



**Elisabeth T. Hurren, Dissecting the Criminal Corpse:
Staging Post-Execution Punishment in Early Modern
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Elisabeth T. Hurren, *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-Execution Punishment in Early Modern England* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, 358 pp., €29.12 hardback)

Elisabeth T. Hurren is a professor at Leicester University. She has already published one book (*Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, 1832 to 1929* (2012)) and several papers on related topics. She is probably the best English specialist on penal death and the medical uses of the corpses of the condemned.

This work relates to the management of criminal corpses over a period extending from the adoption of the Murder Act (1752) until that of the Anatomy Act (1832). It discusses how these corpses were managed by lawyers and, above all, by penal surgeons, whose role was regulated by both the Murder Act and the Anatomy Act. The Murder Act provided that in case of 'horrid crimes', the sentenced should be publicly dissected (c. 5% of those sentenced); hence it introduced post-mortem punishments involving the medical profession. The Anatomy Act broadened access to corpses in so far as it allowed the dissection of those unclaimed after death, for instance the poor who died in hospitals, workhouses or jails. Interestingly, Hurren interprets the Anatomy Act as setting up several stages of death: the social death (when the convict was sentenced to death by a court of law); the penal death (when he was hanged); the medical death (when the reality of death was checked by the surgeon). This book aims precisely at making the effects of these stages more concrete and precise, and to reposition them within the social history of medicine and surgery.

According to Hurren, the historians of crime and punishments have not been sufficiently aware of what actually happened after the convict had been cut down from the gallows, and have generally focused on London events. A history of the material fate of the criminal corpse is thus lacking.

At first, Hurren maintains that a substantial number of hanged men were not actually dead ('half-hanged') when they were cut down. Some had a strong neck, or were too light; the hangman had to choose the right length for the rope as well as the right knot. Although the law prescribed that a convict had to be left hanging for one hour, all too often they were left hanging for a far shorter time (30 or 40 minutes), either because of the season or because public order could be threatened by a riot.

Death usually came by asphyxia, after a long and cruel struggle (the jerking) which had consequences on the body shape. While this probably responded to the crowd's expectation of actually seeing a dead body, it did not match the expectations of the surgeon, who was waiting for a nearly intact body to arrive as soon as possible, especially in the summer.

The body was then anatomised. At the time when the Murder Act was enacted anatomy and medicine – especially regarding the process of dying – were changing; many physicians wondered if death came by the heart, the lung or the brain. Classical anatomy, performed in order to demonstrate the perfection of Nature, and almost exclusively performed on the chest, was challenged by a new anatomy, based on dissection and focused on pathology. The fact that a significant number of hanged men were not dead after hanging provided surgeons with opportunities to experiment, and to increase both their knowledge and their reputation as researchers. Hurren emphasises that anatomy is not dissection, although they were both carried out in public; and that a lot of historians describe them as a continuous process, although they were miles apart. Anatomising meant opening the body (autopsy) in order to prove the death and to show the inside of the chest. It was not very different from splanchnology, one of the traditional variations of anatomy. Because of the uncertainty of death, anatomy was often a mix of vivisection and euthanasia. Dissection led to the destruction of the body, which was effectively torn to pieces. The audience was not necessarily the same for the two operations, and expectations could vary depending on the audience.

One of the original features of this book is that the author takes the reader away from London and provides an overview of what happened in the rest of the country. Places for anatomy and for dissection were not always the same; a lot of cities did not have a hall of surgeons as in London, and dissections often took place in dispensaries, and later in hospitals – thereby paving the way for the Anatomy Act, inasmuch as they already hosted the poor people who died there unclaimed. As a result of extensive archival research, Hurren is able to show that it was much easier to access bodies in the provinces than in the capital. Practising dissection outside of London was thus an advantage in the competitive world of surgery and medicine. A tight market and an economy developed around these bodies, which travelled from one city to another, according to complex power relationships.

To what extent was dissection performed? It depended on various factors: the social condition of the convict, the nature of the crime, the shape of the body and the type of research conducted by the local surgeons could all interfere. In any case, the surgeon owned a real discretionary power of punishment – which was, however, limited by the audience and its emotional unpredictability. Staging the dissection could awake a 'good' curiosity (a desire for learning, a means to legitimate the public execution), but also a bad, 'morbid' curiosity, which progressively led to the concealment of dissections.

Dissecting the Criminal Corpse is a fascinating, amazing trip through the post-mortem fate of this outcast kind of dead. The author stresses the renewal that she hopes to bring to the history of crime and justice. Since the early 2000s (and especially in France) the history of death has also undergone a form of regeneration via a

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material approach, through the corpse itself, its status and its treatment. Away from a simplistic and general synthesis, solidly grounded in sources and archives, this book is a plentiful source food for thought.

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Dorothée Delacroix, *De pierres et de larmes. Mémorisation et discours victimaire dans le Pérou d'après-guerre* (Institut universitaire Varenne – Collection des thèses, Paris, 2016, 369 pp., €42 paperback)

Under the evocative title 'Of stones and tears: The construction of memory and discourse of victimhood in post-war Peru', anthropologist Dorothée Delacroix has produced a masterful study on memory and discourse in connection with victims of the internal armed conflict that gripped Peru during the 1980s. Delacroix begins by exploring the process leading up to the construction of a monument to remember the victims of the violence, installed in the very urban setting of the country's capital, Lima, in 2005. At the centre of the monument stands a rock, known as *El ojo que llora*, 'The Weeping Eye'. A few years later, a replica of the Weeping Eye was created in a rural community in the province of Aymaraes, again with the intention of commemorating victims – this time from the village of Llinque.

By comparing the processes through which each monument came into being, the author seeks to understand how Peruvian society has progressively formulated both its own memory of the conflict and the criteria for determining who can be claimed as a victim. To this end, she draws on what today we might call a post-conflict anthropology, an extremely valuable approach for understanding today's world, where more and more countries are grappling with internal turmoil – in contrast to other times in history when most conflicts arose between countries. There is a growing and pressing need to acknowledge the memories of the various collective actors involved and the affected population's struggle for identification and identity. This requires social science disciplines, such as anthropology, to contribute to an understanding of how societies construct their memory or memories, so that this work, in turn, might inform national and international policy making in relation to intra-state armed conflicts.

Delacroix develops an anthropological study that draws on one of the discipline's classic tools: ethnographic analysis. Hers is not, however, an ethnography focused on one single group. Rather, Delacroix sets out a comparison of neighbouring societies before contrasting them with a proxy for 'national' society in the form of the country's capital, Lima. This approach allows the author to combine two different dimensions of Peruvian society as a whole: rural communities and the country's quintessential urban space, the capital city. This ethnographic model, which we might call multidimensional, also incorporates the central power apparatus itself – the state – and various groups that interact with it, functioning sometimes as intermediaries and sometimes as allies. The author also takes account of non-governmental organisations (humanitarian NGOs) and institutions such as