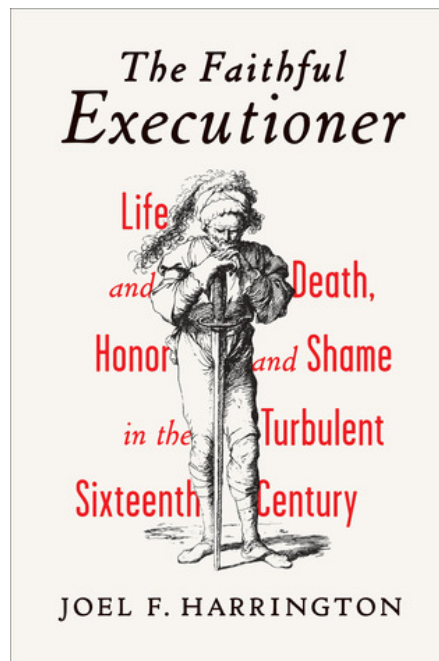




The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century

Joel F. Harrington

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The extraordinary story of a Renaissance-era executioner and his world, based on a rare and overlooked journal.

In the late 1500s a Nuremberg man named Frantz Schmidt began to do something utterly remarkable for his era: he started keeping a journal. But what makes Schmidt even more compelling to us is his day job. For forty-five years, Schmidt was an efficient and prolific public executioner, employed by the state to extract confessions and put convicted criminals to death. In his years of service, he executed 361 people and tortured, flogged, or disfigured hundreds more. Is it possible that a man who practiced such cruelty could also be insightful, compassionate, humane—even progressive?

In his groundbreaking book, the historian Joel F. Harrington looks for the answer in Schmidt's journal, whose immense significance has been ignored until now. Harrington uncovers details of Schmidt's medical practice, his marriage to a woman ten years older than him, his efforts at penal reform, his almost touching obsession with social status, and most of all his conflicted relationship with his own craft and the growing sense that it could not be squared with his faith.

A biography of an ordinary man struggling for his soul, *The Faithful Executioner* is also an unparalleled portrait of Europe on the cusp of modernity, yet riven by conflict and encumbered by paranoia, superstition, and abuses of power. In his intimate portrait of a Nuremberg executioner, Harrington also sheds light on our own fraught historical moment.

The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century Details

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From Reader Review The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century for online ebook

Darren Anderson says

Excellent book. For the most part, he presents a fair narrative without imposing modern ideas of morality. He places a lot of the practices of the day in a context that creates sympathy rather than disgust.

Aaron Kent says

This one is currently holding the title of best book I have read in 2013. It tells the story of a 16th century executioner, through the critical study of a journal he kept through-out the course of his career. Although it isn't a journal in our modern sense of the word, it nevertheless informs this utterly engrossing look at medieval society in 16th century Nuremburg. It's a real eye opener and refutes a lot of (non academic) preconceptions I think the majority of us have concerning the middle ages, capital punishment and the caricature of "the executioner" we all take for granted. Instead, Harrington presents a moving and intimate portrait of an individual tasked with the brutal job of meting out justice in the form of floggings, decapitations, breaking on the wheel, garoting and the like. This isn't a book for the squeamish, but even during the worst descriptions of the crimes perpetrated, or the graphic executions that followed, you get a real sense of the humanity of all involved. This isn't a one dimensional rendering of an ogre in a black mask with an axe. Frantz Schmidt, our Faithful Executioner is presented in deservedly clear light.

Rick Skwiot says

Although not recommended for the faint of heart, this book gives much more than graphic and gruesome accounts of 16th century German crime and criminal justice--the latter with sanctioned torture to elicit confessions, burning "witches" alive, and other forms of painful punishment and death. (Underscoring how painful and frightening were some execution methods, are accounts of prisoners throwing themselves down before the court and kissing the judges' hands in gratitude for commuting their sentence to mere beheading.) Historian Joel Harrington mines the journal of Nuremberg executioner Frantz Schmidt and other contemporary sources to paint a convincing portrait of the social class restraints, religious imperatives, superstitions, political realities, epidemics, and medical practices of a distant time and place--though in some ways revealing how little we have changed.

Emily says

The chief storyline of this book concerns Meister Frantz Schmidt's efforts to restore his family name. Schmidt's father, a respectable woodsman, had the misfortune to be standing around when a despised local noble required someone to dispatch some supposed would-be assassins, on the spot. The father was permanently tainted by this killing, leaving him and his son no choice but to become professional executioners. Frantz spends his entire (unusually long) life trying to revive his family's good name through careful strategy and unfailing probity and piousness. Reading this, you feel lucky to live in a modern society

where you can't incur lifelong untouchability through the whim of a social superior. Frantz's carefulness and thoughtfulness also make him surprisingly sympathetic for a guy who personally killed nearly 400 people and tortured or maimed many more. No other livelihood was open to him, so he tried to be good at his unwanted profession.

I hadn't previously thought much about this, but early modern jurisdictions didn't imprison people for long periods of time; they simply jailed them until they were dealt with, by execution, flogging or some kind of punitive mutilation, or exile. Because the punishments were a one-time deal, they tended to be more extreme, with executions being handed down for property crimes or for repeated minor crimes, simply because that was the only way to permanently deal with a criminal. However, you don't walk away from this book thinking that we--by which I mean Americans--are much smarter than these early modern people in terms of devising punishments that are coherent or give the desired results. In fact, reading about how the city councilors get frustrated with recidivists and order the execution of teenagers, you're reminded how frequently teenagers get charged as adults in our society, just because someone thought them especially bad.

I read this book because I'm interested in 16th century Nuremberg, not because I'm interested in crime and punishment, and on that front the arrangement of the material is a little disappointing. Harrington follows the chronology of Schmidt's journal and the progress of his quest for social rehabilitation, which is quite interesting but perhaps does not warrant 250 pages. Meanwhile, you get glimpses of late 16th to early 17th century life throughout--ridiculous nicknames of career criminals, tiffs between master and servant, unruly teens, the fashion for "earth apples" (globes), recurrent outbreaks of plague, etc.--but these take a backseat to Schmidt's career. Harrington is so successful at bringing his narrow topic to life that I wish he'd highlighted and interpreted more of the details he encountered along the way.

As it is, this seems to occupy an uncomfortable middle ground between academic history (reflected by the author's meticulousness and contextualization) and popular history (reflected by its focus on one person's biography and inspiring personal story). I'd recommend it if you're interested in the period or in law and order.

Jill says

I'm a crime fanatic so this book was right up my alley. It is a non-fiction work based on the diary of an actual executioner in Germany in the late 1500's. The book delved into an executioner's place in his world; well-paid but ostracized by greater society. In addition to executing 300+ people during his tenure, Frantz Schmidt also acted as the town doctor, married and raised children. There is of course much time spent on execution methods at the time and various other physical punishments. However, the existence of the journal allows the author to share the thoughts, feelings and personal history from Schmidt which gives the book a very personal feel.

Jonathan says

An utterly fascinating book. The memoir of a stuffy German early 16thC hangman, torturer and medical guru is impossible to resist. I love a book that takes you into a completely different world and this delivers in spades. The subject of the book is the famous executioner Frantz Schmidt of Nuremberg who kept a diary that went on to become famous and an object of fascination to all sorts of people over the centuries. The author discovers an early version of the memoirs that he believes places an unusual spin on the executioner's life and one that explains his life better than was previously understood. Basically Schmidt's father was made

to execute someone on orders of the local Lord by being in the wrong place at the wrong time and ended up being shunned and only able to find work as an executioner, which then became the family business as executioners were shunned and kept out of respectable trades. Hence Franz' life was an effort to become respectable and allow his descendants to escape the shameful family trade into which they had fallen, eventually he succeeded. His pious and fastidious approach to the work is unnerving. The Nuremberg city council loved his steady and righteous work which was an important part of maintaining civil order during a tumultuous time - the executioner was seen as an unfortunate but essential part of society. This book places him in his time and is an extraordinary bit of research and scholarship but I was frustrated that there weren't more extended passages from the original text. I tried in vain to locate the original (translated) text - which 400 years later must be well out of copyright! - but with no luck (still can't believe this, not even on Gutenberg). All the splendid research would have been even better with a few longer passages to let the authors words speak. The details are hilarious, the superstitious wisdom of the day makes for many amusing tales : the man who pretended to be a ghost so as to avoid paying rent, the doctors who poo poohed the common practice of consuming body parts to cure sickness but only because they thought body parts healed people for totally different more "scientific" reasons. Reminds of the quackery involved in a book I read on London in 1700 and how the midwives who practised the art of "catching" the baby caused many mothers to die because of their unsanitary practices, poorer women were better off especially as they couldn't afford to send their kids off to wet nurses where disease was rampant. One telling, and horrifying scene tells of the "spastics" who, hoping to be cured of their condition, would wait by the chopping block to drink the fresh-spurting blood so as to get the maximum benefit of the fresh blood (younger the better obviously as well). A good reminder of the stupidity of common wisdom and fashionable experts. Note will correct spelling later, its late!

wally says

the faithful executioner: life and death, honor and shame in the turbulent sixteenth century, kindle...that is not among the list here at goodreads...2013, joel f. harrington

i think i saw a question related to this in the big quiz and so here i am.

read the introduction by harrington...and the only exception i take to that intro is his characterization of the man as *killer*..."professional killers like frantz schmidt have long been feared...catch a glimpse of the inner life of this professional torturer and killer...let alone a career killer from a distant time and place." i'll hazard that harrington is opposed to the death penalty and that that stance is apparent throughout this historical narrative.

the introduction has some curiosity, as it describes an execution, a public burning...for counterfeiting. till then, i had the cartoon-image of the stubbled man w/a black kerchief tied low, a big blade, so forth so on. there is a drawing of frantz in the intro...his back to us...a sword in his hands.

too...executions were civic events...not hidden away behind thick walls during the dark of night.

today, i read monthly in a magazine i subscribe to about honest citizens, violated by repeat offenders, their list of felonies as long as their victims' arms, made to become executioners in their own homes, due to societies failure to punish the offender. we've come so far. those events rarely make prime time...unless there's an agenda under our white hispanic sun.

anyway...onward & upward.

moving right along, update, 3 aug 13, 7:48 p.m. e.s.t.

yeah okay then...

honor...this idea presented in the introduction, makes me wonder what role it played in the justice system. is there *honor* among thieves...not the kind of honor that cliché brings to my mind...but how did honor play in torture? i get the idea that torture was not the prevailing method here...but torture was an option. *honor* among men must have played a part.

so anyway...the intro also tells the reader how this came to be...that there was actually an "original" journal, one that had been edited and changed a bit, and that this original had more information than the journal entries...although even so, this is not a confessional by the executioner...there is no right/wrong commentary on what transpired...simply the facts, ma'am...so-and-so executed...*botched*, the few times it took more than one swing to execute the condemned.

too...i wondered about "rates," what w/our penchant for polls, numbers, the big advertising companies (the establishment media) always on us about numbers...*billie is doing better in school because he eats kellogg's corn flakes!*...but so far, there is little to nothing about 'crime rates'...that sort of thing.

although here at the @25%-mark on the kindle, there is noted the change in numbers--less executions for theft...this that the other. there is/has been a sprinkling of cases from the record, both recalcitrant "poor sinners" and those who repented.

too...i considered *The Gunslinger* from the author of horror himself, Stephen King, and the public execution portrayed therein...tame, by comparison to some of the brutal public humiliations recorded herein. perhaps that says more about us and how we have come to view executions...as does king's other story on the matter, *The Green Mile*, wherein an innocent man spends time on the mile...in the death-house.

i've read a few others...*The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town* by John Grisham...*The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer...those i recall...there might be others.

but too...although grisham's story...don't recall if that was fact or fiction...mailer's story is historical fiction...but all of them glorify the condemned...in king's mile, it makes for great theatre...

but in this one here...the end for more than a few is given in brief or more...the variations, sorrow/repentance...drunken folly...that is part and parcel of the process. today, it is by invite only, and the public can only presume to know the process or the condemned's state-of-mind.

in king's mile, paul knowingly and willingly goes through w/an execution although he knows the process has been botched by a member of the team. that failing on his part is seldom, if ever, spoken about when praise is heaped on king and his story...there...the focus is an innocent man, and rightfully so...but in this one here, *botched* executions were at times met by public stonings of the executioner. archers at one of frantz's executions protected him from an irate public.

ummmm...more later

update, finished, 4 aug 13, sunday afternoon, 4:24 p.m. e.s.t.

good read. a brief look into life of the late 16th, early 17th centuries...in part through the equally as brief journal entries of an executioner who spent most of his working life in nuremburg.

an outsider there--he came from another town--he persevered. eventually he became a citizen of that city...the description of which is mind-boggling--a castle w/walls a couple hundred feet high, the centerpiece of the town...although when he first moved there, he was not "in". Nor was his profession, as executor...although people also went to them for healing.

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Moonreaders says

Având la baz? jurnalul c?l?ului Frantz Schmidt, întregul volum este o fresc? a Nurnberg-ului sec. al XVI-lea. "C?l?ul credincios" este un valoros document istoric, care ne ofer? informa?ii de o roman?are minim? despre lumea de acum c?teva secole.

Afl?m cât de importante erau onoarea, renumele, provenien?a ?i apartene?a în aplicarea pedepselor ?i a tratamentului pentru scoaterea la lumin? a m?rturisirilor.

Acceptarea puterii statului ca entitate recunoscut? divin, într-o lume în care supersti?ia era la fel de r?spândit? precum religia, s-a realizat prin lupta împotriva criminalit??ii. Reprezentan?ii statului vegheau ca siguran?a locuitorilor ?i pl?titorilor de taxe s? fie p?strat?. În acest sens, execu?iile publice aveau un dublu rol: de a preveni noi acte de criminalitate ?i de a ar?ta puterea ?i autoritatea statului. Scenariul prestabilit ?i teatralitatea ocupau un rol primordial în ritualul de execu?ie.

Profesia de c?l?u era indezirabil? ?i s?rac? în beneficii. Este fascinant destinul lui meister Frantz Schmidt, care a reu?i pe parcursul a aproape jum?tate de secol, s? ascead? de la statutul de persoan? blamat? la cel de cet?ean onorabil. Recunoa?terea profesiei sale s-a realizat concomitent cu recunoa?terea statului ca putere suveran?.

Recenzia detaliat? o g?si?i aici:<http://www.moonreaders.org/istorie/20...>

Oleksandr Zholud says

This book is based chiefly on the diary of Nuremberg executioner Frantz Schmidt, who worked in this capacity for the city from 1588 to 1617. It also uses other contemporary sources to depict not only a life of the protagonist, but the picture of late medieval Europe.

While there are some gruesome details of the trade, they aren't the point. The executioner himself says almost nothing about the executions and nothing at all about tortures, which he had to perform.

There are several works of fiction that attempt to look in the executioner's mind, to show either his cruelty, or more often his dignity in performing the necessary albeit unpleasant job. Not in this case: Frantz disliked the job, or more precisely the low status associated with it: hangmen had to live outside the city, they weren't allowed to enter a church, could be stoned to death by a mob, etc. He became the executioner because his father was pressed into the job and all other trades were closed for him. Therefore, his lifetime goal was to save his children from the similar fate.

One of the more surprising discoveries (for me) was that he also worked as a healer, which makes sense if you think about it – the knowledge of anatomy and healing external wounds are essential for a torturer. The number of his patients was around 15000, which is much more than 394 persons he executed.

A great window into the late medieval Europe.

Susan says

This is the fascinating story of Meister Frantz Schmidt (1555 - 1634) who was an executioner and torturer in Nuremberg and who kept a diary, which the author has fleshed out into an incredible biography of a man and a time which is little known. It was unusual to keep a diary in those times, but Schmidt kept a personal journal of the executions he carried out throughout his long career, from 1573 at the age of just nineteen, to his retirement in 1618.

One of the oddest, and saddest, things about Schmidt's life is that he became an executioner through a quirk of fate when his father, Heinrich, was called upon by a noble to act as executioner after he had arrested three locals for plotting against his life. Up to that point, Heinrich had been a woodsman and fowler. After the hapless man was forced to kill he had no choice but to become an executioner. Since the Middle Ages, executioners were shunned and excluded by society and tended to bond together out of necessity. When this terrible social exclusion was forced upon him, Heinrich did the best he could and trained his son Frantz in his new profession - although both men had plans to try to escape the calling forced upon them.

It has to be said that Frantz did the best he could under the circumstances. His training began with using rhubarb stalks to practice on (apparently similar to the sinews in the neck - much of this book is gruesome, so this is not for the squeamish), continuing with beheading stray dogs and helping his father in his work before, ahem, striking out on his own. During his long career, he personally killed three hundred and ninety four people, torturing countless others. For this was a time of violence, when the executioner had to administer justice for the community, both to avenge the victims and end the threat posed by dangerous criminals as well as setting an example of what could happen if crimes were committed.

Frantz, in fact, lived in "the golden age of the executioner", when it was decided to prosecute criminals more effectively and full time experts were needed in this reform of criminal justice. Professional executioners were seen as part of this reform. Although many of the crimes discussed in this book seem to be treated harshly, and the stories of torture are often troubling to read, there is also a great deal of compassion and good sense. Although this was a time when superstition was rife and women often accused of witchcraft, the area where Frantz worked seemed to have fairly enlightened views about such things. Often Frantz seems troubled by violence against children (thieves often chopped off babies hands, using them as candles and good luck charms) and also made disparaging comments about prisoners who refused to act in a solemn or repentant way at their executions. Although most prisoners seemed to try to make some kind of religious peace at the end of their life, some refused to cooperate (understandably) and others treated events with levity; one proclaiming that the priests words gave him, "a headache" and apparently dying with a smirk on his face. Other attempts to leave corpses on the gallows as a warning was not treated with the respect those in authority expected - one thief was stripped to his stockings, causing a surge of curious onlookers, including

"cheeky females", which caused the executioner to be ordered to make him respectable again.

This is a really interesting read and the author has done a great job of taking a journal with little that is personal and recreating the life of Frantz Schmidt. We hear of his success, his tragedies, the sudden onset of plague in the community, the way crimes were viewed and dealt with and read, with interest, whether he ever managed to escape the fate thrust upon his family and find social acceptance. Highly recommended.

Clif Hostetler says

This nonfiction history provides a uniquely detailed description of life in Reformation-era Europe as revealed by the personal diary of Meister Franz Schmidt who worked as a professional executioner from 1573 to 1618. During the final forty years of this career he held the official position of Executioner for the German city of Nuremberg. It appears that his written record of executions and torture was begun during the first five years covered by the journal as a resumé to support his application for the full time salaried position at Nuremberg. The diary was continued from that point through the end of his career as a supporting document to his application for a declaration of respectability from the Holy Roman Emperor which was made six years after his retirement from work.

One of the reasons I was interested in this book was to see if perhaps Franz Schmidt may have executed one of my anabaptist ancestors. As it turns out the word "anabaptist" is not mentioned in the book. Most of the turmoil of the early Reformation years took place during the first half of the sixteenth century, and things had settled down by Franz Schmidt's time. Nuremberg was a Lutheran City within the Holy Roman Empire that was mostly Catholic, but their relationship seemed peaceful. Executed prisoners could choose between the Lutheran or Catholic final rites. The first half of the Thirty Years War occurred elsewhere, and by the time the war came to Nuremberg, Franz Schmidt was no longer living.

It so happens that many executions of witches were taking place throughout Europe during this era. Fortunately, Nuremberg was resistant to this particular craze. One incident recounted in this book was of a man who showed up in town spreading rumors of witchcraft. Nuremberg city official ended up executing the accuser for disruption of the peace. In another case the person making accusations was banned from the city.

Many of the crimes being punished were related to theft and robbery. For minor crimes it appears that the first sentence was stocks, whipping, or banishment (a.k.a forced to leave town). When faced with a case of multiple repeat offenses the city didn't have facilities for long term incarceration, so execution was about the only practical option available. Also, torture to force a confession seems to be the usual procedure used. Franz Schmidt did make some comments regarding cases of false accusations, but never questioned the technique of using torture to obtain confessions.

During his career he averaged about one execution per month, a torture session per week, and probably daily consultations on matters of health, healing, and wounds. His involvement with the healing arts may seem counter intuitive to people of today, but during his time he probably knew more about the human body than almost anybody else in the city. It is known from his journal that he sold cadavers to physicians for dissection and on several occasions performed the dissections himself. It was also part of the executioner's official responsibilities to mend and heal the effects of his torture prior to execution.

Frantz Schmidt's profession was deemed dishonorable in the class conscious society of the time. However, it was very important that he not be tainted by association with the criminal element of the time which left him somewhat isolated socially. Nevertheless, it was important for him that he be recognized for his competence and dependability in spite of this isolation. One way he broadcast his professional demeanor and separation

from the ruff was to refrain from alcohol.

Thus Frantz did not make any great social sacrifice when he came to what was a remarkable decision for a man of his era: never to drink wine, beer, or alcohol of any kind. It was a vow he apparently kept for the rest of his life and for which he eventually became widely known and admired. Frantz's religious beliefs may have played a role in this choice, but complete abstinence from alcohol was rare in the sixteenth century, even among the most godly men and women. Our modern inclination might be to speculate that he had suffered from the embarrassing behavior or drunken violence of someone close to him—perhaps even his own father. But whatever his religious or emotional reasons, Schmidt's vow not to drink was also a carefully calculated career decision. Early modern Europeans considered it a given that the executioner would drink to excess—a stereo type with a great deal of truth behind it. Compelled to kill and torture their fellow human beings again and again, many in Frantz's profession likely sought preexecution courage in a tankard or two of beer or oblivion after the fact in a large quantity of wine. By publicly refuting the legendary fondness of his fellow executioners for the bottle, Frantz found an extraordinary means of underscoring the sobriety, both literal and figurative, of the way he had chosen to live. This jujitsu maneuver cleverly took the disadvantage of his de facto social isolation and turned it into a virtue that distinguish him in the eyes of future employers and perhaps even society at large. The quiet journeyman who sat without companions—or drink—in a far corner of the tavern may have been lonely but he knew exactly what he was doing.?

I learned about this book from the following short review that was in the PageADay Book Lover's Calendar for 5/14/2015:

In the late 1500s, a public executioner in Nuremberg, Germany, began keeping a journal. During his 45 years in the profession, he executed 394 people and tortured hundreds more. Historian Joel F. Harrington uses the diaries as a way to explore Frantz Schmidt's life, revealing aspects of his medical practice, his marriage, and his growing sense that his day job did not line up with his religious beliefs. This unusual biography is also a portrait of Europe in the period when it still had one foot in the Dark Ages.

THE FAITHFUL EXECUTIONER: LIFE AND DEATH, HONOR AND SHAME IN THE TURBULENT SIXTEENTH CENTURY, by Joel F. Harrington (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013)

The following is a link to an example of an executioner of that era with the job of killing of 88 people in one day. <https://m.facebook.com/marginalmennon...>

Similar books:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/simila...>

Trevor Kew says

Quite a unique read, this historical account of this infamous profession focuses on the life of one particular 16th-century individual, Frantz Schmidt, based on the diary he kept over more than 40 years as Nuremberg's executioner.

Harrington is to be commended for the way he has approached this subject. The temptation to sensationalise aspects the book must have been quite strong; instead, he combines some (truly) revolting details with the mundane reality of what was, after all, a job. I also appreciated how clearly Schmidt's life and profession (and indeed the death penalty itself) were contextualised, as well. What I found most surprising was that executioners tended to be relatively wealthy, but were still considered untouchables by their society.

Paradoxically, the fact that many of them were also healers is fascinating as well, though given their familiarity with anatomy (ahem...), there is more of a logical connection than might be thought.

This book is well worth a read for anyone interested in medieval history told on both a personal and societal level. Highly recommended.

Cristina says

A macabre tour de force, based on historical records of a German executioner's life and social position in the 16th century.
