

EXECUTION CULTURE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

FROM PUBLIC SPECTACLE TO HIDDEN RITUAL

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Capital punishment and execution culture explored

With federal executions in the US reaching a 200-year high under Donald Trump's presidency, a new book by North East academics looks back at the history of public executions.

Execution Culture in Nineteenth Century Britain: From Public Spectacle to Hidden Ritual was co-edited by Helen Rutherford, a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria Law School and Dr Clare Sandford-Couch, a Visiting Lecturer in Law at Northumbria Law School, and University of Sunderland PhD graduate Dr Patrick Low.

The book offers reflections and analysis on a variety of themes on 19th Century executions in the UK, many related to the fundamental change in capital punishment culture as the execution moved from the public arena to behind the prison wall. Topics covered in the collection include the issue of race in capital punishment cases in Wales, post-mortem punishments in Scotland and the behaviour of the execution crowd in London. The book also includes chapters that deal specifically with North East cases, from the well-known Mary Anne Cotton to the lesser-known George Vass, the last man to be hanged in public in Newcastle.

Helen Rutherford, who is also a practicing solicitor, said: “The inspiration for the book came out of a conference we organised with fellow academics and contributors in 2018 which marked 150 years since the end of public execution in Britain (1868). We wanted to reflect on this fundamental change in the history of punishment and invite contributions from across the world. Its publication now could not be more timely given the historically high number of executions in the US under Donald Trump’s presidency. This included sanctioning the execution of the only woman on federal death row: Lisa Montgomery. She was the 11th prisoner to be killed since the president restarted federal executions in July last year.”

Published by Routledge, the book is split into two parts; the first part addresses the criminal body and the witnessing of executions in the 19th Century, including studies of the execution crowd and executioners’ memoirs, as well as reflections on the experience of narratives around capital punishment in museums today. Part two explores the treatment of the execution experience in the print media, from the 19th and into the 20th century.

The book draws together contributions from the fields of Heritage and Museum Studies, History, Law, Legal History and Literary Studies. The volume will be of interest to students and academics in the fields of criminology, heritage and museum studies, history, law, legal history, medical humanities and socio-legal studies.

For more information or to read ***Execution Culture in Nineteenth Century Britain: From Public Spectacle to Hidden Ritual***, click [here](#).

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