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Book Review: The Woolfolk Tragedy (1996)

Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

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{Lit.}

Georgia's Most Ghastly Murder

The Woolfolk Tragedy

Carolyn DeLoach
Anewakee River Press
(P.O. Box 456, Douglasville, Ga. 30133-0456)
381 pp./\$14.95

Everybody has heard of Lizzie Borden, the young Massachusetts woman charged in 1892 with murdering her father and mother-in-law (both hacked to death with a hatchet), and acquitted by a jury the following year. We all remember the ditty:

"Lizzie Borden took an ax and gave her mother forty whacks, and when the job was neatly done she gave her father forty-one."

Hardly anyone, however, remembers a convicted mass murderer named Tom Woolfolk whose far worse crime, an ax mass murder, occurred in Macon, GA, five years before Lizzie Borden's arrest. The ditty about that crime —

"Woolfolk, Woolfolk, look what you've done, you've killed your whole family and never used a gun"

— has long been forgotten.

The case of Tom Woolfolk (pronounced WUHL-fork) is thoroughly examined by Carolyn DeLoach in her excellent new book *The Woolfolk Tragedy*. Ms. DeLoach, a former schoolteacher who lives in Douglasville, has spent the last 20 years researching and writing this remarkable, fascinating work.

In the early morning hours of Saturday, Aug. 6, 1887, nine members of Tom Woolfolk's family were slain with a short-handled ax. The victims were Tom's father and mother-in-law and their six children, as well as an elderly aunt of the mother-in-law. The heinous crime occurred in the Woolfolk family farmhouse west of Macon in Bibb County and electrified Georgia and the nation, gaining significant newspaper attention. The dreadful slaughter was called "more bloody, more fiendish" and exhibiting "a deeper depravity" than any crime ever committed in this state, and Tom Woolfolk himself was described as "an incarnate fiend" and "a brute of the lowest form".

Indicted on nine counts of murder but placed on trial only for the murder of his father, Tom Woolfolk was convicted by a Macon jury and sentenced to death in Bibb

County in December, 1887. After the Georgia Supreme Court reversed the conviction, Tom was retried in Perry, in Houston County, where he was re-convicted, and again sentenced to death. The state supreme court, on appeal, upheld the sentence this time and on Wednesday afternoon, Oct. 29, 1890, in one of the last public executions in Georgia, Tom was hanged in front of a crowd of 10,000 people near the courthouse in Perry. He protested his innocence to the last.

Ms. DeLoach is the leading authority on the Woolfolk murder case. Much of her book is based on contemporary newspaper accounts, but it is clear she has read everything ever written about the case. Her book recounts in amazing detail the events of the murder case — the slayings, the post-crime publicity, Tom's imprisonment, the pretrial legal maneuverings, the trials and appeals, and the execution. Her book also includes a number of important illustrations, including a photograph of Tom's father, victim Richard F. Woolfolk, which is published for the first time.

One interesting feature of *The Woolfolk Tragedy* is that it permits us to see the close connections between the Woolfolk case and Athens. Tom Woolfolk lived in Athens from 1860 to 1867. When the murders occurred an aunt of Tom Woolfolk's, Mrs. John Ross (Fanny) Crane, was living here in a residence located at 774 Prince Avenue. Living at the same address was Tom's sister Floride Edwards, who attended Tom's trials and never lost her faith in Tom's innocence. Fanny Crane, who died in 1927, is buried in Oconee Hill Cemetery. Also buried in that cemetery is an Athens lawyer, John Cobb Rutherford, who served as Tom's chief defense counsel at the trials and on appeal. Rutherford, who also believed Tom was innocent, ruined his health in defending Tom and died at age 45 in 1891, five months after his client was hung.

One of the few mistakes in *The Woolfolk Tragedy* arises from Ms. DeLoach's misunderstanding of Georgia evidence law. She erroneously asserts that at his second trial Tom Woolfolk swore on a Bible to tell the truth and then testified as a defense witness. She assumes defendants were eligible to take the stand in the 19th century. Actually, criminal defendants in Georgia were not allowed to take the stand and testify under oath until 1961. Before 1961, they were allowed only to remain silent or to make an unsworn statement to the jury. Unsworn statements were not subject to cross-examination. At neither of his trials did Tom testify as a witness; at both trials he made an unsworn statement denying guilt.

Additionally, Ms. DeLoach seems to somehow believe in Tom Woolfolk's innocence, even though the evidence of his guilt is overwhelming.

Still, what makes *The Woolfolk Tragedy* so readable is the wealth of details it provides. About the only factual tidbit Ms. DeLoach omits to mention is this bizarre one: at Tom's hanging vendors sold and spectators ate possum sandwiches!

This is a wonderful book, a landmark achievement in Georgia history writing.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

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