



★ **Murder on Shades Mountain: The Legal Lynching of Willie Peterson and the Struggle for Justice in Jim Crow Birmingham**

Melanie S. Morrison

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Melanie S. Morrison's gripping, revealing, and tragic *Murder on Shades Mountain* returns to 1931 and the Jim Crow South to cover the trial of Willie Peterson, blamed for the murders of Augusta Williams and her friend, Jennie Wood.

Morrison's is a deeply researched account of the shooting, the ensuing trials, and the fight between the NAACP and the American Communist Party for the allegiance of black Americans in Birmingham and the nation.

Peterson's accuser, Nell Williams, accompanied her older sister and friend on a car ride to Shades Mountain, where Williams claimed she was wounded and the other two women were shot to death by Peterson. Although Jim Crow conventions required that a white woman be believed when she accused a black man of violence, the circumstances surrounding Williams's accusation were immediately doubted by the black press, the local black community, and a number of white citizens.

Willie Peterson did not even resemble the man Williams described. Furthermore, weighing only 125 pounds and with his body ravaged by tuberculosis, he lacked the strength to climb Shades Mountain, let alone to overpower the three women.

This investigative book unravels the circumstances around the murder through a flowing narrative. Its work is based on primary sources—newspapers, magazines, NAACP official records, and trial transcripts—and it introduces local and national NAACP leaders who fought hard to free Peterson. Their efforts are stirringly recounted.

The author deserves praise for identifying Peterson's trial as an important precursor to the 1960s civil rights movement. Audiences will be enthralled and angered by this all-too-familiar account of a criminal justice system that was and remains biased against black Americans.

KARL HELICHER (March/April 2018)

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