



Jennifer McKendry

James Stevens Curl (2000)
The Victorian Celebration of Death
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The value of the nineteenth-century cemeteries today as open spaces in large urban conurbations is enormous. The trees are now mature (indeed, many are at the end of their lives and need to be replaced) ; graves, monuments, and mausolea have taken on the patina of age ; and a wonderful quality has evolved that could all too easily be ruined. The reminders of death, inside and outside a church or cathedral, or in the cemeteries laid out during Queen Victoria's reign, convey an ever-present visual memorial to our collective past without which we become loose and unsettled, and drift, with no roots and no tribal memory. The obliteration of cemeteries and churchyard memorials reflects the unease with which society views death, seeking to keep it out of sight and out of mind. Current obsessions with keeping everything tidy, not accepting long grass, leaning tombstones, and the patina of time, go with treating funerals as refuse-disposal problems : they reflect a deep malaise. Death was never a tidy thing; it is foolish to try to make it so, and to compartment it away from life and the living. The neglect of cemeteries and the contemporary playing down of death are symptomatic of how society collectively wills it.

Professor James Stevens Curl, Senior Research Fellow at Queen's University of Belfast, is a well-known name to cemetery enthusiasts who are likely to have read his important study, *A Celebration of Death* (1980 and 1993), on the architecture associated with the history of graveyards and cemeteries from ancient cultures to modern day. He is also the author of articles on garden cemeteries, as well as books on Freemasonry and the Egyptian Revival, both useful about certain aspects of death customs. These have stood him well in placing the Victorian period in a broader context including a consideration of relevant music and literature.

Jennifer McKendry is from Kingston, Ontario. She is the author of Into the Silent Land : Historic Cemeteries and Graveyards in Ontario (forthcoming).

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Included in a *Victorian Celebration of Death*, for example, is a chapter discussing the nascency of Victorian attitudes to death in the poetry of the 18th century "Graveyard Poets" such as Robert Blair ("*The grave, dread thing! / Men shiver when thou'rt nam'd*"), Thomas Gray ("*Elegy in a Country Churchyard*") and Edward Young whose "*Night Thoughts*" ("*How populous? How vital, is the Grave? / This is Creation's melancholy Vault.*") gained international recognition due, in part, to its "all-pervasive gentle melancholy." With France's pleasure-gardens, where the occasional private burial of noted figures (J.-J. Rousseau at Ermenonville in 1778) conflated landscaping and burial sites, and with India's colonial cemeteries, located outside of cities with impressive mausoleums for the wealthy, the stage was set for 19th century developments in British cemetery design.

While Curl does embrace some cemeteries in other parts of the world touched by the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), the book concentrates on the legal, social and physical aspects of death – including cremation and funerals – as manifested in England, Ireland and Scotland. The general reader may find it a tough slog to read through the historical details of numerous British cemeteries, but there is no doubt that this material is a valuable contribution to a proper understanding of the complexities of the needs of social reformers and the greed of private entrepreneurs, with the Established Church uneasily straddling in the middle. From particulars of legislation, ownership and design in the British Isles, one can draw out significant generalities to apply to one's own special interests. For example the Cemeteries Clauses Act of 1847 to regulate certain aspects of British urban cemeteries are echoed in Canadian legislation of 1850 (an extrapolation : Canada is not discussed in Curl's book).

Given the numerous tantalizing descriptions – expressed so eloquently by Curl – of monuments and cemeteries ("*Nottingham Church Cemetery [...] laid out in a disused sandstone quarry to designs by Edwin Palchett, who created a powerfully evocative necropolis, complete with catacombs, constructed on bedrock ; exposed sandstone cliffs, caves, and other features*"), the reader hungers for more illustrations. It is particularly helpful for the prospective tourist when the history of a 19th century cemetery is brought up-to-date, and thus alerting the reader whether a visit is worthwhile. Too often one is chilled by the descriptions of monuments and buildings being cleared and grounds redeveloped. For "today," as the author states, "the

traveller misses much if the places where the dead are buried are avoided."

[He] will fail to gain an insight into aspects of the city he explores, for the manner in which the dead are disposed of and commemorated can reveal much. The cemetery of a great city can offer those who trouble to see it a rewarding and delightful experience, at once enriching and uplifting, and this is especially true of many European cities. However, a visit to the vandalized cemeteries of far too many cities in Britain can be profoundly disturbing, for widespread destruction (official and otherwise) is common. The ephemeral nature of life and the transience of kinship, of friendship, of fame, and of love, are devastatingly obvious to the beholder of neglected graves and of vandalized monuments. Funerary memorials in the wrecked cemeteries of Liverpool, London, Manchester, and other cities often insisted on a remembrance that failed: intended to commemorate in perpetuity, they have become targets for destroyers, and many have barely survived a century.

Curl's strong opinions about today's society often break through the customary neutrality of scholarly writing and surely must irritate some readers ; nonetheless, this erudite publication must find its way into the libraries of universities, colleges, genealogists and interested general readers ; all unable to escape "the icy fingers of death."