

Ida: A Sword Among Lions

Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching

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INTRODUCTION

Sword Among Lions

Ida B. Wells

(1862–1931)

Ida B. Wells was in New York City when she heard the terrible news. Back home in Memphis, the office of her newspaper, the *Free Speech*, had been gutted; J. L. Fleming, her partner and co-owner, had been run out of the city upon the threat of being hanged and castrated; and a former owner of the paper,

Reverend Taylor Nightingale, had been pistol-whipped and forced to recant the words of the May 1892 editorial that had detonated the violent response in Memphis. Ida learned that she herself had been threatened with lynching. She was receiving urgent telegrams telling her that whites were posted at the railway station waiting for her return. Ida did not return. Going home would only mean more bloodshed, she decided, after hearing that black men had vowed to protect her.

The southern city had been in an unsettled state since March, when three black men, including a close friend of Wells's, had been lynched, and she had urged thousands of black Memphians to leave a city that would not give them justice. Her May editorial, published just before a long-planned trip East, was a response to another paper's assertion that the spate of recent lynchings in the South had been triggered by the increasing occurrences of rape perpetrated by black men upon

white women. In her riposte, Wells challenged the charge, and insinuated that cries of rape often followed the discovery of consensual relationships between black men and white women. Wells's short editorial had been written hastily, but not without forethought. Since the Memphis murders, she had begun investigating lynchings by interviewing eyewitnesses and relatives of the victims, and had analyzed the *Chicago Tribune's* annual lynching statistics, which included the putative motives for them.

In June of 1892, Wells, now an exile, wrote a long exposé for the *New York Age*, a black weekly with a substantial white readership. Later published as a pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, it was the first study of lynching and Wells's initial attempt to show how this particular form of racial violence said more about the cultural failings of the white South than of blacks; how not only race, but attitudes toward women and sexuality, instigated it; and that lynching

represented the very heart, the Rosetta Stone, of America's troubled relationship with race. Wells believed that lynching was the central issue that defined blacks as the nation lurched toward the twentieth century, and one that demanded new strategies that included self-defense and civil disobedience. Her determination to follow the logic of lynching into the modern age also demanded that she, in advance of most of her peers, male and female, shed the confines of Victorian attitudes.

The origin of the term "lynching," according to James E. Cutler, author of *Lynch-Law* (1905), the first scholarly text on the subject, is attributed to Charles Lynch, a Virginia justice of the peace (and brother of the founder of Lynchburg). Lynch established informal, extra-legal citizen juries during the Revolutionary War years when official courts were few and traveling to them through British-occupied territories was perilous. The common sentence for those found

guilty—mostly horse thieves and Tories—was thirty-nine lashes with a whip. By the 1830s, when southern abolitionism reached its height, lynching was associated more with those who threatened the slave order. Following the Civil War, the practice became more murderous with the bloody struggle for power among northern federalists, Confederates, and newly enfranchised black men.

However, it wasn't until 1886, when increasing numbers of rural blacks migrated to southern cities, that the number of African Americans lynched exceeded that of whites: a trend that continued even as blacks became increasingly disenfranchised; had largely eschewed their political aspirations in favor of building institutions, acquiring wealth, and eliminating ignorance; and ex-Confederates had regained control of their state governments. Both Wells and Cutler cited what were surely conservative estimates by the *Chicago Tribune*, which reported that 728 persons were

lynched between 1882 and 1891, the majority of them African American men. The statistics further showed that less than a third had been accused of rape, much less guilty of it. By the end of 1892, the year of the Memphis lynchings and Wells's forced exile, the annual number of lynchings reached a new peak of 241.

IDA B. WELLS was a biographer's dream, I thought when I first began researching her life for my first book, *When and Where I Enter*, a history of black women's activism. Even before it was completed, Wells managed to inhabit my imagination, where she promptly began demanding a book of her own. "Fine," I said with the leisurely naïveté of a first-time biographer, who thought that the task would be demanding but not daunting. In addition to the research I had already done on African American women, I would familiarize myself with the historical contexts that informed Ida Wells's life from

her birth in 1862 to slave parents in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to her death sixty-eight years later in Chicago. I would concentrate on the literature concerning lynching, particularly in the New South and seamlessly incorporate it into Wells's articles and her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*. I knew that I would also benefit from the extraordinary scholarship on black women that has been published during the last several decades. But long before the task was completed, reality set in.

Copies of Wells's newspaper, the *Free Speech*, no longer exist; I would have to rely on quotes that appeared in other papers. Her autobiography, begun in 1928, fewer than three years before her death, was indispensable, yet there are important events missing from it and others are merely alluded to with little explanation. The invaluable text appears hurriedly written, much like her early antilynching editorial, but, in this instance, there was not time to flesh it out. In some ways it was as

if Wells was daring someone else to fill in the blanks.

The biggest "blank" was her own persona. Although Wells is a frank writer who leaves things out rather than tell an untruth, there is little to suggest what was at the core of a woman—a college-educated black woman with Victorian values, no less—who had the imprudent courage to stand up to southern lynchers in 1892. Fortunately, there is a fragment of a diary she kept between December of 1885 and April of 1887, when Wells was in her twenties. The journal provides a window into the mind of a highly self-conscious, religious—and highly flirtatious—young woman who constantly struggled with her "besetting sin," as she called the ever-present anger that churned within. Wells had been orphaned at the age of sixteen, when both of her parents succumbed to yellow fever, and throughout the remainder of her life, she struggled to turn the negative emotions of abandonment into a righteous

determination to reform herself and the society that had forsaken her race.

The diary also appears to be the only eyewitness account of the everyday lives of southern, reform-minded African American women and men who, one generation removed from slavery, had managed to become schoolteachers, lawyers, newspaper editors, tradesmen, business owners, ministers, missionaries, and an array of political actors unacknowledged by published histories of their time and place. How Wells shaped, and was shaped by, the community she inhabited is important for understanding the full measure of her achievements and failures. It is a dimension largely missing in other excellent studies about her and, indeed, about many African American figures who are primarily viewed through their relationships with white elites.

Completing the picture required researching newspaper

accounts from the white daily press and, especially, the black weeklies that, while lacking the documented evidence of scholarly studies, provided visceral evidence of what Wells and her contemporaries were seeing, reading, and, above all, feeling. Wells felt compelled to quote verbatim newspaper passages; I found myself doing the same in this biography, and for the same reason. Without them, her claims about the nature and depth of sentiment toward African Americans seem so far-fetched that they could be easily dismissed.

While informed by the impressive—and prolific—literature on lynching, this biography is not a history of the practice, nor an explication of the conclusions drawn by scholars. Rather, it looks at lynching as Wells saw it within the context of her own life, times, and writings, as it migrated from the rural backwoods to the cities; from lone midnight murders to communal daylight spectacles in which bodies were dismem-

bered and organs kept or sold as souvenirs; from southern cities to northern ones where lynchings took the form of “legal” executions by racist justice systems and mob-led riots that took multiple lives, burned down entire communities, and deprived blacks of their property and livelihoods.

Although Wells’s years in the South, climaxed by the dramatic events that led to her exile, could be a book in itself, I soon realized that that period was closer to the beginning of her life as an activist than its end. After being driven from Memphis, she was involved in and/or wrote about national politics and reform issues regarding labor; women (black and white) and African Americans. Wells traveled, twice, to the British Isles, crisscrossed the country from New York to California, and finally settled in Chicago, where she married a like-minded lawyer and newspaper editor, Ferdinand L. Barnett, bore four children, and balanced motherhood and activism with

mixed success. During this period, she was a catalyst for the creation of the first national black women’s organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW); she founded a black settlement house; she was a member of the NAACP’s “founding forty”; and worked with Hull House’s Jane Addams. Wells canvassed the state of Illinois to promote women’s suffrage and campaigned to elect white women candidates for office. She also founded the first black women’s suffrage organization in Chicago, which was instrumental in the election of the city’s first black alderman in 1915.

During the World War I years, Wells defied the threats of military intelligence agencies and worked with Marcus Garvey, the Boston editor Monroe Trotter, and the hairdressing magnate and philanthropist Madam C. J. Walker. In the 1920s, Ida, with the help of black women’s organizations, including her own Ida B. Wells Club, rallied black

Chicagoans to support A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids when the fledgling union was an anomaly to many blacks who benefited, institutionally and personally, from the largesse of the Chicago-based Pullman Company. In 1930, a year before her death, Wells ran as an independent for an Illinois state senate seat during a time when the gangster Al Capone was filling political machine coffers and candidates were being assassinated.

While I knew that Wells-Barnett's life spanned some of the most tumultuous and defining periods in American history, I was surprised by how much of that history had to be retold because it took on a new meaning and significance when viewed through the eyes of a progressive reformer with Wells-Barnett's passions and concerns. This first became evident when I read a two-line entry in a daybook she kept. In January of 1930, Wells-Barnett wrote that she and her oldest daughter

braved Chicago's icy winds to attend a local Negro History Week meeting. The topic for discussion was a book by Carter G. Woodson, the black Harvard-educated "father of African American history" who conceived the idea of setting aside the week every year to focus on the contributions of people of African descent. Wells-Barnett left the meeting, she noted, disappointed that Woodson's book had failed to mention her own contributions to the campaign against lynching.

To exclude Wells from the movement that she had created was a stunning omission, even when taking into consideration the biases concerning women. How could she have been overlooked? Her campaign was amply covered in both the white and black press and was supported, as well as opposed, by whites, blacks, and influential Britons, who had organized the London Anti-Lynching Committee in the wake of Wells's travels abroad. Her movement was instrumental in

making lynching a national issue. Several states in both the north and south passed antilynching laws; Congress attempted to pass federal antilynching legislation; and after 1892, the number of lynchings never again reached the threshold that had been recorded that year. Moreover, Woodson knew Wells-Barnett. In 1915, the year he organized the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History while still a student at the University of Chicago, she had invited him to speak before the Negro Fellowship League—the settlement house that she had founded.

The daybook entry led me to look at other books written by those with whom Ida had had meaningful encounters during the course of her life and activism: W. E. B. Du Bois; Booker T. Washington; Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) who had known Wells since they had met in Memphis; Jane Addams;

and Frances Willard, the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), headquartered in Chicago, among others. Wells-Barnett's work is not acknowledged in them. Even books about lynching published in the 1920s and 1930s, including Walter White's *Rope and Faggot* and Arthur Raper's *The Tragedy of Lynching*—two widely cited reference texts on the subject—failed to mention Wells. Her name does appear, if cursorily, in James Cutler's *Lynch-Law*. Interestingly, Cutler, an instructor at Wellesley College and Yale University, was also a military intelligence officer during World War I when Wells, characterized as a dangerous and well-known “race agitator,” was the subject of War Department surveillance. Finally, several NAACP documents about the history of the anti-lynching effort, including those published during her lifetime, gave her own role short shrift if any at all.

The oversights could be explained, in part, by her reputa-

tion as a “difficult” woman. Wells was certainly that, even when taking into account the double standard applied to assertive, independent women. During the latter period of her life, Wells was more militant than all of the reform figures mentioned above and publicly crossed swords with them. On the other hand, history books are filled with the names of combative and highly individualistic people. And despite her reputation as an isolated—if courageous—crank, there is ample evidence that Wells was not petulant in the sense that she refused to cooperate with those whom she personally disagreed with over matters that benefited the race.

I concluded that Wells’s legacy was the victim of those same progressive movements of which she was a part. Predominantly white reform organizations could never subscribe to her views about race; those with race-based agendas, such as the NAACP, the NACW, and to a lesser extent the Urban

League, could not accommodate her views regarding leadership and class. The ideological differences were most clear in Wells-Barnett’s relationship with the NAACP during the early years after its founding in 1910, when it was struggling to gain legitimacy within the black community. Although later responsible for remarkable achievements, it can be argued that the civil rights organization did not gain that legitimacy until it belatedly made lynching its central issue. Subsequently, the NAACP marginalized Wells-Barnett’s contributions, even while it adopted her strategies and perspectives.

DESPITE ALL THAT she had seen, Ida Wells-Barnett, remarkably, never lost her faith in the nation’s ability to reform, and she lived to see many victories. But crusades also exact a personal price. She died before her autobiography was completed, and for decades after her death her achievements were largely unheralded. They

might have remained so but for the tireless, forty-year effort of Alfreda M. Duster, her daughter, to publish *Crusade for Justice*. It finally appeared in 1970 as one of a series of black autobiographies published under the guidance of the historian John Hope Franklin

by the University of Chicago Press. For this writer, the autobiography, the first written by a black woman political activist, was an essential guide to render the full testament of a life, which like a restless ghost, seeks its rightful place in history.