

## FOREWORD TO THE 1970 EDITION

### JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

For more than forty years, Ida B. Wells was one of the most fearless and one of the most respected women in the United States. She was also one of the most articulate. Few defects in American society escaped her notice and her outrage. Among the things she fought were the racial discrimination at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, disfranchisement based on race, discrimination in employment, and segregation on public carriers. She was one of the first persons to bring legal action against a railroad because of discrimination. She was perhaps the first person to recite the horrors of lynching in lurid detail. By the written and spoken word, she laid bare the barbarism and inhumanity of the rope and faggot. Through her visits she became nearly as well known in England as she was in the United States, for she was determined that the entire world should know her native land for what it really was.

If Ida B. Wells spent much of her time fighting the evil aspects of human relations, she worked equally hard in the effort to devise means to improve the lot of her fellows. She was one of the group that conceived and organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She was a leader in the club movement among Negro women. For many years she maintained almost single-handedly a facility in Chicago where a variety of

John Hope Franklin (1915–2009) was the James B. Duke Professor of History at Duke University and the author of many books, including *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin*, *Racial Inequality in America*, and *Reconstruction after the Civil War*. From 1967 until 1978, he edited a series of African American biographies in which this was originally published.

young people's organizations could meet under favorable conditions and auspices. She was in the forefront in promoting political activity among Negroes; and on one occasion she ran for public office herself.

Her zeal and energy were matched by her uncompromising and unequivocal stand on every cause that she espoused. She did not hesitate to criticize southern whites, even before she left the South, or northern white liberals, or members of her own race when she was convinced that their positions were not in the best interests of all mankind. She did not hesitate to go to the scene of racial disturbances, including riots and lynchings, in order to get an accurate picture of what actually occurred. She did not hesitate to summon to the cause of human dignity anybody and everybody whom she believed could serve that cause.

In this autobiography she tells her story simply, but engagingly. In it one learns of her private life as well as her public activities. There is the task of caring for a growing family while continuing to serve the public in many ways. There is the problem of trying to develop leadership that will not destroy itself by petty bickering. There is the exciting opportunity to serve as correspondent for a big-city newspaper without compromising her outspoken position on the problems that she discusses. Few documents written by an American woman approach this one either in importance or interest.

The autobiography has been carefully edited by Alfreda B. Duster, the daughter of Ida B. Wells. Although her interest in the subject is understandably deep and her knowledge of the things about which her mother writes is great, Mrs. Duster has not intruded herself into the story that is, after all, the story of Ida B. Wells. She has accurately perceived her role as an understanding and sympathetic editor, scrupulously avoiding the pitfalls of filial subjectivity.