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## **Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America by Laura Wexler, Scribner, January 13, 2004 288pp**

'Fire in a canebrake' is quite a scorcher by Laura Wexler and which focuses on the last mass lynching which occurred in the American Deep South, the one in the heartland of rural Georgia, precisely Walton County, Georgia on 25th July 1946, less than a year after the Second World War. Wexler narrates the story of the four black sharecroppers who met their end 'at the hand of person's unknown' when an undisclosed number of white men simply shot the blacks to death. The author concentrates on the way the evidence was collected in those eerie post war times and how the FBI was actually involved in the case but how nothing came of their extensive investigations.

Interestingly the book does not focus solely on the Georgia lynching but delves into the actual study of the word lynching which was coined by legendary judge Charles B Lynch of Virginia to indicate extra-legal justice meted out to those in the frontier where the rule of law was largely absent. In fact Wexler continues to analyse how the term lynching began to be used to describe mob violence in the 19th century when the victim was deemed to have been guilty before being tried by due process in a court of law.

The Moore's Ford lynching shows that the Ku Klux Klan was still very powerful in Georgia just after the Second World War. Blacks who lived in these areas which were overwhelmingly rural and contained large plantations owned by white men were regularly browbeaten into submission by the white minority and sporadic outbreaks of violence were not uncommon. There was a wealth of evidence against several white men who were prominent citizens of the county but no prosecution was ever

conducted and the murderers went to their graves without having paid for their crime.

'Fire in a canebrake' is undoubtedly a very important work since it is very well researched and fastidiously written. I would describe it as the definitive work on the Moore's Ford lynching apart from the fact that it also reads exclusively like a novel. The description of the lynching is a fairly standard one; four helpless blacks (including two women) were shot in cold blood on the banks of the Apalachee River which is about nine miles from the town of Monroe, Walton County, Georgia, a town which was certainly not a stranger to violence. Wexler's detailed investigation into the case reveals how men like Loy Harrison as well as his lawyer James Arnold worked assiduously together to derail the FBI investigation. The 1948 Senate election is also given some publicity since it ensured the election Herman Talmadge, an out and out racist who would ensure that the blacks of Georgia would be 'put in their place'.

Wexler unearths evidence that the Klan was very active in counties such as Walton and Oconee where certain individuals such as James Arnold held high offices in the Klans of these counties. Another important personage who features regularly in Wexler's narrative is Stetson Kennedy who was also present for particular Klan meetings. Dr Samuel Green is also another important figure and he is also mentioned by Wexler in her narrative.

The book also focuses on the FBI investigation which was quite poorly conducted and also lacked the co-operation of state officials. One also has to consider that Georgia was the home of that arch-segregationist William Russel who although a polite and suave politician, harboured an intense

distaste for mixing of the races and would thus ensure that blacks would not have any extra rights. Hi political power was quite immense and he must have pulled some strings to ensure that the Mooore's Ford murderers were never brought to justice.

Wexler also does an excellent job in discovering new evidence which sets the stage for the drama that is about to unfold and she also skilfully blends the state political agenda as well as the national one. One of the main merits of the book is that the reader is able to understand what life went on in rural Georgia where violence and displays of drunkenness were regular occurrences. There is also extensive analysis of the political gamesmanship which was used in states such as Georgia to deny blacks their civil rights as well as federal protection. Wexler reveals the shameful standards of the investigation which was simply a cover up from beginning to end. There is also some feeling with regards to the racism and hatred of the white townspeople who almost thought that the blacks actually deserved their terrible fate.

' Fire in a Canebrake' is important since it sheds new light on the last mass lynching in America. It certainly shows the ambivalence and poor standards of the investigation into the case by the authorities as well as the terrible racism of the common townsfolk who could not care a jot about the fate of the murdered blacks. The book is a clear indictment of the terrible plague of lynching.

## **Works Cited:**

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