

INTRODUCTION

'We mercifully preserve their bones, and pisse not upon their ashes'

THOMAS BROWNE, *URNE-BURIAL*

MEET YOU AT THE CEMETERY GATES

I am writing this book in an apartment block that sits right on the boundary line that marks out the limits of the ancient City of London. The windows look towards St Paul's Cathedral and its much-diminished, once famous churchyard on one side; on the other, onto the borough of Islington, where the spire of St Luke's Church sits in a green space largely cleared of headstones, except for a handful of elegantly weathered chest tombs. In every direction this is a city of the dead. Roman law required that burial be extramural – outside the city walls. Consequently, every gate into the old city of London is shadowed by cemeteries at least two millennia old. The ground at Smithfield beyond New Gate and Moorfields beyond Moorgate has long yielded up Roman remains: coffins, cinerary urns, bones and occasionally grave goods. In the medieval period, the Christian church invited the dead back inside the city walls, crammed into the consecrated ground under and around churches. Pocket parks remade from deconsecrated burial grounds now sit amid the gleaming financial towers of the City, the old gravestones pushed to the edges, uneasily repurposed as boundary markers.

Every compass point is covered. To the west lies Carthusian Street, which leads to Charterhouse, the site of a vast burial pit for those who died in their thousands from the Black Death in 1348 and the monastery set up there to pray for the souls of the otherwise unremembered dead. To the east, outside the line of the old walls, lies Bunhill Fields, its name a likely corruption of 'bone hill'. The Saxons buried their dead there; the thousands of bones from St Paul's charnel house were reburied there from 1549. Between 1665 and 1854, over 120,000 dissident Christians, the Methodists, Quakers and Unitarians who were barred from burial in consecrated ground, were also interred there. If I extend my walks just a little further, I pass over several plague pits and specialist graveyards: the pit under the Mount Mill cul-de-sac that received bodies from another outbreak of plague in 1665, and which Daniel Defoe visited for his *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722);



above: Invitation to the opening of Bunhill Fields, London, as a public amenity, 14 October 1869.

opposite: Richard Gough, 'A body found in the S. aisle of Lincoln minster ... 1781', *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, London, 1786.

the playground on Seward Street, which is ominously two feet higher than street level because of the number of bodies buried there when it served as the St Bart's Hospital Ground for unclaimed bodies and paupers; the graveyard for the inmates of St Luke's Pauper Asylum, which loomed over Old Street and whose gloomy wards were once visited by Charles Dickens.

The dead shadow my steps wherever I go.

You will probably be able to construct a similar account of your locality. Thousands of books and websites make this possible; meanwhile survey maps are dotted with varied marks for graveyards and memorials, for tumuli and round or long barrows, all of them resting places for the dead that have reshaped the landscape and have survived, silent and enigmatic, sometimes for millennia.



above: Francis Frith,
*Pyramids of Giza from
the south-west, c. 1857.*

below: National September
11 Memorial, New York
City, New York.

Consider how many of the world's wonders are memorials to the dead – the pyramids at Giza, the Angkor Wat temples and mausolea, the Paris Catacombs or the Père Lachaise Cemetery, the Taj Mahal in Agra. Crowds still snake in long queues to enter St Mark's in Venice, Westminster Cathedral in London or St Peter's Basilica in Rome, built on the grave of St Peter himself, the early Christian burials beneath the floor built on a prior necropolis even deeper down. The principal national collections and

museums of many countries tell their narratives through fragments of grave goods, funerary architecture and other traces of the dead – including, sometimes, bits and pieces of the dead themselves – as much as through their collections of art and sculpture. It is only very recently that museums have started to address the ethics of these displays, and to return the dead to their descendants.

There is a growing trend in travel that specializes in dedicated journeys to sites of death and disaster, often called dark tourism. This might be to sites associated with a lone celebrity (Elvis Presley's Graceland or Oscar Wilde's grave in Père Lachaise), or to places of political violence (Ground Zero, now called the National September 11 Memorial in New York), disaster (the exclusion zone around the Chernobyl nuclear site in Ukraine), mass death (battlefield tours of the American Civil War, the deadly fields of Flanders from the First World War) or atrocity (the Hiroshima Peace Park, built in Japan after the destruction of the city by an atomic bomb in 1945, or the sites of Nazi extermination camps in northern Europe). Such journeys may raise questions





about the ethics and motivations of some travellers, but many forms of travel have *always* been kinds of dark tourism: returns to ancestral origins, religious pilgrimages to sites of martyrdom or journeys to pay respects to fallen soldiers who died on foreign fields.

All of which is to say that to live in human cultures is to exist alongside the dead, to be in a constant relationship with them. To be human, some say, is to be defined by rituals in remembrance of the dead.

There is an influential argument that, over the last century or so, industrial nations have come to ‘sequester’ the dead and the dying, have hidden death in hospitals or hospices. Displays of mourning have become pathologized, suspicious if they are too overt, go on too long or not long enough. The French historian Philippe Ariès propounded this view in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), which ended with a section on the secular modern world called ‘Death Denied.’ The English sociologist Geoffrey Gorer was shocked at the speed of this cultural eclipse, which he argued had accelerated in the twenty years after the end of the Second World War.

But the European and American societies that Ariès and Gorer argued had turned their back on death still produce and circulate vast quantities of cultural reflection on death, burial and mourning. The more sociologists or anthropologists say that some societies bracket off death, the more those very same cultures seem to find new ways to explore the obsession with the dead outside standard traditions

above: The grave of Elvis Presley, flanked by the graves of his grandmother and father, at Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee.

overleaf: *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero, 1968.





or religious expression. Grief counselling, mourning memoirs, biographies, films and television about death and dying proliferate. The Gothic, that now global form of staging stylized encounters with the dead (and undead), has one of its origins in the gloomy eighteenth-century Graveyard Poets, who indulged their melancholic sensibilities and composed their lines amid mouldering tombstones. There are so many iconic graveyard scenes in horror films: the grave-snatching doctor in the opening scene of *Frankenstein* (1932); the stumbling into view of the first modern zombie in the Pittsburgh cemetery of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); the hand that lurches from the grave in the last shot of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). Gorer would have contemptuously dismissed these examples from popular culture, arguing that the suppression of death has led only to a vulgar counter-reaction, a 'pornography of death'.



above: *Carrie*, directed by Brian De Palma, 1976.

Was he right?

Visit virtually any graveyard or cemetery and there will be a guide, either published online or for sale, often researched on behalf of a group that fights to keep the place protected from erasure by development or further decay, and who do their best to preserve the memory of their special dead. Books reflecting on the allure of graveyards also remain popular. You can tell the story of a life through the graveyards that silently shadow it, as the poet Jean Sprackland has done in *These Silent Mansions* (2020), or begin by reflecting on the place of the graveyard as a sanctuary, as Peter Ross does in his *Tomb with a View* (2020). The comfort Ross says he found in his local graveyard on solitary walks during the Covid-19 pandemic reverses a long history of belief that graveyards might be crucibles of disease, places with bad air best avoided. It recalls the fantastic story a friend told me about a large slab in the churchyard in the Scottish village of Nigg, which marks the moment in 1832 when the people of the town saw a dreaded cloud of cholera coming in off the sea, which they trapped in a bag and buried under the heavy stone to contain the deadly infection.

Such singular tales are oddly comforting because they help to individualize the vast weight of the numberless dead: the nightmare of history that presses upon our brief, living consciousness. The implacable fact of our own death is so intrinsic to our existence (and yet so outside it) that the philosopher Martin Heidegger suggested that our Being would be better grasped in the compound word *Being-towards-Death*. We can't ever quite face up to it, though. So, like Sheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, we postpone death by telling just one more story. Cemetery tours and graveyard books in fact want to bring the

dead *back to life*, or back into memory, at least; to rescue a lucky few from the oblivion of the ages.

Rather than focusing on micro-narratives, this book has grand ambitions. Part One sketches out a history of human burial from the earliest archaeological traces to the necropolises of Imperial Rome. Part Two explores the sometimes troubling fascination of burial grounds and practices for anthropologists and tourists alike, before chronicling some of the myriad cultural and religious burial practices that have developed around the world. Part Three focuses on the sheer *number* of the dead in the modern era, the political work that they have undertaken for the living in shoring up narratives of power, and the meaning of communities defined by the dead they commemorate.

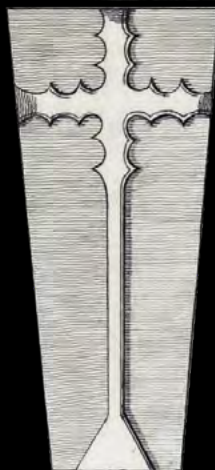
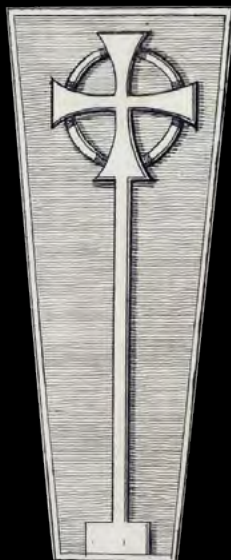
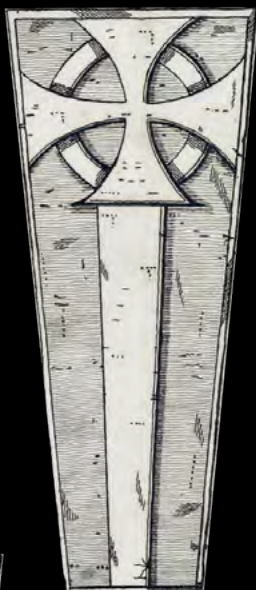
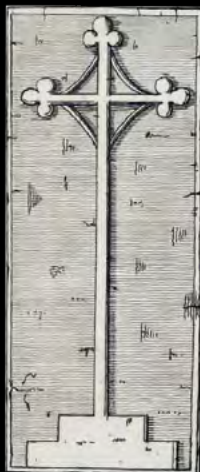
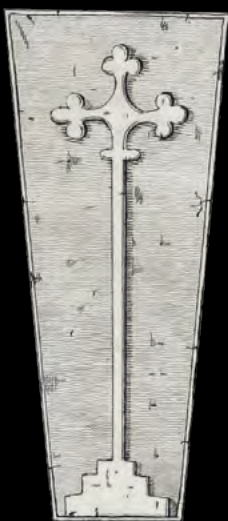
Before commencing this history, though, let's just pause a moment to interrogate the motives for writing such an account. I mean, isn't it all a tad *ghoulish*? That's exactly the right word, since 'ghoul' originates in the Arabic term for a spirit believed to hang around graveyards and prey on human corpses. The *ghul* is an evil creature born of the accumulation of wisdom that we should probably not tarry too long among the dead, as it might not be good for us either physically or mentally. Observed rituals give us a cultural framework in which to mourn the dead, but they are also there to stop us being pulled down into the earth with our beloved dead at our rawest moment of grief.

right: Domenico Fetti,
Meditation, c. 1618.

below: Albrecht Dürer, *St Jerome*, 1521.

This is human pragmatism, perhaps, and yet we often ignore these rules. It's worth remembering that the modern discipline of history-writing has its origins in the work of seventeenth-century scholars, called antiquarians. They were often mocked as obsessives disordered by melancholia, a disease of body and mind that left them too much in the company of dead things and drew them, as one doctor diagnosed in 1639, to 'grots, caves, and other hidden cels of the earth.' Richard Gough, the director of the Society of Antiquaries in London in the 1790s, did nothing to dispel this when he proposed that a full chronological catalogue of the significant monuments of the dead did nothing less than tell the history of the nation itself. He had published his giant, lavishly illustrated *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain, Applied to Illustrate the History of Families, Manners, Habits and Arts at Different Periods from the Norman Conquest to the Seventeenth Century* in three volumes in 1786. The Renaissance also gives us the over-sensitive soul contemplating Death embodied by Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet, waxing lyrical on the





exhumed skull of the court clown Yorick. If we identify too much with this young melancholic, don't we also share his morbid obsessions with 'the witching time of night/When graveyards yawn'?

You could reach for a high-minded answer. Many religious and philosophical traditions have asked their adherents to reflect intensively on mortality, from Christianity to Buddhism, Greek Stoicism to French Existentialism. It was once very important to study the *ars moriendi*, the Art of Dying, and to prepare for a 'good death' throughout your life. You could read Erasmus's 'On Preparing for Death' (1533) or click through your rosary, some of the beads intricately carved into skull-shaped death heads. A spiritual advisor, shaman or priest might lead you carefully along the path to that good death in the final days and hours. As the living can be directed to observe the correct rites to deal with material remains, so the guides that conduct the soul through the transition to the afterlife can be paid up ahead of time. The Egyptian dead needed a lot of kit stashed in their tombs to help them get through the initial assault course in the first phases of the afterlife. The Greek and Roman dead were sometimes buried with a coin in the mouth, payment for the ferryman Charon to carry the bearer across the Styx. The medieval

Christian church happily took payment to ensure their clients were included in daily or weekly prayers, the Offices for the Dead. It's all in the preparation.

In art and culture, the focus on death has fostered a long tradition of its formal contemplation. Many of us might only really encounter poetry these days at funerals, building on its common elevation as a privileged form, given solemn power through recitation in many of life's rites of passage. Christina Rossetti's 'When I am dead, my dearest', written when she was just eighteen, in 1848, asks that the reader.

Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.



above: *Hamlet*, starring and directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

below: An obol coin from ancient Thebes, depicting Heracles battling serpents and Dionysus, c. 395–387 BCE.

opposite: Richard Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, London, 1786.



In painting, meanwhile, traditions of deathly contemplation such as the *vanitas* or the *memento mori* genres ('vanity' and 'remember that you will die') were consolidated in European medieval and Renaissance art. Transient earthly goods (flowers, candles, fruits) sit alongside a ubiquitous skull as a moral lesson on the inevitability of death, often accompanied by the common legend: I AM AS YOU SHALL BE. Skeletons hold up mirrors to the vain, revealing eternal truth beneath the transient skin. In Hans Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), now in the National Gallery in London, the markers of the two French diplomats' status are undercut by the smear of an anamorphic skull: an enigmatic eruption of Death amid the grubby reality of Anglo-French politics. Another defining painting is Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia ego* (c. 1638), which shows shepherds in a pastoral idyll coming across the legend on a tomb, stooping to decipher it, learning of death's insidious presence lurking in paradise.

The contemplation of death in art seems to me very similar to the ambivalent emotions produced by ruins, which on the one hand signify the inevitable triumph of death over man, a stern moral about the vanity of our grand designs, and on the other, animate the human imagination, leading it towards the heights of the sublime. 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!' shouts

below: Nicolas Poussin, *Les Bergers d'Arcadie (Et in arcadia ego)*, c. 1638.

opposite: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monastery Graveyard in the Snow*, c. 1817–19.



the wrecked stone colossus of Ozymandias in Percy Shelley's famous sonnet, inspired by the Egyptian statue of Rameses II. As Denis Diderot put it in 1767, 'The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures.'

The graveyard is the ruin, doubled. Graves are both memory markers and sites of decay. And once the grave falls out of living memory, it becomes a ruin itself: a ruin of a ruin. Older sites that give up their bones, millennia old, sometimes leave only the most enigmatic impression of the customs that once animated them, and yet these graves might be the only traces left of entire cultures.

Is there anything that better captures an ambivalent mix of allure and horror than an abandoned graveyard? Michel Foucault once called cemeteries 'heterotopias'. If utopia is the *u-topos*, the ideal 'nowhere space', the cemetery was for him a *hetero-topos*, an 'other space', standing alongside ordinary society yet separate from it, out of normal time, sometimes with its own distinct laws. Heterotopias often reveal productive tensions with the dominant social order, perhaps acting as a space from which to launch critique.

In contemplating graveyards or burial grounds, we join a quintessential tradition of exploring what it means to be human: reflecting on what the dead mean to us, how they remain animate in us and how we might best memorialize our fleeting passage on this Earth.

We've been doing this for a very long time. Since before, in fact, we were human. Let's start there.



