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Review – Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions; Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*

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IDA: A SWORD AMONG LIONS; IDA B. WELLS AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST LYNCHING, by Paula J. Giddings, xii, 800 Pp. HarperCollins, New York, 2008. \$35.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-0605-1921-6.

Today in our country we have been traumatized by the events of nine-eleven and the fear of possible future violence, but few Americans recall the hundreds of men and women who were put to death at the hands of other Americans. Between 1882 and 1951 more than 5,000 persons were summarily killed, mostly by hanging, sometimes by fire and shooting. Most of the victims were black and male; some were white and some were female. The spectators were mostly white. Photographs often reveal the atmosphere of revelry. Most victims had been charged with a crime—very often rape—and most were put to death without a trial or sentence.

Ida B. Wells was a strong, determined, articulate writer, journalist, and lecturer who appealed to the consciences of both white and black, male and female, to work, legislate, and to stamp out lynching and lynch mobs. This African American newspaperwoman wrote, spoke, traveled, organized, excoriated, and challenged her audience. Fearlessly, she alienated, shamed, and moved followers and enemies. A small black woman, Ida B. Wells, born in Holy Springs, Mississippi in 1862, the child of slave parents and the eldest of eight children began her career as a journalist on a black newspaper in Memphis.

In 1892 in Memphis, Tennessee three black men, all three business men, had been seized and lynched by a white mob. These men had incurred the enmity of a white business rival. An altercation between two young boys, one white and the other black, had begun earlier. The quarrel resulted in a fight and then a shooting, and finally the three lifeless bodies were hung in public view. Ida Wells, co-editor of the black newspaper, expressed her pain and horror, calling on the black population to “save our money and leave a town” where they could not receive protection nor justice. Her newspaper article urged the black populace to leave Memphis and to head for the newly-opened Oklahoma territory. Ida Wells was blamed for the emigration of the black population. This was in part true, but the important result was Ida B. Wells had her eyes opened, and she discovered her life-long mission. This took her all over the United States. In 1893 and in 1894, she was invited to address crowded audiences in England and Scotland.

Ida B. Wells not only fought for the passage of anti-lynching legislation and the eradication of lynching in sentiment and in acceptance. She was also a suffragette and an ardent supporter of women’s rights. She was one of the founders of the NAACP. A militant and a fighter, she carried a revolver; and she believed with all her heart that blacks should fight racism and never give in or compromise.

This work by Paula Giddings is both detailed and thoroughly researched. Giddings has produced a biography—in over 700 pages – that situates us in the confusing context of African-American history in the age

of racial triumph and segregation in the first half of the 20th century.

Lynching touched the lives of men and women everywhere, North and South. The Churches played their role for good and for bad. Bodies were hung on trees; they were strange fruit indeed, part of the American landscape.

The work of Paula Giddings has opened the door to even further research. Was the Catholic Church always silent before this tragedy? The archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament reveal that St. Katherine Drexel did support the work of the NAACP by contributions that she made regularly during the years. Correspondence with NAACP does reveal that in the 1930s she contributed to anti-lynching legislation and activity. The one stipulation was that her contributions were not to be disclosed. One might ask whether one should not put the light on the lamp stand.

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