

Reading

Excerpt from “Lynching and the Excuse for It”

In this editorial, Ida B. Wells responds to Jane Addams, a progressive who was known for her work serving immigrant communities in Chicago. Addams had rationalized the violence of white lynch mobs as a natural reaction to alleged crimes committed by African Americans. Wells wrote this editorial to correct Addams’s claims using lynching data from the 728 lynchings she documented from 1882 to 1891.

Among many thousand editorial clippings I have received in the past five years, ninety-nine percent discuss . . . that lynchings are the desperate effort of the Southern people to protect their women from black monsters, and while the large majority condemn 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.

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

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 . . .

But the record makes not such disclosure . . . 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 cause assigned being “mistaken identity,” “insult,” “bad reputation,” “unpopularity,” “violating contract,” “running quarantine,” “giving evidence,” “frightening child by shooting at rabbits,” etc. . . .

As only negroes are lynched for “no offense,” “unknown offenses,” offenses not criminal, misdemeanors and crimes are not capital, it must be admitted that the real cause of lynching in all such cases is race prejudice, and should be so classified. A careful classification of the offenses which have caused lynchings during the past five years shows that race prejudice constitute the real cause of all lynchings . . .

. . . the record . . . reads as follows:

Year	Race prejudice	Murder	Rape	Total lynchings
1896	31	24	31	86
1897	46	55	22	123
1898	39	47	16	102
1899	56	23	11	90
1900	57	30	16	103
Total	229	179	96	504

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 (rape) 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 . . . should be the basis of every investigation which seeks to discover the cause and suggest the remedy for lynching. The excuse of lynchers and the specious pleas for their apologist 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 . . . and that truth, swift-winged and courageous, summoned this nation to do its duty to exalt justice and preserve . . . the sacredness of human life.¹

1 Ida B. Wells, "Lynching and the Excuse for It," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader, 4th Edition*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2005), 117.