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Observing Felons Die

A woman waiting on the scaffold to be executed stares directly at the audience from the cover of Antony E. Simpson’s anthology. Her stare is a vivid reminder of the act of voyeurism involved in public executions as well as how much attitudes toward the condemned have changed since Théodore Géricault’s sketch *A Public Hanging* (1820). As this sketch suggests, the condemned seem to be looking back at us these days as capital punishment continues to be supported by a majority of citizens in some Western countries despite its brutal history. The future in store for the unnamed scaffold victim is better captured by the original French title of Géricault’s sketch: *Le Supplice* (The agony). The agony experienced by both the condemned and the spectator is the occasion for Simpson’s collection of eyewitness accounts to public executions by English literary figures.

The six essays in Simpson’s collection record public executions in nineteenth-century Britain with the exception of George Orwell’s account of a military execution attended in Burma. Many of the criminals featured here will be familiar to those with passing knowledge of the Newgate Calendar. The accounts appear in chronological order, including Pierce Egan on John Thurtell in 1824, William Makepeace Thackeray on François Courvoisier in 1840, Alexander Smith on Dennis Doolan and James Hickie in 1841, Charles Dickens on Frederick and Maria Manning in 1849, G. A. Sala on Sarah French in 1852, and Orwell on an unnamed man in the early 1920s. All of these accounts respond in various ways to the central question posed by Simpson’s collection: “What motivated this almost universal interest in observing felons die?” (p. 8).

Today’s sensitivities toward the ethics of capital punishment make it easy to forget just how popular such spectacles were during an era in which upward of fifty thousand people turned out for the executions of notorious criminals. “The attraction of repulsion” is the memorable phrase used by Dickens to explain the appeal of watching a convict being put to death (p. 142). Many executions were advertised in advance; some employers even gave workers the day off to attend hangings. Nor were these events attended solely by the lower classes as people from all ranks, genders, and ages attended public executions before their abolishment in 1868. As Simpson dryly notes, the gallows represented one of the few truly democratic institutions in Victorian England.

Simpson’s substantial introduction recounts the legal status of criminals sentenced to death during the nineteenth century, a period in which England’s criminal justice system developed into one resembling today’s system. Simpson’s primary intent is to explain how the emergence during this period of a reformed system of penal law opposed to capital punishment existed alongside the Bloody Code responsible for inhumane death sentences. He attributes this discrepancy to a schism between the judiciary responsible for implementing the law and the legislature responsible for creating the law. The
introduction is thorough in its appraisal of criminal law and rich in historical detail. What the introduction lacks is any commentary on the actual witness accounts making up the collection. There is something of a disconnect between the historical introduction and the subsequent essays, which are scarcely mentioned in the first fifty pages of the book.

It is unusual to encounter an introduction that spends so little time addressing the anthology’s actual selections. Instead, each of the witness accounts is prefaced by a separate introduction to both the condemned criminals and the literary figures witnessing their executions. The crime summaries are helpful since the accounts presume the audience’s familiarity with the condemned. Still, the prefaces have a tendency to overwhelm the actual reports; for instance, the Orwell introduction is twice as long as Orwell’s actual essay. These prefaces could have been more concise. For instance, do we really need a detailed account of Sala’s involvement in the American Civil War occurring ten years after the essay featured here? The crime summaries can even work contrary to the author’s intentions in the case of Dickens, who deliberately refuses to speak about the criminal in order to direct attention to the consequences of capital punishment at large. The prefaces also risk deflating the subsequent reports by giving away their best lines. The rhetorical force of Thackeray’s essay in particular is diminished when its climactic anecdote about a pair of children announcing “We’ve koom to see the mon hanged!” is told in advance (p. 125). Such spoilers can interfere with the reader’s efforts to reconstruct the potential impact these essays may have had on their original audiences.

Some kind of an overview of these diverse writers would have been appreciated as it is not clear whether their accounts add up to any kind of consensus. Perhaps the sheer range of opinion is the goal since they disagree on the efficacy of capital punishment. In any case, it would have been helpful to know why the collection focuses exclusively on literary writers when the primary interests of Simpson’s collection appear to be legal and sociological. No explanation is given for the selection of these particular writers apart from a line on the book jacket indicating that "the best and brightest of their time" informed the general debate over capital punishment. This is no doubt true, but other material from the introduction suggests that such insights were equally available to nonliterary figures. For instance, Major Frederick Blake, a former governor of Pentonville Prison, complains that “one feels deeply the mind of the stricken man” during an execution no matter how egregious the crime (p. 35). Blake’s response intimates the degree to which forceful prose from any source can potentially transform our perception of events whether or not it comes from a celebrated literary figure.

The essays themselves exhibit a range of personal reactions to the unpalatable sight of an execution. As Orwell points out: "No one ... ever writes of an execution with approval" (p. 215). The firsthand accounts will no doubt be of historical value to those interested in recreating the carnivalesque conditions of public executions. The behavior of the crowd is a recurring preoccupation among the writers, who participated to some extent in contemporary debates over whether the spectacle acted as a deterrent or an incitement to further crime. (Dickens argued the latter since the vast majority of convicts sentenced to death had attended at least one public execution.) But the real interest here goes beyond the sociological to what might be called existential in the attention given to the impact of the execution on the author’s state of mind. Thackeray interrupts his account to collect his thoughts after witnessing the execution; the event itself is relegated to the blank space in between paragraphs. The physicality of Thackeray’s revulsion—he describes the execution as weighing on the mind “like a cold plum pudding on the stomach” for weeks afterward—is more effective protest against capital punishment than any logical argument made by these witnesses (p. 107). The best pieces here single out the seemingly insignificant detail that compels the spectator to realize the enormity of the event. A child’s game in Thackeray, a lark’s song in Smith, a puddle sidestepped by the condemned in Orwell, each lead the author to reflect on the meaning of death. These images evoke the experience of witnessing an execution more effectively than any amount of historical background included elsewhere in the book.

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