

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Lizzie Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory*, London: Routledge, 2014, 188pp. Hardback £85, ISBN 978-0-415-62244-8**

In the century between 1865 and 1965 capital punishment in the UK went from being a public event attended often by tens of thousands of people, to taking place only behind prison walls to finally being abolished. There is a large historiography on why this dramatic shift took place, as well as the longer process of what Gatrell has called 'the retreat from hanging' that began in early decades of the nineteenth century. In this book, Lizzie Seal explores the changing cultural meanings of capital punishment in Britain during the twentieth century, and how growing ambivalence and anxiety among the public contributed to its abolishment. As Seal rightly notes in her introduction, the historiography of the abolition of capital punishment has focused predominantly on elites and on the political process that led to abolition, rather than on the changing symbolic meanings of capital punishment in British society that increasingly came to undermine it. As such the present work is a welcome addition to the historiography on the subject.

After an introductory chapter that traces the practice of capital punishment in the UK after the end of public executions in 1868, chapter two explores the role of newspapers in both representations of and debate about capital punishment. No longer a public spectacle, executions became instead private affairs, mediated by the press who, until they were barred from the proceedings in the early decades of the twentieth century, served as proxy for the public, reporting to their readers the last days and moments of the condemned felons life. Denied the ability to report of the execution scene itself, reporters turned to reporting scenes outside the prison and, in particular, the drama and trauma experienced by the families and friends of the condemned. Consequently, by mid-century capital punishment

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had increasingly become an emotional issue, with the press increasingly focusing on the emotional world of the condemned and their families.

Even though they took place in private with no accompanying press reportage, executions nevertheless continued to retain their appeal as sources of entertainment through, for example, news reports of capital trials, plays, films and waxwork exhibitions. Chapter 3 focuses on how these popular forms of entertainment received criticism from elites who, seeking to distance themselves from what they saw as the vulgar sensationalism of the masses, decried them as expressions of prurient bad taste. 'To be entertained in such circumstances', Seal observes, 'was morbid – it was unhealthy and uncivilised, sounding [for such elites] an unwelcome echo of the execution crowd' (p.74).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore public responses to capital punishment, both in terms of popular protest and in letters and petitions sent to the Home Office concerning condemned criminals. Chapter 4 focuses particularly on the campaigns of Violet van der Elst from the mid-1930s, examining both her own use of popular cultural forms and public reactions to her campaigns. In Chapter 5, Seal explores how from the 1940s a growing number of people who were not connected with the condemned wrote to successive Home Secretaries both in favour and against reprieves of condemned prisoners. Five main themes were to be found in this correspondence which, the author argues, reveals the growing ambivalence about capital punishment in British society and how popular ideas of justice and injustice intersected with legal understandings. Thus, issues were raised about the safety of the conviction, whether there were any mitigating factors, whether the punishment appeared arbitrary or an iniquity, or whether a reprieve would fail to secure justice for the family of the victim.

Chapter 6 explores in depth two high profile cases typically framed as miscarriages of justice, the execution of Edith Thompson and Timothy Evans in 1923 and 1950 respectively. Here Seal uses the metaphor of 'haunting' drawn from the work of Avery Gordon to explore the 'seething presence' of these two executed persons in subsequent discussions of capital punishment; their 'haunting' being "a 'reminder of lingering trouble...[that]...signals that something needs to be done' (p.122).

The remaining two chapters examine the cultural legacy of capital punishment in the half decade since its abolition. As Seal notes, capital punishment was abolished in the face of large public support (a Gallup poll from January 1965 found 77% in favour of its retention), and it has continued to retain a degree of support; its return being called for by some segments of the press in response to acts of terrorism and particularly heinous murders,

such as those involving children. Chapters 7 and 8 explore the long shadow cast by capital punishment in the intervening period in both criminal justice debate and within the British cultural memory.

This is a truly fascinating book that makes an interesting and timely contribution to the historiography of both the place of capital punishment in British society and the abolition movement. Almost a half century after the abolition of capital punishment in the UK, it continues to remain an area that still provokes both political and popular debate, not least in the frequent calls for its reinstatement. Seal's book provides an interesting analysis of the role that cultural memories of capital punishment continue to play in both these debates and in British culture more broadly.