

Ballad of Tom Dooley ^[1]

"Ballad of Tom Dooley."

by Thornton W. Mitchell, 2006



The Kingston Trio revived the "Ballad of Tom Dooley" in the 50's. Image courtesy of Flickr user David Bookcock.

^[2]Thomas C. Dula was born in Wilkes County ^[3] on 20 June 1844, the son of Mary Dula. In 1862 he enlisted in the 42nd Regiment, North Carolina Infantry, as a private. Dula was captured at Kinston and was a prisoner of war at Cape Lookout, Md., where he was released in 1865. He returned to Wilkes County, where he resumed a liaison with Ann Melton, begun when he was 15 years old. In 1866 he cohabited with Laura Foster, from whom he eventually contracted syphilis.

On the morning of 25 May 1866, locals saw Foster on Stony Fork Road riding her father's mare with a bundle of clothing on her lap. The next morning, the mare returned alone to the Foster home, and a search began for Laura. On 18 June, searchers found Laura in a shallow grave, dead from a stab wound. Dula fled to Watauga County ^[4] and then to Tennessee, where he was captured about three weeks later and returned to Wilkes County.

Dula and Melton went to trial for murder in Wilkes County, but the case was moved to redell County ^[5], where Dula was convicted. A second trial was held after the North Carolina Supreme Court ^[6] reversed the decision, and Dula was again found guilty. He was hanged in Statesville on 1 May 1868.

Even before Dula's execution, locals in Wilkes and Watauga Counties sang a ballad about the incident, featuring the following lyrics:

Hang down your head, Tom Dula,
Hang down your head and cry;
You killed poor Laura Foster,
And now you're bound to die.

The Kingston Trio revived and popularized the folk song in the 1950s as "The Ballad of Tom Dooley."

Educator Resources:

Hang Down your Head ^[7] Lesson Plan, State Archives of North Carolina

References:

Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson, eds., *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, vol. 2 (1952).

John Foster West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula* (1971).

Documents from the NC Digital Collections:

"Insight: the Tom Dooley Story." 1966. Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. (Publication includes

lyrics of a popular song about Dula.) Online at <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/insight-the-tom-dooley-story/746389> [8]

"Iredell County criminal action papers: Tom Dula case." 1866-68. Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. Online at <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/iredell-county-criminal-action-papers-tom-dula-case/746391> [9]

"Wilkes County criminal action papers: Tom Dula case." 1866-68. Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. Online at: <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/wilkes-county-criminal-action-papers-tom-dula-case/746556> [10]

"Wilkes County, Minute Docket Superior Court: Tom Dula Case." 1868. Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. Online at: <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/wilkes-county-minute-docket-superior-court-tom-dula-case/746560> [11]

North Carolina Supreme Court. 1867. "Supreme Court Case Number 8922." Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. Online at <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/supreme-court-case-8922-state-v.-tom-dula/746514> [12]

North Carolina Supreme Court. 1868. "Supreme Court Case Number 8923." Thomas Dula Collection, State Archives of North Carolina. Online at <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/supreme-court-case-8923-state-v.-tom-dula/746521> [13]

Image Credit:

The Kingston Trio revived the "Ballad of Tom Dooley" in the 50's. Image courtesy of Flickr user David Bookcock, taken on November 5, 2011. Available from https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradford_timeline/6324990427/ [2] (accessed May 30, 2012).

Subjects:

[Antebellum \(1820-1861\)](#) [14]

[Civil War \(1861-1865\)](#) [15]

[Court cases](#) [16]

[Culture](#) [17]

[Music](#) [18]

[Reconstruction \(1865-1876\)](#) [19]

Authors:

[Mitchell, Thornton W.](#) [20]

Origin - location:

[Watauga County](#) [21]

[Wilkes County](#) [22]

[Iredell County](#) [23]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) [24]

1 January 2006 | Mitchell, Thornton W.

Source URL: <https://ncpedia.org/ballad-tom-dooley>

Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/ballad-tom-dooley> [2] https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradford_timeline/6324990427/ [3] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/wilkes> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/watauga> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/iredell> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/supreme-court-north-carolina> [7] <https://archives.ncdcr.gov/hang-down-your-head-lesson-plan-0> [8] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/insight-the-tom-dooley-story/746389> [9] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/iredell-county-criminal-action-papers-tom-dula-case/746391> [10] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/wilkes-county-criminal-action-papers-tom-dula-case/746556> [11] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/wilkes-county-minute-docket-superior-court-tom-dula-case/746560> [12] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/supreme-court-case-8922-state-v.-tom-dula/746514> [13] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/supreme-court-case-8923-state-v.-tom-dula/746521> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/antebellum-1820-1> [15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/civil-war> [16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/court-cases> [17] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/culture> [18] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/music> [19] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/reconstruction> [20] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/mitchell-thornton-> [21] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-19> [22] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountai-22> [23] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont/i> [24] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->