



Patricia A. Schechter. *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930.* Gender and American Culture Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. x + 386 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4965-1.

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Ida B. Wells-Barnett: A Visionary Pragmatist

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Patricia A. Schechter has written a brilliant biography of Ida B. Wells-Barnett which enriches our understanding of a complex and devoted reformer, both beloved and condemned for her visionary thinking and outspoken rhetoric. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of her life, Schechter is more interested in exploring Wells-Barnett's ideas and their reception. Her work spanned several decades, and Schechter explores how and why Wells-Barnett's reputation rose and fell over time. Her work builds upon and expands recent histories of African American men and women working to uplift the race during the rise of Jim Crow and Progressive era reform. In particular, because Wells-Barnett was more outspoken than many other prominent black women reformers at the time, her experiences provide insight into the resistance black women faced from whites, black men, and each other as they sought to improve their communities.

Schechter argues that Wells-Barnett operated on the basis of her "visionary pragmatism" (p. 3). By this, she means that Wells-Barnett was more deeply inspired by religious faith than many white Protestant Progressive era reformers, who were beginning to move to a more secular reform rhetoric, and that she used politics and the ballot among other tactics as a means of uplifting her community. Wells-Barnett's visionary pragmatism guided her as she fought lynching and sought social justice through women's clubs, community organizations,

and finally through running (unsuccessfully) for political office in Chicago.

Wells-Barnett was and still is best-known for her role as an outspoken crusader against lynching in the 1890s. The dramatic incident most associated with Wells-Barnett is undoubtedly the controversial editorial she wrote in response to the lynching of friends in Memphis. In it she claimed that lynchings were most often not related to rape but to economic and political control of African Americans. Furthermore she dared to hint that sex between white women and black men was consensual—a suggestion which resulted in the burning of her newspaper office in Memphis and her exile from the South. Using brilliant gender analysis, Schechter explores Wells-Barnett's rise and fall in the anti-lynching movement, producing the two strongest chapters in the book.

Wells-Barnett understood and articulated well before many other African American leaders that lynching was a form of social, political, and economic control. At the end of the century, white fears of black progress amidst a time of social change led not only to black disfranchisement and segregation but also a dramatic rise in the public spectacle of lynching black men. Whites commonly defended lynchings on the basis that their victims were black rapists of white women. In *Southern Horrors*, a pamphlet published soon after the Memphis editorial, Wells collected data to prove that less than 30 percent of lynchings were related to rape charges, repeated her as-

sertions regarding white women, and argued that black women were frequently the victims of sexual assault by white men. Schechter shows that by drawing attention to the plight of black women, Wells-Barnett broke down the false distinction between private (rape) and public (lynching) crimes against African Americans by showing how “concepts like ‘race’ and ‘rape’ were socially constructed and politically employed” (p. 88).

Wells-Barnett fought lynching by trying to change public opinion—she wrote pamphlets and gave speeches in the North and on two trips to England. Her second pamphlet, *A Red Record*, continued many of the arguments in *Southern Horrors*, with a few significant differences. This pamphlet stressed the negative consequences of lynching not only for African Americans, but also for America as a civilized society. Wells-Barnett also tried to balance two images of African American men: both as fully developed men, stressing their manhood, and as the powerless victims of lynchings.

Portraying African American women was just as fraught with tension. At the time, black clubwomen and other female leaders stressed the moral motherhood of black women in order to assuage attacks about their morality. If Wells-Barnett followed this convention, she could not draw attention to their vulnerability to sexual attacks by white men. Instead, Schechter points out that Wells-Barnett settled on using cases of sexual assault against young black girls, whose innocence was more easily established. In so doing, she helped break down the idea that moral virtue was the birthright of white women only.

But Schechter also shows that Wells-Barnett’s claims, particularly because they were made by a black woman, were too much for whites and even many blacks—they assaulted her character, questioned her color, and moved her to the sidelines. As an outspoken black woman, Wells-Barnett herself was pushed aside in the anti-lynching movement even as her argument concerning the lack of rape charges stuck. However, her more inflammatory discussion of rape of black women and white women’s virtue were lost. Her focus on rape and racism and the tangling of sex and race was considered too incendiary. Instead, the discussion in the early twentieth century became one of progress and social harmony, led by men in the NAACP, especially Walter White, who focused on lynching as extralegal murder and legislative solutions. Schechter argues that Wells-Barnett understood that the general public saw both lynching and rape as wrong and therefore was unable to analyze the rela-

tionship between the two critically. Black men’s focus on the law neatly solved this blindness.

Wells-Barnett also found herself eclipsed for several other reasons. Her rhetoric including her comments regarding the need for blacks to defend themselves with arms if necessary was also beyond the comparatively more mainstream NAACP approach. Furthermore, after WWI many black male leaders focused more on manliness and masculinity, leaving even less space for women like Wells-Barnett. Black women in general were moved to the sidelines where they continued their valuable contributions to race uplift, but they worked locally and without the press that black male leader received. This is of course true for the role of black and white women in much Progressive era reform. Because the National Association of Colored Women aligned themselves with the NAACP in the crusade for the Dyer Antilynching Bill, Wells-Barnett lost the support of organized black women in the NACW who preferred to focus on motherhood and morality than to support her controversial platform.

In the context of Wells-Barnett’s difficulties as a black woman, Schechter also explores her relations with Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, her husband Ferdinand Barnett, and other men. Orphaned at an early age, she sought the protection and sponsorship of various men throughout her life. In particular, in the 1890s during her anti-lynching campaign she asked Douglass for his support several times, including for letters of introduction and defense of her character against various charges. When she was in conflict with him, she found it necessary to apologize, because his sponsorship legitimized her work. Yet, Wells-Barnett had difficulty sustaining these relationships because she was too outspoken, and later because she was not well-educated.

In the last two chapters, Schechter turns to Wells-Barnett’s activism on the local level in Chicago—including the Negro Fellowship League, woman suffrage, electoral politics, and women’s clubs. Even as she was becoming marginalized in the national anti-lynching movement, Wells-Barnett became more active in Chicago. She founded the Negro Fellowship League, a social settlement which differed from Hull House and other well-known institutions built by black and white women at the time. It was not intended to reach women and girls, but rather men and boys, a dramatic shift from the work of most Progressive era white and black women social reformers. Furthermore, the NFL was an expression of Wells-Barnett’s visionary pragmatism – it was overtly Christian and it quickly turned to partisan pol-

itics because Wells-Barnett saw the ballot as a sacred moral duty. This was an interesting change from her anti-lynching work, which was a moral crusade rather than a legal one.

Because women got the ballot in 1913 in Illinois, Wells-Barnett worked for woman suffrage nationally, but also quickly tried to organize women in Chicago to take advantage of their new electoral power, at first through non-partisanship, then through support of the Republican party, and finally through running for office themselves. In these two chapters, the clear marginalization of Wells-Barnett which Schechter described in the anti-lynching crusade becomes more nebulous. It seems as though depending on the day of the week and the activity, Wells-Barnett was praised, damned, or ignored by other African Americans and reformers in Chicago.

Schechter's title, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform* is an interesting choice, because it draws attention to Wells-Barnett's role in American, rather than African American reform. While she does suggest ways

in which Wells-Barnett differed from white female reformers of her generation, particularly in her religious outlook, Schechter could have furthered this line of thinking. She never fully articulates how Wells-Barnett can help us to reconsider Progressive era reform more generally.

Given the complexity of Wells-Barnett's character and her reform career Schechter faced a challenge to produce a coherent manuscript. Although it wanders at times, particularly in the introductory chapters, Schechter does an excellent job of using visionary pragmatism to pull together the various strands of Wells-Barnett's work in Chicago. Furthermore, she succeeds brilliantly, especially in the anti-lynching chapters, in analyzing the complexities of Wells-Barnett's ideas on sex and race and the ways in which her position as a black woman shaped her ability to articulate those ideas to an often non-receptive audience. *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* is a must read for anyone interested in the complex relations between race and gender in the African American freedom struggle.

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