

# A Protestant Purgatory



## A Protestant Purgatory Theological Origins of the Penitentiary Act, 1779



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出版者:

出版时间:2008-11

装帧:

isbn:9780754663928

The Penitentiary Act of 1779 marks the beginning of a significant shift in attitudes in Britain towards the punishment of criminals. Until the introduction of this act, penal legislation had rested primarily upon capital punishment and transportation, after 1779 however, long-term prison sentences increasingly became the norm. This book examines the role of protestant theology on the penal system of eighteenth-century England, emphasizing that this change had as much to do with evangelical theology as it did notions of enlightenment thinking. Whilst modern historians of crime admit that religion played an important role in the conception and practice of justice, relatively little work has been undertaken to assess just how these two pillars of early modern society interacted. At the core of this study is an examination of the theological background to the Penitentiary Act, a deeply theological piece of legislation that conflated punishment and hard labour with the ability to redeem sinners. Whereas Catholic theology stressed the role of purgatory after death, this study looks at how the Church of England fostered a sense of earthly purgatory for those convicted by the criminal justice system. Of interest to historians and theologians, this book provides a fascinating glimpse at the importance of religion, and particularly Protestantism as understood and preached by the Church of England, to the politics and social policy of the eighteenth-century British state.

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目录:

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