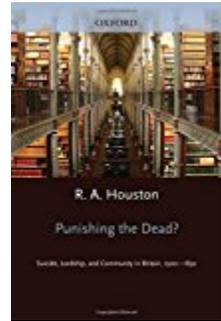


H-Net Reviews

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R. A. Houston. *Punishing the Dead?: Suicide, Lordship, and Community in Britain, 1500-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xiv + 397 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-958642-4.

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Varying Forms of Ambivalence

There are two histories of suicide: one of the despair, hopelessness, and anger that shaped the doing of the deed, and the other of its legal, social, and cultural consequences. The first is concerned with motives, states of mind, and the chains of causation and circumstance that might lead someone to take their own life. The second attends to the plight of survivors, the response of society, and the fiscal, judicial, and declaratory actions that dealt with the body and goods of the deceased. The first approach is biographical and psychological, with an interest in individual emotional and mental health. The second is sociological and demographic, with reference to ethnography, comparative history, and the development of law. The first is likely to be speculative, since suicides rarely explain their behavior, and documentation of their demise is mostly absent or unreliable. The second encounters more abundant records, but is no less fraught with difficulties. The verdicts of courts and coroners provide meager but suggestive evidence, though records of almoners and sheriffs, magistrates and justices, newspapers and commentaries, have more to say about post-mortem readjustments of relationships and resources, and the disposal of the suicide's body.

Comparing suicide in England and Scotland, from the end of the Middle Ages to the dawn of the industrial era, R. A. Houston is more concerned with the afterlife of *felo de se* than the crises that brought it about. His histories begin with the discovery of a hanged or drowned corpse, or more rarely the victim of self-shooting or poisoning, and then proceed to the procedures that followed when

suicides laid violent hands upon themselves. Neighbors, kin, authorities, kings, and God were all offended, and each needed some assuagement, resolution, or penalty for the deed. We hear little here about the devil or demons, or suicidal distress, but the author guides us through the thickets of law and custom to explore the processes of forfeiture and the degradation of corpses in Britain north and south.

This work is the most authoritative and wide-ranging account of the aftermath of suicide in early modern England and Scotland. It is explicitly and systematically comparative, from a vantage point north of the border. English historians especially will benefit from Houston's familiarity with Scottish records that reveal a social environment, legal system, and church all unlike those centered on London. Regional variations within each country are equally compelling, especially the distinct patterns of southeast England compared to the peculiarities of the English North. The practice of hammering a stake through a suicide's corpse was confined to the Southeast, but other shameful punishments such as dragging and gibbeting were more common closer to the border. The practice of hanging a suicide's body in public died out in later Stuart Scotland, though other ignominies still attached to their corpses. "Normal" practices prove hard to find, since much was left to local discretion, and many suicides were interred without drama. As stated in the conclusion, "regions and local vernaculars in British history await further study" (p. 371).

Houston blends stories and commentary with statistical summations, and lightly threads his work with theoretical, methodological, and historiographical observations. Chapters and sections are arranged to expose the laws of lordship and suicide in Scotland and England, and the patterns and processes of forfeiture, punishment, arbitration, and burial in each country. The author is clearly comfortable with ambiguity, irregularity, eclecticism, and indeterminate change. His hallmark is nuance rather than the taking of positions. The text is densely footnoted, the range of reading impressive, and the detailed and accurate notes are set at the foot of each page. Oxford University Press maintains its high standard of typography and design, as well as its formidable elevated price.

Any intervention in the history of suicide must engage with the leading English work on that subject by Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy. Their book *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (1990) explains why suicide was so harshly punished in Tudor England, and why it was decriminalized, tolerated, and even sentimentalized in the century and a half following the English Revolution. They see a secularization of suicide and a revival of leniency after an era of religious and judicial severity. Though greeted with skepticism as well as applause at its appearance twenty years ago, *Sleepless Souls* has commanded the field that *Punishing the Dead?* now enters. Houston is relentless in sniping at MacDonald and Murphy and challenging their findings. He sees them as Anglo-centric and ignorant of continental as well as Scottish scholarship and conditions. He finds fault with their evidence, their methods, and their conclusions. According to Houston, contra MacDonald and Murphy, “it is quite wrong” to claim that after 1640 the reporting of suicides to England’s central government declined and finally stopped almost altogether (p.146). More recent work “wholly disproves” their belief that juries very seldom returned verdicts of *felo de se* prior to 1500 (p.176). In fact, claims Houston, “there was neither ‘medicalization’ nor ‘secularization’ of suicide to explain the shift in verdicts in the seven-

teenth and eighteenth century” (p. 177). “Attitudes towards self-murder were more complex and contingent” that previous scholars have judged (p. 210). Rather than MacDonald’s and Murphy’s “generalized treatment” of the burial of suicides outside sacred ground, at highways, crossroads, or boundaries, usually with a stake driven through the corpse, Houston sees instead “an enduring selectivity in how suicide’s bodies were treated” (p. 191). He casts “further doubt” on their “assertion” that episcopal intervention was necessary to avoid profane burial (p. 208), though MacDonald and Murphy, to be fair, cast this more cautiously as a suggestion (*Sleepless Souls*, p. 358). Their claim that early modern suicide was seen primarily in supernatural terms, says Houston, “is far to exceed the evidence” (p. 323). Other judgments in *Sleepless Souls* are said to rest on erroneous transcription (p. 290), “mere supposition” (p. 336), or “the most superficial reading” (p. 357). In contrast to Houston’s wider-ranging account, their treatment of eighteenth-century evidence, he finds, “is purely qualitative, and seems to be based on a cursory reading of newspapers published in an around London, bolstered by the liberal application of literary theory” (p. 325). To which one might add the exclamation, “Ouch!” In sum, in fundamental rejection of MacDonald’s and Murphy’s argument, Houston insist that “attitudes did not change from harshness to leniency between the early sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, but manifested varying forms of ambivalence” (p. 372).

Both books now need to be read together, the one as a landmark of late-twentieth-century scholarship, the other as mature scholarship of today. Neither mentions one of the most spectacular and widely commented upon suicides of the early modern era, when Henry Butts, the vice chancellor of Cambridge University, hanged himself in 1632 after failing to win patronage from Charles I. The evidence in that case yields abundant clues to the vice chancellor’s state of mind, and reference to forfeit of his goods, but nothing about the handling and burial of his body.

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