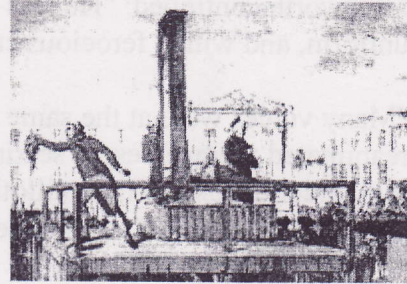


# Execution of Louis XVI

January 21, 1793

Whatever can be said of Louis XVI's performance during his reign and the early parts of the French Revolution, there can be no doubt he died bravely and like a king.



He met his fate only a day after the National Convention condemned him to death and only hours after saying goodbye to his queen Marie-Antoinette and their children the previous night. It had taken two hours for a large escort of cavalymen to bring him to the Place de la Revolution through a massive crowd that had gathered to witness the historical moment.

Journeying in the green carriage with Louis XVI was an English priest, Henry Edgeworth, who gave him a book of psalms to read.

According to Edgeworth's description of the proceedings the carriage stopped in the middle of a large space left around the scaffold. Surrounding that were cannons and further away "an armed multitude extended as far as the eye could reach."

As the guards prepared to get out Louis stopped them and said "I recommend to you this good man (Edgeworth); take care that after my death no insult be offered to him - I charge you to prevent it."

Then he alighted and three soldiers moved to take off his brown coat to prepare him for the blade.

Edgeworth said: "But he repulsed them with haughtiness - he undressed himself, untied his neckcloth, opened his shirt, and arranged it himself."

Then the guards, who for a while were taken aback, then surrounded him again and moved to seize his hands. The indignant king fought them off, but was calmed by Edgeworth.

The priest's description of the next moments of the execution are particularly moving.

"The path leading to the scaffold was extremely rough and difficult to pass; the King was obliged to lean on my arm, and from the slowness with which he proceeded, I feared for a moment that his courage might fail; but what was my astonishment, when arrived at the last step, I felt that he suddenly let go my arm, and I saw him cross with a firm foot the breadth of the whole scaffold."

Edgeworth said that "by his look alone" the crowd was silenced and then the king spoke in a loud voice: "I die innocent of all the crimes laid to my charge; I pardon those who have occasioned my death; and I pray to God that the blood you are going to shed may never be visited on France."

Edgeworth continued: "He was proceeding, when a man on horseback, in the national uniform, and with a ferocious cry, ordered the drums to beat."

"Many voices were at the same time heard encouraging the executioners. They seemed reanimated themselves, in seizing with violence the most virtuous of Kings, they dragged him under the axe of the guillotine, which with one stroke severed his head from his body. All this passed in a moment."

"The youngest of the guards, who seemed about eighteen, immediately seized the head, and showed it to the people as he walked round the scaffold; he accompanied this monstrous ceremony with the most atrocious and indecent gestures."

It should be noted that in another description of the execution a witness describes it taking two drops of the guillotine to sever Louis' head, due to the corpulence of his neck.

The time of death of France's king was 10.15am, five-and-a-quarter hours after he rose from his bed.

Other reports have members of the crowd dipping material into the king's blood that ran from the scaffold so they could keep them as souvenirs.

After his death Louis' body was taken to the cemetery at the Church of the Madeleine where it put into a large pit, close to the wall of the Rue d'Anjou, and then smothered in quicklime.