

“Tom Dooley”--Frank Proffitt (1940)

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Essay by Ross Hair (guest post)*



Frank Proffitt

“Tom Dooley,” is a ballad in the macabre tradition of “Pretty Polly,” “Omie Wise,” “Knoxville Girl,” and “Poor Ellen Smith.” Based on true events that occurred in Happy Valley, Wilkes County, North Carolina, in 1866, the Appalachian folk song recounts how a local Civil War veteran called Thomas C. Dula (pronounced in the local dialect as “Dooley”) murdered his lover, Laura Foster. The unprecedented chart success of The Kingston Trio’s version of the ballad in 1958 (which sold over six million copies) made it, arguably, the most well known, if not the most played folk song in America. The song was also the galvanizing force of the American Folk Revival that burgeoned in the following decade. However, the history of the ballad, like the story that it tells, is a complicated and contentious affair. The roots of the version popularized by The Kingston Trio is traceable back to the North Carolinian folk singer, tobacco farmer, part-time carpenter, and maker of banjos: Frank Proffitt (1913-1965).

The full details of the Dula-Foster affair can be read about in any number of books, including John Foster West’s “The Ballad of Tom Dula” (1971) and John E. Fletcher’s “The True Story of Tom Dooley” (2013). Although it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, the story essentially boils down to a lascivious lovers’ triangle involving wanton promiscuity, adultery, venereal disease, intimidation, and (some have claimed) pregnancy.

Something of a libertine, Tom Dula was sleeping with a local farmer’s daughter, Laura Foster, who also happened to be the cousin of another of his lovers, Ann Foster Melton. Ann, who was married to the local farmer James Melton, had been intimately involved with Dula since adolescence, and it was only Dula’s service in the Confederate army during the Civil War that interrupted their liaisons. Dula also began sleeping with the cousin of Laura and Ann, Pauline Foster, when, in the March of 1866, she moved to Happy Valley from Watauga County to work as a housekeeper for the Meltons. Unbeknownst to her cousins, or to Dula, the real motive of Pauline’s move was to seek treatment for her syphilis. Dula’s promiscuity resulted in both Ann and Laura contracting the disease. Learning of his condition, Dula vowed to kill the woman who had given him the disease and believed Laura to be the culprit.

One early morning in the May of 1866, Laura took her father's horse and left her home, possibly to elope with Dula. (Some accounts claim Laura was pregnant with Dula's child.) Laura was never seen alive again. With Laura missing, and rumors circulating that he had killed her, Dula left Wilkes County for Tennessee where a man called James Grayson eventually arrested him. Laura's decomposing body was discovered after Dula's arrest. She was buried in a shallow grave with knife wounds to the chest. Based on the testimonies of Pauline, Ann (who was alleged to have shown Pauline the location of Laura's grave and also seen threatening Pauline to silence) was arrested for aiding and abetting Dula.

Dula and Ann stood trial in the October of 1866 and again in the April of 1867. Finally found guilty, Dula was sentenced to death and executed on May 1, 1868 by hanging. Ann was acquitted of all crimes. A sentimentalized addendum to the story is that Ann murdered Laura. Dula, out of love, hanged for her.

It was the most basic rudiments of this story which Frank Proffitt related when, in 1937, at the Beech Mountain home of his father-in-law and dulcimer maker Nathan Hicks, he sang his version of "Tom Dooley" to two folksong collectors from Greenwich Village, Anne and Frank Warner. The following year, the Warners returned to North Carolina, this time visiting Proffitt at his own home in the remote Pick Britches Valley. There, on an early portable tape recorder, they recorded Proffitt singing his haunting, melancholy version of "Tom Dooley," accompanying himself on his own handmade, five-string fretless banjo.

Nevertheless, it would be another 24 years until Proffitt's performance of "Tom Dooley" would appear on vinyl. In 1962, it was included on the Folk-Legacy Records LP, "Frank Proffitt of Reese, North Carolina," by which time Warner himself had been performing his version of Proffitt's ballad for a decade, and John and Alan Lomax had included it in their book "Folk Song USA" (1947), crediting Warner. Proffitt later joined with Warner and the Lomaxes in successfully suing The Kingston Trio over the publishing rights of "Tom Dooley." Like the story it recounts, the tangled transmission of "Tom Dooley" and its contested authorship is a pertinent reminder of just how protean the oral folk tradition is.

The Kingston Trio's version of the ballad begins with a spoken intro that conveniently sets the scene: "Throughout history, there have been many songs written about the eternal triangle. This next one tells the story of Mister Grayson, a beautiful woman and a condemned man named Tom Dooley. When the sun rises tomorrow, Tom Dooley must hang...." Lacking any such preamble, Proffitt's version strikes a more unsettling and ambivalent note that resists the implicit romanticizing of the Trio's version.

Compared to other variants of the ballad (Doc Watson's, for example) Proffitt's version is scant on narrative detail. We're told that Dooley "killed lil' Laurie Foster" with a knife and "hid her clothes," but we don't know why. The removal of Foster's clothes with its tacit suggestion of sexual violation casts a sinister tone, not unlike the sadistic pathology of "Pretty Polly." Indeed, what Greil Marcus has noted in that particular ballad is also applicable to Proffitt's: "It is preordained"--"there seems to be no will in the story, only fate, or ritual." Although, in Proffitt's, it's Dooley, not just Laurie, who is "*bound* to die."

There is no motive, no reason to “Tom Dooley” and the events it tells of--only actions and consequences. Like the narrator in “Tom Dooley,” all we can do is surmise:

*You met her on the mountain,
It was there I suppose,
There you went and killed her,
And then you hid her clothes.*

Even when the narrative shifts to the perspective of Dooley, we are no closer to gaining insight about the murderer’s emotional state, his moral conscience, or the full nature of his crime:

*This time tomorrow,
Reckon where I’ll be,
Down in yonder valley,
hanging on a white oak tree.*

Resignation is evident in Dooley’s words, but not remorse. It is left to us to “reckon” and “suppose” Dooley’s guilt.

But, if we can only conjecture, how then can we judge? This is perhaps the very crux of the ballad and its disinterested account of Dooley’s fateful crime. We might do well to note the suggestions of condemnation *and* compassion conjured in the refrain “hang your head”: “*Hang your head Tom Dooley, / Hang your head and cry.*” Whereas the first line suggests Dooley’s head hanging from the noose, the second stirs feelings of pathos. Should we, then, show sympathy for this “poor boy [...] bound to die”? The jury is still out.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.