



British Enlightenment Research Network – Public Lecture

Fierce Justice and Legal Reform: The Limits of the Enlightenment Program in Late Eighteenth-Century England

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In the aftermath of the Gordon Riots of 1780, and in the midst of an increasingly futile effort to regain the American colonies, legal authorities in England intensified their reliance on the gallows in an effort to promote law and order. By restricting the extension of pardons to offenders convicted of capital crimes, they insured that a higher proportion of criminals suffered death for their offences. There is something surprising about the timing of this turn to the gallows. The preceding fifteen years had seen a mounting tide of criticism of the English criminal law and, in particular, of its reliance upon the death penalty. The sudden turn to death in the 1780s offers an interesting moment to assess the status of the “bloody code” in eighteenth-century England. This paper will examine the reaction, or lack of it, to the dramatic rise in the number of people executed in the early years of the decade. Of equal interest is the reaction to the precipitous decline in execution rates that occurred at the end of the decade and that accompanied the return of large scale transportation, this time to Australia.

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By Monday 11th December

