

ONE
IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT
(1862–1931)

There is scarcely any reason why this woman, young in years and old in experience, shall not be found in the forefront of the great intellectual fight in which the race is now engaged for absolute right and justice under the Constitution.

—T. Thomas Fortune, 1893 (Thompson, 1990, p. 1)

INTRODUCTION

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was an antilynching and civil rights activist at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In spite of her national and international reputation and membership in the Negro elite of Chicago, her contributions have been sorely neglected until very recently. This was due, at least in part, to the masculinity of the civil rights movement. Furthermore, unlike many African Americans at the turn of the century who were silent on the issues of lynching and mob violence, Wells-Barnett was an outspoken race woman (Thompson, 1990). She had a reputation as an “Afro-American Agitator,” a term coined by Henry Gady of the *Atlanta Constitution* to describe the more aggressive and militant African Americans of that era (*ibid.*, p. 20).

For various reasons, Ms. Barnett had no graduate school training. Clearly, she had the ability to complete graduate studies, but her life circumstances, especially the early death of her parents, and perhaps her gender, precluded this accomplishment. Nevertheless, she had an illustrious career as a teacher, journalist, antilynching crusader, orator, and activist involved in civil rights and political and social issues.

Wells-Barnett’s contributions to criminological thought are found in her research on lynching in the United States. She was one of the first individuals to call attention to the implications of lynching for both government and law and order in the late 1800s. She viewed lynching as a national crime and called attention to its deleterious impact on the administration of justice before and after the turn of the nineteenth century. Until very recently there has been a lack of information on Wells-Barnett’s writings, activities, and accomplishments (Thompson, 1990). Consequently, her contributions to understanding crime and justice have not been included in the study of criminology. With few exceptions, she is still unknown to most criminologists.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Wells-Barnett, the first of eight children, was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on 16 July, 1862 to Jim Wells and Lizzie Warrenton. Ida's father was the only son of his master, and his mother, Peggy, a slave. Thompson (1990) described Jim Wells as belonging to the favored class of blacks and thus was spared of some of the cruelties of slavery, including whipping and being sold. His father provided training as a carpenter for his son and apprenticed him to a contractor in Holly Springs. Wells-Barnett's mother was born a slave in Virginia. She was employed as a cook for the Holly Springs family where Jim Wells was apprenticed. The couple was married once as slaves and again after emancipation.

After emancipation the Wells family remained in Holly Springs. Thompson (1990) described Jim Wells as a good provider and Lizzie Wells as a religious woman who guided the children's housework, schoolwork, and religious service. In 1878 the Wells and one son were victims of a yellow fever epidemic that swept through the town. Ida was visiting with her grandmother at the time but returned immediately to care for her surviving brothers and sisters. At sixteen, Ida Wells became a surrogate parent to her five siblings, insisting that they be neither separated nor cared for by others.

As a result of her education (described below) at Shaw University (Rust College), Wells was hired as a teacher in Holly Springs and later moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to stay with an aunt. She left three of her siblings and took two sisters with her. For most of the 1880s she taught in Memphis. After losing her teaching appointment, she turned her attention to the newspaper of which she owned one-third, the *Free Speech and Headlight*. In 1892, her outspoken editorials (described below) resulted in her being exiled from Memphis.

After leaving Memphis, Wells-Barnett lived in New York City, working for the *New York Age*, edited by her colleagues T. Thomas Fortune and Jerome B. Peterson. She also lectured extensively, both nationally and abroad. She settled in Chicago in 1895, after marrying Ferdinand Barnett, a prominent Chicago lawyer and newspaper publisher. In 1896 Ferdinand Barnett was appointed assistant state's attorney (Thompson, 1990). The Barnetts were considered black leaders and belonged to the black social elite of Chicago. They were both journalists, politicians, and social activists.

Shortly after their marriage, Wells-Barnett assumed the responsibilities of editor of her husband's newspaper, the *Conservator*. Two years later, in 1897, Wells-Barnett gave up her duties and other activities to stay home with her children.

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

When Ida B. Wells was young, her father, Jim Wells, served on the board of Shaw University, a Freedman's school that included elementary, secondary, and college

levels of learning. All the Wells children attended the school. Sometimes their mother would also attend classes to learn to read. At the time of the yellow fever outbreak, Ida had begun the college course, although she was unable to complete it. She also studied at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, during several summers. Wells-Barnett passed the exam for country teachers in Holly Springs and taught there before relocating to Memphis to teach. In Memphis, she worked as both teacher and journalist. She relocated to Visalia, California, for a brief period to take a teaching position but resigned after a short stay (Thompson, 1990).

During the 1880s, Wells-Barnett contributed articles to several religious weeklies and other black and white newspapers using the name *Iola* (ibid., p. 15). She also belonged to Memphis' black literary circle and edited its weekly publication, the *Evening Star*. In 1889, she became a partner and joined the editorial staff of the *Free Speech*, an Afro-American newspaper. Eventually, her editorials criticizing the Memphis school system caused her to lose her reappointment as a teacher. This allowed her to devote more time to both editing and building up the circulation of the paper of which she was now co-owner (ibid., p. 19). Wells-Barnett's antilynching crusade began in the early 1890s. According to Thompson (1990), the lynching of three friends who owned a grocery store just outside of Memphis was a defining moment in Wells-Barnett's antilynching activities. Like most other Americans, she believed that lynching victims committed crimes, especially rape. However, the three blacks lynched in Memphis had not committed such crimes. Rather, they were victims of a scheme by a white grocer in the vicinity who was losing business to them. The circumstances of the lynching of her friends prompted her to investigate those that were supposedly related to rapes. After concluding that many of the rape stories were untrue, she penned her famous editorial that eventually led to the demise of *Free Speech*.

Her editorial on lynching that appeared on 21 May 1892 angered the leading business men of Memphis. Her statement, "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women" (ibid., p. 29) prompted an editorial response in the white newspaper the *Daily Commercial*. That editorial noted "the fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites" (Wells-Barnett, 1892/1969, p. 4). In reality, the leading citizens of Memphis were outraged. Within days, Mr. Fleming, the business manager and half-owner of *Free Speech* was forced to leave town, and Wells-Barnett was advised not to return from her participation in a church conference in Philadelphia and vacation in New York City. The *Free Speech* office was subsequently destroyed, taken by creditors and sold.

While exiled, Ms. Wells continued her antilynching writing and speaking. After a speech at a testimonial fund raiser sponsored by "two black club women" in New York City, she was able to finance her first publication on lynching, *Southern Horrors* (Thompson, 1990, p. 32). She lectured in the United States and in England at the request of both blacks and whites. Her lectures would also appear as newspaper

articles. She was among the first to call for self-help against lynching among Afro-Americans. She supported economic boycotts, emigration, and self-armament to stamp out “lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery” (ibid., p. 24).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO CRIMINOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Our country's national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an “unwritten law” that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal.

—Ida B. Wells (1900, p. 15).

Wells-Barnett's research on lynching and mob violence was an outgrowth of both her personal experience in Memphis and her belief that no one else seemed to be defending Afro American victims against lynching during the 1890s. For over twenty years she was actively involved in efforts to understand the causes, extent, prevention, and control of lynching. Her research and writings presented the historical development of lynching, prevailing rationales, secondary data, case studies, and remedies. Yet her contributions were glaringly omitted. Here, Wells-Barnett's research on lynching and its acceptance by those responsible for upholding the law and the administration of justice are presented.

Although trained neither as a sociologist or a historian, Wells-Barnett utilized research methods common at the time, including content analyses of reports of lynching in newspapers, analyses of secondary data from the *Chicago Tribune*, and field research, usually after a lynching had occurred. She also published newspaper articles and three anti-lynching pamphlets, *Southern Horrors*, *A Red Record*, and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. Her contributions to understanding lynching and mob violence are summarized below.

History and Rationale for Lynching

Historical information and the causes of lynching are important components of most of Wells-Barnett's antilynching writings. Like other early scholars, she acknowledges the roles of slavery, emancipation, and post-Reconstruction in the ongoing plight of blacks in America. She noted the effect of post-Reconstruction social, economic, and political conditions on the deteriorating status of the Negro. More specifically, she accused Southerners of depriving blacks (males) of the ballot, civil rights, redress in the courts, the fruits of their labor and of lynching them in efforts to maintain their

power. One of her major contributions to understanding the causes of lynching is found in her rebuttal to the prevailing rationales, which she described as excuses for barbarism (Wells-Barnett, 1892/1969).

Wells-Barnett (1893) traced the origin of lynch law to Pittsylvania County, Virginia. In 1780 a group of citizens joined together to suppress horse thieves and counterfeiters who defied ordinary laws. A Colonel William Lynch drafted a constitution for the citizens' group, and since then the term *lynch law* has been used to refer to the infliction of punishment by private and unauthorized citizens. Wells-Barnett (1909) also noted that frontier lynch law was very popular in the far West until judicial apparatuses were established. However, in the South, even with the existence of a judicial process, lynch law continued. For fifteen years after emancipation, Negroes were lynched for trying to vote and attempting to rule whites.

Wells-Barnett (1892/1969) identified at least four causes or rationales for lynching during the late 1800s. Drawing on the writing of Frederick Douglass, Wells-Barnett noted that lynchings were justified by whites because they were used to prevent race riots, to prevent Negroes from voting, and to punish those who assaulted or attempted to assault white women. Another rationale she identified was an ongoing effort to eliminate blacks who were becoming too prosperous (Thompson, 1990).

Immediately after the civil war, until the early 1870s, lynchings were excused by propaganda that blacks were planning and participating in insurrections and riots. However, there was rarely any evidence to support this rationale. Wells-Barnett noted, "No insurrections ever materialized, no Negro rioter was ever apprehended and proven guilty, and no dynamite ever recorded the black man's protest against oppression and wrong" (Wells-Barnett, 1892/1969, p. 9). During Reconstruction, lynching to prevent voting began to occur. According to Wells-Barnett, "The southern white man would not consider that the Negro had any right which a white man was bound to respect, and the idea of a republican form of government in the southern states grew into general contempt" (ibid., p. 9). By 1882, the major reason for lynching was purported to be either attempting to or assaulting white women (Thompson, 1990, p. 195). Wells-Barnett refuted these causes/rationales/excuses for lynching on several grounds. First, she noted that in spite of the rationals given for lynching, in fact, blacks were lynched for almost any offense. Second, she argued that the term *rape* was used to describe any and all alliances between black men and white women, whether or not they met the legal definition of the crime of rape. Through her research, she discovered that many white women and black men were involved in voluntary relationships for which the male was lynched to uphold the honor of the woman (Wells-Barnett, 1892/1969).

Perhaps Wells-Barnett's most stinging argument against the rationale for rape/assault lynching is found in her comments on relationships between white females and black males and white males and black females during both slavery and the Civil War period. She specifically noted that during slavery and the Civil War, black males were not accused of rape but rather were the protectors of white women and children

while white males fought the rebellion. Furthermore, she believed it hypocritical for white males to speak of chivalry when they themselves had fathered numerous biracial children in the South, usually by assault/rape of black female slaves.

Wells-Barnett's last rebuttal against the so-called causes of rape-related lynching was related to the role Northern white women played in educating former slaves after emancipation. She stated that these women were ostracized, insulted, and persecuted by the chivalrous white Southern men. More important, they spent most of their time with Negroes, in very remote areas, with little protection, and were not assaulted. Wells-Barnett believed that it was important for those outside the South to recognize the real facts about the morality and trustworthiness of the Negro.

Lynching Statistics

In order to give validity to her lynching facts, Wells-Barnett relied on the statistical compilations reported annually in the *Chicago Tribune*. In her pamphlets, she focused specifically on lynching of blacks and included the victims' names, the date and the location of incidents, and the offenses charged. Although she did not provide trend analyses, she did notice a steady increase in reported lynching and provided a breakdown by states for the years 1892, 1893, and 1894. In *Mob Rule in New Orleans* she focused more specifically on Negroes murdered by mobs between 1882 and 1899 (Wells-Barnett, 1900/1969).

Between 1880 and 1891, approximately one hundred Negroes were lynched annually. In 1892, the year that Wells-Barnett's friends were lynched in Memphis, lynching of black men reached an all time high of 160. The majority were lynched for murder (58) and rape (46). Others were lynched for attempted rape (11), incendiarism (6), race prejudice (6), and several other offenses (Wells-Barnett, [1895] 1969, p. 20). In 1893, 159 blacks were lynched for murder (44), alleged murder (6), alleged complicity in murder (4), rape (39), attempted rape (8), alleged rape (4), and other offenses (*ibid.*, p. 19). In both years, the majority of victims were lynched in the Southern states.

Lynching Case Studies

Accounts of lynching, herein referred to as case studies, appeared in most of Wells-Barnett's antilynching writings. While some accounts were more detailed than others, each provided a glimpse of the facts surrounding lynching incidents. Her case studies were based upon content analyses of previously published articles as well as field visits to communities after a lynching. Her interest in understanding the situational characteristics of lynching increased after her friends were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee. As previously stated, even she had accepted the ideology of lynching until this incident.

After the deaths of her friends in Memphis in 1892, for three months (March–May) Wells-Barnett carefully researched the details of lynching incidents where the

victims were accused of rape (Thompson, 1990). Based upon her findings, she challenged what is often referred to as the (lynching) “rape myth.” This prompted her editorial that led to the destruction of *Free Speech* and her subsequent exile. Her accounts of the incidents she identified and that of the Memphis lynchings appeared in *Southern Horrors*. Additional accounts of rape lynchings and lynching of imbeciles and innocent men appeared in *A Red Record*.

The most detailed case study published by Wells-Barnett (1900/1969) described the mob lynchings of two black males in New Orleans, Louisiana, in July 1900. Based upon information reported in the *New Orleans Times Democrat* and the *New Orleans Picayune*, Wells-Barnett (ibid.) described the mob violence that lasted from Monday, 24 July to Friday, 28 July 1900. The mob brutality was provoked by an attempt by two New Orleans police officers, Officer Mora and Officer Cantrelle, to arrest two black men, which resulted in a shoot out, injuring one of the officers and one of the blacks. According to Wells-Barnett, Robert Charles and Leonard Pierce were resisting an unwarranted arrest and were victims of police harassment and brutality. Contrary to the depiction of the Negroes as desperadoes in the local papers, Wells-Barnett maintained that Charles, who killed Officer Mora, drew his weapon in self-defense. Although he was wounded, Charles escaped, and Pierce was taken into custody. Immediately, the mayor of New Orleans sanctioned Charles to be killed on sight and offered a \$250 reward for his capture, dead or alive (ibid.). By Wednesday, 25 July, Charles was still at large, in spite of several attempts to capture him and his success in killing more police. Civil unrest that included rioting, assaults, and killings of blacks ensued. On Friday, the police were informed of Charles’s location in a house, which they set on fire. After another shootout with the police, while the house was burning, Charles finally emerged and was riddled with bullets (ibid.).

Another case study of a double lynching in Cairo, Illinois, in November 1909, was reported by Wells-Barnett (1910). While the facts of the lynching incident are similar to the heinous and barbaric characteristics of other incidents, this one resulted in the governor’s removal of the sheriff of Alexander County for failure to protect prisoners. This was believed to have had a profound impact on reducing lynching in the state (Thompson, 1990).

The Administration of Justice

Lynch Law has become so common in the United States that the finding of the dead body of a Negro, suspended, between heaven and earth to the limb of a tree, is of so slight importance that neither the civil authorities nor press agencies consider the matter worth investigating.

—Wells-Barnett (1900/1969, p. 44)

The lynching era in American history points to a breakdown in the administration of justice. First, lynching involved criminal behavior, including assaults, kidnapping, murder, riots, vigilantism, and other types of violence. Second, these acts often

involved police officers and sheriffs and were tacitly condoned by those expected to uphold the law. Third, the majority of lynching victims were “along the color line” (Wells-Barnett, 1909, p. 261). Antilynching crusaders spoke out against the absence of law and order.

Cutler (1905, pp. 157–58) defined lynching as “the practice whereby mobs capture individuals suspected of crime or take them from the officers of the law or break open jails and hang convicted criminals with impunity.” Wells-Barnett and other antilynching crusaders acknowledged that many of the black lynching victims had committed crimes. However, they called for the use of the judicial process in determining guilt and punishment and denounced vigilante justice.

Wells-Barnett (1909) viewed federal protection as the remedy for lynching since Americans were citizens of the country as well as its states. If state governments could not control the lawlessness of its citizens, she believed the federal government should.

Wells-Barnett was instrumental in establishing the utility of enfranchisement in preventing and controlling lynching. After the Cairo lynching, she petitioned Governor Charles Deneen, with the support of Cairo residents, to deny reappointment of the sheriff. In a legal brief prepared by her husband, Wells-Barnett argued that the sheriff acted in violation of the Anti-Mob Violence Statute of 1905 by his failure to protect his prisoners (Thompson, 1990).

CONCLUSION

As previously stated, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an antilynching crusader, journalist, lecturer, militant, race woman, civil rights, political, and social activist, was well known both nationally and internationally. Her greatest contribution to criminology and to society is the detailed information about lynching she made available. Her work also laid the foundation for a better understanding of the reality of the problem of lynching as opposed to the hysteria it created. Wells-Barnett systematically dispelled many of the myths about both lynching and blacks and crime. She did not excuse the criminal behavior of those blacks who did commit crimes. Rather, she called into question the failure of the government and its agencies to prevent and control illegal lynching. Wells-Barnett also shaped public opinion and antilynching legislation during her antilynching campaign. Although lynching was not eradicated during her period of activism, other individuals and organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), joined the antilynching movement in the early twentieth century.

Responses to both Wells-Barnett and her antilynching efforts were mixed. She was respected by some and disliked by others, both black and white, male and female. In the introduction to the reprint of Mrs. Wells-Barnett’s antilynching pamphlets, August Meier described her as a propagandist even though she presented evidence of lynching that was factually accurate. Shortly after publishing her first pamphlet on

lynching, entitled *Southern Horrors*, Wells-Barnett received a letter from Frederick Douglass thanking her for her knowledge and facts about “the lynch abomination” (Wells-Barnett, 1892/1969). Until his death in 1895, Douglass was a supporter of Wells-Barnett (Thompson, 1990). However, when Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois ascended as spokespersons for blacks, Wells-Barnett was less prominent, due in part to her outspokenness and radical views.

More recently, Wells-Barnett has been recognized as the leader and heroine she always was. Fradin (2000) describes her as the mother of the civil rights movement. She is included in numerous publications that focus on outstanding Americans, black women, and women (Sterling, 1979; Thompson, 1990; Miller, 1995; Smallwood, 1998). Others continue to write about her life and antilynching crusade (Lisandrelli, 1998; McMurry, 1998; Welch, 1999). It is hoped that her contributions to criminological thought will receive more attention in the future.

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