



**A HANDBOOK
ON HANGING**
CHARLES DUFF

INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

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A H A N D B O O K
O N H A N G I N G

CHARLES DUFF (1894–1966), who also went by his Gaelic name Cathal Ó Dubh, was born in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, in what is now Northern Ireland. He served in the British Merchant Navy, fought in World War I, and subsequently entered the British Foreign Service. Duff was a gifted linguist, fluent in seven languages, and in his later years he worked as a freelance writer and translator. His own writing included plays, travel essays, and an introduction to James Joyce; among his many translations were works by Quevedo, Zola, B. Traven, Gorky, and Arnold Zweig.

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A HANDBOOK ON HANGING

Being a short Introduction to the fine Art of Execution, containing much useful Information on Neck-breaking, Throttling, Strangling, Asphyxiation, Decapitation, and Electrocutation; Data and Wrinkles on Hangmanship; with the late Mr. Hangman Berry's Method and his pioneering List of Drops; to which is added an Account of the Great Nuremberg Hangings; a Ready Reckoner for Hangmen; and many other items of interest including the Anatomy of Murder by

CHARLES DUFF

of Gray's Inn, Barrister-at-Law

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

"THEY'RE SELLING POSTCARDS of the hanging," Bob Dylan intones flatly in the opening stave of his long and haunting lament, "Desolation Row." Those who have had the opportunity to read James Allen's extraordinary book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* will need no further illustration of what is intended: for several generations (and well into the fourth decade of the twentieth century), public immolation of outcasts furnished an occasion for Saturnalia. The lurid photographs of the event, cheaply reproduced for sale and salacity and still counted as "collectibles" (which is how Mr. Allen, an antique dealer, came across them), were often the least of it. Fingers, toes, and ears, or pieces of the rope, or even private parts in the special instance of alleged rapists, were given and taken as souvenirs, trophies, or talismans.

Generally speaking, the hanging was just the beginning of the treat; a treat for which special excursion trains were run and special editions run off the presses. A semi-garotting would be the prelude to mutilation, burning, and dismemberment. An early society of the spectacle had no special wish for the execution of justice to be swift. And when the spectacle became considered as too turbulent and outlandish, and was finally domesticated and moved inside official doors and gates, the element of prurient lavishness was not entirely discarded. There were still rituals by which the victim could be kept endlessly uncertain of his fate, and there were still excited descriptions by radio and newsmen, and there were still ways in which—as the name "Old Sparky" in Florida

continues to remind us—the object of all the excitement could be burned alive.

Many playwrights and novelists have expended themselves on the occult ways in which these practices—the gratification of the mob, the amputation of souvenir body parts, the elaborate and lascivious attention to detail—recall the witch trials and *grands peurs* and libidinous repressions of an earlier America. However, what all these habits and routines really illustrate is another even more obvious line of descent: the lineage of the American penal system from the English one. Look at the history of capital punishment in Britain and you will find all the ancestors of the pornography of lynching. “Hanging, drawing, and quartering”—the procedure whereby a half-strangled convict is cut down, eviscerated, and castrated alive, and then dismembered and burned—was the big attraction at what is now Marble Arch on the northeastern corner of Hyde Park, then called Tyburn. Grisly keepsakes were commonplace. Favorable vantage points were for sale. Ministers of religion (usually Protestant) were on hand. Executioners were celebrities. The free availability of strong drink, loose women, and a generalized atmosphere of *fiesta* were of the essence.

An awareness of this history, and a strong revulsion against English tradition, form the underlay of this potent book. Charles St. Lawrence Duff, who occasionally employed his Gaelic synonym Cathal Ó Dubh, was born in County Fermanagh in 1894 and, after suffering injuries in the First World War, became in turn a diplomat, a translator, and a teacher of language and linguistics. Little enough is known about his life, yet his name alone makes it a certainty that he was born into a Catholic or nationalist family, in what is now Northern Ireland, but several years before Ireland was partitioned. When the first of *A Handbook on Hanging's* seven editions was published in 1928 it was subtitled “A Satire”: one need not be too fanciful in imagining the young Duff, having wit-

nessed many hangings and shootings of Irish rebels, modeling himself in part on Swift and *A Modest Proposal*. The last public hanging in Britain was of a Fenian named Michael Barrett in May of 1868; Duff mentions it with particular scorn. (His next book, published in the rather early, not to say advanced, year of 1932, was entitled *James Joyce and the Plain Reader*.) He refers, in closing this book, to “the Struldbrugs who order our affairs,” which witnesses at any rate to a close reading of *Gulliver*.

Duff might, indeed, have made room for a substantially wider range of literary allusion than he did, since English literature has not exactly declined the challenge presented by the gibbet and the scaffold: Blake wrote imperishably about the execution of children in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; Thackeray noted mordantly the congregation of criminals and the outbreaks of vicious crime at public hangings; Dickens in *Barnaby Rudge* gave us a hangman—the unrelievedly hateful Mr. Dennis—whose chief delight is to reminisce, as if over sexual conquests, about his part in dispatching young women, and infants, and sometimes mother-and-child combinations. In an obscene piece of vernacular, Dennis describes this exercise as “working-off”: an expression for which Duff also finds sarcastic use. (The portrait of Dennis, Dickens insisted, was taken from life and reality.) Wilde found the hanging day the most onerous and terrifying of his entire sentence. George Orwell, writing in Duff’s own day, noted, primly but grimly, that there was one aspect of the hanging process that was known and whispered by everybody but never mentioned in print or polite society. (He meant the stupendous erection that results from dislocation of the neck, and that is a commonplace in sadomasochistic literature from Genet onwards.)

Sternest and most penetrating of all, in my view, was Thomas Hardy in his 1888 story “The Withered Arm.” Here, it is the stark arm of the gallows tree that spreads a minatory

and superstitious shadow across the entire countryside. Gertrude Lodge, already a bucolic sexual victim who would have been recognized by Faulkner in an instant, seeks every nostrum and quackery for her own diseased limb before visiting the sinister local shaman Trendle:

“There is only one chance of doing it known to me. It has never failed in kindred afflictions—that I can declare. But it is hard to carry out, and especially for a woman.”

“Tell me!” said she.

“You must touch with the limb the neck of a man who’s been hanged.”

She started a little at the image he had raised.

“Before he’s cold—just after he’s cut down,” continued the conjuror impassively.

“How can that do good?”

“It will turn the blood and change the constitution. But, as I say, to do it is hard. You must get into jail, and wait for him when he’s brought off the gallows. Lots have done it, though perhaps not such pretty women as you. . . .”

Mr. Duff, who for his satire adopted the tone and style and address of an English barrister, does not make too much of prurience and fetishism. He seeks to lampoon the judicious, the forensic, and the detached. But there is no doubt about the source of his outrage and contempt: it is the ineffaceable *indecent* of the death penalty, most especially in its rope-and-trapdoor manifestation, perhaps, but in all the other permutations, too:

They do things better in those efficient United States. Take, for example, the efficiency of the publicity given to the electrocution of Mrs. Creighton, romantically

called "New York's Borgia Killer," in July 1936. Cables were hot conveying to the four points of the compass the news that, for three days before her execution in Sing Sing, she had been so paralyzed with fear that she was "unable even to feel needles thrust into her body and was unconscious when lifted from a bath-chair into the electric chair." Sing Sing certainly must have an excellent publicity service—not much happens in it that Americans cannot read in their fine morning papers. Do not think for a moment that this pamphlet is a subtle piece of American or other propaganda; or an attempt to advocate American methods. But let honor be given where it is due, and let us also frankly recognize that we are not respected for our hole-and-corner hangings.

Here, as throughout the book, Duff's irony is bitter and unrelenting, though in his eagerness to reprove British hypocrisy he could be said to have missed a trick: surely the detail about the needles thrust into the female body shows us that the spirit of Salem continued to flourish in the modern U.S.A.

Still, the chief virtue of his book is precisely its exposure of hypocrisy, which many believe to be the characteristic *vice anglaise*. Having resolved to "go straight," as it were, and to have done with the vulgar populist spectacle of the public execution, the British Establishment decided to become demure to the point of obsession. Hangmen became more like anonymous civil servants; secrecy and discretion veiled the proceedings; pious little notes posted on the front gates of prisons were the only public notification that a "working-off" had taken place at all. Yet an assiduous reporter or attorney could compile a whole anthology of atrocity and indecency, lurking shadily behind this pretense. The hangman who took a little too much drink to steady his hand; the plastic underwear proffered to female victims; the rope that slipped and caused slow strangulation; the rope

that was poorly judged and caused decapitation; the rope that broke; the second and even third attempts to “work off” miscreants who didn’t expire the first time . . . Duff has them all. On not a few occasions, a clergyman or other official witness would resign from the prison service after some macabre piece of bungling or cruelty: word leaked out, as it always will when filthy matters are whispered about. As Wilde put it: *“They do well to hide their hell/For in it things are done. . . .”*

In the past few years there have been, to my certain knowledge, three belated public admissions by the British authorities that they committed the ultimate profanity of hanging an innocent man. These cases—of Derek Bentley, Timothy Evans, and James Hanratty—were subjects of tempestuous controversy at the time they occurred; in each case the identity of the actual murderer was also known or at least conjectured. The most appalling such case, and the one which began the long campaign in and out of Parliament for abolition, was that of Derek Bentley in 1953. Bentley, who had gone on a stupid thieving expedition with an accomplice named Christopher Craig, had actually been arrested when his younger friend discharged a shot and slew a policeman. Since Craig was only sixteen it was legally impossible to hang him (I pause here to note that seventeen Americans have been executed since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976 for crimes they committed while they were still minors), and thus Bentley was awarded the death penalty because somebody had to pay for the crime.

Duff was prescient in his treatment of the hanging of the innocent, and also in his summary of this landmark case, where he deployed his icy sarcasm (and his Irish Republicanism) to the best effect. It is important to bear in mind, here, that the jury had made a strong recommendation of mercy and that therefore only the Queen could save Bentley from being dropped through the trapdoor:

When it was announced that the sentence must be carried out, all sorts and conditions of people, including many Members of Parliament, set to and did their utmost to have the decision altered. Not until then was it discovered—greatly to the surprise of most people—that even the House of Commons could not find a way to alter a decision which involved the Royal Prerogative. . . . For the first time in their lives Members of Parliament and the public had it strikingly brought home to them that the inflexibilities surrounding and guarding the Royal Prerogative were acting in a way to silence even the House of Commons—the elected representatives of the people!—when the matter was the important one of to hang or not to hang. A Member asked whether the House must wait until Bentley was dead before it was entitled to say that he should not die.

That arresting question was in point of fact answered by the Speaker in the affirmative, and Derek Bentley was duly hanged.

In characterizing this gruesome and arbitrary episode, Duff uses the unironic words “authoritarian totalitarianism,” “blood sacrifice,” and “ritual hanging.” These may appear extreme but, coupled with his angry reflection on the role played by the Monarchy, they help make the case that continues to underlie this whole dispute. The right of the State or the Crown to take life—to exact this penalty as an example or symbol of its power—is a survival or hangover from the days of Divine Right, of feudalism, of the ownership of human beings, and the propitiation of evil spirits. It deserves its association with slavery and racism in the Americas, and with capricious hereditary power in Europe. The arguments that support it would (and once did) make a case for maintaining an official torturer. To look up the dates on which the death penalty was either abolished or restored in the

twentieth century is to consult a palimpsest of modern reaction (abolished by Weimar, restored by the Third Reich; reinstated in Italy by Mussolini). Thus when the Mitterrand government abolished the guillotine in France as its first legislative act in 1981, its Minister of Justice Robert Badinter made the usual patient points about the failure of the guillotine to deter crime, but told the National Assembly that capital punishment was fundamentally abhorrent because it expressed a totalitarian conception of the relationship between the citizen and the State.

Such a conception, Duff points out, was reflected in the vast expansion of the death penalty, specifically to punish crimes against property and the social order, that occurred in Georgian and Victorian England; it continues to be in the American expansion of recent years. U.S. authorities, the better to sanitize execution and to make it resemble a clinical event rather than a state killing, have adopted the new technology of "lethal injection," but in doing so they have not been able to disguise the absolutist, and pitiless, character of the act. When I attended the execution of Mr. Sam McDonald in Potosi prison, Missouri, in 1997, I was forced as a "states' witness" to see the entire thing through a thick glass window. Mr. McDonald was speaking volubly as the chemical cocktail first silenced and then extinguished him, but nothing could be heard, and then the "attendants" lowered the blinds. I later asked the prison authorities to tell me what his last words had been: they solemnly instructed me that he had said, "Tell my brothers to be strong." He had been speaking for much longer than that. In medieval times the doomed man was permitted his last words on the scaffold; white-coated efficiency now denies even this grace-note (presumably because it cannot be scripted). All the same, the element of obscene Saturnalia cannot be entirely repressed. As the guards began to shepherd the witnesses from the room, I heard someone exclaim cheerily, "Sam McDonald bought the farm. Ee-eye-ee-eye-O."

Duff updated his polemic every decade from 1928 through 1938 and 1948 and up until 1961, and there can be little doubt that he exerted an influence on the two decisive interventions made by Arthur Koestler and Albert Camus in, respectively, 1956 and 1957. The opening lines of Koestler's *Reflections on Hanging*, indeed, partake of some of Duff's wryness and sarcasm:

Great Britain is that peculiar country in Europe where people drive on the left side of the road, measure in inches and yards, and hang people by the neck until dead.

While Camus, who wrote his *Reflexions sur la guillotine* for a joint symposium with Koestler the following year—and the year after the hanging of many Hungarian rebels in what he called “the Socialism of the gallows”—made explicit Duff's belief that abolitionism was a weapon in the general battle for what we now term “human rights.”

Koestler lived to see capital punishment abolished in his adopted country. Camus and Duff did not; their victory was posthumous (and today the European Union will not even consider admitting a nation which retains the death penalty). All three men made use of lurid or tragic American examples, especially those where the mass media had acted as surrogate or ventriloquist for the mob or crowd. Indeed, the second edition of Koestler's volume, in 1957, carried an “Introduction for Americans” by Professor Edmond Cahn of New York University, which asked the provocative question, “Are we no worse than the English?” Professor Cahn pointed out that the original manifesto against capital punishment—Cesare Beccaria's 1764 tract *On Crimes and Punishments*—had found a ready audience among Enlightenment men like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush. Elements of this American abolitionist tradition still survive

(Michigan, for example, forbids the practice in its state constitution), but the memory has been overlaid by the toxic mixture of populism and elitism that sometimes goes by the name of "law and order." A new or fresh exposure to Duff's *saeva indignatio* may help people to discern the cultural and historic roots of the gallows tree and the unalterable opposition that has always obtained between it and the liberty tree, and perhaps assist in tearing out the roots of the first, the better to nurture and preserve the second.

—CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS