# Book Review

## *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story*

Timothy B. Tyson, Crown Publishers, New York, NY, 2004. 355 pp., bibliography. $17.00 hardcover (ISBN 0-609-61-58-9)

Reviewed by Elizabeth Hines, University of North Carolina at Wilmington

A racially-motivated killing in the small North Carolina tobacco market town of Oxford is the focal point for Timothy Tyson's newest book. *Blood Done Sign My Name* is an enthralling historical geography of American race relations seen through a deeply personal lens. In it, Tyson recounts a particular incident, the murder of a young black man in 1970, that he deftly relates to the universal notion of race in America. *Blood* is the epitome of what Charles Joyner has praised as the modern historian's proclivity to explore "a large question in a small place." Although told in Tyson's genuinely funny Southern, sometimes homespun manner, the story is poignant to the point of tears.

A sudden and violent attack on a young black veteran, Henry Marrow, following a perceived sexual overture to the white daughter-in-law of a local merchant, Robert Teel, resulted in Marrow's essentially public execution as he was beaten and shot to death by Teel and his son in front of their convenience store at a busy crossroads in Oxford's black neighborhood known as "Grab All." The murder, and the subsequent exoneration of the Teels, threw tiny Oxford into turmoil and haunted Tyson throughout his life.

Tyson uses ethnologist Clifford Geertz's method of thick description to place the reader firmly in Oxford, a typically segregated Southern town, then casts a wide net to capture the unhappy story of race in America. As the eleven-year-old son of a recently arrived "Eleanor Roosevelt liberal" Methodist minister father and equally committed social activist mother, Tyson experienced the awful truth of the murder and its violent aftermath in Oxford. This included the sudden appearance of robed and armed Klansmen, the unhurried arrest of the murderers, the Teel's ultimate exoneration by an all-white jury and the burning of Oxford's tobacco warehouses (the town's economic mainstay). We are quickly reminded, however, that the life and death struggles in Oxford in 1970 were not exceptional: the week before, National Guardsmen had killed four war protesters at Kent State in Ohio; the day after, six blacks died in a racially motivated riot in Augusta, Georgia; and five days later two black students died and twelve were wounded when Mississippi state troopers fired on a dormitory at the traditionally black Jackson State University.

Inter-racial sex, historically the most worrisome issue for whites and the most dangerous for blacks, is a recurring theme. However, the idea of white fears of sexual trespasses by black males over-simplifies a more complex story. Tyson explains that although sexual innuendo may have precipitated the Marrow killing, the real story had much to do with Teel's business ventures into black "Grab All" and the restlessness of blacks, especially black Vietnam veterans, as civil rights era activism waned and failed to produce what had been promised. Teel's exploitive business strategies won him few friends of either race and his Klan ties were well known. The Klan's role in the Oxford incident culminates in a succinct history of white supremacy in America.

The Reverend Tyson's racial activism and support for integration ultimately forced him from his congregation in Oxford. In an ironic twist of fate, the Tysons moved to Wilmington just in time for the school desegregation riots here, the accused instigators of which were locally (and nationally at the time) referred to as "The Wilmington Ten." It seemed to young Tim Tyson that the post-*Brown v Board of Education*/Civil Rights Act era brought only upheaval to North Carolina and his family, but, of course, the distress was nationwide.

A cast of compelling characters populate the story, including all of the Tyson clan and their "bohemian intellectual" friend, Thad Stem, poet laureate of Oxford, newsman, liberal co-conspirator of the elder Tysons, and mentor of the fledgling historian. A veritable *leit motif* throughout the book, he and the Reverend were the greatest foils to the prevalence of die-hard white supremacy in Oxford. The Reverend Benjamin Chavis (also known as Benjamin Muhammad), a native of Oxford and later one of the Wilmington Ten, and his influential family, are part of the narrative, as is North Carolina's perennial Civil Rights activist, Golden Frinks. Eddie McCoy, a Vietnam veteran and still an Oxford activist, is a steady presence and one of Tyson's most trusted and enduring sources on the events surrounding the murder and the temper of Oxford's black community.

The racism that lurks in all of us is considered on a personal and realistic, if unnerving, manner before engulfing the reader in the Civil Rights era. Tyson says that Americans have as hard a time becoming aware of white supremacy as fish have becoming aware of water, and reveals his own struggle to overcome the cultural legacy that instilled in him, as it instills in all Americans, white and black, the notion that *something is wrong with black people.* The role of religion and the ideas about the equality of humankind from the liberal left in overcoming this notion is examined from the vantage point of the last in the long line of families headed by Methodist ministers.

*Blood Done Sign My Name* resonates with Southern cultural geography to the native, while, I assume, it offers a regional crash course to the non-Southerner. Tyson has expertly crafted the primary Southern theme—*race*—into his personal narrative. His treatments of slavery, titular emancipation, post-Reconstruction violence, miscegenation, the myth of the black rapist, lynching and, of course, the racial caste system, universalize the story, relieving any notion that Oxford's story might be unique.

This book is a good read, difficult to put down, riveting for students, affirming for scholars. I've assigned it to two university classes on American race relations because of its accessibility and comprehensiveness, each time with appreciation from the students. And it's all true. The 322 page story is seamlessly woven into twelve chapters, which brim with detail and insight into the small and large stories contained therein. Eighteen pages of useful chapter by chapter Notes on Sources appear at the end. The Author's Note states that this story first appeared as his master's thesis at Duke University in 1990. It's much more than a master's thesis now. What began as a memoir has blossomed into an important synthesis of our national racial consciousness under Tyson's passionate concern for the story and a professional historian's patient attention to detail. If there is a flaw in the book, it is that it lacks an index. Perhaps the second edition, and I hope that there is one, will remedy that.

Timothy Tyson was born and raised in North Carolina. He earned a Ph.D. in History from Duke University and is an Associate Professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He is the author of *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power,* which won the James Rawley Prize and the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize from the Organization of American Historians. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy,* co-edited with David S. Cecelski, won the Outstanding Book Award from the Gustavus Meyers Center for the study of Human Rights in North America. He is currently a John Hope Franklin Senior Fellow at the National Humanities Center where he is working on *Deep River: African American Freedom Movements in the 20th Century South.* Tyson calls this "history that matters."