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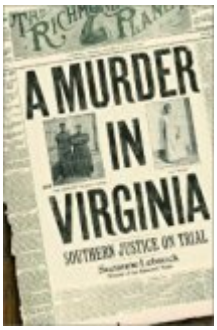

Suzanne Lebsock. *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. 442 pp. $26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-04201-6.

Reviewed by Lynn M. Hudson

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When a white woman named Lucy Jane Pollard was murdered with an ax on a sticky June afternoon in 1895, it set in motion a bizarre set of events in rural Virginia. *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial*, the story of these events, is a murder mystery and a finely wrought historical investigation by prize-winning historian Suzanne Lebsock.

In the course of the narrative, Lebsock unravels the mysteries of some of the most pressing and thorny questions in southern history: How is the color line constructed? What are the messy overlaps of race, class, gender, and sex in a small rural town? And what do these convergences mean for southerners of all description in the age of Jim Crow? This is a complicated tale to tell, partly because when the story is told correctly, things are not what they seem. Unlike Lucy Jane Pollard, however, the reader is in safe hands.

Lebsock's first book, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, explored gender and race relations in a sizable Virginia community.[1] This study, however, takes place not in a city or even a town. Lunenburg County, Virginia, "had no newspaper and not a single settlement big enough to be called a town" (p. 16). Eighty miles south of Richmond, in the tobacco belt, Lunenburg makes an ideal setting to examine the relations between southern urban centers and the region's vast rural areas--very different, if proximate, worlds. It is also a provocative site to uncover the complicated relationships between black and white southerners.

Lebsock displays an uncanny ability to convey the intimacy between the black and white inhabitants of this rural county. White Virginians were busy segregating, in the author's words, "everything that wasn't already segregated" at the close of the nineteenth century. Lunenburg County was a place where the color line was everywhere and nowhere. It should come as no surprise, then, that within days after the murder of Pollard, authorities had arrested three African American women and one black sawmill hand, all of whom maintained their innocence.

Lynch mobs formed as inhabitants of Lunenburg sought revenge. In order to put the suspects

on trial, they first had to be kept alive. The women, Pokey Barnes, Mary Barnes, and Mary Abernathy, were whisked off to Petersburg where, due to extensive publicity, they had become celebrities. Solomon Marable, the only male accused, would prove to be a slippery suspect; two days after the murder he disappeared into the woods, but was soon caught by a posse that included black and white men. According to Marable, the women did it.

Not surprisingly, the press made much of the murder, the arrests, and the subsequent trials. After all, as Lebsock reminds us, ax murders sell papers. From the press's earliest coverage of the murder to its function as "a thirteenth juror" in the trials, media coverage shaped the outcome of the trials and thus played no small role in the fate of the accused.

This careful attention to the role of the press is one of the strengths of the book. To her credit, Lebsock underscores the role of Richmond's black newspaper, *The Richmond Planet* and its activist editor, John Mitchell, Jr., who hired the three lawyers who defended Pokey Barnes and the two Marys. It was the *Planet* that published the first photos of the four prisoners on August 3, 1895. An intriguing, if incidental, part of the story comes when Lebsock shows how Mitchell manipulates mammy stereotypes in his newspaper's coverage of Mary Abernathy, "betting that white people's declared love for mammy could be strategically deployed on behalf of living black Americans" (p. 156).

The initial trials of the three women and Solomon Marable provided ample fodder for journalists. But they were not the only onlookers; soldiers had to be called to Lunenburg Courthouse to keep the peace and protect the prisoners. In fact, Lebsock is at her best when she chronicles the spectacle that occurred inside and outside the courtroom. One of the singular contributions of *A Murder in Virginia* is the way in which the author conveys the intensity and significance of this oft-neglected arena of racial meaning. Stories of lynching often--and rightfully--take center stage in histories of Jim Crow's vicious reign, but this book shows that the courtroom offers an equally rich site to explicate the ways Jim Crow justice--and injustice--were meted out. Of course, the two venues were linked; African Americans who appeared in courtrooms made easy targets for lynch mobs.

How and why African Americans were lynched are questions woven throughout the narrative. Lebsock lays waste to the claim that the upper South only dabbled in lynching, leaving states like Georgia and Mississippi to perfect the craft. "Virginians," she writes, "could lynch with equal determination and festivity" (p. 63). Like lynching, white supremacy and segregation animate this story from beginning to end. Black resistance is also here but does not make its presence felt until halfway through the narrative, when black Richmond and its activist women appear.[2] Giving voice to the black actors in this narrative is crucial, and Lebsock handles the task well, given that none of the suspects could write.

Some readers might find Lebsock's prose a bit daring when she makes suppositions about the interior lives of her subjects. Was John Mitchell, Jr., for example, "depressed beyond speaking" when he took the train to Farmville to witness Mary Abernathy's second trial? And did Pokey Barnes look at a witness "as if she were homemade slime"? Maybe. But herein lay Lebsock's dilemma: How to tell the story as a page-turner and stay true to her craft as a historian? In the Prologue, the author states explicitly that she did "not put words in people's mouths" (pp. 18-19). Of that, I have no doubt. This book is a model of meticulous research and carefully executed narrative. It is also, like Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*, a meditation on what historians can know.[3] Lebsock makes use of courtroom narratives to get at larger questions about race, memory, evidence, and proof.

A biracial jury found all of the suspects guilty in the initial trials held in Lunenburg County; three were sentenced to hang, and Mary Barnes, who was judged to be an accessory to murder, was sentenced to ten years in the penitentiary. But the case was far from over. In a fascinating twist, the accused were granted new trials in Farmville, located in adjacent Prince Edward County. This time the jury consisted of sixteen white men, all "substantial farmers" (p. 210). In the new courtroom, the testimony of the women themselves proved far more significant--even momentous. The attorneys for the accused decided to put Mary Abernathy and Pokey Barnes, both "unlettered," up against some of the best trial lawyers in the state. Lebsock's juxtaposition of the educated lawyers and the illiterate orators works well and exposes the problematic assumptions that reside in such a facile dichotomy.

Of course, the dichotomy that *A Murder in Virginia* addresses most explicitly is that of black and white. Teasing out the meanings of race in Virginia between Reconstruction and the Jazz Age is the task Lebsock sets for herself. Her success at this endeavor means that readers will learn about much more than a murder. Yet because this is history and not fiction, a simple ending is not forthcoming. In this unsolved murder mystery, the lessons are about race and remembrance, not whodunit.

Notes

[1]. Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984).

[2]. See also Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (1994): pp. 141-144.

[3]. Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

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