

Woman of Valor

Reviewed by Sherrilyn A. Ifill

To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells

By Mia Bay

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 374 pp.

Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign

Against Lynching

By Paula Giddings

New York: Amistad, 2008, 800 pp.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was neither the first nor the last woman to wonder at the end of her life whether she "had anything to show for all ...[her]...years of toil and labor." Given her enormous contributions to racial justice, investigative journalism, and civil rights, the question — raised in an uncharacteristic moment of self-doubt — is a poignant testament to Wells-Barnett's increasing isolation in the years before her death. Never one to wallow for long in self-pity, however, she answered it by starting work on her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*.

Two recent biographies, Mia Bay's *To Tell the Truth Freely* and Paula Giddings's towering *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, document that Wells-Barnett had more than most to "show" for her years of activism. Both well-researched accounts reveal a tenacious and uncompromising activist who found her contributions sidelined even as they laid the groundwork for the emergence of later, more famous initiatives: the legal challenges to segregation in public accommodations, the founding and development of the NAACP, the creation of the field of investigative journalism, and the push for antilynching legislation in Congress.

Those who have heard of Wells-Barnett most likely know her as an antilynching activist and journalist. Both Bay and Giddings cover this aspect of her life in detail, especially her early years as a reporter in Memphis, Tennessee, writing under the name of *Iola*. There, she covered the lynching of three local black business leaders, one of whom was her dear friend Thomas Moss, owner of the People's Grocery Store. The murders had their roots in whites' anger at the increasing economic competition they faced from Moss's store. In response to the lynching, Wells-Barnett wrote an editorial in the *Memphis Free Speech*, a black newspaper of which she was part-owner, that made her infamous when it was reprinted in white papers. It's Wells-Barnett at her most powerful and provocative. In its most famous passage Wells-Barnett cautioned,

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the reputation of their women.

Had Wells-Barnett not been in Philadelphia at an African Methodist Episcopal Church conference when the editorial was published, she would have met with violence. (The African Methodist Episcopal Church and the support of one of its leaders, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, were crucial to her earliest public successes — and Wells-Barnett herself was a committed Christian.) A white mob broke into the newspaper's offices and gutted them, leaving behind a note threatening the lives of Wells-Barnett and the paper's other publishers.

After the *Free Speech* was destroyed, Wells-Barnett left Memphis. Although in many ways a quintessential Southerner, she lived out the rest of her life in the North, in New York and Chicago. There, she became a brilliant investigative journalist, returning to the South only to visit towns where lynchings had occurred, to find out what had really happened and then to report on them in fact-laden, caustic prose in newspapers of which she was often a part-owner. Her tireless activism took her on speaking tours across the United States and, on two occasions, to the United Kingdom.

Wells-Barnett's newspaper stories about lynching in the *New York Age*, of which she became part-owner after she left Memphis, were almost single-handedly responsible for awakening the antilynching activism of Frederick Douglass. The former slave, brilliant public intellectual, and orator was in his seventies when Wells-Barnett was at the height of her popularity and effectiveness. He was the kind of leader Wells-Barnett admired, and she treasured his support and friendship all her life.

Douglass's attention was captured by the very aspect of Wells-Barnett's work that became her most lasting contribution to the analysis of lynching: her meticulously researched conclusion that the excuse offered by Southern apologists — that lynchings occurred in response to the rape of white women by black men — was a myth. In an article that took up seven columns on the front page of the *New York Age*, titled "The Truth About Lynching," Wells-Barnett went a step beyond documenting the fact that most lynchings occurred for reasons other than accusations of rape. She found that even when rape was the excuse offered by the lynch mob, in most instances the murdered black man and the white woman were involved in a consensual sexual relationship. This was nothing short of incendiary in the 1890s, and Wells-Barnett's daring in speaking this forbidden truth set her apart from other black antilynching leaders. Some of these, including Booker T. Washington, who later became Wells-Barnett's nemesis, even argued that lynching would abate if black men would only control their sexual impulses.

As both Bay and Giddings recognize, Wells-Barnett's astonishing courage as a thirty year old can be understood only in the context of her childhood. Giddings, in particular, provides helpful historical background information about freedmen and the influence of the so-called "Radical Republicans" at the time of Wells-Barnett's birth in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. She was the eldest child of two former slaves. The circumstances of her father's birth acquainted her early on with the complicated nature of sexual relationships between blacks and whites: Jim Wells was the son of a slaveholder whose sexual relationship with a favored slave was an open secret on the plantation. His father/master apprenticed him as a carpenter with the expectation that he would "use his skills on the plantation." The trade enabled Wells to support his family in those first, difficult years after Emancipation, when most Southern blacks faced the almost insurmountable combination of white mob violence and the virtual servitude of sharecropping.

Wells-Barnett's mother's experience was equally influential in shaping her sensibility. Sold by slave traders at a young age, Lizzie Wells continued to search for her scattered family long after Emancipation. As a little girl, Wells-Barnett watched her mother write countless letters in an ultimately fruitless effort to track down her family members. With the exception of two sisters who had been sold along with her, Lizzie Wells had been left, like so many other slaves after Emancipation, with only vague memories of her parents and other siblings, and the feeling that she was not quite whole.

Wells-Barnett's parents instilled in her a sense of responsibility and discipline, and an unshakeable belief in the fundamental decency and integrity of the black family — especially of black men. This was the basis of her instinct — often correct — that black men accused of raping or sexually assaulting white woman were in fact innocent of wrongdoing. Her parents' deaths in the yellow fever outbreak of 1878 (which Giddings describes in chilling detail) left the sixteen year old in charge of her five brothers and sisters, but she refused to allow well-meaning neighbors to break up her family. Her determination to keep her siblings together after her parents' deaths, and later her decision to have a family of her own, were likely influenced by seeing the effects of her mother's painful experience with familial separation. Interrupting her schooling at Rust College (where she had developed a passion for books), she took a teaching position in town and then rode home on a mule each Friday to handle the cleaning and laundry for her siblings. At first she continued attending Rust College in the summers, but she was expelled over an incident, never fully made clear in her papers, that was probably connected to her temper. Never one to hold her tongue, she apparently made intemperate remarks to a teacher.

Later she joined her mother's sister in Memphis. Living in town made Wells-Barnett's life somewhat easier, although she continued to teach and take care of her siblings, and the financial pressures were staggering. Now, however, she had the advantage of town life. She was old enough to savor the pleasures of dating, attending concerts and plays, and coming to the attention of middle-class black society.

Leaving school early had lifelong consequences for Wells-Barnett. Her incomplete college education left her feeling permanently outside the class of women who were better educated than she, especially as she made forays into the world of the black women's club movement. Her relationships with the more patrician club women was always complex and frequently negative. She had difficulty making common cause with them, and they often clashed.

Wells-Barnett challenged injustice whenever it confronted her. After being put off a train in Memphis for her refusal to sit in the colored car, Wells-Barnett undertook a years-long legal battle, challenging segregation in rail accommodations. Paying the legal fees on her meager salary was a hardship, but she pushed her lawyer to continue the case to its ultimately unsuccessful end.

Because she was physically attractive and self-sufficient, the young Wells-Barnett often found herself the subject of malicious gossip. It seems incongruous today, and it was deeply frustrating to Wells-Barnett even one-hundred years ago, but despite her courage in investigating and speaking out truthfully about lynching with greater passion and boldness than most men were doing, the public seemed mostly interested in her quite circumspect love life. Ironically, the passages describing how Wells-Barnett dealt with these challenges are some of the most enjoyable parts of Giddings's detailed book, perhaps because they are about the aspect of Wells-Barnett's life with which readers are least familiar, and because the pettiness of the challenges to Wells-Barnett's good name, and the pain the rumors caused a young woman — even one as self-assured as Wells — seem so familiar. Moreover, it's hard not to be inspired by Wells-Barnett's refusal to be shaken by rumor and innuendo. She is remarkably self-possessed and determined to press forward with her work.

Personal attacks, especially from women, plagued Wells-Barnett throughout her career. Even Susan B. Anthony, generally a strong supporter, criticized her decision to marry at the advanced age (for that time) of 33, saying that Wells-Barnett would be "dividing her loyalty" between work and family. However, Wells-Barnett's life of exhausting travel, and struggle to fund her work and make ends meet must have been tremendously difficult, especially since several of her siblings were financially dependent on her, at least in part. Anthony's failure to understand Wells-Barnett's desire to marry reflects the divide between a grassroots black woman activist like Wells-Barnett and a white suffragist who enjoyed strong and consistent support from wealthy philanthropists. Wells-Barnett spoke of these conflicts. Of Mary White Ovington, a renowned abolitionist and settlement worker, Wells-Barnett contended that Ovington had "made little effort to know the soul of the black woman; and to that extent has fallen far short of helping a race which suffered as no white woman has ever been called upon to suffer or to understand." And yet Wells-Barnett enjoyed a number of fruitful, working relationships with white women in the US and Britain. She was one of the few black woman leaders who, without question, accepted and treated with respect Frederick Douglass's second wife Helen Pitts, a white woman who had been his secretary.

Despite having put off marriage, and once having stated that she had no real desire for children (perhaps, she speculated, as a result of having been responsible for her five siblings when she was only a teenager), Wells-Barnett had real affection for her husband, and took quite energetically to family life. Ferdinand Barnett was a widower and Chicago lawyer who participated in and fully supported his wife's antilynching work. She was exhausted by the time she and Barnett married, and conventional in many ways, she wanted a home life. But she was still modern enough to refuse to relinquish her professional identity. She chose instead to hyphenate her last name, something virtually unheard of among married women at that time. She took her first-born son on the road with her while he was still nursing. In fact, she continued her activism unabated, while her husband took over the responsibility for preparing dinner in the evenings. As she continued to give birth to more children, one of her newfound causes was the fight to create a kindergarten for black children in Chicago.

Wells-Barnett continued her activist work to the very end of her life, writing, creating a social-service home for poor black men in Chicago, and running (unsuccessfully) for elected office. But there is something heartbreaking about seeing her increasingly sidelined, as the NAACP and the Urban League became the voices of black activism — and as the NAACP, in particular, built its reputation on her antilynching work, without acknowledging her courage and insight.

Although everything Wells-Barnett did was part of her effort to make a difference in the lives of blacks, much of her work ended in frustrating conflicts with race leaders, philanthropists, and women's groups. This lends an air of melancholy to the account. At each turn, the reader hopes things will turn out differently. They almost never do. There is a disturbing consistency to the excitement and effectiveness with which Wells-Barnett forms an organization or joins forces with another activist, only to see the relationship deteriorate into tension, distance, and disaffection.

Both Bay's and Giddings's books offer windows into the complex life of an uncompromising black woman activist in a world dominated by men, whites, and racial violence. For sheer detail, Giddings's book is unparalleled, and in fact, it's the detail that helps the reader understand the treacherous nature of the world in which Wells-Barnett operated as an activist. Financial pressure, competition, interracial tension, and veiled ambition all played heavily into the workings of the clubs and organizations in which Wells-Barnett promoted her work. Seeing this laid bare in the excerpts from the letters of the leaders of these organizations Giddings provides helps the reader appreciate the challenges Wells-Barnett faced. No corporate boardroom was ever more beset by political gamesmanship, naked ambition, and double-dealing than some of the women's clubs that Wells-Barnett attempted to lead. Her marginalization in the NAACP, largely at the hands of W.E.B. DuBois, is a story that unfolds with dreadful inevitability. Giddings's speculation as to why DuBois and other members of the nascent, mostly white, elite organization would have been put off by Wells-Barnett's gender and militancy is a compelling read. Because she had no use for the dishonest but often useful feints of self-deprecation, deference, and stoic silence, her path to leadership was rocky

and thankless. It would be a cliché and inaccurate to describe Wells-Barnett as ahead of her time, but the story of her life and her many professional frustrations will sound disturbingly resonant to contemporary activist women.

Bay provides a trenchant analysis of the obstacles facing Wells-Barnett in her introduction, "If Iola Had Been a Man," which is worth rereading as an epilogue. In it, Bay explores the way sexism as well as classism and racism defeated Wells-Barnett. She was born too late to have experienced slavery, but too early to be free of the personal knowledge of slavery's violent underpinnings. She was too educated to be working class, but not educated enough to join the ranks of black women's club leaders, who were graduates of Oberlin and other northern schools. She was deeply religious, but also honest in her enjoyment of male companionship and a public life. Her outspokenness and militancy would have been lauded in a man.

Nevertheless, her troubles cannot all be attributed to external discrimination. Giddings provides clues to what is perhaps Wells-Barnett's tragic flaw, best summed up in her observation that "Wells suffered from a chronic case of political myopia." She waded into fights armed with the truth and righteousness of her cause, but with little sensitivity to the political and personal complications swirling around and within the organizations and individuals from whom she sought support. On the few occasions when she was mindful of interpersonal conflict and rivalry — as when a dispute broke out between the British Women's Temperance Association leader Catherine Impey and the Scottish suffragist Isabelle Mayo, who were Wells-Barnett's sponsors on her first tour of Great Britain — she managed to keep herself above the fray and to maintain her relationships with both women.

Had Wells-Barnett not channeled her late-in-life moment of despondency into the decision to write her autobiography, she would surely have faded forever into anonymity. She didn't finish the book before her death, but her daughter Alfreda Duster collected the manuscript along with her mother's letters and writings and published *Crusade for Justice* in 1970. It was only thereafter that the work and life of Wells-Barnett became known to modern audiences. Twenty years later she was commemorated with a US postage stamp. It seems fitting that it took both Wells-Barnett's legendary assertiveness and the dedication of her daughter to finally bring her the recognition she always wanted and so richly deserved, the two strands of her life — self-sufficiency and family — finally working effectively and successfully together.

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