

## ONLY A PAUPER WHOM NOBODY OWNS: REASSESSING THE PAUPER GRAVE c.1880–1914\*

The pauper grave is one of the most potent symbols in the cultural landscape of the nineteenth century: it signified abject poverty, carried the lowly taint of the workhouse and suggested insufficient grief, not least because the parochial authorities prohibited or circumvented mourning rites. Contemporaries and historians alike have emphasized the degradation inherent in such an interment: to be buried ‘on the parish’ was to bear ‘a lifetime’s stigma’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, definitions of the ‘decent’ or ‘respectable’ funeral have usually been set in opposition to the parish burial, which was ‘abhorred as a disgrace to the bereaved household’.<sup>2</sup> Thus, respectability in death was embodied in the purchase of exclusive rights to burial in a private grave and access to full mourning and commemorative rites. There is a danger, however, that the distinctions between the pauper and the private burial have been reduced to a dichotomy based on a concept of respectability as embodied in thrift and consumer culture.

The degradation inherent in pauper burial was inextricable from the punitive philosophy of the New Poor Law.<sup>3</sup> Stripped of all mourning paraphernalia, the pauper coffin bore little or no indication of the individual personality of the corpse or those who mourned it. Interred in the most rudimentary fashion, the

\* I would like to thank Jon Lawrence, Andrew Davies and Paul Johnson for constructive criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (London, 1971), 87. See also Carl Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity: The Urban Poor in England, 1834–1914* (Manchester, 1995), 104; F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London, 1988), 200.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Ross, “‘Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep’: Respectability in Pre-World War One London Neighbourhoods”, *Internat. Labour and Working Class History*, xxvii (1985), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Anne Crowther, *The Workhouse System: The History of an English Social Institution* (London, 1981), 193–221. See also Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity*, 102–25; Anne Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (1982; London, 1989), 14–18.

pauper corpse rotted in anonymity, restrictions on commemorative customs ensuring that the graves (otherwise known as ‘paupers’ pits’) were unrecognizable as such. Moreover, following the much-publicized ‘body-snatching’ or ‘burking’ scandals of the 1820s, the passage of the Anatomy Act in 1832 authorized the use of unclaimed pauper corpses for anatomical study, a fate previously reserved for hanged felons.<sup>4</sup> Ruth Richardson has argued that the kernel of antipathy towards pauper burial lay in the fear of anatomization. From the 1880s onwards, however, boards of guardians increasingly refused to pass unclaimed pauper corpses on to medical schools.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Richardson herself introduces alternative ‘subtexts’ into the popular culture of death at the close of the nineteenth century, the principal of which is respectability.

This article argues that the juxtaposition between the pauper and the respectable burial has lent itself to oversimplification. The concept of respectability — as used by both contemporaries and historians — is notoriously slippery. As Ellen Ross notes, it is a ‘mystifying word’.<sup>6</sup> Given the complexity of respectability, it is curious that the ‘respectable’ funeral has remained a historical constant dependent on thrift, display and interment in a private grave. This is not to dismiss ‘respectability’, but to call for recognition of the fluidity of the concept in relation to attitudes towards death and burial. I invest the concept of respectability with meaning beyond economic or consumer status, defining it as an elastic notion relating to the ownership and the dignity of the dead. Furthermore, I argue that accounts of antipathy to pauper burial have failed to explore the cathartic effects of the funeral and the use of ritual as a forum for the creation and expression of loss and identity. Moreover, whilst pauper burial was clearly abhorrent to the majority of bereaved families, I contend that we know very little about those who did have pauper funerals and the meanings they inscribed onto notions of parochial interment, death and decency.

The period 1880–1914 was characterized by changes in the material culture of working-class life: increased wages coupled with a rapidly expanding consumer market raised living standards. However, that also raised expectations. In this context, the

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, “Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep”, 40.

cultural distinctions between the frugal pauper and the private (consumer) burial hardened. In addition, changing perceptions of 'the poor' prompted growing criticism of the severity of pauper burial: if the poor were not an undifferentiated mass, they should not be buried as such. Indeed, those who turned to the parish in this period repeatedly demonstrated a determination to inter the dead with dignity. That these aspirations frequently found expression in material symbols of loss does not mean that consumerism and status were the foci of bereavement, but, rather, that they signify the cultural and material context of working-class life at the turn of the twentieth century.

Drawing on little-used material from burial boards in the North-West of England, I re-read antipathy to the pauper burial less as a consumer-driven desire for respectability than as the struggle to secure respectful burial. Customs such as laying out the dead, viewing the corpse and partaking in funeral processions not only allowed the bereaved to articulate a sense of loss, they also acted as forums for the verbal and symbolic expression of condolence and sympathy. In addition, rituals concerning the care of the cadaver facilitated a renegotiation of identity and the relationship between the dead and the bereaved. Parochial burial in late Victorian and Edwardian England curtailed or prohibited these rites, especially when the bodies of paupers who died in the workhouse were retained, until burial, in the workhouse mortuary.

Thus, hostility to pauper burial derived not only from the shame of poverty but also from the inability to claim ownership of the dead and the denial of mourning customs. Indeed, some families interred their dead in a common grave only to apply for the exhumation of the corpse once they had accumulated sufficient finance to purchase a grave. This would hardly cancel the initial stigma of the pauper burial, especially as the reinterment of coffins took place in the dead of night. Furthermore, responses to pauper burial were far from fixed: whilst some families vested their resources in reclaiming the remains of the deceased, others prioritized the fulfilment of mourning customs over the final resting place of the dead. In this sense, I argue that notions of the 'decent funeral' were rooted not so much in social status and expense as in the desire to claim ownership of the corpse and/or to fulfil secular and spiritual obligations to the dead.

## I

## CLAIMING THE DEAD

In the late nineteenth century, the purchase of a private grave permitted the bereaved to bury the dead in their chosen manner with all the trappings of grief. As Paul Johnson notes, an increasing consumer consciousness ensured that items of extraordinary expenditure were invested with meaning beyond their intrinsic worth.<sup>7</sup> F. M. L. Thompson suggests that the ability to finance a funeral testified to thriftiness and therefore assured a family's respectability within the community: 'The ultimate disgrace for a Victorian worker's family was a pauper burial. Having the means to avoid it and provide for a decent funeral that would preserve the family's standing in the community was the measure of basic respectability'.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, the purchase of a private burial plot and mourning paraphernalia signified social status. Thomas Laqueur has developed this theme, suggesting that the private grave also signified cultural membership: the procession to the cemetery, the occupation of public space and the participation of family, neighbours and colleagues operated as rituals of inclusion and testified to a community identity. Thus, thrift was not valued in isolation, but 'became the locus of enormous anxiety' because the economy of the pauper burial condemned the dead to 'dying bereft of the final signs of communal membership'.<sup>9</sup>

Given the communal context of funerals, an element of display was, perhaps, inevitable: a 'good' funeral bore testimony to a man's breadwinning status and his wife's thriftiness whilst representing, in a public language, the private grief of the bereaved. Yet the significance of such customs was not rooted in consumption alone. Many working-class funerals were characterized by improvisation and 'making do', whilst some rituals cost nothing at all.<sup>10</sup> Wearing black, for instance, was important as a signifier of loss. However, definitions of 'black' differed widely, and most

<sup>7</sup> Paul Johnson, 'Conspicuous Consumption and Working-Class Culture in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, xxxviii (1988).

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, i/1 (1983), 117.

<sup>10</sup> See Julie-Marie Strange, 'She Cried a Very Little: Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c.1880–1914', *Social Hist.*, xxvii (2002). See also Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death', in Ralph Houlbrooke (ed.), *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London, 1988), 199–207.

'new' garments were either old items dyed in darker shades, clothes borrowed for the occasion or items bought from, and immediately returned to, the pawnshop.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in some working-class districts of Manchester, funerals were typified not by coaches and horses but by families carrying their coffins to the cemetery.<sup>12</sup> In such instances, the 'respectability' of the funeral was rooted not so much in what had been spent as in the fact that the family contrived to fulfil mourning customs within the means available to them.

Without dismissing this element of display, I would contend that the principal significance of mourning rites lay in their role as verbal and symbolic landscapes for grief and expressions of condolence. For instance, laying out the dead facilitated reflection on the character of the relationship lost and enabled the bereaved to renegotiate their identity in relation to the deceased. For Catholics, care of the corpse assumed extra significance in that it enabled the bereaved to offer practical assistance (through prayers and lighting candles around the corpse) for the passage of the soul through purgatory. Some families turned to a local woman to lay out their dead for them, paying her either a fee or in kind.<sup>13</sup> Yet laying out could also represent an informal forum, in the immediate aftermath of death, for friends to offer the bereaved emotional succour alongside practical assistance. Likewise, the custom of opening the house to those who came to pay their respects to the dead, to share memories and express their condolences, provided the bereaved with emotional support.<sup>14</sup> This was further cemented by the inclusion of friends, neighbours and workmates in the funeral cortège and participation in the funeral (or wakes) tea.<sup>15</sup> For the bereaved, the funeral

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood* (1973; Bolton, 1990), 15; Andie Clerk, *Suffer Little Children: The Autobiography of an Early Century Street Arab* (Liverpool, 1973), 11; Margaret Penn, *Manchester Fourteen Miles* (1947; Firlie, 1979), 162; A. S. Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood* (London, 1969), 121; Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914; London, 1993), 523.

<sup>12</sup> Strange, 'She Cried a Very Little'.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Chamberlain and Ruth Richardson, 'Life and Death', *Oral Hist.*, xi/1 (1988), 37–8; Sheila Adams, 'A Gendered History of the Social Management of Death in Foleshill, Coventry, during the Interwar Years', in David Clark (ed.), *The Sociology of Death: Theory, Culture, Practice* (Oxford, 1993), 156–7.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Florence Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907; London, 1985), 103–4.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Anne Bromilow and Jim Power (eds.), *Looking Back: Photographs and Memories of Life in the Bolton Area, 1800–1939* (Bolton, 1985), 35; Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy: The Story of a Welsh Mining Valley* (1937; London, 1991), 66.

tea provided a convivial interlude between the potential distress of interment and their return to the sphere of the living. Such rituals not only confirmed the identity of the deceased and those who grieved for them, but they also represented a language of loss.

Given the complex significance of the 'decent' funeral, it is not surprising that investment in burial insurance was so widespread.<sup>16</sup> For those without the buffer of a burial policy, the pawnbroker and/or sympathetic friends might provide the necessary finance to purchase a grave.<sup>17</sup> Burial authorities themselves were aware of antipathy to the pauper grave whilst retaining an acute sense of the financial straits of many families. Toxteth burial board in Liverpool, for instance, initiated a scheme in the 1870s whereby a grave could be obtained on hire purchase, an initial payment of half the cost securing the grave for use.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Ramsbottom and Bacup burial boards in Lancashire 'allow[ed] poor people three months credit when buying graves, rather than have public graves'.<sup>19</sup> At St James's Cemetery, Liverpool, graves were available for lease (for fourteen years) after which they reverted to the trustees of the cemetery for use as public graves.<sup>20</sup> This permitted families to claim autonomy at the time of burial without necessitating the full expense of a private grave.

A more unorthodox approach to securing burial in a private grave was to inter the corpse in a common grave immediately following expiration whilst family and friends rallied to accumulate resources. Once the necessary finance had been raised, the bereaved could apply to have the cadaver exhumed from the common grave to be reinterred in a newly purchased private grave. Initially, the family would petition the relevant burial board for the removal of the cadaver from the parochial plot.<sup>21</sup> If the board agreed to the exhumation, they would assist the next of kin in making a formal application to the Home Office for

<sup>16</sup> Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain, 1870–1939* (Oxford, 1985), 11–47.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of the pawnbroker, see Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit* (Leicester, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Liverpool Record Office (hereafter LVRO), TOX 354/21/2, 14 Oct. 1875. In the event of defaulting on payment, ownership of the grave reverted to the burial board.

<sup>19</sup> Lancashire Record Office, Preston (hereafter LRO), UDCl 60/1, 26 Nov. 1886.

<sup>20</sup> Retrospective on the cemetery in view of closure, 1932: LVRO, 352 CEM 3/17/5.

<sup>21</sup> Some families approached undertakers or monumental masons who then referred them back to the burial board or to the Home Secretary. See, for instance, Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), HO 45/10311/123811.

permission to disturb the dead.<sup>22</sup> As Joseph Makin, a labourer, explained to Bolton burial board, Lancashire, in 1886:

I Joseph Makin not being in circumstances when we buried my son Robert Makin to purches a new grave but having purched one since hopes that it lies in your power to get Him removed from common grave to purched grave . . . we will be very thankfull for your kindness.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in October 1889 George Argill requested permission from Bolton burial board to move his three children, who had all died within one week, from a common to a private grave. Explaining to the board that 'at the time of the funerals I was sick myself and unable to buy a grave', George had since saved enough money to purchase a private plot.<sup>24</sup>

These letters are unusual: for most cases where relatives applied to the Bolton burial board to have a body exhumed, only the corporation's copy of the Home Office application form has survived.<sup>25</sup> Yet both letters are also significant in that they articulate the hopes, in a very literal sense, of people generally consigned to historical silence. The language employed in the letters is quite formal, both in terminology and their apparent conformity to notions of financial responsibility. The letter from George Argill also indicates the vulnerability of families for whom a combination of sickness and death meant the collapse of relative economic security. Both fathers were tentative in expressing hopes for their requests being granted. This not only suggests an awareness of a language separate from the colloquial, it also highlights a willingness to show deference in order to regain ownership of the

<sup>22</sup> The Secretary of State dealt primarily with applications for reinterment where one or both of the graves in question lay in unconsecrated ground. If the body was to be removed from one consecrated grave to another in the same ground, relatives could, alternatively, approach the bishop of the diocese for a 'faculty' to exhume the body. The Home Office respected the prerogatives of the Established Church but could override a bishop's decision if necessary. However, as Toxteth burial board noted in 1895, a faculty from the bishop cost £5 whereas the Secretary of State's licence for removal cost only 1d. PRO, HO 45/9768/B1065, Nov. 1895.

<sup>23</sup> Bolton Record Office (hereafter BRO), ABZ 3/1, 4 Dec. 1886. The spelling is that of the original.

<sup>24</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1, Oct. 1889.

<sup>25</sup> The other burial board records consulted in this research only made reference in minute books to applications for exhumation being made and either granted or refused. Similarly, the Home Office files held at the PRO contain little relating to applications for exhumation and reburial of pauper corpses. This may well explain why this unconventional mode of interment has been entirely overlooked in analyses of the working-class culture of burial.

dead. Thus, 'respectability' as a code of values provided a common language through which the poor could interact with municipal officials.

A family had to move swiftly if an application for disinterment was to be successful. Once another body had been interred over the deceased, permission for exhumation would not be granted unless the kin of more recent interment(s) agreed to the disturbance of their dead. Given that common graves frequently held around ten bodies, the more coffins that were interred, the less likely it seemed that all families would grant permission for disinterment.<sup>26</sup> Hence, most families wishing to exhume their dead applied to the corporation within days of the original burial. For instance, Elizabeth Jones died of influenza on 5 March 1906 and was interred three days later in a common grave in Heaton Cemetery in Bolton. By 13 March, her sister had written to the town clerk requesting permission to have the body removed to a private grave:

Sir, my Father wishes to have my sisters body removed to a new grave in the same cemereatry as she as already been laid to rest but we want it so as we can have a headstone and then we can claim our own grave and have it to look upon as our own . . . we want it removed as soon as possible.

Jones and her father, Isaac, trusted that their application would be brought forward for consideration 'at once without delay'. The sense of urgency in their application suggests that the pauper grave had only ever been perceived as a temporary measure. The licence for removal of the body was granted on 6 April.<sup>27</sup>

In Bolton, applications for exhumation and reburial were made for cadavers of all ages, including very young children. Richard Jackson applied to have his children, Rosanna (died aged fifteen months) and Maud (died aged two years), exhumed for reinterment.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Sarah Ann Holt applied to have the remains of her twin grandsons, Francis and Edward Grundy, removed from a common grave: both babies had lived only sixteen hours

<sup>26</sup> For instance, Josephin and Joseph Matot died at the beginning of 1915 and were interred in a double common grave 'to curtail the funeral charges, the parents having no money to defray the expenses'. In the period between burial and application for removal, eighteen more coffins had been placed over the two children. Thirteen of the nearest relatives of those interred subsequent to the Matots objected to the disturbance of their dead. BRO, ABCF 15/28, Feb. 1915.

<sup>27</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/18, 13 Mar. 1906, correspondence between family, board and Home Office; the spelling is that of the original.

<sup>28</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1/4, 12 Nov. 1892.

before dying from congenital debility.<sup>29</sup> The interment of young children appears to have been accorded a significance similar to that of adults. Indeed, in many instances, the burial acquired extra poignancy by emphasizing the youth and innocence of the deceased.<sup>30</sup> Applications for exhumation were also made on behalf of distant relatives and friends. Elizabeth Hardacre removed her nephew from a common grave whilst James Hilcroft requested permission to disinter his friend, Arthur Warden.<sup>31</sup> Joannah Whittle, a spinster, requested that her 'intended husband' be reburied in a private grave as she did 'not like the idea of the body being interred [*sic*] in a common grave'.<sup>32</sup> Such concerns were not exclusive to the residents of Bolton. A young couple from East Farleigh, near Maidstone, applied in 1879 to exhume the body of their uncle, Samuel Mills (died aged eighty-six), from the workhouse grounds to a grave in their local churchyard. Before the man's death, they had promised to secure his interment by the side of his wife. The Secretary of State's observation that refusal of this application 'would be very hard, if not a mockery, to both these poor people' implies an appreciation of the reluctance to leave the dead to rot ignominiously.<sup>33</sup>

Manoeuvring between graves should not, however, be seen as a viable option for the poor en masse. Applications for disinterment tended to be refused or deferred for a minimum of nine months in circumstances where the deceased had died from an infectious disease.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when Elizabeth Williams sought permission to remove her husband and child from a common grave in December 1905, the Medical Officer of Health for Bolton deemed removal of the bodies 'inadvisable' as both had died of

<sup>29</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/28, 27 Jan. 1914.

<sup>30</sup> This is most explicit in the use of white coffins, a visual metaphor for the purity of the young. See, for instance, A. S. Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood* (London, 1969), 14; Mary Chamberlain, *Growing Up in Lambeth* (London, 1989), 85–7; Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (1928; London, 1983), 78–81. See also Julie-Marie Strange, 'This Mortal Coil: Death and Bereavement in Working-Class Culture, 1880–1914' (Univ. of Liverpool Ph.D. thesis, 2000), 245–6.

<sup>31</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1/4, 19 Dec. 1889 and 14 Apr. 1892.

<sup>32</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1/9, 8 May 1902.

<sup>33</sup> PRO, HO 45/9577/82750, Apr. 1879.

<sup>34</sup> Germ theory had replaced 'miasmatic' theory (the spread of disease through noxious smells) as the dominant paradigm in medicine and public health. Presumably, contact with the decaying remains of a corpse — dead from infectious disease — was perceived as a huge health risk to those exhuming and reintering the body. See Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1983), 86–116, for a discussion of germ theory in relation to public health.

typhoid fever.<sup>35</sup> More significantly, perhaps, many families and friends found the cost of the purchased grave beyond their means, even with delaying tactics. It is worth noting that many of the families who approached the Home Office for the exhumation of a body had not actually purchased the grave at the time of their application. Rather, they claimed to have saved enough money to do so, and would purchase the grave if and when permission for exhumation was granted.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Ann Dickens applied to Hampstead burial board in June 1885 for the exhumation of her husband Timothy as she was 'about buying a grave'. Timothy had been interred the week before when she was 'much grieved' and 'could not know what was best'.<sup>37</sup> It seems plausible to suggest that, moved by a sense of urgency, some families made an application for removal whilst still accumulating finances. Moreover, for those with scant resources, the expense of a grave was a luxury which only featured in financial calculations if there was a cadaver to place in it.

Somewhat ironically, application for exhumation and reinterment not only protracted the process of laying the dead to rest, it also proved more expensive.<sup>38</sup> Yet burial boards appear to have accepted applications for exhumation as normal. Correspondence between the chair and clerk of Clayton-le-Moors burial board, Lancashire, in December 1896 concluded that such applications were 'purely formal' and that they could consent to exhumations without calling special meetings of the board.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, members of Toxteth burial board agreed in 1895 that they were 'sympathetic' to the relatives who 'frequently' approached them with questions concerning the exhumation of their dead.<sup>40</sup> That the Home Office printed a standardized form of application for the removal of bodies from common graves also suggests that such requests were expected.

Evidence from several burial authorities in the North-West suggests that this somewhat unorthodox approach to (re)burial

<sup>35</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/18, correspondence during Dec. 1905.

<sup>36</sup> George Argill is a typical example, claiming 'I intend to purchase [a private grave] if you can grant this request': BRO, ABZ 3/1/4.

<sup>37</sup> PRO, HO 45/9654/A40146, June 1885.

<sup>38</sup> The burial board charged a fee for application and exhumation in addition to standard burial fees. See, for instance, BRO, ABZ 3/1/4, memo dated 8 July 1904.

<sup>39</sup> LRO, UDCL 7/5, 7 Dec. 1896. That burial boards usually profited from the exhumation and reinterment of corpses no doubt encouraged the rapid turnover of applications.

<sup>40</sup> PRO, HO 45/9768/B1065, Nov. 1895.

was widely used and, more often than not, successful.<sup>41</sup> This is interesting for several reasons. First, it suggests a resourcefulness and a network of knowledge relating to the potential for the disinterment of cadavers. It also testifies to a desire to reclaim ownership of the corpse.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, it is unclear how the reinterment of the dead in a private grave would reinstate respectability. The initial interment in a common grave had advertised to the community the family's lack of finance at the time of burial. They would therefore already have suffered the stigma associated with the pauper grave. In terms of repairing the damage to their reputation, Home Office regulations stipulated that exhumation and reinterment of the corpse had to be executed 'with due care and attention to decency'.<sup>43</sup> This necessitated covering the exhumed coffin ('and any other matter that may be offensive') with ground lime or 'McDougall's Disinfecting Powder'.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the exhumation had to take place either at night or very early in the morning with no public witnesses, a stipulation introduced for public health reasons and, perhaps, to prevent ghoulish interest. This measure redefined the pauper corpse exclusively in terms of contagion. Yet the ruling also meant that reinterment could not be accompanied by any secular or religious ritual: the bereaved were simply informed that reburial had taken place. Thus, if 'respectability' was reinstated by this process, it was done so very quietly.

I would suggest that in undertaking to pay extra costs for reburial and prolonging the process of laying the dead to rest, families were articulating a desire to reclaim the corpse as their own. The application made to Bolton burial board for the exhumation of Elizabeth Jones explicitly stated a wish to 'claim our own grave' and, implicitly, to assert kinship beyond death.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the language of the 'private' or 'family' grave is loaded with connotations of familiarity, identity and spiritual reunion. In contrast, the terminology of the common/pauper grave drew

<sup>41</sup> Applications failed when relatives of other cadavers refused the disturbance of their dead or because the cause of death was an infectious disease.

<sup>42</sup> This casts further doubt on Richardson's claim that the fear of anatomization dominated antipathy to the pauper grave, as any corpse subject to post-mortem would already have been examined before interment.

<sup>43</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/28. Standardized Home Office regulations attached to the licence for exhumation throughout the period of study.

<sup>44</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/28, and PRO, HO 45/9768/B1065, Feb. 1887.

<sup>45</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/18, correspondence Mar. and Apr. 1906.

on notions of anonymity, poverty and bodies whom 'nobody owned'. Yet in claiming kinship, the bereaved were also affirming the ownership and identity of the dead and ensuring that the cadaver lay in a recognized social and cultural space.

## II

### THE PAUPER BURIAL

Common burial compromised the dignity of the dead, not only in its association with the workhouse but also in the actual logistics of interment and the surrender of the body to the parochial authorities. Guardians of the poor were notorious for their insistence on meagre economy. A series of articles in the Liverpool satirical magazine the *Porcupine* in April 1892, headlined 'Desecration of the Dead at Anfield Cemetery', highlighted both the vulnerability of the pauper corpse and the shoddy manner in which it was interred. The demand for public graves at Anfield Cemetery had outstripped supply. The first article claimed that, despite the availability of an area of uncultivated land, cemetery employees ('graveyard churls') had reopened old public graves, 'broken up and trampled down' the coffins in them and deposited remnants of bones in a basket. Many of the exhumed coffins were intact; one exposed a woman's head 'with the flesh of the face and long hair attached'. Conceding that 'it makes no difference to the dead' what atrocities were committed to their graves, the author maintained that such 'ghastly treatment' was deeply offensive to working-class people and made a mockery of the grave as a 'last resting place'.<sup>46</sup> A second article acknowledged that the burial board were within their rights to re-use public graves after a minimum of fourteen years. This did little, however, to assuage the horror of desecration for bereaved families, especially when coffins and bones had to be smashed in order to accommodate new interments. Moreover, the author continued, the very character of pauper burial was 'simply a scandal to any community pretending respect for the dead'. In their 'frail deal boxes', pauper corpses were 'packed like sardines' into graves which resembled a 'sand pit'. There was not the 'slightest sign' of cultivation or care; the land was a 'mere waste, an open chasm,

<sup>46</sup> *Porcupine*, 9 Apr. 1892, p. 8.

in fact, where it would be very appropriate to place a notice to the effect that “Rubbish may be shot here”.<sup>47</sup>

The comparison of common graves to rubbish sites was a telling metaphor: often situated in obscure locations (notably by cemetery waste deposits or behind ‘back boundary walls’) and deprived of memorial paraphernalia, the pauper grave signified the marginalization of the poor.<sup>48</sup> In 1885 the registrar at Wigan Cemetery objected to the use of the ‘best ground’ for common graves. A piece of wasteland that had recently been drained was, he thought, more appropriate for the interment of paupers.<sup>49</sup> During the 1890s, Catholic paupers in central Liverpool were interred in the stone quarry at the far end of Anfield Cemetery.<sup>50</sup> In 1906 a deputation of Anglican, Catholic and Nonconformist ministers petitioned Bolton burial board to curtail their shoddy treatment of the pauper cadaver. In particular, they called for an end to the desecration of common graves by the laying of pathways over them.<sup>51</sup>

As if to compound the humiliation of interment in wasteland, cemetery bylaws usually prohibited the installation of a headstone on the pauper grave, frustrating the use of the gravespace as a concrete memorial to the dead.<sup>52</sup> As Sarah Tarlow notes, headstones were typically inscribed with details relating to the identity of the dead and their relationships with those who mourned them. As such, the headstone was a metaphor for bereavement.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, visiting and tending to the grave enabled the bereaved to maintain a point of contact and, by implication, a relationship with the deceased. Recollecting the burial of her father in a pauper grave in the mid twentieth century, Bernadette Murphy

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Apr. 1892, pp. 8–9. These graves were twenty-eight years old.

<sup>48</sup> LRO, UDCI 58/1, 18 Jan. 1889.

<sup>49</sup> Wigan Record Office (hereafter WRO), A 10/1/Z, 19 Feb. 1885.

<sup>50</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 Oct. 1895, p. 3. Also reported in *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 Oct. 1895, p. 5. A member of Liverpool Select Vestry, Joseph Moss, challenged his fellow guardians’ choice of such an ‘inhuman’ location.

<sup>51</sup> BRO, AB 13/1/11, 1 Mar. 1906. As late as 1925 the vicar of Bolton protested that placing pathways over public graves, ‘where anyone can walk over them’, was tantamount to desecration: BRO, ABCF 15/39, 19 Mar. 1925.

<sup>52</sup> See, for instance, the table of fees for Haslingden Cemetery, Lancashire, 1901, LRO, MBH 42/1, and regulations for Chorley Cemetery 1913, LRO, MBCh 42/48. Elizabeth Roberts notes the oral testimony of a woman whose mother had been interred in a pauper grave. That the family were unable to visit the grave caused deep distress for years after the burial. Roberts, ‘Lancashire Way of Death’, 191.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality* (Oxford, 1999).

emphasized the ‘burden of grief and shame’ the interment laid upon her mother. More poignantly, perhaps, Murphy’s account of the difficulties she faced when trying to locate her father’s grave, and of the absence of symbols of identity, loss and remembrance on the grave, conveys a powerful sense of the exclusion, grief and bitterness of the bereaved.<sup>54</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the status of the poor was changing.<sup>55</sup> Increasingly, calls were voiced for the classification of paupers into categories according to moral worth, thus enabling Poor Law union authorities to distinguish ‘the moral and well-disposed’ pauper from those of ‘indifferent or vicious character’.<sup>56</sup> As attitudes towards poverty began to change, burial boards gradually and, in some instances, grudgingly made concessions to the memorialization of pauper graves. In 1910 Stretford burial board invited tenders for the erection of headstones over public graves whereby the family of the deceased could pay (9d. per dozen letters in 1913) to have the name of the dead inscribed on a communal stone.<sup>57</sup> The stone remained the property of the cemetery.<sup>58</sup> By 1903, Bolton burial board permitted mourners to inscribe the name and age of the dead and the date of death on a flatstone which lay over the grave.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that in 1917 the board reviewed this resolution, concluding that ‘due to lack of interest’ inscriptions on public graves would only be available in one of

<sup>54</sup> Bernadette Murphy, ‘Remembrance Remembered, Remembrance Observed: An Irishman’s Daughter Visits his Grave’, *Jl Hist. Sociology*, x/4 (1997).

<sup>55</sup> Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 54–87.

<sup>56</sup> Classificatory categories taken from a local government circular distributed in August 1896: LVRO, 353 SEL 10/14. These categories were also adopted by philanthropic organizations. For instance, William Grisewood, organizer of a survey into the poor of Liverpool by the Liverpool Central Relief Committee and the Charity Organisation Society, asserted in 1899 that many of the poor were worthy and moral people and should not be classed along with those who were indolent, vicious or criminal. William Grisewood, *The Poor of Liverpool and What Is To Be Done for Them* (Liverpool, 1899), 6. Likewise, Anne Crowther notes that it seems equally unlikely that the poor perceived themselves as a monolith; those who had managed to distance themselves from extreme poverty dissociated themselves from the ‘riff-raff’ who had been denied outdoor relief: Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 236 ff.

<sup>57</sup> LRO, MBH 2/20, 8 Feb. 1910.

<sup>58</sup> LRO, MBS 2/21, 8 July 1913. A similar arrangement was in operation at St James’s Cemetery in Liverpool. LVRO, 352 CEM 3/17/5.

<sup>59</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/30, Rules and Regulations and Tables of Fees for Bolton Cemeteries, 1903.

the corporation's three cemeteries.<sup>60</sup> Of course, many families who interred their dead in a pauper grave may have found the cost of an inscription too expensive. In addition, it is questionable whether families wanted their dead simply listed with other (unknown) unfortunates. Nonetheless, access to this form of memorialization was important in itself, as the prohibition of public remembrance perpetuated the indignity of the pauper funeral even after burial had taken place.

Even the smallest gesture of commemoration could meet with hostility from the union authorities. An article in the *Times* in 1878 chided guardians who moved pauper corpses from coffins provided by their families to parochial boxes of 'inferior value' and replaced tin nameplates with 'a piece of paper with a name and number'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, an article in the *Lancet* in 1884 attacked the 'petty tyranny' of the Cambridge guardians who, it revealed, removed all nameplates and small ornaments attached to parish coffins by the friends of the deceased. As the author noted: 'All those who have worked among the poor know the feelings with which they regard their dead, and how even the very poorest will strive to secure the means sufficient for a decent burial'. For this author, then, even modest gestures of mourning and identity salvaged some decency for the pauper corpse.<sup>62</sup>

In a similar vein, most guardians prohibited the use of coffins purchased by the bereaved. Yet, as Robert Roberts noted, parochial coffins were notoriously cheap and ineffectual: 'The *Essex* casket . . . was just the job for paupers and those amongst our poor who had foolishly backslid on their burial premiums. Fashioned in elm, it tended, like the cheap Macintoshes of the time, to split and let in water'.<sup>63</sup>

In 1895, one Salford guardian described the pauper coffins commissioned by the union as a 'perfect disgrace': 'Their quality was so poor that they cracked when a nail was driven in, and unless bodies are carefully handled, they fall out of them'.<sup>64</sup> Liverpool Select Vestry contracted coffins that were little more than 'rough boxes without handles' with the names of the dead

<sup>60</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/39, taken from a table of 'Total Number of Interments in the Corporation's Three Cemeteries over Five Years'.

<sup>61</sup> *Times*, 28 Nov. 1878, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> *Lancet*, 3 May 1884, pp. 812–13.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling: Growing Up in the Classic Slum* (Manchester, 1976), 134–5.

<sup>64</sup> *Liverpool Echo*, 25 Aug. 1895, p. 4.

‘written in chalk in a very illegible manner’.<sup>65</sup> In 1884 one guardian remonstrated that coffins with holes large enough to poke an umbrella through were unseemly, not least because they exposed the corpse to view. Indeed, there was not one member of the vestry who would ‘care to bury his dog in one of them’.<sup>66</sup> In 1891, another guardian, Mr Brooks, called for more ‘liberality’ with regard to expenditure on coffins. As it was, pauper coffins were made from flimsy wood whilst their uniform size meant that larger corpses were ‘indecently’ crammed in them.<sup>67</sup> Cracks and holes in the coffin were not only a danger to public health, they did little to assist the grieving process. Recalling one pauper burial, the guardian Mr Roberts described a coffin which had cracked to a width of over one inch: ‘A poor creature put her finger through the crack and felt the body, and the result was a lamentation that was terrible to listen to’.<sup>68</sup> Such shoddy quality was particularly disappointing, as only one month earlier, tenders had been invited for a new contractor to provide coffins of a reasonable standard.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, such was the flimsiness of the parish coffins that carpenters were unable to sell them to anyone else. This not only points to their appalling quality, it implies that — like the workhouse uniform — they were readily identified as belonging to the parish.<sup>70</sup>

Increasingly, the meanness of pauper interments was perceived as indicative of outdated attitudes towards poverty rather than as an acceptable way of treating the poor. Indeed, guardians often found themselves in the difficult position of defending the principle of pauper burial whilst admonishing excessive severity. When the guardians of Preston union accepted a tender for the supply of cheap but (allegedly) good-quality coffins in 1897, the *Lancet* suggested that the pecuniary difference could be expended on upgrading the pauper burial itself:

The Preston Guardians will, we hope, now that a coffin can be purchased for a penny, make the funeral of a pauper somewhat less of a perfunctory ceremony than it is at present and take some care to show that a body

<sup>65</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 Oct. 1895, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> [Liverpool] *Express*, 7 Oct. 1884, in LVRO, 353 SEL 14/5.

<sup>67</sup> *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 12 Sept. 1891, p. 3, and *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 Sept. 1891, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 Oct. 1895, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> LVRO, 353 SEL 10/14, 19 Sept. 1895.

<sup>70</sup> One firm of joiners complained to the Liverpool workhouse committee on losing their contract for coffins that no one else would purchase the coffins already made for the workhouse: LVRO, 353 SEL 10/16, 19 Nov. 1903.

should not be huddled into the ground at the cheapest rate and in the most careless manner.<sup>71</sup>

Yet the 'huddling' of paupers into their graves went beyond a question of financial expenditure. Whilst the Christian burial service articulated egalitarianism in death (at least for the believer), entry into cemetery chapels was often barred to both the pauper corpse and mourners prior to interment. In 1891 Canon Carr, the Roman Catholic priest for Anfield Cemetery, complained to the Liverpool burial board that prohibiting paupers' admission to the chapel was an unjust practice. He qualified his appeal, however, by adding that access should only be encouraged for those paupers 'that were fit — not disagreeable or dangerous'.<sup>72</sup> At Walton workhouse cemetery, Liverpool, paupers were permitted into the cemetery chapel by 'special arrangement' and the payment of a small fee. Again, this only applied to those who displayed no 'unpleasant' or 'dangerous' characteristics.<sup>73</sup> Such language is richly suggestive: it points to a vision of the abject poor as unpredictable and perilous guests in the house of God. Moreover, whilst fears concerning the behaviour of paupers were no doubt justified in some cases, the policing of the church served only to reinforce the abasement of the common grave.

The Burial Act 1880 removed the privileges of the Established Church with regard to interment in consecrated ground, thus enabling the bereaved to select the minister and the burial service of their own choice.<sup>74</sup> This facilitated the articulation of a denominational identity within the space of the burial ground, an identity reinforced through the selection of an undertaker sympathetic to confessional difference.<sup>75</sup> Crucial distinctions between the burial services of different denominations, notably the Nonconformist's rejection of high church ritual and the Catholic's belief in purgatory, further augmented the importance of access to the minister and spiritual observances of one's choice. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, most Poor Law guardians permitted non-Anglican ministers to officiate at the interment of the dead, although some institutions still balked at paying for their ser-

<sup>71</sup> *Lancet*, 9 Oct. 1897, p. 930.

<sup>72</sup> LVRO, PAR 6/5/1, 15 Oct. 1891.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2 vols. (London, 1966–70), ii, 202–7.

<sup>75</sup> In Liverpool, members of the Irish population were also able to turn to funeral directors who sympathized with sectarian identities: see, for instance, LVRO, 353 PAR, 23 Mar. 1876.

vices. Guardians also permitted pauper graves to be located in denominational portions of municipal cemeteries, although workhouse cemeteries remained largely undifferentiated.

The obscurity surrounding the religious beliefs of the working classes renders analysis of the spiritual significance of the burial service problematic. For those who did seek spiritual balm in religious rites, comfort could be derived from the reading of the relevant burial service as the corpse was lowered into the grave. Indeed, the chaplain for Walton workhouse in the 1880s noted those 'respectable' and 'decent folks' who thanked him for his ministry and/or expressed anxiety for the soul of the departed.<sup>76</sup> Yet even this concession to decency could appear slapdash and half-hearted. Workhouse funerals were rarely personalized, not least because one service catered for all the pauper burials taking place that day. Moreover, scandals concerning failure or reluctance to read the burial service at pauper funerals indicate a degree of clerical ambivalence towards the corpse, especially when no mourners were present.<sup>77</sup> When Stretford burial board refused consecratory status for the Anglican portion of the cemetery in the 1880s, the bishop of Manchester expressed concern that he would be unable to 'compel' the rector of the parish to officiate at the burials of the parish poor.<sup>78</sup> In 1882, the governor of Wigan workhouse, Mr Lowe, issued a report criticizing ministers for non-attendance at pauper funerals, noting that 'things like that are occurring pretty often here lately'. In the space of one week, two bodies from the workhouse had been interred without the appropriate clergy. Julia Bray had been buried for two days before a minister read the burial service over her grave. Similarly, no minister arrived to officiate at the interment of Edward Edwards, prompting the sexton (the caretaker of the cemetery) to read the burial service himself. He then abandoned the coffin in the chapel for the duration of the night.<sup>79</sup>

The flippancy of the clergy towards the pauper corpse provided an opportunity for guardians to deflect criticism from themselves. On a visit to Walton workhouse cemetery in June 1883, Mr

<sup>76</sup> LVRO, 353 WES 14/3.

<sup>77</sup> For instance, the *Local Government Chronicle and Advertiser* noted in 1885 that members of the clergy seemed reluctant to perform services over the bodies of paupers who had died in the workhouse but whose 'home' parish could not be traced: LRO, UDCI 60/1.

<sup>78</sup> LRO, MBS 2/18, c. July 1885.

<sup>79</sup> WRO, A 10/1/Z, 27 May 1882.

Beesley, a member of the West Derby guardians, near Liverpool, witnessed the interment of a pauper in the absence of the chaplain, Reverend Leslie.<sup>80</sup> Reporting this 'defect' to his fellow guardians, Beesley called for Leslie to be reprimanded. In his defence, Leslie argued that the coffin in question had arrived at the cemetery after the appointed hour for the burial service. He had sanctioned immediate interment for sanitary reasons: the corpse had been found drowned, which had necessitated a post-mortem. In any case, continued Leslie, he read the burial service over the grave two days following the interment.<sup>81</sup>

This rather missed the point. The board requested that, forthwith, Leslie should contrive to remain at the cemetery one extra hour each day in order to conduct the burial service over any late arrivals. Leslie refused, but, as a gesture of goodwill to the board, offered to read the burial service the day following the interment of any 'casuals'. This concession would, however, occasion 'personal hardship' and was, he considered, 'quite unnecessary'. Moreover, he suggested that the board remember that his salary had remained static since 1869, despite the steady increase in his workload, much of which was done 'voluntarily and unsolicited'.<sup>82</sup> Leslie's lackadaisical approach towards the burial of 'casuals' encapsulated the humiliation attached to the 'pauper whom nobody owned'. Beesley, the champion of the cause, concluded his admonishment of Leslie by declaring he 'would not like one of his relatives to be put in a hole like a dog'.<sup>83</sup> Curiously, however, he found no such inhumanity in the pauper burial itself. Rather, the burial service conferred Christian status on the pauper grave, and therefore distinguished it from an uncivilized and indecent interment. That even this could be postponed until the day following interment when confronted with an obstinate chaplain indicates that any concern for decency was tenuous and easily compromised.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> LVRO, 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883.

<sup>81</sup> Leslie argued that Home Office regulations demanded safe and speedy burial for bodies 'in all stages of decomposition'.

<sup>82</sup> Leslie noted that when the workhouse opened in 1868, it catered for 800 inmates. During the past year, however, the population of the house had reached almost 2,000. Following this confrontation with the board Leslie received an increase in his annual salary of £25. See LVRO, 353 WES 14/3, 12 July 1883. See also *ibid.*, 21 June 1883, and *Liverpool Daily Post*, 21 June 1883, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> LVRO, 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883.

<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Beesley retracted his charges of neglect of duty: see LVRO, 353 WES, 28 June 1883.

It is impossible to determine the meanings invested in the burial service. It is plausible to surmise, however, that clerical nonchalance compounded the secular indignities of pauper burial. On Thursday, 27 February 1908, a boy named Thomas Roberts died in the workhouse hospital at Brownlow Hill, Liverpool.<sup>85</sup> His father informed workhouse officials that he would make private arrangements for the burial of his son on the following Sunday. Owing to a misunderstanding, however, the clerk authorized the interment of the body in a pauper grave. When Roberts arrived at the hospital later that day to finalize arrangements for the collection of Thomas's body, he was deeply 'grieved': not only had the burial already taken place, Thomas had been interred 'without so much as a prayer'. Whether Roberts considered religious rites to be of spiritual significance is unclear. To a point, it was not the issue at stake. As one guardian involved in the case stated: 'The boy should not have been taken away and buried like a dog, with no intimation being sent to his friends'. The evocation of animal imagery emphasized the un-Christian nature of the burial, seemingly made worse by its taking place in the absence of the bereaved. The censures issued in regard to the mistake hinged, however, on inefficiency and incompetence rather than the wretchedness of the pauper burial itself.

Bureaucratic mistakes and oversights inflamed charges that the Poor Law guardians were 'mean-souled' and a 'board of bigots'.<sup>86</sup> As the *Porcupine* had noted in January 1881, ineptitude was, all too often, inseparable from indifference to the feelings of the poor.<sup>87</sup> Reporting that a young girl, Rebecca Scott, had died in Liverpool workhouse hospital and had been interred in a parochial grave without any notification of either event being sent to her concerned mother, the journal concluded: 'The blunders, great and small of our local parish are becoming a byword, and until the contemptuous and unfeeling manner in which the poor are treated is stopped with a firm hand, "mistakes" and "negligence", such as the above, will never cease'.<sup>88</sup> Blunders clearly exacerbated the distress of the pauper burial yet, as the *Porcupine* noted,

<sup>85</sup> *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 6 Mar. 1908, p. 3. Subsequent quotations derive from the same source. See also LVRO, 353 SEL 14/5.

<sup>86</sup> See *Liverpool Review*, 3 Jan. 1880, p. 11, and *Liberal Review*, 12 June 1880, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Porcupine*, 22 Jan. 1881, p. 684.

<sup>88</sup> Rebecca's mother had supplied her address to the clerk at the hospital and called in the days following her daughter's admission to enquire about her progress. Two days before the death, hospital staff informed her that Rebecca was 'fine'.

bureaucratic errors stemmed from a fundamental insensitivity to the feelings of those forced to turn to the parish. Again, this would suggest that antipathy to pauper burial was inseparable from a desire to ensure that the corpse was treated with care.

### III

#### CONTESTING RESPECTABILITY

If we are to use the notion of respectability with reference to the working-class culture of death and bereavement we must, therefore, posit a more fluid understanding of the 'respectable' funeral. The exhumation of pauper corpses for the purposes of reinterment indicates that dichotomies between stigma and respectability were not rigid. Furthermore, I would suggest that many of the families who did turn to the parish for burial strove to retain, where possible, a degree of dignity in death. The cheap nameplates attached to pauper coffins are a prime example of the desire to claim a modicum of identity and respect for the dead. In such circumstances, notions of 'respectability' and paying respect to the dead were not fixed to the purchase of a private gravespace, but, rather, invested with malleable and mutable meaning.

One of the most authoritative contemporary analyses of respectability and antipathy towards the pauper grave was Maud Pember Reeves's account of thrift and burial expense.<sup>89</sup> Her conclusions challenged the notion that the money spent on funerals could, with prudence, be halved. This was, Reeves maintained, an 'erroneous idea' based upon ignorance concerning the 'real circumstances' of the poor.<sup>90</sup> Rather, the expense incurred by the 'decent' funeral was a rational form of expenditure when set against an appreciation of the aversion to the pauper funeral.<sup>91</sup> Parochial burial not only lacked dignity, it pauperized the entire family with the 'consequent political and social degradation' attendant on that status.<sup>92</sup> Reeves acknowledged that antipathy to the common grave might be perceived as 'sheer prejudice'. Yet it was, she suggested, a prejudice 'even the most educated and highly born' of parents would share if their child were to be

<sup>89</sup> Maud Pember Reeves, *Round about a Pound a Week* (1913; London, 1979), 66–72.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> Reeves did, however, remain critical of the 'pomp and ceremony' which accompanied many adult burials.

<sup>92</sup> Reeves, *Round about a Pound*, 68.

buried in a pauper grave.<sup>93</sup> Reeves's study undoubtedly gestured towards an understanding of the working-class culture of death and values of thrift. This gesture was, however, limited to the 'respectable, hard-working, independent' poor as defined by Reeves and her fellow surveyors.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Reeves's claim to know the 'real circumstances' of the working classes rested on twice-weekly visits to thirty families in Lambeth by members of the Fabian Women's Group between 1909 and 1913.<sup>95</sup>

Nonetheless, Reeves's account posited a relatively nuanced perception of the working-class funeral. By setting the impulse for burial insurance against the aversion to the pauper grave, Reeves implied that interment in a private grave secured the 'decent' and, therefore, respectable burial. Decency in death was, however, flexible. For Reeves, excess expenditure compromised respectability as much as pauperism. Citing the bill for a child's funeral, she concluded that 'no display and no extravagance' were evident in paying for hearse attendants, a woman to lay the body out, flowers and a new black tie for the father of the deceased.<sup>96</sup> Rather, they represented modest and sincere expressions of loss. The child was interred in a common grave. Significantly, however, Reeves still defined the funeral as respectable. Thus, an appreciation of the social stigma attached to pauperism did not nullify the respectability of a funeral in terms of personal gestures of mourning. Between the ideal of the private grave and the shame of pauper burial, there was considerable scope for individuals to inscribe mourning rites, no matter how rudimentary, with profound personal meaning.

For some at least, therefore, interment in a common grave could be reconciled with notions of decent burial, especially if some autonomy could be exercised in the manner in which the dead were conveyed to the grave. Indeed, it was this recognition that prompted criticisms of guardians who adhered to draconian interpretations of the punitive purpose of pauper burial. It is worth remembering that, despite the boom in burial insurance, interments in common graves accounted for a significant number

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction. In addition, Ross McKibbin notes that external observers of working-class lives, such as Reeves, represented figures of authority who were unable to empathize with or rationalize the mentality of the poor: Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 167–96.

<sup>96</sup> Reeves, *Round about a Pound*, 70–1.

of burials in most cemeteries.<sup>97</sup> To suppose that the families of these corpses were either too 'rough' to care about decent interment (or their dead) or were in perpetual thrall to the stigma of pauperism seems simplistic, not least because it overlooks the potential to redefine decency and/or respectability. Indeed, the rudimentary effects of mourning could assume extra significance as the locus for representations of loss when other rites were circumscribed. This did not eclipse the indignity of witnessing the guardians' (and clergy's) shoddy treatment of the corpse. Rather, the ignoble elements of pauper burial could be ameliorated by autonomous displays of respect and grief. As the Liverpool workhouse committee noted in February 1884, bereaved families frequently removed bodies from the workhouse, claiming their intention to bury them directly.<sup>98</sup> They then performed mourning customs and organized wakes before returning to the parish authorities to request parochial interment. That burial policies were often drawn but evidently not spent on the purchase of a grave was a 'scandal' which, the committee agreed, required immediate 'suppression'. In future, bodies would only be released to families who undertook to buy a grave immediately.<sup>99</sup>

The guardians were at a loss to understand this seemingly skewed sense of priority, especially when set against the supposed horror of the pauper grave. Yet such cases posed a persistent problem for union authorities. Moses Waddington died in the workhouse at Bolton on 21 October 1905 and was interred in the cemetery there three days later. Yet the guardians' enquiries revealed that Waddington's son had drawn £5 from one burial club whilst his brother-in-law withdrew £8 from a policy with Prudential Assurance. The small fortune had subsequently been spent on clothing for the family, to which several guardians cried

<sup>97</sup> As the scandal surrounding the re-use of public graves at Anfield in 1892 highlighted, the demand for common graves often outstripped a cemetery's initial calculations. A similar difficulty arose in the cemetery at Burton upon Trent in 1896 when the board were forced to create 270 new common graves. PRO, HO 45/9921/B23268, correspondence and newspaper cuttings, 1896–7. A survey of St James's Cemetery in Liverpool in 1932 revealed that since the ground opened for interments in 1829, 5,789 private graves (to hold five bodies each) had been sold, whilst 1,728 common graves had been filled. Common graves held between seven and ten bodies. See LVRO, 352 CEM 3/17/5.

<sup>98</sup> LVRO, 353 SEL 10/11, 7 Feb. 1884.

<sup>99</sup> See also *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 Feb. 1884, in LVRO, 353 SEL 14/3. The issue was raised again in 1887. See LVRO, 353 SEL 10/12, 17 Mar. 1887.

‘Shame’. This ‘disgraceful (hear, hear)’ expenditure moved the guardians to propose strict measures which would necessitate an investigation into the private finances of any person committed to burial at the expense of the parish.<sup>100</sup> If the family and friends of the deceased had money to fritter away on clothing, they had sufficient means to buy a grave. A similar case arose in 1908 when the family of a woman who had died in the workhouse removed her corpse for burial. They then applied for a parochial burial. On the day of the funeral, however, the woman was ‘conveyed to the cemetery in a hearse drawn by four horses, whilst there were three coaches, each drawn by two horses’. Alderman Brooks was furious:

if anyone went to the workhouse, getting everything at the expense of the ratepayer and yet money was spent so lavishly on the funeral without interring the body in *anything but a common grave*, surely there should be some recompense to the Guardians for what they had done for the woman. [my emphasis]

It transpired that the woman’s son had insured her for the sum of £40 and, after her extravagant transport to the grave, was ‘drinking the rest of the money as fast as he possibly could’.<sup>101</sup>

It may be that the relative extravagance of these burials induced the wrath of the board. Yet it is plausible to suggest that many families buried their dead with more modest mourning rites while still turning to the parish for a grave. The guardians’ objections towards the squandering of burial money on mourning paraphernalia hinged partly on a desire to recoup money spent on those who evidently had no need to burden the ratepayer.<sup>102</sup> Yet there was also a reluctance among guardians to accept any rationale that permitted expenditure on the effects of mourning whilst committing the dead to the perceived disgrace of a parish grave. Moreover, guardians made no concession to the possibility that decisions concerning the distribution of burial finance necessitated protracted and potentially antagonistic family discussion. Again, this would suggest that the attitudes of the poor towards the burial and the pauper grave were far from monolithic. For some, giving the dead a ‘good send-off’ and opening the house to neighbours and relatives expressed immediate grief in a symbolic

<sup>100</sup> [Bolton] *Daily Chronicle*, 15 Nov. 1905, in BRO, GBO 12/13.

<sup>101</sup> *Bolton Evening Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1908, in BRO, GBO 12/13.

<sup>102</sup> At Liverpool, relatives could only claim the effects of those who died in the workhouse after the guardians had deducted the cost of the keep and interment of the deceased: see, for instance, LVRO, 353 SEL 10/14; 353 SEL 10/16; 353 SEL 10/17.

and verbal language which the final rotting place of the dead often failed to supply. Indeed, research into the short- and long-term care of graves in cemeteries in the North-West of England indicates that in the aftermath of death, the graves of working-class families frequently fell into disrepair.<sup>103</sup> Rather, domestic space became the locus for commemoration.<sup>104</sup> It was therefore not ‘respectability’ as defined and understood by the guardians which was at issue for such families, but the assertion of independence, the articulation of respect for the corpse and the ability to express loss through the familiar rituals of burial.

It must be noted, however, that the pauper grave did not command universal loathing. The expense incurred by a ‘respectable’ burial was thought by some to be money foolishly spent. As Walter Greenwood’s father suggested, far better to spend the money on the living:

A pauper grave wouldn’t trouble me . . . Come to think of it you can let my burial insurance lapse here and now and let’s be having the pennies every week. If I sup it away in beer it’ll be one in the eye for those insurance robbers [and] the right man will have benefited.<sup>105</sup>

On a more mercenary note, William Morris of Bridgeman Street in Bolton permitted the interment of his friend and distant relative, Jonathan Redford, in the grounds of the workhouse in the full knowledge that the dead man owned a gravespace in Tonge Cemetery. Following the burial, Morris applied to Bolton burial board to have Redford’s grave deeds transferred to himself as he was the only living relative of the dead man.<sup>106</sup>

Crucially, some people were unaware of the distinction between the private and public grave, despite the supposed ‘horror’ of parochial burial. Indeed, some families interred their dead in common graves in ignorance that the plot would not belong to them. Thus, Elizabeth Wright applied to Bolton burial board in 1883 to have her husband disinterred from a common grave as she ‘was not aware at the time she made arrangements with the undertaker that the grave would not belong to her’.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Emily Barley interred her son Frederick Henry in a parochial

<sup>103</sup> Strange, ‘This Mortal Coil’, 167–78; see also Julie-Marie Strange, ‘“Tho’ Lost to Sight, to Memory Dear”’: The Neglected Grave in Victorian and Edwardian Commemorative Culture’, *Mortality*, forthcoming.

<sup>104</sup> Strange, ‘This Mortal Coil’, 204–10; Strange, ‘“Tho’ Lost to Sight”’.

<sup>105</sup> Walter Greenwood, *There Was a Time* (London, 1967), 23.

<sup>106</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1/1, 18 Sept. 1886.

<sup>107</sup> BRO, ABZ 3/1/4, 1883.

plot in 1912 on the advice of the undertaker. Two weeks later, however, she wrote to Bolton burial board explaining that this was a mistake and she wished Frederick to be reinterred in a private grave.<sup>108</sup> Correspondence between Farnworth burial board and the Home Office in January 1909 further suggests that many relatives were unaware of the restrictions imposed upon pauper burial plots, giving rise to a significant number of bodies being interred (on the advice of undertakers) in public graves by ‘mistake’.<sup>109</sup> Again, this would suggest that it was the implications of the pauper grave for mourning and commemorative rites rather than a fear of social disgrace that motivated the impulse to claim one’s own corpse/grave. That a number of people were oblivious to the ramifications of interment in the common grave also indicates that the stigma associated with pauper burial has, to some degree at least, been mythologized. In this light, the neatness of the pauper/respectable burial dichotomy falters. It is only by recognizing the fluidity of respectability that we can begin to appreciate attitudes towards the disposal of the dead.

#### IV

##### CONCLUSION

Respectability is a notoriously slippery concept, its meaning in perpetual flux in relation to context and perspective. Nonetheless, historical narratives of the respectable burial have overwhelmingly emphasized the public languages of status and consumption: they have focused not on the bereaved, but on public perceptions of the bereaved; they have exaggerated the social jealousies of working-class neighbours at the expense of a considered analysis of grief. Given that notions of the ‘respectable funeral’ are weighted with such baggage, it may be more appropriate to speak of attitudes towards interment in terms of ‘respectful’ burial. Shifting the locus of analysis from a preoccupation with social status towards a concern with loss, it is possible to write a narrative of antipathy to pauper burial which emphasizes the multifaceted concerns of the poor: attitudes which may have drawn upon elements of display, but which prioritized care of

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 Dec. 1912.

<sup>109</sup> BRO, AF 6/40, 19 Jan. 1909. It was in the interests of the undertaker that the bereaved inter the dead in a pauper grave as this meant more money to be spent on coffins, shrouds, hearses and general mourning paraphernalia.

the corpse and the utilization of mourning rites for the articulation of identity and emotion.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 'pauper grave' remains a term loaded with connotations of social exclusion and anonymity.<sup>110</sup> That it has been renamed the 'social fund' grave is, perhaps, indicative of a wish to challenge the images associated with the Victorian and Edwardian terminology of impoverished death. The employment of euphemism in an attempt to rob the pauper grave of its stigma is, however, nothing new. For instance, in 1891 Urmston burial board, near Preston, described its pauper graves as 'fourth class' burial plots while Chorley burial authority preferred the phrase 'unpurchased graves'.<sup>111</sup> A resolution by Bedwellty union in 1912 that 'in the opinion of this board, the time has arrived when the word "pauper" should not be used when speaking of the chargeable poor of this country' similarly indicates a move away from the early Victorian punitive philosophy of poverty.<sup>112</sup> On 5 March 1912, members of Liverpool Select Vestry voted to adopt the Bedwellty ruling, determining to use the phrase 'Person in receipt of parochial relief' in preference to 'pauper' in future. As one guardian noted, the removal of the 'hateful word' from the language of the union signified steps towards 'spar[ing] the feelings of the people who sought their aid'.<sup>113</sup>

Despite such changes, the implications of the pauper grave remained overwhelmingly negative. Cremation propaganda from the early decades of the twentieth century evoked the imagery of the 'paupers' pit' as a means of emphasizing the egalitarianism of the crematorium.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, burial board records through to the 1920s highlight the persistence of applications for exhumation from families who 'were not in a position at the time' or who 'had not the means' to purchase a private grave in the immediate aftermath of death.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, it is possible to locate a persistent culture of active rejection of the pauper grave that still exists today. Again, the parsimony of the pauper grave is thrown into

<sup>110</sup> See, for instance, *Guardian*, 15 Feb. 1999, pp. 6–7.

<sup>111</sup> LRO, UDUr 2/26, 10 July 1891, and MBCh 29/15, Borough of Chorley Regulations, 1913.

<sup>112</sup> LVRO, 353 SEL 1/14.

<sup>113</sup> *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 6 Mar. 1912, in LVRO, 353 SEL 14/5.

<sup>114</sup> See, for instance, *The Cremation Society: Council Report, 1933*, in LVRO, 942 BIC.

<sup>115</sup> BRO, ABCF 15/28, 20 Jan. 1919, and ABCF 15/40, 11 June 1923.

relief when set against a culture where consumer choice is, theoretically, in abundance and higher standards of living mean that fewer people should have to resort to public assistance.<sup>116</sup> The pauper grave was — and is — invested with meaning beyond burial space: it condemned the dead to eternal anonymity and an ignoble funeral. The private grave represented the antithesis of this. The social aspirations of the poor may have found expression in the purchase of a grave, yet the private grave also represented the desire to exercise some control and dignity in life, even if — ironically — this be over the dead.

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<sup>116</sup> Mark Drakeford, 'Last Rights? Funerals, Poverty and Social Exclusion', *Jl Social Policy*, xxvii/4 (1998).