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Rugg, Julie Joyce orcid.org/0000-0002-0067-6209 (2018) *Consolation, individuation and consumption : Towards a theory of cyclicity in English funerary practice*. *Cultural and Social History: the Journal of the Social History Society*. pp. 61-78. ISSN 1478-0038

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2018.1427339>

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Consolation, individuation and consumption: towards a theory of cyclicity in English funerary practice

At the heart of the paper is the core contention that the literal scale of mortality – the size of the community and the number of dead that community has to deal with – is a more significant determinant of change in funerary practice than chronological periodization. Change over time in westernised funerary practice is generally understood in terms of dichotomised swings between periods when death was somehow hidden or ‘taboo’, and times during which death was regarded as ‘tame’, accepted and largely unproblematic.¹ This paper suggests a new meta-narrative, in proposing that funerary practice is cyclical and has a recurring pattern: innovation, gradually absorbed as a mass option, provokes new innovation. This cyclicity is not seated within the desire for the lesser-status members of society to emulate the elite or garner ‘respectability’.² Rather, it reflects a more essentialist search for consolation that is undermined by the threat to individuation by industrial-level scales of operation and professionalization. Within this framework, consumption is posited as a facilitator and the bereaved make active choices – depending on their unequal resources – amongst a range of products and services to secure consolation. The paper draws from a range of historic sources and offers a fresh interpretation of change in use from churchyard to cemetery and from cemetery to crematorium in the English context. The paper then reviews the ways in which the more recent development of natural burial reflects the repetition of the pattern.

The material realities of mortality

This paper draws on data from multiple research projects on the disposal of the dead in the nineteenth and twentieth century in England.³ New reflections were provoked by recent research on churchyards and cemeteries in rural North Yorkshire from 1850-2007.⁴ The research was spatially specific, and aimed to encompass individual histories of the churchyards and cemeteries within a bounded geographic area, fringed by the North York Moors and the Yorkshire Dales, and containing hundreds of small and dispersed villages. Scawton is one such village, situated between the market towns of Thirsk and Helmsley, and scattered over a wide area. In 1890, its population was recorded as being 132.⁵ The parish population has not grown substantially since that time, and agriculture remains a principal occupation. At the centre of the village stands the church of St Mary, which was built in the twelfth century. Burials around the church have taken place for close to a thousand years, and historic maps indicate that, in all probability, the churchyard has not been extended. In the period of sixty years from 1840 to 1900, a total of nineteen interments took place.⁶ South Ottererington, to the north west of Thirsk, runs almost into the village of Newby Wiske. Both share the churchyard of St Andrew's at South Ottererington, which in the fifty years between 1813 and 1863 accommodated 289 interments. This was an average of between five and six burials a year: perhaps one every couple of months or so, if spaced evenly. Burials tend not to be evenly spaced, and so again it is likely that months could pass between interments: in the whole of 1820, just one burial took place.⁷ Both churchyards are still in use. This very bald information on interment in these small villages provokes a series of reflections on the ways in which the *scale* of interment might impact on the experience of death.

Phillipe Ariès, always nostalgic, reflected on a time when 'the death of a man still altered the space and time of a social group that could be extended to include the entire community'.⁸ This observation could even now be applicable in small village communities, but how could it ever be or ever have been the case in larger settlements where the scale of

death was exponentially greater? The demographics of mortality in the past tend to be dominated by analysis of increasing and decreasing death rates, regional and class differentiation and competing explanatory theories for change. The actual number of dead bodies does not necessarily feature in these accounts.⁹ Evidence of the scale of operation in larger cities in the nineteenth century is available in reports produced by public health officials. Perhaps the most startling is a slender Parliamentary report produced in 1889 and containing a tabular summation of burial practices in some of the largest cemeteries in England at that time, operating in London. The report aimed to gather data on the incidence of mass interments in common graves, but also – as contextual information – requested the number of burials that had taken place in the site to date. The majority of the 23 cemeteries had been in operation since the 1840s or 1850s, and the largest were over 40 acres in size. Brompton Cemetery, in use since June 1840, had taken 155,004 burials; Lambeth Cemetery, opened in 1854, had had 100,010; and interments in the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery had – in its 48 years of operation – reached 247,000. This figure equates to over 5,000 burials a year or around two burials an hour if the site was open for eight hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year.¹⁰

The two extreme experiences of village and city mortality, sitting at either end of a numeric scale, indicate that some account must be taken of the very basic materiality of death in the past, of the actual number of bodies to be disposed of at a given time and in a given place, and of how that number must have had an impact on funerary practice. This paper reflects on how that materiality can be accommodated in a meta-narrative of change. It is suggested that the scale of mortality drives change in funerary practice in very specific ways, and does so as a consequence of three interlinking and mutually intensifying factors: the deployment of strategies by the bereaved to secure consolation; the search for mitigation to possible threats to individuation posed by mortality; and the commercialisation of elements of

dying, death and the burial or cremation of the dead. The paper argues that, as a consequence, change in funerary practice has been and will tend to be cyclical.

Consolation, individuation and consumption

The paper rests on a bundle of contentions and ‘key words’ which require some unpacking and more exact definition: consolation, individuation and consumption. There are alternative interpretations and uses of these terms, and it is not the aim of this paper to address those in detail. It is also worth noting that terms do not denote emotions, but are activities and responses entangled with emotions and subject to a level of social construction which changes over time.

Consolation

As Davies observes, meaning-making is the ‘prime human project’, and takes place through multiple frameworks.¹¹ Here it is argued that the very desire to make meaning in response to the inevitability of mortality is closely intertwined with a search for consolation. For Reich, consolation ‘disappeared from scholarly and public interest in the late 19th century’.¹² To observe that consolation is needed in the face of mortality is perhaps mundane, but it remains the case the fact of mortality demands a human response. That response invariably includes activity which overtly or unconsciously secures comfort to ameliorate the negative emotions – fear, sadness, grief, anxiety – that generally follow a death. In anthropological terms, ritual activities are undertaken to address the rupture caused to society by the loss of one of its members.¹³ In some senses, addressing the ‘rupture’ is a rather less emotional way of describing the consolation that may be found by individuals attending the funerals of family or friends who see physical evidence that their kinship or community group continues to function, that the individual is not alone, and that others who they love are still alive.

However, anthropological accounts of funerary activity tend to sit in the realms of what is observable, and in describing funerary ritual do not necessarily question or even introduce the notion that such ritual may be enacted because it is, personally, comforting to the enactors. For example, Miller and Parrot give a detailed account of domestic ritual involving photographs, clothing and jewellery following loss in a South London community. However, their conclusions tend to dwell on the use of material culture to mediate relationships with the dead and gloss over the comfort someone might find in, for example, cuddling a dress once worn by their mother.¹⁴

Individuals are likely to draw on a range of ritual repertoires to secure consolation. For example, simply believing that a funeral was correct, proper and appropriate to a person may be felt as comforting.¹⁵ Spiritual consolation may be found in beliefs that the deceased will benefit in the afterlife from properly enacted rituals which have been formally defined by a Church or denomination, or reflecting a more informal diffuse and personal spirituality. Klass pinpoints the ability of religions to console through their facilitating – through various rituals, beliefs and sacred objects – ‘continuing bonds’ with the bereaved.¹⁶ Even ostensibly mundane objects bring consolation through their symbolic significance.¹⁷ It is argued here that the search for consolation is an essential response to mortality, which sits underneath and directs choice in funerary practice. The nature and type of consolation is culturally and historically fluid, and may be overlaid by other concerns.

A further nuance to this argument rests in the possibility that there may be elements of ‘emulation’ in the search for consolation. In 1989, Cannon published a theorisation of change in mortuary expressions of status and sentiment, based on the presumption that lower status groups emulated the funerary practices of higher status groups. Emulation was evidenced through a cycle of elaboration and restraint. Using data from a survey of 3,500 monuments in rural Cambridgeshire, Cannon concluded that ‘higher social classes had greater access to the

monument medium at an earlier date and tended to utilize styles prior to their peak of popularity, while lower-status individuals tended to be commemorated by monument styles that were well past their peak of popularity'.¹⁸ In his view, as 'ostentation' became a dominant form of funerary expression, 'restraint is the only available avenue of distinction'.¹⁹ Cannon ostensibly addressed 'sentiment' in his analysis, but in actuality the bulk of his discussion centred on emulation in terms of status aspiration. This paper argues that new practices might be copied in the hope they would deliver a greater level of consolation than more customary activity. New practice evidenced what would now be interpreted as a degree of new or higher adaptive competence.²⁰ That practice may be rejected if it does not 'work', or may be absorbed if it does indeed offer more effective amelioration.²¹ An example might be the initially innovative but now commonplace practice of laying flowers at the site of a fatal accident. Furthermore, people will take their lead from a range of different authorities on the types of activity that might best offer consolation. The current middle-class obsession with the 'authentic' may indicate that agencies espousing practices deemed to have a higher level of sincerity or encompassing a higher level of agency are given greater credence by that group.²²

Individuation

The concept of individuation is one that sits more commonly within the framework of psychotherapy, and often refers to either babies' gradual understanding of their physical distinctness from their mother or the progress to independence of adolescents within the family dynamic. A rather broader definition of individuation simply addresses the existence of human beings as distinct entities: social individuals who can be distinguished from one another and have a singularity or uniqueness. The concept of individuation carries within it a presumption of physicality: individuation connotes human beings that are materially

distinguished by their personhood. This is not to say that the sense of an individual human being cannot range beyond that materiality.²³ Rather, ‘others’ – or human beings in relation to ourselves – are generally apprehended in the normal course of events as unique and embodied. In discussion of matters relating to the dead body and varying means of disposal, individuation is a central but largely overlooked concept. It is tempting to elide individuation and identity, and from that point become embroiled in definitions of identity²⁴ and the very many ways in which various identities – familial, political, national, sexual, religious, cultural – are construed and shaped by funerary practice.²⁵ However, this paper is not directly concerned with identity as a set of defining characteristics: simply the fact that individuals are generally regarded as unique and embodied.

Anthropological accounts of funerary practice have often considered death rituals with limited regard for the actual person who had been lost unless, unless that person’s identity had been principally defined by their status. Nevertheless, it is possible that subtle changes are made to ritual practices in order to exact a higher level of consolation for the loss of a particular person. Personalisation in funerary ritual is not a ‘modern’ and Westernised construct: respect for material individuation is evident throughout history. From the Bronze Age, the placing of sometimes elaborate grave goods and the location choice afforded to the act of interment indicate care for an individual, and – arguably – a desire for personal consolation through ritual. From the 10th century, legal consecration rituals defined exclusion from churchyard burial as a punishment meted out to an individual for particular sins.²⁶ By the fourteenth century, church memorials were including representations of individual likenesses, a trend continuing well into the nineteenth.²⁷ Archaeologists are increasingly regarding emotion as a key element in interpreting the material cultures of mortality. In Tarlow’s view, ‘if we are to recognise the humanity of those whom we study, we have to find

a way of incorporating into our archaeologies the fact that they were subtle, complex, emotional, motivated people'.²⁸

The enduring solicitude for the corpse of a loved one runs counter to common academic constructions of the dead body as 'object' matter.²⁹ Attitudes towards a dead body are defined by the identity of the deceased. Over time, personhood might cease to be attached to those remains, which often disappear in their entirety: the corpse is a dynamic object in a progressive state of decomposition. It moves from being an identifiable 'person' very close to life, through a process of wet de-fleshing and on to becoming dry bone.³⁰ This paper generally reflects on attitudes towards the very recently dead, and the particular solicitude attached to the identifiable corpse of a loved one. Not quite rationally, even superstitiously and employing 'childlike modes of logic'³¹, the dead body of a loved one is often defined as having a degree of sentience.³² Indeed, certain actions are thought to confer comfort to the dead, such as burial with a personal item, or in a location with a fine view. The newly and 'known' dead body requires a level of care that is rarely afforded the skeletal remains of the 'unknown' long-dead, although where identity or political significance is still attached to those remains then ritual treatment may still be regarded as obligatory.³³

Consumption

The search for consolation might take place through choices made from a more or less restrictive repertoire of options dictated by personal resources and structural factors and increasingly, from the early medieval period onwards, from the response of the market to the demand for choice. Academic consideration of consumption and death has focussed on material goods such as transitional objects and commemorative items displayed at public, significant sites or in a domestic setting. The funeral is included as a package of services and tends to dwell on elements such as the coffin, flowers and services provided by the funeral

director – including hygienic preparation of the body – and on the individual paid to conduct the service itself. The bereaved are generally construed as vulnerable consumers, whose ‘decision-making powers are problematized’³⁴ and who are subject to supposedly ruthless funerary capitalism. Critique of undertakers has been in evidence since such specialism emerged in the seventeenth century, and currently underpins concerns with regard to funeral poverty.³⁵ This paper shifts focus slightly away from purchases and ritual activities associated with the funeral, and instead considers the ways in which the mode of disposal itself can be construed as an act of consumption.

Choice between contemporary modes of disposal has recently been reviewed within the frame of consumerism, with a particular emphasis on the newer options with higher levels of technical or ritual innovation.³⁶ Arguably, there has always been an active market in disposal options although the economics of burial space under the auspices of organised religion in the past has rarely been subject to scrutiny. Certainly through the medieval period, well-resourced individuals might choose to endow chapels within abbeys or indeed construct entire churches in order to secure space for interment, and dependent chapels vied with their parish churches for the lucrative right to provide burial space.³⁷ By the early modern period, the marketization of spaces became reflected in a range of prices fixed according to the supposed spiritual benefits of certain locations, with higher fees for sites closest to the altar; vault burial also carried a premium as did – over time – locations in main rather than more marginal detached churchyards.³⁸ From the eighteenth century, commercial funerary chapels emerged as an inner-city alternative to churchyard burial, and in some locations the pew rent included the rights to space in the chapel’s vaults.³⁹ Through the nineteenth century, scandal was attached to excessive Church of England burial and memorial erection fees which were finally subject to regulation following a parliamentary inquiry.⁴⁰

Few would claim that the offer of space for burial and its subsequent purchase can be viewed simply as an economic transaction. Again, historians have discussed funerary consumption in terms of lower orders emulating the upper, and as a means of expressing a desire for respectability. The purchase of burial space within the church building itself is generally discussed in terms of status: for Harding, 'it was a fertile field of competitive display and conspicuous consumption'.⁴¹ The Victorian cemetery is also generally posited as a locale for the expression of status – or idealised status expression – by the class-conscious bourgeoisie, articulated through substantial memorials and through spatial location.⁴² However, people's relationship with things they purchase is rarely simple, and it is highly unlikely to be straightforward in the complex realms of funerary activity. It has been argued that the consolation afforded by the guarantee of burial as a family was intrinsic to the appeal of the Victorian cemetery, which offered this option on a range of graduated payment points.⁴³

It is important also to note that consumption is not solely an 'elite' activity. Unequal access to economic resources shapes cultural expectations with regard to levels and styles of consumption. Even within the Poor Law system, Hurren and King found that some parish authorities responded to the increasing commercialisation of Victorian funerals through the creation of 'new levels of customary rights' with regard, for example, to decorated coffins. Choice on burial location was also respected.⁴⁴ Outwith the Poor Law system, expression through consumption was still evident amongst those with fewer resources on which to draw. Glennie's suggestion that 'possibly, material sparsity intensified the meanings of particular items' is certainly relevant in this context.⁴⁵ In the realms of commemoration, high levels of emotional significance can be attached to very modest items, including items without obvious commemorative purpose.⁴⁶ Strange noted that, indeed, commemoration might adopt 'flexible, abstract and personal forms, none of which need fix on the cemetery'.⁴⁷ However, choice and agency – key underpinning determinants of consumption demand – could be still

expressed at the site of burial through ‘repurposing’ items to use on the grave such as tins and jam jars to contain flowers, through using old wood to create grave surrounds, and through sheer labour to refashioning the earth itself to create a mound over the grave, to signal the presence of the body and create a platform for the display of ephemeral items.⁴⁸

Mass mortality: consolation compromised

This paper suggests therefore, that the bereaved consumer has a level of agency within the market place and is in active search of products, services and rituals that will offer consolation. Decisions made with regard to disposal of the dead are framed to protect the body of the loved one and to secure an appropriate ritual treatment, and that treatment generally encompasses respect for the body’s individuated status. The importance of all these aspects of funerary activity is evidenced by the approbation that is afforded an absence of protection.

There are perhaps two arenas where this absence was and is most often apparent. In both instances, a failure to care for the individuated dead is deployed as an amalgam of political strategy and pragmatism. In the context of violence and war, atrocity often leaves its traces in mass graves containing the remains of multiple individuals whose bodies are discarded with disrespect.⁴⁹ The act of mass interment is undertaken with a deliberate disregard for any damage done to the bodies: their intermingling is a signal that the remains can be construed as so much waste product. The transgressive nature of mass burial reflects its use as a punitive measure, signalling the victors’ view of their victims as less than human, and denying the possibility of consolation to the victims’ family and community. Post-conflict, the discovery of a mass graves invariably leads to attempts to ‘re-individuate’ its contents and effect more appropriate ritual disposal; depending on that context, that might be re-interment in family plots or – at the very least, and if at all feasible – in separate graves.

In the England, from the 1830s. the operation of the Poor Law contained regulations that could be deployed in a deliberately punitive way. In instances where death took place in the workhouse and the body remained unclaimed, the parish authorities arranged a 'pauper' funeral. Contracts were often drawn up between parish authorities, funeral directors and burial providers, establishing a set fee per funeral which might take place in mass graves, often with little opportunity for formal commemoration. The actual practice of pauper burial is something about which less is known than might be expected.⁵⁰ However, what is indisputable is the degradation, horror and shame that 'pauper burial' elicits even as a concept. A nuanced reading of the strength of this concept discerns at its basis the signal failure of a family to protect its dead as individuated beings. The provisions of the Anatomy Act 1832, which permitted the appropriation for anatomical study of the bodies of unclaimed dead, compounded this failure.⁵¹

Mass burial also constitutes a pragmatic response to a practical problem: that the number of bodies requiring immediate interment has overtaken the resources available to afford singular treatment: the matter is less politically discursive and more prosaic. The recourse to mass interments is often used as a symbol and measure of acuteness of any epidemic outbreak. The sudden increase in mortality subverted the ordered disposal of the dead: for example, cholera outbreaks are given as explanation of the incidence of trench burials at St Pancras churchyard at particular periods in its long history.⁵² During the Second World War, there were months when the intensity of aerial bombardment was such that the number of fatalities exceeded the capacity of the authorities to offer interment in family graves. The public were highly critical of the recourse to 'trench' burials, with multiple coffins placed side by side in a long ditch; resonances with mass pauper interment were not mitigated by invocations of heroic sacrifice as part of the funerary ritual.⁵³ Here it is suggested that scale of interment above a certain level can appear to be so close to mass

interment as to negate the consolation sought within funerary ritual and practice. Similarly, cremation at the busiest sites – offering just thirty-minute slots – construes the dead as innumerable units passing on oiled rollers through an industrial process. This paper argues that over the last two hundred years, changes in funerary practice have evolved in response to the increasingly massed nature of mortality, concentrated in urban locations.

A brief history of burial in England

The paper will use the history of burial in England specifically to evidence its case. Every nation has its own burial history that requires some explanation: misunderstanding often follows the presumption that meanings and terms can readily cross national boundaries. In England, the Roman Catholic Church, and – following the Reformation – the Church of England dominated provision of space for burial for hundreds of years up to around the seventeenth century, at which time the advent of Protestant Dissent created a demand for independent burial space separate. From around the same period, the level of Jewish migration to England also created a need for distinctive and separate provision, met through the operation of burial clubs. Unlike many countries throughout Continental Europe, there was no distinctive push for burial reform during the course of the eighteenth century. In England, national burial legislation on sanitary principles was not passed until the mid-nineteenth century although private, joint-stock cemeteries came into being from the 1820s and served the majority of the rapidly-growing industrialised cities. From the 1850s, new burial legislation allowed for the creation of cemeteries paid for largely through the rates. Agitation in favour of cremation developed pace from the 1880s, leading finally to the passage of the Cremation Act 1902, which empowered burial boards to create crematoria. Cremation was slow in gathering popularity, with just thirteen crematoria in operation by 1914, undertaking just over 1,200 cremations in that year. After World War II, growing

cremation numbers were facilitated by and no doubt facilitated an increase in the number of crematoria, and cremation overtook burial as the principal funerary option in the 1960s.⁵⁴ The concept of 'woodland' or green burial, arose in the early 1990s as a single cemetery manager's response to what he regarded as being the ecologically unsound nature of the funerary business, in the mass production of coffins and use of stone memorials. Green burial sites allow for either the planting of trees on the grave, or locate graves within an existing natural woodland or meadow. 'Green burial' has increased in popularity; currently the number of green burial sites exceeds the number of crematoria operating in England, and it is estimated that 'natural burial' constitutes around one per cent of all interments.⁵⁵

The transition from one mode of disposing of the dead to another was generally accompanied by rhetoric which both extolled the merits of the 'new' type of disposal, and denigrated the 'old' tradition. This rhetoric was deployed by advocates in favour of the new methods, and gradually became accepted as orthodoxy until the 'new' methods were adapted to a point of saturation. Innovation was again required as the consolation implicit in the 'new' method was undermined by its mass absorption. This recurring pattern is best illustrated through example. Space precludes extensive quotation from primary sources; rather, indicative examples are given of common rhetorical tropes.

From churchyard to cemetery

The churchyard is generally posited as an ideal last resting place, idyllic in the supposedly timeless nature of the repose that it offers the dead. It is difficult, therefore, to apprehend a time in which churchyard burial was denigrated. Indeed, Dickens used churchyard burial as an indicator of the lowliest and worst possible fate. Captain Nemo's burial in *Bleak House* (1853) is described by Jo, the crossing sweeper, as being in ground so overlaid that the sexton interring Nemo's body was 'obliged to stamp upon it to git it in'.⁵⁶ In 1843, Edwin

Chadwick’s report on interment detailed the number of burial grounds in operation in London at that time. Chadwick sought to highlight three interlinking facets of London burial which were becoming problematic: density of burial, overall scale, and the accretion of the dead. In terms of density, Chadwick presented an equivalised number of burials per acre for each site, which underlined the very limited physical extent of the churchyards and other burial grounds in the capital.⁵⁷ Secondary analysis of the data indicates that the scale of operation was very variable: around 40 per cent of the sites had no more than one burial a week, and less than ten per cent had three burials a day or more. However, the proportions are telling: of the 45,004 burials taking place in the sites in the year charted by Chadwick, 44 per cent took place in the ‘higher-volume’ locations (see Table 1).

Number of burials per week	CHURCHYARDS			OTHER BURIAL GROUNDS			ALL SITES		
	Churchyards in that category n.	Interments in that category n.	Interments in that category %	Sites in that category n.	Interments in that category n.	Interments in that category %	Sites in that category n.	Interments in that category n.	Interments in that category %
<1	59	1,400	4	28	685	6	87	2,085	5
2-5	53	8,689	25	20	2,291	21	73	10,980	24
6-10	29	11,917	35	1	300	3	30	12,217	27
11-15	8	5,174	15	4	2,270	21	12	7,444	17
>16	6	7,118	20	4	5,160	48	10	12,278	27
	155	34, 298	100	59	10,706	99*	212	45,004	100

SOURCE: Chadwick, E. (1843) *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, 274ff. Note that cemeteries are excluded from the analysis, as are the 24 sites where burials were recorded as eg ‘seldom used’ or closed. The incidence of burial would not necessarily be evenly spread. These figures are indicative of general scale of operation.*May not total 100 due to rounding

Chadwick’s figures are a snapshot, and do not underline the effect of accretion over time.

One example from North Yorkshire is indicative. In the small market town of Helmsley, All Saints churchyard accommodated well over 1,800 interments in the fifty years before a new extension was laid out in 1874: the old churchyard was simply saturated with remains: ‘every inch of it has been again and again dug over, and old graves have for years past been disturbed, and bodies turned out of their resting places in order to inter others, skulls even

covered with hair have been lying at the feet of the Clergy when they have been taking the services.⁵⁸ This was the commonplace experience of churchyard burial, where accretion meant that the soil lost the capacity to effect decomposition, and sites became ‘choked with the accumulated deposits of mortality’.⁵⁹

Undoubtedly the science of graveyard ‘miasma’ and public health was very much to the fore in public debate. However, scientific language was inter-woven with more visceral description of indignities to the dead afforded by what was – essentially – mass burial at its least controlled. Corpses, in a fleshed state and readily identifiable to relatives, were being disturbed in the worst ways possible:

But, should you happen to have a father or a mother, a brother or a sister, a wife or a child, a playmate of your young, or a companion of your mature years, deposited in such a place, I advise you under all circumstances to keep away from that churchyard, and forgo the cherished but melancholy pleasure of shedding a tear upon their tomb, or strewing ‘a rose bud o’er their ashes’ lest your feelings should be tortured by finding their loved remains wantonly mangled by the careless sexton, their bones made the playthings of children, or their dust scattered to the wild winds of heaven.⁶⁰

Nineteenth century churchyard burial offered no consolation, and clearly constituted a substantial threat to individuation.

Early cemetery company rhetoric was often framed to address those concerns directly. The planned cemeteries would be ‘ornamentally laid out with walks, trees and shrubs [...] thus tending to soothe the feelings of survivors by offering them eligible opportunities of erecting monuments [...], and of visiting their place of sepulture free from the annoyance and inconvenience of densely crowded churchyards’.⁶¹ Consolation was clearly evident through

the landscape, 'planted with suitable shrubs, presenting an inviting retreat, which may be frequented with fond affection by the relatives and friends of those who slumber within its enclosure'.⁶² The cemetery also provided a new 'offer' of care for the body: ecclesiastical regulation did not readily allow for the reservation of burial space; in churchyards there was no guarantee that families could be interred together; and grave disturbance was routine. From the 1820s, private cemeteries could make these guarantees, through the sale of rights of perpetuity which enabled individuals to determine who would be buried in a particular grave. The Burial Acts were based more squarely on scientific principles, but nevertheless continued to offer the possibility of purchasing rights in a family grave.

From cemetery to crematorium

The cemetery 'ideal' very quickly degenerated through the course of the nineteenth century. As urban centres exploded in size, cemeteries themselves expanded and new cemeteries were built on new outskirts. Cemeteries had originally posited themselves as 'gardens' in which it might be possible to wander and find the tomb of a loved one. By the 1870s, cemetery landscapes in many urban locations had become overwhelmed with the pressure of interment. Unlike churchyards, cemeteries were often ten or more acres in extent, and after a time offered little to the eye except an apparently unbounded landscape of tomb after tomb (see Image 1). Cemeteries' functionality was further underlined by the need to maximise land use: a 'second wave' of municipal cemetery expansion was happening as it came to be realised that burial space would be an interminable burden on the rates. New cemetery extensions were grid-like in form to maximise land use and contained minimal planting.

Cremation lobbyists deployed rhetoric underlining the inability of the 'old' practice of burial to respect the individuated corpse. Peter Chalmers Mitchell, Chairman of the Cremation Society, spoke in 1932:

On average, 500,000 deaths occur annually in this country. The average weight of each body is ten stones, and thus five million stones of decaying organic matter have to be disposed of every year so that it may not be a danger and an offence to the living [...] it takes on average ten years for each body to become innocuous in the grave, so that each year we have to add five million stones of corruptible matter to an existing bulk of fifty millions.⁶³

In its first iteration, cremation was – like cemetery burial – posited as an option for the elite. Indeed, initially, cremation was available only to Cremation Society members, who paid a guinea a year or a single payment of ten guineas.⁶⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, cremation was regarded as being preferred by the ‘educated’ classes, which was a reflection of effective marketing of the technique by and to ‘opinion makers’ such as John Everett Millais and Anthony Trollope. Indeed, in 1924 the Cremation Society of Great Britain advised Leicester’s Cremation Society to foster support for its crematorium, by targeting only the local intelligentsia with pamphlets.⁶⁵ In Jalland’s view, cremation offered the opportunity ‘to develop new secular rituals with appeal to intelligent and imaginative people’: ‘first-generation’ cremationists were self-conscious opinion-makers and taste-setters, clearly enjoying their consumption of a modern technology in a new architectural setting.⁶⁶

It could be argued that much of the initial appeal of cremation lay in its exclusivity and the promise of singularity in ritual style. This was entirely possible where crematoria undertook one or two cremations a week. However, cremation was becoming a ‘mass’ option as the Second World War approached, and reached the majority option in the 1960s. As Table 2 indicates, the number of crematoria in operation expanded substantially and by the 1960s crematoria were handling, on average, five cremations a day. Data from the 1990s

indicate that the three largest crematoria were each handling over 80 cremations a week: sixteen cremations a day, one every half an hour.

Year	Number of crematoria	Number of cremations	Cremations per crematoria (rounded)	Cremations per week per crematorium (average)
1910	13	812	62	1
1915	14	1,347	204	4
1920	14	1,716	122	2
1925	16	2,585	161	3
1930	21	4,287	204	4
1935	29	8,766	302	6
1940	56	22,336	399	8
1945	58	38,272	660	13
1950	58	81,633	1407	27
1955	82	130,060	1586	30
1960	148	188,294	1272	25
1965	184	250,236	1359	26
1970	206	327,127	1587	31
1975	218	364,340	1671	32
1980	220	387,296	1760	34
1985	222	408,523	1840	35
1990	225	403,290	1792	35
1995	229	408,876	1785	34

SOURCE: Cremation Society of Great Britain website www.srgw.info/CremSoc/LegalEtc/index.html, accessed 23 June 2016. Note that, like burial, the incidence of cremation would not necessarily be evenly spread. These figures are indicative of general scale of operation.

Critique of cremation practice emerged as the scale of operation intensified: indeed, Davies notes that the ‘conveyor belt’ trope defining cremation as an industrial process was in evidence from the 1960s.⁶⁷ By the 1990s, criticism had become widespread. Lobbyists for funerary reform criticised the functional nature of cremation architecture, ‘not designed to enable people to mark a life and a death, but to get one party in and out without bumping into the previous and following parties’.⁶⁸ Indeed, cremation has come to be construed as symbolic of ‘the modern way of death’⁶⁹

However, there was and is clearly consolation in the act of cremation as a chosen option, and it is evident that the nature of that consolation is not uniform across all

individuals and indeed changes over time. In the nineteenth century, cremation was construed as ‘metamorphosis’, in transforming the decomposing body from something ‘unspeakable’ into innocuous ash.⁷⁰ That act of transformation can be interpreted as a species of protection, saving a loved one from the ‘potential indignity’ of protracted decomposition in an overcrowded cemetery or churchyard.⁷¹ More recently, research has indicated that choosing cremation can be a way of assuaging a variety of fears attached to interment, such as being buried alive or being ‘eaten by worms’⁷²

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, consolation and a respect for individuation has become evident within increasingly commonplace practice of taking cremated remains away from crematoria for personal disposal.⁷³ Here, decisions to take ashes away could be read, in part, as ‘acts of resistance to traditional sites of disposal and associated modernist practices’: in the words of one respondent to a recent study, “[Nan] wouldn’t want to be...with a load of other dead people up there”.⁷⁴ This study of the fate of human ashes following cremation also indicates that the bereaved were often confident creators of ritual, who generally chose from a range of options in what was and still remains a highly responsive marketplace. This trend in the disposal of cremated remains carries an intrinsic advantage in terms of individuation. Dispersal locations are often unique. Since the dead are not fixed spatially to a prescribed location, they do not necessarily ‘accrete’ although the frequency with which ashes are often scattered at football stadia, for example, has meant that those stadia have begun to establish their own gardens of remembrance.⁷⁵

The appeal of natural burial

In a parallel development, contemporary natural burial also offers a context in which highly personalised ritual can be enacted, and which again delivers consolation through an assurance of complete control of material remains. ‘Natural burial’ is a highly malleable concept, and

development of this practice indicates that there is a wide ‘offer’ in the marketplace depending on personal preferences.⁷⁶ At what might be considered the purest and most austere end of the spectrum, natural burial requires the bereaved not to erect any memorial or indeed mark the grave in any way: burial takes place within a meadow which retains its character as an open meadow. Here, it might be argued, the body disappears in the landscape, but retains the illusion of singularity: there is no sense of massed interment. At the other end of the spectrum, natural burial may take place within the grounds of an existing cemetery and constitutes little more than an interment option in a more ‘natural’ setting, but without formal stone monumentation. Much of natural burial provision sits at a mid-way point, in offering interment in a specific, generally privately-owned, site with some limited option for individualised commemoration generally through tree planting.

Research indicates that ‘early adopters’ of natural burial had multiple reasons for their decision.⁷⁷ Currently, the desire for a higher level involvement in funerary arrangements is deemed evidence of a greater emotional intelligence, which conditions a rejection of normative burial and cremation practice. Natural burial offered ‘openness for the imagination’⁷⁸ and a scope for a greater level of personalisation in the funeral and the deployment of multiple spiritualities which perhaps were thought to be constrained in a cemetery or crematorium setting. There was a ‘desire to individualise and display the uniqueness of the deceased, and indeed themselves, through their choice to bury in a natural landscape’.⁷⁹

Proponents of green burial are often quick to state the rapid take-up of this option, but it may be that the very low scale of operation is intrinsic to its current appeal. Clayden *et al.* indicate that there are no robust statistics with regard either to the exact number of sites in operation or the number of interments being completed. In 2013 it was estimated that there were 274 sites, accommodating around one per cent of all burials in England and Wales. Data

from ten sites in the Clayden *et al.* study indicates that the average annual number of interments in any type of site did not exceed 90. Leaving to one side what is probably a handful of larger-scale operators, it is probable that most natural burial providers undertook perhaps one burial a month. Certainly there was an expectation amongst these smaller-scale providers that they would never undertake more than one funeral in a day, offering ‘one-to-one guidance and support’ through the course of funeral planning.⁸⁰ The study anticipated that the increase in market share of the larger-scale providers would be likely to degrade the very ‘bespoke’ nature of this experience, as one-to-one service and an on-going, personal relationship between bereaved and providers would be difficult to sustain at higher scales of operation.⁸¹

Conclusion

According to Bernstein, ‘people both create and perpetuate death practices as actively as they discard them...modern societies, then, do not deny death so much as remake it’.⁸² This paper has used historic and contemporary data to argue that responses to death are continually being remade in a constant search for effective consolation. Patterns are repeated. The search for consolation is undermined by the threats to individuation posed by mass uptake of particular funerary practices; amongst the bereaved, active consumers and choice-makers play a large part in the invention of new ritual. ‘Green cremation’ is on the horizon, in techniques of body disposal through alkaline-hydrolysis.⁸³ However, it might be argued that this innovation becomes cyclical as an increasing number of individuals follow the lead that has been given. The scale of operation starts to require a degree of strategic and even regulatory response. So, for example, natural burial providers have been encouraged to sign up to a ‘code of practice’, by which means the public can be assured of a basic level of service. Looking to the future, nascent ‘professionalism’ of natural burial practice will follow where larger-scale natural

burial providers develop brand identity. Natural burial may be threatened by a loss of emotional authenticity as practice becomes formalised. Increasing take-up of this option might erode the level of consolation brought by the concept of ‘bespoke’ ritual for an individual in a natural setting, where the numbers seeking natural burial push the scale of operation upwards and personalisation begins to follow common tropes.

This interpretation of change has a wider resonance than just the ways in which disposal of the dead takes place, offering some commentary on critiques attached to professionalization in death practice. In many death-related activities, an increase in the scale of operation will always require a strategic and professional response, which in turn will undermine the ‘authenticity’ of experience. The expansion in use of hospice services was deemed a threat to its core values of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘pioneering spirit’; Cruse bereavement counselling was an informal enterprise based largely on untrained professionals until a step-change in operation called for better strategic co-ordination and training; and the use of civil celebrants is becoming so widespread that, again, professionalised practice and best practice ‘templates’ have started to emerge.⁸⁴ In all these three areas of death work, perceived value has been grounded in the notion of the ‘authentic’ amateur in juxtaposition to the ‘insincere’ professional.

There is a sense, therefore, in which innovation in funerary ritual becomes cyclical. This possibility has already been forwarded by Cannon, but his analysis lacked essential nuance. ‘Emulation’ is too simple a concept to explain drivers in changing funerary practice. This paper suggests the importance of a tightly intertwined node of imperatives blending the search for consolation, a desire to protect the individuated body and active consumption. The possibility that these factors might drive a cyclicity in funerary practice offers a more satisfying meta-narrative than one resting on dichotomised swings between a ‘hidden’ and a ‘revived’ death, and moves the debate away from equally problematic conceptualisations of

what might be traditional, modern or post-modern in the ways in which society deals with its dead.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Douglas Davies and Brian Parsons for comments on an earlier draft of this paper; thanks are also expressed to the peer reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

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