

*The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American Contribution to Columbian Literature.* By Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand Barnett. Edited by Robert W. Rydell (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Pp. xviii, 81. Illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95; Paper \$14.95.)

Robert W. Rydell as editor of *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American Contribution to Columbian Literature* has helped to rescue from near obscurity this important pamphlet written by African American leaders Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand Barnett, on the eve of the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and as the White City. Rydell's new introduction provides historical context for the booklet, which is an important source of primary data about late nineteenth century African American and American history.

The Chicago World's Fair was "held to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the New World and was designed to advance the causes of American nationalism, imperialism, and consumerism," according to Rydell (xi). President Benjamin Harrison appointed two bodies to work with local business and political leaders to plan the fair: the all-male United States National Commission and a separate women's group, the Board of Lady Managers. Neither group included African Americans. Black leaders, including Wells, Douglass, Penn, and Barnett, and many others, were incensed over this deliberate and obvious omission, and immediately sought inclusion for African Americans. After attempts to get black appointees to these two boards and other subordinate groups failed, Wells, Douglass, Penn, and Barnett, with financial support from Frederic Loudin and other blacks, published *The Reason Why*. The purpose of this booklet was to make others aware that blacks were not included on the planning boards for the fair and to explain why blacks were not included.

*The Reason Why* included a preface in three languages – English, French, and German – a very powerful introduction by

Frederick Douglass, and five additional, well-argued essays. The pamphlet addressed various issues, including the general denial of black civil and political rights, African Americans' unequal access to public accommodations, their increasing disfranchisement, and the growing number of lynchings. The group contended that the omission of African Americans from the planning of the World's Fair pre-saged their exclusion from the international showcase provided by the Fair. The four leaders argued that African Americans were excluded from the planning of the fair because the U.S. wanted to keep them in a state of surrogate slavery characterized by a subordinate position in education, politics, and economics. Further, the United States did not want to acknowledge the remarkable strides that blacks had made in the twenty-eight years since emancipation. In an essay entitled "The Progress of the Afro-American since Emancipation," educator and journalist Irvine Garland Penn addressed the advancements that African Americans had made in the post-slavery era. Penn argued that African Americans had progressed "in education, in the professions, [and] in the accumulation of wealth and literature" (44).

Ida B. Wells, who acted as the chief agent and fund raiser for the group in the publication venture, published 20,000 copies of the pamphlet, which were available free of charge. The booklet apparently fared poorly as a molder of public opinion. Many people opposed its publication and distribution, as Rydell indicates. Many African Americans, for various reasons, questioned the wisdom of producing such a work. Some African Americans argued that public discourse about their plight might undermine the limited support which they received from whites, while others found this open discussion of their second-class citizenship too painful to explore. Still others argued that inclusion in the fair would be possible, despite their exclusion from the planning bodies. For example, blacks could be included in exhibits under the auspices of various white organizations and companies and through affiliation with other countries. Frederick Douglass, for example, who was a former U.S. minister to Haiti from 1889-1991, represented that country at the fair. Whites either opposed the pamphlet or paid little attention to it, according to Rydell.

Rydell's introduction is important for the pre-publication context that it provides. Rydell discusses a nation increasingly riddled by racism and discrimination, and one in which many African Americans offered resistance to their growing consignment to second-class citizenship. Further, he points out that the Chicago World's Fair and the pamphlet critiquing it "underscore the cultural construction of racism in post-Reconstruction America and the struggles by African Americans for social justice in a nation that seemed determined to build its future on the basis of blueprints that featured a White City at its core" (xv). The section entitled "Aftermath" would have been more effective if Rydell had developed it further. The black presence at the fair was greater than what a reading of *The Reason Why*—including the present version—suggests. Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand Barnett could not have known that this would be the case because they published the pamphlet before the fair had opened. Rydell, writing over one hundred years later, had access to secondary sources and considerable primary data which indicate that blacks participated in the fair in various capacities. As Christopher Reed indicates in *All The World Is Here: The Black Presence at White City*, blacks took part in the fair as employees, performers, and exhibitors. African Americans also attended as fair goers. African Americans were included in the World's Columbian Exposition — contrary to what the title of the present pamphlet suggests — although not as equal partners with white Americans, as the writers of *The Reason Why* had demanded.

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