

Death at Cross Plains: an Alabama Reconstruction Tragedy

Gene L. Howard

University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1984

This book explores the life of one William Luke. Like many Grey County residents at this time of year, William Luke left for warmer climates. He was a man who believed in emancipation through education. The details of how he came to teach Black children in Southern Alabama, and die for it are somewhat less exemplary.

Luke was born in Tyrone County, Ireland, and with his parents in the late 1840s came to Ontario, Canada, first locating in Owen Sound and then to a farm in Artemesia Township in Grey County. He attended public school in Owen Sound and was an industrious student and a church enthusiast attending services in a log church near Flesherton. He read voraciously, often borrowing books from friends and members of the church, and in 1858, at the age of twenty-four, was ordained in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. At the time, this honour seemed the start of a great career for William. His first appointment was at the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Church in Wallace, in central Ontario, and with this position he was able to marry his long-time sweetheart Fanny Irwin of the Markdale Assembly. William did well in Wallace, where he stayed for three years, and was rewarded with a move to Point Abino on Lake Erie. The Luke family (there were two children at this point) moved to one of the few parsonages in this prosperous farming community. However, they did not stay in Port Abino for long. A more difficult community was soon assigned to William, and this time he did not fare so well.

He was next assigned to Eganville (north-west of Ottawa) which was not delighted with the development of a Wesleyan church in its German midst, and although the jury's still out on whether or not William Luke was innocent, it was this community that charged him with adultery. This resulted in his expulsion from the church, and although the community's rejection of William was harsh, a far worse fate awaited.

No longer employed as a missionary, Luke decided to try his luck at teaching. With Fanny, and their now six children, William moved back to Artemesia Township where he worked as a teacher and Sunday School Superintendent, but he was not satisfied here. The American Civil War had recently ended, and William's interest was captivated by the plight of the newly-freed slaves. He decided that these were souls in need of his spiritual guidance, and minds that wanted his teaching.

In 1869, as a member of the American Missionary Association, he moved to Patona, Alabama, in the United States, and took a teaching post at the Talladega College, the only school for Blacks in the area. Fanny and the kids stayed behind in Grey County to wait for him to send for them. Sadly, this never happened.

Race relations were very strained in Patona and from the moment he arrived to take up his position, he was criticized and called a ["n----- teacher"] *sic*. After being ousted from his lodgings at a local hotel, he went to live with a Black family.

William also befriended two men, Captain Barney and Henry Brown, who were involved in the construction of the Ralton Railroad. They were interested in the development of a sustainable Black and northern workforce for their enterprise and hired William as both bookkeeper of the operation and schoolteacher for Black youth.

While he was teaching, William also spread his ideals of equality, and encouraged Black workers to demand equal wages. They shared his belief that God loved all races. Like many men before him, William allied himself with the oppressed, and shared their punishment and their fate.

He was singled out by the extremely strong and influential Ku Klux Klan and just one year after he arrived, William Luke was killed for his convictions. Following a disturbance, William Luke, along with three Black men, on July 11, 1870, was hanged in Cross Plains, a mile from Patona. He was buried in the City of Talladega's cemetery. William did not deny providing the Black people with guns, but claimed that his aim was protection rather than violence. Shortly before he died, he wrote to Fanny explaining his fate and wishing her well in what was to be her life as a widow. He left six children for her to care for, and although his own roots never quite took hold in Grey County, those of his descendants did. He was not a perfect man, and he died in a land that did not want him, but he died working for the equalities in which he believed.



Clare McLean-Wilson