

Melanie S. Morrison. *Murder on Shades Mountain; the Legal Lynching of Willie Peterson and the Struggle for Justice in Jim Crow Birmingham*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. x+ 443 pages. Cloth, \$26.95.

Some crimes against people stand out and some scream out. Such has been the case with lynching, the killing of African Americans without a trial. It is the scourge of southern history, peaking at the coming of World War I, but never really ending altogether. As Melanie S. Morrison reminds us forcefully, some lynchings happen with the trappings of “justice”—judge, jury, lawyers in courtroom—but the result is still a lynching, an execution of an African American for *being* African American. Such “legal lynchings” are as problematic as Klan violence since the evidence does not matter to a jury that has come bound in determination to convict.

The Rev. Dr. Melanie S. Morrison is academically certified to undertake this difficult study, as she earned an M.Div. from Yale Divinity School and a Ph.D. from the University of Groningen. She is certified by interest and experience because of her decades of work, especially in Michigan, in race relations with emphasis on racial justice issues in law enforcement, the courts, and the prisons. Yet the political is here truly personal, for she first learned of this case of northern Alabama injustice from her father, a reformist minister who raised her in Michigan after leaving his native Birmingham in protest. The basic outline of the events covered in this book (minus some extremely troubling details that he withheld) she first learned at her father’s knee in his study in East Lansing.

Now she brings her own life of academic, political, and spiritual engagement to the densely tangled story of Willie Peterson, a disabled coal miner falsely accused of sexual assault on three white women, and the murder of two white women at a once-popular picnic site, Shades Mountain, which overlooked Birmingham’s coal and iron works in the 1920s and early years of the Depression. The case, although largely lost to historians outside Black Birmingham, would

be interesting anyway, but it coincides with two other racial justice cases: The Scottsboro Boys, nine young men (some not even teenagers at time of arrest) who had hopped freight cars in company of some white women who subsequently claimed rape; and Angelo Herndon, a Communist Party labor organizer in Birmingham (originally accused of the Shades Mountain rape and then “cleared” by the surviving white victim) who worked on the Willie Peterson trial and then moved to Atlanta where he was sentenced to death for a peaceful protest of the city’s Depression Era welfare system. Those two cases reverberate in southern and justice history, as should this related one.

Coming even to mistrust her beloved father in terms of hiding ugly truths (the southern minister died before his northern daughter could question him on details that did not fit), Morrison carefully follows newspaper accounts, including the local Black newspaper and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (which in those days covered southern events quite thoroughly), as well as records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP; full disclosure: I am a lifetime member) and its rival, the Communist International Labor Defense (ILD). Additionally, Morrison also utilizes the majority white newspapers, the personal papers of two governors, the police blotter, and the transcripts of the court proceedings, as well as personal papers of attorneys involved, most prominently Charles Hamilton Houston, head of the School of Law at Howard University and onetime mentor to the great majority of black jurists in the US.

Some aspects of the case would be laughable if no deaths were involved. The surviving victim described her assailant as young, tall, and sophisticated with a fancy hat, gold fillings, and a complex vocabulary of Communist reasoning. Willie Peterson, disabled by tuberculosis from years in the coal mine, was forty-six but looked older, stood about 5’6” tall, looked “emaciated”

from his disease and overwork, and had a very limited vocabulary, especially with regard to politics. Too, the assailant held three young women at bay for hours and then raped all three, while Peterson had redundant witnesses to his being far from Shades Mountain. The police chief and other law enforcement officials could not believe that he had the physical strength and stamina to carry out the assaults, especially since the officers had testimony that he was impotent. For all that, a woman of “quality” among Birmingham’s upper bourgeoisie had identified him and stuck by her testimony despite the fact that her own early descriptions of her assailant were dramatically counter to Willie Peterson’s identity.

The story is a page-turner, and its drama will not be spoiled here by giving away the ending. The details as spun out are both ghastly and strangely illuminating. Above all, we historians will have to quit celebrating the ending of mob lynchings out of court in 1920 and mark it that “legal lynchings” in court in the 1930s and 1940s essentially replaced white-robed speakers of overt racism with black robed speakers of Latin. The result, torture and death for innocent black men, is certainly the same and is connected to continuing abuses in this century that have moved far beyond southern regions.

John Herbert Roper Sr.
Richardson Professor of American History Emeritus Emory & Henry College
Emory, Virginia