



The Lynching of Cleo Wright

Dominic J. Capeci Jr.

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On January 20, 1942, black oil mill worker Cleo Wright assaulted a white woman in her home and nearly killed the first police officer who tried to arrest him. An angry mob then hauled Wright out of jail and dragged him through the streets of Sikeston, Missouri, before burning him alive.

Wright's death was, unfortunately, not unique in American history, but what his death meant in the larger context of life in the United States in the twentieth-century is an important and compelling story. After the lynching, the U.S. Justice Department was forced to become involved in civil rights concerns for the first time, provoking a national reaction to violence on the home front at a time when the country was battling for democracy in Europe.

Dominic Capeci unravels the tragic story of Wright's life on several stages, showing how these acts of violence were indicative not only of racial tension but the clash of the traditional and the modern brought about by the war. Capeci draws from a wide range of archival sources and personal interviews with the participants and spectators to draw vivid portraits of Wright, his victims, law-enforcement officials, and members of the lynch mob. He places Wright in the larger context of southern racial violence and shows the significance of his death in local, state, and national history during the most important crisis of the twentieth-century.

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