Lynching and the Excuse for It

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT United States.
Born in slavery. Civil rights and women’s rights
speaker and advocate. Leader in antilynching cam-
paigns. Participated in founding the NAACP. *Southern
Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), *A Red
Record* (1895), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography

It was eminently befitting that *The Independent*’s first number in the new century should contain a
strong protest against lynching. The deepest-dyed
infamy of the nineteenth century was that which, in
its supreme contempt for law, defied all constitu-
tional guarantees of citizenship, and during the last
fifteen years of the century put to death two thou-
sand men, women and children, by shooting, hang-
ing and burning alive. Well would it have been if
every preacher in every pulpit in the land had made
so earnest a plea as that which came from Miss
Addams’s forceful pen.

Appreciating the helpful influences of such a dis-
passionate and logical argument as that made by the
writer referred to, I earnestly desire to say nothing
to lessen the force of the appeal. At the same time an
unfortunate presumption used as a basis for her
argument works so seriously, tho doubtless uninten-
tional, an injury to the memory of thousands of vic-
tims of mob law that it is only fair to call attention to
this phase of the writer’s plea. It is unspeakably infa-
mous to put thousands of people to death without a
trial by jury; it adds to that infamy to charge that
these victims were moral monsters, when, in fact,
four-fifths of them were not so accused even by the
fiends who murdered them.

Almost at the beginning of her discussion, the
distinguished writer says:

"Let us assume that the Southern citizens who take
part in and abet the lynching of negroes honestly
believe that that is the only successful method of
dealing with a certain class of crimes."

It is this assumption, this absolutely unwarrant-
able assumption, that vitiated every suggestion which
it inspires Miss Addams to make. It is the same
baseless assumption which influences ninety-nine
out of every one hundred persons who discuss this
question. Among many thousand editorial clip-
pings I have received in the past five years, ninety-
nine percent discuss the question upon the pre-
sumption that lynchings are the desperate effort of
the Southern people to protect their women from
black monsters, and while the large majority con-
demn lynching, the condemnation is tempered with
a plea for the lyncher—that human nature gives
way under such awful provocation and that the
mob, insane for the moment, must be pitied as well
as condemned. It is strange that an intelligent, law-
abiding and fair-minded people should so persist-
ently shut their eyes to the facts in the discussion of
what the civilized world now concedes to be Amer-
ica’s national crime.

This almost universal tendency to accept as true
the slander which the lynchers offer to civilization

[1898]
as an excuse for their crime might be explained if the true facts were difficult to obtain. But not the slightest difficulty intervenes. The Associated Press dispatches, the press clipping bureau, frequent book publications and the annual summary of a number of influential journals give the lynching record every year. This record, easily within the reach of everyone who wants it, makes inexcusable the statement and cruelly unwarranted the assumption that negroes are lynched only because of their assaults upon womanhood.

For an example in point: For fifteen years past, on the first day of each year, the Chicago Tribune has given to the public a carefully compiled record of all the lynchings of the previous year. Space will not permit a résumé of these fifteen years, but as fairly representing the entire time. I desire to briefly tabulate here the record of the five years last past. The statistics of the ten years preceding do not vary, they simply emphasize the record here presented.

The record gives the name and nationality of the man or woman lynched, the alleged crime, the time and place of the lynching. With this is given a résumé of the offenses charged, with the number of persons lynched for the offenses named. That enables the reader to see at a glance the causes assigned for the lynchings, and leaves nothing to be assumed. The lynchers, at the time and place of the lynching, are the best authority for the causes which actuate them. Every presumption is in favor of this record, especially as it remains absolutely unimpeached. This record gives the following statement of the colored persons lynched and the causes of the lynchings for the years named:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Murder</th>
<th>Attempted murder</th>
<th>Rape</th>
<th>Attempted rape</th>
<th>Incendiary</th>
<th>No cause</th>
<th>Alleged rape</th>
<th>Cattle stealing</th>
<th>Miscegenation</th>
<th>Attempted rape</th>
<th>Murderous assault</th>
<th>Rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Murder</th>
<th>Attempted rape</th>
<th>Robbery</th>
<th>Attempted assault</th>
<th>Race prejudice</th>
<th>Plot to kill whites</th>
<th>Suspected robbery</th>
<th>Giving testimony</th>
<th>Attacking white men</th>
<th>Attempted murder</th>
<th>Threats to kill</th>
<th>Suspected murder</th>
<th>Assault</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this record in view there should be no difficulty in ascertaining the alleged offenses given as justification for lynchings during the last five years. If the Southern citizens lynch negroes because "that is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crimes," then that class of crimes should be shown unmistakably by this record. Now consider the record.

It would be supposed that the record would show that all, or nearly all, lynchings were caused by outrageous assaults upon women; certainly that this particular offense would outnumber all other
causes for putting human beings to death without a trial by jury and the other safeguards of our Constitution and laws.

But the record makes no such disclosure. Instead, it shows that five women have been lynched, put to death with unspeakable savagery, during the past five years. They certainly were not under the ban of the outlawing crime. It shows that men, not a few, but hundreds, have been lynched for misdemeanors, while others have suffered death for no offense known to the law, the causes assigned being "mistaken identity," "insult," "bad reputation," "unpopularity," "violating contract," "running quarantine," "giving evidence," "frightening child by shooting at rabbits," etc. Then, strangest of all, the record shows that the sum total of lynchings for these offenses—not crimes—and for the alleged offenses which are only misdemeanors, greatly exceeds the lynchings for the very crime universally declared to be the cause of lynching.

A careful classification of the offenses which have caused lynchings during the past five years shows that contempt for law and race prejudice constitute the real cause of all lynchings. During the past five years 147 white persons were lynched. It may be argued that fear of the "law's delays" was the cause of their being lynched. But this is not true. Not a single white victim of the mob was wealthy or had friends or influence to cause a miscarriage of justice. There was no such possibility—it was contempt for law which incited the mob to put so many white men to death without a complaint under oath, much less a trial.

In the case of the negroes lynched, the mobs' incentive was race prejudice. Few white men were lynched for any such trivial offenses as are detailed in the causes for lynching colored men. Negroes are lynched for "violating contracts," "unpopularity," "testifying in court" and "shooting at rabbits." As only negroes are lynched for "no offense," "unknown offenses," offenses not criminal, misdemeanors and crimes not capital, it must be admitted that the real cause of lynching in all such cases is race prejudice, and should be so classified. Grouping these lynchings under that classification and excluding rape, which in some States is made a capital offense, the record for the five years, so far as the negro is concerned, reads as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Race prejudice</th>
<th>Murder</th>
<th>Rape</th>
<th>Total lynchings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table tells its own story, and shows how false is the excuse which lynchers offer to justify their fiendishness. Instead of being the sole cause of lynching, the crime upon which lynchers build their defense furnishes the least victims for the mob. In 1896 less than thirty-nine percent of the negroes lynched were charged with this crime; in 1897, less than eighteen per cent; in 1898, less than sixteen per cent; in 1899, less than fourteen per cent, and in 1900, less than fifteen per cent were so charged.

No good result can come from any investigation which refuses to consider the facts. A conclusion that is based upon a presumption, instead of the best evidence, is unworthy of a moment's consideration. The lynching record, as it is compiled from day to day by unbiased, reliable and responsible public journals, should be the basis of every investigation which seeks to discover the cause and suggest the remedy for lynching. The excuses of lynchers and the specious pleas of their apologists should be considered in the light of the record, which they invariably misrepresent or ignore. The Christian and moral forces of the nation should insist that misrepresentation should have no place in the discussion of this all-important question, that the figures of the lynching record should be allowed to plead, trumpet tongued, in defense of the slandered dead, that the silence of concession be broken, and that truth, swift-winged and courageous, summon this nation to do its duty to exalt justice and preserve inviolate the sacredness of human life.

CHICAGO, ILL. [1901]

NOTE
1. Published in The Independent, a progressive weekly newspaper, May 16, 1901, with an article by Jane Addams to which Wells-Barnett's article is a response.