

New Bedford symposium on Douglass, O'Connell

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By Irish Echo Staff

In 1845, Frederick Douglass, then an escaped slave from Maryland living in Massachusetts, traveled to Ireland and Britain, in part, to ensure his safety from "slave catchers" in the United States.

While in Ireland, Douglass remained an active and outspoken abolitionist and befriended the Irish nationalist and abolitionist Daniel O'Connell.

The product of the exchanges that took place between Douglass and O'Connell was the subject of a recent symposium in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Working with the National Park Service, the New Bedford Historical Society, the Irish Institute at Boston College, the Irish Network Boston, and the Frederick Douglass/Daniel O'Connell Project, hosted a series of panel discussions on Douglass and O'Connell.

Working closely with the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation, run by Douglass' descendants, the Douglass-O'Connell project seeks to educate the Irish and American publics about the leadership of Douglass and O'Connell in the civil rights movement.

Don Mullan, a co-founder of the project, said: "The project's primary objective is to harness the memory of Douglass and O'Connell to work for civil rights today."

The mayor of New Bedford, Jon Mitchell, and the Consul General of Ireland in New England, Michael Lonergan, welcomed nearly 200 people to the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park for the symposium.

Lonergan told the crowd that he was particularly pleased to be in New Bedford to recognize the city's strong connections to Ireland. Kristin Leary, a co-founder of the project, echoed Lonergan's sentiment and added, "the symposium will foster greater public understanding between the Irish and African diasporas in the U.S."

The symposium was made up of three panels. The opening session focused on Douglass' political thought.

Denis Hale, professor of political science at Boston College, suggested that Douglass was a liberal republican in the classical sense who sought to promote

self-governing societies where people could control their own destinies.

Christine Kinealy, professor of Irish history at Drew University, agreed, and pointed out that what Douglass and O'Connell shared above all was a fierce commitment to human rights and the development of individual consciousness.

The Frederick Douglass-Daniel O'Connell project plans many future events, including the establishment of the Institute for Ethical Leadership and Civil Rights at All Hallows College in Dublin and, with the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation, a human rights education course designed to help young people understand human trafficking.

More at www.douglassoconnell.org.