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Ida B Wells: the unsung heroine of the civil rights movement

The pioneering African American reporter counted, investigated and reported lynchings in America as no one had done before

'Lynching is color-line murder': Ida B Wells-Barnett's blistering 1909 speech

David Smith *in Washington*

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Today, a simple marker on a street corner in Memphis, Tennessee commemorates the People's Grocery lynching. In 1892 three black men, co-owners of a store giving white businesses a run for their money, were attacked, fought back and were arrested. They never stood trial. A white mob broke into the jail, dragged them away and lynched them.

The murders were grieved by their friend Ida B Wells, an African American teacher, journalist, civil rights pioneer and suffragist about whom it was once said: "She has plenty of nerve; she is as smart as a steel trap, and she has no sympathy with humbug."

Wells was galvanised to count, investigate and report lynchings in America as no one had done before, hurling her 5ft frame into hostile territory with all the fearlessness of a war reporter.

For a century she has languished as an unsung heroine, overshadowed by more familiar giants of the civil rights movement. In recent years, however, her crusading activism and muckraking techniques are being rediscovered. A society for investigative reporting bears her name; the New York Times - which once branded her “a slanderous and nasty-minded mulattress” - just published a belated obituary, and there are moves to name a street after her in New York and build a monument in Chicago.

“I consider her my spiritual grandmother,” says Nikole Hannah-Jones, an investigative journalist covering civil rights. “She was was a trailblazer in every way ... as a feminist, as a suffragist, as an investigative reporter, as a civil rights leader. She was just an all-around badass.”

Wells was born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi, during the civil war. She was orphaned at 16 after her parents - as well as a younger brother - died from a yellow fever epidemic. She found work as a teacher to support her five remaining siblings, then moved to Memphis, where she became a leading journalist and civil rights activist.

At 21, Wells clashed with a white train conductor who ordered her to move from the ladies' car to the a section designated for black passengers, despite her having bought a first class ticket. When she refused and the conductor tried to forcibly move her, Wells “fastened her teeth on the back of his hand”, as she wrote later.

Wells sued after being ejected from the train and won the case (a newspaper headline declared “Darky damsel gets damages”), though the decision was later reversed in court.

By the time Wells turned 25, she was the co-owner and editor of the Free Speech and Headlight, a local black newspaper, a platform she used to skewer racial inequality. Then came the People's Grocery Lynching. She denounced it in print, armed herself with a pistol and spent months traveling alone in the south, researching more than 700 lynchings from the previous decade.

Some 4,075 African Americans were lynched in 12 southern states between 1877 and 1950, according to the Equal Justice Initiative's 2015 report, *Lynching in America*. Some were witnessed by big crowds who brought children and picnic baskets, as if at a public entertainment.



A crowd surrounds two African American men hanging from nooses on a pole. Photograph: Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

Wells's great-granddaughter, Michelle Duster, an author and public speaker, says: "They would torture people before they were killed and dismember them afterwards and pass around the body parts. It was shocking to me that people would take bones as souvenirs. The more I learned about the level of violence, the more I appreciated what it took for her to do what she did. I am just amazed."

Wells visited places where people had been hanged, shot, beaten, burned alive, drowned or mutilated. She examined photos of victims hanging from trees as mobs looked on, pored over local newspaper accounts, took sworn statements from eyewitnesses and, on occasion, even hired private investigators.

It was astoundingly courageous work in an era of Jim Crow segregation and in which women did not have the vote. Hannah-Jones, who writes for the New York Times Magazine, says: "There was no protection from the law for a black woman who was going into territories where black people had been stolen from the jail and lynched with the help of law enforcement.

"These places would have been hostile to a black person questioning these communities at all, but think about the types of emotion in a community that has just lynched someone and strung their body up for public display and then to have a black woman come in there asking questions. One has to ask: 'Would I have the courage to do that?' There was no help that was going to come for you. There was no protection from the law. Black folks didn't even have a lot of legal rights and they certainly didn't have much protection from law enforcement."



A marker on a street corner in the Soulsville neighbourhood marks the spot of the People's Grocery lynching of African-American proprietors Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Will Stewart in 1892.
Photograph: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Wells, however, was a force of nature who once said, “One had better die fighting injustice than die like a dog or a rat in a trap.” On another occasion, she wrote: “I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. If I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little bit.”

She destroyed the mainstream media’s narratives that suggested lynching victims were criminals – often rapists of white women – who got their just desserts. Her reporting showed that rape had not been alleged in two thirds of the lynchings or was only alleged after a covert, consensual, interracial relationship had been exposed.

Duster says: “She was putting names to stories and names to statistics. She was putting context into what was happening. Without what she did, it was pretty much ‘OK, this person committed a crime, they got what they deserved.’ She said, ‘No, they did not commit a crime.’ The narrative of the mainstream media at this time was very different from the reality she found on the ground.”

Hannah-Jones adds: “Much like the killing of black people by police today, the ‘official’ story of lynchings was just largely accepted, which was that black men were rapists and that unknown vigilantes were just meting out justice to black brutes. You can look at the way that newspapers covered these things and that was just accepted and Ida B Wells exposed the reality behind lynchings, which is that they were often used as economic retaliation.

“They were used to sow fear in black communities so that black people would stay in their place and she exposed the truth about that. She also exposed that while law enforcement would often say they these lynchings occur ‘at the hands of parties unknown’, everyone in town knew who committed them and often law enforcement took part.”

While Wells was out of town, a mob destroyed her printing press in Memphis and threatened to kill her if she returned. She stayed away from the south for more than three decades but toured the US and UK, raising awareness through public speaking. In 1895 she published a pamphlet, the Red Record, the first statistical record of the history of American lynchings, a forerunner of data journalism projects such as The Counted, the Guardian’s project to document people killed by police.

Hannah-Jones says: “She was one of the first people to actually tally the number of lynchings that were happening. We like to say she was one of our early data reporters. She began to collect data on this to show how actually vast the scope of the problem was.”

Wells married Chicago lawyer and newspaper editor Ferdinand Barnett and, uncommonly for the time, hyphenated her name rather than take his. The couple had four children. Wells juggled motherhood, journalism and civil rights. In 1909, she was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), although was later ousted because she was perceived as too “radical”. She also worked with Susan B Anthony as a leader in the movement for women’s suffrage.

When Wells died in 1931 at the age of 68 from a brief illness due to kidney failure, her influence was waning, her autobiography was unfinished and her ambition of a federal anti-lynching law was unrealised. Duster muses: “She went out with a whimper. She was almost obsolete. She writes in her autobiography that there was a generation who didn’t know who she was and didn’t know about lynching. She wrote the book to stop it being forgotten.”

Wells and Barnett are interred together in the Oak Woods cemetery in Chicago. She remains a little known figure in America and abroad. Hannah-Jones, who adopted the Twitter handle Ida Bae Wells, reflects: “A lot of people have no idea who Ida B Wells is. To this day people think my name is Ida; they don’t even get the reference of my Twitter handle.

“I think her being a woman, and a black woman, were things that pretty much guaranteed her obscurity. She was also written out of the suffrage movement even though she played a huge role in it and was trying to push the white suffragists on racial equality. Both her gender and her race are the reasons why she was largely written out of history.”

But now she is inspiring a new generation of women in journalism. Hannah-Jones is co-founder of the Ida B Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, which aims to increase the ranks, retention and profile of reporters and editors of colour in the field.

What if Wells herself were alive today? “I think she would be very unsurprised by the America of 2018,” she says. “In many ways it would look very familiar to her. As long as she was able, she would be one of the sharpest critics of this country right now.”