

## The Persistence of Ida B. Wells, Reform Leader and Civil Rights Activist

BY KRISTINA DUROCHER

In an 1892 speech, Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) told her audience, “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”<sup>1</sup> She lived these words, determinedly and vocally confronting every social injustice she encountered. Wells was part of an evolving world that experienced major racial, gendered, sexual, and political shifts. Born into slavery during the Civil War, she was a southern black woman without political power for most of her life, but these obstacles shaped her approach to reform differently from that of whites or black men. She began fighting racial discrimination in the legal system, but as white southerners lynched African Americans, she leveraged the press to expose the false rhetoric mobs used to justify their extralegal violence. In doing so, Wells launched an international anti-lynching campaign. Although Wells joined national organizations to incite change, her lack of a college education, outspoken personality, and the unwillingness of many to follow black female leadership prevented her from gaining lasting traction in these associations. Undaunted, Wells formed her own organizations where she could fight racial and other inequalities her way and subsequently influenced nearly every major reform movement during the Progressive Era.

When she was twenty-one years old, Wells experienced an incident of racial discrimination that began her life as an activist. On September 15, 1883, in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells purchased, as she had many times before, a train ticket for her commute to her rural teaching job. When the train was underway, the conductor, instead of collecting her ticket, handed it back to her. He later returned and informed Wells that she had to transfer to the other train car, but because she had purchased a first-class ticket, Wells refused to leave her seat. Undeterred, employees

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1. “Miss Ida B. Wells, A Lecture,” *Washington Bee*, October 22, 1892.

physically forced Wells, who stood just under five feet tall, from the compartment. On the side of the tracks, with her clothing torn and clutching her train ticket in her hand, she vowed to fight her mistreatment and filed a legal complaint against the Chesapeake, Ohio, Southwestern Railroad Company. Her lawsuit, which she ultimately lost, opened her eyes to the erosion of African Americans' civil liberties, and she determined to continue challenging discrimination.

Wells's lawsuit introduced her to the world of newspaper publishing, and she began writing, sharing her perspective on the political, economic, and gender issues facing African Americans and women. As her points of view gained widespread recognition, she earned the designation of the "Princess of the Press."<sup>2</sup> When a Memphis mob lynched her friend Thomas Moss along with his business partners Calvin McDowell and William Stewart in March 1892, Wells dealt with her grief by using her pen. Her perspective countered the white media's portrayal of the three middle-class black businessmen as crooks and troublemakers and led Wells to turn a critical eye to the white press coverage of other lynchings. She began traveling to sites of mob violence and interviewing local witnesses. Although whites leveled the accusation against black men of raping white women to justify lynchings, Wells failed to find any evidence to support these charges of sexual assault. She believed whites constructed such allegations to hide their economic and political motivations. Wells compiled her findings into an article, sent it to press, and boarded a train to attend a conference.

When the article was published in Memphis by her newspaper, the *Free Speech*, local whites, outraged by her claims, destroyed her newspaper office. Armed men watched her home with the intention of killing her on sight. As it was unsafe for her to return South, Wells settled in New York City, where she found allies in the black clubwoman movement, whose members focused on social reform and racial betterment. They supported Wells's work by founding the Ida B. Wells Testimonial Reception Committee to raise money and publish her findings in the pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892). Her work gained Wells an ally in Frederick Douglass, and she began lecturing across the nation and in England, launching an international campaign to reveal the truth behind the increasingly widespread practice of lynching. Returning from her first trip to England in August 1894, she declared, "I wanted the moral support of that wise Christian nation when I should demand in this country that the Negro shall have a fair trial when charged with crime, and not be made the scapegoat of a white man's crime, or a white woman's falsehood."<sup>3</sup>

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2. Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions, Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 628.

3. "An Anti-Lynching Crusade in America Begun," *Literary Digest* 9, no. 15 (August 11, 1894): 1, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09896.

## TOPICS OF THE DAY.

### AN ANTI-LYNCHING CRUSADE IN AMERICA BEGUN.

AFTER her successful anti-lynching crusade in England, Miss Ida B. Wells, the colored journalist, has returned to America and started a campaign in the Eastern States against lynching. Her plan is to lecture in the large cities and organize anti-lynching societies. She will visit the Western States when her work in the East is completed. Her lectures in New York and Brooklyn, and her interviews in the newspapers of these cities, have provoked considerable discussion in the Press. One remark of Miss Wells has attracted special attention. Referring to her work in England, she said:

"I wanted the moral support of that wise Christian nation when I should demand in this country that the Negro shall have a fair trial when charged with crime, and not be made the scapegoat of a white man's crime, or a white woman's falsehood."

Asked by a Southern correspondent of *The New York Sun* to explain the meaning of this remark, Miss Wells made these statements:

"I mean to say that Negroes have been known to be the scapegoats for white men's crimes. It is only necessary for a white man to blacken his face when he commits a crime, throw the suspicion on the first Negro he meets, follow him up until he is lynched, and then enjoy his stolen goods. The white criminals of the South know that no investigation will be made when suspicion is thrown on a Negro. No opportunity will be given the black man. The real criminal has only to lead the mob, or rest content until the man he has accused is dead. That is what we mean by white men making scapegoats of the Negro.

"As to white women's falsehoods, a woman has only to accuse a Negro to free herself from blame. In the South it is degradation of the lowest type to commit a sin with a black man, far worse than to err with one of your own race. It means loss of caste. The men will not believe it possible. We have villains among us, but it is a slander as foul as it is false, to accuse Negro men of the monopoly of a crime of which Southern white men have been so notorious, not only before, but since the war. My candid belief founded on investigation, is that four-fifths of the cases of so-called assault of white women by black men would be called adultery if the man was of the same race as the woman. Why should it be impossible to believe white women guilty of the same crime for which Southern white men are notorious?"

The comments of the Press on these significant charges are not lacking in warmth.

The newspapers have reported the formation of one or two anti-lynching societies in New York and Brooklyn, among the

*A detail from the Literary Digest 9, no. 15, August 11, 1894, reporting Ida Wells's campaign to stop lynching. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07752.01, p. 1)*

Upon returning from her second international tour in 1895, Wells married the lawyer Ferdinand L. Barnett and moved to Chicago, Illinois. As an outward sign of her continued commitment to her own identity, she hyphenated her last name, an uncommon practice in the nineteenth century. Wells-Barnett continued investigating lynchings around the country, and other social reformers, including Hull House co-founder Jane Addams, joined her anti-lynching cause. Her increased exposure also subjected Wells-Barnett to criticism, with one activist describing her as "a bull in a China shop" in reference to her blunt approach to sensitive subjects.<sup>4</sup> Additional critiques focused on her insistence on voicing her opinions, and in doing so, failing to be deferential to whites or black men in leadership roles. She faced swift professional repercussions after she publicly spoke out against African

4. Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 256; Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 244.

American education reformer Booker T. Washington for not refuting the message of whites that black men were sexual predators. In her own fight against lynching, she boldly declared that "it is a slander as foul as it is false, to accuse Negro men of the monopoly of a crime of which Southern white men have been so notorious, not only before, but since the war. My candid belief founded on investigation, is that four-fifths of the cases of so-called assault of white women by black men would be called adultery if the man was of the same race as the woman."<sup>5</sup> Washington's supporters blocked her efforts to maintain leadership roles in national organizations. In response, Wells-Barnett sought to create new spaces for her activism.

During the next decade, Wells-Barnett attempted to establish interracial reform societies, but she could not pry leadership roles away from whites. She ended her efforts in 1909, the same year that she answered a call for volunteers to create an organization focused on racial progress. Even at the inaugural meeting of what would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Wells-Barnett fought prejudice. Of the sixty attendees, there was only one other black woman. The meeting coordinators, both white, decided to create a committee to establish and guide the association. Although the list was supposedly secret, Wells-Barnett saw her name on a draft, but the next day discovered that a white woman had replaced her. Dismayed, Wells-Barnett fought against the change and her name was added as one of the forty founders.

At the 1910 NAACP meeting, Wells-Barnett suggested developing a publication to spread news about the organization's work in combatting lynching. The committee agreed and launched *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, but chose W. E. B. Du Bois, a black male activist, to be the editor. Wells-Barnett saw this as a purposeful slight; she had started the anti-lynching movement and possessed nearly two decades of journalistic experience. Wells-Barnett continued to participate in reform associations but her candor, lack of education, race, and gender prevented her from advancing into leadership roles. She never stopped trying to effect change on a national level, but redoubled her efforts at local reform, where she could direct her own endeavors.

One of the organizations she founded was the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first black women's voting rights group in Chicago.<sup>6</sup> When the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) announced a march in Washington DC to coincide with President Woodrow Wilson's 1913 inauguration, Wells-Barnett's club members raised money to attend. Upon their arrival, NAWSA leadership

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5. "An Anti-Lynching Crusade," 1.

6. Wells-Barnett also established the Negro Fellowship League (NFL) to support urban black men and fight issues of poverty in Chicago. She spearheaded several legal battles for the fair treatment of African Americans, advocated for the unionization of Pullman Porters, and became the first black female probation officer in Chicago, applying her salary to support these undertakings.

informed the interracial delegation that African Americans must walk at the back of the parade. Wells-Barnett responded, "I was asked to march with the other women of our state, and I intend to do so or not take part in the parade at all."<sup>7</sup> When the procession began, Wells-Barnett appeared to have fulfilled her threat and was absent from the African American division. Once the delegation of white women from Illinois stepped forward, however, Wells-Barnett walked out from the crowd and calmly joined them. Her defiance led the *Chicago Defender* newspaper to note, "The race has no greater leader among the feminine sex than Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett."<sup>8</sup>

During the following years, Wells-Barnett continued to advocate for women's suffrage and investigate racial violence. She also returned to her journalistic roots, focusing on issues of fair housing, education, jobs, and equal treatment before the law. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment legalized women's suffrage and Wells-Barnett, eager to encourage newly enfranchised African American women to challenge social injustices, founded several political organizations, including the Third Ward Women's Political Club.<sup>9</sup> Her goal in establishing this group was to train black women to run for political office. She acted on this conviction herself, running for an Illinois senate seat in 1929. She lost in the primary, but felt the campaign was a valuable experience that would benefit other black women.

Wells-Barnett would not live to see another election. In March 1931, at sixty-eight years old, she died of kidney failure. Her story is of a woman in the front lines of a society that perpetuated massive inequalities, which she fought to correct. Wells-Barnett began the last chapter of her unfinished autobiography with the words "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."<sup>10</sup>

While serving as an exhortation to her readers, this statement also reflects Wells-Barnett's own unwavering and lifelong work as a civil rights activist.

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7. Giddings, 517.

8. "Illinois Women Participate in Suffrage Parade. This State Was Well Represented in Washington," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 5, 1913; "Marches in Parade Despite Protests," *Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1913.

9. Wells-Barnett also joined the Chicago chapter of the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLRCW) and became a National Organizer for the Colored Women of Illinois. She formed the Women's Forum, a group focused on weekly social programs, and remained active in the Ida B. Wells Woman's Club founded in her honor.

10. Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1970), 415. Wells is quoting Wendell Phillips's 1852 speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Phillips told his audience, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; power is ever stealing from the many to the few." Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 52.



*Ida B. Wells, photograph taken by Miss Garrity, Chicago, 1893.  
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)*