

Overall, *Indigenous Women and Feminism* is a book that will appeal both to those who are new to the topic and to those already expert in it. It is highly relevant to a range of disciplines, including feminism and women's studies, Indigenous studies, Canadian studies, transnationalism, performance and theatre studies, English, media and film studies, political science, sociology, anthropology, ethnic and cultural studies, and, of course, socio-legal studies. It is a forceful volume that importantly expands understandings of social justice.

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Ken Leyton-Brown

The Practice of Execution in Canada. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010, 205 p.

In this work of historical scholarship, Ken Leyton-Brown has produced a lively account of the process of execution, from the delivery of the jury's guilty verdict to the final disposal of the condemned person's corpse, between 1868 and 1962. The discussion of the various stages of the process, from courtroom to grave, is narrated chiefly through contemporary newspaper reports. Leyton-Brown uses the light these reports shed on contemporary attitudes to draw attention to his own concerns about capital punishment.

The book is clearly a critique of execution practices in Canada, both because the author's moral perspective (that for all its claims to a higher purpose, execution is merely the intentional killing of a human being) is evident throughout and also because what dominates the discussion is a catalogue of errors and incompetence. The book therefore devotes much of its attention to bringing to life (so to speak) particular cases which indicate that executions were often demonstrably either inappropriate or illegitimate: trial judges abusing their position by effectively telling juries to find defendants guilty of capital crimes; juries undermining their own guilty verdicts by recommending mercy; prisoners being persuaded or cajoled into confessing after sentencing in order to assuage justified doubts about their guilt; hangings going horribly wrong thanks to miscalculations by hangmen or the inadequacy of the scaffold; the public disorder that undermined any claim that a serious message was effectively communicated by execution; doubts about whether prisoners had actually died after being hanged, or whether the right person had been executed. This book does not deal in statistics, and so, beyond some rather speculative suggestions, there is no attempt to identify exactly how widespread such malpractice was. However, the

evidence of such happenings from contemporary newspaper reports seems sufficiently abundant to justify taking these accounts seriously rather than treating them as isolated anecdotes.

The stories of the people involved in the execution “business” make for often chilling reading. We learn that difficulties in determining how far a human body needs to “drop” to ensure that the spinal cord is broken very often resulted in prisoners’ being either slowly strangled (rather than killed quickly) or dropped so far that they were decapitated. When Canadian reporters squeamishly omit the grisliest of details, Leyton-Brown often seems to relish finishing the job, sharing with readers the horrific prospect of observers’ being “suddenly drenched in blood and possibly other bits of the body” (p. 139) when the body of a hanged prisoner became separated from its head. On the more eccentric side, we learn that among those prisoners moved to genuine penitence for their crimes, one condemned man directed that his eyeballs should be removed and donated to a blind boy, thereby earning praise from the local press (p. 45). Fully public executions were ended in Canada just two years after the birth of the nation, and executions were always restricted to hangings, so it is unsurprising that Leyton-Brown makes up for any possible lack of gore with sporadic references to the much more bloodthirsty public torture-executions of Canadians’ ancestors in early modern England.

There is a clear argument to Leyton-Brown’s book, although it must be said that this argument is made without engaging in either sociological or historical debate or controversy in the main text. Apart from the details of what actually happened to Canadians convicted of capital crimes, the overarching narrative is the story of how the various ways in which the state attempted to maintain the moral integrity and meaning of execution and its message were gradually and finally eroded. In part this erosion was due to dismay at botched hangings; in part it occurred because removing execution from the public view made it increasingly difficult to use as a means of communicating a public message. The book contains extensive notes that will be useful for scholars using it as a resource for further historical study, though some readers may find the text itself conspicuously free of academic debate about events and their meaning, both in a contemporary and in a modern sense. It will be up to others to draw grander conclusions from Leyton-Brown’s identification of the success of the ritual practices in sustaining the legality of execution as long as they did, and of their final failure, possibly starting with his own reference to Anthony Giddens’ “practice theory” (p. 146). This is a highly enjoyable book for its colourful characters, quick narrative, and logical thematic organization. Gripes about a lack of engagement in theoretical or historical controversy aside, readers will appreciate the directness and vividness of its style.

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