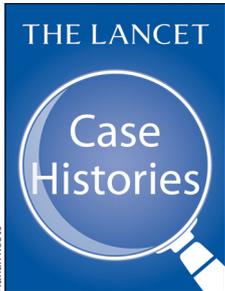


Case histories

Suicide



Adrian Roots

For more on Case histories see
[Comment Lancet 2016; 387: 211](#) and [Perspectives Lancet 2016; 387: 217, 737, 1265, 1711, 2082, 2495](#)

In his 1813 verse tragedy *The Giaour* Lord Byron compared “the mind that broods o’er guilty woes” with a “scorpion girt by fire”, who uses “the sting she nourished for her foes” to end her suffering before she is consumed by the flames. Byron—himself no stranger to suicidal impulses—drew solace from a classical view of suicide as an honourable response to an unendurable existence. Beyond his Romantic circle European cultural attitudes to suicide were shifting, under the influence of Enlightenment legal humanitarianism and the growing status of medicine. Ancient penalties for suicide were no longer widely enforced, and many had come to see suicide as tragic—a view set out in another founding text of Romanticism, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)—or the result of overwhelming mental illness.

Changing responses to suicide highlight the chasm that separates theoretical or poetic speculation from the lives and experiences of those who kill themselves, and those who are left behind. In his classic study of suicide in the western tradition, Michael MacDonald shows that the distinctions between classical tolerance and Christian condemnation were not always so clear-cut. Some Greek and Roman writers, notably Seneca, defended suicide, but Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle had condemned it, and some Greek city-states framed self-murder as a crime. Although the Bible contains no specific prohibition of suicide, Christian attitudes were rooted in the sixth commandment—“Thou shalt not kill”—and in the idea of human life as a gift from God. Early Church councils insisted that those who died by their own hand should not be buried in consecrated ground, and by the 13th century many European states claimed forfeiture of a suicide’s estate. In practice, though, English coroners’ juries treated suicide more leniently, attributing questionable deaths to less contentious causes, or returning verdicts of lunacy in unambiguous cases.

By the early 19th century, as Byron contemplated his suicidal scorpion, swift industrialisation transformed debates over suicide. Cities grew and sprawled, creating new and frightening landscapes of pressure, poverty, and anonymity—hotbeds of suicidal despair, in the view of some observers. In her analysis of suicide in 19th-century Britain, Olive Anderson notes the importance of different “suicide cultures” in determining popular attitudes. For most people, she argues, its meaning was shaped by “practical everyday notions of morality, psychology, and pathology, and what one might call the etiquette of personal crises”. In the second quarter of the 19th century, European states began to adopt population statistics as a tool for governing mass-industrial society. But as Anderson and MacDonald

have observed, the interpretation of suicide statistics was far from straightforward. In England, attempted suicides were not officially recorded, and the data show that suicide rates depended on age, sex, and location. Industrial cities seem to have made life harder for older men but easier for teenage girls, and the steepest increase in suicide rates came in rural counties during the late 19th century.

Statistical analyses of suicide also brought a new dimension to older arguments over free will. By showing that the numbers of suicides remained fairly constant from year to year, mid-19th-century studies suggested that larger social forces, not individual decisions, were important determinants of suicide. Émile Durkheim’s influential *On Suicide* (1897) marked a growing appreciation among psychiatrists and sociologists that suicide could have many intersecting causes and contexts. By the mid-20th century, as Edmund Ramsden and Duncan Wilson have shown, studies of animal behaviour led scholars to interpret self-destructive behaviour in humans and animals in terms of “innate and unconscious responses to social and ecological pressures”.

In the early 21st century suicide remains as divisive and troubling as it has been for millennia. Since 1961 it has no longer been classed as a crime in England, and the classical view has gained ground in European and American debates over assisted suicide, while increasingly sophisticated studies have revealed complex demographic patterns of influences. But as the philosopher Simon Critchley has remarked, “We think that suicide is sad or wrong, often without knowing why. And we don’t know what to say, other than mouth a few empty platitudes.”

Richard Barnett
 richard@richardbarnettwriter.com

Further reading
 Anderson O. *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987
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 MacDonald M. *The secularisation of suicide in England, 1660–1800*. *Past Present* 1986; **111**: 50–100
 Ramsden E, Wilson D. *The suicidal animal: science and the nature of self-destruction*. *Past Present* 2014; **224**: 201–42



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