

## BOOK REVIEW

*David J. Cox*<sup>1</sup>

**Mitchel P. Roth, *An Eye For An Eye: A Global History of Crime and Punishment*, London: Reaktion Books, 2014. 342 pp. £20.00 hardback. ISBN 978 1 78023 359 8.**

Any publication with the word 'global' in its title immediately sets itself up for potential criticism; how can a single volume ever hope to cover comprehensively the history of punishment throughout the world? Obviously it cannot. However, in his defence, Roth (Professor at the Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University) has previous experience of this conundrum, having already published a global account of prison systems.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he does state in his Introduction that his ambitious book aims to be 'a synthesis and survey of this topic over the millennia, rather than a comprehensive reference work' (p.9). It is one of the few single volume publications to attempt what is still a considerable task, and despite certain important caveats it largely succeeds.<sup>3</sup> It is undeniably refreshing to see an undertaking that deliberately casts its net wide in order to avoid being simply a history of punishment in either the Western hemisphere or the Anglophone world.

It follows a broadly chronological structure, beginning in the pre-literate past and drawing on evidence as varied as the incredibly well-preserved body of 'Lindow Man' (the bog body found in a Cheshire peat bog, often irreverently called Pete Marsh), whose death was either a murder or possibly a 'ritual' killing, and the oral traditions of tribal groups including the Ashanti and Aboriginal Australians. The book then proceeds to discuss the rise of legal traditions throughout the world, Roth arguing that 'while most modern scholars focus on the four major contemporary legal traditions, at least sixteen different traditions have flourished at various points in history' (p.48).

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<sup>2</sup> M.P Roth, *Prisons and Prison Systems: A Global Encyclopedia*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Other books attempting a global perspective of the history of punishment with varying degrees of success include M. Pate and L.A. Gould, *Corporal Punishment around the world* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012) and L. Lyons, *The History of Punishment* (London: Amber, 2003).

The next chapter of the book is entitled 'Crime in a Changing Landscape: From Feudalism to the City and the State', and in it Roth discusses the purposes and history of punishment before the development of the recognisably modern nation-state, including examples from Norman and Japanese feudal societies and pre-Revolutionary Russia. The book then turns to the change (at least in the Western world) from immediate, retributive capital or corporeal punishment to the increasing use of different forms of incarceration as a punitive measure. The chapter includes a brief discussion on the use of transportation by the English and the harsh penal colonies (respectively external and internal) of France and Russia. Roth then moves on to a brief discussion about the various forms of organized criminality and banditry, including English highwaymen, Corsica bandits and American outlaws such as Jesse James. Having recently seen Roth appear as a guest on an American television series about the 'Wild West' and its outlaws, I would have liked to have read much more on the comparative aspects of this type of crime and its respective punishment.

The book continues with a discussion of the rise in what Roth calls the 'internationalization of criminality' (p.171), dealing with narcotics, piracy and slave-trading, before the next chapter turns to a discussion of murder in the recognisably modern world. This chapter best demonstrates one of the weaknesses of the book; apart from having to cover a wide range of topics and countries in what is after all a modestly sized publication, Roth occasionally appears to concentrate on describing the crimes rather than analysing the punishments meted out. For example, he spends a considerable amount of time discussing various serial killers and their means of killing but there is virtually no analysis of the punishments which they subsequently received.

The last two chapters of the book concentrate respectively on 'Crime and Punishment in a Post-colonial World' and 'Crime and Punishment in the Twenty-First Century'. Both the titles of the last two chapters and Roth's concluding words, in which he states 'The global history of crime and punishment remains a work in progress' (p.299) appear to implicitly acknowledge the fact that this book is in fact attempting to be not purely a global history of punishment, but of crime as well. This is a pity, as on the whole the book is a fascinating and well-written piece of research, but is (at least in the eyes of this reviewer) somewhat let down by a minor crisis of identity.