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# 'A Lynching at Port Jervis' Review: Disgrace in the North

On June 2, 1892, a horrific act of racist murder occurred, not in any of the former Confederate states but just 65 miles from New York City.



*By David S. Reynolds*

June 8, 2022 6:23 pm ET

On Thursday, June 2, 1892, Robert Lewis, a 28-year-old African-American teamster and bus driver in the village of Port Jervis, N.Y., was killed by a mob.

Earlier that day, a light-skinned black man had been seen arguing on a riverbank with a young local woman, Lena McMahan, who emerged from the altercation with torn clothing and wounds on her body. She said that a black stranger had assaulted her (she withheld details but did not contradict a physician and others who later said the attack was sexual in intent). A 12-year-old boy who witnessed the scene from a distance reported that Robert Lewis was the attacker. The word spread. Lewis was hunted down, captured and taken to

town in a wagon. When the wagon reached the Port Jervis jail, a howling mass of people surrounded it, seized Lewis, and pummeled him. A few men tried to save him, but shouts of “Hang him!” and “Kill him!” came from the crowd of 2,000 that had gathered. A rope was found, and Lewis was strung up on a tree limb. His body hung for over an hour before it was cut down. Witnesses tore off pieces of Lewis’s clothing and stripped chunks of bark from the tree on which he was hanged. The relics were later sold as souvenirs.

This horrible incident is the subject of Philip Dray’s stirring book “A Lynching at Port Jervis.” Mr. Dray, the author of the acclaimed “At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America,” here focuses on an event that was unusual because of where it occurred. By the 1890s, lynching was common in the former Confederate states. As Mr. Dray tells us, “of the 1,134 recorded lynchings of African Americans between the years 1882 and 1899, the lynching of Robert Lewis was the only one known to have occurred in New York State.” Port Jervis, then a town of 9,000, is 65 miles outside of New York City, at the confluence of two rivers that form the borders of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The murder of Robert Lewis, Mr. Dray writes, was “a portent that lynching, then surging uncontrollably below the Mason-Dixon Line, was about to extend its tendrils northward.” In the decades after the Lewis murder, “white-on-Black terroristic violence” occurred in New York City, rural Pennsylvania, southern Illinois, Duluth, Minn., and elsewhere in the North.



Mr. Dray’s account of the Port Jervis incident merits strong praise for its comprehensiveness and clarity. Mr. Dray is a skilled archival sleuth. But even the most scrupulous research yields few answers when directed toward lynchings of the Jim Crow era. As Mr. Dray writes: “Lynching has a perverse relation to recorded history, for obfuscation is central to its purpose.”

Did Robert Lewis rape Lena McMahan? Upon his capture, Lewis blurted out a vague

confession, but he said that he had been goaded on by Lena's boyfriend, Philip Foley, a rakish man. But while he was under attack by the mob, Lewis repeatedly shouted, "You have the wrong man. I didn't do it. I am the wrong man." Questions also swirled around Lena McMahan. Two days before the lynching, she had fought with her mother, who objected to her relationship with Philip Foley. Lena fled the house, vowing never to return. She later said that she took a train to Manhattan, returning the next day to Port Jervis and spending the night in a cemetery that was about a mile from her home.

A different story came from Foley, who said that on the night before the lynching he and Lena slept together in the woods near Port Jervis, where they were "as husband and wife." He denied the charge that he had encouraged Robert Lewis to make an advance on Lena, saying that he had barely known Lewis. Yet other questions arose. Was Lena in fact having an affair with her supposed attacker, and was the confrontation on the river bank a lovers' spat? Had she taken the trip to have an abortion? Or did Lena pretend to have been raped, in a charade intended to make her parents view Philip Foley as a desirable partner for her in a dangerous world?

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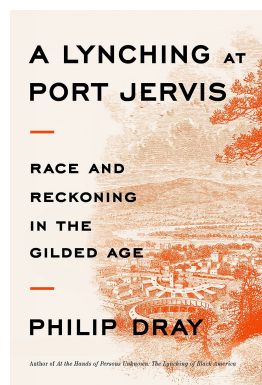
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## A Lynching at Port Jervis: Race and Reckoning in the Gilded Age

By David S. Reynolds

Farrar, Straus & Giroux



News reports of the Port Jervis lynching were sensational, with headlines like "Flight of the Brute" and "Southern Methods Outdone." Two inquests met with denial and dodging on the part of the those who had participated in the lynching. The testimony of the few who had tried to help Robert Lewis was ignored or discounted. Eight men were indicted for assault and inciting to riot, but the jury acquitted all the accused. The verdict: Robert Lewis came to his death "by being hanged by his neck by a person or persons unknown."

A special contribution of Mr. Dray's book is its discussion of Stephen Crane, the author of "The Red Badge of Courage." Crane, who grew

up in Port Jervis, knew people involved in the lynching. His brother, Judge William Crane, was one of those who tried to rescue Robert Lewis before he was hanged. Although Stephen Crane was not in Port Jervis on the day of the lynching, the event resonated in his mind. Mr. Dray agrees with recent commentators who have suggested that Crane's 1898 novella "The Monster" was based loosely on the crime. In the novella, Henry Johnson, an African-American coachman in a New York town that resembles Port Jervis, is cruelly ostracized and finally driven insane by white townspeople. Johnson ends up sitting all day on a bench, waving his arms and chanting mournfully. As Mr. Dray notes, Johnson becomes a marginalized victim of white supremacy of the kind later portrayed in the novel "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, an admirer of Crane.

The shattering impact of racism. Mob violence for political ends. Obfuscation in the face of criminal charges. Philip Dray reminds us how deeply ingrained these phenomena are in American history.

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