

Southern Horrors and Other Writings

The Anti-Lynching Campaign of
Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900

Edited with an Introduction by Jacqueline Jones Royster



THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900**

Edited with an Introduction by

Jacqueline Jones Royster

Ohio State University

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Foreword

The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

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Preface

Ida B. Wells was an African American who achieved national and international fame as a journalist, public speaker, and community activist. This volume collects the three pamphlets that constitute her major works during the anti-lynching movement: *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, *A Red Record*, and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*.

In introducing these documents, I have sought to contextualize mob violence in general and lynching in particular as a “strange” though not really mysterious “fruit”¹ of American culture. I look closely at Wells’s campaign in light of what Wahneema Lubiano² calls “cover” stories—in this case master narratives of mob violence that have embedded within them myths and realities. Lubiano reminds us that there are things that we say, things that we do not say, things that we subvert, and things that our subversions conceal.

My task has been to define lynching, in the company of other acts of mob violence, as a multilayered aspect of American history, with dimensions related to political and economic power as well as to race and gender control. Wells disassembled and targeted separately the many contradictions and hypocrisies built into the broad myths that white southerners had used to justify lynching, making a case for justice at a particular moment in time. Through the pamphlets we can recognize lynchings as more than isolated incidents arbitrarily happening to African Americans and occasionally to Americans of other ethnic groups. We see instead lynching’s complex relationships to systems of power and domination, to public discourse, and

¹*Strange fruit* as an image of the lynched bodies of African Americans hanging from southern trees was popularized in both literature and music. Two examples bearing this title are a song made famous by Billie Holiday (with words by Lewis Allen) and a 1944 novel by Lillian E. Smith.

²Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 323–63.

to social activism, including the activism of African American women.

As complements to each other, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and *A Red Record* clearly state Wells's position on lynching, revealing the insight and perception with which she was able to launch the most successful of the early anti-lynching campaigns. Wells's courageous analysis helps us to understand the told and untold story of this sinister thread in the fabric of American life. The third pamphlet, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, is a case study that dramatically details an individual incident as it escalates in the absence of law, order, and the application of justice to become yet another striking example of "southern horror."

I have also sought to establish an appropriate framework for understanding the personal achievements of Ida B. Wells. Born into slavery, Wells went on to garner a place of respect as a nationally and internationally prominent journalist and as a leader in the black club-women's movement. Wells was one among a relatively small but growing number of "public" women in an era when public arenas were not considered the place for women. Going against this grain, Wells earned a reputation as an outspoken and steadfast crusader for justice, and the three pamphlets presented here are testimony to her achievement.

Fundamentally, therefore, this collection is an occasion to look at Wells, her work, and her accomplishments so that we might more carefully consider the complex of issues and actions that converge in making lynching such a disquieting phenomenon. *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* is a gateway to a much needed dialogue on lynching as an American experience.

A NOTE ON THE PAMPHLETS

Please note that this volume preserves the spelling and punctuation of the original documents, including errors. When an error makes meaning unclear, I have explained it in my annotations, noting for example when words and phrases are out of order. Rather than correct obvious mistakes or impose contemporary writing conventions, in the interest of preserving historical accuracy we have reprinted the documents in this collection as they originally appeared.

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As always, I am grateful to my family: Pat, Rebecca, and Giles, without whose love and support nothing seems possible or worthwhile.

Jacqueline Jones Royster



Ida B. Wells, ca. 1887

At the time of this photograph, Wells was teaching in the Memphis, Tennessee, public schools and writing a weekly column for the *Living Way*.

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PART ONE

Introduction: Equity and Justice for All

LYNCHING AND RECONSTRUCTION

Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the *Free Speech* one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke (?) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.¹

Ida B. Wells wrote this editorial on May 21, 1892. An African American woman who was co-owner, editor, reporter, and publisher of the *Free Speech*, a weekly newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells was what we

¹See in this volume *A Red Record*, p. 79. All further references to the Wells pamphlets will be included parenthetically in the text using the abbreviations SH (*Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*), RR (*A Red Record*), and MR (*Mob Rule in New Orleans*).

might today call an investigative journalist. Typically, she would identify a problem or issue, collect data that served to instruct and enlighten, and report the findings to her readers. She was known for stating her case simply and directly, without mincing words. This editorial, however, which describes eight incidents of lynching, was incredibly bold, even for an outspoken journalist, because of what it suggested about the "truth" of lynching.

Inspired by the data that she had been collecting for more than two months, Wells raised several very uncomfortable specters between the lines of this editorial. The unstated question was, "If assaulting white women is a threadbare lie, then what might the truth be?" In suggesting such a question, Wells permitted all sorts of codes of etiquette to be broken by alluding to relationships between black men and white women that in 1892 would have been unspeakable, and certainly not spoken about in the newspaper by an African American woman. She hinted that the truth might be more obvious than the crafters of the threadbare lie were willing to acknowledge—more obvious, that is, if readers actually paid attention to the facts. The editorial invited the readers to do just that—to pay attention to the facts.

As documented by *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*,² Wells campaigned energetically for truth and justice throughout her life, with anti-lynching activities figuring prominently among the causes to which she gave her attention. The activities between May 21, 1892 (when she wrote her provocative editorial), and September 1, 1900 (when she signed the introduction to *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, her third pamphlet on lynching), however, mark the most intense portion of her contributions to the anti-lynching movement.³

Wells chronicled a change in her understanding of lynching that began with the lynching of three friends (*SH* pp. 64–65; *RR* pp. 133–34). On the morning of March 9, 1892, the bodies of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Wil Stewart⁴ were found shot to pieces in a field a mile north of Memphis, Tennessee, "by hands unknown." The men had owned and operated the People's Grocery Store, a store in competition with a grocery owned and operated by a white man. The stores were located across the street from each other in an area

²Published posthumously in 1970 by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster, who served as editor.

³See A Wells Chronology (1862–1931) in this volume for an account of her life and work.

⁴Stewart is listed variously by Wells and others as Wil, William, Henry, and Lee.

known in Memphis as the Curve, an area that was beyond the Memphis city limits and beyond police protection. A few days before, an altercation instigated by the white store owner had resulted in a late-night shoot-out at the People's Grocery and the wounding of three white men. In the wake of the shoot-out, numbers of African American men were randomly arrested, guns were confiscated throughout the African American community, and the three business partners were jailed and charged with wounding white men, despite their doing so in what they had thought was the defense of their property. By law the wounding of a white person, as compared with the killing of a white person, was not punishable by death. Nonetheless, on March 9, lynch law prevailed, and between two and three o'clock in the morning the three men, who were not yet convicted by law, were removed from their jail cells, put in a railroad car, carried north of the city, and shot to death.

Word came to Wells about the lynching while she was in Natchez, Mississippi, on one of her many trips as co-owner, editor, and reporter for the *Free Speech*.⁵ Thomas Moss and his family were Wells's closest friends. She was devastated by the news but also incensed that such a thing could happen. Before this incident, Wells had abhorred lynching but had accepted the idea that it was the horror of rape and other crimes that incited such violence. With this lynching, however—the lynching of men whom she knew to be leading citizens of Memphis—her eyes were opened to the truth. Lynching was not simply a spontaneous punishment for crimes but an act of terror perpetrated against a race of people in order to maintain power and control. She began to see that these ritualized murders were acts of violence and intimidation designed to retard the progress of African Americans in their efforts to participate more fully in social, political, and economic life. As she explained in her autobiography,

Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Lee Stewart had been lynched in Memphis, one of the leading cities of the South, in which no lynching had taken place before, with just as much brutality as other victims of the mob; and they had committed no crime against white women.

⁵Details about Wells's life and work are based on information presented in Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), and Mildred I. Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893–1930* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990).

This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and "keep the nigger down."⁶

Wells's immediate response to the lynchings was to write editorials that encouraged African Americans in Memphis to leave a city that offered no protection of their rights of citizenship and to go west to Kansas and Oklahoma. Her editorials were successful, affecting in a significant way the migration of thousands of African Americans to the West.⁷ Wells also began collecting data on other lynchings, and on May 21, 1892, she wrote the editorial quoted at the start of this introduction.

Wells's actions were extraordinary for her time. To appreciate fully just how bold and courageous she was, we need to examine two sets of factors relative to the period in which she lived: the rise and fall of Reconstruction and the backdrop that it provided for mob violence against African Americans, and the emergence of a "woman's era," a time during which women were questioning, redefining, and reshaping the "woman's sphere."

The Rise and Fall of Reconstruction

The era in which Wells was writing is known as the post-Reconstruction era. It is defined largely by the ways that social and political practices began to shift and settle after Reconstruction, when federal troops were withdrawn from the South and local governments began to institute, or in many cases reinstitute, laws and practices that took away liberties that had been achieved for African Americans by means of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

The victory of the North over the South in the Civil War signalled both the end of slavery and the beginning of disagreement and tension over how the eleven defeated southern states would be restored to the Union. "Reconstruction" activities actually began as early as 1862, before the end of the Civil War, when President Abraham Lincoln appointed provisional military governors for Louisiana, Tennessee, and North Car-

⁶Duster, 64.

⁷More information about her campaign to get African Americans to migrate west is available in the following sources: William Greaves, producer, *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, installment of the PBS series *The American Experience* (New York: Video Dub, 1990); Mary M. B. Hutton, "The Rhetoric of Ida B. Wells: The Genesis of the Anti-Lynch Movement," Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1990; David M. Tucker, "Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching," *Black Women in American History: From Colonial Times through the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 1085-95.

olina. Also, on December 8, 1863, President Lincoln issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction. The policy it outlined was lenient. It permitted the recognition of southern state governments based simply on a swearing of allegiance to the Union and to the Constitution of the United States by one-tenth of the voting population in a given state. Tennessee was the first of the eleven states to be readmitted in 1866.

In legislating the reentry of the southern states into the Union, the Proclamation for Amnesty and Reconstruction made no specific provision for the social, political, or economic entry of the four million slaves (including approximately one hundred eight-five thousand veterans of the Union Army) that were released on January 1, 1863, by the Emancipation Proclamation. Neither Lincoln nor his successor, Andrew Johnson, insisted that the freed slaves should have the right to vote. Instead, Lincoln suggested that black soldiers who had fought gallantly during the Civil War, or perhaps those few black men⁸ who showed particular "intelligence," might be awarded voting privileges. In addition, neither Lincoln nor Johnson was an advocate for the redistribution to blacks of plantation lands that had been confiscated for abandonment and nonpayment of taxes.

On March 3, 1865, Congress charged the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau, with the task of facilitating the transition of African Americans into a life of freedom. The bureau functioned in all of the southern states, providing assistance with the negotiation of land purchase contracts and thus serving as the primary mechanism enabling freed men and women to acquire land. The bureau also provided other services. For example, it took over the administration of justice for freed men and women by establishing court systems responsible for the protection of civil rights. It provided food and medical care, and perhaps most significantly of all, it established day, night, industrial, and Sunday schools, and supported newly established institutions of higher education (for example, Atlanta, Howard, and Fisk Universities). The bureau functioned successfully until about 1870 and with limited activity until about 1874, much to the benefit of millions of African Americans across the South.

By the time that its activities ended, the bureau had established well over four thousand schools and offered educational opportunities to tens of thousands of African Americans.⁹ Without advocacy, how-

⁸At this point women had not gained the right to vote.

⁹For a detailed chronicling of schooling in the South for African Americans, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), and Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light, Soldiers of*

ever, the bureau was not able to make much headway in the redistribution of confiscated plantation lands. In fact, in May of 1865 President Johnson issued a proclamation granting amnesty to Confederate leaders and restoring their property rights in exchange for their oaths of allegiance. Much of the confiscated land that might have been made available to the freed men and women to begin making their own lives was ultimately either sold to northern speculators or restored to the former owners. President Johnson's lack of support for the plan, therefore, made this part of the original charge to the bureau impossible.

Further, the presidential pardons of the old leadership made it possible for the Confederates to participate once again in the "new" governments and in the political decision-making processes of the post-Civil War South. With this restoration of power, southern states began enacting legislation that placed the freed men and women in a state of virtual bondage. These laws, known as the Black Codes, reinscribed systems of control that were reminiscent of the old Slave Codes. Slave Codes developed from a general philosophy that the enslaved Africans were property and not human beings. The laws were designed to protect the property owner and to secure the labor supply. While these codes varied from state to state and changed periodically in order to adapt to new needs for economic power or social control, they firmly established the color line and legally restricted the personal, social, political, and economic lives of all of the enslaved people.

The Black Codes enacted at the end of the Civil War resembled these Slave Codes. Although there were a few changes, this legislation was still designed to secure a cheap labor force; to carry out a philosophy that openly stated a belief in the inferiority of people of African descent; and to control the participation of African Americans socially, politically, and economically in society. The freed men and women were permitted to marry and to have legal offspring, but interracial marriages were prohibited. They could sue, be sued, and testify in court but only in cases involving other African Americans, and still they were not allowed to vote or to serve on juries. They were allowed to own property, but typically the areas where they could purchase or rent property were restricted. Newly established vagrancy laws compelled African Americans to work by the dictates of whites, no matter what the conditions for working might be. If found to be unemployed and without permanent residence, they could be arrested and fined. If

Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).