

Donald G. Mathews. *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South.* Cambridge Studies in the American South Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 354 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-18297-4.

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Published on H-Law (January, 2018)

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"The cross was raised not only nineteen centuries ago on Golgotha, but near Palmetto and Newnan in 1899," writes religious historian Donald G. Mathews in *At the Altar of Lynching*, an insightful monograph on the relationship between southern religion and anti-black lynching, as revealed in the torture and burning of Tom Wilkes (better known as Sam Hose) by a white mob in Coweta County, Georgia, on April 23rd (p. 281). The burning of Wilkes was the culmination of heightened racial tensions in Georgia at the turn of the century, in part the result of white resentment over the posting of blacks soldiers in the state during the Spanish-American War and in part the result at the local level of the killing by a mob of a group of black men in nearby Palmetto just a few weeks before the burning.

On April 12th, Wilkes quarreled with Alfred Cranford, his employer and a prominent white resident, and killed him with an axe, likely in self-defense. Recognizing the peril that he now faced, Wilkes fled Newnan and took refuge with his mother in another county. In the wake of the killing, whites in Newnan and surrounding areas reacted with horror to an act that they could perceive only as rebellion against their mastery. As the story spread, posses hunted for Wilkes, and the white press ran breathless, grossly exaggerat-

ed accounts designed to enflame public opinion. Soon whites added a highly inflammatory detail to their version of the story, claiming that Wilkes raped Mattie Cranford in a pool of her husband's blood. Although these charges had no basis in fact, they increased and justified the bloodlust.

On April 23rd, several white men captured Wilkes and relayed him to the authorities, as rumors of an impending lynching ran wild. Seizing Wilkes from law enforcement officials in Newnan, a mob marched the prisoner to a point north of town where they tied him to a tree; tortured him by cutting off his ears, fingers, and sexual organ; shredded his body with knives; and burned him alive. Whipped into a terrible froth, mob members hacked off portions of the corpse, the chain, and the tree as ghoulish mementos. When some men arrived too late to participate, they soothed their disappointment with a second lynching. Converging on the cabin of preacher Elijah Strickland, they tore him from the arms of his family, tortured him, and hanged him to a tree limb near Palmetto.

With the weeks of premeditation, the barbaric torture, the agonizing immolation, the harvesting of the corpse for mementos, and the gory published accounts, the lynching of Wilkes earned an unusual level of attention in a lynching-besotted

period. Famously, W. E. B. Du Bois, the great sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist, identified the burning as a turning point in his life. “Sam Hose was crucified,” he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 (p. 260). Over the next forty years, he returned to the incident twice more. In its details, he saw “the race-hatred of the whites as I never dreamed of it before—naked and unashamed!” (p. 262). Since historians began to study lynching seriously in the 1980s, they have returned to this 1899 burning repeatedly because it distills some of the most depraved and shameful elements of the tradition. The scholars who have considered the incident and made it one of the most widely known and widely studied incidents include Herbert Shapiro (*White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* [1988]), W. Fitzhugh Brundage (*Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* [1993]), David Levering Lewis (*W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* [1993]), Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck (*A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* [1995]), Philip Dray (*At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* [2002]), Crystal N. Feimster (*Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* [2009]), and Edwin T. Arnold (*What Virtue There Is in Fire: Cultural Memory and the Lynching of Sam Hose* [2009]).

With *At the Altar of Lynching*, Mathews returns to the notorious events in Coweta County. However, he uses the lynching as a prism through which to explore southern religion at the turn of the twentieth century. In short, he claims that white and black southerners—albeit in very different ways—understood lynching within religious frameworks to a greater degree than historians have previously recognized. Far from constituting some peculiar deviation from white southern religious beliefs, for instance, Mathews argues that lynching reinforced white beliefs—fusing religious and racial principles—that sin, broadly defined, required violent punishment. “Pain and

penalty were written into the white Southern moral universe,” he explains (p. 18). “Since punishment was vital in sustaining honor and mastery as well as religion, Christian slaveholders could easily meld the former with the latter. In a society sensitive to the polarities of free and slave, obedience and disobedience, male and female, honor and dishonor, a religion so clearly defined by conflict between good and evil helped validate a culture of constant vigilance” (pp. 19-20). In constructing his argument, Mathews builds on the foundational work of historian Amy Louise Wood (*Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* [2009]).

In an important contribution, Mathews considers the consequences of lynching not just for those lynched but also for their families, friends, and communities. As a result of his research and the multigenerational suffering of his own family after a 1910 mob attack on his white grandfather, Mathews found himself reflecting in “awe at the enormity of the emotional and cultural cost of violence inflicted by *thousands* of lynchings, beatings, rapes, and murders ... by *whites* against those unlike themselves. The pain and emotional distress that affected my father and through him my sister, mother, and me was absolutely *nothing* compared to the horror of hideous acts against the thousands of documented black lynching victims and their families.” Losing a loved one to a mob, he reckons, “affected those families in ways impossible ... to imagine.” Yet he concludes that their suffering represented merely “the first stages of a *multiplier effect*” that continues to haunt “perhaps millions” of African American families. This contagion, he adds, has consequences in the present: “its effects are far-reaching and contemporary” (p. 6).

In a striking passage, Mathews focuses on the suffering endured by the Wilkes family after the burning. “The person he [Tom] had been was gone. His brothers, sister, and mother must have faced an unimaginable chasm, an overwhelming

emptiness.” A man who had “tended his mother and little brother for so long had been transmuted into a monster and slain in a manner too terrible to imagine.” The impact of the lynching, he writes, “would linger for years and affect his family in ways they would never be able to resolve” (p. 179). In developing this argument, Mathews builds on recent scholarship. In 2014, historian Kidada E. Williams called for scholars of lynching to delve into the effects of the trauma experienced by the families of black mob victims and, in 2015, sociologists Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay demonstrated a way to achieve this aim. Using online genealogical databases, they recreated the back story of a man lynched—and, infamously, photographed—in Florida in 1926, identifying his age and profession, the biographical details of his wife and children, his address, and the details of some of his neighbors.[1] Notably, scholars working on the racist lynchings of persons of Mexican descent by Anglo mobs in the Southwestern United States have likewise theorized this strain of thinking, including William D. Carrigan, Clive Webb, and Nicholas Villanueva Jr.[2]

At times, Mathews’s analysis of religion and lynching in the South at a high level impedes his storytelling at the local level, including the narrative of the events in Coweta County. Furthermore, the author’s prolific use of the exclamation point becomes increasingly distracting as the book progresses. Yet, aside from these issues, Mathews has produced an important and provocative monograph that not only advances themes developed in recent scholarship but also develops new ones. *At the Altar of Lynching* should be indispensable reading for scholars of southern religious history, the history of lynching, and the study of American racism and racial inequality.

Notes

[1]. Kidada E. Williams, “Regarding the Aftermaths of Lynching,” *Journal of American History* (December 14, 2014): 858; and Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 36-38.

[2]. William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74; and Nicholas Villanueva Jr., *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 7.

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Citation: Brent Campney. Review of Mathews, Donald G. *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. January, 2018.

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