

Forward

B R Y A N P . S C H W A R T Z

About forty years ago, as a newly minted faculty member, I attended a “strategic planning” meeting with my colleagues. One of them, Alvin, who had been hired a few years earlier, made a remark that has stayed with me. He observed that dedicating twenty or thirty years to teaching in a field could transform someone into a true scholar. His words resonated because they reflected deep respect for the discipline and commitment required to seek, uncover, and communicate truth with skill and integrity.

Today, the academy often seems trapped in an ideological phase where scholarship begins and ends with political dogma. Arguments, evidence, and rhetoric are frequently marshaled to serve predetermined causes rather than the pursuit of truth. In stark contrast, Alvin’s vision of scholarship—rigorous, open-minded, and truth-seeking—is brilliantly exemplified in this study on Canada’s state-authorized executioners.

The book explores profound questions: Can we generalize about the character of executioners? Are they ordinary people performing a necessary job, or do those who volunteer for such roles tend toward psychological disorders like psychopathy? With meticulous care, the study profiles each of Canada’s executioners, drawing on extensive research, including sifting through aging archival documents. It uncovers the real identities of many, while candidly noting that some identifications remain probabilistic or speculative. The result is a wealth of original discoveries, each grounded in judiciously assessed evidence.

The study approaches its sources with appropriate skepticism, particularly when evaluating executioners’ self-characterizations. Some are exposed as liars, and the book consistently weighs evidence with dispassionate precision, clearly delineating the limits of what can be known. The profiles themselves are gripping, offering fascinating stories of individuals who chose to become state-sanctioned killers-for-hire. These narratives will engage readers quite apart from the study’s broader conclusions.

The book’s central finding reveals a jarring disconnect between the majesty of the law—its claim to wield the ultimate power over life and

death—and the often tawdry character of those who carried out its final act. Many executioners are portrayed as mercenary, dishonest in their personal lives and motives, and, in some cases, psychopathologically detached from the emotions that typically accompany taking a life, even when justified. This conclusion challenges the law's moral authority and invites reflection on the human cost of such roles.

In Modern Canada, there are other contexts, such as soldiering or providing medical assistance in dying, in which a professional employed by the state may have a role in ending human life. These roles are fundamentally different, of course, than that of serving as an instrument of state-mandated retribution, and each carries its own purposes, moral dilemmas, and impact on the personnel involved. Notwithstanding these differences, studies such as this may offer insight or warnings as we select, train, and support members of our society for these tasks.

We at the Manitoba Law Journal are honoured to publish this monograph as a peer-reviewed contribution to public understanding of issues fraught with importance and complexity. It offers profound insight into the moral and human dimensions of state-sanctioned death. This study, with its industry, rigor, precision, and originality, stands as a model of scholarship. Readers will find no more reliable guide than this author and this author and this book.

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