

Chapter 14

Conclusion

While we will not give much attention in a comparative way to the hangmen of other countries, we have examples of executioners who claimed to have survived unscathed by their killing career. While the early history of electrocution was horrible, with lots of smoke and burning flesh,¹ eventually according to the executioner who pulled the switch in 387 cases from 1926 to 1939, the technical details were worked out so that electrocution was now considered more humane than hanging.² While not in favor of capital punishment, the executioner, Robert Elliott, claimed that he was not bothered by his career as an executioner, and had lived a happy life, despite the unjustified public scorn for executioners. He quoted a former French executioner, “To kill in the name of one’s country is a glorious feat, one rewarded with medals. But to kill in the name of the law, that is a gruesome, horrible function, rewarded with scorn, contempt, and loathing.”³ Elliott, like all our Canadian hangmen, asserted that the killing was not his decision, but rather the decision of the judges, juries, and the executive branch denying commutation.

Similarly, Darshan Singh, Singapore’s chief executioner from 1959 to 2006 with a body count of about 1000 killings was said to be unrepentant and unremorseful, even though his wife had left him.⁴

¹ Richard Moran, *Executioner’s Current* (New York: Vintage, 2002). Also, for an American history of hanging, electric chair, gas chamber, and lethal injection, including many bumbles with all of them, see, Frederick Drimmer, *Until You Are Dead* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1990).

² Robert Greene Elliott, *Agent of Death: The Memoirs of and Executioner* (1940) Amazon.com.

³ *Ibid* at 200.

⁴ “The Jolly Hangman, the Jailed Journalist, and the Decline of Singapore’s Death Penalty,” (2013) 8 *Asian Criminology*, 41-59.

Even when an executioner claims that he was unremorseful and unrepentant, like George Maledon, famous American hangman in the 19th century, contemporary writers surmise that there must be some kind of trauma, including ghosts of victims interrupting their sleep, not unlike the stories that supposedly haunted Radcliffe in the end.⁵ This tendency to look for trauma is understandable. While one author suggested that most of the English hangmen, aside from John Ellis who committed suicide, did not seem particularly bothered by their work,⁶ in another book on the history of the hangmen of England, the author concluded, “these men were given public part-time employment which in most cases resulted in the permanent maiming of their personalities.”⁷

We may view a hangman as an honorable person,⁸ who did their duty on behalf of society, with as much skill as possible, but then inevitably became a secondary trauma victim of the process.⁹ A normal person does not kill people, even if judicially sanctioned, without being affected by the experience. As Deanna Foster has written:

The emotional weight of being a hangman caused several to take their own lives. It destroyed many lives and many livers, for several hangmen became heavy alcoholics as a result of their work. There were intense psychological implications that not only came from ending the life of a convicted man, but from the enduring and negative views from the people and the press.¹⁰

Martin McDonagh wrote a play called “Hangman” in 2015 which again portrayed the hangman “profoundly affected on a deep psychological level by his former profession.”¹¹

⁵ Lonnie E Underhill, “George Isaac Maledon, Guard and Executioner,” Fall 2022, 61:4 *Journal of the West* at 64-70.

⁶ Howard Engel, *Lord High Executioner* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1996).

⁷ Brian Bailey, *Hangmen of England: The History of Executioners from Jack Ketch to Albert Pierrepoint* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1989) at 192.

⁸ Jeffrie G. Murphy, “People We Hire as Executioners: Who are They? Who are We?” 2016, 35:2 *Criminal Justice Ethics* at 87-99.

⁹ Lizzie Seal, “Albert Pierrepoint and the Cultural Persona of the 20th Century Hangman,” 2016, 12:1 *Crime, Media, Culture* at 83-100.

¹⁰ Deanna Foster, *A History of Hangings in Nova Scotia*, (Lawrencetown Beach, N.S.: Pettersfield Press, 2007) at 30-31.

¹¹ Fiona Mountford, “Blackest of Black Comedies,” *London Evening Standard* (8 December 2015) at 34.

There is another possibility, however, in that some hangmen were likely psychopaths. For example, the most famous English hangman of the last century, much celebrated for his efficiency, dignity, and respect for his victims, has recently been reconsidered as a likely psychopath.¹² Albert Pierrepoint has been lauded in various books, movies, and plays as a “civilized, dignified, respectful, compassionate” hangman.¹³ He was just a loyal servant of the law, without a troubled conscience. A woman who grew up in a family with a close friendship with the Pierrepoint family, called him “Uncle Albert,” the kindest man she has ever known.¹⁴ Superficial charm is one of the characteristics of a psychopath.

Albert Pierrepoint was born into a family of executioners, including his father, Henry, and his uncle, Tom. At the age of 11, Albert had read his father’s story serialized in the *Thomson Weekly News* and declared in school that when he grew up, he wanted to be the chief executioner, and stated that “Death was an adventure... The Execution was romance.”¹⁵ Between 1931 as an apprentice to his uncle, and then as chief executioner in 1941 until his retirement in 1956 he allegedly hanged 435, including 16 women and 200 Nazi war criminals.¹⁶ A more recent count was that he hanged 433 men and 17 women.¹⁷ He used the excuse in 1956 to resign because he was not paid the full hanging fee in Manchester when the victim was reprieved at the last minute. However, this was a ruse since he had several weeks previously started secret negotiations to sell his story about some famous hangings to a Sunday newspaper for a lot of money, which he could

¹² David Leafe, “Was the infamous hangman Albert Pierrepoint, actually a psychopath who relished killing?,” *London Daily Mail* (12 May 2023) at 24 [Leafe].

¹³ Quoting Canadian playwright Rod McDonald, *Regina Leader-Post* (9 June 2005) at 39.

¹⁴ Nicola Rossi, “My ‘Uncle,’ The Executioner,” *London Independent* (11 December 2005) at 49.

¹⁵ Francisco Garcia, “Rope: Albert Pierrepoint,” *London Financial Times* (10 February 2024) at 18 [Garcia].

¹⁶ “Capital Punishment in Britain,” *London Independent* (7 April 2006) at 16.

¹⁷ Leafe, *supra* note 12.

not do if he was still the executioner.¹⁸ The stories turned out to have numerous errors of fact.¹⁹

In 1974, long after the abolition of capital punishment in England, a ghost-written autobiography *Executioner: Pierrepont*²⁰ was released to wide acclaim. Only recently has it been shown that the book includes numerous lies. For example he claimed he never kept a record of the condition of the necks of his victims, when recently on the sale of his notebooks it was discovered that every victim had a description made as the condition of the neck.²¹ In the book he suggested that he was now against capital punishment, although this opinion hardly mattered given that capital punishment had been abolished, and more importantly he never expressed any regret at the hanging of several persons who were later shown to be innocent.

The movie *Pierrepont, The Last Hangman* in 2006 further cemented his reputation as a good person, as the great character actor Timothy Spall presented Pierrepont as a humble man, not out for personal aggrandizement, but just having pride in doing the job well. Therefore, Spall was quoted as saying, "I had to believe he was not a psychopath; he was a born hangman."²² Therefore the movie suggests a level of traumatization and regret, while in fact Albert Pierrepont never claimed to be haunted or traumatized at all.²³ There is no evidence that he ever experienced the kind of regret that the movie portrays.²⁴ He continued to relish speaking about his exploits in the pub that he ran with his wife. He died in 1992 at age of 87 still lauded in various obituaries such as the *London Independent* that claimed he was a "brave, decent, honest" man.²⁵ It is suggested now that along with pathological lying, he had a grandiose sense of self-worth. He claimed that he had a

¹⁸ Steve Fielding, *Pierrepont: A Family of Executioners*, (John Blake: 2008).

¹⁹ "Game of Hangman," *London Independent* (12 March 2009) at 18.

²⁰ *Executioner, Pierrepont*, (London: Magna Press Books, 1974) reprinted many times by a variety of publishers.

²¹ Leafe, *supra* note 12.

²² "Our Mutual Friend," *The London Independent* (2 April 2006) at 93.

²³ Lizzie Seal, "Albert Pierrepont and the Cultural Persona of the 20'th Century Hangman" (2016) 12:1 *Crime, Media and Culture* at 83-100.

²⁴ Garcia, *supra* note 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

mission from God and was put on earth especially to do it.²⁶ Unlike the claim that he never talked about hanging with his pub customers, numerous witnesses now say that he milked his experience as hangman at any opportunity.²⁷ So instead of a traumatized secondary victim, perhaps Albert Pierrepoint was a psychopath?

The idea that the job of hangman might have attracted psychopaths is also illustrated in the case of John C. Woods, the United States Army executioner during World War Two. Woods, an alcoholic, had been diagnosed as a psychopath by the Navy, then convicted of fraud in civilian life, and then had lied about being an assistant hangman, to get the hangman's job in the Army. His many botches may have not only resulted from his incompetence as a hangman, but may have been intentionally motivated at times to create suffering.²⁸ Like our hangmen in Canada who inflated their body counts, Woods would brag that he had executed 347 men, when in fact the number was closer to 90.

In our presentation of the seven most important hangmen in Canada, we have surmised that many of them were likely psychopaths, although in a few cases we lack enough evidence to come to that conclusion. In any case, they were usually unsavory characters. If readers disagree, I hope that this focus on the hangmen of Canada, not only dispels many myths about them, but also is a contribution more broadly to the history of crime and punishment in Canada.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Leafe, *supra* note 12.

²⁸ See, Col. French L MacLean, *American Hangman: John C. Woods* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2019).