

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

1862-1931

Ida B. Wells-Barnett is best known as a courageous, tenacious, consciousness-raising investigative journalist of lynching; however, it is more accurate to consider her a community organizer and literary activist who wrote stirring essays on a variety of political subjects, including education and equal rights. Born to enslaved parents, Jim and Elizabeth Warrenton Wells, six months before Emancipation, Ida Baker Wells was the oldest of eight children. When the Freedman's Aid association opened a school in Holly Springs, Mississippi, Jim Wells became a member of the trustee board and Ida B. Wells became one of its first students. When her parents died in the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, sixteen-year-old Ida dropped out of school and found work as a teacher in order to support her siblings. Later she moved to Memphis where the salaries were higher, and during the summer breaks she attended Fisk University. An outspoken critic of substandard education for African Americans, Wells-Barnett began her journalism career as a contributor to the *Evening Star*, a paper affiliated with her Friday evening "lyceum," one of several informal educational endeavors in black America that provided experience in elocution and reading through discussion of current events and literature. In 1884 she became editor of the *Living Way*, a weekly black Baptist newspaper. Wells-Barnett later wrote, "I had an instinctive feeling that the people who had little or no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with their problems in a simple, helpful way. So in weekly letters to the *Living Way*, I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people." One subject was her own lawsuit against the Chesapeake, Ohio, and Southwestern Railroad. Wells-Barnett had sued the railroad company for attempting to expel her from the ladies' car. Though she won her case in a lower court, the Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the ruling. Her columns written under the pen name "Iola" were reprinted in newspapers throughout the country. When she was twenty-seven, Wells-Barnett became editor and part owner of the *Memphis Free Speech*. Two years later, when she wrote an article denouncing inadequate schools for black children, she was fired from her teaching position. Not long afterward another article almost cost her life. In March 1892 three black businessmen opened a grocery store that competed with a white merchant. They were lynched. Outraged, Wells-Barnett wrote a scathing report that challenged the purported cause of the lynching with this statement: "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 a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." Fortunately, Wells-Barnett was out of town visiting Frances E. W. Harper when the white mob destroyed the office of the *Free Speech*. Her partner, J. C. Fleming, was run out of town and Wells-Barnett was advised not to return.

Making the best of her exile, Wells-Barnett made a new home for herself and soon became writer, editor, and part owner of the *New York Age*. She continued to develop her critiques of lynch law and to publicize events in the South, believing that northerners would be moved to action if they were made aware of what was happening. A *Red Record* was one of several publications written to inspire her readers to take positive action. Among her other well-publicized crusades was one she undertook with Frederick Douglass, Ferdinand Lee Barnett, and I. Garland Penn, for which

Wells-Barnett wrote and distributed a pamphlet titled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

She later married Ferdinand Lee Barnett and had four children, but Wells-Barnett continued her activism. She continued to edit newspapers and to author provocative essays. She became nationally prominent in the women's club movement and was part of the founding group of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1913 she organized one of the first suffrage groups made up of black women, and in 1930 she ran as an independent candidate for Illinois state senator.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett is remembered as an outspoken and articulate advocate of equal rights and a fearlessly feminist pioneer in journalism. However, as her diary demonstrates, her literary aspirations included becoming a serious novelist. Realizing that her contributions were being ignored, belittled, or usurped by men such as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois, Wells-Barnett wrote her own autobiography, *A Crusade for Justice*, which was published after her death, by her daughter, Alfreda B. Duster.

From A Red Record

Chapter I

THE CASE STATED

The student of American sociology will find the year 1894 marked by a pronounced awakening of the public conscience to a system of anarchy and outlawry which had grown during a series of ten years to be so common, that scenes of unusual brutality failed to have any visible effect upon the humane sentiments of the people of our land.

Beginning with the emancipation of the Negro, the inevitable result of unbridled power exercised for two and a half centuries, by the white man over the Negro, began to show itself in acts of conscienceless outlawry. During the slave regime, the Southern white man owned the Negro body and soul. It was to his interest to dwarf the soul and preserve the body. Vested with unlimited power over his slave, to subject him to any and all kinds of physical punishment, the white man was still restrained from such punishment as tended to injure the slave by abating his physical powers and thereby reducing his financial worth. While slaves were scourged mercilessly, and in countless cases inhumanly treated in other respects, still the white owner rarely permitted his anger to go so far as to take a life, which would entail upon him a loss of several hundred dollars. 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."

But Emancipation came and the vested interests of the white man in the Negro's body were lost. The white man had no right to scourge the emancipated Negro, still less has he a right to kill him. But the Southern white people had been educated so long in that school of practice, in which might makes right, that they disdained to draw strict lines of action in dealing with the Negro. In slave times the Negro was kept subservient and submissive by the frequency and severity of the scourging, but, with freedom, a new system of intimidation came into vogue; the Negro was not only whipped and scourged; he was killed.

Not all nor nearly all of the murders done by white men, during the past thirty years in the South, have come to light, but the statistics as gathered