

Good Life, Good Death

*Memoir of a writer who became
an euthanasia advocate*

Derek Humphry

A paperback original
The Norris Lane Press

“Derek Humphry is widely acknowledged to be the initiator of the euthanasia reform movement in the United States.”¹

“If reporters could be cloned, I would clone Derek Humphry.”²

“*Final Exit* is among the 25 most significant books published in the past quarter century.”³

1. *Dying Right: The Death With Dignity Movement*, by Daniel Hillyard and John Dombrink (Routledge, New York & London, 2001)
2. *Farewell to Humphry address* by Harold Evans, editor of the London *Sunday Times* (30 June 1978)
3. *USA Today* (April 2007) www.usatoday.com/life/top25-books.htm

Books by Derek Humphry

General

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Police Power and Black People
Passports and Politics
The Cricket Conspiracy
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London Sunday Times
Los Angeles Times

Editor in Chief:

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PREFACE

When I was 48 I decided to desert my native England and spend the second half of my life in America. Despite a slender wartime education, I had climbed from messenger boy to the top of English journalism with the *Sunday Times*, published four books, won a literary prize, raised a family and was settled in London.

But the appeal of America, its variety and hugeness, its riches and poverty, its brilliance and its darkness, all greatly appealed to me. I had exhausted the best of little England. (With my second wife a US citizen I had no trouble with immigration rules).

Thirty years after flying west to join the *Los Angeles Times*, I do not regret my chosen relocation, though my spell at that newspaper was short yet highly productive. Not realized by me at the time, the world-wide publication of *Jean's Way*, a memoir of how I helped my first wife to die to escape the last ravages of terminal cancer, was changing the whole course of my life.

As I relate in this book, events caused me to found the Hemlock Society USA in my garage in Santa Monica, kick-start the American right-to-die movement, and to self-publish perhaps the most controversial non-fiction book ever to hit the Number One spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list – *Final*

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Exit. I began campaigning for the Oregon physician-assisted suicide law eight years before it was eventually passed; it is still the only such law in the USA.

Ten years after I started the Hemlock Society, Dr. Jack Kevorkian arrived but we never hit it off, although fundamentally we were driving down the same track – seeking to allow all people who had enjoyed a good life to then achieve a good death. This is a memoir of the important events in my life; not an autobiography. So many happenings in my life were to have consequences much later on that a linear sequence of events is nearly impossible.

INTRODUCTION

Life After Death

When I was chief editor of a tabloid weekly newspaper in Greater London, the *Havering Recorder*, I was sat at my desk one Friday morning admiring the week's work of myself and my team when the telephone rang.

“Is that the editor?”

“Speaking.”

“It says on the front page of your newspaper that I'm dead.”

Ouch! I grabbed the paper. There on the front page was a brief news item naming a man who had collapsed and died in a city street.

“Is this you?” I asked the caller.

“It's me, but I ain't dead yet.”

This was about the worst blunder a newspaper can make. Not only did it reek of inefficiency, but can there be a worse libel than stating a person is dead when they are not? A smart lawyer might take us for everything we owned.

I asked the caller to stay put and I would be with him shortly. I jumped in my car and tore round to his house. There I found an elderly couple at the kitchen table beside the remains of a abandoned breakfast, my newspaper thrown to one side. I

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apologized profusely for our error, then, seeking to blunt any possible verbal attack, quickly asked how they found out about the ‘death.’ They offered me a chair and a cup of tea, seemingly anxious to tell someone. This was the story they told me.

Every Friday morning a man came to clean their windows, regularly giving a wave as he mounted his ladder to clean the upstairs panes. That morning, when he was half-way up, he froze, dropping his bucket, staring transfixed at the breakfasting couple. His paralysis continued so long that the couple went outside and asked him if something was wrong.

“It says in the paper that you’re dead,” said the window cleaner. “I thought I was seeing a ghost.”

“Well, you can see I’m not dead,” said the man, who then rushed indoors to get the paper and read that what the window cleaner had said was true, insofar as what was printed. Then he called me. Around the dining room table, we talked about the incident, and other local news, for an hour or so. By the time I left we were friends. Back at the office, I called in the young reporter who had blundered. We traced that while checking his facts, he had read the wrong name and address from a street directory. Another error like that, I told him, and you’re fired. The following week I printed a correction on the front page;

that was the last I heard of the matter. I was fortunate that the couple were so forgiving.

Stories of dying and death normally scream at us from television and newspaper start-up headlines. It's the attention-getter the media must have. My life, both in and out of journalism, has had a great deal to do with death, but none ended as pleasantly as the man who discovered life after (reported) death.