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REVIEW ESSAY

Death's Histories

Mortal Remains: Death in Early America.
Edited by NANCY ISENBERG and ANDREW BURSTEIN.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
253 pp.

Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell.
ELAINE FORMAN CRANE.
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
236 pp.

I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company: A Novel of Lewis and Clark.
BRIAN HALL.
New York: Viking, 2003.
419 pp.

There is a trail of macabre and fascinating scholarship that glistens like moonlight through the recent annals of early American life, where historians had hitherto been content to study the dead without, however, devoting much attention to death as such. This neglect began to be remedied in the 1970s, as students of American history came under the influence of the great European historians of death such as Philippe Ariès. Yet notwithstanding some important exceptions—including David E. Stannard's *The Puritan Way of Death* (1977)—death in America continued to receive only limited and intermittent historical treatment until the early 1990s, when a slew of books representing a wide range of disciplines began to appear. Among them were Mitchell Breitwieser's *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning* (1990), David Sloane's *The Last Great Necessity* (1991), Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* (1991), Daniel A. Cohen's *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace* (1993), Jay Ruby's *Secure the Shadow* (1995), Sheila Rothman's *Living in the Shadow of Death* (1995), Gary Laderman's

The Sacred Remains (1996), Patricia Cline Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (1998), Karen Halttunen's *Murder Most Foul* (1998), Jeffrey Hammond's *The American Puritan Elegy* (2000), Robert Wells's *Facing the King of Terrors* (2000), and Michael Sappol's *A Traffic of Dead Bodies* (2002).

In often sanguinary and sepulchral detail, this dark syllabus teaches us more than we might have thought it tolerable to know about how and why people died in early America, the ways in which the dying and the dead were treated by the living, their mortuary customs and mourning arts, their attitudes, beliefs, and ideas about death, and their physical remains. Facing this history and the accumulating *disjecta membra* of generations can be unsettling. Yet for all of its obtrusiveness upon the mortal fears we generally seek to evade, this necrotic turn in early American studies is welcome, for it has not only opened up exciting new areas for research but has also directed fresh critical attention to our various historical practices and the extent to which they either enliven or encrypt the past.

The three books under review—a collection of historical essays, a microhistory, and a historical novel—all contribute new material and insights to the expanding history of death in America. The dozen essays in *Mortal Remains* are without exception informative and accessible. *Killed Strangely* is an ingenious synthesis of some original and intensive research. And in reading *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company*, one feels the struggle over the stakes of history to be something especially urgent and real—to be, so to speak, a matter of life and death.

In their introduction to *Mortal Remains*, Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein identify a common goal of the volume's contributors: to "write of life as lived in relation to death as felt" (1). All three books aim at some version of this imperative. Isenberg and Burstein intend that the essays in *Mortal Remains* show how early Americans "combated personal dissolution and attempted to make sense of their suffering and loss while projecting a future of cultural permanence and spiritual value" (1–2). Elaine Forman Crane, in her account of a late seventeenth-century case of matricide, seeks to uncover and interpret "the confluence of events surrounding the tragedy and the ways in which family, community, and authorities responded" (4). And Brian Hall's intent throughout his novel of Lewis and Clark is, as he puts it in his author's note, to "imagine character traits and unrecorded incidents that [provide] plausible explanations for certain historical questions" (413). For Hall, these include many questions about rela-

tions between the living and dead and, centrally, about Meriwether Lewis's suicide.

Little is said of suicide in *Mortal Remains*, but other ways of dying are abundantly and graphically represented. Robert Wells, for example, writes of the "unfamiliar and often loathsome forms of death" caused by epidemics in Cotton Mather's Boston and Elizabeth Drinker's Philadelphia (56). Laura Stevens examines white attitudes toward the "wasting" of Indian populations through war as well as disease. And Daniel Cohen's essay makes murder its focus. Richly illustrated with images from popular crime publications of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Cohen's essay argues for the influence of the earliest and most gruesome English crime publications on later American sensationalist motifs. He observes that the popularity and abundance of American crime literature endured across the colonial and early national periods, even as its many modes and styles changed according to shifting political and cultural conditions. One gets the sense that large numbers of Anglo-American readers were developing their imaginative relation to death in accordance with the mixed promptings of piety and sensation that characterized the bloody publications they craved.

Julia Stern, Thomas Connors, and Nicholas Marshall address Americans' cravings for more sentimental views of death. Stern discovers in novelistic images of dead or dying women an affluent source of readerly sympathy—a shared sympathy, conducive, during the 1790s and beyond, to the promotion of specifically national feeling. Like Stern, Connors focuses on literary culture, introducing us to what he calls the "sentimental geography" of American romanticism through an interpretive tour of Washington Irving's home, Sunnyside, and the cemetery at Sleepy Hollow. Marshall's essay turns our attention from formal literary culture to the ordinary letters and diaries of afflicted and bereaved folk in antebellum New York. Along with Elizabeth Reis's essay on how, during the same period, the ranks of angels swelled to abundance in American religious iconography, Marshall's essay helps underscore the extent to which antebellum mortuary culture encouraged a view of death as an opportunity for consolation, most often in assurances of a heavenly reunion of the lost.

Against the frequently stylized and lugubrious postures of relinquishment reflected in the writings of the white middle class, Douglas Egerton's essay sets the horrific disruption of the prospect of consolation in slave so-

cieties. Egerton recounts how magistrates and slaveholders, aware of the importance of body-intactness in certain African mortuary rites, imposed torture and dismemberment upon slain or condemned slaves, thereby denying the deceased his or her hoped-for afterlife. One obvious consequence of such assaults on religious beliefs and practices, along with the attendant suppression of mourning rites within slave society, is our lack of a substantial record of colonial African-American attitudes and practices relating to death. Egerton's is the only essay in *Mortal Remains* on slaves or African Americans.

It is worth pausing here over the question of scope and representativeness to observe that *Mortal Remains* focuses overwhelmingly on the experience of Anglo-American Protestants. Indeed, it is surprising how seldom noted are the presence and relevance of other religious and ethnic populations to the history of death in early America. The opening essay by Laura Stevens is the only essay in the volume to concentrate at length on Indians from any perspective, and in this case the perspective is that of whites' fascination with their self-constructed image of the dying Indian. None of the essays address the substantial body of writing about death and dying by African Americans from the early national and antebellum periods. The Catholic presence in early America is merely hinted at; the Jewish presence not at all. It would have been interesting and valuable to hear some reflections on these gaps from the editors in their introduction.

Each of the editors has contributed an essay of her or his own; these and two others round out the volume. Andrew Burstein's essay traces the politically consolidating force of eulogistic praise for U.S. leaders from Franklin's death in 1790 to Jackson's in 1845. Nancy Isenberg's essay—like Cohen's, extensively illustrated—explores satirical depictions of the state as a mutilated woman in the context of the Atlantic revolutions and the violent, uncertain emergence of the democratic nation-state. The two other essays investigate political and literary struggles over human remains in the early republic. Matthew Dennis's essay compares the treatment of Indian remains and the bones of Revolutionary soldiers, discovering that their symbolic meanings as well as their ossuaries were subject to repeated upheavals and dislocations. Michael Meranze's essay investigates what he calls the "haunting" of America by Major John André after his execution in 1780. Meranze interprets André's afterlife—the diplomatic struggle over his remains, and Cooper's fictional reworking of André's story in his novel *The*

Spy—as an object lesson in the likelihood of forgetting "the disparate violence done in the name of civility" (135). Thanks to the essays by Burstein, Dennis, Isenberg, Meranze, and Stern, *Mortal Remains* is strongest in coverage of the revolutionary and early national periods. Disappointingly, only four or five of the essays devote much more than passing attention to materials dating prior to 1750.

Earlier instances of murder and mayhem, however, are investigated at length in Elaine Forman Crane's *Killed Strangely*, the account of a possible matricide in late seventeenth-century Rhode Island. Impossible to ratify with certainty at this late date, the Rhode Island General Assembly's finding that Thomas Cornell had murdered his mother was solid enough to cost him his life in 1673—but not so solid that it prevented them from holding two subsequent trials for the same crime. Crane takes advantage of this ample room for doubt in order to construct a narrative offering "alternative story lines" (7), approaching the evidence from a number of directions, adhering closely to the documentary record and secondary scholarship, but never shying away from speculation where evidence is thin.

Rebecca Cornell and the other members of her son Thomas's household were fairly unremarkable people, apart from the fatal circumstances with which they are connected. Rebecca's life as the 73-year-old matriarch of a reasonably well-off, multigenerational, Rhode Island Puritan family thrills only as she meets her end, as a partially burned and possibly stabbed corpse lying on her bedroom floor. Crane's interest in reconstructing Rebecca and her brood as characters in a gory and suspenseful drama has more to do with the social world they inhabit than with their personalities or accomplishments. This is not to say that Crane is unsympathetic to her subjects or that she has no interest in their interior lives. On the contrary, Crane often finds the temptation to psychologize impossible to resist, which gives certain passages in *Killed Strangely* a presuming air. For the most part, though, she keeps us alert both to the incompleteness of the record and to the larger world beyond the family tragedy. "It is a compelling tale," Crane writes in her introduction, "one that begs to be told not only because of our fascination with violence at a distance, but because it involves complex historical issues about which there is rarely enough evidence to permit critical analysis. If, on one level, the trial of Thomas Cornell may be read as an exposé, the depositions also expose features of seventeenth-century family and community dynamics usually shielded from scholarly view. As a re-

sult, the surviving evidence propels the significance of the Cornell case far beyond the immediate event" (2).

If Thomas's murder of Rebecca is singular and aberrant (Crane refers to it as "the only fully recorded case of matricide in colonial America" [4]), the family's circumstances and the community's response to the crime are, in Crane's view, sufficiently representative as to shed light on the domestic relations, religious beliefs, generational conflicts, and criminal laws and procedures of late seventeenth-century New England. It is with reference to these elements of the Cornells' world that Rebecca's death takes on its multiple meanings in *Killed Strangely*.

Most intriguingly, Crane discovers that, for many of those she left behind, Rebecca continued to be a maker of meanings even after her death. One of the deponents, Rebecca's brother John Briggs, claimed that his sister's ghost had appeared to him in a vision and spoken a few possibly incriminating words regarding the circumstances of her death. These words, as reported by Briggs, became part of the evidentiary record—posthumous hearsay testimony, as it were, that had to be reckoned with by the Assembly. Other forms of supernatural evidence were proffered during the discovery process. For example, one witness claimed that Rebecca's corpse had bled from the nose in Thomas's presence, as if in accusation of her murderer. The effect that such evidence might have had on other witnesses, jurors, and members of the Assembly is a matter of much supposition in Crane's account. She cannot fully reconstruct the role such evidence actually played in the disposition of the case. Yet she paints a fascinating picture of a stage in legal history when medieval superstition and modern evidentiary standards both contributed to the evolution of common law.

Crane has done a painstaking as well as inventive job of assembling and interpreting the surviving documents—most important, a set of two dozen depositions, supplemented by coroners' reports and jury lists, along with diaries, letters, deeds, and wills pertaining to the case and the Cornell family. From these records, there is a great deal that can only be inferred, and for Crane this is where most of the fun is. She delights in proposing multiple scenarios consistent with, but not proven by, the evidence at hand. For example, the record shows that an Indian man named Punneane was sentenced to be hanged with Cornell for a different crime. Crane wonders what might be made of a prison scene as the two men await their execution: "If the two men conversed—if they lamented their fate or engaged in

dark humor—to pass the time, they would have had to do so in Punneane's language, since he spoke no English. If Cornell lacked bilingual skills, perhaps they merely gazed at each other and ate in sorrowful silence. Perhaps their sleep—perchance a dream—was disturbed by taunts from late-night revelers who staggered by the jail. Sarah visited her husband, no doubt. His sons must have paid their last respects. His friends . . . would have stopped by" (53). Such suppositious scenarios abound in *Killed Strangely*, and they lend to it the impression of an author yearning to take greater imaginative license with the actions, utterances, and features that the primary documents have left out.

Reconstructing a dead world is a daunting task to face, whether one chooses to employ the scholarly and discursive conventions of historical writing or the protean elements and rhetorical embellishments of fiction. Brian Hall has done an excellent job of turning the latter to account in *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company*. This "novel of Lewis and Clark" is not a book principally about death as such, and it is obviously not a work of conventional scholarship. Yet its scenes and impressions of "life lived in relation to death as felt" are numerous and vivid. Furthermore, Hall's very knowledgeable and scrupulous handling of the historical material on which the novel is based, combined with the eloquent manner of its telling, enable in the reader an experience of conviction that the other two books under review do not provide.

The novel presents the story of Lewis and Clark's expedition and its aftermath from four overlapping perspectives: those of Meriwether Lewis, Sacagawea, her husband Toussaint Charbonneau, and William Clark. Proximity to others' deaths, consciousness of their own mortality, and the demands made on them by the dead (and vice versa) contribute to the texture of their experience throughout the novel. Sometimes the effect is horrific, as in Clark's recollection, from his Indian campaign experience, of the scalping of both Indians and whites: "When you pulled the hair it sounded like a sneeze" (56). Some encounters with death and dying are peculiar to the rigors of the expedition, as when Lewis discovers the tremendous difficulty of killing a bear. Others are closer to the common experience of less violent or adventuresome lives: Sacagawea's preparation, after the birth of her son, of prophylaxes against infant mortality; Lewis's thirty-first-birthday musings on life expectancy; the visible traces on Jefferson's face of grief for his daughter Polly; Clark's despair, as an aging man

in retirement, at the rapidly succeeding deaths of all his friends and contemporaries.

The novel also offers a variety of perspectives on Indian mourning practices, for example in this early scene, told from Sacagawea's point of view shortly after she is abducted by a Hidatsa war party: "Her strange-eater would not give her a knife to cut her hair for the dead, maybe not wanting her to chop off fingers—his own salmon finger was missing, for some brother or parent—because if he was planning to sell her that might lower the price. The second night, her hands tied behind her, she took pleasure in gouging her cheeks against a sharp rock, pleasure at honoring the dead and spoiling his goods" (12). For Hall's Sacagawea, mourning her losses at this point may mean both honoring a ritual requirement of self-disfigurement *and* struggling to sustain a form of self-possession within the complex economies of personhood through which she moves. In a later scene, Lewis happens upon an Indian funerary scaffold and examines the shrouds and war shields, the bag of grave offerings, and the body wrapped in buffalo skins. Gazing at the bundle, he "tries to conceive of the unexpectant and unrewarded life of the woman wrapped in it. He fails. Could she but speak to him" (191). Here is an object lesson in the historian's plight: how do you assemble an answer to your question out of the past's broken remains?

But for Lewis, in this novel, the questions to which his encounters with the dead give rise are chiefly existential rather than historical. Hall's characterization of Lewis is a marvelous achievement, thanks in no small measure to the way it anticipates Lewis's suicide. Suicide is a theme woven throughout the book—not heavy-handedly insisting on its inevitability, but revealing with great sensitivity that suicide was an idea in relation to which Lewis lived his life. Lewis killed himself en route to Washington in 1809, and it is now commonly held that he suffered from manic depression. But, as Hall points out in his author's note, explanations continue to be put forward that suggest "a desire . . . to find a cause extrinsic to Lewis's personality." Hall goes on to explain his novel's focus on the crux of Lewis's despair: "In making his curiously insoluble loneliness the center of my explanation (with malarial fever, writer's block, and financial embarrassment as contributory causes), I naturally looked for its source. The hints in the record are circumstantial, negative, and wholly inadequate for historical probability, let alone certainty. But the fact that they have never,

to my knowledge, been added up to form even a speculation suggests that tolerance still has other territories to open up" (414–15).

This is not just a matter of scholarly propriety. Hall is obviously aware of the masculine anxieties that militate against such speculation, especially where a figure of national mythology like Lewis is concerned. All the more impressive, then, is the subtle assurance with which Hall, through a series of linked scenes and brief impressions, associates Lewis's suicide with his attachment to William Clark: the two of them sharing some seemingly frivolous banter about Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy; Lewis somberly watching Clark sleeping; Clark catching a peculiar look in Lewis's eye: "like a man who'd fallen into a river in winter and was drifting away. That dull look that didn't say *save me*, but *let me go*" (130). As these delicate impressions of melancholy attachment accumulate, one can't help but recall, from one of the early chapters, the question about Indians Benjamin Rush was so eager to have Lewis answer for him: "Is suicide common among them, and does it ever issue from love?" (51).

Like a good historian, Hall respects the unknowability of the erotic dimension of Lewis's suicide. Like a good novelist, he transforms that unknowability into something dramatic and keenly felt. A long and elaborate celebration of the expedition's bicentennial (2004–2006) is just beginning, and it will be interesting to see what sort of reception Brian Hall's Meriwether Lewis gets among the various institutions and constituencies that feel they have a stake in his remembrance.