

Beheading and The Guillotine

by Darcia Helle

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Throughout world history, criminals have been executed as punishment for their crimes. Early methods were brutal and torturous. Held as public events, entire towns gathered to watch the accused be drawn and quartered, hanged, beheaded, or burned at the stake.

Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin came into this unforgiving world on May 28, 1738 in Manchester, England. Some say his mother went into premature labor after witnessing a criminal being broken on the wheel of the public scaffold at Saintes. The victim's screams were too much for her.

Guillotin initially obtained a Master of Arts degree from the University of Bordeaux. The essay he wrote for his degree so impressed the Jesuits that they persuaded him to join their order. Guillotin then took the position of professor of literature at the Irish College at Bordeaux.

Within a few years, Guillotin left the college and travelled to Paris to study medicine. In 1768, he earned his diploma from the faculty at Rheims.

Oddly enough, Guillotin opposed the death penalty. Elected to the National Assembly in Paris on May 2, 1789, he directed most of his attention toward medical reform. On October 10, 1789, during a debate on capital punishment, Guillotin stated that "... the criminal shall be decapitated; this will be done solely by means of a simple mechanism." This mechanism was defined as "... a machine that beheads painlessly".

Beheading had become a common, if imprecise practice in France during the 1700s. Most often, several strikes of the sword or axe were needed before a victim died. The executioner would miss. The process could be grisly. Furthermore, considered a nobler death, beheadings were reserved for the privileged class. Commoners of that time were typically hanged. Dr. Guillotin believed that the public would be more appreciative of their rights if all capital punishment was done by mechanical decapitation, regardless of class.

Guillotin also took issue with the fact that a criminal's family suffered monetarily punishment for the criminal's misdeeds. Property was confiscated and family members were not allowed to inherit anything of worth. Guillotin opposed this practice, believing that the criminal alone should be held responsible for the crimes and that his or her family should not suffer because of those actions.

A civil rights activist of his time, Guillotin believed that adopting a more humane method of execution was the first step toward total abolition of the death penalty. Opposed to the public

spectacle these events had become, Guillotin also worked toward making the execution more private. He wanted to spare people the trauma of witnessing these executions.

In 1789, Guillotin helped pass a law requiring beheading be done by machines, rather than swords or axes. Guillotin stated that "... the privilege of decapitation would no longer be confined to nobles, and the process of execution would be as painless as possible."

At a follow-up meeting, Guillotin spoke of his ideal machine. In his exuberance, he said, with a flourish, "Now, with my machine, I cut off your head in the twinkling of an eye, and you never feel it!" His statement elicited laughter and quickly became a popular joke. Within days, a comic song about Guillotin and "his" machine forever linked the two together.

Primitive machines for beheading had been in use for approximately 500 years. By the 1700s, beheadings by machine were routinely done on the elite in Italy, Germany, Scotland, and Persia. The most popular of the time, the Italian Mannaia, made its first appearance in France in 1631. The device held an axe that descended between two perpendicular slipboards. Other beheading machines of the time included the Scottish Maiden and the Halifax Gibbet. None of these machines held the body still, which allowed for slips and misses.

The design of this new killing machine fell to the king's physician, Dr. Antoine Louis. He sought expert advice from Charles-Henri Sanson, the official executioner. Sanson believed that the problem with current beheadings was that the accused often lacked the "firmness which was absolutely necessary for such executions". Criminals who were made to kneel for their beheading often fainted. He or she would fall sideways, blunting the effect of the first swing of the sword or axe. Sanson's solution was to confine the criminal's body to a horizontal position.

Sanson then conferred with Tobias Schmidt, a German instrument maker. Schmidt sketched the design of what would later become the guillotine.

Dr. Louis approved the design, though he questioned the crescent-shaped blade. Sanson and Schmidt agreed that a diagonal blade might be better. Both were put to the test.

On March 20, 1792, a carpenter by the name of Guidon was paid 5,500 francs to make the first prototype. Upon completion, Sanson tried it out on three corpses in the courtyard of a prison at Bicetre. The first two strikes with the diagonal blade were successful. The third try, using the crescent-shaped blade, was not. The diagonal blade then became a permanent part of the design.

This new killing machine initially took the name *Louison* or *Louissette*, after the king's physician, Dr. Louis. Some time later, the French began calling it the *guillotine*, after Dr. Guillotin, the perceived inventor. An English poet added the extra 'e' for easier rhyming.

On April 25, 1792, at the Place de Greve on the Right Bank, the guillotine made its first public appearance. The victim was Nicolas Jacques Pelletin, a common criminal. Upon facing his death

sentence, Pelletin fell into a dead faint. This would have made beheading by sword or axe impossible. The guillotine was, therefore, proven an instant success.

For the first seven months, the guillotine primarily took the heads of common thieves and forgers. However, France's political situation quickly grew more volatile and the machine soon found uses in political executions. Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were among the guillotine's most famous victims.

Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin died in 1814 of natural causes and is now buried in the Pere-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. The association of their name with this killing machine so embarrassed Dr. Guillotin's family that they petitioned the French government to rename it. When the request was denied, the Guillotin family changed their last name.

In 1870, assistant executioner and carpenter Leon Berger made improvements to the guillotine. Berger added a spring system, stopping the mouton at the bottom of the grooves. He also added a lock/blocking device, as well as a new release mechanism for the blade. All guillotines built after 1870 incorporated these improvements.

The murderer Hamida Djandoubi holds the dubious honor of being the last victim of the guillotine. The execution took place on September 10, 1977 in Marseilles, France.