



Victorians Against the Gallows (Library of Victorian Studies)

James Gregory

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By the time that Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, the list of crimes liable to attract the death penalty had effectively been reduced to murder. Yet, despite this, the gallows remained a source of controversy in Victorian Britain and there was a growing unease in liberal quarters surrounding the question of capital punishment. In this book, James Gregory examines organised efforts to abolish capital punishment in Britain and the Empire in the Victorian era, focusing particularly on the activities of the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment. The amelioration of the notoriously 'Bloody Code' of the British state may have limited capital punishment effectively to a small number of murderers after 1840 but, despite this, capital punishment was a matter of perennial debate, from the local arena of school debating societies to the 'imperial Parliament', and a topic to trouble the minds of thoughtful Victorians across the British world. Drawing on a wide range of sources, from pamphlets by abolitionists or their opponents to gallows broadsides, official inquiries, provincial newspapers, novels and short stories, Gregory studies a movement acknowledged by contemporaries to be agitating one of the 'questions of the day' - challenging as it did contemporary theology, state infliction of violence, and prevalent ideas about punishment. He explores important aspects such as: capital punishment debates in the 'Lex Britannica' of British colonies and dominions, the role of women abolitionists and the class and gendered inflexions to the 'gallows question', the representation of the problem of capital punishment in Victorian fiction, and the relationship between abolitionists and the Home Office which exercised the royal prerogative of mercy. While the abolitionism of Nonconformist reformers such as the Quakers and Unitarians is familiar, Gregory introduces the reader to the abolitionist debates in Jewish, secularist and spiritualist circles, and explores themes such as the imagined role of the Queen as 'fount of mercy' and the disturbing figure of the hangman. Studying the provincial, national and international aspects to the movement, *Victorians Against the Gallows* offers an important contribution to our understanding of Victorian reform activities, and Victorian culture.

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