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To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells Book Review

Mackenzie Bender

In the book, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, author Linda O. McMurry gives an in-depth synopsis of Wells' life. McMurry uses pictures and quotes from Wells' personal diary to portray the kind of life that she led. Wells became an adult in the generation that followed Fredrick Douglass. This African American woman lived a migrant life, constantly moving from state to state because of her many professions and occupations. Ida B. Wells started out as a teacher, then became a full time journalist, and an activist for anti-lynching laws. McMurry emphasizes throughout this historical text the ups and downs in Wells' life. This book gives a thorough representation of the life that Ida B. Wells led and is a good choice for anyone seeking to learn more about how African American women contributed to American history.

McMurry opens *To Keep the Waters Troubled* by talking about the birth of Ida B. Wells, which took place on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, a few years prior to the reconstruction period in America. Wells' parents died while she was in her early teenage years, leaving her to care for her five siblings. In an attempt to support her siblings and herself, Wells dropped out of high school to become an elementary school teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, where she moved the family for a better paying position. As a teacher, Ida felt unheard and ignored, therefore hated being a teacher. The only reason she held the position for many years, was solely for the steady income to keep her and her siblings afloat.

During her tenure as an elementary school teacher, Wells entered the realm of journalism. In order to prevent others from tracing her unpopular beliefs back to her, Ida B. Wells undertook the pseudonym, Iola. Under this pseudonym, Wells wrote several hundred articles for many different newspapers that mainly discussed anti-segregation. One article that Ida "Iola" Wells wrote in *The Living Way* paper pertained to an incident that occurred upon a train in which she had purchased a first class ticket for in 1884. On this train, the conductor ordered Wells to leave her seat and go to the smoking-colored car of the train, which she refused, so was physically dragged to that section. It was because of this and similar pieces, that Wells was eventually 'found out' and fired by the Memphis Board of Education for criticizing the education system used in the colored schools, and how the conditions were far worse than those of the white schools. Ida B. Wells then began writing full time for various newspapers. Wells highlights in her diary that she "tried hard to fulfill many expectations that were unnatural for her, all the while wondering 'what kind of creature [she] will eventually become?' Journalism helped her find a way out of this confusion and gave her an outlet through which to express the 'real [her]'" (76).

Early in her journalism career, Wells partnered with Rev. Taylor Nightingale and J.L. Fleming, and bought one-third of the *Free Speech and Headlight* newspaper, becoming an editor, a position she had dreamed of for years. Upon writing a strong controversial article about the horrors of lynchings in Memphis, Ida B. Wells received horrible threats from many community members. Wells then left without plan to return Memphis, to escape these threats and still have the ability to have her voice heard. These horrific events though, did not stop Wells' demand for

the motives behind lynchings. Wells' interest in this topic began when three of her close friends were lynched and humiliated, simply because their white counterparts feared competition of the blacks. Wells went on to spread knowledge of the tragic lynchings of Southern America on abroad tours that she took to Europe. Ida's sole purpose for these trips was simply to let the Europeans know what was going on in the states with hopes that they would step up to aid the anti-lynching and anti-segregation efforts in some way.

Following her European tours, Ida B. Wells settled down to start a family of her own. Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, and gave birth to four children. Being an orphan without a mother and father, Ida wanted to personally be there to watch her children grow up and to be a part of their lives. Therefore, Wells' traveling abroad career was now over, but she did not end her anti-lynching efforts, and continued to travel to neighboring cities and states. Wells-Barnett sought to actually make change on top of investigate, "by writing anti-lynching pamphlets and articles for white periodicals" (259). Wells also founded the Negro Fellowship League (NFL) in 1910 to give African Americans a place where they would have a sense of community in the new places in which they were migrating. For the latter of Wells' life, she worked on creating organizations like the NFL to make Chicago, the last city she resided in, a better place to live for African Americans. Ida B. Wells died in March of 1931, preceding her four children and husband. After death, Wells' legacy continues as one of the most prominent African American women in history because of her involvement in anti-segregation and anti-lynching efforts.

In McMurry's book, there are many components that negatively attribute to the telling of the life of Ida B. Wells. A few of these components are the use of too many details, the misuse of photographs, and the overuse of Wells' personal diary.

Linda McMurry makes this biography of Ida B. Wells far more detail-oriented than necessary. The overuse of details makes focusing on the content of the book rather difficult. McMurry gets very caught up in specific dates for events of Wells' life, and jumps to new people, while almost losing the reader in the process. One example of this occurs between pages 210 and 211, where McMurry talks about an interview (of Frances Willard, a man Wells met) that was published in October of 1890, then jumps to Wells leaving for England in 1893, and lastly to leaving again in 1894. *To Keep the Waters Troubled* of itself is in chronological order. McMurry might have benefited from simply giving a general timeline, as tagging a year on to every single piece of information is excessive.

The pictures that McMurry used did not contribute much to the storyline. The majority of the pictures used ranged from single sketches/photographs of Wells to photographs of her with her family. These pictures were more unnecessary than anything, as they did not play any pertinent role in telling the story. For example, there is a picture of Wells on page 152 that is seemingly 'randomly' inserted, as it does not pertain to Well's journalism about lynching, which is the topic being discussed on this page. The lack of 21st century technology during the time period may have contributed to the limited selection of photos McMurry could choose from. To reverse this, McMurry may have inserted pictures of Wells on her tours or with her various activist groups.

Even for writing a biography, Linda McMurry references Ida B. Wells' diary far too often. In the text, McMurry frequently quotes and gives credit to Wells' diary as a source for information. Even when other sources were used, McMurry did not put them in plain-text, but rather only included the specific sources in the ending 'notes' section of the book. This leads the reader to think that McMurry is almost telling Wells' diary over again, and making the whole biography solely about the diary, as one would not normally pause at every endnote to check the rear of the book for the author's source. For example, of the fifty citations used in chapter three of the book alone, thirty-three of them are from Wells' personal diary, and the remaining minority consisting of a few newspapers and journals.

In conclusion, despite the many challenges that Ida B. Wells faced, she led a life and gave influences that would change America for centuries to come. Her efforts in the anti-lynching initiative really opened people's eyes not only in America, but in other countries as well, that would lead to better treatment of African Americans and minorities alike. Linda O. McMurry's *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* covered Well's life in plenty detail. One might even consider McMurry's piece as an information overload that would be intended for a postgraduate audience, or someone of a similar rank. McMurry did though, use plenty primary sourcing, directly from Well's personal diary for the biography. By the end of her life, Ida B. Wells-Barnett had showed that African American women had the power to make prominent changes that would make America a better country in the future.

