

History of death

Introduction

The history of death has been a key subject in *Mortality* since its inception. The first four numbers all contained an historical article and history has been represented at least once in every subsequent volume, supplemented by numerous book reviews and two 'Classics Revisited'. These 'revisits' are themselves by two 'classic' scholars, reflecting their own thoughts about the history of death, and therefore are doubly illuminating.

The late Roy Porter asked if Philippe Arie`s's work had stood the test of time or whether it had been superseded.[1] Outlining the five well-known stages into which Arie`s divided the long chronology of Western death, he noted that, in his original formulation, Arie`s had identified only four such periods. Porter's criticisms initially focused on this extra stage, corresponding with the Enlightenment, a time which fascinated and excited Porter himself but against which, he argued, Arie`s was prejudiced by his conservative Catholicism. However, principally, Porter criticized Arie`s' failure to engage with the scientific and medical aspects of his subject, which were, of course, Porter's own speciality. Despite these criticisms Arie`s remained, for Porter, 'the doyen of the historians of death'.

Ralph Houlbrooke reassesses David Stannard's book on death in Puritan New England, in part drawing on some of the many reviews it originally attracted.[2] While he deems it 'a classic worth revisiting' he feels that its argument 'melts under critical scrutiny like the wings of Icarus in the rays of the sun'. In particular he is unconvinced by Stannard's attempts at an interdisciplinary approach to the history of death, a position he himself has expounded in his own writing. Also at issue is the precise nature of Puritan belief—is it permitted to know one is saved or is perpetual doubt essential? Houlbrooke, quoting Thomas Becon, opts for the former while Stannard took the latter viewpoint.

Half of the historical articles in *Mortality* relate to the early modern period, each employing a particular source to illuminate their subject. Danae Tankard focuses on the Reformation in England, looking at the impact of religious controversies and reforms on the spiritual preparation of the dying. She compares the Catholic last rites in the *Sarum Manual*, widely used during the time of Henry VIII, with the protestant procedures laid out in the two prayer books of Edward VI's reign. For each, she provides an example of an actual deathbed in London, as described in depositions in the Court of Chancery, to underline the profound changes facing the dying from 1549 onwards. Elizabeth Hallam explores gender issues,[3] initiating an important theme which reappears frequently in *Mortality*, and which will be the subject of another 'virtual edition'. For her exploration of deathbeds in Canterbury between 1580 and 1640, Hallam analyses witnesses' depositions in testamentary disputes, less partisan than the

eulogies in the funeral sermons more commonly used by historians to describe deathbeds. She differentiates the women's sphere of activity, principally in caring for the dying, from men's roles in will making. However, women not only identified the all-important signs of approaching death but also frequently mediated between the dying person and the man actually transcribing the testator's wishes.

Ralph Houlbrooke chooses three Somerset gentry funerals from the later seventeenth century as his subject.[4] In particular he draws on the 'narrativecum-expenditure account' of the funeral of Colonel Edward Phelips in 1680, a particularly detailed document probably drawn up by the deceased's son. Houlbrooke shows how each funeral was appropriate not only to the status of the deceased but also to the precise time and place. The heraldic funeral of Sir John Stawell in 1662 was a public display of triumph, held shortly after the Restoration, for a faithful Somerset royalist. Colonel Phelips's funeral was 'private' and less grand but was still expensive, displaying neighbourly hospitality and charity; that of his twenty-year-old granddaughter in 1707 was a much simpler affair.

Clare Gittings takes as her source the diary of a curmudgeonly elderly woman, Sarah Lady Cowper, in London and Hertfordshire during the early years of the eighteenth century.[5] The article sets out to trace her various encounters with death—of parents, children and a much-hated husband—as well as the ignominy of having her son tried for murder (though later acquitted). It also unravels her many musings on death and divine providence in a time and setting where, unlike Stannard's Puritan New England, some people clearly felt no qualms about declaring complete certainty in their own salvation. Sarah Cowper carried this to such an extent that she positively gloated over the eternal damnation of those, such as her husband, whom she deemed to be sinners.

Deathbeds and funerals have long been the staples of historians of death. Recently, greater attention has also been turned to the afterlife, not just as described by theologians but in its more popular manifestations in ghost stories, a topic first explored by Keith Thomas. Joseph Helt concentrates on one French treatise, Francois Richard's *Of False Revenants*, published in 1657.[6] Richard believed that, while flesh remained on a corpse, it was capable of 'walking', bringing misfortune with it. He collected examples, also suggesting that, on exhumation, these corpses would show telltale signs of being 'restless dead.' The best insurance against becoming such a creature was to lead a blameless life ending in a good death. Helt concludes his discussion of this text with an account of the increasing number of historians working on ghosts and ghost stories.

John Wolffe's article was a foretaste of his then forthcoming book[7] (reviewed in *Mortality*, Volume 6, Number 3, pp. 330 – 331). His subject was the deaths of famous people in Britain between 1800 and 1914, as revealed in published sermons. He concentrated on the four people for whom the greatest number of

such sermons survives—Princess Charlotte (d. 1817); George III (d. 1820); The Duke of Wellington (d. 1852), and Prince Albert (d. 1861). The high number for Charlotte and Albert he ascribes to their dying tragically young while, for George III and Wellington it was the fact that they each defined an era. Interestingly, there were fewer for Victoria; by then sermons were far shorter and the flood of publication had abated. For Wolffe the sermons underline the role of national grief in creating solidarity and a cohesive society. He also points out the multiplicity of views of the afterlife which appear, belying any notion of Victorian uniformity of belief.

Clare Humphreys fills an important gap by focusing on the development of the first hospices to be founded in Britain since the Middle Ages.[8] These were set up between 1878 and 1914, generally calling themselves homes rather than hospices. In particular she looks at three London charitable institutions providing medical, nursing and spiritual care for dying ‘respectable poor’. Humphreys notes that spiritual care was considered most important of the three functions and that the view of death and dying varied according to the denomination of the hospice. Accounts of the dying patients written by those involved in the homes provide valuable material for this study.

Terminal care in a slightly later period, 1948 – 1967, is the theme of David Clark’s article, assessing the National Health Service’s claim to provide care ‘from the cradle to the grave’.[9] Clark finds continuities with the period explored by Humphreys, in particular the emphasis on religious care and the charitable nature of work with the dying. He also notes the paternalism of doctors at the deathbed. However, there are four principal innovations which occur towards the end of the period he is scrutinizing. One innovation is the shift from anecdote to evidence in the care of the dying. Ideas emerge such as dignity and meaning in death, while a more active approach is taken to the care of the dying so that it becomes a new area of medical concern. Fourthly, recognition of the interrelatedness of body and mind leads to a more integrated approach to issues such as pain and suffering.

The modern hospice and palliative care movement dates from the opening of St Christopher’s Hospice in London in 1967. Another article by David Clark[10] explores the events and circumstances leading to the development of St Christopher’s, drawing upon the personal correspondence of Cicely Saunders, who founded the hospice, and records kept at St Christopher’s. Clark places this enterprise within its wider historical context, showing that Saunders was part of a national and international network. Saunders access to the social networks within the upper levels of British society and her strategy of securing the personal endorsement of key figures within the British establishment was central in her ability to carry forward her scheme. Other factors were her strong sense of personal calling, her personal energy and her ‘assiduous attention to detail’. Through her work in setting up St Christopher’s Hospice Saunders stimulated and influenced the emerging professional agenda about the care of dying people, leading to the explicit emergence of what is now known as the ‘hospice

movement’.

The foundation of the hospice movement represents a mainstream development in the history of death in the western world. William J. K. Keenan’s study of Marist death culture from 1817 to 1997,[11] on the other hand, reminds us that subcultures may follow a very different trajectory. The group he explores is the Roman Catholic Marist Brothers Institute, with houses throughout the Christian world. While scholars debate to what extent death was or was not the great taboo subject of the twentieth century, for this religious order ‘the good death’, and in particular martyrdom, has always been central to its beliefs and practices.

Many centuries separate Clark’s dying patients, cared for by the NHS, and the Canterbury deathbeds described by Elizabeth Hallam in the very first number of *Mortality*. However individual circumstances may have changed, many of the issues surrounding death and dying remain the same, whether in the past or today. From its beginning, *Mortality* has provided its readers from all disciplines with valuable insights to help set their own current research concerns into a wider historical context.

CLARE GITTINGS
National Portrait Gallery
London
UK

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