Suicide in the Middle Ages. Volume I: The Violent against Themselves

Why attempt the history of suicide? Leaving aside the rare episodes of mass self-destruction by such people as sect members and warriors determined to die rather than fall into the hands of their enemies, suicides have never made up more than a tiny m inority of any known human population. A rate of 25 per 100,000, or one in four thousand, counts as high in the late twentieth century. Yet the subject has attracted an increasing amount of attention from social historians driven to enquire what motives underlay so drastic a response to human misfortune, and to what extent those motives changed in the course of time. As Alexander Murray points out, suicide is an extreme reaction to situations which many other people besides those who ultimately take the ir own lives find hard to bear. Each self-killer is a promontory of mankind, feeling an anguish which may differ only in degree from that felt by countless fellow human beings. Suicides provide 'a searchlight into otherwise elusive areas of private emot ion' (p. 11). Historians and sociologists writing about suicide since Émile Durkheim transformed its study in 1897 have seen its incidence as a barometer of powerful social pressures and forces. So much for the general considerations which have dr awn historians to the study of suicide. But the 'first idea' or hypothesis which 'provoked and shaped this project' (p. 7) was the notion that material progress, and the diminution of physical dangers, may have exacerbated the 'problems of the soul' which underlie suicide. Of this idea more must be said in the discussion of Murray's provisional conclusions.

This book is only the first part of a planned trilogy. It deals with suicides themselves, their motives, and other immediate circumstances of their deaths. The second volume will deal with medieval law, religion and conventions concerning suicide, the third with the exploration of suicidal emotions by psychologists, poets,

and pastors. The historian of medieval suicide faces a far more difficult task than his colleagues charting developments in more recent periods. The most obvious problem lies in the acute dearth or absence of most of the sorts of material (censuses, registers of deaths or burials, bills of mortality, newspaper reports, records of inquests and criminal proceedings) which survive in increasing quantities from the centuries after 1500. This difficulty has simply enhanced the relish of his chosen subject's challenge for Alexander Murray, and sharpened his ingenuity in exploiting the available sources. Built in marshy ground, his edifice sits on three great piles: chronicles, judicial re cords, and religious narratives, above all from England, France, Germany, and Italy. A large proportion of his book is taken up by the careful assessment of his sources. How did a particular text come into existence? What were its author's chief concerns and motives? What are the discernible biases in texts of its class? What were the conventions which shaped them? How did ostensibly 'factual' narratives of suicide develop and achieve the forms in which they have come down to us? What differentiates the various types of record of suicide, and what do they have in common? This ongoing critical appraisal alternates in steady rhythm with a succession of 'portraits' or stories sufficiently detailed to give us a vivid picture of a particular suicidal person and event.

Medieval accounts of suicide describe it as a private deed which its perpetrators did their best to conceal. It was often difficult to prove, and commonly the subject of discreet allusion by means of euphemism, metaphor and circumlocution. Suicide was widely felt to be too terrible to talk about, and though the word *suicida* was coined as early as c. 1178, it was not accepted into general use, and seems to have vanished until well after the end of the Middle Ages. Chronicles, largely devoted to the deeds of the great and famous, were extremely reticent on this subject. In what Murray calls 'whispers' about the deaths of the high born, self-killing was mentioned obliquely, or given as one of two or three alternative explanations of a particular d eath. Only the suicides of men such as 'the fallen favourite or functionary' who had risen above his station and then encountered sudden disgrace, were likely to be reported unambiguously in the 'ordinary, mainstream historical chronicle' (p. 81). Less re ticent were the chronicles of towns and religious houses. All sorts of crimes and punishments figure largely in the former, and anything affecting monastic property rights in the latter. Both took note of what appeared to be spectacular divine punishment s: atrocious weather, for example, following the suicides of town inhabitants or failure to treat their corpses with appropriate severity. Chronicles of all sorts nevertheless provided only about 6 per cent of the 560 entries in Murray's 'Register of Reco rded Suicidal Incidents' (pp. 423-69) which went into his statistical exercise.

The great bulk of his cases come from judicial records, and of these cases a large majority, 354, are English. As Murray explains, the English crown was unique among medieval monarchies in its success in imposing the principle that *any* violent d eath within his kingdom was *prima facie* a crime against the king and therefore a matter for investigation by royal justice. In France, the fragmentation of the Carolingian monarchy had left the exercise of first instance High Justice in the hands o f about a thousand seigneurial courts, the overwhelming majority of which have left no records. (Murray lists about twenty-three incidents found in town and abbey registers.) By a vigorous development of appellate jurisdiction and by insistence on its pow er to remit excessively harsh penalties the later medieval French monarchy took cognisance of a growing mass of cases originating in lower courts. The examples of suicide so far discovered in such French royal archives as those of the Paris *Parlement* nevertheless amount to a mere fraction of the cases found in the surviving English eyre and coroners' rolls, though they provide fuller 'portraits' than the English sources do. Within the Empire, the monarchy exercised no effective jurisdiction over suicide. Many German town courts, on the other hand, did investigate all violent deaths, including suicides, as breaches of the Town Peace. Nearly fifty cases appear in Murray's register, by far the largest group from any class of continental judicial r ecord.

A very detailed canonization process, the only one mentioned in Murray's register, links the chapters devoted to judicial evidence (of which this sort of process is an exceptional type) and those devoted to miracles and *exempla.* The story is on e of the most vivid of Murray's 'portraits'. The investigation concerned Nicholas of Tolentino (1245-1305) an Italian Austin friar. Among the evidence considered was the case of Giacomuccio Fatteboni, a 55 year old peasant who had suddenly hanged himself in 1320. Anguished prayers to Nicholas had been followed by Giacomuccio's return to life. Nobody, least of all Giacomuccio himself,

could explain his suicide attempt convincingly. Some thought he had been out of his mind. Alexander Murray speculates that marital incompatibility was the trigger. His wife nevertheless prayed fervently that he be spared so shameful a death. She knew that suicides ended up in the town ditch - a clear indication that Giacomuccio's case was by no means unique.

'Religious sources', especially saints' lives, sermons and didactic treatises, yielded about 14 per cent of the instances of suicidal behaviour in Murray's statistical sample. Of all his sources, these in general give the fullest accounts of feelings, motives and circumstances. Several give glimpses of unhappy personal experiences of love or family life which were seldom mentioned in judicial records. Some throw light on feelings of religious melancholy and despair, especially among the inmates of mona steries. Since the main purposes of such narratives were to point a moral or to illustrate the power of a saint, they often omitted such details as the name of the individual concerned, or the date of the incident. The memory of miraculous events was some times kept alive in various different versions of a basic narrative. In analysing clusters of this sort, Murray tells the 'story of a story' as part of the process of examining a miracle's 'credentials' and getting as close as possible to the original eve nt.

This volume ends with some 'quasi-statistical' (p. 352) analysis of cases in Murray's register of suicides. He readily recognises (p. 350) that so far as the Middle Ages are concerned the difficulties facing statisticians are usually 'so big as almost to block the way to statistics at all'. Yet his conviction of their importance, a 'version of the faith of Durkheim' makes him try to clear the path. Several of the questions he poses can only be answered from English judicial sources, and some of them f or only a few years of the long period (1000-1500) subject to scrutiny. The penultimate chapter demonstrates the impossibility of supplying the 'Absolute Numbers' to which its title refers. The Essex eyre roll of 1285 points to an annual suicide rate of 0.88 per 100,000 since 1272. That figure is based on the assumption that the Eyre had picked up all suicides occurring over the previous thirteen years. Murray concedes that the assumption is an unrealistic one. It is impossible to determine what sort of multiplier ought to be used in order to bring that figure into line with more modern statistics. Another significant statistic, apart from the overall suicide rate, is the suicide: homicide ratio. The averages worked out from a number of series of coron ers' and eyre rolls range from 1:27 and 1:39, pointing to a far higher level of inter-personal violence, or a far lower level of suicide, or both, than prevailed in some later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century societies for which Murray gives figur es. The longest single series of coroners' rolls exploited, containing the largest number of deaths, relating to Wiltshire between 1340 and 1384, was however excluded from the above figures. It yielded a ratio of 1:17, and the 1249 Wiltshire eyre one of 1:13. Some criminal registers of French abbatial jurisdictions give figures close to those for Wiltshire, but Murray believes that these registers under-recorded murderers.

The statistics presented in the last chapter, 'The Person and the Act', relate to a larger range of variables. Figures for distribution by sex show that males were nearly always in a majority among recorded suicides. The majority calculated from Englis h legal sources, 74 per cent, is the same as for all sources used in the study taken together. There are naturally variations between different types of record, but the broad picture is very similar to that presented by modern sources, at least prior to 1 950. Only English legal sources include a body of data concerning personal wealth large enough to provide the basis for useful statistics. They show a clear predominance of the poor and destitute, which is again what one might expect in the light of data from later centuries. The reasons for suicide most frequently mentioned in legal sources (but in only a relatively small proportion of cases) were madness, disease, and imprisonment or accusation. These also appear in the literary sources (chronicles, sa ints' lives, etc.), but among a much wider range of motives, including despair or *tristitia,* love or bereavement, shame and disgrace. Hanging was by far the commonest recorded method, followed by drowning and 'blades'; the rese mblance between the figure presenting these data and one based on a large volume of late nineteenth-century statistics is very close. According to English legal sources, the months of the year during which suicide was commonest were December, July and Apr il (in that order). December and April also appear as dangerous months in a very much smaller set of cases recorded in French legal sources. The April peak may have been due to the growing shortage of food in late winter and early spring, the July one (ex clusively male) to exceptionally heavy field work at that time of year. These are

perhaps the clearest and most significant conclusions of a fascinating chapter.

No reader can fail to be struck by the spaciousness of this volume. Its author seems to have been the recipient of a plenary dispensation from word limits. Most other scholars who have worked with the sorts of source which yield stories or 'portraits' can only envy Murray the scope allowed him for scrupulous and detailed assessment of his material and the unfolding of engrossing narratives. Reading social history can sometimes be hard work, like hacking and sweating one's way through the dense undergro wth of a dark, crowded wood. Guided by Alexander Murray, an immensely knowledgeable historian and consummate story-teller, the reader canters through rolling park land, enjoying broad vistas and well-spaced stands of timber.

This is not to suggest that all is neat and tidy within Murray's domain. Some of his efforts at categorization appear loose or even inconsistent. The story of Giacomuccio Fatteboni, for example, appears in a chapter devoted to judicial sources, but in the register at the end of the book it is assigned to the 'Religious Sources' section. A story of a young Santiago pilgrim is headed 'A Man *Loses* a Woman' (my emphasis). Yet this pilgrim had already renounced his lover, albeit reluctantly; the po int of the story was that the devil made him believe that he could not atone for his past sins save by self-mutilation and suicide. It might have fitted better in a chapter exploring the theme of religious despair. Alexander Murray quite clearly and fairl y warns his readers that his register of suicides makes no claims to completeness. But the process of selecting records, especially English court rolls, seems to have been a somewhat haphazard one. Few fifteenth-century English judicial sources seem to have been used. All readers need to consult the great register of suicidal incidents with circumspection, noting that it was still being expanded *after* the gates were closed for statistical purposes, and that a list of addenda, beginning six pages after the end of the main register, includes a number of cases 'accidentally omitted'.

These knots in the woodwork of a splendid edifice hardly impair its integrity. The early modernist may however have one fairly serious misgiving about the drift of Murray's argument. Both his account of the origins of his project in the introduction an d a more extended discussion in the penultimate chapter indicate his attachment to the notion that suicidal impulses have probably strengthened since the Middle Ages. But the provisional explanations offered in the two passages differ sharply from one ano ther. Progress has not made everybody happy, he remarks in the introduction. 'The absence of physical challenge can sometimes even add to people's unhappiness. That may be why "problems of the soul" ... have become more conspicuous in the twent ieth century' (p. 8). In his penultimate chapter, however, Murray looks forward, not as far as the twentieth century, but only to the sixteenth, and produces very different explanations for what he believes to have been a dramatic rise in suicide at that time. He notes the enormous increase in verdicts of *felo de se* in Tudor records already observed by such historians as Roy Hunnisett, Simon Stevenson and Michael Macdonald. In Nuremberg too there was a massive growth in the reported incidence of suicide during the sixteenth century. Why should this have happened? The fullest explanation of these developments yet offered, at any rate for England, by Michael Macdonald in *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (1990) emphasizes abov e all the greatly enhanced efficiency of Tudor government and its vigorous determination to uncover the causes of all violent deaths. Murray is convinced that such arguments provide only part of the answer. He points to the growing volume of sixteenth-cen tury complaint about suicide, the likely impact of 'tough' government on the social tensions which encouraged it, and the disruptions of the Reformation, along with its enhancement of onerous lay religious responsibilities. The Protestant reformers, Murr ay suggests, spread among the laity habits of religious introspection once confined to the monastery.

It is not clear from Alexander Murray's comments on post-medieval suicide whether he regards the sixteenth-century rise in its recorded incidence as a particularly severe but passing episode, or the prelude to a long-term upward trend characteristic of modern societies. Michael Macdonald's carefully constructed graphs of rates and numbers of suicides show that increases in *recorded* suicide in early modern England were not sustained. The rate of suicide calculated from King's Bench inquisitions, for example, fell steadily after a peak in the early 1570s. Professor Macdonald, in the most comprehensive analysis so far published, reports that the identifiable motives of suicide in the early modern period were in very broad terms similar to those fo und by Alexander Murray in medieval sources. Although some enemies of the godly certainly claimed

that they were exceptionally prone to suicidal melancholy, Macdonald concludes that the claim was exaggerated. In any case such religious melancholy was impl icated in only a very small minority of recorded suicides. On the other hand Macdonald frequently mentions poverty and material immiseration as important elements of the context of suicide. If indeed suicide rates increased during the sixteenth century (s omething we are unlikely ever to know for certain), this might have been due more to the fall in living standards than to the traumas caused by the Reformation. It seems curious that Alexander Murray plays down the role of material conditions when some of the statistics in his own last chapter seem to underline their importance. The consistent preponderance of the poor and destitute among reported suicides, and the rising trend of suicide during the hungry months of late winter and early spring are the cl earest examples. In order to test for the late middle ages a hypothesis concerning the effects of material immiseration on suicide rates, one would turn to those terrible years of the early fourteenth century when medieval population, reaching its high w ater mark, pressed hard on resources, and England experienced between 1315 and 1322 the worst agrarian crisis of its history. But perhaps insufficient records survive for this purpose.

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