

Stephen J. Whitfield. *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. New York: The Free Press, 1988. Pp. xiv, 193. Cloth, \$19.95.

The story of the death of Emmett Till and its immediate and long-range impact on Southern race relations is told in a historical and literary context that presaged the social revolution and civil rights movement of the post-1955 era.

Stephen Whitfield makes no claim that the death of fourteen year-old Till "accomplished the revolution in civil rights in the South," but he does argue convincingly that "his murder deserves recognition as an overlooked and obscured factor in catalyzing [black] resistance" to a Southern social system that relegated African-Americans to a status of inferiority, subjugation, and abject fear. He also contends that the Till Case "helped to expose the tangled relationship between sex and race in America."

The author persuasively demonstrates that Till was murdered primarily because he, unwittingly perhaps, broke a long-standing Southern code of conduct by which black males were constrained from eyeballing or making insulting and/or sexual overtures toward white women. Till, the Chicago teenager on a visit with relatives in Money, Mississippi, committed a cardinal sin when he allegedly "wolf whistled" and made sexual advances toward a white clerk in the local grocery store. For this act of teenage prankishness, Till was abducted from his sharecropper great-uncle's home, mutilated, murdered, lynched, and his body dumped into the Tallahatchie River.

Although two white men were tried for this child-murder, they were acquitted. According to the author, this Southern mockery of justice, ironically, was the result of the nationally-led NAACP publicity campaign that sensationalized the murder-lynching in black and white media, North and South. The coverage of the lynching and trial created a xenophobic backlash that caused the all-white jury and white Mississippians in general to damn what they considered outside media hype and rally behind the accused murderers.

Contrary to those who viewed Till's murder and trial as another grotesque example of the travesty of the Southern way of life for African-Americans. Whitfield claims the accused murderers were reinforcing traditional sexual and race relations and believed that they were avenging transgressions against Southern womanhood. Yet, a few "good people of Mississippi" privately abhorred the child-murder-lynching. The reaction was so strong in Money, Mississippi, that the accused murderers were ostracized and eventually forced out of the state.

Whitfield believes that the broader significance of the Till Case lies in the fact that a black sharecropper had testified in open court against white men. Moses Wright's testimony "signified that the intimidation of Delta blacks was no longer as effective as in the past." The testimony also suggests that oppressed Southern blacks were becoming emboldened to take a stand against the repressive white South. In the process, they initiated a redefinition of what became a social and sexual revolution in Southern race relations.

The strength of Whitfield's study is his pre-eminent ability to blend autobiography, biography, politics, historical, and popular literature. Thus, the story of Emmett Till's death has a gut-wrenching immediacy enabling the reader to experience what blacks and some whites felt at the news of this atrocity and to understand why this incident pushed forward the struggle for civil rights. Whitfield undergirds his narrative further by bringing together a cornucopia of Northern and Southern black and white literature and social ideology. In so doing, he admirably illustrates the indelible impact that the Till case had on its black and white contemporaries and on post-1955 civil rights activists, politicians, and intellectuals.

Whitfield's book is an excellent humanities and social studies teaching tool in the study of Southern race relations. It should appeal to high school as well as college students. The book will no doubt create pain for some and controversy for others. But *A Death in the Delta* is a valuable contribution to the literature of American civil rights.

Fayetteville State University

Phillip McGuire