



To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells

By Mia Bay

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Born to slaves in 1862, Ida B. Wells became a fearless antilynching crusader, women's rights advocate, and journalist. Wells's refusal to accept any compromise on racial inequality caused her to be labeled a "dangerous radical" in her day but made her a model for later civil rights activists as well as a powerful witness to the troubled racial politics of her era. In the richly illustrated *To Tell the Truth Freely*, the historian Mia Bay vividly captures Wells's legacy and life, from her childhood in Mississippi to her early career in late nineteenth-century Memphis and her later life in Progressive-era Chicago.

Wells's fight for racial and gender justice began in 1883, when she was a young schoolteacher who traveled to her rural schoolhouse by rail. Forcibly ejected from her seat on a train one day on account of her race, Wells immediately sued the railroad. Though she ultimately lost her case on appeal in the Supreme Court of Tennessee, the published account of her legal challenge to Jim Crow changed her life, propelling her into a career as an outspoken journalist and social activist. Also a fierce critic of the racial violence that marked her era, Wells went on to launch a crusade against lynching that took her across the United States and eventually to Britain. Though she helped found the NAACP in 1910 after resettling in Chicago, she would not remain a member for long. Always militant in her quest for racial justice, Wells rejected not only Booker T. Washington's accommodationism but also the moderating influence of white reformers within the early NAACP. The life of Ida B. Wells and her enduring achievements are dramatically recovered in Mia Bay's *To Tell the Truth Freely*.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Bay (*The White Image in the Black Mind*) delineates journalist and antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells's life (1862–1931) and her passionate commitment to a range of causes so extensive that they defy easy summary. When her parents died in 1878, 16-year-old Wells became the head of her family, caring for her five siblings. After a brief stint teaching, she found her two callings—political activism and, more powerfully, journalism, becoming by the late 1880s one of the most prolific and well-known black female journalists of her day. In 1884, she sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad over segregated cars; in 1889, she became part owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech* newspaper. In 1892, catalyzed by the lynching of three black businessmen, she devoted herself to an anti-lynching campaign that would cost her the Memphis newspaper, threaten her life, and sever her ties to Memphis forever. Bay relies heavily on Wells's published writing, especially her posthumous autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, supplemented by secondary sources, making this a useful book for students. The perilous edge that Wells traversed, however, is blunted; she led a life full of drama, but Bay's quotidian account is an utterly unexciting summary. (Feb.)

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Review

“Mia Bay . . . brings dimension to history’s minimalist portrait of [Ida B. Wells] in her insightful new biography . . . Bay’s book gives credit where it’s long overdue.” —Sandy Nelson, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*

“In the richly illustrated *To Tell the Truth Freely*, the historian Mia Bay vividly captures Wells’s legacy and life, from her childhood in Mississippi to her early career in late nineteenth-century Memphis and her later life in Progressive-era Chicago.” —*The African American Book Review*

“This well-researched book . . . should be useful to both mass communication scholars and a general audience, thanks to Bay’s fluid writing style, attention to details, and facts.” —Jinx Coleman Broussard, *Journalism History*

“In this remarkable book, Mia Bay understands Ida B. Wells in full—as thinker, writer, crusader, politician, and woman of the world. Finally, we have a biography worthy of one of the bravest and most influential activists in U.S. history.” —Michael Kazin, author of *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*

“Ida B. Wells is one of America’s most important yet relatively unknown historical figures. Absorbing and insightful, *To Tell the Truth Freely* deftly chronicles the way in which her extraordinary life and career altered the evolution of race and democracy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century America.” —Peniel E. Joseph, author of *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*

“Mia Bay’s biography of Ida B. Wells is as sharp and sassy as the woman herself. The vigilance and bravado of this dynamic black woman crusader shines through on every page. Bay’s triumphant tapestry reveals the life and times of an unsung heroine woven into battles for African American freedom.” —Catherine Clinton, author of *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*

“At last—an eloquent, concise, yet richly detailed account of Ida B. Wells. Beautifully crafted, this book

restores Wells to her rightful place in American political history by telling her story with verve and grace.”
—Barbara D. Savage, author of *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*

“Superb . . . Having been squeezed out of a role in national civil and women’s rights organizations, Wells lost a prominent place in the historical record. It took several generations before her relentless and often discomforting agitation for social justice received the appreciation it deserved, as scholars over the last twenty years gradually reestablished her place in history. Mia Bay’s lucid biography contributes enormously to this project.” —Andrew Feffer, *History News Network*

About the Author

Mia Bay is an associate professor of history at Rutgers University and the associate director of Rutgers’s Center for Race and Ethnicity. This is her second book.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nora Carter:

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Alice Weaver:

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David Blackwood:

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