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Death has always had a repellent fascination for those willing to admit to the harbouring of such “disgusting” emotions. One only has to look to the large crowds that gathered at public executions in the past to understand that there was, and is, such a fascination. In *Witnesses to the Scaffold*, Antony E. Simpson examines six nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century eyewitness accounts of public executions written by well-known British writers and journalists (all of whom are listed in the title). In so doing, he attempts to reveal the individual motivations that drew them to their witnessing as well as their often unique responses to what they had witnessed.

Simpson provides detailed histories of the men and women executed, something frequently missing from histories of crime and punishment. He includes full accounts of the facts of the case leading up to the trial and of the trial itself. For instance, in the case of François Benjamin Courvoisier, a Swiss servant who was executed for killing his master Lord William Russell, Simpson includes a thorough analysis of the controversy surrounding Charles Phillips’s defence of the accused after he had confessed his guilt.

The circumstances that influenced and the context surrounding the writing of the individual narratives are also given attention. For example, we learn that there is some question attached to the provenance of Pierce Egan’s narrative of the execution of John Thurtell (1824). We also learn that Egan was acquainted with Thurtell and may have represented him in a favourable light because Thurtell rewarded Egan with an exclusive interview from prison and because they shared a passion for boxing.

In addition to all the details he provides on the individual cases, Simpson also relates the executions to broader British societal concerns. In the introduction to Alexander Smith’s essay on the execution of two Irish Catholic navvies who murdered an English foreman in Glasgow in 1841, Simpson explicates the religious tensions and ethnic conflict prevalent in certain industries, primarily in Scotland, but also to a lesser extent in England. The cases thus become useful tools for exploring wider issues in British society.

Simpson’s chief goal, however, seems to be to uncover the motivations and reactions of the authors. He carefully details why the narratives were written, notes
whether they were focused more on the response of the condemned or of the crowd, and attempts to describe the impact of the execution experience on the witnesses — their descriptions of the execution crowd being the most important factor. Overall, one gets the sense that any negative description of the crowd moves the witness, at least in Simpson’s eyes, from a human whose sympathetic emotions allow him to rise above class bias to someone whose bias blinds him to the coping mechanisms, such as laughter, that the crowd utilize in their witnessing.

I take issue with this emphasis on two fronts. This is an argument that owes some recognition to Vic Gatrell, who has argued that descriptions of the scaffold crowd should not be taken at face value since polite observers often focused on the negative and did not recognize the complexities of crowd behaviour (see The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868 [Oxford University Press, 1994], pp. 75, 76, 80, 89, 608). However, Simpson does not cite Gatrell in this context (see especially p. 109). Furthermore, Simpson’s distinction is too stark. I agree that middle-class witnesses to the scaffold were blinded to many of the motivations that instigated crowd misbehaviour at executions; however, their discomfort cannot be completely put down to class bias, nor can the motivations of the crowd be placed on a pedestal of purity (Denise Guthrie, “Law, Empire, and the Bodies of Women: British Notions of ‘Civilization’ and the Retreat from Public Punishments in England, 1750–1870” [PhD thesis, University of Essex, forthcoming], chap. 6).

More importantly, Simpson’s facts are not always accurate. He maintains, for instance, that “[b]etween 1800 and 1840, as fewer crimes were left capital, more people were condemned to death and more were executed” (p. 20). There are two problems with this statement. First, there was no substantial alteration to the number of capital statutes until the early 1830s. Before this point, with few exceptions, the only capital statutes removed were those that were defunct or infrequently used. Second, the number of executions began to decline in the late eighteenth century, rising again briefly in the second decade of nineteenth century before falling slightly in the 1820s and then rapidly in the 1830s. Even including the period of relative severity in the 1810s and 1820s, fewer people were being executed in the early nineteenth century than in the late eighteenth. He also states that the “last gibbeting occurred in 1832. Dissection of murderers continued until 1834” (p. 15). The last gibbeting was in 1832, but it was not abolished until 1834, and dissection of murderers came to an end in 1832.

Also, the book is weighted toward the nineteenth century, particularly the mid-nineteenth century. There is only one account written in the twentieth century and none from the eighteenth. Of course, this is largely due to the availability of sources. The mid-nineteenth century was the most prolific period of writing on the public execution, and executions were hidden from view in 1868. In fact, the twentieth-century public execution included in the book took place in colonial Burma. Still, I would have liked to see at least one eighteenth-century piece, and there are a few available; for example, there is one in Samuel Richardson’s Familiar Letters on the Most Important Occasions (1741).
Overall, I am of two minds on this book. It contains a good overview of the history of the administration of the criminal law including trials, the pardoning process, and public executions. Such an overview would be appropriate for an undergraduate class in the history of crime and punishment, especially as it is framed within interesting narratives of crime. However, the mistakes in the book are worrying. Thus, if it is to be used in this context, it should be used with caution.

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