



Philip Dray. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2002. xii + 528 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-50324-5.

Reviewed by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

Published on H-Law (April, 2002)

## Invisible

### Invisible

One day last January, I pulled my bicycle out of the garage and pedaled for the nearest Barnes and Noble. I was looking for a new book by Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, already praised in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. I suppose all shoppers instinctively understand that the managers of bookstores organize their inventory in a strict hierarchy. Just inside the front door I encountered the bargain bins. Passing through a second door, I squarely confronted the first display table, exhibiting the hot new books, including novels by Nevada Barr and John Grisham.

I knew Dray's book would not be there, so I turned to the new nonfiction table, just to the right of the best-sellers. I scrutinized the titles, but it was not there. Disappointed, I walked to the history section deeper in the store: Not there either. Finally, I asked a clerk and she retreated to the back, emerging with three brand-new copies of *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*. Just three, I noticed. Barnes and Noble did not think that many of its customers wanted to read about lynching. This book would quickly disappear into the bowels of the history section, to be found only by those determined to search for it, reading titles spine by spine.

Dray's book was easier to find at the 2002 Organization of American Historians meeting in Washington, D.C. There over two thousand historians streamed through the book exhibit, where Random House prominently displayed *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*.

In some ways this seems an odd judgment. The general public could learn much from this book and enjoy reading it. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* is well written and covers an undeniably important topic. Dray tells stories with a novelist's eye for the telling detail. He takes us, for example, to 1916 Waco, where a mob crowded into Judge Richard Irby Monroe's courtroom. Faced with

a mob, the judge "sighed and requested merely that all 'gentlemen' remove their hats" before continuing with the trial (p. 217). And Dray's book is encyclopedic, a narration not only of the ugly violence called lynching but of black America more generally. In five hundred pages he describes the boxing match between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries, the movie *Birth of a Nation*, scientific racism, the work of Franz Boas, the Harlem Renaissance, the Scottsboro boys case, Gunnar Myrdal, *The Ox Bow Incident*, Jackie Robinson, and much, much more.

Professional historians will have troubles with this book. There are no footnotes in the traditional sense and the source notes, keyed to page numbers, seem skimpy and incomplete. The inquiring reader will find some quotes simply not attributed to any source. For example, on page 452 Dray quotes U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark as saying that federal legal action against mobs rested on "a very thin thread of law." In the back of the book, there is no source note for any of the information on page 452. In fact, all the pages from 446 through 452 are missing from the source notes.

Dray stuffs his stories with journalistic detail, making them very readable.

Early in the book Dray describes the Sam Hose lynching and the events leading up to it. On page 8, Dray provides a detailed narrative of Hose's supposed crime, explaining that the information came from the family of his white victims. At the bottom of the page, Dray reports that various newspapers, government agencies, and individuals put up a \$1600 reward for Hose's capture. There is no source note for page 8. There is for page 7, but the source for that page documents quotations from W. E. B. Du Bois, not the details of the Hose lynching.

Dray has an amateur's fascination with "firsts." According to Dray, the first "widespread application of Lynch's Law" came in North Carolina, Kentucky, and Indiana, in the form of "Regulators" (p. 21). Yet, the

well-documented work of eighteenth-century regulators seems “widespread” as well. Ida B. Wells was “the nation’s first antilynching advocate” (p. xi). This ignores T. Thomas Fortune, who denounced white racial violence well before Wells. The “first carefully written analysis of a lynching death” came in 1916, according to Dray, when the NAACP published an article in *Crisis* about the Jesse Washington lynching. Surely Dray does not want to say that Ida B. Wells was not careful in her analyses. In 1920, the Kentucky militia “shattered” an “old taboo” when it fired into a lynch mob, Dray writes (p. 274). There was no such taboo. Dray dates the first “scientific” analysis of lynching as a social phenomenon to 1930 (p. 304). Perhaps *The Tragedy of Lynching*, published by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, really was more scientific than the *Chicago Tribune’s* yearly tabulations or the work of Ida B. Wells, but Dray does not explain how or why. *Life* magazine’s photograph of Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price at their trial for killing Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney was “modern America’s first good look at a lynch mob.” Perhaps America was not yet “modern” when William Bradford Huie interviewed the killers of Emmett Till? Perhaps the various drawings, photographs, and descriptions of the thirty-one lynchers tried in South Carolina does not count because –well, why wouldn’t that count? What about the lynching postcards mailed over the United States and recently exhibited? Dray relies on this series of “firsts” to advance his story, but the “firsts” often seem dubious at best.

Dray makes mistakes too. He describes Kentucky as “the lone slaveholding state to remain loyal to the Union” (p. 47), forgetting Missouri, Delaware, and Maryland. Later (p. 337), he comes perilously close to saying that Prohibition “brought into being” organized crime. Nor is it accurate to say that Franklin D. Roosevelt thought lynching “was not actually a major problem requiring a statutory remedy” (p. 358). FDR did not support the antilynching legislation pending in Congress, for fear of losing southern support for his New Deal programs, but his attorney general created the Justice Department’s civil rights unit, which made a major effort to prosecute lynchers under existing Reconstruction-era civil rights

legislation. Roosevelt recognized the need for a “statutory remedy;” he just hoped that an old statute could be that remedy.

Dray repeats the false statement that Willie McGee, executed by Mississippi for rape in 1951, served in the military (p. 398). And he writes that *Screws v. United States*[1] marked the first time that a lower federal court had convicted anyone acting “under color of law” since Reconstruction (p. 441).

There are lots of flaws here. Nonetheless, this is the first book to chronicle racially-motivated mob law from the Revolution to the present since James Elbert Cutler published *Lynch Law: An Investigation Into the History of Lynching in the United States* in 1905 (reprinted, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969). Academics will not rely on this book in their scholarly work and probably few will assign it to their students. Its length alone forecloses that market. Mob law is our national crime, yet so invisible that one historian confessed he only “learned about white people massively lynching black people” in the 1960s.[2] One would think that more than three customers strolling the Barnes and Noble near my house would want to read a well-written history of racial violence in America and would recognize the topic as important. Even if its author does not always provide citations for his quotes and thinks Kentucky was the only slave state not to secede, one would hope that the first catalog of racial violence published since 1905 would find an audience.

#### Notes

[1.] 325 U.S. 91 (1945).

[2.] Joel Williamson, “Wounds Not Scars: Lynching, the National Conscience, and the American Historian,” *Journal of American History* 83 [1997]: 1229.

Copyright (c) 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:  
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Christopher R. Waldrep. Review of Dray, Philip, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6165>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).