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Book Review: The History of the Death Penalty in Colorado

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BOOK REVIEW

The History of the Death Penalty in Colorado. Timberline Book Series. By Michael L. Radelet. Forewords by Sister Helen Prejean and Stephen Leonard. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017. xxi + 283 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendices, notes, index. \$45.00, cloth; \$36.00, ebook.)

The State of Colorado—the Centennial State—is known for its majestic Rocky Mountains, hiking trails, columbine, western spirit, ranchers, cowboys, and rodeos. In *The History of the Death Penalty in Colorado*, the internationally renowned sociologist Michael Radelet effectively lassos the past and present state of affairs as regards a centuries-old practice—capital punishment—in his home state. His subjects: the use of the noose from pre-territorial days through statehood, Colorado’s transition to the gas chamber then lethal injection, the abolition movement, and the current *de facto* moratorium on executions, courtesy of Governor John Hickenlooper.

Radelet’s meticulously researched study of Colorado’s death penalty should be of considerable interest not just to state residents but to anyone concerned about the United States’ ultimate sanction. He begins—as Sister Helen Prejean’s foreword notes—“with the forty-year history of public executions in the state” (p. xi). He then methodically describes Colorado’s sordid history of hangings, asphyxiations, and—in the case of Gary Lee Davis, the 103rd person put to death in the state—lethal injection. All of Colorado’s executions from 1859 through the present—the earliest ones viewed by thousands of spectators—are cataloged in Appendix 1, with separate

appendices describing those sentenced to die but never executed.

Radelet is a serious academic with a storyteller’s eye for colorful detail. He brings this story to vivid life even though gruesome state-sanctioned killings—and extra-judicial lynchings, numbering 175 from 1859 to 1919—pepper the text. Among his findings: five men sentenced to death from 1859 to 1860 in People’s Courts that led to summary hangings in newly settled Denver; the use of an hydraulic “upright jerker,” a gallows employing weights and pulleys to hang men (leading to a “Jerked to Jesus” newspaper headline and to horribly botched executions); three men executed in alphabetical order on one day and another triple execution in which coin flips determined the order of the men’s deaths; a prison warden who refused to participate in executions; a “gag” law barring reportage of them; the posthumous pardon of Joe Arridy, an innocent man executed in 1937; and the testing of the state’s three-seat gas chamber on animals before its first use in 1934.

This book highlights the death penalty’s arbitrariness and cruelty, and it shows how often the mentally ill, minorities, and the poor are executed. It provides a microcosm of America’s death penalty, but all Americans should read it for its deep insight into that penalty’s inhumanity. To understand capital punishment’s fatal flaws, look westward to Colorado—and to an expert, adept tour guide, Professor Radelet.

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