

BOOK REVIEW

*Lizzie Seal*¹

James Gregory (2011) *Victorians Against the Gallows*. London: I B Tauris. ISBN10: 1848856946 ISBN13: 9781848856943 pp.384. £65.

Gregory's book on Victorian abolitionism persuasively demonstrates why this movement deserves serious scholarly attention. His text also further enhances our understanding of the increasingly ambivalent position capital punishment held in Britain by the 1860s. Victorian abolitionism gathered force in the 1840s, a time when reformist societies proliferated on a variety of issues following the high profile and success of the Anti-Corn Law League. In the late 1840s, certain other European countries were bringing about the abolition of the death penalty as old regimes fell. The main focus of the book is the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment (SACP), founded in 1846, the members of which were inclined to promiscuity in their interest in social causes and membership of organized groups. Many abolitionists also embraced anti-slavery, temperance, vegetarianism and the peace movement, as well as being interested in 'scientific' innovations such as phrenology and mesmerism. At the heart of the Victorian debate over capital punishment, as Gregory highlights, were arguments about sensibility. The abolitionists couched their cause in the language of rationality, whereas retentionists accused them of sentimentality.

Gregory's key contribution is to highlight abolitionism as an important feature of mid nineteenth century British society. The SACP was very active until the ending of public execution in 1868, and members were eager to demonstrate that abolitionism was a British, not merely metropolitan, movement. Consequently, they travelled to meetings in northern cities. Gregory explains that the Victorian fascination with murder meant that the cause was able to gain press attention, and that reporting of abolitionist activity such as civic meetings was an important means of demonstrating the existence of local support, as was the performance of the meetings themselves.

Much of the richness of this study derives from the wide lens Gregory has brought to his topic. He explores the involvement of women in the abolitionist movement, as well as the gendered meanings that reactions to abolitionism generated. Prominent female abolitionists

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included Harriet Martineau, Mary Carpenter and Elizabeth Fry. On the one hand, abolitionism was not a fully respectable cause for women's involvement, as it necessarily entailed reflection on the operation of the gallows. On the other, pleading for the reprieve of individual women or arguing that capital punishment should not be applied to women at all, could be construed as suitable activity for respectable women.

Shifting masculinities were also significant to perceptions of abolitionism. Belief in the supremacy of free will and rationality was central to dominant views on crime and punishment, and self-discipline was expected as a constituent part of masculinity. In criticizing abolitionists as 'sentimental', retentionists displayed anxieties about manliness. The charge of sentimentality was related to accusations of effeminacy. Support for capital punishment was linked with questions of warfare and the need to defend British rule in the Empire. Gregory argues that prominent Victorian men who defended the gallows, such as Carlyle, Mill, Ruskin and Dickens (after a period as an abolitionist), did so as a 'manful assertion' (p.186).

The membership of the SACP was predominantly middle class but Gregory has uncovered evidence of working class abolitionism during this period. Working class men constituted the majority of the hanged and newspapers aimed at a working class readership displayed abolitionist sentiments. The Chartist and Owenite movements were anti-capital punishment and endorsed the SACP. Proletarian abolitionism cast hanging as a political issue and something employed by elites as a class weapon. However, although these currents of working class abolitionism existed, the SACP did not produce large scale, populist literature on their cause and as Gregory states, they sought to appeal to the legislature rather than the execution crowd.

The intellectual sources of abolitionism were derived from certain Christian beliefs, particularly Quakerism and Unitarianism, and faith in progress and science. Those who embraced emerging scientific perspectives on crime, such as phrenology, which interpreted criminal behaviour as resulting from disease or malformation of the brain, tended to oppose capital punishment. When it came to intervention in actual cases, abolitionists departed from their more abstract arguments and instead emphasised the practical flaws in the legal system, especially in relation to the perceived inequity of the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy. SACP correspondence with the Home Office on particular cases stressed doubts about the strength of the evidence or the mitigatory aspects of the case. Although guided by religious and scientific principles, abolitionists also engaged with the real world operation of capital punishment.

At the close of the book, Gregory usefully traces the continuing threads of abolitionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whilst acknowledging that the movement died down after the ending of public execution. *Victorians Against the Gallows* makes an important contribution to the historiography of capital punishment in Britain by showing both how active the abolitionist movement was in the mid nineteenth century and by situating it in relation to the political causes, sensibilities and intellectual developments of the era. More widely, this study helps us to understand the potential for capital punishment to function, at certain points, as a source of cultural anxiety and some of the ways in which abolitionism interacts with this anxiety.