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Journalism and Human Rights: From the Abolition of the British Slave Trade, the AIDS Crisis, and Injustices Beyond and In-Between

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JOURNALISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS:
FROM THE ABOLITION OF THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE, THE AIDS CRISIS,
AND INJUSTICES BEYOND AND IN-BETWEEN

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Communication Studies
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By

Andrew F. Henderson

May 2018

CE/T Committee:

Professor Patti Minter, Chair

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Vickey and Greg Henderson, who have always believed in me. I also dedicate this work to my partner and friend Ashley, who has been by my side. I dedicate this work to everyone, both present and future, on the staff of the College Heights Herald, including students and professional staff (especially Tracy Newton and Sherry West).

Finally, I dedicate this work to the administration of Western Kentucky University for their conscious, ongoing, decision to sue the Herald to cover for sexual predators.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this process, I have been moved to tears many times learning the stories of journalists as they dedicated their lives to better the world around them. Empathy, truthfulness, and understanding is what I took from each of their stories. Thomas Clarkson empathized with slaves while he could have easily not, Ida B. Wells understood the dangers that would face her by tackling white supremacy with her own race while she could have easily carried on a teaching career, Randy Shilts wanted people to know the truth about being gay in the hopes that everyone would come to accept him and those like him. Empathy is a powerful force, one which has propelled human rights forward and one that should be present in every person's lives.

I'm thankful I came to WKU. I am even more thankful that I walked into the front doors of the College Heights Herald newsroom during the second week of my freshman year. Doing so allowed me to find my place, and my home, at this university. Neither of those can be taken away. I am also thankful for all the people I was able to come in touch with during my time as a reporter and editor for the Herald; being a journalist afforded the opportunity to look into the windows of many lives, no matter how brief.

The largest thank you I can muster goes to all the professors I've had while at WKU, specifically those who have impacted my life in some way: Charlotte Elder, Judy Rohrer, Patricia Minter, Molly Kerby, Jieyoung Kong, Amanda Crawford, and Andrew Rosa.

Journalism has recently found itself in a situation of heightened scrutiny, distrust, and even violence; admittedly some wounds are self-inflicted. If they are interested in

moving the arc of justice forward for all people, and if they wish to return to their roots of advocating for human rights, then I suggest this thesis as a good starting point.

ABSTRACT

The conception of human rights is one that is enshrined within the shared, collective history of humanity. Encompassing secular traditions, Asian religions and traditions, and monotheistic religions and perspectives as a base for what would come to evolve into universal human rights. Throughout history these traditions and religions have all played a role in shaping where we are at today in terms of human rights. Yet the road which led to a universal declaration of rights was not paved with ease. From the onset of Aristotle, Plato, Hammurabi, other secular authors, and culminating to the end of the French Revolution at the tail end of the eighteenth century, rights were not freely extended to all people. Certainly, white men, and specifically men who owned property have been well off, but there are several points in our shared history where not all of these rights were declared to everyone.

The author argues that journalists have had a profound role in the advancement of human rights as there's historical precedence to support this, and evidence to support that their work as jouranalists comes to support a growing concept of universal human rights. This theis will examine the role one specific group of people who had a part in the evolution of human rights, and human rights movements: journalists. This thesis will examine the roles of three individual journalists over the course of time and how their work altered, and in many cases began, human rights movements. Focusing on Thomas Clarkson, Ida B. Wells, and Randy Shilts, the author argues that the contributions of journalists have had profound effects on human rights within the framework of rights struggles.

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INTRODUCTION

A March 25, 2018 story on the front page of the Louisville Courier-Journal focused on a group of high student journalists from DuPont Manual High School reporting on the March for Our Lives event in Washington D.C. Headlined, “We're the ones that are dying': Manual students attend, cover 'March for Our Lives' in D.C.,” the lead of the story makes an interesting point. These high school journalists were among the thousands of teenagers gathered in the nation’s capital. As journalists, they were performing routine tasks—taking photographs, shooting video, posting on social media—but the students also strayed away from what some may consider objective journalism, “they were clear they were students and activists as well as chroniclers.”¹

*“We're the ones that are dying, we're the ones this is happening to,”
senior Jordan Grantz, 18, told in an interview with the Courier Journal.
“We can talk more directly about what's happening because it could be
anyone next.”*

The March For Our Lives was a student-led demonstration that took place on March 24 in D.C. with more than eight hundred sibling marches across the United States and the globe, which supported gun control policies.² The march was announced after 17 people died in a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. A group of Parkland students have become outspoken activists in the aftermath of the February school shooting. They’ve continually challenged lawmakers and the National Rifle Association, which in turn has kickstarted a national, sustained dialogue on gun control. Special notice is made of this particular Courier Journal story because of

¹ Darcy Costello, “We're the ones that are dying': Manual students attend, cover 'March for Our Lives' in D.C.,” *Courier Journal* (Louisville, Kentucky), March 24, 2018.

² New York Times, “March for Our Lives Highlights: Students Protesting Guns Say ‘Enough Is Enough’,” *New York Times* (New York, New York), March 24, 2018.

the discussion it sparked from within my own personal and professional network. A former director of Western Kentucky University's Student Publications, Bob Adams made a Facebook post about the Courier Journal story the same day it came out in print. He is a former advisor to the College Heights Herald, WKU's student newspaper, and the Talisman, WKU's former yearbook and now magazine, and in 2005 was inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame. His post sparked a conversation among current and former journalists about if this so-called idea of journalistic objectivity was crossed in this instance with the student journalists covering the march. In his view, he took issue with students being taught that it's okay to be "an activist and chronicler at the same time," putting the future of journalism in a precarious place. "Journalism is changing much quicker than an old person like me can keep up with and it has been five or six years since I've been in a newsroom setting every day, but I'm concerned with journalists telling people what they think rather sharing what we called 'objectivity,'" Adams wrote in his post.³

The thread of comments that followed was populated with scores of current and former journalists, many were past students of his. The majority of respondents echoed agreement. Some said there's an entire generation of journalists who have conflated their own opinions as news, that journalism isn't the same today as what it once was, people threw out terms like "straight journalism," bemoaning how the days of objective journalism are gone and other similar comments. Journalism is undoubtedly changing and always has been since it first stumbled out of the nursery, notebook and pen in tiny hand.

³ Bob Adams, Facebook, March 25, 2018
<https://www.facebook.com/bob.adams.14/posts/10160150419860076>.

You'd only have to look at the past few years to notice the most drastic changes: the rise of social media and the decline of the traditional print newspaper. A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that four-in-ten Americans get news online and social media has become a common news source.⁴ Couple this with an overall decline in circulation and revenue for newspapers in the U.S., then you're presented with a drastically different news environment than the one many older people came accustomed to knowing.⁵ There aren't only sharp changes with how people are choosing to consume their news but also the amount of distrust there is in journalism. A 2017 Pew Research Study found attitudes American people hold about the news media is increasingly becoming divided along partisan lines, meaning even the most fact-based news, especially political news, is coming down to party registration.⁶

Make no mistake, this discussion as to whether journalists are activists or if objective journalism is just waiting for someone to close its casket lid isn't solely being debated by Adams and others on Facebook. This discussion has become an increasingly large part of debate played out by members of the contemporary media. Just last March, a *CNN Reliable Sources* segment aired where one of the editors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student newspaper, Rebecca Schneid, was asked by the host, Brian Stelter, if she saw a difference between the reporting they were doing in D.C. at the March For Our Lives and the activism in advocating for stricter gun control laws. "I think

⁴ Katerina Matsa and Kristine Lu, "10 facts about the changing digital news landscape," *Pew Research Center*, Sept. 14, 2016.

⁵ Michael Barthel, "Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall," *Pew Research Center*, June 1, 2017.

⁶ Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell, "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines," *Pew Research Center Journalism & Media*, May 10, 2017.

that for me, the purpose of journalism is to raise the voices of people that maybe don't have a voice," Schneid said on *Reliable Sources*. "And so I think that in its own right journalism is a form of activism."⁷ Her comments sparked debate online, showing a sharp, and even partisan, divide among those who agreed with her sentiments and those who did not. The politics editor of *National Journal* tweeted, "Journalism isn't activism; it's presenting the facts, honestly and objectively. It's this mentality that's killing trust in our profession."⁸ On the opposite side, a national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* tweeted, "Journalism *is* activism in its most basic form. The entire basis for its ethical practice is the idea that a democracy requires an informed citizenry in order to function. Choosing what you want people to know is a form of activism, even if it's not the march-and-protest kind."⁹ This idea that journalism is a form of activism debatedly has developed into a partisan divide, yet I argue there's no need for any sort of divide to exist as to whether journalists are activists/advocates. Rather, there's historical precedence to think of journalists as such, and there is strong evidence to support that such activism comes to support a growing concept of universal human rights. This paper will examine the role one specific group of people who had a part in the evolution of human rights, and human rights movements: journalists. This paper will examine the roles of three individual journalists over the course of time and how their work altered, and in many cases began, human rights movements. Focusing on Thomas Clarkson, Ida

⁷ Brian Stelter, "Journalism and activism: This 'Reliable Sources' segment sparked a debate," *CNN*, March 27, 2018.

⁸ Josh Kraushaar (@HotlineJosh). 2018. "HotlineJosh Twitter post." Twitter, March 25, 2018, 5:24 p.m. <https://twitter.com/hotlinejosh/status/978019910625452034>.

⁹ Matt Pearce (@mattdpearce). 2018. "mattdpearce Twitter post." Twitter, March 25, 2018, 8:37 p.m. <https://twitter.com/mattdpearce/status/978068381495582720>.

B. Wells, and Randy Shilts, I argue that the contributions of journalists have had profound effects on human rights within the framework of rights struggles.



Figure 1 Newsroom of the *New York Times*.

Why journalists and not Jimmy Carter?

Undoubtedly, there are other people and institutions which promote human rights in different ways. The United Nations is a prime example of an institution that works to promote human rights. For politicians or public servants, President Jimmy Carter is another example. Samuel Moyn argues without Carter’s “explosive affiliation” with human rights rhetoric and policy it may not have made the comeback that it did following the Cold War.¹⁰ There are general functions and purposes journalism serves that can be easily identifiable. At a base level, journalism is meant to inform the community and public which it serves. Walter Lippmann writes in *Public Opinion* that the press serves as

¹⁰ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 149.

“an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.”¹¹ Lippmann argues that newspapers reflect the organization of public opinion. The concept Lippmann postulated is a fairly straightforward one: the press should be able to bring the necessary information to others so they can make informed decisions. The idea of an elite group of journalists, as well as the notion of journalists closing themselves away from the public, has drawn sharp criticism from others, such as John Dewey who would reject the notion journalists were needed to navigate democracy and direct control should be placed into the hands of the people.¹²

Arguably, there are inherent expectations in journalism, such as remaining ethical and truthful. There is no monolithic governing body for journalists follow, no set rules, but there are principles which many strive to follow. While no governing body exists, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics is a good touchstone when it comes to journalistic practices. The Code outlines four main principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, be accountable and transparent.¹³ However, something often heralded as the supreme deity of journalism is objectivity.¹⁴ For example, say you're a reporter going to cover a city hall meeting where they talk about a proposed budget to put a waterpark in the middle of the city. As the reporter, expectations dictate that you report the story about the proposed plan, including those who are in favor of the

¹¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 31.

¹² Jay Rosen, *What are journalists for?*, (Yale University Press, 1999), 20.

¹³ Society of Professional Journalists, *Code of Ethics*, Accessed June 1, 2018.
<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

¹⁴ David Mindich, *Just the facts: How "objectivity" came to define American journalism*, (NYU Press, 2000), 3.

waterpark, and those who are in opposition to the waterpark. This would often be widely accepted as being objective with all sides of the argument accounted for. Yet, from where does this idea of objective journalism develop? First, let's examine some of our earliest understandings of the First Amendment. For the grandiose importance placed on the First Amendment, little has ever been known of how to interpret the amendment. "The birth of the First Amendment threw no light on how its scope should be understood," writes Anthony Lewis.¹⁵ What we may consider the right of a "free press" today was not held in the same regard as the American colonists in the eighteenth century. According to John Tebbel and Sarah Watts, what the colonists referred to as freedom of the press was the "freedom to express their own beliefs as against those who were loyal to the Crown."¹⁶ In the early days of the American press, newspapers were used as mouthpieces for whatever political party owned them to lob attacks on those of the opposing party. Journalism began to form into what we know it as today during the early twentieth century, around the tenure of President Theodore Roosevelt. As George Juergens writes, a shift was occurring from personal journalism to "the newspaper as monolith," things were changing in the scale and operation of the newsroom, more dailies were being launched, American literacy was increasing, and "objectivity became all the more urgent."¹⁷ The use of objectivity, to describe the work of reporters, can be traced to the 1920s. According to Richard Streckfuss, objectivity was not founded on the idea that humans could be objective, but that they could not. To compensate for this flaw, advocates

¹⁵ Anthony Lewis, *Freedom for the Thought That We Hate*, (Basic Books, 2008), 10.

¹⁶ John Tebbel, Sarah Watts, *The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan*, (Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁷ George Juergens, *News from the White House: The presidential-press relationship in the progressive era* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.

proposed a “journalistic system [that] subjected itself to the rigors of the scientific method.”¹⁸ Objective reporting came from people within the industry wanting to establish a more rigorous, fact based and professional method for reporting, but was not intended, as some may assume, to “create a passive justification for the status quo.”¹⁹ Essentially, the mantle of journalistic objectivity wasn’t crafted to uphold things as they should be; it was meant to make it even more factually sound by placing it within the structure of the scientific method, something social scientists were also doing during that time in their respective fields.

Generally, there is a consensus, perhaps not as widespread, that journalism plays a role in a democratic society. And if the press doesn’t play a role in a democratic society then someone should have pointed out the glaring misprint in the First Amendment at this point. Perhaps it is because activism/advocacy have come to be associated with a liberal concept of social justice that many in the public sphere, the press as well, take issue with journalists being deemed activists, especially when one considers burgeoning partisan divide on this. However, this criticism is misguided as well. Social justice, and activism/advocacy, is “the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, social, politically, and/or culturally underresourced.”²⁰ This seems to echo an age-old journalist mantra “The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” However, the full quote, which comes from the 1902 book *Observations by Mr. Dooley*, (Dooley is a fictional Irish bartender created by *Chicago*

¹⁸ Richard Streckfuss, “Objectivity in journalism: A search and a reassessment,” (*Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 4, 1990), 974.

¹⁹ Streckfuss, “Objectivity in journalism,” 979.

²⁰ Lawrence Frey, “Looking for justice in all the wrong places: On a communication approach to social justice,” (*Communication Studies* 47, 1996), 110.

Evening Post journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne) is a bit more critical of the press, but the sentiment, and that part of quote, remains nonetheless. Jay Rosen, echoing many of the sentiments Dewey did a century ago, argues for a model of journalism where the public is empowered to act outside of their own private lives and into the public sphere of the challenges that everyone collectively faces. In a similar way, Lawrence Frey articulates advocacy to adopt an orientation that people “act as effectively as we can to do something about structurally sustained inequalities.”²¹ Clarkson, Wells, and Shilts sought to not only convey information related to the slave trade, lynching, and AIDS, respectively, but to also open the eyes of the rest of the public and invite them into the fray of those current day events. It’s what Rosen would refer to as public journalism, which is defined by: addressing people as citizens and not victims, helping the community act on a problem, improve the climate of discussion, and help make public life go well.²² While public journalism is a relatively recent concept, it’s one that is still grounded within the central tenet of journalism and it’s on this scale that our three figures will be examined.

How do we define human rights?

Depending on what theoretical camp of human rights framework one finds themselves falling into, human rights can be something that has grown and developed over a long period of time, or something that has only taken off in the past fifty-odd years. A singular definition of what constitutes human rights can be complex, mostly because it depends on where the framework of human rights starts. The conception of

²¹ Frey, “Looking for justice in all the wrong places,” 111.

²² Rosen, *What are journalists for?*, 262.

human rights is one that is enshrined within the shared, collective history of humanity. Encompassing secular traditions, Asian religions and traditions, and monotheistic religions and perspectives serve as a base for what would come to evolve into universal human rights. Throughout history these traditions and religions have all played a role in shaping where we are at today in terms of human rights. Micheline Ishay argues in *The Human Rights Reader* that “the spirit of human rights has been transmitted consciously and unconsciously from one generation to another,” ultimately leading to the invocation of the United Nations *Declaration of Human Rights*.²³ Yet the road which led to this universal declaration of rights was not a road paved with ease. Over time, from the onset of Aristotle, Plato, Hammurabi and other secular authors and culminating to the end of the French Revolution at the tail end of the eighteenth century, rights were not freely extended to all groups of people. Certainly, white men, and specifically men who owned property²⁴, have been well off, but there are several points in history where not all of these rights were declared to everyone. Even by the end of the French Revolution, it’s evident that women²⁵ and slaves²⁶ were left out of the larger human rights narrative.

By the 1940s, human rights had changed, adapted, and evolved from where they first took root. But, there was a noticeable gap within the history books concerning human rights. The progression of human rights in the late eighteenth century, and in the aftermath of the French Revolution, seemingly came to a halt. As Lynn Hunt echoes, the “long gap in history of human rights” following the formation in the American and

²³ Micheline Ishay, *The human rights reader: Major political essays, speeches, and documents from ancient times to the present*. (Taylor & Francis, 2007), xxi.

²⁴ Plato, “The Republic,” in *The human rights reader*, 41.

²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the rights of Women,” in *The human rights reader*, 181.

²⁶ Aristotle, “The Politics,” *The human rights reader*, 79.

French Revolutions to the United Nations' declaration "has to give anyone pause."²⁷ Rights began taking on different meanings as nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism began to have greater reach around the globe. Samuel Moyn argues that during the onset of the 1940s, human rights turned into a substitute for what "many around the world wanted, a collective entitlement to self-determination."²⁸ This self-determination was especially tempting for colonized empires and peoples instead of the language human rights carried at the time. Nationalism gradually took over as the dominant human rights framework after 1815.²⁹ Over time, nationalism turned from a convoy which rights could be secured through self-determination to one that was closed off and unwelcoming.³⁰ As a result, universal rights became a thing of the past as nationalism was seen as a way to gain rights for the nation, but again not everyone was included. The rights of man began being placed upon biological explanations as a reason for rights to be less than equal. "In these new biological doctrines, education or changes in environment could never change the inherent hierarchical structures in human nature."³¹ Hunt and Moyn's perspectives are crucial to understanding how human rights historically developed. As Hunt argues human rights did not develop in a vacuum, and points to the *Declaration of Independence* and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* being two watershed documents that would culminate in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Currently, the declaration includes 30 articles that range from: right to freedom and

²⁷ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (WW Norton & Company, 2007), 176.

²⁸ Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 45.

²⁹ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 177.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

movement, right to a nationality, right to freedom of thought, right to a standard of living, right to an education, etc.

Hunt argues that these declarations didn't simply signal transformations in attitudes, but had a forward thrusting effect: "declaring opened up whole new political vistas."³² Her framework for what constitutes human rights, their development, and even their reversals and failures is the framework that will be utilized to place the work of the aforementioned journalists into the context of advocating for human rights. Even before either declarations, Hunt argues the declarations themselves were only possible as a result of change in the meaning of self. During the course of the eighteenth century, individuals began having new experiences in which empathy started to develop, such as by viewing public executions and reading novels about love and marriage, which would help spread the practices of both autonomy and empathy.³³ Hunt's definition of empathy can be summed up by examining the novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*. This novel, written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and published in 1761, tells the story of a young woman who is forced by her father to give up her poor lover and instead marry a Russian soldier, who once saved her father's life. According to Hunt, the readers of the novel were drawn in by the characters and their struggles and opened up readers to new forms of empathy, enabling readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines.³⁴ Typically, everyone learns empathy from an early age, but Hunt argues that empathy develops through social interaction and in the eighteenth century, those who read these novels "learned to extend

³² Ibid., 114.

³³ Ibid., 32.

³⁴ Ibid., 35-38.

their purview of empathy...as a consequence, they came to see others—people they did not know personally—as like them, as having the same kinds of inner emotions.”³⁵

Hunt asserts that empathy developed as people pushed for a greater definition of self-determination. Prior to these developments in the eighteenth century, individuals would derive their sense of morality and community from reason or biblical scripture, but these models lacked the ability to reconcile one’s self with a greater good.³⁶ Philosophers developed a model they referred to as sympathy at the time, which Hunt refers to as empathy, despite the word itself not entering the English lexicon for another two centuries, because empathy better captured the active will to identify with others. Sympathy had a broad meaning in the eighteenth century; philosopher Francis Hutcheson saw sympathy as a moral faculty which made social life possible and acted like a social gravitational force that brought people outside of themselves.³⁷ But, empathy would come to be a more accurate prevailing moral sentiment for human rights as seen with the abolishment of torture in France. Scottish philosopher Adam Smith would use torture as an example of how empathy operated in his 1759 work *Moral Sentiments*. Smith argues that a person can only identify with the suffering of one being tortured by virtue of one’s imagination, which lets others place themselves in the same situation and endure the same torments. This is the process of sympathy which allows an observer to comprehend what the person being tortured feels, but when the observer is able to see themselves as the object of others’ feelings then they are able to better identify with others, and able to

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

³⁶ Ibid., 64.

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

empathize and not just sympathize.³⁸ Additionally, in a similar vein, Frey lays out advocacy as seeking identification with others, “this critical perspective is grounded in the fundamental realization that we share a world with others, and thus ethical conduct requires consideration of the stories of others.”³⁹

The development of these sorts of novels—the epistolary novel—coincides chronologically with the birth of human rights, according to Hunt. Taking Hunt’s argument one step farther, I argue that the means of the dissemination of written text, in this case novels, play a role in advancing the ideals of empathy and therefore human rights. In this case, it becomes even more evident the role journalists have had and can play in advancing human rights when using the concept of novels, written and widely disseminated texts, as a basis for judgement. As Alexis de Tocqueville argues, only a newspaper can accomplish the towering task of getting everyone on the same page, and for the purposes of this argument getting everyone on the same page also means teaching and promoting empathy, and spreading the ideals of human rights.

“When no firm and lasting ties any longer unite men, it is impossible to obtain the cooperation of any great number of them unless you can persuade every man whose help is required that he serves his private interests by voluntarily uniting his efforts to those of all the others. That cannot be done habitually and conveniently without the help of a newspaper. Only a newspaper can put the same thought at the same time before a thousand readers.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

³⁹ Frey, “Looking for justice in all the wrong places,” 111.

⁴⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Volume 2, (John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1889), 517.

THE ADVOCATE FOR ANTISLAVERY

In 1785, Thomas Clarkson entered Cambridge University's Latin essay contest. The question of this essay was set forth by the vice-chancellor of Cambridge Dr. Peter Peckard: "*Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?* 'Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?'"⁴¹ Clarkson began doing what he would later become extremely well-known for: conducting research, gathering interviews, and piecing together evidence. Clarkson was a man privileged by British society, one who looked toward a promising life with the Church of England. As such, he had nothing to gain from his later endeavors to end the slavey trade, or from founding the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade two years later. In fact, many of the men who were in the bookstore and printing shop of James Phillip's at 2 George Yard in London on May 22, 1787 didn't have reason to gather their strength in hopes of abolishing the British slave trade.⁴² Men like Clarkson, Granville Sharp, James Ramsey, William Wilberforce, and John Newton, had no any reason whatsoever to take up an anti-slavery stance. Yet, there was something that convinced those who were part of the newly formed antislavery committee which pushed them towards this endeavor. Perhaps it can be called a sense of greater morality or justice, and while their original goal was not emancipation for slaves, they still took this task upon themselves. A task which held no precedent in the course of human history up to that point.

"I always slept with a candle in my room, that I might rise out of bed and put down such thoughts as might occur to me in the

⁴¹ Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A biography*, (Macmillan, 1989), 9.

⁴² Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 95.

night...conceiving that no arguments of any moment should be lost in so great a cause."⁴³



Figure 2 "The Anti-slavery Convention 1840"

Clarkson before the committee

A good portion of Clarkson's life before the founding of the anti-slavery committee isn't touched on much in the literature surrounding the committee; save for a biography written by Ellen Gibson Wilson in 1996. From Wilson's biography, we learn Clarkson was born on March 28, 1760 in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire meaning his work in forming the anti-slavery committee began while he was still very young, in his mid to late 20s. His father, John Clarkson, was "a model of devotion to duty. While the elder Clarkson died when Thomas was young, the example John set before him "must surely have been held before his two sons and daughter as they grew up."⁴⁴ When looking at why Clarkson set himself toward the mission of abolishing the slave trade, it's important

⁴³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 88.

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 5.

to remember the influence his father had on him, and especially his father's Anglican faith. "In his saintly father he had a perfect model of self-sacrifice for higher duty. The Anglican faith he learned as a child stayed with him to the end. He believed that the abolition movement began with the earliest teachers of Christianity and saw himself in that great chain."⁴⁵ Clarkson became convinced that the impulse that forced him into the work of the anti-slavery committee came directly from God. In fact, it would be Clarkson's Anglican identity which became of great benefit to him later in life in his work with the anti-slavery committee. As a member of the Church of England, Clarkson was awarded more public attention and seriousness than the Quakers, despite the fact the Quakers had taken up abolition a few years prior to Clarkson and members of the Society.⁴⁶

Arguably, much of Clarkson's early life is obscured because there was a concerted effort in the latter years of his life to remove him from the anti-slavery narrative, thus removing a lot of his work from the history books. Clarkson and Wilberforce, then a member of Parliament, did not see eye to eye on political matters. Wilberforce was ideologically conservative but, despite their difference of beliefs, they needed one another for the committee's goals to be achieved. Yet, while Clarkson was jumping at the chance to abolish the slave trade, Wilberforce was always more politically reserved on the issue. "Searching for ways to fulfil the 'awful sense of his duty as a Christian' (Clarkson's words), Wilberforce may have given the particular subject of the slave trade no more than cursory thought until the persistent Clarkson appeared."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 95.

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 23.

Wilberforce needed a push from someone to move in this direction, but move he eventually did. Despite their occasional disagreements, their friendship would last for decades. However, issues would arise after Wilberforce's death when his sons would undertake a campaign to erase Clarkson's work with the Society and place greater emphasis on their father. Wilberforce's two sons, Robert and Samuel, were dismayed to discover their father didn't originate the abolition campaign and they became influenced by others to dispute the narrative set forth by Clarkson, and as a result greatly diminished Clarkson's role with the Society.⁴⁸

In 1775, Clarkson, at the age of 15, entered St. Paul's School in London; following in the footsteps of his father. Up to this point, he spent his childhood years growing up in Wisbech, a town which Wilson describes as being small and full of rural scenes. "The family lived near the bustling cobblestoned marketplace and not far from the quay where vessels loaded their cargoes of foodstuffs for London and the Continent. Outside the town stretched the level fenland crisscrossed by drainage ditches and dikes and dotted with gaunt windmills."⁴⁹ Once at school, he was submerged into the city life that was eighteenth century London. Yet, it was not until he began school at Cambridge does his story begin to fully form. In 1779, he was admitted to St. John's at Cambridge where he came to receive several honors and accolades, and later graduate with his bachelor's degree in 1783, but remained at Cambridge to prepare himself for the clergy. A year later he won the Latin essay prize and seeing as no one had ever taken two essay prizes at Cambridge, Clarkson was determined to be the first. So, the 1785 essay, which

⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 8.

focused on slavery, became the moment in Clarkson's life where he would discover the true horrors of the British slave trade as he tirelessly pursued all avenues of information and sources to thoroughly prepare for his essay. He became consumed with learning and understanding slavery in Britain.

The impact of the essay contest

If one could mark a singular flashpoint in someone's life then this essay was the flashpoint for Clarkson; it was the moment which would come to define his life's work compiling evidence to be published and presented to the public on the slave trade. The prompt of the university's annual essay contest that year was brought about by a tragedy from a few years before. The captain of the British slave ship "Zong" ordered his crew to throw 133 chained Africans overboard to their deaths; no one in the affair was prosecuted for murder, a London court ruled the matter a civil dispute. The judge declared the drowning of the African people was "just as if horses were killed."⁵⁰ Originally, Clarkson saw the essay contest as just another intellectual challenge for him to overcome. He pursued the essay topic through several avenues of information: relying on the primary documents of a dead friend who had experience working in the slave trade and eyewitness accounts of slavery from others. He worked with the mindset of winning the contest, but the facts overwhelmed him: "It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the daytime I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest... It become now not so much a trial for academic reputation, as for the production of a work, which might be useful to injured Africa."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Lawrence Reed, "The Inspiring Story of Thomas Clarkson: A Student's Essay that Changed the World," (Mackinac Center for public policy, 2011), accessed online <https://www.mackinac.org/archives/2011/Clarkson2011web.pdf>

⁵¹ Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 11.

Clarkson's essay was later republished in 1786 by Phillips as *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* and widely distributed as part of the Society's campaign. His essay is broken up into several chapters that touch on a variety of different facets of slavery and the slave trade: a history of the trade, personal treatment of slaves, the ancient slave trade, the universal prevalence of the trade, the decline of commerce of slavery in Europe, etc. Clarkson begins his essay by pointing out the roots which slavery had taken universally, stating that many nations had established slavery through customs, but also principles of justice. Yet, empathy begins to shine through as Clarkson made the argument that no consideration had ever been made to those reduced to a fate of servitude who "have the had the same feelings with ourselves; when reflect that they have had the same propensities to pleasure, and the same aversions from pain, another argument seems immediately to arise in opposition to the former, deduced from our own feelings and that divine sympathy, which nature has implanted in our breasts, for the most useful and generous of purposes."⁵² This sense of grief for those he never knew speaks to the faith Clarkson had instilled in him from a young age. The idea of self-sacrifice, which may have been some use to "injured Africa," was a moving force for Clarkson to mobilize. After all, Clarkson, at this point in this life, should be considered a man in a position largely privileged by British society writ large. He likely would have benefited becoming a clergy with the Church as they were absentee owners of several sugar plantations in the Caribbean.⁵³

⁵² Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* (J. Phillips, 1786), Second Edition, 2.

⁵³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 67.

Clarkson also touches on the “barbarous and inhuman treat” which the slaves endured, a status which he attributed to commerce, “for if men could be considered as possession; if, like cattle, they could be bought and sold, it will not be difficult to suppose, that they could be held in the same consideration, or treated in the same manner.”⁵⁴ Clarkson even goes so far as to historically attribute the treating of slaves as commerce, tracing this attitude back to Greece and Rome. Clarkson continues to take his argument further and claim that slavery was founded on the idea that men were property, taking this line of thought back to the biblical story of Joseph being sold by his brothers. Clarkson also touches on the way in which Africans are subjected to slavery, contrasting the experiences of African societies which also practiced slavery, although a different form from that of the Europeans, and how Europeans went about obtaining slaves. Clarkson writes that the slave trade is said to begin at the great River Senegal and extend to the farthest limits of Anogla, a distance which is some thousand miles. In the second part of his essay, Clarkson sets out to answer the question if slavery is “consistent with the laws of nature, or the common notions of equity, as established among men.”⁵⁵ He concludes that the arguments of those who fall or deliver men into slavery and those who receive or purchase them are false and it’s evident that “commerce, is not only beyond the possibility of defense,” but is “wicked, and justly impious, since it is contrary to the principles of law and government, the dictates of reason, the common maxims of equity, the laws of nature, the admonitions of conscience, and, in short, the whole doctrine of natural religion.”⁵⁶ After reading his essay aloud (in Latin) in June 1785, he left the

⁵⁴ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

university to return home. He made it mid-way to Wades Mill in Hertfordshire when he stepped down off his horse and was overcome with a thought:

“I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought come into my mind that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end.”⁵⁷

Clarkson investigates

What exactly was Clarkson’s role with the Society? If one were to compare the committee to a modern-day heist movie where you assemble all the best people in the field to successfully steal a sacred scroll, then you would want Clarkson as the brains behind the operation. You’d put him in charge of gathering the blueprints of the building where the scroll is kept, have him identify the weak points of said facility, and plan how the group will escape. Apart from the theoretical heist analogy, Clarkson’s main role with the Society was gathering evidence to persuade the British public and Parliament to act towards ending the slave trade. To do this, he was tasked with finding witnesses, gathering information, and organizing allies and sympathizers of the committee. Clarkson chronicles his journeys to several cities and towns across Britain in *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, which is a book of the progression of the movement to abolish the slave trade.

He first traveled to Bristol in 1787. The first person Clarkson met in Bristol was Harry Gandy, a Quaker who previously was a seafaring man and had been on two voyages in the slave trade. Clarkson writes that he was able to obtain useful information

⁵⁷ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 89.

on the trade from Gandy and his network in Bristol.⁵⁸ While there, Clarkson heard word that the ship “Brothers” was unable to employ seamen, and that a party onboard became increasingly terrified by the prospect of sailing the slave trade. He discovered that the treatment of seaman in the trade was also one which brought cruelty upon them, a lesser degree than that of slaves, but enough to make the profession a dangerous one. He was later able to confirm, by way of a friend who had given him access to the master-roll of the “Brothers,” that thirty-two seaman had died on the last voyage.⁵⁹ Additionally, Clarkson found the people of Bristol spoke very openly about the slave trade and seemed to be well versed with its various facets. It was this openness which led the people of Bristol to tell Clarkson about a black, free man named John Dean. The general reports about Dean was that the captain of a ship had fastened Dean with his belly to the deck and poured hot tar onto his back and made incisions with tongs; Clarkson, while unable to track down Dean, as Dean had left From Bristol to London, was able to confirm with several other people, such as a landlord and attorney who knew him, that these events had transpired.⁶⁰ On a later return trip to Bristol, after going to Monmout, Clarkson was able to get an interview with Alexander Falconbridge, who had been to the coast of Africa as a surgeon for four voyages. Falconbridge was able to confirm the many violent and treacherous methods of procuring the slaves from Africa, their “wretched” condition, the consequences of being crowded together on the slave ships, their attempts to rebel, as well as their attempts to “destroy themselves” by jumping overboard into the sea. “I can

⁵⁸ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (Oberlin College, 1835-1863), 181.

⁵⁹ Clarkson, *The History*, 183.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

hardly say how precious I considered the facts with which Mr. Falconbridge had furnished me from his own experience, relative to the different branches of this commerce,” Clarkson wrote.⁶¹ Tracking down leads in Bristol, and elsewhere, is where we can see the restless nature English painter Benjamin Haydon described of an elder Clarkson, “impatient, childish, simple – hungry & will eat, restless & will let you see it; punctual & will hurry, nervous & won’t be hurried, positive & hates contradiction.”⁶²

Clarkson was also, more or less, obsessed with obtaining African artifacts. In Bristol he gathered samples of African ivory, gum, rice, pepper, wood, and small pieces of cloth. He would come to refer to all of these artifacts as his “little collection of African productions.”⁶³ His goal by collecting these artifacts was to obtain as much information about Africa as possible, including the material things they produced, so he could demonstrate how Britain could carry on a profitable trade with Africa in goods other than human beings.⁶⁴ Apart from African-produced artifacts, Clarkson also sought to obtain artifacts that were specifically used in the slave trade. He came into possession of many of these while in Liverpool. In a store window, he found several iron instruments such as a part of hand-cuffs, leg shackles, a thumb screw, and a speculum oris, which was a surgical tool used to wrench open the mouth in the case of a locked jaw. However, it had been adapted to the slave trade as “the slaves were frequently so sulky as to shut their mouths against all sustenance, and this with a determination to die; and that it was necessary their mouths should be forced open to throw in nutriment.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶² Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 185.

⁶³ Clarkson, *The History*, 248.

⁶⁴ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 115.

⁶⁵ Clarkson, *The History*, 224.

While Clarkson was determined to bring about the abolishment of the slave trade, he wasn't so blinded by his ideals that he didn't ground himself in principle, and this includes verifying claims instead of taking them at face value. In all likelihood, there was a part of Clarkson, specifically his religious background, ready to believe these claims, but another part of him knew better. "I conceived that it became me to be very cautious about giving ear too readily to reports; and therefore, as I could easily learn the truth of one of the assertion which had been made to me, I thought it prudent to ascertain this, and to judge, by the discovery that I should make concerning it, what degree of credit might be due to the rest."⁶⁶ He was a cautious man, committed to the cause of abolishing the slave trade, but likewise weighed his work by giving an accurate presentation of the horrors of the trade to the public. He writes in *History*, after first reaching Bristol, on the gravity of the work he was doing.

"I began now to tremble, for the first time, at the arduous task I had undertaken, of attempting to subvert one of the branches of the commerce of the great place which was then before me... I anticipated much persecution in it also; and I questioned whether I should even get out of it alive. But in journeying on, I became more calm and composed. My spirits began to return."⁶⁷

Slavery as an institution in Britain

The Atlantic slave trade first reached Britain's shores in 1555 when the mariner John Lok had sailed back from West Africa carrying "black slaves, whereof some were tall and strong men." Two centuries later, British ships dominated the market for slaves in the Americas and supplied African captives to French, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies as well.⁶⁸ The slave trade enslaved a cumulative total of over 10 million

⁶⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁸ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 13.

Africans to the New World from 1500 to 1900; closer to 12 million were dispatched in ships from Africa and over 1.5 million perished in the Middle Passage.⁶⁹ Portugal and Spain were the first European nations to sanction the slave trade, but it wasn't long until other European nations like France, Britain, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany also invested. After 1740, Britain surged ahead of their Portuguese and French competitors, and in 1740 alone British traders enslaved over 200,000 Africans—more than all other countries combined.⁷⁰ By this time, Britain had established outposts in all of its thirteen colonies and India and in their peak years transported some forty thousand slaves.⁷¹

When discussing the slave trade, you cannot separate it from its inherent capitalist nature. Seymour Drescher argues in *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery*, that from the period of 1783 to 1807, slavery was more prosperous than it had ever been before. “The British slave system enlarged its frontier, its supply of virgin soil, its relative proportion of British trade, its imports and exports, its share of world sugar and coffee production, and its overall size, both absolutely and relative to other colonial systems... In other words, the British colonial slave system after 1783 was doing what it had done before, and doing it even better.”⁷² The period before the Seven Years' War is represented as an age where sugar was the great commercial crop of slavery, and Adam Hochschild argues that sugar was a reigning

⁶⁹Hilary Beckles, *Slave voyages: the Transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans; educational resource for teachers...* (Unesco, 2002), 47.

⁷⁰ Beckles, *Slave voyages*, 54.

⁷¹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 13.

⁷² Seymour Drescher, *From slavery to freedom: Comparative studies in the rise and fall of Atlantic slavery* (Springer, 1999), 9.

king of the slave trade. In the slave trade, people were profit and this profit is what kept Britain running. Nowhere in the British Empire was the slave trade more successful and important than the Caribbean where sugar was crowned king. “Just as oil drives the geopolitics of our own time, the most important commodity on European minds then was sugar, and the overseas territories that mattered most were the islands so wonderfully suited for growing it.”⁷³ In this way, we can see how both economic interest and class status kept the slave trade going. Not only was sugar economically viable to Britain, it was considered a commodity that provided people status and comfort in society. To remove the slave trade would mean taking away the means of genteel status of plantation owners and removing “that one vital link and the empire was gone.”⁷⁴

Additionally, religion served as a roadblock to abolish the slave trade. The Church of England was not free from the grips of slavery. In fact, the Church had their finger firmly on its pulse. The Church served as an absentee owner, or rather their missionary arm, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, served as one.⁷⁵ Before John Newton’s conversion, he too thought of slavery as the natural way of things and wanted to focus on converting slaves not emancipating them. How could he think otherwise? Newton’s entrenchment in the slave trade had warped him into thinking it was acceptable, and the Church’s backing, no matter how explicit or implicit, can be viewed as a sign of support for slavery in their believers’ eyes. Newton wished for wealth,

⁷³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

adventure, and promoting the life of God in life and “for some thirty years afterwards, John Newton seems never to have heard God say a word to him against slavery.”⁷⁶

The slave ship “Brookes”

So how would the committee overcome the slave trade which had an extremely strong foothold in the country? The committee decided to chart their route of abolition through Parliament. However, approaching the abolition of the slave trade through government channels would prove difficult as well. First, the legal status of slaves in England was not something that had been defined at that point. The status of slave legality “was surprisingly uncertain.”⁷⁷ It wasn’t until Granville Sharp took on the Somerset v. Stewart case a precedent for slaves was set. The case can be summarized as such: James Somerset, a slave from Virginia, escaped from his master, Charles Stewart, and the court had to decide his freed status following an attempt by Stewart to recapture Somerset and place him on a ship to Jamaica to be enslaved once again. Sharp argued that the law allowed no one to be a slave in England while the opposing side argued that Somerset was Stewart’s property and thus belonged to him. Lord Chief Justice Mansfield ruled in Somerset’s favor and he was freed, but this did not give slaves any rights nor did it affect the slave trade in any way despite many believing that Mansfield’s decision had outlawed slavery.

In 1789, Wilberforce entered Parliament on behalf of the anti-slavery committee as he began to introduce the first of many abolition bills to Parliament in the House of Commons. However, before the issue could be taken up for debate in the House of Commons, there were hearings occurring about the slave trade in the Committee on

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 35.

Trade and Plantations of the Privy Council.⁷⁸ While Wilberforce had support from the public in the form of anti-slavery petitions, and would later gain the support of MPs in the House, the anti-slavery committee still had to face “the strong West Indian influence in Parliament itself.”⁷⁹ Combine the influence of the West India Committee, which had more resources and wealth at their disposal, in Parliament with Wilberforce’s one-man army arguing for the abolishment of the slave trade resulted in what can nicely be called an uphill battle. The House wasn’t exactly known for being civil on matters and even if the abolition bill did pass in the House, which it did on several instances, the House of Lords, the English elite, would not pass it. This was why drumming up public support was so crucial, and why Clarkson’s role of amassing evidence to present to Parliament and the public on the horrors of the slave trade was needed.

To better prepare for the upcoming battles, Clarkson embarked on another journey, this time to Plymouth. It was there he discovered one of his most important artifacts. He was given an illustration of the slave ship “Brookes,” which has become an iconized image of the physical toll of the slave trade. The illustration of the “Brookes” gave the abolition committee a weapon to levy against the West India Committee as they began publishing the diagram in earnest in newspapers and pamphlets, as the ship “seemed a sinister echo of a scene familiar to fall: detailed drawings of the animals in Noah’s Ark.”⁸⁰ In the *History*, Clarkson said the print seemed to create an instant impression of horror upon all those who saw it and because of this considered it very

⁷⁸ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 156.

instrumental in “serving the cause of the injured Africans...”⁸¹ Clarkson also touched on some of the logistics of the physical spaces of the “Brookes” in his *History*, which were provided by Captain Parrey of the Royal Navy: the length of the boys’ room was thirteen feet and nine inches, the length of the women’s’ room was twenty-eight feet and six inches, the depth of the hold from ceiling to ceiling was ten feet, and so on. Utilizing mathematics, the size of room for every slave was figured out: every man had six feet by one foot four inches, every women had five feet by one foot four inches, every boy had five feet by one foot two inches, and every girl had four feet six inches by one foot. Clarkson paid special attention to the living conditions amongst the slaves in the ship, specifying how closely they were all living amongst one another. “If when four hundred and fifty-one slaves are put into the different rooms of the “Brookes”, the floors are not only covered with bodies, but these bodies actually touch each other,” according to the abstract of evidence presented to the House of Commons.⁸² This all demonstrated the confined spaces of the slave ships. In contrast, tea carrying vessels of that time were awarded spacious room; the slave ships were kept tightly packed. The effect this visual presentation had can perhaps be explained by briefly turning to Lynn Hunt. Hunt notes the change in public opinion towards torture in Britain in the late 18th century and the transformation from viewing torture as a “sacrificial rite” accompanied by festivity to a more subdued form of anxious that came from watching public torture.⁸³ There was an individualistic and secular view emerging which came about after an evaluation of the

⁸¹ Clarkson, *The History*, 377.

⁸² J, Phillips. *An abstract of the evidence delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, in the years 1790 and 1791: On the part of the petitioners for the abolition of the Slave Trade* (1792), 50.

⁸³ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (WW Norton & Company, 2007), 95.

individual body and pain. Pain was something more personal than before since it no longer belonged to the greater community, could not be scarified on behalf of the individual for the greater good of the community or for religious purposes.⁸⁴ “In the new view, consequently, cruel punishment exacted in a public setting constituted an assault on society rather than a reaffirmation of it.”⁸⁵ Clarkson and the committee had brought this form of cruel punishment into the public setting with the publication of the diagram, reaffirming the shifting opinions on personal space and autonomy.

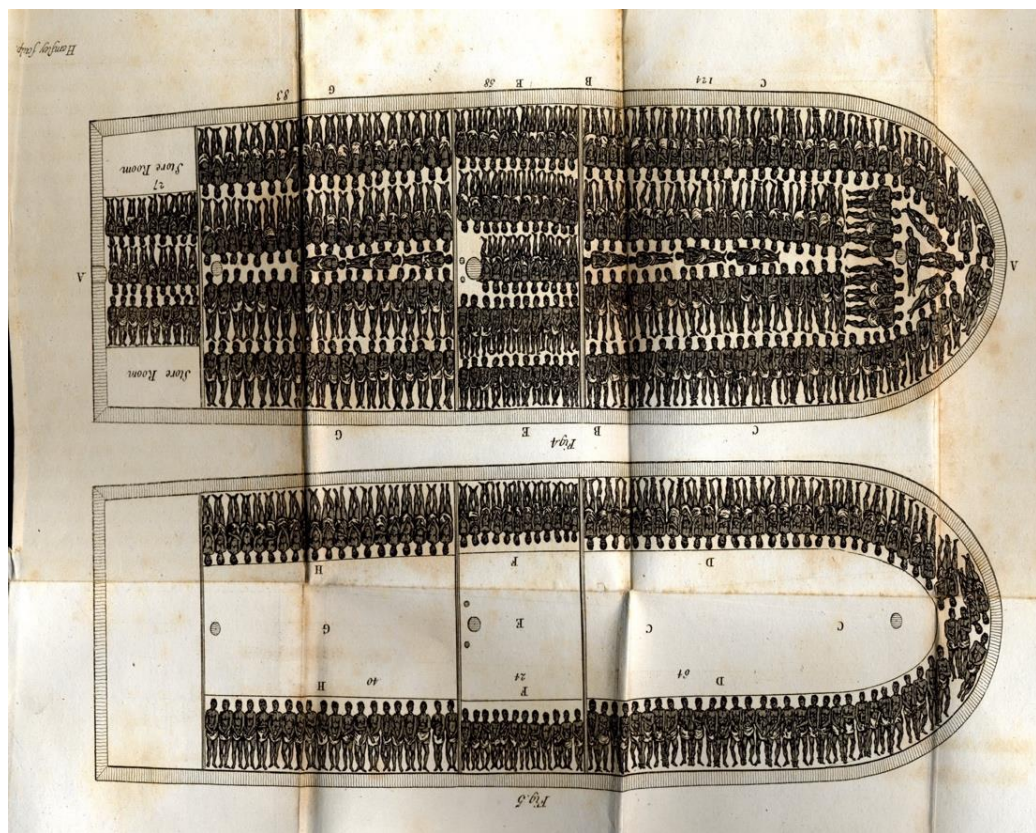


Figure 3 A diagram of the slave ship the "Brookes"

Compiling The Abstract

⁸⁴ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 97.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

For years, Clarkson had amassed evidence and in 1790 it was time to boil down everything he had gathered into a single publication. Assembling countless interviews, documents, diagrams and other evidence, Clarkson and the abolition committee published *The Abstract of the Evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of Commons in the years 1790 and 1791, on the part of the petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. “In consequence of the numerous petitions which were sent to Parliament...in the year 1788, for the ABOLITION of the SLAVE TRADE, it was determined by the House of Commons to hear evidence upon that subject,” the preface to *The Abstract* reads.⁸⁶ The boiled down version of *The Abstract* is as thorough and extensive as one could expect from the nearly 150 page document document. A lot of what Clarkson recorded in his memories in *History* also appear in the abstract, such as people he interviewed and observations he made while on his journeys. Parts of his original Latin essay also appear in the document. *The Abstract* presents evidence from witnesses who experienced, or took part in, the slave trade firsthand. There are six pages just of witness names. *The Abstract* provides first-hand testimony from slave traders, plantation owners, seaman, slaves, and others who have visited Africa and had some role in the slave trade as well. One chapter details how the slaves are treated once they arrived in the European-owned plantations. Once they arrive they are esteemed as “a species of inferior beings, whom the right of purchase gives the owner a power of using at his will.”⁸⁷ There are the field slaves who work on the plantations that are “called out by daylight to their work,” and if they are late to the fields are flogged and even while working

⁸⁶ Phillips, *The Abstract*, 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

the fields are, without exception, “under the whip of drivers.”⁸⁸ Mr. Mark Cook, who was in the plantation business in Jamaica for three years, said during the season slaves typically work eighteen out of twenty-four hours and have become hurt through fatigue and want of sleep. “He knew a girl lose her hand by the mill while feeding it, for being overcome by sleep, she dropped against the rollers. He has heard of several instances of this kind.”⁸⁹ The chapter “Capacity, Feeling, Affection, and Moral Character” poses the questions of whether African natives are equal to the Europeans. Many interviewed deemed the African people as “capable of equal improvement with those of the whites,” however, this was largely based on what the native people were able to manufacture and produce such as gold, iron, cloth, and leather.⁹⁰ Of their moral character, those interviewed described the native Africans as honest, hospitable, and “grateful, but when placed within the context of European influence, those on the coasts who primarily participated in the trade are called roguish, ‘To this account may be added the words of Captain Smith, who says, he always considered them as a keen, sensible, well-disposed people, where their habits were not vitiated by cruel usage on the part of the Europeans’.”⁹¹ The last chapter questions whether the “Natives of Africa are happier in the European Colonies than in their own Country.” Those who participated in the trade, in whatever facet, were uncompromising on this question in their view that the trade must be abolished.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁹¹ Ibid., 96.

“‘*That the trade to Africa for slaves, was neither consistent with sound policy, the laws of nature, and morality*’.”⁹²

Abolished in the ‘largest empire on earth’

Clarkson and the Society weren’t perfect. They strayed from their goal, failed, quieted down, and were revived again. At the very beginning the Society wasn’t dedicated to the emancipation of all slaves, just the abolishment of the slave trade.⁹³ Yet, the work of the Society still shone through. In 1807, following twenty years of work, a bill abolishing the entire British slave trade passed through both houses of Parliament. On March 25, 1807 King George III gave his assent and the bill became law.⁹⁴ However, the work was far from over, slavery itself was not abolished: the slaves in plantations in the Caribbean, and elsewhere, remained slaves despite the trade being abolished. In the coming years, the antislavery movement was reignited and this time they called for immediate emancipation. By this point, Clarkson was in his seventies, and the work of emancipation was taken up by others; where he had once traveled the country on horseback, the new Agency Antislavery Committee had a dedicated staff to travel and could use the steam-powered railways.⁹⁵ Mentions of Clarkson in major London museums which examine the slave trade are sparse. Truthfully, just a few places make explicit mentions of Clarkson and his role with the Society. These include the National Portrait Gallery and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, however, neither of them truly encapsulated the crucial role Clarkson played. In August 1838, some forty years after *The*

⁹² Ibid., 117.

⁹³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 110.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 307.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 346.

Abstract was published, slavery was abolished “in the largest empire on earth,” and Thomas Clarkson was still alive to see it happen.⁹⁶

“After emancipation passed, the British activists reorganized to agitate for the freedom of those enslaved elsewhere, especially in the United States. The linear descendant of one of those organizations is the human rights group Antislavery International, which works today for the freedom of the millions of people who still live in some form of bondage: to cross border traffickers in women, to employers of child labor, to rural landlords in Asia, and more.

Its London headquarters is named Thomas Clarkson House.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

THE PRINCESS OF THE PRESS

In the 1880s, Ida B. Wells could not fathom making a decent living as a journalist, even though journalism allowed Wells to “express the real ‘me’.”⁹⁸ Before becoming a school teacher, Wells experienced great hardships. She was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16, 1862. Before the end of the Civil War, her parents married when they were both slaves and then married again following the end of the war.⁹⁹ A strong bout of yellow fever gripped Memphis, Tennessee in 1878 and the fever soon spread to Holly Springs. Wells was visiting her grandmother’s farm and was able to escape the worst of the fever, but she didn’t escape tragedy altogether. Three men traveled to her grandmother’s farm to deliver the news that her parents had died.¹⁰⁰ The fever continued to rage in Holly Springs as Wells returned there to care for her siblings, but soon there would only be six of them left, including Wells, as they perished from the fever or from complications. Suddenly at the age of fourteen, Wells “after being a happy, light-hearted schoolgirl,” became the head of the family.¹⁰¹ More than four hundred Holly Springs residents died from the fever, and the Wells family was the only black family to have suffered multiple deaths.¹⁰² Wells wrote in her autobiography that she was adamant about keeping all of her siblings together and would not allow them to be separated. In order to provide for her siblings she took exams to be a county school teacher, and later went to teach in Memphis. Likely unknown to Wells at that young age, Memphis was to become

⁹⁸ Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 31.

⁹⁹ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰² Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (Harper Collins, 2008), 36.

a vital part of her life, it was there she would not only pursue journalism, writing for several publications and become the co-owner of a newspaper, but Memphis would soon become ground zero for the first anti-lynching campaign the United States had ever seen. With pen in hand, Wells would lead the crusade against the form of racial terrorism known as lynching.

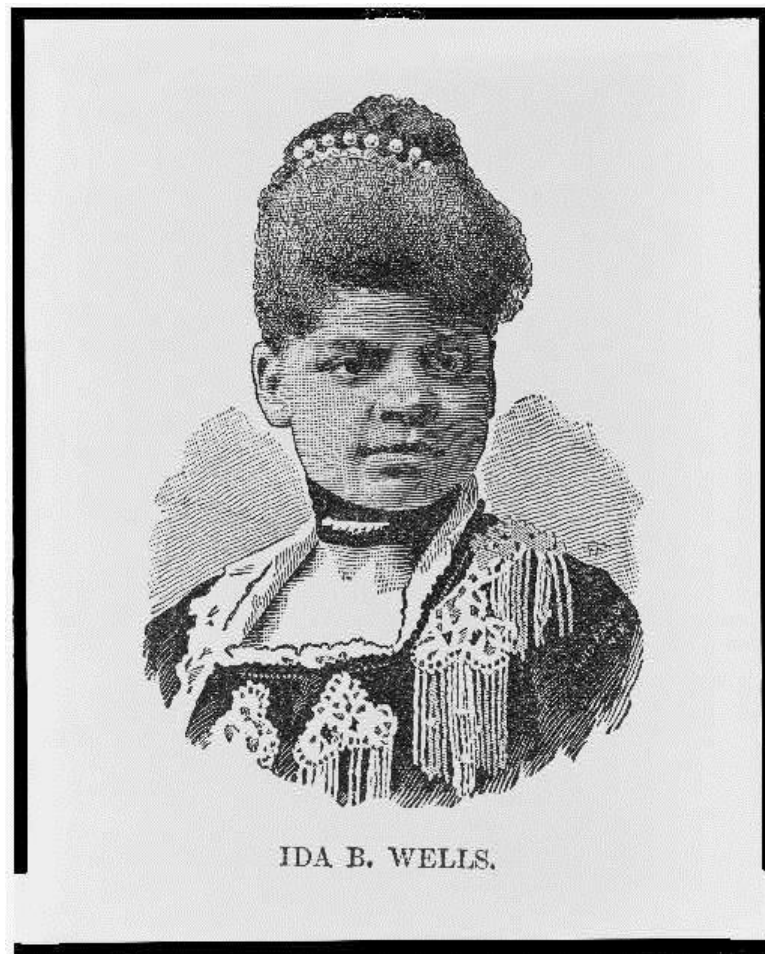


Figure 4 A portrait of Ida B. Wells

Wells in the classroom

Before pursuing a career in journalism, Wells was a teacher in the Memphis public school system. As previously mentioned, Wells went into teaching early on so she

could support her siblings. Her first teaching stint was at a school six miles outside of Holly Springs. She would later write of the physical and moral “squalor” she found among the country folk there.¹⁰³ Following the death of her parents, and at the insistence of family, Wells and several of her siblings moved to Memphis at the invitation of her Aunt Fanny. Once there, she started teaching at a school in Woodstock, a small town about 10 miles outside of Memphis where she earned \$30 a month.¹⁰⁴ Wells often took the train to reach Woodstock, and this too, unknown to her at that time, would result in controversy. In 1884, Wells got a teaching job in Memphis.¹⁰⁵ Being a schoolteacher in Memphis carried a certain social standing. Certified teachers not only had to pass a written exam, but women had to demonstrate “a good moral character” and “the purest and truest of natures,” and it was a reason why teaching was one of the few jobs where “a lady might openly engage without compromising her social status.”¹⁰⁶ Aside from Memphis, there was a period of time, two years later in 1886, where she had taught one month in the states of California, Missouri, and Tennessee.¹⁰⁷

Understanding Wells’ background as a school teacher is helpful in understanding her early origins of learning about racial politics in Memphis and the American South. “Few things were more important to African-Americans then access to adequate education. As one key economic dependence, black education became a major issue in the relationships among white southerners, black southerners, and white northerners.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Linda McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000), 76.

The need for black education encompassed integration, political party alliances, class divisions, racial violence, integration, and suffering, Linda McMurry argues. Wells was not the kind of person to keep her nose out of the realm of school politics. She often made alliances in the school system which worked to further the interests of African-Americans. In 1885, Wells sided with Virginia Broughton, the first black woman to graduate from college in Tennessee and considered one of the city's "oldest and best" teachers.¹⁰⁹ Wells agreed with Broughton who was protesting the school principal for giving a "coveted" position to a younger and less experienced teacher, Green Hamilton. While Hamilton was an African-American, he was also a member of the "Memphis elite."¹¹⁰ Moreover, Broughton's protest was fraught with political overtones. Class issues often created chasms between African-Americans, for example within the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in its early years.¹¹¹

Wells's teaching career lasted approximately ten years, and certainly seven years in Memphis. Teaching was not something Wells ever wanted to find herself doing. "I never cared for teaching, but I had always been very conscientious in trying to do my work honestly," Wells wrote in her autobiography. "There seemed nothing else to do for a living expect menial work, and I could not have made a living at that."¹¹² Despite this, Wells had limited career options. Black women in Memphis had fewer opportunities to escape unskilled occupations than men did; indeed, it was "the Memphis public school system that symbolized the greatest opportunity, if, in many ways, a limited and

¹⁰⁹ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 83

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34

¹¹¹ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (Penguin, 2002), 69.

¹¹² Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 31.

contested one.”¹¹³ However, Wells also found a noble role in teaching, one that bled into her pursuit of journalism: “The teacher’s mission, Wells concluded, was one of cultivating ‘flowers’ where the ‘cruel thorns or rank and poisonous thistles’ had once flourished ‘unmolested’.”¹¹⁴

The Reconstruction Era

Wells was born and grew up during the Reconstruction Era, and she started her career as a journalist after it had ended. Reconstruction was a period of time following the Civil War that started in 1863 (the legal end of most slavery in the U.S., but the Civil War would not end until 1865) and ended in 1877. Reconstruction brought about drastic changes in the United States following the Civil War, such as the attempted transformation of the former Confederate states. In the days, weeks, and months after the end of the Civil War, “an orgy of brutality and violence swept across the South. White southerners—embittered by their defeat and unable to adjust to the end of slave labor and the loss of millions of dollars’ worth of slave property—lashed out at black people.”¹¹⁵ The retaliation does make sense. Up until this point, the institution of slavery had been upheld for over two centuries. Slavery was an institution based on treating African-Americans as property like livestock as they were sold in markets and harshly punished for not doing their work. Some claim slavery was a paternalistic institution that worked to maintain a cohesive family unit. However, that same institution included the separation of families during the domestic slave trade, and the rape of black women at the hands of white men for countless decades. Therefore, it’s crucial to understand that Wells, as a

¹¹³ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 73.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹⁵ Darlene Clark Hine, William Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *African Americans: A Concise History, Volume One*, 5th edition, (Pearson, 2014), 12.4., E-book.

black woman, is writing during a time where recently slavery was law, her people were property, and whites in the North, and especially the South, were looking for a way to fill the vacuum of power the abolishment of slavery had created. There were many key events which took place during Reconstruction that greatly affected African-Americans: the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, creation of black codes, the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, the Reconstruction Act, the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, and the Compromise of 1877.¹¹⁶ Slavery had collapsed and African-Americans were freed from chains which had held them down for over a century. However, there was far from a U.S. smooth transition for former slaves to integrate into society. That type of work was fell into the hands of the Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau was established in 1865 as a temporary agency to assist freed slaves, or freedmen, to make the transition to freedom; the bureau was under the control of the U.S. Army.¹¹⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois called the bureau, "one of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition."¹¹⁸ Reconstruction was not just a matter of being able to integrate millions of newly freedmen into society no longer as slaves, as Du Bois would argue, but it also had the momentous task of finding a space for them, helping them attain a sense of autonomy they had long been denied. With the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, along with the passage of the Reconstruction Act, the era brought about universal manhood suffrage, which allowed all adult males in

¹¹⁶ Hine, *African Americans*, Chapters 12 , 13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.2.3.

¹¹⁸ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, Brent Hayes Edwards, *The souls of black folk*. (Oxford University Press), 2008, 10.

the states of the former Confederacy the ability to vote. With this came a massive wave of black political power in the South. According to Hine, over the course of Reconstruction, nearly 1,500 black men would come to hold political office in the South.¹¹⁹ But Reconstruction also had its flaws and failed to ensure crucial things for freedmen such as land, education and an inability and unwillingness to enforce a policy of racial equality.¹²⁰ White Democrats wanted to take back political control and Reconstruction soon crumbled as white supremacy began to take hold and with it brought Jim Crow, segregation, and lynching.

Iola

After becoming a teacher in Memphis, Wells joined a lyceum mainly of public school teachers.¹²¹ According to the Oxford Dictionary, a lyceum traces its origins back to ancient Greece, known then as a garden in Athens where Aristotle taught philosophy, but in this context a lyceum is a literary institution, lecture hall, or teaching place. Wells grew increasingly lonely in Memphis, so she quickly immersed herself in the lyceum activities. Part of these activities included reading the *Evening Star*, the publication of the Memphis Lyceum, which Wells described as a “spicy journal,” which included news items, literary notes, poetry, and social items.¹²² Following the vacation of the editor position of the *Star*, Wells was elected to head the publication in 1885. Shortly after, she was invited to write for the black religious weekly newspaper the *Living Way*. This surprised her. In her autobiography Wells wrote she “had no training expect what the

¹¹⁹ Hine, *African Americans*, 13.1.2.

¹²⁰ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 4.

¹²¹ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 22.

¹²² Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 74.

work on the *Evening Star* had given me, and no literary gifts and graces.”¹²³ Despite her lack of training, she had a straightforward goal about what she could do with her writing.

*“I had an intensive feeling that the people who had little or no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with problems in a simple, helpful way...I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people.”*¹²⁴

Her first published piece in *Living Way* was about a legal case against a railroad company she found herself very much involved with. In 1883, she sued a railway company, and won, following an attempt by a white train conductor to drag her out of the ladies’ car, prompting Wells to bite the man’s hand and draw blood. She was awarded \$200.¹²⁵ Wells boarded a train on September 15, according to *Sword Among Lions*, headed for her school in Woodstock and was dressed for the first-class car in which she planned to ride. She was asked by the conductor, who was employed by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company, to give up her seat on the train and ordered her into the colored/smokers’ car, or "Jim Crow" car, which was already crowded with other passengers. Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1875 banning discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color, in theaters, hotels, transports, and other public accommodations, several railroad companies defied this mandate and racially segregated its passengers. “He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand.”¹²⁶ Wells was forcefully removed from the train and the other passengers—all white—applauded. When Wells returned to Memphis, she immediately hired an attorney to sue the railroad. She won her case in the local circuit

¹²³ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 23.

¹²⁴ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 23-24.

¹²⁵ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 30.

¹²⁶ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 18.

courts, but the railroad company appealed to the Supreme Court of Tennessee, and it reversed the lower court's ruling.¹²⁷ This was the first of many struggles Wells faced. However, from that moment forward, she worked tirelessly and fearlessly to overturn injustices against women and people of color. Upon entering journalism, Wells developed an increasing appetite for speaking out against a number of topics such as political parties, the treatment of African-Americans, the race at large, and the Memphis schools. Journalism was the outlet she chose to vent her frustrations and thoughts : “her pen become her tool for confronting much of what angered her.”¹²⁸ The name “Ida Wells,” however, did not appear on bylines. She signed her articles “Iola” because, according to her autobiography, she knew her readers may have limited education so she “never used a word of two syllables where one would serve the purpose.”¹²⁹

A short time after entering the journalism profession, Wells received invitations from the editors of the *Fisk Herald*, *Detroit Plaindealer*, the *Gate City Press*, and the *AME Church Review*.¹³⁰ She became a star amongst the black press, and even other editors of black newspapers were taking notice of her, for better or worse. For instance, the editor of the *Washington Bee*, a black Washington, D.C. newspaper owned by lawyer and journalist Calvin Chase, grew tired of Wells and her knocks against him, the Republican party, and the editorial practices of black newspapers.¹³¹ The black press refers to newspapers that are: owned and managed by black individuals, intended for black consumers, and “serve, speak and for the black minority,” according to Roland

¹²⁷ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 64-67.

¹²⁸ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 86.

¹²⁹ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 24.

¹³⁰ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 88.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

Wolseley.¹³² The black press in the United States started in 1827 and, as Wolseley argues, was, and remains needed “mainly because all the old battles have not yet been won and because there are so many news ones.”¹³³ By 1880, the black press had evolved and the field of journalism became ripe to enter. During this time, the growth of black newspapers was helped by the dramatic increase of black literacy. Wells wrote for numerous publications over the span of several years, many that fell into the category of the black press and others that had religious affiliations as well: *Gate City Press*, the *New York Freeman*, the *American Baptist*, the *AME. Church Review*, and a slew of others. Her reasons for writing were simple, she felt a need to “combat the racist rantings that had become so common in both white popular culture and academic literature.”¹³⁴

Additionally, her reason for wanting to combat these rantings, which had become so popularized in the public sphere, coincides with what Hunt describes as biological explanations for exclusions. Following the French Revolution, it became increasingly difficult to reassert differences on the basis of tradition, custom, or history. The Revolution, which culminated in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, proclaimed that men were born and remain free and equal in rights. The nineteenth century introduced the science of race as scholars tried to put together arguments that “a biologically based hierarchy of races determined the history of mankind.”¹³⁵ Wells’ attempt to confront the popular thought at the time of black people being lesser based on

¹³² Richard Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.*, (Iowa State University Press, 1971), 3-4.

¹³³ Wolseley, *The Black Press*, 8

¹³⁴ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 102.

¹³⁵ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 190.

biology became more defined once she gained editorial control of *Memphis Free Speech* in 1889.

Lynching at the Curve

Wells began her tenure at the *Free Speech* in 1889, and for the next two years she juggled her responsibilities with the newspaper and her teaching job. This dynamic changed when Wells wrote an editorial railing against the Memphis school system that ended with her termination. Her school editorial protested inadequate buildings for black children and the “poor teachers given us, whose mental and moral character was not of the best.”¹³⁶ When she sought an explanation for her termination she was told it was not because of the conduct or quality of her teaching, but the editorial that prompted the decision. She could now dedicate her full attention to journalism. With Wells at the helm, the *Free Speech* flourished both in and outside of Memphis. She would often travel out of town to sell subscriptions or go to conferences, which is how she ended up not being in Memphis on March 9, 1982 for the lynching of Calvin McDowell, Will Stewart, and Thomas Moss.¹³⁷ The lynching on March 9 began in the Curve in Memphis a week prior with a game of marbles. A white and black boy began playing a game of marbles near the People’s Grocery. The two got into a disagreement that progressed into a fight. Stewart and McDowell came to the black boy’s defense, and William Barrett, would later claim to the police that Stewart, the store clerk of People’s Grocery, had clubbed him in the back of the head near the grocery during the melee.¹³⁸ For some time, the Curve was served exclusively by a white-owned grocery store operated by Barrett; however,

¹³⁶ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 36.

¹³⁷ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 182.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

following Reconstruction's demise the utilization of black economic nationalism was becoming a popular form of racial advancement as African-Americans began business ventures.¹³⁹ The People's Grocery, run by Moss, was soon in direct competition with Barrett. Following the melee, black Curve residents met together to address the recent incidents. Barrett orchestrated a rumor that a conspiracy against whites existed in the community and they were gathering at People's Grocery to plan attacks. The rumor subsequently resulted in a raid on the store and confrontation with police officers as the men and others at the grocery armed themselves for defense; McDowell, Stewart and Moss were subsequently arrested.¹⁴⁰ On March 9 at 2:30 a.m., seventy-five men wearing black masks surrounded the jail, made their way inside, took Moss, Stewart, and McDowell out their cells and dragged them a mile outside of Memphis to a Chesapeake & Ohio railroad yard. The three black men were shot to death. The local papers retold the lynching in such vivid detail that Wells assumed a reporter was given advanced notice of the events and invited to witness it. The *Commercial Appeal* reported McDowell had been shot four times in his face and neck where "his right eye had been there was a big hole" from "which his brains oozed out."¹⁴¹ The *Appeal-Avalanche* deemed the lynching as one of the most orderly ever conducted. "There was no whooping, not even loud talking, no cursing in fact, nothing boisterous. Every thing was done decently and in order... The Vengeance was sharp, swift, and sure but administered with due regard to the fact that people were asleep all around the jail..."¹⁴² This specific lynching serves to

¹³⁹ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 130.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁴¹ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 183.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 183.

demonstrate what lynching really set out to accomplish; extrajudicial killing where a mob is the judge, jury, and executioner. After the lynching, a mob descended on the People's Grocery destroying it, helping themselves and to food, and stealing the rest. What was left of the People's Grocery was attached by creditors and sold for one-eighth of its cost. The purchaser was William Barrett.¹⁴³ Although the accuracy is doubted, there is a quote that reporters who were at the rail yard attribute to Moss, who was said to have faced death with grief and weeping, imploring the mob to spare his life for the sake of his pregnant wife and child. His last words became a clarion call for the people of Memphis, "Tell my people to go West—there is no justice for them here."¹⁴⁴

Go West

After the lynching, Memphis was in the midst of a dramatic change. There were reassurances that order had been restored in the city, but the black community in Memphis was in stunned disbelief that mob violence had come to Memphis, a city where African-Americans held public office just a few years prior.¹⁴⁵ Wells echoed Moss's sentiments and called for the black people of Memphis to leave the city—the same city which had demonstrated no desire to protect them: "There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but take us out and murder us in cold blood when accused by white persons."¹⁴⁶ Wells proclaimed to black Memphians they should leave, and leave they did. The black people of Memphis readied themselves to head for the newly opened Oklahoma Territory. People heeded the words of the *Free Speech*, the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴⁴ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 188.

¹⁴⁶ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 52.

words of Wells, and droves of black Memphians began to leave the city despite the fact the Oklahoma Territory was completely unknown to them, unknown to really everyone. Wells took it upon herself to travel there and report on the conditions for the *Free Speech*. She urged people to think responsibly about leaving the city—she didn't discourage the massive wave of migration but warned them of the challenges they would face.¹⁴⁷ With thousands of people leaving Memphis, the city began to notice an immediate economic change. Wells had urged people to save up their nickels and dimes so they could afford the trip; this had an effect on the streetcar company. Officials with City Railway Company asked Wells why their black patronage had fallen off so suddenly. Wells pointed out the lynching had happened just six weeks prior. ““But the streetcar company had nothing to do with the lynching,” said one of the men. ‘It is owned by northern capitalists. And run by southern lynchers,’” Wells retorted.¹⁴⁸ This particular instance is of importance as it demonstrates that while the city of Memphis had leveraged the racial terror of lynching against them, black Memphians were still able to coalesce and disrupt the city; their absence effected Memphis and no one realized it before it was too late. The migration ignited by Wells's words would come to demonstrate just how influential she had become.

Southern Horrors

Ten weeks following the lynching, Wells published an unsigned editorial which denounced lynching as plain murder, “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women...if Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and...a conclusion will then be reached which

¹⁴⁷ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 200.

¹⁴⁸ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 54.

will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”¹⁴⁹ Following the editorial, Wells left Memphis, not purposely because of the editorial, she left for New York to meet with T. Thomas Fortune, who was in charge of the *New York Age*, one of the most influential black newspapers at the time. Fortune broke the news to Wells that, acting upon the advice issued in an editorial by the *Commercial Appeal*, a mob had descended on the offices of the *Free Speech*, run her partner J.L. Fleming out of town, destroyed the office, and left a note on the building saying “anyone trying to publish the paper again would be punished with death.”¹⁵⁰ *Free Speech* died on May 27, 1892.

Wells had gone into dangerous territory with her words, words which angered many whites in Memphis. Wells called out the myth of the “Southern rape complex.” The complex was coined by journalist Wilbur J. Cash and performed the task of “reinforcing white supremacy and white patriarchy.”¹⁵¹ Essentially, the Southern rape complex, allowed white men to use a false narrative of black men raping white women as a basis for lynching. The threat of rape, as Fairclough puts it, “justified denying blacks the vote and excluding them from juries” and gave white Southerners a pass to explain “the need for strict segregation by stressing black sexuality and the awful consequences of ‘social equality’.”¹⁵² Wells called out lynching and debunked the myths surrounding it whenever she could: she discovered rape was not charged in two-thirds of lynching cases she examined, diagnosed the purpose of lynching as racial terrorism, and challenged the manhood of southern whites’ as a basis citing the refusal of men to accept new

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁵⁰ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 62.

¹⁵¹ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 26.

¹⁵² Ibid., 27.

definitions of manliness.¹⁵³ “Rape became a metaphor in the white mind for any assault on white supremacy.”¹⁵⁴ The 1890s was the worst decade for lynching with the yearly total only twice dipping below 100 and the peak year being in 1892 when white mobs lynched 161 African-Americans.¹⁵⁵ Lynching was the starting line for fighting back against white supremacy, the origins of the modern civil rights struggle, and it was ignited by a black woman journalist in Memphis. In the aftermath of Wells’ editorial, whites in Memphis began defending lynching, steadfast not to let the cornerstone of white supremacy be undone. “Whenever it comes to a conflict between the races the Scimitar is for the grand old Anglo-Saxon every time not matter what the original cause,” the *Evening Scimitar* wrote.¹⁵⁶

After the death of the *Free Speech*, Wells was exiled from Memphis—and exile gives people some time to reflect, which is what Wells did. She reflected on why her newspaper had been destroyed. Why? Why destroy the paper some three months after the editorial was published? She thought it was because she had exposed the lies within the white southerners’ chivalrous defense of womanhood, but she knew it was actually just an excuse to do what they had always wanted to do but didn’t until that infamous editorial.

“For the first time in their lives the white people of Memphis had seen earnest, united action by Negroes which upset economic and business conditions...The whites had killed the goose that laid the golden egg of Memphis prosperity and Negro contentment...In casting about for the

¹⁵³ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 143, 145.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁵⁵ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 24.

¹⁵⁶ McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 138.

cause of all this restlessness and dissatisfaction the leaders concluded that the Free Speech was the disturbing factor. They were right."¹⁵⁷

The death of the *Free Speech*, however, gave Wells more power than it detracted. Her voice was soon elevated to Fortune's *New York Age*. It was there she published "The Truth About Lynching" in the June 25, 1892 edition in the *Age*. Her lengthy seven inch column on the front page would later be transformed into pamphlets and called *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. The column in the *Age* was not signed Iola—it was signed Exiled. Wells needed to draw on her years of writing experience for the task at hand. This column was not a simple political protest as she had written about in the past. It was going to be the first comprehensive look of lynching that would speak to its true motives, meanings, the moral failings of African-Americans, and a white supremacist culture.¹⁵⁸ She begins by outlining the events that had transpired in Memphis, laying the claim that Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were not lynched by a "lawless" element of the city, but by the white leading businessmen of Memphis. Wells also threw down the rhetorical gauntlet, "The miscegnation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 63-64.

¹⁵⁸ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 221.

¹⁵⁹ Ida Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, (1892), accessed online via Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm>

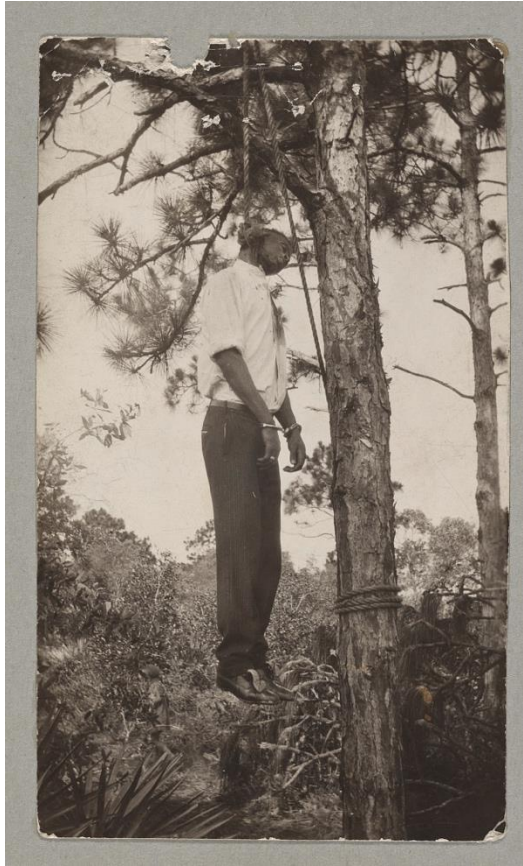


Figure 5. 18 year-old Jesse Washington lynched in Texas

Wells meticulously deconstructed everything she could that had been popularized about lynching, about current race theory as well, in her earnest attempt to mobilize both white progressives and African-Americans to action. In the section “The Black and White of It” Wells gives evidence of the folly of miscegenation (a mixture of races; especially in the context of marriage, cohabitation, or sexual intercourse between a white person and a member of another race, according to Merriam-Webster). One account she cites is the case of Mrs. J.S. Underwood, the wife of an Ohio minister, who had a black man thrown in jail on the charge he had forced his way into her home and raped her. The man, William Offet, denied the accusation of rape and said he and Underwood had a

longstanding relationship—Offet was found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years. Underwood later confessed to her husband that Offet was innocent, “I hoped to save my reputation by telling you a deliberate lie,” she told her husband.¹⁶⁰ Wells also included the story of Memphis woman Sarah Clark who loved and openly lived with a black man. Clark was indicted for miscegenation and swore in court she was not a white woman—she was able to escape punishment and live her life undisturbed. Clark’s story goes to show how whiteness was determined by social circumstance and not hierarchy and also shows how the “leading citizens” of Memphis were not interested in defending the “honor” of all white women.

Wells also established a new link between lynching and rape when she wrote of several incidents in Nashville. A white man, Pat Hanifan, had outraged (which in the context of this time meant engaged in violent behavior) a “little Afro-American girl, and, from the physical injuries received, she has been ruined for life.” He was jailed for six months, discharged, and went on to be a detective. A black man, Gizzard, was charged with raping a white woman, taken from jail, with the governor and police standing by, dragged through the streets in broad daylight, and had knives plunged through him along the way. At the same time this was happening, a white man was in the same jail for raping eight-year-old Maggie Reese, a black girl. The white man was left unharmed. “The outrage upon helpless childhood needed no avenging in this case; she was black.”¹⁶¹ However, Wells was careful not to claim that no black man was guilty of rape—she instead made the case that the South was using the charges of rape against black men to

¹⁶⁰ Wells, *Southern Horrors*, accessed via Project Gutenberg.

¹⁶¹ Wells, *Southern Horrors*, accessed via Project Gutenberg.

cover up their own failures, especially from the industrialists in the North. Wells also took aim at the white press, whom she referred to as “malicious and untruthful” and laid a good portion of the blame at their feet for propagating these myths as well. In her autobiography, as she was gathering the evidence to compile *Southern Horrors*, Wells writes of a realization she had. “The more I studied the situation, the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income.”¹⁶² Wells concluded *Southern Horrors* with a “Self-Help” section. In it, she calls for the black race to boycott, with their dollar, white-owned businesses, arm themselves with a Winchester rifle, and rally to support and read black newspapers.

“Nothing is more definitely settled than he must act for himself. I have shown how he may employ the boycott, emigration and the press, and I feel that by a combination of all these agencies can be effectually stamped out lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery. The gods help those who help themselves.”¹⁶³

Taking the campaign internationally

As her exile, and work with the *Age*, continued, Wells found herself in other avenues promoting her work. She began giving testimonials about her work, which were more or less lectures. The first lecture was in October 1893 in Lyric Hall in New York. Wells was nervous because she was a writer, not a speaker. She retold the story of the Memphis lynching, what she had learned from *Southern Horrors*, her thoughts of exile, her friends who were gone. She started to cry.¹⁶⁴ In 1895 she published the *Red Record* in an attempt to tabulate the statistics and alleged causes of lynching in the United States. In

¹⁶² Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 70.

¹⁶³ Wells, *Southern Horrors*, accessed via Project Gutenberg.

¹⁶⁴ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 79.

1892, she tabulated 241 persons lynched, 160 of which were African-American, and 46 out of the total 241 were charged with rape. Over the course of her work on both the *Red Record* and *Southern Horrors*, Wells uncovered that African-Americans were lynched for reasons such as not paying debts, being considered a nuisance with whites, competing with whites economically, and other acts. Little basis was ever established for the frequent claim that black men were lynched because they had sexually abused or attacked white women. “The Negro does not claim that all of the one thousand black men, women and children, who have been hanged, shot and burned alive during the past ten years, were innocent of the charges made against them... But we do insist that the punishment is not the same for both classes of criminals.”¹⁶⁵ Did her efforts have an influence on lynching? Perhaps so, but it’s hard to say with certainty. Fairclough concedes that “Wells’s activities did have an effect,” as her articles forced white Americans in both the North and South to reconcile with the horrors of lynching, but the gradual decline of the practice has many layers.¹⁶⁶ Wells did not enjoy being a school teacher, yet her long-time career as a journalist ended up being centered around educating people on the truth behind lynching.

¹⁶⁵ Ida Wells, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (1895), accessed online via Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm#chap2>

¹⁶⁶ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 38.

THE CHRONICLER OF A COMMUNITY

May 19, 1972 wasn't the day *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Randy Shilts was born, but it was a day which held significance in his life nonetheless. It was the day Shilts "came out" as a gay man.¹⁶⁷ It happened during his time at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon. "I told every friend, everybody in my family that I was gay," Shilts said as quoted by Laurie Udesky. "And I swore that I'd never live another day of my life in which people didn't know that I was gay." Shilts was born on August 8, 1951, in Davenport, Iowa. His father was Bud Shilts, a salesman, and his mother was Norma Shilts, a homemaker. He attended Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon, and completed his education at the University of Oregon in Eugene, majoring first in English and later in journalism. He was managing editor of the student newspaper, *The Oregon Daily Emerald*. He received his journalism degree in 1975, and he was also the head of the Eugene Gay People's Alliance while at college. Shilts was one of the first journalists in the country to recognize acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS, as an issue of national importance. Shilts was the author of three books: *And the Band Played On*, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, and another book on gays in the military, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the US Military from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf*. His byline appeared in, at least, 400 stories for the *Chronicle* from 1985 until his death in 1994, according to a database search of NewsBank. Shilts was not just a reporter who covered the AIDS crisis, but was a gay man who suffered from AIDS himself.¹⁶⁸ He

¹⁶⁷ Laurie Udesky, "An Interview with Randy Shilts," in *Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall: Hidden History Series Book*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), accessed via e-book.

¹⁶⁸ Jeffrey Schmalz, "At home with: Randy Shilts; writing against time, valiantly," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 22, 1993.

began reporting on AIDS for the *Chronicle* in 1982 and since 1983 spent “virtually all my time reporting on AIDS.”¹⁶⁹



Figure 6. A portrait of Randy Shilts

Roots in activism, turning to journalism

After he transferred from community college in Portland to the University of Oregon at Eugene, Shilts began his involvement with student government. As he sought election, the student newspaper at the university gave Shilts an endorsement. The *Daily Emerald* called Shilts an impressive candidate and referred to him as an “avowed homosexual, chairman of the Gay People’s Alliance and a knowledgeable newcomer to ASUO politics,” their ringing endorsement let the student body know Shilts was “more

¹⁶⁹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: People, politics, and the AIDS epidemic* (New York: St. Martins, 1987), Xi.

than capable” of providing leadership to their student government.¹⁷⁰ The *Daily Emerald* described Shilts as a former conservative from the Midwest who in the past was a charter member of the Young Americans for Freedom in his hometown of Aurora, Illinois, and had previously volunteered for Barry Goldwater. The *Emerald* also wrote about his interest in poetry and his point of clarification that he is not an “avowed or admitted homosexual because those words connote guilt.”¹⁷¹ Shilts won the election. It’s difficult to determine, however, from the text examined for a concrete reason why, but Shilts later decided to run for student body president. He was one of ten pairs vying for a position as student body president and vice president. Shilts was a junior at the time, according to the *Eugene Register-Guard*, and was the serving chairman of the student government’s five-member incidental fee committee.¹⁷² As head of that committee, he was the number-two person in student government and used his position to give money to the Gay People’s Alliance. As a result of the funding, the alliance was able to hold the first gay dance at the university, a gay-straight sock-hop.¹⁷³

Shilts, in an interview with the *Daily Emerald*, said the mainstay of his presidential campaign was to promote students having a say in the university’s decision making process, and he planned to let university administration know he meant business.

“What we plan to do is to confront the administration with student issues.”¹⁷⁴ His

¹⁷⁰ No byline, “*Emerald* endorsement interviews,” *Oregon Daily Emerald*, (Eugene, Oregon), March 6, 1973. (as cited in Stoner, 2013, 27.)

¹⁷¹ S.A. Callister, “Incredible programs we can do,” *Oregon Daily Emerald*, (Eugene, Oregon), March 30, 1973. (as cited in Stoner, 2013, 27.)

¹⁷² No byline, “Twenty seek student posts,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, (Eugene, Oregon), April 17, 1973.

¹⁷³ Eric Marcus “The Idealist: Randy Shilts,” in *Making history: The struggle for gay and lesbian equal rights*, (Harper Collins, 1992), 230.

¹⁷⁴ No byline, “Second ASUO ticket aims at ‘new leadership’,” *Oregon Daily Emerald*, (Eugene, Oregon), April 5, 1973. (as cited in Stoner, 2013, 28.)

participation in student government allowed him to understand being gay in a political context, “When I ran for student government, I could say to myself, ‘I am running because I want to show that gay people can live openly, that they don’t have to stay in the closet’.”¹⁷⁵ He lost the election for president, but he hadn’t lost his political appetite. Following his defeat, he tried his hand at editorial writing in the *Daily Emerald*. In 1973, the state of Oregon was considering the passage of House Bill 2930, which if passed would have prohibited housing and employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. According to the Gay & Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN), the bill fell a few votes short of the majority needed to pass it on to the governor; nonetheless, the bill was described as a “watershed in the Oregon movement for gay civil rights.”¹⁷⁶ Shilts said the bill was the most important issue facing the Oregon legislature that year, adding “gay people are subject to the most vicious oppression our society can dole out. Gay people are the victims of almost universal job, housing and public accommodation discrimination.”¹⁷⁷ Shilts chose activism, and came out as gay, because he was fueled by the belief that society’s views of gay individuals, of him, was wrong and it was this that sparked his political fire. “There’s one sentence that explains it all in my mind: ‘I am right and society is wrong’.”¹⁷⁸ But Shilts grew tired of political activism. He saw the ceiling of political activism, felt confined, and wanted to do more. His time at the University of Oregon began to shift his focus more towards journalism.

¹⁷⁵ Marcus, “The Idealist,” in *Making history*, 230.

¹⁷⁶ George Nicola, “Early Attempts at Oregon Gay Civil Rights,” *Gay & Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest*, Oct. 22, 2010.

¹⁷⁷ Randy Shilts, “Support needed for gay rights bill,” *Oregon Daily Emerald*, (Eugene, Oregon), May 18, 1973. (as cited in Stoner, 2013, 29.)

¹⁷⁸ Udesky, “An Interview with Randy Shilts,” accessed via e-book.

He started taking journalism courses and changed his major from English to journalism.

In a 1993 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Shilts elaborated on why he thought political activism was not the route for him.

“I sort came to the conclusion that most people are prejudiced, not because they are mean people, are evil people, but they lack information. By using information, you could do a lot more to advance understanding than just by being polemic and yelling at people in protest... As soon as I got into journalism, I stopped being an activist. I just feel you can't be agitating for something on one hand and still be a journalist. Your job is to tell both sides of the story.”¹⁷⁹

Starting off at *The Advocate*, yearning for more

After graduation, Shilts moved to Portland and started working as a freelancer for *The Advocate*, a gay newspaper that operated out of Los Angeles. He wrote many stories for the *Advocate* that focused on gay rights. In 1976, Shilts was given an assignment to cover the Democratic National Convention in New York City. The 1976 convention was shaping up to be an interesting one. Just a few days before the convention started “about 700 advocate of rights for homosexuals” marched in the city demanding the repeal of anti-sodomy laws that, at the time, still existed in 35 states, the *New York Times* reported.¹⁸⁰ Shilts’ reporting for *The Advocate* compared and contrasted the experiences of four openly gay DNC delegates with that of the thousands of protestors who were kept outside of the convention in Madison Square Garden.¹⁸¹ Such an approach was Shilts’ attempt to employ the objective stance he wanted, showing both sides of the convention. According to Marcus, Shilts had been brought onto *The Advocate* as a staff writer (no

¹⁷⁹ Garry Willis, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Randy Shilts,” *Rolling Stone*, Sept. 30, 1993, 46-49.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Kihss, “10,000 Antiabortionists Attend a Protest Rally,” *New York Times*, (New York, New York), July 12, 1976.

¹⁸¹ Randy Shilts, “A most conventional convention,” *The Advocate*, (Los Angeles, California), Aug. 11, 1976. (as cited in Stoner, 2013, 39.)

longer a freelancer) in April 1976, but he still longed to work in the mainstream press. He longed for the larger audience working for a mainstream publication could afford him; both because he wholeheartedly believed that getting the facts out to people about gays would prove to alleviate bigotry and discrimination, but also because he personally wanted more. In his interview with Marcus, Shilts talks about this “horrible rage” he had while working at *The Advocate* because while he “worked around the clock and every day of the week,” he grew angry at a “big, nebulous ‘them’” which was all the places in the mainstream press, including the *Chronicle* at the time, he believed would not hire him because he was gay.¹⁸² And Shilts was right to feel that way, until World War II, gay individuals were not mentioned in American newspapers and magazines, and it was only until the 1940s did the press pick up on gay issues. This was result of a military campaign to weed out gays from the armed forces.¹⁸³ It would be almost another 30 years before gays began to cover their own communities in publications that reached farther than that of newsletters and small-circulation magazines, such as the *Mattachine Review* which was operated by the Mattachine Society.¹⁸⁴ Although, in a promising turn for gays in the media, the 1970s also signaled a year where writers started coming out. In a seven-page column for the *Times*, Merle Miller, a best-selling author, came out as a gay man—describing the pain of growing up gay, hiding it from others, and denouncing “queers” all in an effort to hide his true identity. “It is one thing to confess to political unorthodoxy,

¹⁸² Marcus, “The Idealist,” in *Making history*, 233.

¹⁸³ Edward Alwood, *Straight news: Gays, lesbians, and the news media* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 20.

¹⁸⁴ Alwood, *Straight news*, 77.

but quite another to admit to sexual unorthodoxy.”¹⁸⁵ A greater trend began to develop from Miller’s column as more and more writers and reporters began to come out and assert their sexual identities.

Gay rights and gay liberation

Mention should be made of the historical period of time in which Shilts was writing. As he notes in his interview with Marcus, the Stonewall Riots happened three weeks after he graduated from West Aurora Senior High School in Aurora, Illinois. How people come to define the gay liberation and gay rights movement can be a bit tricky because there’s a lot of nuance to be made between them, and there’s no singular, monolithic “gay rights” movement. Largely speaking, gay liberation is a movement which many trace back to starting in the 1960s with the Stonewall Riot to the 1970s, and gay rights came about from that movement which promoted reform in the form of legal rights. While there is any number of people and organizations who have fought political, legal, and cultural battles, there’s not necessarily widespread agreement on what is right. However, generally speaking, a broad range of demands that sprang from gay liberation and gay rights: basic legal rights, employment rights, recognition of families, responses to violence, religious recognition, participation in society, cultural expression, political power, and sexual freedom.¹⁸⁶ As Rachel Kranz and Tim Cusick define it, gay liberation implies the need to transform the entire society and gay rights refers more narrowly to the notion of winning equal rights for gay men and lesbians within existing society. Despite the differences between the two, they are also deeply intertwined. While it’s irresponsible

¹⁸⁵ Merle Miller, “What It Means To Be a Homosexual,” *New York Times*, (New York, New York), Jan. 17, 1971.

¹⁸⁶ Rachel Kranz, Tim Cusick, *Library in a Book: Gay Rights* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 5-8.

to trace back all the efforts of gay liberation to Stonewall, it makes a good jumping off point. When gay patrons of Stonewall fought back against police raids, their action was seen as an even greater refusal. “They effectively declared a giant NO to the social, political, and economic system that supported only one, narrow view of human sexuality.”¹⁸⁷ In that sense, gay rights, while narrow, still borrowed from gay liberation.

In Florida, Anita Bryant, singer, orange juice spokeswoman and unlikely political activist, began campaigning for the repeal of a gay rights ordinance in Dade County.¹⁸⁸ The city commission in Dade County passed a gay rights ordinance, which would have stopped employment and housing discrimination based on sexual orientation, but she swore to change that. Bryant’s organization, Save Our Children, made gay rights a national issue, and she’s considered the first person to have formed an organization explicitly, and adamantly, against gay rights.¹⁸⁹ California Senator John Briggs expanded on the momentum of Bryant’s movement when he proposed Proposition Six, or the Briggs Initiative, to California voters. The initiative would ban homosexuals from teaching in public schools. Special mention is made of the Briggs Initiative because Harvey Milk, a San Francisco city supervisor at the time, adamantly, and publicly, opposed and challenged Briggs on it. “My name is Harvey Milk—and I want to recruit you. I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve democracy from John Briggs and Anita Bryants who are trying to constitutionalize bigotry.”¹⁹⁰ In part due to Milk, Proposition Six was rejected at the ballot box in 1978.

¹⁸⁷ Kranz, *Gay Rights*, 23.

¹⁸⁸ Dudley Clendinen, Adam Nagourney, *Out For Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), 297.

¹⁸⁹ Alwood, *Straight news*, 167.

¹⁹⁰ Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (Macmillan, 1982), 224.



Figure 7. San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk

Entering the mainstream, coming to the *Chronicle*

In what Shilts calls his “big break” he was hired by KQED, a public television station owned by the Public Broadcasting Service in San Francisco, to run a nightly news show called Newsroom. “They wanted to start covering gay stuff. They were going to be the first because nobody covered gay stories.”¹⁹¹ Interestingly enough, Shilts’ first story, in 1977, was about Harvey Milk, who would later go on to become the main figure of Shilts’s book, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. Milk ran for political office in the state of California four times before finally being elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. Milk’s election made him one of the first openly gay people to hold public office in the United States. A search of the San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, which preserves 6,000 hours of news film, documentaries and other T.V.

¹⁹¹ Marcus, “The Idealist,” in *Making history*, 233.

footage and is part of the J. Paul Leonard Library's Department of Special Collections, demonstrates the variety of assignments Shilts took while at KQED. He reported on San Francisco's Gay Freedom Parade in 1977, 1978, and 1979, interviewed Mayor George Moscone about gay militancy, and reported on gay political influence in the city, gay voting issues, and gay rights in surrounding cities and counties. Again, his desire for objectivity comes through. For example, in a segment that aired on May 19, 1980 about gay rights in Santa Clara County, Shilts included interviews with pro and anti-gay pundits.¹⁹² His time on Newsroom solidified him as not simply a journalist but an expert on the gay community. This was bolstered by the number of stories he did, and the fact he was the only openly gay reporter at the T.V. station. Following the assassination of Milk and Moscone on Nov. 27, 1978, Shilts was hired by commercial news service KTVU, Channel 2. KTVU needed a reporter who could contextualize and explain the protests and riots, which were organized by residents of Castro Street (the main commercial street in the predominantly gay Castro neighborhood in San Francisco) following the assassination. Not long after, in 1980, funding dried up for his KQED news show and KTVU let him go after Shilts appeared in an article about the ten most eligible gay bachelors in San Francisco.¹⁹³ The entire ordeal left him in a complete state of despair, but another opportunity was over the horizon.

Coming to the *Chronicle*

In 1981, Shilts was hired by the *Chronicle*. He's often heralded as the first openly gay reporter for a major daily newspaper, and while that moniker may need additional

¹⁹² Randy Shilts, *Gay Rights in Santa Clara County*, Online, directed/performed by Randy Shilts (1980; San Francisco: KQED/NCPB, 2011), Television. Accessed via diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/2570?page=4.

¹⁹³ Marcus, "The Idealist," in *Making history*, 235.

clarification, it cannot be argued that his work reporting on AIDS was unparalleled at the time. Shilts finished his work on *The Mayor of Castro Street* about a year after he started at the paper. His book of Milk's life played an additionally crucial role in introducing gay culture and lifestyle into the American mainstream, as Milk was one of the first openly gay political officials in the country at the time. Milk himself was cognizant the role the press played in not only getting his political aspirations to the public, but portraying the gay community as well. "The *Examiner* ran an editorial saying Milk was off to a 'disappointing start.' He privately noted that the *Examiner* editorial had served its most important purpose, spelling his name right. And no matter what the editorial page said, the afternoon paper's front page was dominated by one picture—Harvey with his arm around Jack, leading the march up Castro Street."¹⁹⁴

Additionally, there are notable similarities between Shilts and Milk. Both were advocates for education about gay individuals in some form of fashion, Harvey through politics and Shilts through reporting. One of Shilts's first stories at the *Chronicle* in April 1982 examined the Shanti Project, an umbrella group that organized and coordinated local support groups for those with AIDS. The article sat on his editor's desk for three weeks. To make a point, Shilts searched the library for copies of articles the *Chronicle* had printed on Legionnaires' disease and toxic shock syndrome. "To dramatize his point he created a third stack of articles on AIDS—all four of them."¹⁹⁵ The newspaper printed his Shanti Project story before he confronted an editor and Shilts moved to his next assignment. One month later, on May 13, he wrote his first story exclusively on the

¹⁹⁴ Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 190.

¹⁹⁵ Alwood, *Straight news*, 232.

developing epidemic. Headlined “The Strange Deadly Diseases That Strike Gay Men,” Shilts wrote about a forty-five-year-old San Francisco man who developed Kaposi sarcoma (a skin disease that first developed in people who have HIV or AIDS).¹⁹⁶ The database for the *Chronicle* on NewsBank only goes back to 1985, but it provides a lot of the groundwork reporting Shilts would use when writing *And the Band Played On* for its’ 1987 release. According to the database, in 1985 alone there were approximately 80 AIDS stories with his byline. His reporting covered a lot of aspects of the disease. For instance, in a January 1985 story, Shilts reported on the San Francisco Civil Service Commission delaying a vote on a \$10,000 appropriation for private detectives to monitor gay bathhouses and sex clubs.¹⁹⁷ In a Feb. 9, 1985 story, he interviewed an official with the Centers for Disease Control who predicted an increase in AIDS cases by the end of year to 1,000 new cases a month and who said the disease had become the leading cause of death of young adult men in San Francisco.¹⁹⁸ Another story about AIDS turned its attention to the medical nature of the disease, which information about was often false in the early years of the epidemic. Shilts reported how new research showed that saliva played little, if any, role in spreading AIDS and that in a certain case from 1979 where a woman died from an AIDS-tainted blood transfusion did not pass the disease to her husband through kissing him but from sex.¹⁹⁹ Others in the media eventually picked up

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 233.

¹⁹⁷ Randy Shilts, “Vote Delayed on Funds for Bathhouse Cops,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco, California), Jan. 29, 1985.

¹⁹⁸ Randy Shilts, “Gloomy AIDS Forecast – 1000 New Cases a Month,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco, California), Feb. 9, 1985.

¹⁹⁹ Randy Shilts, “Experts Doubt Saliva Spreads AIDS Virus,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco, California), March 26, 1985.

on AIDS as a story of importance. But, according to Alwood, in 1983 Shilts was the only reporter among the mainstream media covering AIDS full time.²⁰⁰

AIDS reporting elsewhere

To understand the role Shilts played as a journalist covering AIDS, it's important to examine at how AIDS was covered by the press at the time. The first reportage of AIDS entering the public sphere, before it was even called AIDS, came June 5, 1981 in a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report published by the CDC which described cases of a rare lung infection in five young, previously healthy, gay men in Los Angeles. At this point, the disease was called Kaposi's sarcoma, according to AIDs.gov. The news of the disease graced the front pages of the *Times* one month later with the headline "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals."²⁰¹ In December 1981, Bobbi Campbell, a registered nurse, became the first Kaposi's sarcoma patient to go public with the disease. He became the "KS Poster Boy" in an attempt to raise awareness and money for "gay cancer."²⁰² By 1982, the disease was called gay-related immunodeficiency, or GRID. The name pigeonholed the disease as one that harmed only gay people. It wasn't until later that year would the CDC renamed it acquired immune deficiency syndrome, AIDS. By 1981, the pace was already set for how AIDS would be covered—it wouldn't. By that point, the *Times* had written two stories and other bigger publications, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, were just starting to run their own pieces late the year. Editors were killing stories about gays, and didn't want stories about "distasteful sexual habits littering their

²⁰⁰ Alwood, *Straight news*, 233.

²⁰¹ Lawrence Altman, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," *New York Times*, (New York, New York), July 3, 1981.

²⁰² Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 108.

newspapers.”²⁰³ Reporting on AIDS would change in the coming years, Shilts asserts, but the formula for how it was covered had already been developed: focus on men in the white coats, don’t incite panic, don’t dwell on how sex was involved, end on a positive note.

*“Most importantly, the epidemic was only news when it was not killing homosexuals. In this sense, AIDS remained a fundamentally gay disease, newsworthy only by virtue of the fact that it sometimes hit people who weren't gay, exceptions that tended to prove the rule.”*²⁰⁴

AIDS really entered the forefront of public discussion when Rock Hudson, a well-known actor at the time, was diagnosed with the disease in 1985. It was only a matter of time before all the mainstream publications, who up to that point had sparsely covered AIDS, jumped on the story with a greater ferocity. The *Chronicle*, one day after the diagnosis was made public, detailed how friends in Hudson’s life were urging him to come out of the closet and acknowledge his homosexuality.²⁰⁵ Hudson’s case was new, and while he was gay no one knew beforehand, but he was also rich and well-known. Now the disease had spread to those who were affluent, and that meant people might care. “We just haven’t been able to find a handle that would make the story interesting to the general population,” a *Washington Post* reporter told Bill Kraus, a gay rights and AIDS activist, before an interview about Hudson.²⁰⁶ Hudson died shortly after his diagnosis, but Shilts was adamant his death had kickstarted real public attention to AIDS.

“After four years of being viewed as a curious affliction affecting a handful of outcast groups, AIDS has leaped to the forefront of the

²⁰³ Ibid., 110.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 213.

²⁰⁵ Randy Shilts, “Why Rock Hudson Kept Quiet About Being Gay,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco, California), July 25, 1985.

²⁰⁶ Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 576.

public consciousness and grasped the attention of everyone, from National Enquirer readers to the president of the United States. The fresh concern has translated into a sharply increased budget for federal AIDS research, a substantial private fund-raising effort for more AIDS studies and, perhaps most significantly, a broadened understanding of the profound threat that the lethal syndrome poses to the health of America and the world."²⁰⁷

Some publications, when they were busy not covering the epidemic, would frame AIDS stories as being centered around straight individuals. Of course, AIDS did come to affect heterosexuals, but the disease disproportionately affected gay men, sex workers, drug users, and, to a lesser degree, women who were involved with gay/bisexual men. However, AIDS was an even more popular story when gay people weren't involved. For instance, in September 1987, *The Saturday Evening Post* published a special section about the AIDS epidemic. None of people included were those directly under attack by the disease, i.e. the gay community. *The Post* lauded the efforts of Elizabeth Taylor, an actress and co-founder of the American Foundation for AIDS Research, for taking up the crusade against AIDS through a fundraising effort. *The Post* credits her for raising millions of dollars towards the campaign as she used her talent to make "impassioned pleas" across the country. Yet, her benevolence is framed as something unimportant. "It's not that the actress has nothing else to occupy her time, Sweeney practically ran out of breath briefing us on Elizabeth Taylor's schedule."²⁰⁸ It implicitly comes off as those suffering from AIDS should be lucky that Taylor decided to take the plight of this disease into her own hands. *The Post* asked Taylor if she could bring one message to the American people about AIDS what would it be? Taylor invoked President Ronald

²⁰⁷ Randy Shilts, "Hudson's Contributions to AIDS Battle," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco, California), Oct. 3, 1985.

²⁰⁸ Holly Miller, "Elizabeth Taylor's crusade against AIDS," *The Saturday Evening Post*, (Indianapolis, Indiana), Sept. 1 1987.

Raegan saying, “AIDS calls for urgency, not panic—compassion, not blame—understanding, not ignorance.”²⁰⁹ Yet, as Shilts would tell us from his reporting, in 1983, the Reagan administration had so far been successful in impeding the House of Representatives from “ascertaining the real needs of agencies in time for a concerted AIDS budget plan.”²¹⁰ Furthermore, the administration’s budget plan for 1983 called for a \$300,000 cut in AIDS funding at the CDC and there were still no federally funded AIDS-prevention campaigns. The Reagan administration, as revealed from Shilts’s reporting, was deeply divided and conflicted on how to handle AIDS. Federal health officials were telling Congress and the media that emergency funds were not needed for AIDS, but internal memos exchanged within the administration painted a scene of inability due to a lack of funding.²¹¹ The attitude of those in Reagan administration towards AIDS was also, simply stated, lacking empathy. According to *When AIDS Was Funny*, the first time a public question was asked of the administration about AIDS was on Oct. 15, 1982. Reporter Lester Kinsolving asked a question to White House Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes. Kinsolving asked AIDS related questions more than once during his time in the White House Press Corps, all of which were met with laughter.²¹²

Lester Kinsolving: Over a third of them have died. It's known as "gay plague."
(Laughter.)

No, it is. I mean it's a pretty serious thing that one in every three people that get this have died. And I wondered if the President is aware of it?

Larry Speakes: I don't have it. Do you? (Laughter.)

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁰ Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 359.

²¹¹ Ibid., 235.

²¹² Vanity Fair, Scott Calonic, *When AIDS Was Funny*, YouTube, 7:43, Dec. 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAzDn7tE1IU&feature=youtu.be&t=36s>.

Only when it entered the mainstream of heterosexuality did AIDS become an issue worthy of the press's attention. The latter claim was one echoed by Vito Russo in *Why We Fight*. "Twice, three times, four times—*The New York Times* has published editorials saying, don't panic yet over AIDS—it still hasn't entered the general population, and until it does, we don't have to give a shit."²¹³ *The Post* didn't limit themselves to stories about fundraising for AIDS either. Another story, written by Maynard Stoddard in the same issue, "salutes two courageous men who have chosen not to take the death sentence of this burgeoning epidemic lying down." One of the men in question was Reverend Donald C. Wade who contracted AIDS due to several blood transfusions. He revealed the diagnosis to his congregation through a videotaped announcement which drew wide newspaper and television coverage. "What we're trying to do is treat Rev. Wade as a human being with a problem... we're just trying to act like Christian people, loving him and supporting him and the family in a very difficult time," Rev. Gene B. Crawford said of Wade's diagnosis.²¹⁴ As Shilts tells us, however, in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, there wasn't this sort of understanding or compassion towards people with the disease, which, again, were predominately gay men. For example, in mid-1982, Dr. Arye Rubinstein was treating eleven babies in the Bronx that were stricken with AIDS, but few scientists would believe the diagnosis. "The *New England Journal of Medicine* had returned it to Rubinstein with the firm conclusion that these kids most certainly did not have AIDS, the homosexuals' disease."²¹⁵ More often than not, Shilts' main role as a

²¹³ Vito Russo, "Why we Fight," *Dissent in America: The voices that shaped a nation* (Pearson Longman, 2008), 684.

²¹⁴ Maynard Stoddard, "Stand up to AIDS," *The Saturday Evening Post*, (Indianapolis, Indiana), Sept. 1, 1987.

²¹⁵ Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 172.

journalist during the AIDS crisis was to counteract the narrative journalists were peddling about those who had AIDS.

‘I wanted to keep on being a reporter’

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Shilts said he wrote *And the Band Played On*, his massive anthology chronicling the AIDS epidemic, because he was frustrated—frustrated that all the AIDS stories were stopping at the *Chronicle* and not getting the attention of the country. “Writing a book was the way to get over the heads of the *New York Times* and the other papers that weren't covering this issue, in terms of the political components of it.”²¹⁶ Yet, for all his talk of not wanting to be an advocate, he certainly came off as one. A prime example of this was the debate surrounding the closure of bathhouses in San Francisco. Shilts was adamant about the dangers the bathhouses presented gay men. Many local activists feared the epidemic would squarely place the blame on gays during a time where they were finally becoming comfortable being out. Bathhouses spawned out of the gay liberation movement as a way to express themselves sexually, safely and financially support gay businesses.²¹⁷ Gays felt losing the bathhouses would forfeit their sexual freedom they had won in San Francisco, so when Shilts reported on them it often appeared slanted in favor of shutting them down, which led to people labelling him a “gay Uncle Tom.”²¹⁸ Another pointed criticism of Shilts is his usage of “Patient Zero” to describe Gaëtan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant, who Shilts attributes bringing AIDS to the U.S and publicly outs him in *And the Band Plays On*.

²¹⁶ Willis, “The Rolling Stone Interview,” 46-49.

²¹⁷ Shilts, *And the Band Played on*, 19.

²¹⁸ Alwood, *Straight news*, 233.

This myth was later, and soundly, found to be untrue and sensationally incorrect on Shilts's part.

Shilts's reporting was crucial to changing the political response and public perception of AIDS. An analysis conducted by the Institute for Health Policy Studies at the University of California in San Francisco relied on news coverage in New York and San Francisco as part of its determination in the municipal responses to AIDS in both cities.²¹⁹ Between June 1982 and June 1985, the *Chronicle* printed 442 staff-written AIDS stories, 67 made the front page. *The New York Times* ran 226 stories, only 7 of which made page one. The framing of stories between the two publications also differed, Shilts pointed out in *And the Band Played On*. The *Chronicle* focused on the public policy aspects of AIDS while the *Times* treated it almost exclusively as a medical event. "The extensive nature of coverage by the *Chronicle*, aside from providing a degree of health education not found in New York, helped sustain a level of political pressure on local government and health officials to respond to the AIDS crisis," the Institute for Health Policy Studies concluded.²²⁰ Of course, more could have always been done, but Shilts was only one man. He couldn't control how Reagan wouldn't first publicly mention AIDS until 1987, a generous six years after the epidemic first reared its' ugly head.²²¹

More than anything, Shilts wanted to avoid being an activist, "Every gay writer who tests positive ends up being an AIDS activist. I wanted to keep on being a

²¹⁹ Shilts, *And the Band Played on*, 385.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 385.

²²¹ Kranz, *Gay Rights*, 41.

reporter.”²²² Yet, by the sheer virtue of reporting on AIDS and giving a face and voice to gay men, sometimes women but predominately men, affected by the disease, in many ways Shilts utilized his position and power at the *Chronicle* to bring truth to light and educate the country about AIDS.

There is no monument to Shilts nor a street named after him as there are for other prominent San Francisco writers like Jack Kerouac and Dashiell Hammett.²²³ Author Frank Robinson, in an interview with the *Chronicle*, said Shilts is one of the community’s heroes and he believes Shilts had “as much effect on the gay community as Harvey Milk did. Both were immensely important.”²²⁴ In Shilts’ defense, however, this was likely how he would have wanted it. To be remembered for his reporting and not for his diagnosis. Feb. 17, 1994 marked the death of *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Randy Shilts. Shilts exited the world in the way any reporter would want to be remembered, through an obituary in *The New York Times*.

²²² William Grimes, “Randy Shilts, author, dies at 42; One of first to write about AIDS,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 18, 1994.

²²³ Mike Weiss, “Randy Shilts was gutsy, brash and unforgettable. He died 10 years ago, fighting for the rights of gays in American society,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), Feb. 17, 2004

²²⁴ Weiss, “Randy Shilts was gutsy, brash and unforgettable”

CONCLUSION

The lives and careers of Thomas Clarkson, Ida B. Wells, and Randy Shilts all encompass different time periods, different countries, different identities, and different walks of life. Yet above all else, they are journalists. After examining their lives and their work, what are the journalistic implications?

It would be difficult to argue that Clarkson's work was not meticulous, cautious, verified by other sources and accurate in the portrayal of the events he sought to bring to the attention of the public—which sounds like journalism, and specifically many of the principles outlined by the SPJ's Code of Ethics. During the time he was alive, he would have likely been considered a petitioner in a favorable light, or a propagandist in the view of those involved with the West India Committee. Clarkson himself divulges in the preface of *The Abstract* that the information presented is only helpful to the cause of the Society, the petitioners, and not the slave traders. "That it is the business of the slave merchants and planters, if they think their case defensible by the evidence they have produced..."²²⁵ In Clarkson's mind, the prevailing sentiment and discussion surrounding the slave trade was already controlled by those with a vested interest in keeping the trade going, such as the West India Committee. That the slave trade was prosperous and good for Britain was the prevailing sentiment; the opposing side of the argument was missing and Clarkson provided it. Does Clarkson's work fit within the model of public journalism and advocacy as previously defined? Yes, it does. His work addressed the British public at large as citizens whom he was actively looking to support his cause, and even the slaves were given autonomy and not treated as victims. In accordance with the

²²⁵ Phillips, *The Abstract*, X.

tenet of public journalism, Clarkson's work set forth to advance Britain to abolish the slave trade, improved the climate of discussion in Parliament about abolishment, and helped the public life of the country by doing away with the trade.

Wells pointed her pen straight at white supremacy and the racial terrorism that developed after Reconstruction known as lynching. Wells never knew she wanted to be a journalist until she seemingly stumbled her way into the profession. Never really sold on teaching, Wells was a ferocious writer when it came to advancing the causes of African-Americans during those days. The lynching of her three friends drove her to investigate what drove lynching and the charges behind them. She started the world's first anti-lynching campaign, wrote critically about both political parties that would advance their causes to harm African-Americans, and likewise wrote of her disdain for elite groups in Memphis that excluded others. She also wrote at length about African-Americans exercising their right of movement, arming themselves, and taking hold of civil rights. Apart from her writing, she took a stand in her legal case against the railroad company and Jim Crow segregation and helped establish many women's civic unions, which advocated for women's rights and suffrage.²²⁶ Likewise, her work would also fall into the definition of public journalism we have established. In her writing, she gave autonomy to black women that had long since been sexualized and did not treat them as victim, in the aftermath of the Memphis lynching she urged the community to act on this problem and told them to leave Memphis, she not only improved but set the tone for the discussion on lynching, and, above all else, attacked a cornerstone of white supremacy in order to better improve the public lives of African-Americans.

²²⁶ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 238.

Shilts was the most adamant about the three of sticking his guns to objective-based journalism. Even on his death bed, he rejected the label people wanted to put on him of being an advocate. He tirelessly maintained his role as a journalist until the very end. In the history of the American press, Shilts encompassed quite a few monumental firsts: being one of the first openly gay reporters at a mainstream newspaper in the United States and being the first to produce a large volume of work on the AIDS crisis. While other newspapers and reporters struggled to find a way to make AIDS stories acceptable and interesting to a predominately heterosexual public, Shilts carried on reporting about facets of AIDS such as health, politics, and the gay community which it mainly impacted. It would be wrong to completely canonize Shilts for his reporting on AIDS, there are mistakes he's made and even boundaries he set up himself that he crossed. His creation of Patient Zero harmed factual health-based analysis of AIDS, and his strong stance against closing the gay bathhouses in San Francisco made many question how objective Shilts was in some of his reporting. Yet, despite these faults, Shilts's work tenets of public journalism. He gave voice and autonomy to those who suffered from AIDS and didn't treat them as victims, mobilized the country to act on properly addressing AIDS, set the bar for discussing the disease, and helped make public life, especially for gay individuals, better.

This brings us to a discussion of the human rights implications of these three. Each of them represent different points in history for universal human rights. Clarkson started at the beginning when rights were being declared, Wells found herself in the middle where rights wavered, and Shilts followed the United Nations declaration where they returned following an absence.

As Clarkson and the Society were working to abolish the slave trade, both the *Declaration of Independence* and *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* were signed. As Hunt argues, these two documents provide a basis for which the United Nations declaration, and the history of human rights, begins in earnest. Clarkson himself traveled to France in the summer of 1789 and two weeks after his arrival the declaration was signed. He felt certain it was a sign the slave trade would not stand, “surely the slave trade could not last, I should not be surprised if the French were to do themselves the honor of voting away this diabolical traffic in a night.”²²⁷ However, it wasn’t so simple. The night in France proved longer than Clarkson had anticipated; nonetheless, the declaration had come to influence the Society and slaves as well. In fact, the only successful slave revolt in human history was inspired by the declaration and the work of the Society. Slaves living in the French colony of St. Domingue, which is now Haiti, began to draw power from the French declaration which declared that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights” and “liberty consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no other limits than those which assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights.”²²⁸ This led the slaves, and free people of color, to wage a rebellion against French authority in 1791. The rebellion ended when they gained their independence in 1804. As rebellion gained power from the declaration, it also did from prints of the Josiah Wedgwood medallion the Society produced, a depiction of a man in chains with the phrase “Am I not a man and a brother?” The French Declaration and the Haitian Revolution both impacted

²²⁷ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 182.

²²⁸ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, in *Inventing Human Rights*, 221.

the work of the antislavery committee, albeit in both positive and negative ways. This was a time where human rights exploded onto the forefront of history. Hochschild argues if the antislavery fight had never been waged and won then the progress of human rights would have stalled entirely in its tracks, "...for the rights of labor, for the vote, for independence from Britain, and for much more. Could any of these battles have been fought at all if the first and greatest, against slavery, had not been won?"²²⁹

Wells, as previously mentioned, wrote because she felt the need to combat racist rantings that had become popularized in white popular culture and academic literature. This makes sense as the time of her writing follows the period of history which Hunt describes as ripe with scientific and biological reasons to exclude people, non-white people, out of the rights narrative. The scientific basis for racism and exclusion, which developed in the eighteenth century and then culminated in the nineteenth century, was based, according to Hunt, on two arguments: white people were the most advanced civilization according to historical development and inherited characteristics divided people by race. The nineteenth century brought with it the science of race with scholars trying to put together arguments that "a biologically based hierarchy of races determined the history of mankind."²³⁰ Scholars such as Arthur de Gobineau argued that miscegenation explained both the rise and the fall of civilizations. Wells, however, would come to reveal, notably in *Southern Horrors* and other reports, that interracial relationships were not some grave evil bound to break down civilization, but they were common and it was the fact that they were common amongst white women and black

²²⁹ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 360.

²³⁰ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 190.

men that infuriated white men. The fact that women and African-Americans had any sort of control or autonomy, sexually or not, was something they were not accustomed to.

Wells also wrote about womanhood during her time and how African-Americans, especially women, were widely “assumed to be guilty of a range of promiscuities.”²³¹ Black women would remedy this by joining white temperance organizations in an attempt to reaffirm their own womanhood. *Southern Horrors* also tackled the prevailing sexual attitudes of the time, especially as they pertained to women, “‘The Truth about Lynching’ sought to leave the old Victorian beliefs behind, in which the characteristics of race, class, and gender were fixed by immutable laws. In her universe, it was white women who were sexualized, black women victimized; it was the white man who were feral and barbaric, black men, successful and sentimental.”²³² Wells’s work to advance the cause of women, which was also intertwined in ways with lynching, can best be explained by the realization that at this time women still had few to no rights politically or socially. Remember how universal suffrage was bequeathed to African-Americans during the Reconstruction Era? Only to men. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, argues for the educational, social, and political equality of women. Wollstonecraft focused on the limited opportunities given to middle class women, how they had to depend upon their husbands, and that they are required to submit blindly to authority. “Let not man then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that women ought to be subjected because she has always been so.”²³³

²³¹ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 130.

²³² Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 228.

²³³ Mary Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the rights of Women,” in *The human rights reader*, 183.

Shilts joins the human rights debate after the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was signed. The declaration was brought on by the barbarity of the second World War and, as it declares in its preamble, came about from the “disregard and contempt for human rights” which “outraged the conscience of mankind...”²³⁴ Compared to the other two, one may scratch their head and wonder what principle of human rights did Shilts advocate for in his work? Clarkson and Wells are more obvious: the end of slavery, the end of white supremacy in the form of lynching. Yet, Shilts represents a gray area even within human rights. None of the watershed documents for rights we’ve touched on, including the U.N. declaration, ever explicitly cover the rights of sexual orientation and identity. This is not to say same-sex relationships have never been addressed in the course of human rights. The earliest instance comes from Plato’s *The Symposium* where the philosopher Socrates praised the benefits of same-sex relationships. “If two males came together, they would have the satisfaction of sexual intercourse, and then relax, turn to their work and think about other things in their life.”²³⁵ In this context, homosexuality was seen as a divine benefit for men and classified them as being successful and brave. Carl Sythcin writes about the conflict between universalism and cultural rights and how that has been evoked in the struggle for gay rights. In *Same-Sex Sexuality and the Globalization of Human Rights Discourse*, Sythcin argues that the universalizing of same-sex sexualities as identities, which was

²³⁴ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, in *Inventing Human Rights*, 223.

²³⁵ Plato, “On Homosexuals,” in *The human rights reader*, 77.

formed in Western society, has come to hurt an international gay movement, especially in non-Western countries.²³⁶

Stychin's discourse on the international gay movement, however, pertains little to the work Shilts did. As it stood, there were no academics or human rights buff who had really considered gay rights in the larger narrative of human rights. Although, Harvey Milk certainly did. Milk sent letters to President Jimmy Carter, Sen. Edward Kennedy, Brown and Georgia State Sen. Julian Bond, imploring them to make a pro-gay statement in the face of the Briggs Initiative. An aide to Carter sent back a two-sentence reply explaining Carter had prior commitments, but that he "appreciates your thoughtfulness and sends his best wishes."²³⁷ Milk later called out Carter in the Gay Freedom Day Parade of June 25, 1978, where Milk rallied against the Briggs Initiative.

*"Jimmy Carter: You talked about human rights a lot...in fact, you want to be the world's leader for human rights. Well, dammit, lead! There are some 15 to 20 million lesbians and gay men in this nation listening and listening very carefully ... Jimmy Carter, you have to make the choice, it's in your hands: either years of violence ... or you can help turn the pages of history that much faster."*²³⁸

Individuals like Milk and others in the gay community who after crises such as the Briggs Initiative and the AIDS epidemic banded together to forge their own path to human rights as it had never been done for them. The AIDS epidemic brought about a large wave of gay rights activism. Soon people would start lobbying for anti-discrimination laws in the workplace, hate crime laws, and disability laws, according to

²³⁶ Carl Stychin, "Same-Sex Sexualities and the Globalization of Human Rights Discourse," in *The human rights reader*, 430.

²³⁷ Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 214.

²³⁸ Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 369-70.

Kranz and Cusick. “The AIDS movement [was] the first in the United States to accomplish the mass conversion of disease ‘victims’ into activist-experts.”²³⁹ And there along the entire way, chronicling AIDS, painting a portrait of the gay community in Castro, and setting out with the goal that homosexuality was right and society was wrong, was Shilts. He too helped advocate in this burgeoning reconciliation of gay rights into the human rights narrative.

Fin

Journalism has changed since the days of Randy Shilts, and certainly since the days of Thomas Clarkson. Perhaps not all for the best either. In the same way, human rights have evolved, waned, picked up steam, and headed forward into the future. It can be easy to think the topics our journalists wrote about are so far removed from what we deal with today, but that’s simply untrue. This past May, an interview with the last surviving captive of the last slave ship that brought Africans to the U.S. surfaced. Cudjo Lewis, originally, Kossula, was nineteen when members of a neighboring tribe captured him and took him to the coast. He and about 120 others were sold into slavery and crammed onto the “Clotilda,” the last slave ship to reach the continental United States.²⁴⁰ Lewis’s full story will be told in an upcoming book by anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Perhaps Lewis’s account of his time in slavery would be comparable to Olaudah Equiano’s personal narrative of being enslaved, which the Society published to further their cause. In April, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, informally known as the National Lynching Memorial, opened in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial pays

²³⁹ Kranz, *Gay Rights*, 42.

²⁴⁰ Becky Little, “The Last Slave Ship Survivor Gave an Interview in the 1930s. It Just Surfaced,” *History*, May 3, 2018.

tribute to the more than 4,000 known African-Americans who were killed between 1987 and 1950 by the form of racial terrorism known as lynching. The memorial includes more than 800 steel monuments bearing the names of thousands of lynching victims.²⁴¹ A portion of the memorial is also dedicated to the work Wells accomplished. The *Montgomery Advertiser* even made a confession that their newspaper promoted the myths of lynching and “denigrated victims while wallowing in racial stereotypes.”²⁴² The movement for gay rights has also developed since the days of Shilts, same-sex marriage is legal in the United States and many states or cities have anti-discrimination laws. Of course, it’s nothing all-encompassing and there is certainly more to hope for. Violence also remains a looming concern for LGBTQ+ individuals. According to a 2016 story from the *Times*, LGBT individuals are twice as likely to be targeted as African-Americans. Additionally, the rate of hate crimes against them has surpassed that of crimes against Jews, the *Times* claims citing FBI data and statistics.²⁴³ There are also other issues on the horizon for the gay rights movement, one which has become increasingly more focused on transgender rights as well. A plan unveiled last April by the administration of President Donald Trump would do away with a rule issued by President Barack Obama that prevented health-care providers and insurers from discriminating against transgender people.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Andrew Yawn, “Path of reconciliation: A walk through the nation’s first lynching memorial,” *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama), April 23, 2018.

²⁴² Brian Lyman, “‘There will be lynchings’: How the Advertiser failed victims of racial terror,” *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama), April 20, 2018.

²⁴³ Haeyoun Park, Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn, “L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group,” *New York Times* (New York, New York), June 16, 2016.

²⁴⁴ Luis Sanchez, “Trump admin plans to undo Obama-era health-care protections for transgender people: report,” *The Hill*, April 21, 2018.

The past presidential election cycle in the U.S. saw a massive shift in journalism, and not solely in the way the press reported on the presidential candidates. It also made more abundantly transparent the fractured trust people have in the news media.²⁴⁵ There are also now people claiming the mantle of journalism while willfully penning deliberately dishonest, maliciously misinformed, or otherwise fake news, and getting paid upwards of \$40,000 for their work.²⁴⁶ And the election of Donald Trump to the presidency makes for a potent cocktail of journalistic freedom as Trump is often extremely combative with the press. If the examples of Clarkson, Wells, and Shilts prove anything it's that journalism has been a powerful conduit in the progression of human rights. Each of their voices and narratives stood out for one reason or another but it was the power of journalism which help propel these human rights struggles. If these three cases prove anything it's that there is a strong intersection between journalism and the support for and progression of human rights.

“You know the meaning of human rights because you feel distressed when they are violated. The truths of human rights might be paradoxical in this sense, but they are nonetheless self-evident.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Lydia Saad, “Military, Small Business, Police Still Stir Most Confidence,” *Gallup Polls*, June 28, 2018.

²⁴⁶ Terrence McCoy, “For the ‘new yellow journalists,’ opportunity comes in clicks and bucks,” *The Washington Post*, (Long Beach, Calif.) Nov. 20, 2016.

²⁴⁷ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 214.



Figure 8. Liberty Leading the People, painted by Eugène Delacroix commemorating the French Revolution of 1830.

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