The Politics of Death
Death and Politics in Victorian England

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1. Introduction

This paper will introduce the various sociological, economic and political contexts which undergird the creation of Highgate Cemetery as one of seven new garden cemeteries in London during Victorian times. This heralded a radical change in interment practice, the causes of which can be found in a complex interplay between a number of factors. Firstly, the sharp increase of population in London precipitated a crisis in interment practices: local church graveyards became over-crowded which led to shocking unsanitary practices (this is well documented in both preliminary reports from the commission led by the reformer Edwin Chadwick, and by contemporary literature). Connected with this over-crowding are the health issues which threatened the life of the living. A second, and associated factor, can be found in the rise of anatomy schools and their increased need for bodies for dissection. The Anatomy Act of 1832 went some way to curb the increasing traffic in bodies from ‹resurrection men› and led to the need to secure graves. Thirdly, the beginning of the industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of a middle class contributed to a shift in attitude towards the decomposed body (often seen as a commodity). Under the influence of the works of the architect John Loudon and the social reformer Edwin Chadwick, The General Cemetery Company was created in 1832 to establish private, commercial cemeteries. This was followed by The Burial Act of 1852 which officially ended burials in London churchyards. Highgate Cemetery was the third of these of these commercial cemeteries, with its Western part opened in 1839, and its Eastern part in 1854. Finally, a short history of the varying fortunes of Highgate Cemetery will be sketched until the present day.

2. *The Intellectual Climate*

The creation of garden cemeteries in England in the course of the nineteenth century emerged from a complex set of interrelated factors. While it is clear that the material changes brought about by the explosion of population in urban centres and the beginning of the industrial revolution were contributing factors to a reformist movement which sought to rethink the place of the dead body within society, the shift in the intellectual climate has much to contribute to the debate. When William Wordsworth writes his poem *We are Seven*, a fictional encounter of a «little maid» with a man questioning her about her siblings, he was expressing a shift in understanding death. The young girl represents traditional beliefs rooted in the continuity between life and death while the man represents a new rationality, and by extension is representative of the mindset of the burial reformers, characterised by a strict separation between body and soul:[1]

> Then did the little Maid reply,
> «Seven boys and girls are we;
> Two of us in the church-yard lie,
> Beneath the church-yard tree.»
>
> «You run about, my little Maid,
> Your limbs they are alive;
> If two are in the church-yard laid,
> Then ye are only five.»
> […]
> «How many are you, then,» said I,
> «If they two are in heaven?»
> Quick was the little Maid's reply,
> «O Master! we are seven.»
>
> «But they are dead; those two are dead!
> Their spirits are in heaven!»
> 'Twas throwing words away; for still
> The little Maid would have her will,
> And said, «Nay, we are seven!»[2]

1 Sánchez-Eppler 1998, 420.
2 Wordsworth 1909–1914, 394. https://www.bartleby.com/41/394.html (accessed June 18, 2018).

Sánchez-Eppler's view is that for Wordsworth the grave marks «presence» rather than «loss», thus exemplifying a deep-seated sense of the community of the dead with that of the living.[3] This is a good illustration of the widening gap between two world-views, and the emergence of a new conception of death. This situation reflects the philosophical debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine.[4] The former speaks of the dead as ‹benevolent ancestors›, while the latter emphasises the discontinuity between the living and the dead, transforming the dead into a threatening body, potentially harmful to the living. We must not underestimate the importance of this imaginary world, the ‹imagined community› theorised by Benedict Anderson.[5] Indeed, re-imagining boundaries between life and death, to the exclusion of the dead body, is going to be crucial in the changing world of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Utilitarianism also played a part in the changing intellectual climate of the nineteenth century and will help the reformers to conceptualise the changes. Two more thinkers, Jeremy Bentham and William Godwin helped pave the way to reshaping positive attitudes to the dead: not just an erasure of the corpse, but a reconceptualisation of the body's place in society.[6] In his *Essay on Sepulchres: or, a Proposal for Erecting some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in all Ages on the Spot where their Remains have been Interred* (1809), the radical philosopher William Godwin suggests that the bodies of the dead be subjected to the demands of the living.[7] Utilitarian consequentialism and utilitarian ethics introduce new questions about the disposal of the dead body: how should dead bodies be treated? Should they be dissected, and should body parts be used for utilitarian purposes, for example, using heads as building blocks? Should they be stuffed?[8] What is the role of emotion in the burial process? The shift is important: these questions show a move from viewing the dead as

3 See Sánchez-Eppler 1998, 421–422, for a useful commentary on the poem, with reference to Wordsworth's attitude to death.

4 William Wordsworth's poems, «We are Seven», «Michael» (1800) and ‹«The Brothers»› (1800) in which the living enjoy the communion of the dead, all endorse the view of Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), quoted in McAllister 2018, 62. Thomas Paine's views are expanded in full in his *Rights of Man* (1791), where he makes it clear that the dead ‹tyrants› are a «conservative monolith that stood in the way of change», McAllister 2018, 63.

5 Anderson 2006.

6 McAllister 2018, 192.

7 McAllister 2018, 196–198.

8 See Bentham's wish for his body to be stuffed and made into an ‹auto-icon›, McAllister 2018, 223.

part of the community, to regarding the dead as a body to be disposed of, albeit in a decent way. As McAllister writes, the «burial is determined by the consequential effect on the living».[9] A prime example of this axial shift is the debate on providing bodies to medical schools for dissection.[10] Thomas Southwood Smith called for the unclaimed bodies of the poor who died in hospitals and workhouses to be passed on to medical schools. The utilitarian aspect of the body will dominate the reformist debate which led to the Burial Acts in the mid-nineteenth century.[11] These preliminary reflections are inseparable from the socio-economic context which will lead to a series of burial reforms. In fact these will embody the philosophical principles outlined above.

3. The Population Explosion

With this background in mind, there is no doubt that the main impetus for the shift of attitudes comes from demographic changes.[12] The exponential growth of cities, in particular London, combined with the high mortality rates intensified by a series of cholera, influenza and typhoid epidemics in the 1830s and 1840s resulted in a clamour for change in burial practices.[13] However, the notorious overcrowding of churchyards had been a long-standing problem. Since the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the intramural burial practices called for much concern and criticism. Sánchez-Eppler for instance, cites The Revd Thomas Lewis who, in 1721 wrote a pamphlet tellingly entitled «Seasonal Considerations on the Decent and Dangerous Custom of BURYING in Churches and Churchyards,...Proving that the Custom is... fatal, in case of INFECTION», arguing for a change from intra-mural graveyard interments to extra-mural

9 McAllister 2018, 223.

10 Richardson 1987 wrote a comprehensive work on the history and background of the Anatomy Act. She mentions that in the 18th and early 19th century all medical education was transacted on a private basis. Since Henry VIII, the sole legal source for corpses for dissection had been the gallows – bodies of murderers handed over to the anatomists as post-mortem punishment.

11 It is well to mention here that there were anxieties about this utilitarianism, as appeared in various pamphlets. See McAllister 2018, 196.

12 McAllister 2018, 155.

13 London's population rose from 960,00 in 1801 to 2 million by 1840 (Holtz 2009, 19). The population of London doubled again between 1859 and 1909 (Rutherford 2008, 31).

burials, especially in cities.[14] When the size of London's population doubles between 1800 and 1840, land dedicated for graveyards cannot meet the burial demands of the population and gives rise to acute health concerns. Much has been written on the subject, so I will concentrate here on the figure of the surgeon George Alfred Walker who visited a great number of London graveyards and collated his findings in *Gatherings from grave yards: particularly those of London: with a concise history of the modes of interment among different nations, from the earliest periods. And a detail of dangerous and fatal results produced by the unwise and revolting custom of inhuming the dead in the midst of the living* (1839).[15] A quote from Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, although written later, will suffice to illustrate the horror of this situation:

> Then the active and intelligent [beadle], who has got into the morning papers as such, comes with his pauper company to Mr. Krook's and bears off the body of our dear brother here departed to a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed, while our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official back-stairs--would to heaven they HAD departed!--are very complacent and agreeable. Into a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination and a Caffre would shudder at, they bring our dear brother here departed to receive Christian burial. With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate--with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life--here they lower our dear brother down a foot or two, here sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside, a shameful testimony to future ages how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together.[16]

Walker's extensive report attracted the attention of Parliament which three years later appointed a House of Commons Committee to investigate «the evils arising from the interment of bodies»[17] in large towns and cities and to consider legislation to remedy the problem. His work also attracted the

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14 Sánchez-Eppler 1998, 146.

15 https://archive.org/details/b21902963/page/n4 (accessed August 17, 2019).

16 Dickens 2003 (1853), 11.96–97. The novel was serialised between 1852 and 1853. See also, Blount 1963.

17 This was widely believed to give rise to ‹miasma›. Miasma theory held that under predictable circumstances the atmosphere became charged with an epidemic in-

attention of social reformers as he evidenced the catastrophic effects of the noxious state of graveyards in London on its poor population. The lawyer Edwin Chadwick, who was appointed secretary of the New Poor Law Commission from 1834–1842 and commissioner for the board of health from 1848–1852, followed up Walker's report with his *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843).[18]

Strictly speaking, cemeteries were not new: Bunhill Fields, was originally created in 1665 by and for Dissenters and constitutes one of London first public burial grounds. Models from continental Europe, and in particular Père Lachaise in Paris, as well as those provided by examples in the British empire offer models which combine the all too important hygienic standards with its accompanying morality.

The creation of private extra-mural cemeteries in London in 1830 was headed by the General Cemetery Company, an initiative which was ahead of the legislation providing both a response to the crisis, and a way forward.[19] After an outbreak of cholera, an act of Parliament (1832) permitted the company to establish a cemetery by the Grand Union Canal at Kensal Green. This was the first of seven private cemeteries dotted around London and commonly referred to as ‹the magnificent seven›.[20] Although a virtual monopoly was enjoyed by the joint-stock companies through the 1840s, there was a clear need for publicly funded extra-mural cemeteries.[21]

The new legislation aimed to reshape and reorder the world of the living by redefining public and private space: the dead were now excluded from the land of the living. A number of governmental initiatives took place regarding burials and burial practices.[22] As previously noted, Walker's report was crucial to the creation and implementation of a number of reforms. Chadwick took Walker's report forward in his two part 1843 *Re-*

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fluence, which turned malignant when combined with effluvia of organic decomposition from the earth. The resulting miasma produced disease from the body. Chadwick thought of the dead as «miamastically hazardous waste» (McAllister 2018, 21).

18 Hotz, 2001.

19 Hotz 2001, 22.

20 Thee seven were: Kensal Green (1833), West Norwood (1837), Highgate (1839), Abney Park (1840), Brompton (1840) Nunhead (1840) and Tower Hamlets (1841).

21 The Cemetery Clauses Acts of 1847 gave private companies directions regarding laying out cemeteries.

22 A comprehensive analysis of the reformist legislation can be found in Amadei 2014, 47–55.

port on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring population of Great Britain - A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interments in Towns in which he argued for a complete review of burial regulations of the time.[23] He also famously connected poverty with unsanitary living conditions and the high rate of urban mortality among working class people with overcrowded graveyards.[24] The reports led to Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1849, and the Burial Acts of 1852 and 1857.[25] Among the successes of the new legislation regulating the deceased body, is the Anatomy Act of 1832 which effectively put an end to ‹resurrectionists›.[26]

4. The Body, Ethics, Hygiene and Aesthetics

The new language about death and burial now combines both a discourse about hygiene (the corpse as pollutant), a discourse about morality, and a new aesthethics. The botanist and landscape designer John Claudius Loudon, wanted to create an environment which was ‹morally uplifting› and which provided education for the poor: «a properly managed cemetery could become a school of instruction in architecture, botany, and the important points of general gardening: neatness and order» (*On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries, 1843*).[27] Cemeteries were to have

23 Amadei 2014, 47.

24 Specifically, poor people were keeping the corpses of their dead in their home until they could find the money to pay for the funeral.

25 The Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1849 authorised the removal of corpses from private homes. The series of cholera outbreaks led to more governmental interventions with The Nuisances Removal and Disease Prevention Act (1849) which saw the appointment of Health Commissioners with authority to remove the corpse. Finally the Metropolitan Interment Act (1850) introduced ‹receiving houses› or morgues as a safe place for corpses before burial. Amadei 2014, 51. The Burial Act of 1852's main contribution was to regulate burial space, and ban intramural burials. The Burial Act of 1857 banned the reuse of graves.

26 For an extensive study of the Anatomy Act, see Richardson 1987. The scarcity of bodies created a demand: two notorious trials, Burke and Hare (1828) in Edinburgh and John Bishop, London (1831) indicted for trafficking bodies and body parts, brought the ‹resurrectionist› to the attention of the public. It is hard to miss the capitalistic overtones: the body is perceived as ‹utility› and ‹commodity› to be sold by the inch.

27 Loudon 1843, 12–13. Loudon was the first to use the word ‹arboretum›. Abney Park in Stoke Newington, London was created as a garden cemetery and arboretum.

a visual impact. On the one hand this new discourse about aesthetics is also part of a rise in individualism. The new private cemetery companies offer the chance for individuals and families to make their own choices with regards to architectural monuments.[28] On the other hand, the new discourse draws on Romanticism as expressed in the ‹natural› settings of the cemeteries: «The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.»[29]

Finally, the conspicuous Greco-Roman architecture re-inscribes the idea of Western culture as «formative of cultural and national identity».[30] However, it seems that the triple effects of successful cemetery designs are firstly the isolation and containment of death, secondly the reformation of the lower classes to serve the interest of the wealthy and thirdly to create a suitable place for memorialisation and meditation.[31]

Finally the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century impacts on the Victorian view of death and on the practical implementation of dealing with dead bodies. It has been said that the private cemetery companies accentuated the ‹class-bound death cultures› of Victorian England.[32] Indeed an analysis of class should undergird any study of this burial reform movement: although there is a pervading idea that the corpse is viewed as ‹waste›, there is a clear connection between the working class corpse, generator of disease and miasma and willingness to work. Indeed the working class's custom to keep the body in the house until there is enough money to pay for the funeral is seen to impact on the working space.[33] One of the implications of Chadwick's reform is to both medicalise and police death, through the introduction of the Reception House, and the creation of undertakers.[34] Furthermore the different class status of members of Victorian society are mirrored in their arrangements for the disposal of the dead: middle and upper-classes Victorians used death to symbolically express

28 The architecture displayed in the Magnificent Seven can be best characterised as ‹eclectic›, including Greco-Roman monuments, Gothic revival, and Egyptian style.

29 From the Preface to ADONAIS: Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822); Shelley 2009, 529.

30 Hoglund 2010, 28.

31 The garden cemeteries «hide the organic realities of decomposition» (Sánchez-Eppler 1998, 423).

32 Richardson 1987, 262.

33 Hotz 2001, 23.

34 The creation of the function of undertakers represents «an invasion of commerce into the rite of passage» (Hotz 2001, 24).

their own social status though mourning and dress code, purchasing expensive and well situated burial plots mirroring the social status of their owners. The most ostentatious, and expensive of such burials were in stark contrast to the common graves, and a far cry from the pauper's funeral, as we are reminded in the following dirge:

> «Rattle his bones over the stones,
> He's only a pauper, whom nobody owns.
> … He has left not a gap in the world now he's gone,
> … To the grave with his carcase as fast as you can».[35]

This is a far cry from the ‹beautiful death› which is depicted by the historian of death and burial Philip Ariès.[36] From the religious point of view, the evangelical revival contributes to the rise of the concept of ‹the good death› which is exemplified in the famous painting of Prince Albert's death, surrounded by his friends and family.[37] The Victorian Evangelical concept of ‹the good death›[38] is characterised by a combination of good luck, convenient illness, pious character, and familial affection and support, resulting in an eventual reunion with loved ones beyond death.[39] The emphasis shifts to the explicit expression of grief, and to its advertising on the tomb.[40] Indeed, epitaphs and funerary writings became an accepted and

35 Noel, T., The Pauper's Drive, https://www.bartleby.com/71/1414.html (accessed August 20, 2019).

36 Ariès 1974, 409.

37 There are a number of paintings which typify this concept of the ‹good death›. Wheeler includes also Henry Bowler, *The Doubt: Can These Dry Bones Live?* (1855), John Everett Millais, *The Vale of Rest* (1858), and John Martin, *The Plains of* Heaven (1853).

38 Lutz argues that evangelical revivals of the 1830s and 1840s were influenced by romanticism and help popularise the idea of the good death (Lutz 2015, 2). The rise of biblical criticism and the recognition of the concepts of analogy, typology and metaphor help to transform the discourse about death by using the metaphor of ‹sleep› to describe death (Tennyson's *In Memoriam,* 41, cited by Wheeler 1994, 219–220).

39 Jalland 1996, Curl 2002 and Wheeler 1994 all discuss this in some detail. Wheeler in particular argues that the language of consolation is expressed in terms of Christian hope. He discusses the reinterpretation of four theological terms (the ‹four last things›): death, judgement, heaven and hell (Wheeler 1994, 3). There is an emphasis on the continuity between life and death, and an idea of heaven as ‹community› (Wheeler 1994, 5).

40 Ariès 1981, 529–530.

popular art form as the hunt for epitaphs and collation of anthologies demonstrates.[41]

I shall conclude these reflections on the changing culture regarding death in Victorian times by returning to Highgate cemetery. While other cemeteries created in that period suffered an economic downturn to the change in demographic, with the arrival of poor immigrants,[42] by contrast Highgate Cemetery being well-established within the already prosperous area of Highgate village gained from the infrastructure already in place and became a part of a complex of institutions – including hospitals and workhouses. Resulting from combined factors ranging from aesthetic, philosophical and moral alongside commercial and social interests, Highgate Cemetery had a strong environmental impact and became a lasting model for the spatial reorganization of the growing metropolis.

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41 See for instance Vita 1999.
42 Kensal Green for instance.

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