James West Davidson

‘They Say’ Ida B. Wells and the Reconstruction of Race

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James West Davidson is the highly regarded author of a number of widely used textbooks, the best known of which are Nation of Nations: A Concise Narrative of the American Republic written with William Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, and Mark H. Lytle, and After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection, which is very popular in undergraduate historiography courses. The monograph under review is the latest publication in the Oxford University Press series, “New Narratives in American History.” Davidson is the series editor and has been an advocate of “narrative” history since the 1980s.

While the book is ostensibly about Ida B. Wells, the African American activist, journalist and crusader against lynching, it is not a biography. Davidson examines only the first thirty years of Wells life, ending his study in the 1890s when Wells was on the cusp of her fame. ‘They Say’ in the title, refers to what “they” (whites) say “we” (blacks) are. Thus, the monograph is an exploration of the reconstruction of race after the Civil War. With the end of slavery came a war fought over the definition of black in America. Ida B. Wells was an important combatant in that struggle. The text ends in the 1890s because by then, the struggle was largely over. Jim Crow was the law of the land and African Americans would have to struggle on for the next half century before they were able to redefine themselves despite white opposition.

An epigraph from James Baldwin succinctly expresses the theme of the narrative: “If I am not who you say I am, then you are not who you think you are.” In his afterword, he returns to Baldwin’s aphorism explaining that it is actually a paraphrase from remarks Baldwin made in 1963, “So where we are now is that a whole country of people believe I'm a 'nigger,' and I don't, and the battle's on! Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that you're not what you thought you were either! And that is the crisis." The crisis that Baldwin was referring to was a crisis for white America as much as it was a crisis for African Americans. Using Ida B. Wells as a point of departure, the book explores the efforts of African Americans to define black in the face of massive and brutal terror. But the book begs the question that haunts every page, what does this history of brutality; this history of “lynching”, a word used to cover such things as burning men alive, vivisecting them and publicly murdering them in every fashion imaginable, all in front of large audiences, with photographers recording the event for wide public distribution as well as for posterity – what does this history tell us about the
psychology of white Americans. Davidson comments that looking at these brutal pictures today, makes him uncomfortable? What exactly is the nature of this discomfort?

In a brilliant prologue, titled, “Dose This Look Natchel?” – a question asked an average looking man sitting in a studio chair for a portrait. But the question applies equally to us. Davidson meditates on the famous photograph of the 1911 lynching of Laura Nelson and her son, who were hung from a bridge over the Canadian River in Okemah, Oklahoma. In the picture, which was made into a post-card, one sees a line of white people on the bridge with the mother and son hanging below. It is self-evident that in America the sight of a black person being publicly tortured, burned alive or vivisected “looked natural” – at least to white people. It is unfortunate that the psychology of white people during the Jim Crow era has been left largely unexplored. And, while Davidson’s narrative raises the question, his narrative style and focus on the African American identity, leads him to largely ignore it, but with Abu Ghraib on my mind, Davidson left me wondering, is torture still “Natchel” in America? Is that why we are uncomfortable looking at these brutal images? Do we see ourselves in them? Are we still indifferent to the suffering of the “other”?

“They Say,” is certainly well within the grasp of most undergraduates. It is a captivating narrative that can easily be adopted as a reading in a survey course or any course with a major focus on the history of race relations. I teach courses in the history of race in America and am very familiar with the story he tells. Still, I learned a great deal from Davidson’s narrative and I recommend it to my colleagues interested in this area.

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