

Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dula

General Overview

On May 1, 1868 Tom Dula (pronounced Dooley) was hanged for the murder of Laura Foster. The hanging followed several sensational trials, including two in the North Carolina Supreme Court. Prior to the hanging Tom Dula gave one of his attorneys a note in which he said that he was the only one who “had any hand in the murder of Laura Foster.” In the 1950s a ballad, entitled “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley,” was recorded about the events and reached #1 on the Billboard chart for 1958.

NOTE: This trial includes frank discussion of sexuality and sexually-transmitted disease that has not been included in the lesson plan material. If the teacher uses actual trial materials and publicity, such will be mentioned.

Preparation

- Students should read the materials provided at the following website: State Archives of North Carolina, Educational Resources, for Students.
<http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/SHRAB/ar/exhibits/educationalresources/tomdula.html>
- If possible, teacher should play the Kinston Trio’s version of “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley.”

Activities

- As a class create a newspaper, complete with masthead and articles, in which the murder of Laura Foster, the trials and subsequent hanging of Tom Dula are the focus.
- Discuss the song and its characterization of Tom Dooley as opposed to the character of Tom Dula that is given in the court testimony. Does the song disregard the facts of the case? When you hear the song how does it make you feel about Tom Dooley?

Enrichment and Extension

Dramatize the trial scene.

Discuss other stories in which a “bad guy” can be portrayed as a hero. Examples are Robin Hood, Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*, and Captain Jack Sparrow in “Pirates of the Caribbean.”



Sources

West, John Foster. *Lift Up Your Head, Tom Dooley*. Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1993.

PC 1272 Thomas Dula Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.

State v. Thomas Dula, Case 8122, Supreme Court Original Cases, 1800-1909, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh.

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The New York Herald, May 2, 1868.

Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives