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SACRED PLACES IN A SECULAR ERA: THE USE OF ROADSIDE MEMORIALS

One of the themes of the 2006 movie The Queen was the delay in the Royal Family's acknowledgment of the extent of the public's grief at the 1997 death of Diana, Princess of Wales in a Paris road accident. Evidence of this outpouring was the spontaneous laying of wreaths and other items at the royal households at Kensington Palace and Buckingham Palace. Prime Minister Tony Blair's staffs were equally stunned by the reaction but were quicker to respond to the new public mood. The traditional British "stiff upper lip" - which had got the country relentlessly through World War II - was now replaced by a more "tabloid" media era in which it was "okay" to express emotion. The creation of ad hoc ephemeral memorials (as distinct from stone or other permanent memorials) had suddenly become a fact of contemporary life. Death has moved out of the cemetery.

This article examines the reappearance of an old phenomenon: the creation of spontaneous memorials to people who die suddenly in peacetime. As a benchmark, this article begins with the most well known memorial to people who have died suddenly: those killed in battle. It then examines the manifestations of the roadside memorials. It concludes with some suggestions on how to explain the growing phenomenon. In short, there is much more to the roadside memorials and other ad hoc memorials than meets the eye.



War Graves

War graves are the most obvious visual symbols of the human cost of war. They are silent cities. The scale of human loss never fails to shock, especially when it is chiselled in stone. But the custom of giving the wartime dead a proper burial and commemoration is only a recent one. For example at Waterloo in June 1815 and in the Crimea four decades later, the British shovelled their dead soldiers into holes in the ground and forgot about them. Major historical figures certainly did have marked graves and memorials - but not the people who died fighting for them.

The change in attitude began in 1914 with the pioneering work of Fabien Ware in World War I. Too old for military duty; he arrived in France in September 1914 in command of a mobile unit of the British Red Cross. He was quickly struck by the usual lack of any British system for the

marking and recording of the graves of fallen soldiers and he was determined that this should change. He made his own notes and took photographs of the sites for the next of kin.

He called on the British Government to reverse its traditional callous policy of not doing much about the dead. The War Office realised that the proper care of war graves would boost morale of the troops and comfort the bereaved relatives at home. The War Graves Registration Commission was created in 1915. Meanwhile, Ware also contacted British architects and experts on flowers to devise suitable memorials.

On May 21 1917 the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission was established by Royal Charter, with Ware as its Vice Chairman. Its duties are to mark and maintain the graves of the members of the Commonwealth armed forces who died in the two World Wars, to build memorials to those who have no known grave or who perished at sea, and to keep records and registers, including of the Civilian War Dead.

1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces died in the two World Wars. Of these, the remains of 925,000 were found and their graves are marked by a headstone. Where the remains are not marked, the casualty's name is commemorated on a memorial. There are war graves in 150 countries around the world, mostly in the 2,500 war cemeteries and plots constructed by the War Graves Commission.

The Commission still operates on the basis of four principles laid down in the War era: each of the dead should be commemorated individually by name on headstone or memorial; headstones and memorials should be permanent; headstones should be uniform; and there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.

Everyone was to be buried or commemorated as near to their place of death as possible. There should be "equality in death". Ware's system avoided elaborated memorials being erected by wealthy families which would overshadow those who had no wealthy relatives (or no relatives at all) to pay for headstones. This also meant that each cemetery is not only a garden of remembrance but also virtually a regiment on parade, with all the uniform headstones neatly measured and laid down out. The surrounding grounds are immaculate and well maintained – even in poor countries. The overall aim behind the horticultural design of a cemetery is to give the effect of a garden rather than the common concept of a cemetery.

The Commission is financed by its partner governments on the following ratio: Britain pays 78.43 per cent of the Commission's annual budget of 40 million pounds; Canada 10.07; Australia 6.05; New Zealand 2.14; South Africa 2.11; and India 1.20. The total capital value of all the Commission's sites worldwide is worth well over a billion pounds. All the Commonwealth War Grave Commission sites are immaculately maintained and they afford an atmosphere of peace and serenity.

✓ The New Memorial Movement

Ironically, most people who have died in the developed western world have not been killed in battle. Most died of natural causes. The war memorials, especially since World War I, express the regret that the comparatively small number of people who were killed, were robbed of their chance to live longer and so die of natural causes in due course.

However, there has also emerged a new movement to cater for the current number of people who in peacetime are equally robbed of their chance to live longer and so die later of natural causes. In Australia, for example, it has been estimated that about 20 per cent of the scenes of fatal road accidents are now commemorated by spontaneous ad hoc memorials.

The term “movement” is used here to mean improvised, individualized, often anonymous, ad hoc public reactions to an event, as distinct from a well-planned and well-executed government programme (such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission). It is immediate, spontaneous public display of emotion, relying on individual initiative, without the use of textbooks to explain how something should be organized. The memorial marks where the person was last alive (or at least fatally injured if they died later in hospital) – rather than they were buried. The memorial in effect transforms public land into private sacred space.

In one sense, the current movement is not new. Australian writer Chip Rolley was driving through Arizona, USA and was struck by the highway being dotted with “descansos”, roadside shrines to those killed in road accidents, some elaborate with brick altars, poems, offerings, floral arrangements and souvenirs of the dead. “They bring the dead back to our time and place, helping the grieving with the here-not-here that is all that is left of their loved ones” . “Descanso” was originally a Spanish reference to where a coffin rested on the procession’s way to the graveyard. The trend was later expanded to cover places where pioneers died on the trail exploring and settling the South-West USA.

With the invention of the automobile, “descansos” were placed at the spot where fatal road deaths had taken place. More Americans tend to be killed each year on the roads than were killed in all the years of the Vietnam War. Automobiles have become one of the major causes of death in the western world (and doubtless will have an increasingly fatal impact in the newly industrializing countries like China and India as their populations can also increasingly afford to buy them). A person dies in a road accident somewhere around the world every 30 seconds.

The memorial movement in the USA also includes some locations where people have been shot dead. This can be very controversial. Recently retired American academic Sylvia Grider has examined the controversy over the memorials to the 1999 Columbine High School, Colorado shootings (and especially whether it was appropriate for the two shooters who eventually shot themselves to also be commemorated in the same way as their victims). Similarly, she examined

the controversy over the spontaneous shrines for the 2007 Virginia Tech victims and the person who shot them. She also examined the 2006 Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania. The Amish do not approve of public displays of emotion and so resented the way in which local non-Amish folk created their own memorial. There were also tensions with the local non-Amish folk when Amish elders visited the family of the dead shooter in an act of forgiveness and gave them some of the money which had been donated to the Amish.

A more general form of controversy is whether such memorials are a help or a hindrance to society in general. If, for example, people slow down on busy highways to look at the memorials then they could lead to additional tragedies. Similarly for highway emergency service staff being reminded on a regular basis of a particular tragedy in which they had to serve may trigger all sorts of psychological reactions, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

There are also some administrative problems. Who, for example, owns the shrines? How long should they remain in place? Who controls what should be there? Who may remove the remnants? The answers seem to vary from one location to another.

✓ Explaining the Movement

What was described as the first international symposium on roadside memorials took place at the University of New England, in regional New South Wales, Australia in June 2004. Lecturers from around the world examined the particular issue of roadside memorials to road crash victims and popular memorial practice in general. Presenters included Dawn Matthews from Colorado USA and Gerri Excel from the University of Reading, England.

This is certainly an area of intensive study as scholars seek to explain what is happening. The practice is becoming almost a routine, even in the most unlikely of places. For example, in October 2008, at the height of the global financial crisis, The Wall Street Journal recorded that “outside the Bank of England a makeshift memorial recently appeared: a lamp post decorated with flowers and a sign saying ‘In Loving Memory of the Boom Economy’”.

Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann, who organized the pioneering 2004 University of New England symposium, have provided some explanations for the roadside memorials. They have argued that although the memorials often use apparently Christian symbols (notably the cross), they are actually an attempt to find culturally appropriate symbols to express death, not least because they feel there is a shortage of them in the established religions.

The memorials also personalize and individualize each death. In an Australian television documentary, Dr Clarke has noted that road trauma is an “invisible death”. “People who died on the roads – and you must remember that there were great numbers of people who died on the road – more people have on Australian roads than have ever died at war. And yet they were

always just seen as a statistic". The roadside memorial shows that the person was someone's wife or husband, son or daughter, mother or father. There may also be individual items from fellow students or work mates.

Clark and Franzmann also see the memorials as an example of spiritual authority resting with the individual conscience rather than with the institutional church. This is part of the new mood of the time (beginning in the 1960s) with a swing away from respect for the major institutions and a greater willingness of people to think for themselves. People will decide for themselves how they will do their mourning – they don't need to be told by some religious official. Churches and other religious institutions have lost their monopoly over how death is marked.

Additionally, given the way that the memorials are usually on public land such as highways, the memorials are also a rebuff to government (state or local) which owns the land. People would not normally be allowed to deface, say, road signs or to erect their own advertising billboards on that land without official permission. But these memorials are erected without any official permission being sought. They just appear. People just respond in their own way in their own time – they don't seek government permission.

The notion of local personal autonomy is also identified by Sylvia Grider (note 4) who concludes her article: "...individual communities exert their ownership and control over the form and performance of their mourning, regardless of the viewpoints of outsiders". The Amish, for example, know how to conduct their mourning – they don't need others to show them. But the local non-Amish population also had their own ideas on what ought to be done.

This growth of personal religious autonomy also foreshadows the growth of more diverse, pluralistic societies. There may be a decline in church attendance in the western world (outside the USA) but there is an increasing interest in spirituality generally. There is a hunger which the established faiths are not satisfying. This may well flow into other areas. For example, the teenagers of the 1960s reinvented what it was to be a teenager with money and led to the creation of a market for "sex, drugs and rock n' roll". Now these Baby Boomers are heading into old age and their minds are turning to decline and death. I think there will be a renewed debate over the "right to die": "I have had a good life and now I will have a good death". They will not want a gradual decline to become decrepit and demented hovering in "God's waiting room" at the nursing home. They reinvented what it was to be a teenager and they reinvented marriage with serial polygamy (with various partners over the years) – and now they will reinvent old age and decide for themselves when they will die. They will remain social inventors to the end – and they still have the money to do it.

Meanwhile medical technology has been doing some inventing of its own, with the reinvention of death as the "enemy" to be fought off for as long as possible. In traditional societies death is a natural part of life; life had a natural beginning and a natural end. But now western medicine has made death the enemy to be beaten at every step. In earlier eras, families

lived together in large multi-generational households, where people were born and died at home. Now those processes have been medicalized and removed to a separate specific location (hospital or hospice). Medical conditions that are now rarely fatal were routinely fatal in those days, such as the problems arising from the poor quality of water and hygiene. The nature of death has changed from “acute” (for example, childhood illnesses, pregnancy-related complications, industrial accidents and being trapped in burning buildings) to “chronic” (for example, diabetes- and heart-related complications).

Families are now smaller, lives are longer and funerals are at less frequent intervals. This increased life expectancy is overall a good development. But it does mean that people are far less accustomed to death because they have far less experience of attending funerals. Therefore sudden death, such as through road accidents, is all the more shocking: a person is robbed of what could have been a long life and the bereaved are left traumatized by the sudden loss.

Psychology is also aiding our understanding of death. It is a much more complicated process in a more a secular era without the assurance of an accepted religion (or even agreement among the theologians who seem - in this “post-modern” era - to be more divided on most matters now than ever before). We now know that “time does not heal all wounds” with much speed (if at all). The bereaved do not “get over” their grief and there is no sense of “closure”. The grieving process does not end when the last of the funeral flowers are thrown away.

Finally, the article returns to the impact of war memorials. There is now increasing interest in visiting battlefields (as well as the graves), including among young people with no direct military experience. What I have found particularly notable in Australia is the revival of interest in the Gallipoli (Dardanelles) battlefield in Turkey, the scene of the most important battle (but not the largest one) in Australian history. The World War I scene was neglected for decades after the 1920s. But now ANZAC Day, April 25, is in effect Australia’s national day. In the 1960s (with the Vietnam War underway) there was talk of scrapping it because of the lack of participants. The mood started to change in the 1970s, with the surviving wartime veterans feeling able to talk about their experiences. Now the nation comes to a halt on that day.

In April 2005, I was with the Rev Geoffrey Evans of the picturesque Anglican Church of Saint Nicholas in the grounds of the British Embassy at Ankara, Turkey. He has conducted the dawn services at Gallipoli for many years. When he started, the services were small events. Now some decades later, the events are spread out over three days. John Howard, the then Australian Prime Minister, was at the ANZAC Day service the following Monday.

After decades of neglect, the Gallipoli site is becoming an international shrine. Mr Evans commented to me on the good behaviour of the young people at the dawn services. Young people (not least Australians) have acquired an unpleasant reputation for rowdy behaviour while they are overseas. But at Gallipoli there is a sense of awe and reverence. They seem to feel intuitively a sense of identification that they are treading on the ground where thousands of people of their own age suddenly lost their life at the whim of misguided old men.

In an increasingly secular society, with a declining belief in life after death and a declining faith in religious institutions, people – young and old – are searching for new ways to make sense of death.

Keith Suter

NOTES

1. See: Alastair Campbell and Richard Stott (Editors) The Blair Years: Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries, London: Hutchinson, 2007, pp 230-247 (Campbell coined the memorable phrase “the People’s Princess”).
2. Of course, the war memorial process can have its own major controversies; a good example is what has been happening just outside the White House in Washington DC on the Mall; see: Kirk Savage Monument Wars: Washington DC, the National Mall and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape, University of California Press, 2009. Also see: Ken Inglis Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape, Melbourne University Press, 2008
3. Chip Rolley “Tucson and the Souls of the Dead”, Australian Author (Sydney), December 2008, p 34
4. Sylvia Grider “Public Grief and the Politics of Memorial”, Anthropology Today (London), June 2007, pp 3-7
5. “Not so Hot in the City as the Economy Cools Down”, The Australian, October 23 2008, p 20
6. Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann “Born to Eternal Life – The Roadside as Sacred Space” reprinted: Australian Broadcasting Corporation “Religion and Ethics”, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s1000839.htm> (accessed December 22 2009)
7. Australian Broadcasting Corporation Compass July 30 2006 “Roadside Memorials”, <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s1676055.htm>
8. There is also the related issue of the changing nature of funerals. I have had to conduct a few over the years in Australia and attend many more. The funerals now are often less one of Christian mourning and the promise of resurrection, and more one of celebration of a successful life (with few references to what may happen beyond the grave).