ignorant runaway slave, who had picked up a few sentences which he was pleased to retail up and down the country', and expressed his surprise that Paisley's citizens paid money to hear him speak. Four

days later Douglass responded. A number of churches, no doubt due to Macnaughton's intervention, were barred to him on the day he was due to speak. Paisley abolitionists, keen to see public discussion of the issue, took up Douglass's challenge to debate with Macnaughton and distributed handbills, but the latter never appeared.

Douglass repeated the accusation made that he was 'a poor, miserable, ignorant, fugitive slave'. He did not wish to comment on the position of 'that gentleman' nor to 'trace him to any extraordinary ancestors'. He then went on to analyse what he called 'a degree of audacity, which I did not expect to witness on the part of any Free Church clergyman'. 'The man', he said, 'who enjoys his share of the three thousand pounds taken from the slaveholder, and robbed from the slave, stands up to denounce me as being ignorant. Shame on him'. In an emotional piece of oratory which clearly showed his personal hurt, Douglass continued:

> I should like to see the inside of his breast; there cannot be a heart of flesh there. There must be a stone or a gizzard there. Let him launch out that gold and I shall undertake to educate a number of slaves, who will in a few years be able to stand by the side of Mr. Macnaughton. . . . Macnaughton has linked himself with the slaveholder, and he cannot therefore have any sympathy with a slave. The interest of the one is antagonistic to the other. The slave runs, and the slave-owner sets his dogs on him to catch him and bring him back . . . When a slave comes here to plead their cause, Macnaughton calls him a poor miserable fugitive slave. Macnaughton won't get rid of us by any such statements.[8]

Later that year, Douglass returned to Scotland after several months down south. Douglass claimed that the man he now called 'brother Macnaughton', had insulted Henry C. Wright too. But so much had Macnaughton's criticism of him as 'an ignorant fugitive' got under his skin, that Douglass returned to it when he was in Paisley in late September 1846. 'I have made these remarks', he said, 'because he [Macnaughton] has made very free with me elsewhere . . . at the time he was pocketing the money wrung from the souls of my own brethren in slavery. He denounces me for my ignorance. I say such a man is not worthy to be called a Christian minister'.

These words were said from the platform of what was described 'The Great Anti-Slavery Meeting', held in Rev. Robert Cairns's Secession Church in Paisley 23 September 1846. Douglass was accompanied by the veteran American abolitionist and editor of *The Liberator* William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, another invitee of the

Glasgow Emancipation Society, who was very much on the radical wing of the movement, believed in resistance to any authority, and unlike Douglass, with whom he split eventually on the issue, saw no good in the American Constitution, nor any prospect of ridding the United States of slavery through normal democratic pressure. As a protégé of Garrison, Douglass was pleased to have his support at this stage, not least when he intervened to substitute the words 'slave-holder' and 'slave-holding' with those of 'robbery' and 'robber'.[9]

John Macnaughton of Paisley may have been the most vocal and direct opponent of Douglass, but he was not of course alone. Many other Free Church ministers, and some others, simply refused to have him speaking in their churches. On the other hand when Douglass thought that his visit to Aberdeen in March 1846 had simply met with a 'granite' reception, he learnt that there were many who wanted to hear him. On his departure, a petition was given to him from 'a large number of respected citizens', many of whom were from the Free Church. They told him that they had never authorised Lewis to 'form an alliance with slaveholders' or Chalmers 'to write a fraternal letter to a slaveholder in South Carolina'.

Although Douglass was never met with the racist taunt 'Send back the nigger', which he had experienced in Belfast, in an otherwise successful tour prior to his arrival in Scotland, some of his Scottish detractors came close to it. In May 1846 the conservative *Scottish Guardian*, referring to him as 'the black', sneered 'if American slavery were abolished tomorrow, their trade [the Abolitionists] would be gone. Mr. Douglass, we suppose, would instantly return to his more important duties as "a chimney sweeper."

A month earlier, on 11 April the *Scottish Guardian* published a letter by a correspondent who styled himself 'Veritas'. Douglass read it at a meeting in Paisley on 17 April. 'Veritas', who is thought to be William Gregor, a Church of Scotland minister, had been at a meeting addressed by Douglass and Buffum. He had listened to the horrors of slavery, but pled that there were two sides to the story. 'Veritas' had been in New York for eighteen months, and had 'seen the moral and religious character of the proprietors of the Southern States blackened by every means that self interest and the vilest hypocrisy could devise'. He was convinced that many slave-owners treated their slaves better than white workers in the north, and he accused 'Douglass and his constituents' of delusions. He advised 'the semi-savage Douglass', to be more 'tender-hearted in the applications of his three toed thong to the back of Dr Chalmers and others', lest it be turned on him and that 'Send Back the Money' might yet, after

all his pathos, be turned into 'Send Douglass back' to learn more correctness in his statements, and more justice in his conclusions'. Incredibly, 'Veritas' concluded with the statement that Douglass 'and his constituents' were 'inducing a morality incalculably more immoral, savage, barbarous, bloody and brutal than that which he affects so much to deplore', and that 'the Free Church delegation, in appealing to the proprietors of the Southern States', acted, 'with an impartiality, and upon principles of an enlightened philanthropy, for which all ages shall bless them, especially the toil-worn millions'. It was so extreme that Douglass declined to answer it.[10]

In full cry

Douglass told a London audience in May 1846, 'I am used to being hissed in Scotland on the subject, for they do not like me to state the thing in my own language'. It was one of the strengths of Douglass's oratory that he used the starkest descriptive terminology. Frustrated by the Free Church's incessant attempts to find fine distinctions of guilt and absolution over slave-holding, whilst admitting that in Robert Candlish's words slavery was 'a sin of the deepest die', Douglass delighted in the free use of 'theft', 'banditry', 'man-stealing', and 'murder'. In Arbroath he thundered:

> Good God! What a system! A system of blood and pollution; of infidelity and atheism; of wholesale plunder and murder. Truly did John Wesley denounce it as the sum of all villainies and the compendium of all crime. This, Christian friends, is but a faint picture of American slavery, and this is the system upheld and sustained by the entire church in the Southern States of the American Union. It is with such a church that the Free Church of Scotland is linked and interlinked in Christian fellowship. It is such a church that the Free Church of Scotland are trying to palm off to the world as a Christian Church. . . . The Free Church, in vindicating their fellowship of slaveholders, have acted on the damning heresy that a man may be a Christian whatever may be his practice, so his creed be right. So he pays tithes of mint, anise and cumin, he may be a Christian, though he totally reject judgement and mercy.[11] It is this heresy that now holds in chains three millions of men, women, and children in the United States.

Although not a theologian, Douglas did not hesitate to challenge the Free Church on matters of heresy. He was, however, happier in the cut and thrust of campaigning than arguing doctrinal niceties.

Storming the City Crags with 'Quakeresses'

Throughout Scotland's east coast youngsters were said to shout anti-slavery slogans or sing songs (Glasgow saw very little of such happenings despite the much more radical Emancipation Committee), Douglass reported this direct activism with glee. At a meeting in Paisley he stated that 'Send Back the Money' had been painted in red on a wall in Arbroath, representing slaves' blood, that all the efforts to remove it were to no avail. It was not a lone act. Many walls from the Tay to the Tweed saw similar slogans chalked or painted on them.

Rev. John Campbell told a meeting in London of how early one morning, 'this mighty man' Douglass climbed Arthur's Seat, the craggy hill visible from Edinburgh's city centre, and with the help of 'two fair Quakeresses', began to carve out with a spade 'Send Back The Money' on the grass. He was warned that this action was a felony, and he would be 'at the tender mercies of Baillie Gray' of the City Council. Campbell remarked that for a man who had faced the wrath of slave-owners, an Edinburgh Baillie would hardly make Douglass quake.[12] There is no other mention of these two 'Quakeresses' by him, but almost certainly they were Jane and Eliza Wigham.

Although there was a Quaker meeting-house in Glasgow as early as 1660, the track record of Quaker anti-slavery activity in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century in Scotland was as non-existent as it was pioneering in England and America. It could be reasonably argued that members of the Society of Friends were very few north of the border, but it was remarkable that in the decade between the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the 'Send Back the Money' campaign, the Scottish Quakers had achieved such a significant and leading role amongst Scottish abolitionists. This was achieved by two families who were intertwined and originated from the north of England, the Smeals and the Wighams.

In his autobiography, Douglass listed William Smeal as one of the 'sterling anti-slavery men in Glasgow', who 'denounced the [Free Church] transaction as shocking and disgraceful to the religious sentiment of Scotland'.[13] Smeal was joint Secretary of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, and had invited Douglass, on their behalf, to the city where he acted as his host. He was a successful business man in the grocery trade. The collection of anti-slavery papers in Glasgow's Mitchell Library preserved by Smeal, is the surviving source of information on the city's abolition campaigns at this time.

Jane and Eliza Wigham were active in the Edinburgh Ladies Emancipation Society, which took a much stronger line on the

Free Church's policy than its male counterpart. Jane was the sister of William Smeal, one of whose close friends was a fellow Quaker, Anthony Wigham, who had been one of the founding Secretaries of the Glasgow Society before moving to Aberdeen. Anthony's cousin, John Wigham, married William Smeal's sister Jane, whose stepdaughter was Eliza.

Of all the Quaker activists in Scotland, Eliza Wigham, who never married, was probably the most prominent, campaigning over a period that spanned three decades. In her introduction to her book on American anti-slavery, she outlined her philosophy of action. 'It is very important', she wrote, in the middle of the Civil War:

> To bear in mind the character of slavery, in order to estimate the urgency of the call which abolitionists felt bound to obey, 'to cry aloud and spare not'. It is also important to remember the intimate connection of slavery with the whole social, religious, and political organisation of America, in order rightly to appreciate the courage of those who began to assail it.[14]

It was a sentiment that would have the full approval of Frederick Douglass, and possibly reflected the conversations that Eliza had had with him twenty years previously. Although some earlier abolitionists in Britain such as William Wilberforce had been strongly opposed the visible presence of women in the cause, and in the 1840s no women spoke publically on anti-slavery platforms, Douglass clearly appreciated female support for such direct action.

The flame burns

In the first month of his Scottish tour Douglass wrote to Francis Jackson:

> Our efforts are directed to making them disgorge their ill-gotten gain – return it to the Slave-holders. Our rallying cry is "No union with Slave-holders and send back the blood-stained money." Under these rallying cries, old Scotland boils like a pot. It would indeed be a grand anti-slavery triumph if we could get her to send back the money. It would break upon the confounded slaveholder's sky – we shall continue to deal our? [writing obscured] upon them, crying out disgorge, disgorge, disgorge your horrid plunder, and to this cry thus far the great mass of people have cried "Amen, Amen".

The next month he was to write in similar vein to Richard Webb in Dublin:

> The agitation goes nobly on – all this region is in ferment. The

> very boys in the street are singing out '*send back the money'.* I am informed this morning by the *Dundee Courier* that the St Peter's Session have unanimously recommended the sending back the money. I meet Free Church people who are anxious to have the money sent back. I am certain that the people are right on this point, and if the money is not sent back it will be the fault of their leaders. We shall continue with unabated zeal to sound the alarm – the people will be informed.[15]

There is no doubt that Douglas was a sensation in Scotland, and that he drew large crowds. Buffum, Wright, and even the famed Garrison, with their greater experience of the cause, were always rated supporting speakers. George Gilfillan noted that Douglass was 'educated and endowed to destroy his cruel and unnatural mother'.

Two anonymous hearers paid tribute to him in different ways. One who had heard him at a street corner meeting observed – 'the spirit of the Lord is in the black as well as the white man – and the inspiration of the almighty gave him understanding. How forcibly he preached his people's wrong! Strong language indeed. Oh let us be up to send back, not only the money, but the people'.

The other who would no doubt have greatly amused Douglass, dwelt on his physical presence, and did so in broad Scots. He wrote:

> On Monday nicht our Jock got me to gang doun an' hear that chiel Douglass. I had came away wanting ma specks; but frae the luik I gat o' him, he seemed a burly fellow, ane I shouldna like to hae a tussle wi him either feeseecally or intellecktually.[16]

Douglass drew huge and overwhelmingly supportive crowds, and there is no doubt that he succeeded in raising awareness in Scotland of the reality of American Slavery.

At the same time his uncompromising stance inevitably left no room for the leadership of the Free Church to manoeuvre, and his strong and often satirical critique of figures such as Chalmers, Cunningham, Candlish, Lewis and others prevented any possibility of dialogue with the church leadership. In company with most great orators, he exaggerated. Although the Free Church's refusal to deny fellowship to the Southern churches was a psychological blow to abolitionists in America, it was a comparatively small one. And to claim that returning the money and denying acceptance of American christians would shake the foundations of slavery, was a powerful oratorical point, but had little practical basis. Nonetheless, Douglass of all the anti-slavery protagonists of his time, was able to ignite a flame in Scotland that burned for a time in many a household, church, and assembly.