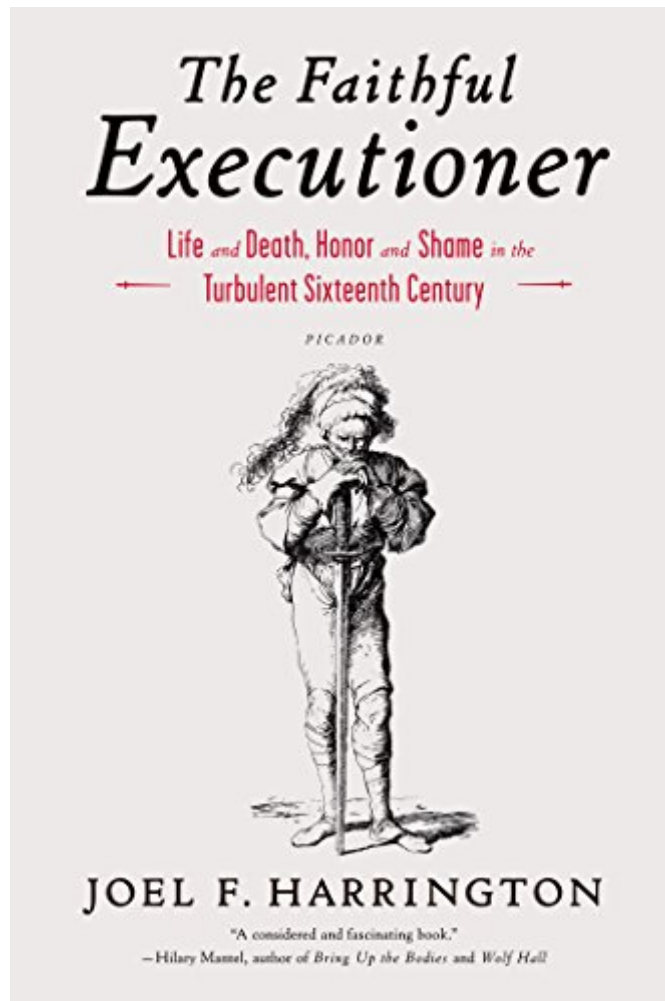


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# The Faithful Executioner: Life And Death, Honor And Shame In The Turbulent Sixteenth Century



## Synopsis

Based on the rare and until now overlooked journal of a Renaissance-era executioner, the noted historian Joel F. Harrington's *The Faithful Executioner* takes us deep inside the alien world and thinking of Meister Frantz Schmidt of Nuremberg, who, during forty-five years as a professional executioner, personally put to death 394 individuals and tortured, flogged, or disfigured many hundreds more. But the picture that emerges of Schmidt from his personal papers is not that of a monster. Could a man who routinely practiced such cruelty also be insightful, compassionate—even progressive? In *The Faithful Executioner*, Harrington vividly re-creates a life filled with stark contrasts, from the young apprentice's rigorous training under his executioner father to the adult Meister Frantz's juggling of familial duties with his work in the torture chamber and at the scaffold. With him we encounter brutal highwaymen, charming swindlers, and tragic unwed mothers accused of infanticide, as well as patrician senators, godly chaplains, and corrupt prison guards. Harrington teases out the hidden meanings and drama of Schmidt's journal, uncovering a touching tale of inherited shame and attempted redemption for the social pariah and his children. *The Faithful Executioner* offers not just the compelling firsthand perspective of a professional torturer and killer, but testimony of one man's lifelong struggle to reconcile his bloody craft with his deep religious faith. The biography of an ordinary man struggling for his soul, this groundbreaking book also offers an unparalleled panoramic view of Europe on the cusp of modernity, a society riven by violent conflict at all levels and encumbered by paranoia, superstition, and abuses of power. Thanks to an extraordinary historical source and its gifted interpreter, we recognize far more of ourselves than we might have expected in this intimate portrait of a professional killer from a faraway world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Some books are engrossing: you don't want to stop reading. This is as engrossing a book as you'll ever read - and it's non-fiction. Think of it: the diary of an executioner of the late 1500s to early 1600s - a time when thousands were brutally tortured and put to death by barbaric means - has been preserved. Further, the man and his journal entries are then made the centerpiece of a detailed and captivating social history of the time and place in which he carried out his 361 executions, a history entirely different than what the common reader might expect. This is, in fact, what this excellent book is all about. As a lover of history, I cannot recommend this volume highly enough; it is like stepping back into another, darker, time. The story of Meister Frantz Schmidt (b. 1555, d. 1634), executioner of Nuremberg from 1578 to 1617 (after a bloody "apprenticeship" in Bamberg from 1573 to 1578) is one you will not soon forget. It is not a story for the squeamish. However, the author does not serve horror for horror's sake: the times were, in fact, horrific. Executions were carried out by garoting (rope), sword, breaking wheel (for the most violent of criminals), burning (for those considered worse than violent criminals: counterfeiters and homosexuals), and drowning. Schmidt made diary entries for each of his 361 executions, the latter ones more detailed than the earlier, as well as for the 345 "light" punishments of cutting off an ear or finger, or flogging. However, these violent events only punctuate the social history of Schmidt's life and times; not only the crimes and criminals which kept the executioner steadily employed (and, in fact, fairly wealthy) but the societal structure of crime and punishment and of the executioner's place in that society.

The death penalty, the punishment of legally killing someone guilty of a crime, is controversial now. More than half the nations of the world do not allow it, and the number of US states banning it has increased to eighteen. It was taken for granted centuries ago that you could be hanged for theft, and also that you might have your ears cropped or fingers cut off for other crimes, or that torturing people was in the legal interest of governments. Governments would pay executioners to carry out

this handiwork, so there were lots of executioners who were government employees within cities and states. Meister Frantz Schmidt of Nuremberg was just one of these functionaries, working from 1573 to 1618, but he was different: he kept a journal. That journal is the basis for *The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by historian Joel F. Harrington. The journal is sparse. There are a few pages in this book that have lengthy quotations from it, with most quotations being a few sentences regarding a particular miscreant or the administration of a particular punishment. It seems, however, that Harrington has dug deep into the archives of the times, and fills out Schmidt's ambitious life story, along with giving insight to his time's views of crime, punishment, and the social role of the executioner. Schmidt got his life vocation as executioner from his father, who had been unwillingly forced into the job. His father would have trained him in decapitation by the sword, and hanging. Just as important was learning how to apply instruments of torture.

This is the fascinating story of Meister Frantz Schmidt (1555 - 1634) who was an executioner and torturer in Nuremberg and who kept a diary, which the author has fleshed out into an incredible biography of a man and a time which is little known. It was unusual to keep a diary in those times, but Schmidt kept a personal journal of the executions he carried out throughout his long career, from 1573 at the age of just nineteen, to his retirement in 1618. One of the oddest, and saddest, things about Schmidt's life is that he became an executioner through a quirk of fate when his father, Heinrich, was called upon by a noble to act as executioner after he had arrested three locals for plotting against his life. Up to that point, Heinrich had been a woodsman and fowler. After the hapless man was forced to kill he had no choice but to become an executioner. Since the Middle Ages, executioners were shunned and excluded by society and tended to bond together out of necessity. When this terrible social exclusion was forced upon him, Heinrich did the best he could and trained his son Frantz in his new profession - although both men had plans to try to escape the calling forced upon them. It has to be said that Frantz did the best he could under the circumstances. His training began with using rhubarb stalks to practice on (apparently similar to the sinews in the neck - much of this book is gruesome, so this is not for the squeamish), continuing with beheading stray dogs and helping his father in his work before, ahem, striking out on his own. During his long career, he personally killed three hundred and ninety four people, torturing countless others.

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