

LYNCHINGS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the Hands of Persons Unknown:

The Lynching of Black America

Philip Dray

New York: Random House, 2002

\$35.00

528 pp.

Reviewed by Dwight D. Murphey

One of the things most admirable about the film adaptation of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* a few years ago was that the film never allowed itself to focus entirely on the criminals and their hanging. Flashbacks showing their robbery and murder of a Kansas farm family constantly reminded the viewer that there was more to the story than the criminals' own personal travail.

The lack of such balance is a serious flaw in any history of lynching in the United States that presents the subject with an overemphasis on the lynching itself. The selection of the subject has built in the bias unless the author is careful. In Philip Dray's narrative, he will mention briefly that "a white woman named Anna Pelly, twenty-four, was found raped and murdered in an alley, strangled to death," or that "a seventeen year old white girl, Eula Ausley, went missing and was found murdered in a forest clearing, her throat slashed from ear to ear." But all of the narrative from that point forward (often for two or three pages) centers on the search for and eventual lynching of the alleged perpetrator.

A book could just as validly be written entitled *At the Hands of Persons Known: A Century of Outrages against White America*, with emphasis on the innocents who were robbed or raped or murdered or kidnapped, followed by a mere sentence or two about what happened to the accused. Of course, the very suggestion of that, under such a title, will seem outlandish; but the fact that it is a mirror image of Dray's own subtitle, *The Lynching of Black America*, shows just how selective and distorted is Dray's approach.

Unfortunately, the bias does not come only from a naive framing of the subject. Dray is committed to the left's view of American history, which has long since become the conventional view. His lengthy narrative account of a century of lynchings, dwelling primarily on those in the South, tells the story in easily readable fashion, and it is apparent that he has done considerable research into those parts of the story that he chooses to emphasize. Most readers, not predisposed to question the conventional account, will find the book yet another demonstration of how cruel, rapacious, and hypocritical white society has been and how much blacks have been the victims of that viciousness. Dray's book will especially help round out the education of young readers who are assigned the book in school.

From the standpoint of intellectual honesty and accuracy, the well-told narrative doesn't make up for its failings, most of them stemming from Dray's leftist myopia. He brings no historical perspective whatever to his eagerness to condemn white society. "Efforts to establish precise numbers...become, at a certain point, meaningless," he says, "... whether their number was 500, 5,000, or 25,000..." We might note that Robert Zangrando, in his book *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950*, indicates a total of 4,742 between 1882 and 1968. Of these, he says, 1,297 were white and 3,445 black. (*The New York Times* has on at least two occasions reported that all those lynched then were black, but that was the result either of the particular author's dishonesty or sloppiness.)

The number of fewer than 5,000 lynchings over 87 years is hardly "meaningless" when we compare it with the 85 to 100 million victims of Communism estimated by several prominent European scholars in their recent *Black Book of Communism*. Consider, also, the list published in *Insight* magazine of just the more recent genocidal killings:

Sudan, where 1.5 million plus are dead; Rwanda, where estimates range from 500,000 to 800,000; East Timor, at least 100,000; Sri Lanka, 54,000; Tajikistan, 30,000 to 50,000; Algeria, 70,000 to 80,000; Liberia, 200,000; Chechnya, 80,000; Ethiopia/Eritrea, 10,000 in recent weeks; Iraq, 1 million; and Kosovo, 2,000 prior to the NATO bombing attacks.

These are numbers that are beyond effective human comprehension, but each of the victims lived and breathed, laughed and cried, every bit as much as the blacks that Dray tells about. It is ideology, not an objective view of history, that caused Dray and Random House to select their subject.

The hypocrisy of his leftist ideology is especially apparent when at a number of junctures Dray expresses his condonation of communists. This condonation is a part of contemporary intellectual culture even though it has now been seventy years since a good many Western intellectuals began finally to "hear the screams" and turn away from communism. Dray refers to the Communist theoretician Herbert Aptheker as "the scholar Herbert Aptheker." Of Paul Robeson, he says: "A Communist sympathizer, he was also a strong, unbowed

black man....” And to Dray, anti-communism was yet more evidence of America’s depravity, as we see in his references to “the red scare,” “Red baiting,” and “anti-Red paranoia.” He would never write this way if Nazism rather than communism were the form of totalitarianism involved.

Human thought takes so many turns that one is tempted to write a treatise on “the zoology of the human mind.” In that context it is often best just to smile at the results, and it would be unwise to question a speaker’s intellectual honesty. Certainly, I won’t do so here. There is reason, however, to point out some significant “disconnections” in Dray’s thinking.

It seems oddly advantageous for him to cut off his narrative, as he does, in 1965. This leaves the reader with what seems to be a history of struggle for due process and social political equality. If the author had gone just a few months further, he could have told how the “civil rights movement” turned toward “black power” and kicked out its white activists. If he had brought the narrative forward just a short time more, he could have discussed how “equality” transmuted almost immediately into a demand for “compensatory privilege.” More than that, he could have related the American Left’s advance beyond the “black struggle” to use Third World immigration, “multiculturalism,” and an “adversary culture” to swamp the traditional Euro-American society. If Dray had sought a recent subject comparable to his lynching narrative, he could have told the individual stories of the now countless victims of black on black drive by shootings. Instead, he chose to stop in 1965, while the integration movement was still arguably a picture of an underdog seeking justice.

Even though Dray’s book was published in 2002, he strangely fails to add perspective by commenting on contemporary comparisons with much that he discusses. About the Atlanta race riot in 1906, he says that “for blacks, the sense of abandonment during the riot was virtually complete. The police were distinctly unhelpful, and the state militia and federal soldiers stationed at nearby Fort McPherson arrived only after several hours.” It wouldn’t have been out of line for Dray to comment about how similar this was to the Los Angeles riot in May, 1992, when Korean merchants under attack by blacks were left undefended for many hours. Elsewhere, Dray tells how white residents were unwilling to come forward to identify other whites who had taken part in a lynching. It would have helped the reader grasp the universality of much human behavior if Dray had commented upon how little cooperation police receive today from black residents in identifying drive-by shooters. As to the trial of the defendants accused of murdering Emmett Till in 1955, Dray says that the white jury came back with a “not guilty” verdict even though “the known facts that the jury took with them into the deliberation room might, anywhere else in the world, have pointed to a more or less automatic conviction.” Wouldn’t you think Dray would have been moved to comment on how the same thing happened in the O.J. Simpson case with a black jury?

Moreover, Dray's insights are ideologically selective. "American blacks," he says, "were victims of seventeenth and eighteenth century European imperialism." He lets it stand at that, and says nothing about the worldwide British drive to abolish the slave trade or about black African complicity in capturing and selling their fellow blacks into slavery. Of course, there is nothing about slavery having been an institution in a great many societies throughout history.

There is so much lacking in Dray's book that it is difficult to end this review. Before we conclude, however, it is worth noting that at no point is there an effort to understand, with any empathy at all, the concerns of white Americans in those years. They were, it seems, just inexplicably vicious.

*Dwight D. Murphey is the author of a legal studies monograph, **Lynching—History and Analysis**, published by the **Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies**. It is an intellectual scandal reminiscent of the Lysenko case in the Soviet Union that Canada has barred entry to the monograph as "hate literature."*
