

R. A. Houston, Suicide and society in northern England and Scotland, c.1500-1850

A three year award is sought to complete an established and large scale project which explores patterns and understandings of suicide in northern England and Scotland between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-nineteenth century. It builds on my recent interdisciplinary work on the social understandings of mental disability, but the sources used and the questions raised are quite different. The project seeks by systematic comparison to revise existing interpretations, to open up new dimensions of the topic and ultimately to offer a fresh interpretation of social, political and cultural change in Britain and Europe over an extended time period.

Any study of early modern British suicide necessarily sits in the shadow of M. MacDonald and T. Murphy's bold and highly influential Sleepless souls (1990). Using coroners' inquests these American scholars showed a complete reversal in verdicts from near-universal felo de se (wilful self-murder 'at the instigation of the devil') to non compos mentis (mentally incapacitated and thus not responsible). The former verdict entailed forfeiture of goods to the crown or lord and a ritual desecration of the body, the latter no such penalties. This near-total shift in verdicts marked a complete change in mentalities between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: attitudes towards suicide changed from 'harshness' to 'leniency' in England, self-murder becoming in the process 'decriminalized, secularized, and medicalized'. These developments are related to changes in political life, ideologies, attitudes to property and religious beliefs. In its many facets, they hint, suicide demonstrates the 'modernization' of society. So widely accepted has this picture become that it is now enshrined in undergraduate textbooks on British history and is implicit or explicit in European studies (see below).

Perhaps because it appears to provide such a complete explanation, drawing together many strands of early modern life, Sleepless souls has not stimulated much further research on that period. In contrast, medieval and Victorian suicide is better served (Murray 1998; 2000; Anderson, 1987; Bailey, 1998) and Continental studies have burgeoned (see below). With a handful of notable exceptions, early modern British suicide remains a curiosity that is worth a page or a footnote in studies of mortality, mentalities or madness.

While persuasive, MacDonald & Murphy's work suffers from problems in methodology and conceptualisation. Because of the concentration on a narrow range of sources (especially coroners' verdicts reported to and disputed at London courts), the local context of forfeitures and their purpose remains imperfectly understood. My preliminary research on Star Chamber cases involving disputes over suicide, coupled with further research on local records from the north of England, suggest that cases sued centrally were not the tip of an iceberg of remorseless exploitation of the suicide's family by a rampant state, but rare examples where the normal process of accommodation and composition had gone wrong – examples that should not be abstracted from the usual process of negotiation (compromise, co-operation and resistance), which was the keynote of early-modern governance. In Scotland too, forfeiture of a suicide's goods took account of local needs and sensibilities with the crown and Exchequer officials acting as a 'social engineers'. Crown, lords, officials, community and family were all involved in re-ordering complex social and economic networks after a suicidal death.

Complexity and ambivalence are also at the heart of prescriptive and proscriptive literature, notably on the religious and medical dimensions of suicide. My initial investigations suggest that the role of the devil in understanding suicide was never strong in the popular mind, even if it was for some Calvinist divines. The phrase 'at the instigation of the devil' was a legal term of art used in England to describe culpability, not a literal statement of belief, and its disappearance from inquest verdicts c.1650-1750 was related not to 'secularization', but to changing conceptions of legal proof. Scots rarely attributed suicide to diabolic intervention. Suicide had long been a secular matter in the sense that penalties (except denial of Christian burial) were all administered by temporal authorities. Yet at the same time it always had a religious dimension. What changed over time was not the role of religion, but the conception of God from vengeful to benign. Suicide was not secularised in any meaningful sense, for the role of religion in understanding it had simply changed rather than been marginalised. My research uses attitudes to suicide to demonstrate the fallacy of premature secularization.

The totality of the shift in mind-set has thus been exaggerated. Attitudes among legal and medical writers too were far from uniform in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, doctors recognising that not all suicides were mad and not all mad people

suicidal: early nineteenth-century asylum records prove this conclusively. The senses in which suicide became 'medicalized' are rather narrow, involving a more routine authentication of cause of death by doctors. However, this was a nineteenth- not an eighteenth-century development. Furthermore, self-murder had always been seen as at least partly a medical issue, recognised even in the sixteenth century as having corporeal as well as psychological or spiritual causes.

In a simple sense, suicide was a crime in early modern Europe, but the extent to which it was 'criminalized' varied greatly over time. Instead of seeing a shift from 'harsh' to 'lenient' treatment of suicides' bodies, we should ask why there was a period when corpses were treated differently. In Scotland some were dragged and gibbeted, as they were on the Continent. Yet this seems to have been judicially sanctioned for only a short time under James VI as part of the explosion of punishment that characterised late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Europe. Penalties ceased to be imposed on suicides in Scotland a century or more before enlightened writers started advocating penal reform. Awareness of chronology is vital if the outcome of the phenomenon ('Enlightenment') is not to become the explanation for it. Penalties are indeed an important indicator of continuity and change. Profane burial was far from normal for English suicides. Throughout the early modern period selectivity and ambivalence characterised attitudes to interment. Suicide was not totally decriminalised in Britain until 1961, though the penalties against it were very gradually removed by usage and then by statute.

Constructions placed on suicide in coroners' courts – in particular the near-automatic relationship between self-murder and insanity after c.1700 - seem to have differed significantly from those in other contexts or 'domains'. Coroners' juries may have felt growing compassion for the families of suicides, yet eighteenth-century criminal court juries comprised of the same kinds of people could make discriminating decisions about insanity and responsibility, which had similar consequences for the reputation, emotional equanimity and material circumstances of the accused person's family – not to mention his own peace of mind and chances of life. In both Scotland and England, court cases involving contracts and wills made by suicides show a steadfast refusal among lawyers to take for granted that suicides were necessarily mentally disabled. Instead they condemned this linkage as 'bad law ... and wretched philosophy'. Coroners' inquests represent a one-sided picture of understandings of

suicide. Only by using a range of sources that are not specifically about suicide and by studying self-murder in multiple local settings and domains can the complex and varying meanings surrounding it be fully understood.

Design of the project

Comparable sources will be used where ever possible. These include newspapers, asylum records, legal texts, medical writings and civil court suits. Family papers provide valuable qualitative evidence of how suicides were understood by survivors, but estate records also contain important information on the mechanics of dealing with forfeited goods (what to do about the family of a leaseholder, for example). Previously unused collections of coroners' inquests exist in local archives and among the papers of the Northern Assize Circuit at the NA: inquests (including on suicides) continued to be handed into the assize judges until well into the nineteenth century (they were not just passed on to King's Bench) and those for the Northern Circuit can be found in ASSI 47; ASSI 44 also contains untransmitted suicide inquests as do the Palatinate of Durham Pleas of the Crown records. Thus known documentation on a specific geographical area will be interrogated closely for what the evidence actually shows. However, many sources not previously considered in connection with suicide will also be used, including disputes over inheritance following a suicide heard by the Consistory Court of York and Scottish Commissary Courts. There is no Scottish equivalent of English coroners' inquests. Instead records of forfeitures kept by the Scottish Exchequer allow quantitative analysis of the social status, sex, seasonality, geography and means of Scottish suicide between c.1550 and c.1700. Initial sampling suggests that a database of 7-800 suicides can be created for 1550-1750. Preliminary work suggests intriguing differences with England, notably the sex of recorded suicides and the more violent means used by Scots to kill themselves. The Scottish sources are fiscal in origin and an English comparison will involve detailed work in enrolled Sheriffs' accounts and other Exchequer materials (such as E178, where inventoried goods may be found).

The methods used will be principally qualitative, though some quantification will be possible. Theories derived from sociology, anthropology and psychology will inform an analysis whose inspiration will come mainly from social history, but which will also be guided by the distinctive approaches of political, legal, medical and cultural historians.

As well as revising, refining and redrawing the picture of English suicide, and opening up another unstudied area of Scottish history, the project will contribute to the growing awareness of regional variations. ‘That there were differences between the suicide cultures of various parts of mid-Victorian England and Wales seems clear enough; and the question to address is therefore where these cultural boundaries ran, and how they should be explained.’ (Anderson, 1987:239-40) Were northern English approaches to suicide closer to those of southern Scotland than the south of England? The nature of regional and national cultural patterns and identities is an issue I addressed in my first book (1985) and one which continues to exercise British historians. Understandings of suicide create one of the ‘grids’ which allow the historian to appreciate different mentalities, politics and forms of social organisation over time and space. Suicide was construed in social and medical terms, but it also had important political, ideological, religious, criminological and legal dimensions and is a valuable indicator of structures and trends in all these fields. Furthermore, there are opportunities to understand the wider comparative dimensions to this topic, for good published work on European suicide now exists, including Jansson (1998), Lederer (1995), Lind (1999), Vandekerckhove (2000) and Watt (2000; 2004). Yet even these remain more or less trapped within the modernization narrative, which I hope to replace with a more sophisticated model of social and cultural change in early modern Europe.

The project will further the central question that has been the focus of my research for the last 25 years: where does Scotland fit into patterns of social development evidenced elsewhere in Britain and Europe, and what light does the Scottish experience shed on those developments? Most of my published research has been on Scotland, where I have tried both to explore issues receiving attention among historians of England and Europe (1994) and (2001) and to open up new fields and use fresh approaches to topics not yet studied in these historiographies (2000 bis). However, I am qualified to do this project because: my underlying research goal has always required comparison; my early work specifically compared Scotland with northern England; my honours teaching has always been exclusively on English social history and I have supervised and examined doctoral research on the north of England as well as Scotland; I am an advisor to the AHRB Centre for North-East England History and thus thoroughly immersed in research and conferences on the region.

