

Ruth Ellis in the Condemned Cell:

Voyeurism and Resistance

Dr Lizzie Seal is a Lecturer in Criminology at Durham University.

Introduction

When Ruth Ellis became the last woman to be executed in England and Wales in July 1955, execution had long been something which took place in private. It is a well established argument that the ending of public execution in 1868 made the practice mundane and bureaucratic, and ‘wrung out of it any trace of the ceremonial and festive’.¹ However, whilst many twentieth-century executions were carried out with little attention from the press or public, there were also ‘spectacular’ cases which commanded high levels of interest and were intensively reported. These cases demonstrated that the execution audience still existed and craved details about the final, tense days of the condemned, when the Home Secretary’s exercise of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy was the only thing that could save them from the gallows. The hanging of Ruth Ellis was one such case.

Ruth Ellis was found guilty of murdering her boyfriend, David Blakely, whom she shot outside a pub in Hampstead. She received considerable public sympathy for a host of reasons related to her status as the mother of two children; the nature of the killing, which was perceived as a frenzied crime of passion; the physical and emotional mistreatment she had received from David; and concerns that cultural double standards meant that a man in a similar case would be reprieved.² It is easy to understand why Ruth’s case was high profile and widely reported, particularly in the popular press. The trial offered a melodramatic love story about the stormy relationship between a glamorous, 28-year-old woman from a working class background and a 25-year-old, public school educated ‘cad’, who liked racing motor cars. Headlines described Ruth as a ‘blonde model’, and she had been both a nude model and nightclub hostess. As such, it was a story that gave mid twentieth-century newspaper readers a peek into a transgressive, nocturnal, metropolitan world in which the strictures of conventional respectability did not apply. After her guilty verdict and death sentence, she was incarcerated in

Holloway’s condemned cell. This provided the next phase of the story, in which a young, attractive mother faced execution for a murder that seemed eminently understandable. Particularly compelling was her insistence that she did not want to be reprieved and was ready to die. This article examines how Ruth Ellis’ time in the condemned cell was reported in the popular press. It argues that such newspaper coverage reflected both voyeuristic fascination with the incarceration and imminent hanging of a beautiful young woman, and admiration for her strength and forbearance under grimly adverse conditions.

Fascination with the Condemned Cell

In high profile cases, the behaviour and experience of the murderer in the condemned cell was a topic of curiosity in the popular press. In contrast with ‘serious’ newspapers, like *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, the human interest aspects of the story were important in the reporting of papers with a mass readership, such as the biggest selling newspaper of the era, the *Daily Mirror*. Visits to the condemned cell from friends and family were discussed, as was the imputed state of mind of the prisoner. The apparent coolness of mid twentieth-century ‘mass killer’, Neville Heath, was evidenced through passing the time by playing poker with his guards.³ It was unusual for a woman to be awaiting execution and her ‘out of place-ness’⁴ in such an environment was worthy of comment. A column in the *Daily Express* described the conditions that Louisa Merrifield, convicted in 1953 of murdering an elderly woman, would be experiencing at Strangeways. She would be ‘watched day and night’ but had access to ‘cards, chess and dominoes’ and was also entitled to a pint of beer with her food.⁵

Therefore, the reporting of the prisoner’s time in the condemned cell was a constituent part of the execution story. However, in Ruth Ellis’ case, the fascination with her experience of the death cell was particularly intense. The physical conditions of her incarceration were reported in the *Daily Mirror* as follows: ‘The cell is carpeted. A highly polished long table is screwed into the floor. Mrs Ellis is

1. McGowan, R. (1994) ‘Civilizing Punishment: The End of Public Execution in England’ in *Journal of British Studies* 33:3 p. 281.
2. Seal, L. (2011) ‘Ruth Ellis and Public Contestation of the Death Penalty’ in *The Howard Journal* 50:5 p.492-504.
3. ‘Playing Poker in Death Cell’, *Daily Herald* 9.10.46.
4. Worrall, A. (1981) ‘Out of Place: Female Offenders in Court’ *Probation Journal* 28:3 p.90-92.
5. Hickey, W. (1953) ‘No Censor for Mrs Merrifield’, *Daily Express* 9 September.

allowed flowers, unframed photographs, and books.⁶ The *Mirror* also reported her visits to church on the two Sundays preceding her execution.⁷ Both stories explained that she had roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for lunch, with one adding that this was followed by rice pudding. These mundane details offered readers insight into another exotic location as part of the Ruth Ellis story, although in this phase it was the condemned cell rather than a metropolitan nightclub. A pseudo-domestic setting was evoked, with carpets and flowers, and a parody of an ordinary Sunday with church and Yorkshire pudding was related. The strangeness of the condemned cell was enhanced when it contained a woman, but especially when it contained a woman with the kind of spectacular femininity embodied by Ruth Ellis. Unlike Louisa Merrifield, who was 46 and described as ‘plump’ and ‘dowdy’,⁸ Ruth was perceived as glamorous and sexually attractive, and consequently even more of an oddity as a condemned cell resident.

Jacqueline Rose describes Ruth Ellis as ‘[t]he object of voyeuristic attention’ and the press fascination with her time in the condemned cell clearly illustrates this.⁹ The *Daily Mirror* reported that she was ‘under the care of six dark-uniformed women prison officers’¹⁰ and guarded ‘day and night’.¹¹ Entering the condemned cell meant being denuded of her femininity, a process depicted by the *Daily Express*: ‘She exchanged the smart black costume she wore in court for a frock of drab grey’.¹² An article by Ruth’s mother, Elizabeth Neilson, in the *Sunday Dispatch*, emphasised the change that had taken place in Ruth’s demeanour, stating ‘I remember the affectionate, smart, vigorous girl I knew. And I think about what I have just seen — a bird stripped of its fine feathers in the cage of a condemned cell’.¹³

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This fascination with Ruth’s appearance and with her surveillance by female guards had a sexual element to it but also evinced a deeper desire to know her inner life. Haebich explores the case of Martha Rendell, an Australian woman executed for the murder of her stepson in 1909.¹⁴ She argues that the popular press exhibited a ‘dark strain of voyeuristic curiosity about the condemned woman’s body, mind and soul’, and in focusing on the ‘rituals of monitoring and surveillance of the prisoner in the death cell [...] promised insights into her innermost secrets’.¹⁵ The *Daily Express* published facsimiles of Ruth’s letters to her friend, Frank Neale, which were sent from the condemned cell and communicated her wish to die¹⁶ and the *Woman’s Sunday Mirror* ran her ghost-written life story in four parts, the final instalment appearing the Sunday after her execution.¹⁷ This covered Ruth’s childhood, her move to London from Manchester as a very young woman and subsequent fall from grace, as well as her relationship with David Blakely and details of his violence towards her. As Rose argues, spectacle, femininity and violence are mutually associated

‘in public fantasy life’.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, voyeuristic curiosity in the popular press also shaded into fascination with the macabre. A *Daily Express* article on Ruth’s final hours reported that she had asked for ‘candles to be lighted in her cell while she received Communion’ and had requested that a crucifix should hang from the wall of the execution room.¹⁹

Resistance and Subversion

In addition to these ‘dark strains’ of fascination, another important theme, that of Ruth’s forbearance and fortitude, emerged from the popular press’s coverage of

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6. ‘Ruth Ellis Not to Appeal — Solicitor’, *Daily Mirror* 23.6.55.
 7. See ‘Ruth Ellis Leaves Her Cell to Go to Church’, *Daily Mirror* 4.7.55 and ‘2 Days to Go — Ruth Ellis Says: I am Content to Die’, *Daily Mirror* 11.7.55.
 8. ‘The One Charm of Mrs Louisa Merrifield’ *Daily Mirror*, 4.9.53.
 9. Rose, J. (1988) ‘Margaret Thatcher and Ruth Ellis’ *New Formations* 6 p.8.
 10. ‘Ruth Ellis Not to Appeal — Solicitor’.
 11. Johnson, H. (1955) ‘Ruth Ellis Turns Down a Chance of Life’ *Daily Mirror*, 23 June.
 12. ‘A Light in Holloway’, *Daily Express*, 22.6.55.
 13. Neilson, E. (1955) ‘Ruth Ellis: 10 Days to Go. Mother Cries “Why Torture Her?”’ *Sunday Dispatch*, 3 July This is likely to have been ghost-written.
 14. Haebich, A. (2001) ‘Murdering Stepmothers: the Trial and Execution of Martha Rendell’ in B. A. Levy and F. Murphy (eds.) *Story/telling St Lucia*: University of Queensland Press
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
 16. See ‘Ruth Ellis: No Reprieve’ *Daily Express* 12.7.55 and ‘The Last Letter of Ruth Ellis’ *Daily Express* 14.7.55.
 17. See Ellis, R. (1955) *Woman’s Sunday Mirror* — ‘My Love and Hate’ 26 June; ‘David Gaspard “I Can’t Live Without You”’ 3 July; ‘The Night David Tried to Strangle Me’ 10 July; ‘The Last Words of Ruth Ellis’ 17 July.
 18. Rose (1988), p. 8.
 19. ‘And She Had Three Last Wishes’, *Daily Express*.14.7.55. See also ‘MPs Begin Campaign to End Hanging’, *News Chronicle*, 14.7.55.

her incarceration in the condemned cell. Forbearance was required due to the circumstances in which she found herself. The *Daily Express* reported how she had to endure hearing the strains of 'a weekend concert and variety show' held in Holloway's D Block, which featured contemporary hits such as 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' and 'Strangers in Paradise'. Ruth was forced to 'sit in silence as the choruses faintly echoed along the corridors. The shadow of death by judicial hanging seemed far from that laughter-filled makeshift concert hall'.²⁰

This theme enabled press coverage that was sympathetic towards Ruth, but which also emphasised her strength, and even heroism, rather than feminine frailty. In the *Daily Mirror*, journalist Howard Johnson explained that her 'apparent unconcern' about her plight had surprised 'even the most hardened women officials at Holloway Gaol'. Not only that, she had also 'spent her time cheering up the women officers who guard her day and night'.²¹ Ruth's insistence that she wanted to die was key to this portrayal, and also enabled a subversive popular press representation of a woman who would not bow to what the authorities demanded of her — submissive penitence. Her last letter to Frank Neale, reproduced in the *Express*, assured him 'I am quite happy with the verdict'.²² Two days before her execution, people who visited Ruth were 'amazed at her calmness'.²³ She was grateful to petitioners on her behalf but 'content to die', and also thankful to the 'people attending her in the death cell'.²⁴ This picture of fortitude and resistance was tempered by the fact that Ruth 'changed her mind about being happy to die' the evening before she was due to be hanged.²⁵ However, according to the *Mirror*, she was equal to the occasion when it arrived and 'died calmly, a changed woman from the one who broke down and wept the evening before'.²⁶

Ruth Ellis' combination of bravery and despair was compelling and dramatic. After a sensational trial, with

its narratives of desperate love, violence and debauchery, her transformation into a stoic heroine who accepted her fate made a good story. But it also rewrote the portrayal of Ruth as a 'fast woman' and rather than redeeming her as a weak, pitiable figure, which might have been the more conventionally acceptable way of favourably portraying a woman awaiting execution,²⁷ presented her as someone to be admired. Some articles and letters in the 'serious' and popular press decried the sentimentalism that was exhibited for a beautiful woman facing the gallows.²⁸ However, this criticism missed the subversive elements of the Ruth Ellis story, which highlighted a working class woman's re-appropriation of the state's most potent degradation ceremony. Smith contends that execution 'performances' such as Ruth's 'can trigger narrative shifts' that affect onlookers' perceptions of criminal justice and punishment.²⁹

Popular press fascination with Ruth Ellis' incarceration in the condemned cell was complex and multi-layered. On the one hand, articles' discussion of her surroundings and surveillance appeared calculated to appeal to readers' voyeurism and represented Ruth as a novel oddity in the death cell. On the other hand, reports of her forbearance and fortitude transcended gender/class scripts and made her into a heroine. Either explicitly or by implication,³⁰ this cast doubt on the legitimacy of the state's use of the death penalty, 'help[ing] a little to shift the terms of understanding about hanging law', as Gatrell argues of the 1815 case of Eliza Fenning, a cook executed for the attempted murder by poison of the family that employed her.³¹ Popular press representations of Ruth Ellis in the condemned cell can be interpreted as simultaneously reinforcing and subverting readers' fascination with femininity and capital punishment.

20. 'Ruth Ellis in Death Cell Hears Laughter and Song' *Daily Express* 27.6.55.

21. Johnson (1955) 23 June.

22. 'The Last Letter of Ruth Ellis'.

23. '2 Days to Go — Ruth Ellis Says: I am Content to Die'.

24. Ibid.

25. Woods, P. (1955) 'Lawyer's Dramatic Last-Minute Dash to Save Ruth Ellis' *Daily Mirror* 13 July.

26. 'The Last Hours of Ruth Ellis' *Daily Mirror* 14.7.55.

27. See Ballinger, A. (2007) 'Masculinity in the Dock: Responses to Male Violence and Female Retaliation in England and Wales, 1900-1965' *Social and Legal Studies* 16:4 459-481.

28. See Klare, H. (1955) 'The Death Penalty' Letters to the Editor *The Observer* 17 July and Waterhouse, K. (1955) 'If We Hanged Five Pretty Women' *Daily Mirror* 25 August.

29. Smith, P. (2008) *Punishment and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 54.

30. Some papers, such as the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Herald*, were abolitionist. Others, such as the *Daily Express*, supported retention of capital punishment.

31. Gatrell, V. A. C. (1994) *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People* Oxford: Oxford University Press p. 369.