

Albert Pierrepoint and the cultural persona of the twentieth-century hangman

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Introduction

Despite his symbolic importance, the figure of the English hangman remains largely ignored by scholars.¹ In an article dating from the mid-1960s, Robin (1964: 234) noted that 'it is surprising that greater attention has not been directed to the executioner' and this observation remains pertinent. Albert Pierrepoint, hangman from 1932 – 1956, was Britain's most well-known twentieth-century executioner and became a celebrity. Attention to his cultural persona as hangman - his culturally shaped public representation - can reveal much about understandings of, and ambivalence towards, the twentieth-century death penalty. A cultural persona 'persists over time and is embodied as a person and iterations of that person' (Edberg, 2004: 258). It encompasses both cultural meanings and ways of acting. As it is a form of public representation, a cultural persona is articulated via the media but individuals can also connect the persona to their self-representation and self-understanding. In this sense, the construction of persona is an agentive process (Bunten, 2008), whereby it is co-produced by the media and the individual (Langer, 2010). Wider representations can be incorporated into personas, which are 'important symbolic vehicles through which cultural understandings exist [...] over time, evolve over time, are contested, and are disseminated to a broader population' (Edberg, 2004: 270). The epitomizing function of cultural personas is well illustrated by Pierrepoint. He was chief executioner in the period when capital punishment became increasingly culturally and politically contentious, and when the abolitionist movement gathered strength (see XXXX 2014). As a hangman who remained in the public eye after abolition, he was an important vector of cultural memories of the death penalty and post-abolition debates. His persona was a condensing symbol (Corner, 2003) for representations of capital punishment, 'including those that [were] in conflict or even opposition with each other' (Edberg, 2004: 270).

The everyday meanings of capital punishment are 'constructed and expressed through newspaper articles, television programmes, films [and] novels' (XXXX, 2014: 4). It is necessary to turn to sources such as these in order to discover how punishment 'lives in culture' (Sarat, 1999: 9). Press reporting and fictional portrayals have maintained the cultural visibility of the death penalty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as have executioners' memoirs and the willingness of ex-hangmen to be interviewed by the media. Analysis of this amalgam of sources enables understanding of cultural portrayals of the hangman. They are not necessarily reliable guides to 'what happened' but rather create and perpetuate meaning about executioners, illuminating their symbolic resonance.

This article analyses the cultural work done by different iterations of Albert Pierrepoint's persona as hangman through a bricolage approach. 'Bricolage', whilst it does not refer to one fixed approach, can involve drawing on, and reconstructing, diverse sources that constitute what is available (Wibberley, 2012). I weave these diverse sources together using the concept of persona. Sources include a wide range of newspaper articles, Pierrepoint's autobiography, examples of his radio and television appearances accessed from BFI Inview and the British Library Sound Archive, and films and television programmes. Archival material from Prison Commission and Home Office files held in the National Archives has provided historical background.

Short biography

Albert Pierrepoint described his vocation for the role of executioner as 'hereditary' (*Read All About It*, 1977) and 'in my blood' (*Hangman: A Documentary*, 1987) as both his father, Henry, and uncle, Tom, had also been hangmen. Albert's inaugural experience of hanging was to act as assistant to Tom at an execution in Dublin in 1932 (Doyle and O'Donnell, 2012) and his first hanging as chief executioner was of 'Italian gangster', Antonio Mancini, in 1941. Albert received significant press attention in the mid to late 1940s when he took trips to Germany to hang Nazi war criminals and this marked the point when his cultural persona developed. A feature in the *Sunday Pictorial* described him as '[a] dapper little matter of fact man in a natty blue suit', who, after carrying out a hanging 'packs up and goes back to his pub and his wife, Anne' (Warth, 1946).

Pierrepoint gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment in 1950 and, as part of the Committee's investigations, conducted a mock hanging for them. Debates around capital punishment intensified in the 1950s, especially in relation to controversial cases such as Timothy Evans, Derek Bentley and Ruth Ellis.² Albert Pierrepoint hanged all of them. In 1956, Pierrepoint asked for his name to be removed from the official list of hangmen, seemingly as a result of dissatisfaction over claiming expenses. However, he had sold his memoirs to the *Empire News and Sunday Chronicle* and the Home Office considered whether publication should be prevented, or if Pierrepoint should be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act. Neither of these things happened, although the Home Office demanded that certain details relating to the hangings of Evans, Christie and Ellis were withheld (*Empire News and Sunday Chronicle*, 1956; TNA/PCOM9/2024, 1956).

By selling his memoirs to a newspaper, Pierrepoint followed a well-established ex-hangman's tradition and one that had been upheld by both his father and uncle. In a letter to the Home Office, Pierrepoint (1956) explained that 'in fairness to myself I must make the position clear in the public mind', a reference to his wish to dispel the notion that he had resigned because of the Ellis

execution. This assertion demonstrated how he exercised agency in co-producing his mediated cultural persona. He assured the Home Office that 'I have had experiences which would cause considerable controversy but these are locked in my heart, and I am never going to divulge them'. By the time of his resignation, he had executed around 450 people. With his wife, Anne, he ran a pub near Oldham and continued to do so once he was no longer chief executioner. In 1965, the death penalty for murder was suspended before being abolished in 1969.

Although Pierrepoint stopped hanging people in 1956, his cultural persona as chief executioner continued through media-based demand for his expertise. In 1974, he published his ghost-written autobiography, *Executioner: Pierrepoint*, which discussed his early life and career as a hangman, and which asserted that he now believed hanging was not a deterrent and was primarily for revenge. In the 1970s and 80s he made several appearances on radio and television. The autobiography, along with media appearances, was crucial to Pierrepoint exercising some control over his public representation and to his role in shaping the cultural persona of hangman in the post-abolition era. Its authorial voice was not created by Pierrepoint alone and there are fractures and disjunctions between the book and Pierrepoint's media appearances, both in terms of tone and views expressed. However, the autobiography is an important and influential source of Pierrepoint's persona, and was a crucial means for him to exercise agency over his portrayal. As will be explored, he connected iterations of the hangman persona to his self-representation as a decent, respectable working class man. When he died in 1992, most of the national daily newspapers carried his obituary. He was played by Timothy Spall in the biopic, *Pierrepoint* (2005), released in 2006. This film is another, more recent key source of Pierrepoint's cultural persona. It draws heavily on the autobiography, whilst also offering a divergent portrayal.

The hangman persona preceded Albert Pierrepoint. Many of the English hangmen before him had been high profile or even notorious figures, who generated press stories. In publishing his autobiography, he contributed to the well-established 'popular genre' of executioner's memoir (Harrington, 2013: xvii). As stated above, other mid twentieth-century hangmen serialised their memoirs in the newspaper (Pierrepoint, H, 1922; Willis, 1939; Critchell, 1949), and John Ellis' *Diary of a Hangman* was published in 1932. However, Pierrepoint is distinguished by being the first and, crucially, most prominent hangman of the mass media age. By his tenure, hanging had long taken place in private and journalists had ceased to be present at the execution scene by the 1920s. Although details of capital trials, and of the personal life of the condemned, regularly appeared in the newspapers (XXXX, 2014), the execution itself was shrouded in secrecy. A bland official statement from the Prison Governor explained that it had taken place 'expeditiously and there was

no hitch' (Fox, 1927). There was a wide 'experiential distance' between the public and the practice of punishment (Brown, 2009: 9). As the person who actually put the noose around the neck of the condemned, the hangman was the bridge between the private ceremony of execution and the public sphere. This applied especially to Albert Pierrepoint after the Second World War, when his cultural persona developed and capital punishment became more salient as an issue. Post abolition, Pierrepoint was an important figure in the mediation of cultural memory in relation to capital punishment. He was an authentic link with the practice of putting people to death and both a purveyor of ambivalences associated with capital punishment and a canvas upon which these could be projected.

Historical Development of the Hangman Persona

As cultural personas persist and evolve over time, it is important to examine their history and development. In medieval and early modern Europe, executioners were 'widely despised' and were even officially designated 'dishonourable', with restrictions placed on where they could live and the trades that their sons could join (Spierenburg, 1984; Harrington, 2013). By the nineteenth century, they were no longer formally exiled from respectable society, but social prejudices remained. In England, the nineteenth-century hangman was 'execrated at most hangings' other than of murderers and if he bungled the hanging he might receive death threats (Gatrell, 1996: 99). By the twentieth century, the privacy of execution had helped to reduce the scapegoating of the executioner and details of mishaps or botched hangings rarely became public. Capital punishment was carried out only for murder and treason, making the role potentially more admirable as necessary for retribution, crime control and national security. In the mid twentieth century, capital punishment was used sparingly.

Ambivalence towards the hangman persisted alongside this greater acceptability. Discourses of penal modernism stressed the need for punishment, including the death penalty, to be civilised and modern – to take place in private, to be expertly administered and to minimise undue suffering (Garland, 2003; Sarat, 2014). However, bodily punishment inevitably challenged the aspirations of penal modernism (Garland, 2011a). In Britain, this was ameliorated by the putative efficiency and painlessness of twentieth-century hanging. The Report on the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment (1953) considered other forms of execution but concluded that 'hanging best satisfied the criteria of humanity, decency and certainty' (Kaufman-Osborn, 2002: 90).

The perceived character of the modern hangman provides important historical background to Pierrepoint's representation. The disjunction between the executioner's profession and his

demeanour was a recurrent staple of the hangman persona. Late-Victorian chief hangman, James Billington, 'was the last man the outsider would hit on if told that any half dozen individuals of the upper working class order included this dubious "celebrity"' (*Gloucester Citizen*, 1901). That despite his job, the hangman was gentle or kindly, was another element of this contradiction. John Ellis 'could never bring himself to wring the necks of his own chickens' (*News of the World*, 1932), a portrayal bolstered by his memoirs, which recorded 'once when I tried to drown a kitten I was so upset for the rest of the day that my mother said I was never to be given a similar job again' (1932: 33). Albert's uncle, Tom, 'radiated friendliness and kindness' and was a lover of flowers and wild birds (*Daily Mail*, 1954). Similarly, Albert's geniality was much commented on, especially after his death. *The Guardian's* obituary described 'a cheerful, unassuming man' and a tribute on the same page from Syd Dernley, who had worked as assistant to Albert, confirmed that he was 'a very jovial person' (Boseley, 1992; Dernley, 1992). This contrast between the hangman's job of killing people and his gentle or pleasant disposition instantiated him as a decent individual, who was worthy of respect. It also attempted to resolve the ambivalence provoked by his infliction of bodily punishment.

The hangman persona intersected with constructions of working class masculinity. Historically, his drunkenness on the job and rowdy presence in local pubs on the eve of an execution meant that he could seem disreputable. According to the prison governor of Kirkdale, it had 'been the custom for executioners to hold levees at the [local] Hotel for years past' (TNA/PCOM8/191, 1904). In his autobiography, Pierrepoint (1974) emphasises his decency and working class respectability. These are displayed through portrayal of his strong work ethic as a boy, his relationship with his wife and his Uncle Tom, who represents restraint, discretion and circumspection. The steady influence of Tom, both as an adult authority figure and a model hangman, is contrasted with Albert's friendly and popular father, Henry, a heavy drinker not always in regular employment. In distinguishing himself from his father, Pierrepoint also distanced himself from the disreputable aspects of the hangman persona, reconstituting the role of executioner as dependent on the performance of duty.

Reviewing the biopic, Philip French (2006) observed 'Pierrepoint is the very embodiment of that traditional north-country, working-class decency celebrated by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*'. A key part of this decency was Pierrepoint's insistence that his knowledge of the final moments of the condemned should be secret. His autobiography recounts explaining this to the Royal Commission and narrates that although the press 'did much' to make his pub, Help the Poor Struggler, 'prosperous', he would not discuss his role as executioner with customers (Pierrepoint, 1974: 152). This further distanced Pierrepoint from the notorious figure of the hangman who

enjoyed raucous, alcohol-fuelled 'levees', and cemented his construction of the persona as consistent with respectability. That Pierrepoint 'always refused to discuss his work as a hangman' was approvingly explained in positive portrayals of his character (for example, Weatherby, 1979). This secrecy extended to his relationship with his wife, with whom he claimed he did not discuss his second job (Pierrepoint, 1974). Pierrepoint's book does not relate his trouble with the Home Office when he sold his memoirs to *Empire News*. Subsequent depictions that primarily draw on the autobiography, such as news features and the film, also do not raise this episode but portray him as the soul of discretion.

Ongoing ambivalence towards the hangman, recalling his historically reviled status, can be discerned from less complimentary portrayals of Pierrepoint. At the beginning of his fame, a profile in the *Sunday Pictorial* noted that hanging was 'an impersonal matter to a man like Albert. At present he's tempted to plump for the gratuity, cash down' (Warth, 1946). When he resigned in 1956, the *Daily Herald* proclaimed that '[e]xperiences didn't seem to have an effect on Albert' (Andrew, 1956). This perceived imperviousness to emotion was the flipside of Pierrepoint's taciturn respectability. Actress Diana Dors met Pierrepoint in 1953 and visited his pub. In her *A-Z of Men* ('H for Hangman'), she unflatteringly described him as having 'an ego bigger than any film star' and recounted how he boasted of his hangings (Dors, 1984: 79). A Pierrepoint-like figure by the name of Sidney Bliss was satirised in political sitcom, *The New Statesman* (1987-1992). Bliss, supposedly Britain's last hangman, runs a pub called The Hangman's Knot and eagerly awaits the return of the death penalty.

There were also reactions that bore traces of gothic horror. At the time of Ruth Ellis' execution, a 'legal authority' claimed to have met Pierrepoint and 'experienced a slight shudder' when they shook hands (*Sunday Chronicle*, 1955). The unsettling dissonance between Pierrepoint's geniality and his former role as executioner was highlighted in a *Daily Mirror* article about the making of *10 Rillington Place* (1970), for which he gave expert advice. It observed '[h]e smiles a lot, winks occasionally, and if you did not know that the hand you shook had pulled the lever, you might take him to be a mayor' (Zec, 1970). Recalling work on the BBC's 1961 documentary, *The Death Penalty*, on which Pierrepoint appeared, Jeffrey Barnard (1976) remembered him as 'a mild-mannered, reticent and extremely sinister man'.

Opponents of capital punishment sometimes found Pierrepoint distasteful or reprehensible. That the executioner might inspire revulsion was assumed by the *Daily Mirror's* Cassandra (1955), who argued 'if we feel disgust at how this man chooses to earn his money we, his employers, [...] are every bit as guilty'. In 1961, a correspondent to the BBC's new 'right to reply' show, *Points of View*, complained that the inclusion of Pierrepoint in the documentary on the death penalty 'spoiled an

otherwise excellent programme' (Black, 1961). Thirty years later, in response to Pierrepoint's obituary, a letter writer to *The Guardian* was 'filled with revulsion to learn that this killer of 450 persons was a "cheerful, unassuming" man who liked to dance and ran a pub' (Boyd, 1992). Distaste for the executioner could have a class-based dimension. Reviewing the *Today* radio programme's coverage of an upcoming vote on capital punishment in the House of Commons in 1983, Paul Ferris (1983) recounted that 'Pierrepoint spoke with the voice of a family grocer', a reference to his Yorkshire accent. His follow up sentence 'We all listened with unhealthy interest' articulated the view that fascination with the death penalty was seductive but uncivilised. Criminologist Leon Radzinowicz (1999: 263) labelled *Executioner* a 'dull, crude and obviously disingenuous book' and described the hangman's testimony to the Royal Commission as 'callous, impertinent and bombastic' (257), with the use of 'impertinent' suggesting he felt Pierrepoint did not know his place.

There were multiple portrayals of Pierrepoint, some reflecting the concerns of penal modernism, elite distaste for the death penalty and longstanding ambivalence about executioners. Despite this, cultural portrayals have been predominantly positive and sympathetic, frequently taking the lead from Pierrepoint's mediated construction of the hangman persona. There are three dominant iterations of his cultural persona that can be discerned from a bricolage approach – that he took pride in being a professional, that he reformed and became anti-capital punishment and that he was eventually haunted by his past. These portrayals were and are important to his representation in the public sphere. There is no intention to argue that they reflect what he was actually like and there are clear contradictions at play within and between them. There are also examples of representations that dissent from these three iterations. The first two were actively shaped by Pierrepoint and the latter developed after his death. Historical antecedents for each iteration are explored in the following three sections, in addition to discussing each as an aspect of Pierrepoint's cultural persona. The following is not intended as a biography of Albert Pierrepoint, for which see Klein (2006). Instead, it seeks to illuminate continuity and change in cultural perceptions and portrayals of the hangman through the illustrative example of Pierrepoint, and to explore how these relate to wider understandings of capital punishment.

The Professional Hangman

The Professional Hangman is a modern figure who utilises measurement and skill to ensure the condemned meets a swift and painless death. The first 'professional' English hangman was William Marwood, chief executioner from 1874 to 1883, who introduced the 'long drop'. The longer rope meant that the prisoner was killed by their neck breaking, rather than strangulation. Marwood's innovation helped to establish hanging as a 'modern' practice that utilised scientific calculations

based on the prisoner's age, height and weight (Fielding, 2008). The reduced likelihood of strangulation made witnessing a hanging (which by then took place within prison) a less gory experience. Botched hangings still occurred, however. James Berry presided over two incidences of decapitation in the mid-1880s, prompting the appointment of the Aberdare Committee in 1886. This aimed to 'ensure that all executions may be carried out in a becoming manner without risk of failure or miscarriage of any sort' (Report of the Committee, 1886 cited in Kaufmann-Osborn, 2002: 87). The pain of execution was to be minimised or, at least, disguised (Sarat, 2014). The Committee developed a table of drops based on prisoner weight to be used by the hangman, potentially transforming him into a 'dispensable technician' (Kaufmann-Osborn, 2002: 89).

The Professional Hangman was the first iteration of Pierrepoint's cultural persona to emerge and has been an enduring portrayal. Through emphasising his efficiency and meticulousness, Pierrepoint sought to turn the hangman as dispensable technician into the hangman as professional. His reputation for effectiveness was recognised during his tenure and reached its apotheosis in the executions of Nazi war criminals at Hamelin, when Pierrepoint once had to hang 27 people in one day. He described 'in detail what happens when a prisoner goes to the gallows' for the television audience in 1961 (Sear, 1961), assuring them 'it is all over in an instant' (*The Death Penalty*, 1961). His expertise as technical advisor was also utilised by film directors hoping to achieve verisimilitude. In this sense, it was acknowledged that he was a master of his craft. Professionalism and integrity in doing the job of executioner well were at the core of Pierrepoint's representation of himself and his work in his autobiography and media appearances. Efficiency was extremely important. In a radio documentary, Pierrepoint explained that during his career, he reduced the time of a hanging to 8 seconds and was 'quicker than any of them' (*Hangman*, 1987). Hanging demanded 'precise individual preparation and calculation' but also the need to reconcile 'mechanical precision and human awareness' (Pierrepoint, 1974: 65). Secrecy was part of his professionalism, as was respectful detachment – he did not become 'emotionally involved' (75). Pierrepoint distinguished himself from executioners who showed 'suspect delight', emphasising that he never derived satisfaction from hanging (33).

Whilst Radzinowicz may have found Pierrepoint 'callous', Pierrepoint mobilised the discourse of penal modernism that was dominant amongst political, policy-related and academic elites in his characterisation of hanging as a 'craft' and his vaunting of efficiency and professionalism. The modern execution was supposed to be humane rather than a spectacle of suffering and was 'increasingly oriented toward speed and efficiency' (Garland, 2011b: 55). He explicitly rejected vengeance and suffering of the condemned and endorsed the view that execution should be

‘rational, purposive and proportional’ (Sarat, 2014: 29). Appearance before the Royal Commission forced Pierrepoint to compromise another aspect of civilised, modern capital punishment – its secrecy. In *Executioner*, he lamented that this meant ‘now the Press would publish for free [...] what I had, out of principle, refused to disclose even for payment’ (1974: 178). He distinguished himself as a professional craftsman, who therefore understood hanging intimately, whereas the Commission were ‘intelligent people’ who ‘did not seem able to imagine the impact of the moment on a real condemned prisoner’ (193). They owed him ‘not only respect for the dead, but respect for my craft’ (200). Craftmanship separated Pierrepoint from the murderers he hanged, but it also differentiated him from the legal and bureaucratic personnel who were responsible for sentencing people to death. He may have executed them, but he had not decreed that their life should be taken (Greenfield, 2013). His reference to ‘the real condemned prisoner’ demonstrated a further aspect of modernity that Pierrepoint encoded into the hangman persona – recognition of the dignity of the individual (see Emirbayer, 2003), which was regarded as a norm of capital punishment in mid twentieth-century Britain (Kaufman-Osborn, 2011).

Professionalism consistent with penal modernism has been a vital component of wider portrayals of Pierrepoint’s cultural persona, such as in newspapers and on film. A letter writer to *The Guardian* in relation to the 1983 Commons vote on hanging argued ‘By his professional detachment he maintained the dignity of the condemned’ (Wellum, 1983) and his obituary published in the same newspaper nearly ten years later referred to his ‘careful calculations’ and ‘professional pride’ (Boseley, 1992). Journalist Simon Heffer (1997) asserted that Pierrepoint’s professionalism contrasted ‘with the haphazard and barbaric way the Americans went about it’. According to this construction (which drew on views of the superiority of British execution also espoused by Pierrepoint), the British led the way in ensuring modern, civilised capital punishment. This myth persisted in cultural memories of British hanging. A 2007 article in *The Times* on a botched hanging in Iraq explained that ‘[t]echniques perfected by the renowned British hangman, Albert Pierrepoint, were said to have been studied by Iraqi executioners’ but noted the he would have been ‘horrified’ by the execution and ‘was meticulous in his preparation to avoid such errors’ (Brown, 2007).

The biopic is faithful to this depiction of professionalism (Greenfield, 2013), with Pierrepoint taking pride in his speed and commenting on ‘a professional job, well done’ as he takes down the body of 1930s poisoner, Dorothea Waddingham (*Pierrepoint*, 2005). Efficiency and expertise make Pierrepoint first choice as executioner of the Nazi war criminals. As Bennett (2013) argues, the film creates a juxtaposition between the industrial scale of the executions that Pierrepoint carries out and Nazi atrocities, with the hangar in which he operates recalling the ‘grim architecture of the

concentration camps' (372). However, the film does not draw an equivalence between Pierrepoint and the Nazi war criminals. The character's aspiration to be a good executioner and for his work to be a craft mean that he treats those he hangs as human beings of value and worth. This is illustrated particularly clearly when he recommends hanging Irma Grese first because as the youngest, she will be the most frightened.

Applbaum (1995) compares Sanson, Parisian executioner during the Terror, with Adolf Eichmann, one of the main architects of the Final Solution. He argues that Eichmann was a bureaucrat but Sanson was a professional. Sanson's efforts to attain respectability were necessary because as executioner, he was notorious, whereas Eichmann sought to escape insignificance. This resonates both with the film's portrayal of Pierrepoint's Nazi executions and his self-representation in his autobiography and media appearances. In both, respectability and commitment to the exercise of public duty are emphasised, and Pierrepoint's insistence that he derived no satisfaction from hanging was essential to this escape from notoriety. He has frequently been described as 'humane' and 'compassionate', qualities which Timothy Spall, who played him in the film, argued prevented Pierrepoint's efficiency from being 'mistaken for ruthlessness' (Norman, 2006).

A dissenting note from this representation is struck in what may well be the earliest fictionalised portrayal of Pierrepoint, the Ken Loach directed Wednesday Play, *3 Clear Sundays* (1965). This features a hangman called Albert, who makes preparations for an execution with his new assistant. He cheerfully stresses the need for the knot to be placed on the left-hand side under the prisoner's jaw to prevent mishaps. He rhapsodises about hanging as 'a job like any other', 'a great profession' and a 'public service', appearing thoroughly insulated from moral considerations. This satirical depiction preceded the publication of *Executioner* and Pierrepoint's concerted attempts to narrate his own persona.

Significantly, in his autobiography Pierrepoint laid claim to something more than professionalism - hanging as a vocation. He articulated this point in quasi-religious language and reflected that his most quoted statement was his assertion to the Royal Commission that hanging was 'sacred' to him (Pierrepoint, 1974). In this book, Pierrepoint describes himself as having been chosen as executioner by a 'higher power' (8) and also refers to the hangman role as a 'calling' (16). When taking down the bodies of the hanged, he 'received this flesh [...] gently with the reverence I thought due' (133). Such descriptions contrast with the discourse of penal modernism, mobilising instead an older, although not obsolete, discourse of ritualism and religiosity in relation to capital punishment (see Beschle, 2001). This quasi-religious tone was usually not the one Pierrepoint adopted in his media appearances. In these, as poet Martyn Wiley observed, Pierrepoint often sounded 'chirpy' (*The*

Prospect of Hanging, 1993), and made assertions such as ‘I’ve enjoyed every bloody minute of it’ (*Hangman*, 1987). This created a fissure in his self-representation. However, the dominant portrayal of ‘his sense of vocation’ (Weatherby, 1979) helped to create a wise and morally blameless persona for a hangman who did not carry the burden of responsibility for the state’s killing.

The Reformed Hangman

Following retirement, the Reformed Hangman becomes a stern critic of execution, exposing its brutality and futility. He is a culturally useful figure in abolitionist and anti-capital punishment arguments. The hangman’s capacity to reform and renounce capital punishment was embodied by James Berry. After being removed from the official list of executioners, he became a Congregationalist lay preacher when ‘the light came to him at Bradford railway station’ (*Gloucester Citizen*, 1907). Berry gave evangelising sermons at churches, missions and workhouses, during which he blamed his own previous ‘riotous living’ on the ‘loathsome task’ of hanging (*Gloucester Citizen*, 1907). He highlighted flaws in capital punishment by claiming to have hanged innocent people. Robert G Elliott, New York’s official executioner 1926-1939, argued in his memoirs that capital punishment should be abolished as it was not necessary to society’s safety (Kirchmeier, 2015). His *New York Times* (1939) obituary explained how he ‘kept his emotions to himself; tended his flower garden; dreamed of the day when there should no longer be the ancient biblical law of a life for a life’.

Like the iteration of the Professional Hangman, Pierrepoint did not invent the Reformed Hangman aspect of his cultural persona, rather he finessed it for the post-abolition era. His autobiography famously stated that ‘[c]apital punishment, in my view, achieved nothing except revenge’ (1974: 8) and it was in this book that this iteration of his persona was developed. He identifies inconsistencies in reactions to hanging, noting that although there was an ‘outcry’ about the execution of glamorous Ruth Ellis, other women executed or reprieved at around the same time did not receive the same concern from the public. Reprieves were political, rather than justice-based, decisions. In addition to labelling the death penalty ‘a primitive desire for revenge’ (210), Pierrepoint asserted, ‘in what I have done I have not prevented a single murder’ (211). As Klein (2006) argues, *Executioner* was published at a time when the political and public debate about capital punishment had been reignited by terrorist murders in England, and this helped to raise the book’s profile.

Pierrepoint’s reputed anti-capital punishment views have been vital to the construction of his cultural persona, but his publicly expressed standpoint was by no means straightforward. When he resigned, he claimed to have never found the hangman role ‘repugnant’ and ‘[n]or did it offend

against my conscience' (Pierrepoint, 1956). Despite in the 1970s criticising the death penalty, unlike Berry he never expressed personal regret or disgust for hanging. In 1978, Pierrepoint took part in a Cambridge University debate to speak against the motion to restore the death penalty (Klein, 2006). In media appearances, he was less clear cut. During an episode of book programme, *Read All About It* (1977), when asked why he opposed hanging, he replied 'Since I wrote that book, things have changed'. A police officer friend had been shot and Pierrepoint described himself as 'on a see-saw, I don't know which way to think'. In the same year, the *Daily Mail* quoted him as stating 'My opinions on capital punishment are my own. I wouldn't commit myself to either side now' (O'Neill, 1977).

In common with many people, Pierrepoint articulated complicated, ambivalent views about the death penalty. Nevertheless, the myth of the reformed hangman begun in his autobiography was frequently cited in arguments against the reintroduction of capital punishment. This demonstrates how crucial this book has been in influencing views of Pierrepoint's cultural persona and the meanings attached to the figure of the hangman in post-abolition Britain. Commenting on the new Conservative Government's vote on hanging, the *Daily Mirror* (1979) asserted that 'Most of those involved in hanging have turned against it [...] our most notorious hangman, Albert Pierrepoint'. In relation to a further vote in 1983, *The Times* (1983) quoted Pierrepoint as proclaiming hanging to be 'barbaric' and as stating 'I don't think an eye for an eye works anymore' (Evans, 1983). That hanging was about vengeance was given 'eloquent testimony' in his autobiography, according to John Gunn (1983) in *The Guardian*.

In the 1990s, the Derek Bentley case regained prominence due to a film, *Let Him Have It* (1991) (which in the execution scene features a kindly Pierrepoint), and a long running campaign for a pardon waged by his surviving relatives. A feature on the Bentley case in the *Daily Mail* stated that Pierrepoint was 'sympathetic to Bentley' and 'is now a strong opponent of capital punishment, saying it is not a deterrent' (Clare, 1991). When Bentley's murder conviction was quashed in 1998, several newspapers ran a previously unpublished extract from *Executioner*, which detailed his hanging. This further demonstrated how in newspaper representations Pierrepoint's persona was a bridge to cultural memories of capital punishment, particularly those articulated to highlight abolition as a necessary constituent of modernity and civilisation. The *Mirror* (1998) explained to its readers that he subsequently became a campaigner against the death penalty. A letter writer to *The Guardian*, in response to its publication of the Bentley extract on its front page, argued that Pierrepoint's 'brave confession' that execution was not a deterrent 'is an absolute argument against ever bringing back hanging' (Richardson, 1998). Obituaries and articles about Pierrepoint's death in 1992 highlighted 'his opposition to the death penalty' (*Daily Mail*, 1992) or described him as an anti-

capital punishment campaigner after his resignation (*The Observer*, 1992). 'Campaigner' was something of an overstatement but this anti-death penalty version of Pierrepoint was further entrenched by the biopic. Reviewing the film, which ends by displaying a quote from its subject about hanging as revenge, French (2006) described Pierrepoint as 'our most prolific chief hangman of the 20th century and, next to Arthur Koestler, the most celebrated opponent of capital punishment as well'. In drawing this comparison, French both sanitised and simplified Pierrepoint, but aptly illustrated the post-abolition cultural resonance of the Reformed Hangman persona.

In an era when very few people had first-hand experience of execution, Pierrepoint was irrefutably an expert, and one who was recognised for his professionalism. If the person who had actually put the noose around the necks of the condemned described the death penalty as barbaric, motivated by revenge, or not a deterrent then these arguments gained extra strength from his authoritative position as someone who knew more about the human interaction of execution than anyone else. After Pierrepoint's death, his reformation remained a significant aspect of his cultural persona, with the biopic tracing his character's increasing discomfort with the hangman role. Longstanding criticisms of abolitionism constructed the 'anti' position as naive, unmanly, or a result of squeamishness. None of these charges could be levelled at Pierrepoint, the man who had once executed 27 people in one day. Unlike the voices calling for the restoration of the gallows, he could be cited as someone who knew capital punishment very well and had rejected it. If disapproval of the death penalty was open to criticism as elite, intellectual detachment, Pierrepoint was a useful counter to this in arguments against reintroduction. As discussed, this relied on a selective interpretation of his public statements, which seems to have overstated the strength and fixity of his position.

Pierrepoint, the Reformed Hangman, has been an important and enduring portrayal, but not one that has gone uncontested. Syd Dernly, Pierrepoint's assistant in the 1950s, pithily commented in his memoirs '[w]hen you have hanged more than 680 people, it's a hell of a time to find out that you do not believe capital punishment achieves anything' (1989: 199). In an article published in *The Independent* to coincide with the release of the biopic, Cahal Milmo (2006) expressed scepticism about Pierrepoint's reformation, arguing '[h]ere was a philosopher executioner who only professed his own verdict long after it no longer mattered'. As explored in the section on the development of the hangman persona, there were also those with anti-capital punishment views who found Pierrepoint distasteful or even sinister and did not embrace this reformed version.

The Haunted Hangman

The final iteration of the hangman persona emphasises the cumulative, negative effects on the executioner of the experience of killing people for money, whereby his past actions return to haunt him. The Haunted Hangman evokes the subterranean horror lingering in the 'modern' execution. That ex-hangmen frequently did not thrive seemed to be borne out by accounts of their post-hanging lives. James Billington was committed to prison in 1906 due to his failure to pay maintenance in order to release his wife and two children from the workhouse (*Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 1906). James Berry, as discussed above, found religion and renounced hanging. Before seeing the light, he had intended to kill himself 'so wretched, wicked and debauched he had become' (*Gloucester Citizen*, 1907). John Hulbert, former State executioner of New York (and therefore operator of the electric chair), committed suicide in 1929 three years after his retirement (*New York Times*, 1929). The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (1929) described him as a 'haunted man' in their report of his suicide.

The most tragic ex-hangman figure was John Ellis, who attempted suicide by shooting in 1924 and succeeded by cutting his own throat in 1932. Ellis was reported to be 'haunted' by the 1923 execution of Edith Thompson,³ widely rumoured to have been gory and botched (XXXX, 2014). Reporting his first suicide attempt, the *Hull Daily Mail* (1924) reflected that 'the most hardened man must at times be unnerved by the accumulation of grim memories that the work provides, and that a public executioner has to face a sort of social ostracism'. Following his death, the *Nottingham Evening Post* (1932) referred to the 'jeers and insults' that a hangman had to put up with and explained that, according to Ellis, '[i]n company some people get up and won't stay in the same room with you'. The pain of ostracism spoke of continuities with the hangman's historical marginalisation from respectable society. The haunting of John Ellis by Edith Thompson's ghost evoked gothic horror – in this case, the ghost story's convention of the past returning to haunt the perpetrator (Briggs, 2012). This haunting was, as I have argued elsewhere, a reminder of the 'bloody violence of anti-modern punishment' that could not be banished from hanging (Seal, 2014: 126).

Gothic horror employs tropes of 'gruesome injury and trauma, and melancholic haunting', and continues to attach to late modern penalty (Grant, 2004: 111). The popular press is an important source in which this discourse circulates. The supposed haunting of Pierrepoint by his past at the end of his life emerged in tabloid newspapers in the 1990s and insinuated the gothic. By 1991, Pierrepoint lived in a nursing home and had dementia. The *News of the World*, ran a story entitled 'Twilight Years of a Haunted Hangman', which stated '[t]he ghost of the gallows has come to haunt Britain's most famous hangman' and asserted that he was 'stricken with remorse' about his past (quoted in Klein, 2006: 228). The following year, the *Daily Mirror* (1992) also played on the gothic

and reported that the matron of his home 'DENIED reports that he was obsessed with knots'. The executioner as haunted by his actions is a powerful and recurrent trope that lays bare ongoing cultural ambivalences about the death penalty. These depictions of Pierrepoint as ultimately unable to escape the horror of his former role expose anxiety about whether it is possible to fully justify, or come to terms with, execution. They speak of its potential for moral and spiritual pollution.

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first century rendering of the haunted hangman particularly emphasises trauma and the putative damaging psychological effects of execution on the executioner. The portrayal of Pierrepoint as eventually haunted by his proximity to death and his past actions is central to his depiction in the biopic. This fictional version of the hangman relates that there are things in his head and 'I can keep them at bay. But they're waiting for me, they're waiting for me to let my guard down, they're waiting for me all the bloody time they are', and explains that he hanged more people than was good for him in Germany (*Pierrepoint*, 2005). The turning point for the character, however, is when he must hang his friend, Tish, a regular in his pub with whom he sings duets. Pierrepoint returns home from Strangeways Prison drunk, something which is extremely out of character and plaintively begs his wife, Anne, to '[t]ell me I'm not a bad man' (*Pierrepoint*, 2005). He is also haunted by dreams of Tish. Hanging has become intolerable for Pierrepoint and although he resigns from the list of executioners over not being paid expenses for reprieves, this merely provides him with the pretext he needs to bow out with dignity. Newspaper features on Pierrepoint inspired by the film related that hanging Tish was 'one of the hardest he would endure' and the conflict over expenses was 'his opportunity to escape a role that had begun to trouble him' (Dunk, 2006).

Crucially, unlike the Professional and Reformed Hangman, this iteration was not based on Pierrepoint's agentic self-representation, either in his autobiography or media appearances. On the contrary, his narrative of professionalism and public duty insulated him from questions of personal and moral responsibility (Greenfield, 2013). As he explained, 'I didn't kill them. I executed them' (*Hangman*, 1987). In *Executioner's* account of his gruelling schedule when hanging the Nazi war criminals, he asserts '[t]hese multiple executions were exhausting mentally and physically – not morally' (Pierrepoint, 1974: 157). If someone such as Tish, who drank in a hangman's pub, was not deterred then deterrence arguments were flimsy, but he was not a cause of nightmares. Pierrepoint explained hanging Tish 'ha[d] to be done. And I don't get a shiver' (1987). He claimed never to have executed an innocent person, arguing that Timothy Evans, pardoned in 1966, was guilty of the murders of his wife and baby despite wide acceptance that multiple murderer, John Christie, was responsible. When asked on a television programme how he felt about hanging Christie after having

hanged Evans, *Pierrepoint (Read All About It, 1977)* sidestepped the question's implication, answering 'I never troubled about the crime'.

Certainly in relation to the persona that he chose to convey, *Pierrepoint* was not haunted or traumatised by his prolific career as the nation's hangman. Rather, his craft and professionalism were constructed as a source of pride, even if he acknowledged that the institution of capital punishment was flawed. Pro-death penalty journalist, Peter Hitchens (2006), disputed the film's portrayal of the hangman, arguing that *Pierrepoint* would not have been troubled by dreams of Tish. From *Pierrepoint*'s public faces at least, it is difficult to disagree. Significantly, the Haunted Hangman persona developed once he had stopped making media appearances and therefore stopped narrating his own representation.

The interpretation of *Pierrepoint* as haunted partly derived from the contradiction between his 'compassion' and 'humanity' and seemingly clear conscience. It is potentially difficult to reconcile 'a man of complexity and kindness' (Cooper, 2006) with the *Pierrepoint* who claimed 'I sleep very well at night' (Cropper, 1986). The Haunted Hangman of the film is a twenty-first century character. He is beset by a trauma made recognisable in the context of the abundant circulation of images of pain and suffering in late twentieth-century public discourse, in which 'trauma stands for truth' (Berlant, 1999: 72). Contemporary American abolitionist campaigns highlight the 'secondary trauma' caused by executions that affects executioners, wardens, clergy, journalists and the relatives of the executed and their victims (Equal Justice USA, 2014; New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, 2014). Academic research has also explored the secondary trauma of execution. Lifton and Mitchell (2000) identify 'executioner stress' as responsible for symptoms such as depression, nightmares and lack of emotional feeling amongst former execution team members in the United States and Gil et al argue (2006) that executioners can experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to their repeated direct exposure to death. In addition to *Pierrepoint*, films *The Green Mile* (1999) and *Monster's Ball* (2001) also explore the impact of capital punishment on prison guards and the executioner (Papke, 2012).

These points about the wider harms of execution are made in *Pierrepoint* (2005) through the portrayal of its main character as a haunted, traumatised hangman, and exemplify how the film contributes to contemporary arguments against capital punishment in the United States and elsewhere. Girling (2005) examines how, drawing on its status as a 'death penalty free zone', the European Union, and European campaigning groups, are significant in opposing capital punishment worldwide. *Pierrepoint* (2005) can be interpreted as an example of this European abolitionism. However, the Haunted Hangman persona that it portrays also resonates with an older, gothic-

inflected ambivalence about the executioner, according to which he is forever tainted and cannot escape the ghosts of the hanged.

Conclusion

Albert Pierrepoint exercised agency in relation to the cultivation of his public character and the construction of the cultural persona of hangman. He became the embodiment of the hangman (Edberg, 2004). Mediation was crucial to projecting this persona (Corner, 2003; Langer, 2010) – both through his autobiography and media appearances – and through the articles and elements of the biopic that took their lead from the source material he provided. As a public, mediated representation, however, the hangman persona was much more than just Pierrepoint's creation. There were strong historical antecedents for all three iterations of the persona and the final one, the Haunted Hangman, developed contrary to his self-representation.

The three iterations of the hangman persona show how it was an important 'symbolic vehicle' for cultural understandings of capital punishment over time, and for areas of contestation and ambivalence (Edberg, 2004). The Professional Hangman cohered with imperatives of penal modernism and attempts to resolve the problem of bodily punishment by making hanging a painless, civilised process. This element of the persona could find approval from those who were pro-death penalty, but also from those who were anti-capital punishment but sympathetic to Pierrepoint's projection of duty and working class respectability, and accepted his lack of moral responsibility for hanging. The Reformed Hangman chimed with arguments against the reintroduction of capital punishment in the 1970s and 80s – and the statements in Pierrepoint's autobiography about hanging as revenge and its inconsistent application bolstered this position. However, his own more equivocal comments about the death penalty in subsequent media appearances both showed how personas are created through mediation, and reflected wider complex and ambivalent views on capital punishment. The Haunted Hangman conveyed enduring feelings of gothic horror associated with the death penalty and the figure of the executioner, and persists as an element of contemporary abolitionist arguments about the secondary trauma of execution. The epitomizing function of the cultural persona of hangman, and its role as a condensing symbol of capital punishment, meant that understandings of and reactions to Pierrepoint's different faces could be in conflict or opposition (Corner, 2003; Edberg, 2004) – there were dissenters from each of the iterations of his public character, and also those who found him a distasteful, rather than admirable, figure.

The era of the English hangman has long been over. Syd Dernley, the last surviving practitioner of hanging, died in 1994. However, the executioner's cultural persona lives on. Darshan Singh,

Singapore's chief executioner from 1959 – 2006, hanged around a thousand people, more than doubling Pierrepont's total. Singh placed emphasis on being quick, efficient and painless, echoing the Professional Hangman iteration, although he exhibited 'few signs of ambivalence' (Johnson, 2013: 45) about his role and believed that he had helped to make Singapore 'one of the safest nations on Earth' (11). Donald Cabana, former warden at Mississippi State Penitentiary, oversaw executions there in the gas chamber. He published a memoir, *Death at Midnight* (1998), after leaving the prison for academia. In the tradition of the reformed executioner, he espoused anti-capital punishment views due to uncertainty surrounding the guilt of one prisoner and his friendship with another. Jerry Givens (2013) was state executioner for Virginia from 1982 - 1999 and is now an anti-capital punishment campaigner and board member of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty. Former Florida prison warden turned anti-death penalty campaigner, Ron McAndrew, has described himself as 'haunted by the men I was asked to execute in the name of Florida' (Timmins, 2010) and Allen Ault, corrections commissioner for Georgia in the early 1990s, is 'haunted by the executions he oversaw' (Lyons, 2014).

Several American states that use lethal injection have laws to conceal the identities of the execution team and to prevent the public from knowing where execution drugs are purchased (see Dart, 2014). Rather than an identifiable chief executioner, who is responsible for putting the noose around the neck of the condemned or throwing the switch of the electric chair, lethal injection involves a team of personnel with compartmentalized tasks, often including medical professionals (Roko, 2007). This ultimate attempt to dissipate and hide responsibility for the execution event (even from the executioners themselves) has not resolved the ambivalence of the death penalty. Secrecy laws face ongoing legal challenge, particularly following the botched execution by lethal injection of Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma in April 2014 (Pilkington and Swain, 2014). Lockett writhed in pain after the execution team failed to properly insert an intravenous line into his body and died of a heart attack 43 minutes after the execution began (Vogue, 2015). The problem of the pain and suffering of bodily punishment remains (Sarat, 2014) - even without the embodied figure of the executioner and despite the medicalised, clinical method of lethal injection.

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¹ Hangmen were always English, although they also performed executions in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. This tradition continued even after Irish independence, as Irishmen were reluctant to take on the role (Doyle and O’Donnell, 2012).

² Timothy Evans was executed in 1950 for the murder of his wife and baby. In 1953, it emerged that his neighbour, John Christie, had the bodies of seven women concealed in his former flat and was likely responsible for the murders for which Evans hanged. Derek Bentley was executed aged 19 for the murder of a police officer, even though his friend carried out the shooting and Bentley was under arrest at the time. In 1955, Ruth Ellis became the last woman to be hanged in Britain. She shot her abusive lover and received a great deal of public sympathy but no reprieve.

³ Edith Thompson was hanged along with her lover, Freddie Bywaters, for the murder of her husband, Percy.