

The Psychology of Lynching

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NO one, I take it, was surprised when the Wicomico county grand jury reported to Bailey, J., that it could not find the lynchers of Matthews Williams. That result, in such cases, is always expected, and it is rare for anticipation to be disappointed. It must be said for the Salisbury jurymen that, whatever their private hesitations may have been, they showed a rather unusual public diligence. They invited the Attorney-General of the State to sit with them, they accepted the aid of detectives from Baltimore, and they summoned more than a hundred witnesses. Moreover, they let it be known that anyone else who could throw any light upon the business would be heard freely. But no one seems to have come forward, and none of the persons actually examined knew anything. The lynching, it appears, was a sort of transcendental event, taking place in secular space but only dimly visible to mortal eyes. A large crowd turned out to enjoy it, but no one could make out who was running it.

What all this proves is plain enough. *It is that lynchings, despite their apparent violation of all the laws of physics, are not really miracles in a vacuum, but incidents in a long and overt series of phenomena, stretching both backward and forward in time. The impulse to perform them, in all probability, is present everywhere and at all times. It shows itself in Baltimore every time a hold-up man is taken in the act or prohibition agents raid a respectable and popular saloon. But in order that it may lead to actual murder there must be a preliminary collapse of the police power, an antecedent breakdown of the orderly process of justice. Once that breakdown occurs a lynching is imminent, and once it has taken place the recovery is usually long enough delayed to let the lynchers escape.*

That is what happens from time to time all over the Bible Belt, and that is what happened at Salisbury. The makings of the lynching there were visible on the lower Shore for six weeks before Williams murdered Mr. Elliott; they were later described in detail by the Court of Appeals in its declaratory judgment in the Yuel Lee case. First, gangs of ruffians began to menace various prisoners, and the local police, too weak to protect them, had to flee with them to safety. Then the same or other ruffians threatened a lawyer in attendance upon court, and the local judge failed to punish them for contempt. What followed was probably inevitable. The mob, sensing its power, awaited its chance. That chance came at Salisbury on December 4.

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