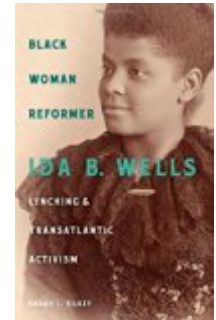


Sarah L. Silkey. *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015. 224 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-4557-4.



Reviewed by Patricia Schechter

Published on H-Law (July, 2015)

Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York)

Black Woman Reformer is a nicely written but in the end unsatisfying account of Ida B. Wells's antilynching activism at the turn of the twentieth century. Historian Sarah L. Silkey promises to document the transatlantic "exchange of ideas" from that time, ideas since obscured by "isolationism and the mythology of American exceptionalism" (pp. 4-5). Silkey recovers a few political activities generated by Wells's agitation and British amplifications of it in the media, notably in Georgia. Yet she misses an opportunity to root Wells in the most recent feminist and race critical literature on empire and transnationalism, especially concerning the drawing of the global color line. Though Silkey does not claim the argument, what she describes is the shaping and endorsing influence of British opinion on the construction of American exceptionalism through complicity in the nascent nationalist racism of the fin de siècle. That is, opposition to extralegal murder (lynching)—much like opposition to slavery—could comport quite nicely with white supremacy, and there the British position stood in the 1890s (elsewhere on

the globe, Gandhi was learning a version of this lesson around this same time).

Silkey's title tips off another aspect of the problem: "Black Woman Reformer" freezes and objectifies Wells as a figure rather than examines her emergence within racially volatile imperial projects. Wells's own identification as mixed race is never acknowledged, nor does Silkey ask why Wells looked backward to slavery and antislavery rather than around her at sharp imperial aggression in order to make her case for a moral order across the color line. W. E. B. DuBois saw the color line as capitalist and imperial; Wells saw it (and fighting it) as Christian and "civilizational." Why? Exemplary works like Claude Clegg's *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (2004) or Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds's *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and International Challenge of Racial Equality* (2008) might have helped Silkey in this regard. The author states an interest in "transatlantic popular culture" but where are British voices outside the big city newspapers and

mainline clergymen (p. 28)? In particular, why did Wells remain on the margins of British women's activism touching race and empire, especially when their writing and agitation, as documented by Antoinette Burton, Caroline Bressey, and others, were so voluble and far-reaching? Instead of exploring such questions, Silkey rehearses much of what has been known for some time now about Catherine Impey and the London-based Society for the Furtherance of the Brotherhood of Man, in the end restating the conclusions of earlier scholars: "Ida B. Wells played an important role in establishing the discursive space in which future debates on American lynching operated" (p. 149).

Silkey accepts rather than interrogates what she calls British "curiosity" and "fascination" with American culture, and thus misses an opportunity to examine the interest in racial facts, racial stories, and racial morality as expressed in the lynching debate. If, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall suggested decades ago, lynching rituals, photographs, and media stories were a kind of "folk pornography" for the US South, what sorts of interests were being whetted by circulating this material internationally?[1] The scenario might be implicated in the schooling and deploying of "the intimate" in the service of empire along the lines suggested by Ann Laura Stoler in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2010), but Silkey refrains from engaging this or other recent feminist work on race, gender, and imperialism. Instead, this book stops where a number of earlier studies (including my own, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* [2001]) stop, concluding that around 1900 the nation-states named the United States of America and Great Britain agreed not to interfere with one another's jurisprudence regarding racism. Yet these two nations were also empires, deeply and mutually involved in constructing imperial regimes that segregated human populations by skin color and that regulated a racialized global labor force within their intertwined capitalist ambitions. The historian to place Ida B. Wells-Barnett in

this larger context has an ample opportunity before them and will be aided by Silkey's study.

Note

[1]. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching*, 2nd ed. (1979; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xx-xxi.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Patricia Schechter. Review of Silkey, Sarah L. *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43486>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.