

STRANGE FRUIT AND SOUTHERN HORRORS: IDA B.WELLS' CRUSADE

AGAINST LYNCH LAW

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the victims of lynching, to Ida B. Wells, and to the other countless women involved in the Civil Rights Movement, including my grandmother.

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PREFACE

“Every mob in every little southern town is always made up of people you know.”
-Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee, 1960).

In 1892, a young African-American journalist named Ida B. Wells was chased out of town. She had the unbridled audacity to publish the following statement: “Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women.”¹ Either ignorant of the radical reverberations of such a statement, or uncaring in light of the recent lynching of her friends, Wells steadfastly challenged the economic and political power of the white male elite. For that reason Wells and her managing editor were threatened with lynching, run out of town and had their paper, ironically titled the *Free Speech*, sold by creditors. The experience was traumatic enough to Wells to inspire decades of anti-lynching activism.

To that end, Ida B. Wells authored a series of pamphlets that she hoped would draw significant attention to the problem. In *Southern Horrors* (1892), she outlines the problem of lynching and dispels the reported cause of lynchings --the rape of white women by black men. Her next pamphlet, *A Red Record* (1895) is a thoroughly researched, sociological study of lynching across the country. Wells’ later pamphlet is titled *Mob Violence in New Orleans* (1900); it detailed a particular incident of shocking violence. In addition to these widely circulated works, Wells published an autobiography and kept a meticulous diary about her struggle in the movement to end extrajudicial murder.

To understand what horrified Wells so much about lynching, the concept of lynching must first be clearly defined. Jacqueline Jones Royster, editor of a selection of Wells’ anti-lynching pamphlets and Angela D. Sims, a writer on ethics, both begin their works on Wells with dictionary definitions of lynching.² However, Ida B. Wells was not into dry dictionary

¹Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: The New York Age Print, 1892), 2

²Angela D. Sims, *Ethical Complications of Lynching: Ida B. Wells’s Interrogation of American Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5

definitions. She preferred to give anecdotes, gather data, name names and track down specific information from a variety of sources, sometimes even going so far as to travel to small towns and conduct interviews. These methods placed her firmly in the “muckraking”era of journalism.³ She also ended each pamphlet with a section on “self-help” or steps to thwart the occurrence of lynchings. Providing an example not only mirrors Wells rhetorical style but better exemplifies the unique but typical horror of a lynching during this time period:

His clothes were torn off piecemeal and scattered in the crowd, people catching the shreds and putting them away as mementos. [The family of the murdered girl] gathered about the Negro as he lay fastened to the torture platform and thrust hot irons into his quivering flesh. It was horrible -- the man dying by slow torture in the midst of smoke from his own burning flesh. Every groan...was cheered by the thickly packed crowd of 10,000 persons...Then the eyes were burned out and irons were thrust down his throat.⁴

This was the case of Henry Smith, accused of murdering the daughter of a deputy policeman in Texas. When faced with such unspeakable horror, even the most misanthropic person would hopefully be moved to denounce it. Wells did so at an incredible cost to her own life, livelihood and reputation. And yet, she persevered, continuing to zealously and publically draw attention to the perpetrators. She frankly addressed the ills of the white male power structure that lived in the shadow of the Confederacy. The ills of white men who yearned to exercise their independence from the federal government for the first time in twenty five years. She spoke without fear about the crossing of sexual and racial boundaries that were thought uncrossable. Wells knew that these horrible crimes could not be divorced from context: the towns in which they took place, the

³ Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 213

⁴Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record* (Chicago: 1894), 95

lives of the victims, the character of the perpetrators and the historical relations that informed the violence in the South.

Lynching in the United States reached its apogee in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, specifically in the year 1892, when Wells' friends were lynched.⁵ Lynchings were virtually unheard of before the Civil War, and usually did not involve black slaves, a fact that Wells points out in her own work: "The slave was rarely killed, he was too valuable, it was easier and quite as effective, for discipline or revenge, to sell him 'Down South'." ⁶ Most lynchings had taken place out West, as a form of "frontier justice" and usually involved whites or Native Americans.⁷ However, Southern tensions after the Civil War caused an increase in the amount of lynching and a change in the type of victims. There are several reasons for this rise in lynchings. In 1865, after five years of a devastating and, in some cases, total war, the South was left decimated. Physically, the Southern states served as the main theater for the war, which left a clear path of destruction. The most famous example of this was Sherman's March to the Sea, which crippled Atlanta, but other, smaller towns were also left smoldering. Mentally, and by nature of their proximity to the war, the Southerners dealt with their losing prospects in the war, the heavy casualties and the uncertainties of the future. Economically, the South was in a precarious state. Thousands of young men marched to their deaths under the rebel flag, leaving behind thousands of war widows and orphans dependant on the shaky Confederate or postbellum governments. Both small farms and large plantations were destroyed, leaving no guarantee that

⁵Ida B. Wells, *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Chicago: 1900), 207

⁶Wells, *A Red Record*, 75

⁷Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, 9

the survivors could return to their farms and the only way of life they had known. Furthermore, the victory of the industrial North proved once and for all that the South's agrarian economy was unsustainable. Lastly, and most importantly, the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the war meant that black labor through slavery was no longer a reality. The surrender at Appomattox was the realization of the Southern white population's worst nightmares.

Reconstruction introduced other indignities: the occupation of Northern troops, the transition from slavery, carpetbaggers, scalawags and Republican politicians. Carpetbaggers, named after the small bags that carried their few belongings, came to the South with the express purpose of 'christianizing' the freed black population; Southerners viewed them as profiteers keen on exploiting their pain. Freedmen began exercising their newfound rights. They moved off plantations, began collecting wages, and voting. Some were even elected to local Republican governments. Most dangerously to Southern whites, certain freedmen even began amassing wealth. Adding to the general feelings of ire, some Southerners even allied themselves with the Republican governments, earning themselves the name scalawag. Though the worst war in their memories had just ended, many Southerners felt that Reconstruction was their new nightmare, a manifestation of all of their postwar fears. This tumultuous time was marked by race riots, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the legislating of Black Codes, designed to undermine the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments. The Klan, a terrorist organization hell bent on maintaining the status quo, was "led by planters, merchants and Democratic politicians, men who liked to style

themselves 'respectable citizens'."⁸ These 'respectable citizens', outraged by these indignities, were at the forefront of lynchings time and time again.

The respectable citizens had their prayers answered by the end of Northern occupation in 1877. The federal government, exhausted by both the war and Reconstruction, "quickly ordered federal troops to stop guarding the states houses in Louisiana and South Carolina, allowing Democratic claimants to become governor" in what was known as the Bargain of 1877.⁹ In exchange for electing Republican Rutherford B. Hayes president in a highly contested election, he agreed to give Democrats complete control of the Southern states, effectively ending Republican control of the South. Without government protection, newly restored Democratic governments were free to disenfranchise blacks. De facto segregation was now the law of the land. What little property the black population had amassed during Reconstruction, was at the mercy of marauding bands of vigilantes. Indeed, there are many cases of black property and money being outright stolen by members of the Ku Klux Klan in violent night raids. The lines between statesman and klansmen were blended beyond distinction. The democratic governments called themselves redeemers and pictured themselves as saving the "white South from corruption, misgovernment, and northern and black control."¹⁰ The men who chased Wells out of town were these redeemers.

In addition to the Civil War and Reconstruction, women's rights and populism were also gaining popularity around the country, leaving white men feeling as if they had been violated.

⁸Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History Vol 1* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011), 576

⁹Ibid, 581

¹⁰Ibid, 579

They were eager to regain a semblance of power and control. Social control was envisioned along racial and gender lines. Women and blacks were possessions who needed the guiding hand of the white Southern man. The emergence of blacks in society, rise of populism and the specter of women's rights threatened to wrest power from elite white men. Lynching was the only way to send a strong message: if you transgress our customs, you will pay. And yet Wells proved that the practice of lynching ironically put Southern white men further from their goals. The redeemers dreamed of a South even more robust economically than it had been before the Civil War. They gave their cities monikers like the "Athens of the South" --hoping to emulate the perfect oligarchic control of Ancient Greek democrats. However, lynching harmed the economy in many Southern cities. Lynching brought the negative scrutiny of the whole world upon the South. Instead of falling into line, blacks countered lynchings both passively and actively. Women, who took far longer to address the situation, eventually formed the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching in 1930.¹¹ Ida B. Wells led the charge against the redeemers in her papers and pamphlets, exposing their crimes to the world and jumpstarting these negative reactions.

The economic goals of the postbellum South were lofty indeed. White Southerners of all classes were ready to emerge economically from the ashes of the war. Poor whites especially who had aligned themselves early on with the Republican party later switched to the Democrats when their economic prospects did not improve.¹² There were calls of a "New South", a place where business interests could be fostered without fear. Southern men such as Henry W. Grady,

¹¹Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, 26

¹²Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 576

a leading journalist, were proponents of this “New South” idea. Unlike the old South, they hoped the “New South” would be “a land of industry, entrepreneurship and, scientific farming.”¹³ Grady himself sold the vision of the “New South” to Northern investors in his 1886 speech to the New England Club of New York, making sure to align his industrial hopes to theirs:

The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement--a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core--a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace--and a diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age.¹⁴

Playing to the crowd, Grady even exalted black laborers, stating incorrectly that “he shares our school fund, has the fullest protection of our laws and the friendship of our people” and that the land owning and employing class shows blacks particular “sympathy.”¹⁵ Despite the bright-eyed optimism of Grady and others, the “New South” was still like the old South in many ways. The South “remained disproportionately poor, characterized by staple crop monoculture, low-wage industry, and external ownership of much of its resources.”¹⁶ Contrary to Grady’s statements on the South’s sympathy for the Negro, the New South still ran on white supremacy, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Ida B. Wells when she tersely commented that “there is little difference between the Ante-bellum South and the New South.”¹⁷ C. Vann Woodward, noted scholar of the New South, sums up the position of the South in the introduction to his thick volume titled

¹³Eric Foner and John Garraty, *The Reader's Companion to American History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 791

¹⁴Joel Chandler Harris, *Life of Henry W. Grady* (Cassell Publishing Company, 1890)

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Foner and Garraty, *The Reader's Companion*, 791

¹⁷Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 66

Origins of The New South: “War and Reconstruction, while removing some of the South’s peculiarities, merely aggravated others and gave rise to new ones.”¹⁸ One of these new “peculiarities” Woodward alludes to is most certainly the practice of lynching.

No city in the South quite captured the quintessential “New South” like Memphis, Tennessee, scene of the lynching that catapulted Wells into her anti-lynching work. Tennessee was the first of the rebelling states to be readmitted to the United States and Memphis was regarded as a city for “forward-looking” African Americans.¹⁹ Wells characterized the population of Memphis as “thrifty law-abiding [and] property owning.”²⁰ In fact, many regarded mob violence as improbable.²¹ Memphis was a grand city, a cultural center-- not the Alabama backwoods. The lynching had occurred just outside of Memphis proper, in an area that was going through a considerable amount of change:

By the 1890s, the area was in transition, as whites were establishing racially exclusive areas within the city and abandoning outlying areas like the Curve to a large number of the poorer African American migrants, who joined the biracial working class already residing there.²²

The economic tension between the influx of optimistic African Americans and the leading white citizens, who enjoyed an economic monopoly, was a major factor in the resulting lynching. As blacks began to finally acquire the wealth cruelly denied to them under slavery, whites reacted violently, smarting at the prospect of competing for resources or consumers.

¹⁸C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Lsu Press, 1981), ix

¹⁹Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 15

²⁰Ibid, 62

²¹Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008), 187

²²Ibid, 176

The People's Grocery incident best illustrates the use of lynching to protect the economic hegemony. Thomas Moss, employed principally as a postmaster which made him a federal employee, was the president of this grocery and a close friend of Ida B. Wells. The People's Grocery was a "cooperative enterprise co-owned by ten other blacks in the community and organized along corporate lines."²³ The other two victims, Calvin McDowell and Will Stewart, worked as a manager and a clerk respectively. The grocery was in direct competition with the grocery of a white man named Barrett, whose establishment was described as less than reputable.²⁴ It was Barrett that lead the first party of officers to The People's Grocery to accost Calvin McDowell. In the confusion, McDowell, Stewart and Moss defended themselves and their property and ended up shooting and wounding (but not killing) the officers. Once it had become clear that they were officers of the law, the three men immediately ceased their counterattack and fled. Eventually they were apprehended and placed in jail. Jails could ironically be places of refuge for blacks accused of a crime, depending on how safe they were or how far away they were from the mob. But more often than not, the victims were stolen from jail, assisted by the policemen and jailers. Unfortunately, this was how it played out: McDowell, Stewart and Moss were taken from the jail and lynched.²⁵ Tellingly, "what was left of the People's Grocery was attached by creditors and eventually sold for one-eighth of its cost. The purchaser was William Barrett."²⁶

²³Ibid, 175

²⁴Ibid, 178

²⁵Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 64

²⁶Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 184

Wells, a close friend to the Moss family, seethed not only at the loss of her friends but also at their smearing in the white press. The white newspapers predictably followed established lynching tropes; one paper stated confidently that the business owners were “Negro desperados who kept a low dive.”²⁷ She was devastated by this crime, carried out against her friends with impunity by the leading white men of Memphis. In her autobiography, Wells remembers it as her “first lesson in white supremacy.”²⁸ Wells resolved to put an end to these crimes by exposing their true causes and using them against whites. She placed economics, not sexual deviance or antisocial behavior, as the main impetus in the lynching of these men.

Thus, as Wells made clear, the ramifications of the lynching were further reaching than the lynchers had hoped. What the ‘leading men’ failed to notice was the reliance of their economy on “Northern capital and Afro-American labor.”²⁹ Through the lynching of Moss, McDowell and Stewart, they succeeded in losing both. The forward-looking black population left the city in droves, at the urging of Wells herself: “There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property.”³⁰ It became clear to black Memphians that the South held no opportunity for them; in fact it was openly hostile to them, a fact that became more apparent as the white citizens refused to punish or even name the lynchers. The lynching of three men belonging to the upper echelon of the black community meant that no one was safe. The mass exodus immediately crippled the economy of Memphis: “Business was at a standstill,” Wells wrote gleefully in her

²⁷Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 65

²⁸Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 189

²⁹Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 68

³⁰Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 189

autobiography.³¹ The Memphians used migration as a non aggressive strategy to counter lynching and white supremacy. The Great Migration that occurred in the following decades was perhaps the greatest counter strategy to racial violence pre-Civil Rights Movement. Ida B. Wells had a personal hand in starting the great surge of African-Americans to the West and North.

The other factor that lynching exacerbated was Northern and foreign support, which Wells highlighted in her pamphlets and on her tour of England. After the bloody Civil War and the Reconstruction, the North had grown “fatigued” by Southern problems, largely acquiescing to the demands that Southern white men rule the South again.³² When Northern white men did acknowledge the lynching epidemic, they did so with the tone of an exasperated babysitter dealing with an unruly toddler: “middle class Northern whites...had previously tolerated lynching as a colorful, if somewhat old-fashioned, Southern regional custom.”³³ Enlightened people across the Atlantic were largely ignorant of these crimes, or believed that they were few and far between. They continued to trade with the South, as they had before the war, for cotton to fuel their textiles based economy. This incident in particular, and Wells’ subsequent activism, however, forced their hands. In the wake of the Moss, Stewart and McDowell lynching, “the Associated Press was asked to forward details about the lynching to businessmen in the North and in Europe who had trade connections with Memphis.”³⁴

³¹Ibid, 201

³²Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 580

³³Gail Bederman *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 45

³⁴Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 185

Many British readers and those in attendance of Wells' talks were shocked to hear the state of affairs in the South; they could not imagine a Christian country, especially one so closely tied to their own history, in which human beings were actively burned at the stake. Their disgust and rage eventually turned to action. Wells describes this sentiment secondhand in *A Red Record* after her tour of England:

An Englishman whose word and active co-operation could send a million sterling to any legitimate Southern enterprise said the other day: "I will not invest a farthing in States where these horrors occur...such outrage indicate to my mind that where life is held to be of such little value there is even less assurance that the laws will protect property. As I understand it the States, not the national government, control in such matters and where those laws are strongest there is the best field for British capital."³⁵

Economic interests could not be fostered in a place where lawlessness was king, the Englishman decided. Another British source flatly exposed the fatal flaw of Southerners who championed an economically powerful New South but practiced Old Southern justice: "For even now Negro labor...must be largely relied on there, and its efficiency must be still further diminished by spasmodic terrorism."³⁶ The English, who had a rich anti-slavery tradition and had abolished slavery sixty years previously, were baffled by the barbaric Southerners who sabotaged their own economy. The white Memphians, feeling besieged from all angles, called a meeting "three months after the lynching [and] passed resolutions for the first time, condemning it."³⁷ Something similar happened in New Orleans in 1899, during the chaos that was spawned by the hunt for Robert Charles, who had shot a police officer after being unduly harassed. Noticing that the "state bonds had depreciated from a point to a point and a half" on the New York Stock

³⁵Wells, *A Red Record*, 136

³⁶Ibid, 137

³⁷Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 69

Exchange, the business community acted to protect the city's credit.³⁸ The economic and political pressure placed on the Southerners seemed to finally be a real deterrent to Lynch Law.

Through her attack on two fronts, Ida B. Wells brought the Southern elite to its knees. As she wrote in *A Red Record*, "the appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience."³⁹ The migration and subsequent economic downturn proved that the Negro was "the industrial factor of the South" and by exercising his power, he could "demand and secure his rights, the punishment of the lynchers, and a fair trial for the accused rapists."⁴⁰ Likewise, by spreading accurate accounts of lynchings to the English and Northerners, Wells convinced them that their economic interests could not be vested in the South. In this way, she forced Memphis whites to denounce lynching for the first time. However, this victory was hollow. The denunciation was only a face-saving measure. After noting the victory in her first pamphlet, she italicized the next sentence for emphasis: "*But they did not punish the lynchers.*"⁴¹ The white businessmen who called this meeting knew exactly who killed McDowell, Stewart and Moss, yet they were compelled by a force larger than economics to not reveal the names or bring them to justice. Wells had discovered that the appeal to economics could only go so far. What was truly central to both the occurrence of lynching and ending the practice was the perpetrator's interpretation of law, order and civilization.

³⁸Wells, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, 173

³⁹Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 69

⁴⁰Ibid, 70

⁴¹Ibid, 69

There is no way to have a conversation about lynching without mentioning the South's system of justice. The turmoil of the past three decades had left the South in a murky area politically. Time spent under Northern control had made them weary of Northern law, of Northern justice and of Northern customs. The rejection of the law fostered lawlessness, ideal conditions for violent actions like lynchings to take place. Royster describes the two situations in which lawlessness is preferable to the law:

The first situation is when law and order does not exist, as in the early western frontier. In such cases people are compelled to take justice into their own hands in paving the way for the establishment of legal systems. When legal systems are in place, "frontier justice" is expected to end. The second situation is when law and order does not satisfy the needs of justice and can therefore be "rightly" ignored or circumvented. Such was the position taken by late-nineteenth-century lynchers of African-Americans. The group justified lynching with the basic argument that "law" was out of order.⁴²

To Southerners, trying blacks fairly in a court of law for the "raping" of white women seemed more barbaric than outright murdering them. Such a crime violated the most intimate "honor" of the white elite and something that heinous must be answered with an equally heinous response. A white newspaper printed the following in 1892: "*The white people won't stand this sort of thing, and whether they be insulted as individuals [or] as a race, the response will be prompt and effectual.*"⁴³ Effectively, the state of lawlessness had become the law.

This lawlessness only went one way. Nominally, Southern white men hated the crime of rape -- but the numerous mulatto children resulting from their rapes of black women said otherwise. Wells felt so strongly about this double standard (something she dubbed "color line justice") that she includes a series of anecdotes in both *A Red Record* and *Southern Horrors*. In

⁴²Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, 9

⁴³Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 64

one egregious example, the mob murders a black man for merely visiting a white woman while a white man sits safely in same the jail after raping a black child to the point of serious injury: “The “honor” of grown women...needed protection; they were white. The outrage upon helpless childhood need no avenging in this case; she was black.”⁴⁴ Even when whites felt the need to take responsibility for lynching, justice was differently meted out for white and black victims. In one of the most violent episodes of the lynching period, eleven Italian men were hung in New Orleans for allegedly conspiring to murder the police chief. The Italian government was angered and demanded justice; the United States government paid 25,000.⁴⁵ The families of lynching victims have yet to receive any sort of monetary reparations --they were, however, given a scanty apology by the US Senate in 2005, co-signed by only 80 senators.⁴⁶ The senators felt personally ashamed by the lack of anti-lynching legislation passed by the Senate.

From the grand halls of the US Senate to the living room of a local sheriff, lynching was aided and abetted by white men in powerful positions. In one case in 1892, a man named Peterson had placed himself in the protective care of the Governor of South Carolina. The Governor personally delivered Peterson to the lynch mob, although the alleged rape victim did not positively identify him.⁴⁷ Most lynchings rarely reached the profile of the governor. More often than not, the criminal justice system operated outside of the parameters of the law to conduct lynchings. In 1893, Paris, Texas, the sheriff and his family personally stuck hot irons

⁴⁴Wells, *A Red Record*, 129

⁴⁵Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 185

⁴⁶Avis Thomas Lester, “A Senate Apology for History on Lynching,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), June 14, 2005.

⁴⁷Wells, *A Red Record*, 125

onto the body of Henry Smith, who was accused of murdering and raping his young daughter Myrtle. The murder of police officers was an impetus for lynching in the People's Grocery case, the Robert Charles case and the lynching of eleven Italians in 1891. This is not even counting the "civilized white Americans" who beat, shot, burned and hung men and women themselves; among this group were judges, business owners, doctors, pastors, newspaper writers and other respectable men.⁴⁸ In the rare instance of a black man being provided a trial, all white juries could be counted on to convict the man of a crime. When these men were in custody, they would be taken from it "without resistance, and put to death."⁴⁹

Even if external forces had agitated Southerners enough to take action against lynchings, grand juries failed to indict the lynchers. Local citizens refused to identify these 'upstanding' men; the perpetrators of one of the very first notable Illinois lynchings "suffered a whit more inconvenience for the butchery of that man, than they would have suffered for shooting a dog."⁵⁰ Lynching was so ingrained in the moral, legal and social aspects of the South that the system of oppression and extrajudicial murder was upheld with little effort.

Wells knew that this was where the real battle had to be fought: in the hearts and minds of Southern people, not in their pockets alone. She crystallized this sentiment by saying that "it is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial."⁵¹ Wells used Southern men's duplicitous conception of justice to embarrass them. How could a Christian

⁴⁸Wells, *A Red Record*, 134

⁴⁹Ibid, 135

⁵⁰Ibid, 128

⁵¹Ibid, 155

people, sworn by the Ten Commandments, take part in such a barbaric practice with glee? Wells posed the question and the world wanted to know. In her book *Manliness and Civilization*, Gail Bederman argues that Wells strategically called into question the civilization of Southern men in order to further her anti-lynching crusade:

American whites believed themselves civilized Anglo-Saxons, superior to primitive blacks, but Wells argued that the opposite was true: African Americans were highly civilized, whereas white Americans were brutal and barbarous. By mobilizing all these arguments, Wells convinced the British that American whites were unmanly barbarians who needed to be civilized, and convinced white American men that the civilized world would condemn them as unmanly barbarians until lynching was stopped.⁵²

The British responded in the same way as they had when their property was at risk: with unilateral disgust. They went so far as to dispatch a fact-finding mission, called the London Anti-Lynching Committee, in 1894, much to the contempt of American whites.⁵³ Though the committee was lambasted in both the North and the South, white Americans had no choice but to acknowledge the British, their “racial equals” who were “qualified to to pronounce upon civilized manliness.”⁵⁴ In her greatest strategy to date, Wells painted the British as moral qualifiers for the Americans. She used them to chip away at the white American man’s civilization.

The London Anti-Lynching Committee specifically, and British condemnation of lynching in general were highly effective. Southern statesmen, at first seething with rage, were thoroughly embarrassed when lynchings occurred under their reign. The local governments, local newspapers and local newspapers who responded to lynchings with vengeful glee, at once began

⁵²Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 75

⁵³Wells, *A Red Record*, 136

⁵⁴Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 68

to reverse their policies. After a lynching in Tennessee, the scene of the People's Grocery lynching two years previously, the governor offered a reward for a lynchers' capture, the leading businessmen raised money for the orphans and widows of the lynched men and the local newspaper condemned the lynching, saying that they must prove themselves "ready to do [their] duty as civilized men and citizens."⁵⁵ In two short years, Wells had elicited this sort of response with her pamphlets and tours. These measures, however, were largely ephemeral. She could only go so far without federal intervention; something that she advocated for many times throughout her lifetime but ultimately never lived to see it.

It is not hard to discern the effect that Ida B. Wells had on lynching. After writing her widely read pamphlets and going on a highly regarded tour of England, Wells dedicated her time to advocating for black and women's rights. She raised a family in Chicago and became a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909.⁵⁶ Although no major legislation had ever passed that curtailed lynching, by the time of Wells death in 1931, the rate of lynching had decreased considerably.⁵⁷ Many groups, most notably the Association of White Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, had taken on the mantle of ending lynching. Wells' thorough dissent in her pamphlets, disseminated throughout the country and in three different languages, undoubtedly changed the tide in these crimes, or at least in the way they were spoken of.

Wells made sure that lawlessness and the law were never confused. These murders were aided and abetted by the local powers. Church going fathers and husbands, the leading citizens,

⁵⁵Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 69

⁵⁶Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, 39

⁵⁷Ibid, 41

became executioners. They stole men from jails, hacked off limbs, shot children and strung up bodies for public display. To the untrained Northern eye, these murders looked like the strange, but justified, practices of an out of mode populace. But Wells made sure that the blame was placed squarely on these men and their system. In her pamphlets and during her tours, she would challenge her audience to act by providing names, locations and detailed descriptions of these horrible crimes. When their moral, legal and social status was challenged by the English, Southerners began to finally take notice. Although it did not ultimately eliminate lynching, it was an important step towards racial equality.

She made the connection between the shifting economic system and the increase of racial violence, something that escapes modern commentators. The New South was only a mirage. The white elite killed any chances of a New South by killing African-Americans. The economy was so reliant on African-American labor which made brutally murdering them detrimental and unwise. The mass emigration of blacks crippled the economy in many cities. Furthermore, Northern and English capitalists looked unfavorably at lynch mobs and knew that their property would not be safe in a place where lawlessness reigned. The redeemers moved further away from their goal of a strong economy. Wells personally had a hand in both of these outcomes; she encouraged blacks to leave the South and went on a widely successful speaking tour in England.

The extrajudicial murder of African-American citizens is unfortunately still a familiar occurrence. The images of Michael Brown's corpse lying in the streets surrounded by white policemen for hours echo the sight of CJ Miller, hanging from a tree by a hog chain, surrounded by white picnic goers. The elaborate victim blaming in the press has not changed since the 1890s. It is clear that the leading men responsible for the lynchings had sons and grandsons who

continue their forefathers' legacies. While there are not large mobs stealing men from jails, we all have a hand in upholding this system that Wells worked so hard to destroy. When Wells was asked what to do by concerned listeners at her lectures, her answer was, unequivocally, "Tell the world the facts."⁵⁸ The only way to stop the scourge of racism is to arm ourselves with information. Wells was a witness to injustice but she was not a bystander: she proved that even the greatest of evils can be overcome through action and information.

⁵⁸Wells, *A Red Record*, 157

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