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At home in the Necropolis

Dr Samantha Matthews reports on her recent research on Victorian literary attitudes to mausolea in cemeteries

'Le Cimetiere du Pere La Chaise' Colour lithograph after J.J. Chalon, 1822

Long before William Godwin complained in the Essay on Sepulchres (1809) that 'I am not contented to visit the house in Bread-Street where Milton was born, or that in Bunhill-Row where he died, I want to repair to the place where he now dwells,' graves and tombs have been understood as our 'last home.' The mausoleum is a commemorative structure which uniquely invokes characteristics and associations of domestic architecture. With four walls, a roof, door and (sometimes) windows, the mausoleum can look like a child's drawing of a house. In his 1843 guide to Kensal Green Cemetery, Samuel Laman Blanchard tells of a child visiting Père Lachaise, who 'when mistaking from the size of the buildings their object, he asked as he stopped before one of them, "Who lives here?"' The child's mistake is ironic as well as comic, since this 'house' precludes the living. Rare cases of the living spending time in mausolea, such as Lady Isabel Burton's penchant for holding séances in the famous 'tent' mausoleum constructed for her husband Sir Richard Burton (in Mortlake Roman Catholic Cemetery) only exacerbate the contrast with home life.

During four years researching the attitudes and approaches of nineteenth-century poets to burial-places, I became curious about the problematic status of mausolea. A mausoleum is the most aggressively monumental and substantial commemorative form found in a cemetery; in contrast, the tendency in poetic representations of graves is strongly anti-monumental. Ambitious monuments are usually read as follies, which outlast the fame of the dead to become a satire on human vanity. My readings of Victorian poetry show that despite radical changes in burial practice in the period (from opening the joint stock cemeteries to legalising cremation), poets remained fiercely loyal to the pastoral ideal of Gray's 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard' (1751). Readers and poets agreed that the ideal grave was simple, grassy, decorated with wildflowers, and marked by a modest stone or none at all.

How do we square this Romantic iconographic ideal with the contrary evidence found in every Victorian cemetery? Urbane Victorians esteemed material monuments highly, and indexed social status to the size, grandeur and location of their memorials. Some families bankrupted themselves to buy a stately monument.

The mausoleum is historically associated with old families who wanted to make a statement of identity separate from the old family vault in the local church. As the stately home asserted local prestige and power, so the architect-designed mausoleum, dwarfing headstones in the churchyard or splendidly isolated on the estate, ensured privacy and distinction from the proletarian dead. The fact that bodies were deposited above ground in triple-lined coffins also appealed to those who sought to sought to preserve the body against decay. As small scale imitations of the grand house, mausolea asserted the old family's unity and strength. Edward FitzGerald, famous for translating the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, was determined not to lie with his family in the flint-faced FitzGerald mausoleum in St. Michael's Churchyard, Boulge, Suffolk; his grave, about ten metres away, is a pointed rejection of kin. Yet at least from the time of the Industrial Revolution the aristocratic status of mausolea was threatened: the nouveau riche wanted to be squires with country estates, and they wanted mausolea to match.

A visitor descends after peeping into the interior of the Burton Mausoleum in the churchyard of St Mary Magdalen, Mortlake, Richmond.

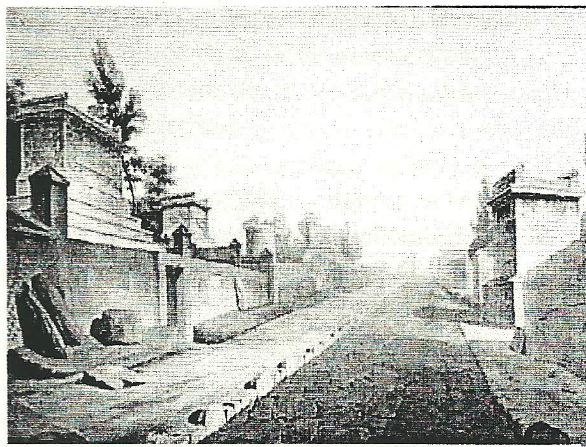
When in his great novel *Bleak House* (1851) Charles Dickens argued for the interdependence of the highest and lowest, richest and poorest members of society, he chose two burial-places to represent the extremes. Privilege and wealth (and exhausted aristocratic blood) are represented by the ancient Dedlock family's mausoleum in the park at Chesney Wold. This is the current family burial place, replacing the family vault in the church, where 'there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.' Degradation and poverty are famously represented by 'a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination' in the 'hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene' where the mysterious pauper 'Nemo' is buried. Dickens campaigned against the city churchyards as a source of both physical and moral corruption to the urban population, who lived overlooking the burial-grounds. These two symbols are connected in the person of Lady Dedlock, the haughty woman of mysterious origins married to the squire, Sir Leicester. The threat that her earlier love affair with 'Nemo' will come to light and shame her husband leads to Lady Dedlock's flight, and ultimately she is discovered dead outside the locked churchyard gates, thwarted in her desire to rest on her lover's grave. Lady Dedlock's tragic death is not the end however; her bereaved forgiving husband brings her body back for deposit in the family mausoleum. Gossips 'wondered [that] the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company.' However Dickens's message is more forgiving: 'the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to object.' The narrator looks foward to the end of Sir Leicester's heartbreak, when 'the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and relieved him.'

Neither burial-place has a future. The city

churchyard is fatal and doomed under the 1850s Burial Acts; Isabella Holmes, who identifies the *Bleak House* churchyard as the graveyard of St. Mary le Strand in Drury Lane, visited the site in the 1890s, and found 'an asphalted recreation ground, ... often crowded with children using the swings and the seats.' Now the house of Dedlock has fallen, Chesney Wold will be up for sale, and the mausoleum in the lonely park is 'damp' and redundant.

Cemeteries were the future, and in the status-conscious landscape of the joint stock cemetery mausolea gained a new lease of life. Here the upwardly mobile could consolidate wealth and social position by adapting the mausoleum to their own ends. The model for this was Père Lachaise in Paris (opened 1800). Père Lachaise was a fashionable and much copied cemetery, a popular location for promenading and sightseers; the sheer numbers and diversity of mausolea is still remarkable. Blanchard observed of the strong relation between property and fashionable status that 'it is usual with the man of wealth at Paris to possess his town hotel, his country house at St. Cloud, a box at the Italian Opera, *and a tomb in this Cemetery*." Blanchard protests against this last property investment as a symptom of French narcissism, protesting that 'we have never felt our human sympathies repelled, whilst traversing the English Cemetery, with a suspicion of this kind, - sent back, as from a fruitless errand, by a sound from the hollow mausoleum, which to the ear of imagination might say, "Not at home."' The basis of Blanchard's disapproval is the view that a person's memorial should be a moral judgement on their character. For a grieving family to construct a grand mausoleum in your honour is a forgiveable folly; for you to choose it yourself is culpable and hubristic.

While grand houses in fashionable areas of London seldom stayed in one family for generations, part of a mausoleum's appeal was that it could commemorate name and fame 'in perpetuity.' The concept was sold to the public very much like a new property development. In the early days of Kensal Green, the Company Chairman Sir John Dean Paul advertised its attractions by constructing a 'show house' - the stolid neoclassical Paul family mausoleum, located on a prominent corner site on the south side of Circle Avenue. This urbane ethos (the desire to see and be seen even after death) encouraged Elizabeth Stone to protest in 1858 against the 'the strange fancy, which can induce persons to prefer to be laid in a gay lounge, the feet of careless, frivolous, and thoughtless promenaders and pleasure-seekers all but treading on your grave.' The character of the fashionable London cemeteries as 'cities of the dead'



'The Road to Pompeii', RA lecture drawing. Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum.

depends on grand central avenues lined with substantial mausolea; the monuments of Abney Park are often considered to be 'disappointing' because only one of its nonconformist dead occupies a mausoleum.

In 1850, Tennyson's friend William Allingham wrote a poem 'In Highgate Cemetery' which explicitly compared the urban values of London 'Far-spread below' with the suburban charms of Highgate:

Incessant troops from that vast throng
  Withdraw to silent colonies;
Where houses, lo, are fair and strong,
  Though ruins, all that dwell in these.

He imagines an army of city workers retiring from the field of battle, and coming to rest in the substantial 'houses' of the cemetery. In this dark view of contemporary life, our value system seems to be reversed, so that the 'ruined' dead occupy the best houses. Allingham finds consolation in the pastoral land-

scape of Highgate, where children play under a 'universal' sky. However twenty-five years later the Cemetery was significantly less pastoral. The blind Pre-Raphaelite poet Philip Bourke Marston imagined Highgate as an extension of the city, overtaken by urban expansion and crowded with monuments:

For me no great metropolis of the dead, -
 Highways and byways, squares and crescents of death, -

Influenced still by the Romantic desire for pastoral and small-scale burial-places, 'My Grave' identifies the cemetery with the alienating scale and stoniness of the 'metropolis.' The city's frontiers have shifted, encroaching on the suburbs, and ironically reinvigorating the pastoral ideal precisely because it has become more elusive in reality. By the end of the century, the mausoleum was viewed as the final gesture of the upwardly mobile self-made man. Rudyard Kipling, a much more pragmatic writer than Marston, wrote in 1896 'The Mary Gloster' a poem in which a dying shipping magnate talks to his only son about his final resting place. Sir Anthony Gloster is proud of his success and new baronetcy, but frustrated in his desire to build a Gloster dynasty, his wealth has become a burden. Gloster's beloved wife Mary 'died in Macassar Straits' and was buried at sea; the ship of the title is named for her. Dick, blessed with all the advantages his father could buy ('Harrer an' Trinity College'), won't join the family business, and lives the aesthete's life on his father's money. Dick is married but childless, and Sir Anthony laments 'there isn't even a grandchild, an' the Gloster family's done.' As in *Bleak House*, opposing values are represented by different burial-places. Before his disillusion, Gloster bought a vault in the fashionable Woking Cemetery at Brookwood; now all he wants is to be reunited with Mary in her watery grave. However, he fears that this dying wish might lead to his will being contested on the grounds of insanity, and blames himself: 'It come o' hoping for grandsons and buying that Wokin' vault.' He pathetically protests that 'I wouldn't trust 'em at Wokin'; we're safer at sea again,' but the poem ends without the reader knowing whether Dick will do his duty. Gloster dies believing that he is going down with his ship: the fashionable vault is clearly not his rightful 'last home,' and should remain empty.

Grand mausolea attract contemporary visitors to major Victorian cemeteries; we are curious about this alien concept of burial, and find it hard to resist the desire to peer inside. Yet these abandoned 'homes' can also be pathetic. Mausolea are especially vulnerable to break-ins and vandalism, resulting in access points being cemented or bricked-up, seriously damaging their architectural unity. Victorian mausolea are the last great examples of ambitious and independent commemorative structures in our cemeteries, and these fascinating anachronisms deserve our attention and protection.

Dr Matthews completed a PhD in Representations of the Grave in Nineteenth-century Poetry in 1998, and teaches English Literature at University College London and Cultural Studies at Central St Martins School of Art and Design. She has published on the graves of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Alfred Tennyson, and is preparing her first book for publication.

Message from the Chairman

Since the last issue of the MMT Newsletter in September 2000, the Mausolea and Monuments Trust has been stealthily thriving. Our list of Friends, all of whom receive our Newsletter, continues to grow and we have just completed Phase 2 of our restoration of the Sacheverell-Bateman Mausoleum at Morley in Derbyshire. Carried out under the direction of Mark Parsons of Anthony Short and Partners, the work included repairs to the stonework of the west gable and parapet of the mausoleum, built to the designs of G. F. Bodley in 1897. The warm red sandstone from which the mausoleum is built had deteriorated badly in some areas, especially the pricklier details, but we were able to effect the repairs with minimal replacement of stonework. Two wrought-iron cross finials have also been reinstated on the apex of both gables. The work, which cost £6400.38, was in part generously funded by English Heritage. The next phase of the restoration will comprise the repair of a fragment of grit-stone walling next to the mausoleum, said to be the remains of an ancient manor house