DEATH IN THE LAKE COUNTIES: Changes and Continuities in Rituals Related to Death and Burial in Cumbria, 1830-1990

by

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ABSTRACT

By examining the changes and continuities in rituals related to death and burial in the county of Cumbria, England, for the period 1830 to 1990, this study challenges the theory of a sharp disjuncture between nineteenth and twentieth-century attitudes towards death postulated by Philippe Aries and David Stannard. Although it acknowledges the enormous impact of the complex transformations to which such changes in attitudes have been attributed, particularly the commercialisation of mortuary rituals in the Victorian era, this thesis shows that these were urban trends which did not influence Cumbrian death ways to any large degree, and that the twentieth-century "denial of death" postulated by Aries can be attributed largely to interdependent social, demographic and economic changes which did not impinge on Cumbrian death customs until the mid-twentieth century or later.

The study, which combines oral testimony with documentary sources, begins by describing the social, geographical, and cultural background of the area under scrutiny, emphasising that cultural context has been a decisive factor in the evolution and maintenance of death customs. Chapter one argues that the physical isolation of Cumbria, and the idiosyncrasies of its social development, combined to produce a cultural backwater somewhat out of step with the norms of nineteenth-

century urban society. Chapter two shows that a strong sense of tradition and community solidarity was instrumental in preserving to the present day many family-centred rituals which, it has been claimed, passed into the hands of paid professionals in the Victorian era.

Chapter three highlights most vividly the differences between town and country death customs by demonstrating that the Cumbrian funeral has maintained many of its traditional characteristics for far longer than might be expected in light of developments in urban parts of Britain. In attempting to discern the extent to which the funeral as status symbol became the prevalent ethos in Cumbria in the nineteenth century, this chapter assesses the way in which commercialism, in its stress on the more "fashionable" Victorian funeral, impinged upon local customs. It concludes that although the flamboyant funeral certainly existed, it was not as prominent a feature of provincial death-culture as it seems to have been in the larger towns. Chapter four illustrates the crucial function of the undertaker in reinforcing the traditionalism of Cumbrian death ways, and argues that the rural environment was much less amenable to the development of the undertaking style of the large town or city.

The thesis concludes by emphasising that changes in customs and attitudes pertaining to death cannot be conceptualised in terms of a theory of uniform development throughout the Western world.By providing valuable insights

into the social relationships and community values in a particular region, it shows that local, environmental factors have played a major role in shaping death culture. In Cumbria physical isolation, poor communications, an unusual social structure, and a preponderance of small, face-to-face agricultural communities with a strong sense of tradition, proved to be very effective in challenging the commercialisation which characterised urban funerals of the Victorian era. This thesis thus highlights the value of the small-scale study as an arbiter of general theory, for it raises the possibility that other rural areas may also have retained traditional mortuary rituals for longer than has been supposed. Equally significant, this study stresses that changes and continuities in death customs must always be seen as an indicator of changes and continuities in other aspects of life.

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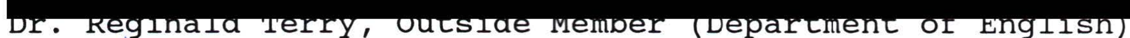

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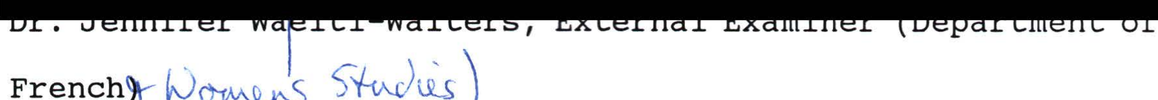

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FOR MY GRANDMOTHER, MINNIE CALLAGHAN, BORN IN 1898, FROM WHOM I HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH OF THE HISTORY OF CUMBRIA, AND WHO HAS LIVED TO SEE HER 'NOT VERY IMPORTANT' MEMORIES WRITTEN DOWN

INTRODUCTION

> ...in all societies...the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences...[1]

Current interest in the subject of death in history is a facet of an ongoing debate on death which has captured the attention of scholars from a wide variety of disciplines since the nineteen sixties. Intrigued by what social anthropologists and sociologists have described as the "taboo" of the twentieth century, cultural historians have endeavoured to probe the origins of the reticence which appears to characterise popular attitudes in contemporary society. The historiographical perspective is valuable not only for the contribution it offers to an understanding of the development of present attitudes, but for its ability to highlight the fact that response to death is typically linked to cultural and structural factors of a more tangible nature. This relationship, and its myriad manifestations, forms the underlying theme of most historical scholarship in this area.

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[1] Richard Huntingdon and Peter Metcalf, Celebrations of Death, (Cambridge, 1979), p.2.

One of the first, and undeniably the most ambitious of the contributions towards an understanding of the history of death in the Western world, is the work of the French historian, Philippe Aries. His study The Hour of Our Death, is essentially an overview of the changing attitudes to death in Western culture for a thousand year period, and it argues that although death's ability to evoke strong emotion has been a constant of human experience, the precise way in which a cultural group has conceived of mortality at any given time has shaped the nature of that society's reaction to it.[2] Broadly speaking, the factors governing this perception include beliefs about an afterlife, incorporating views on the inter-relatedness of the individual as a corporeal entity, the human soul, and the spirit world; and elements more pragmatic than spiritual, in effect the innumerable ways in which factors such as ideology, political interests, social stratification, domestic arrangements, traditions, economic structure and so on, impact upon both the individual and society as a whole.

Most important from a historical perspective, Aries suggests that the elements instrumental in fashioning attitudes to death -- their precise nature and intensity, and the manner in which they have interacted at any given time -- have combined to produce particular views of death for

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[2] Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death, (New York, 1981).

specific eras. Such a theory implies that reactions to death, both private and public, for any given period and/or culture, can best be understood as an integral component of a reciprocal relationship between the enormous power implicit in the death experience itself, and the manner in which civilization chooses to contain it -- an interchange, in essence, dynamic.

The predominant focus of much current work in this field concentrates on the precise nature of this correlation between death, the individual, and culture. Clare Gittings, for example, has described how attitudes towards death in early modern England changed in accordance with an evolving ethos of individualism.[3] She notes the growing importance of the nuclear family from the seventeenth century on, the concomitant breakdown of traditional social networks, changes in attitudes to the body, and a growing desire to separate the living from the dead, and she links these themes to changes in customs surrounding death and burial. David Stannard's analysis of seventeenth and eighteenth-century New Englanders, on the other hand, draws heavily upon anthropological theory, in stressing that the theological doctrine of Puritanism was difficult to reconcile with the realities of Puritan existence. Stannard argues that the intense vulnerability the New Englanders experienced as a result of their physical

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[3] Clare Gittings, Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England, (London, 1984).

isolation, meant that each death was acutely felt, and that their proclivity for funeral ritual underscored a deep anxiety about death.[4]

Not all historical insights into mortality emanate from studies which deal with death per se. In their work on the evolution of familial affection, Lawrence Stone and Edward Shorter have tried to show how changing mortality rates and physical changes in living arrangements precipitated a consequent shift in emphasis from funerary ritual as a community response rooted in fear and awe, to a more personalised expression of intense grief. [5] In short, as family bonding became stronger, death became more threatening.

A feature of many of the works which deal with attitudes to death in history has been their emphasis on the symbolic significance of ritual as an aid to understanding human response at a deeper level. In this regard, the efficacy of funerary practises to articulate the nature and extent of religious belief has been widely recognised by historians. It is perhaps symptomatic of a rather restricted cultural view, though, that the term "funerary ritual" automatically elicits images of the prescribed ceremonies of the established church.

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[4] David Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death, (Oxford, New York, 1977).

[5] Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800, (London, 1977). Edward Shorter, The Making of the Modern Family, (New York, 1975).

It is an underlying premise of the present study that funerary customs are not necessarily rooted in, nor indeed sustained by, theological doctrine, and further, that social rather than ecclesiastical forces have often been instrumental in maintaining specific practices, while causing the decline of others.

As much historical scholarship in the field has made clear, in addition to revealing common spiritual beliefs, prevalent theological precepts and the nature of human response to intense emotional trauma, funerary practises often afford useful insights into elements in the broader cultural landscape, elements which may have little apparent connection with religion -- or even death. Writers such as Lawrence Stone, Olivia Bland, Anthony Wagner, and Paul Fritz, for example, in documenting royal and aristocratic funerals, have suggested that the ostentatious displays of the powerful owe more to the necessity of putting on an impressive demonstration of enduring political strength than to any spiritual or psychological considerations.[6] Others have argued that the flamboyant Victorian funeral falls into a similar category, in that it was largely an attempt to affirm

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[6] Lawrence Stone, The Crisis of the Aristocracy, (Oxford, 1965), Olivia Bland, The Royal Way of Death, (London, 1968), Anthony Wagner, Heralds of England, (London, 1967), and Paul S. Fritz,"From 'Public' to 'Private': The Royal Funerals in England, 1500-1830", in Joachim Whaley, ed., Mirrors of Mortality, (London, 1981), pp.61-80.

social standing. David Cannadine has labelled it a tasteless piece of theatrics engineered to enhance the social position of those it simultaneously robbed, orchestrated by an undertaking profession whose only goal was monetary gain.[7] His views are supported by, among others, John Morley, Nicholas Penny, and Ruth Richardson.[8]

Adding a new dimension to the discussion of the social uses of ritual, Richardson describes how the introduction of the Anatomy Act in England in 1832, by sanctioning the dissection of pauper bodies, precipitated an increasing desire for a "respectable funeral", and in effect gave impetus to the expansion of the undertaking business. In order to satisfy the medical profession's increasing demand for bodies for dissection, and at the same time to put an end to the lucrative trade in corpses, the Act committed the bodies of the poorest workhouse inmates to dissection. In consequence, the socially mobile middle classes, desperate to publicly distance themselves from pauperism, used mortuary ritual as a convenient vehicle for displaying social standing. The fashionable middle-class funeral with its expensive material

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7 David Cannadine, "War and Death in Modern Britain", in Joachim Whaley, ed., Mirrors of Mortality, (London, 1981), pp. 187-243.

8 John Morley, Death, Heaven and the Victorians, (London,1971), Nicholas Penny, Mourning, (London,1981), and Ruth Richardson, Death,Dissection and the Destitute, (London and New York, 1987).

trappings henceforth set the standard for the day. But in so doing it " ...presaged a shift of meaning from the funerals the antiquaries witnessed and recorded. It represented an invasion of commerce into the rite of passage; the substitution of cash for affective and older, more traditional social relations." [9] In highlighting the fervent emotional response to an act of parliament which effectively violated popular beliefs, Richardson emphasizes the complex nature of the interdependence of mortuary ritual, social structure, social relations, the state, and commercial enterprise.

Taking issue with this emphasis on ritual's material function, other writers have stressed its therapeutic benefits. Pat Jalland and James Stevens Curl have claimed that although the twentieth-century gaze might view the Victorian excesses as oppressive and shallow, they were in fact in tune with the emotional climate of the day, and they played an important part in assuaging the grief of the bereaved. Such scholars argue forcefully in favour of the Victorian "celebration" of death as both necessary and beneficial, a corollary to the closely bonded Victorian family, and altogether preferable to what has been described as the "denial" of death characteristic of twentieth-century society.[10]

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[9] Richardson, p.4.

[10] Pat Jalland, "Death, Grief, and Mourning in the Upper-Class Family, 1860-1914," in Ralph Houlbrooke, ed., Death, Ritual and

It is this image of discontinuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- the glaring contrast between the stark prominence of death on the one hand and embarrassed silence on the subject on the other -- which provides the focal point for some theoretical dissent. Supporting and enlarging upon the Aries thesis, David Stannard has explained this perceived shift in attitude in terms of the western world's march toward modernity. He notes the rapid social, economic and cultural developments of nineteenth-century America, and claims that the "socially alienating forces of modernism" resulted in a change in what he calls the "meaning" of death.[11]

In more traditional societies, such as the provincial and folk cultures of America and Mexico, death called forth familiar and trusted coping strategies which involved the entire community. Although it represented a major intrusion into the social fabric, and was much feared "... [death's] meaning remained clear both for the individual anticipating death and for those who would survive..." [12] In cultures where society was becoming less "cohesive", however, death had less impact at a collective level and new practises were of

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Bereavement, (London, 1989); and James Stevens Curl, The Victorian Celebration of Death, (London, 1972).

[11] David Stannard, ed., Death in America, Introduction, pp.xiii-xiv.

[12] Ibid.

necessity manufactured to help the individual family to cope with a situation which was all the more threatening because of the weakening of community support structures.

Throughout the nineteenth century, a growing sentimentality and the increasing anonymity of life, led to the idealisation of death, particularly by the middle classes; it was afforded a "deeper, richer meaning". But it was an attitude which could not be sustained under the steady gains of secularisation, and ultimately, by the twentieth century "...avoidance and denial on the one hand and commercial exploitation on the other, seem to have been the inevitable result." [13]

The dating of this change in attitude towards death concurs with more general theories of the demise of folk culture. Weber's contention that traditional structures in France were almost universally eradicated in a process of cultural integration which swept the nation between 1870-1910, is anchored in a premise that the functional nature of many rituals rendered them obsolete in the light of changing material conditions during the latter part of the nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.[14] Yet this claim must be reassessed in the light of a recent study by Ellen Badone.[15]

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[13] Ibid., p.xiv.

[14] Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen, (Stanford,1976).

[15] Ellen Badone, The Appointed Hour, (London, 1989).

Agreeing with the Aries/Stannard theory in principle, Badone has challenged the time-frame they postulate. While acknowledging that death responses are contingent upon a variety of interconnected cultural and social factors, rather than subscribing to a theory of sharp disjuncture between the past and present centuries, Badone claims that changing responses to death have not evolved at the same rate for all "modern" societies. Her study of twentieth-century Brittany demonstrates that the widely-documented "denial" of death -- the origins of which Aries and Stannard have located in the massive structural changes which were already well underway by the turn of the twentieth century -- has occurred in a much more piecemeal fashion than their evolutionary model would have us believe.

Badone's challenge to the Aries thesis rests on her stress on context over time-period, a bias which underestimates the potency of the dynamic relationship between the two, and may well reflect her anthropological perspective. The whole gamut of transformations which she holds to be crucial to the reshaping of cultural response to death, are symptomatic of a process of social maturation common to all western societies. There can be no doubt that the relationships Aries has described symbolise a process at work, insofar as the marginalisation of death -- and terminal illness -- effected largely by its removal from the family sphere into the realm of paid professionals, has followed

similar stages of development for many different areas. Thus, the historical context is inextricably interwoven with the cultural.

Yet Badone's contention that nineteenth-century developments should not be understood as having equal validity for all localities is sound, and gains credibility in the light of two recent studies. David Clark and Elizabeth Roberts have noted the stubborn persistence, until within living memory, of many older attitudes and behaviours related to death and burial.[16] Clark's findings for the village of Staithes, in the north east of England, and Roberts' for Lancashire, challenge theories presently held by many historians, sociologists, and social anthropologists, concerning the speed and the manner in which the current "taboo" of death has evolved.

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The underlying premise of this thesis is that death ritual, notwithstanding its timeless value as a codified response to death with potential for alleviating intense psychological distress, and its equal importance as a window on religious beliefs, frequently makes a powerful statement about the social milieu in which it is located. More specifically, it argues against theories which assume a

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[16] David Clark, Between Pulpit and Pew, (Cambridge, 1982), and Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death', in Ralph Houlbrooke, ed., Death, Ritual and Bereavement, (London, 1989).

uniform development of attitudes towards death for the past hundred and sixty years. Although it acknowledges the enormous impact of broad social and structural changes, especially the intrusion of commerce into popular death-culture in the Victorian era, it shows that general trends with regard to death response must not be understood as being equally valid for all geographical and cultural environments.

Whereas most research in the area of death ritual has tended to document large-scale trends, and has focused -- certainly in relation to the nineteenth century -- on the urban environment, the locus of the present study is a rural area which, for most of its history, has remained somewhat aloof from mainstream influences. In setting out to describe and analyze continuity and change in mortuary customs in the county of Cumbria for the past hundred and sixty years, this micro-study, paralleling the work of Badone and Clark, to some degree offers a gauge by which the validity of more general theories based on developments in more cosmopolitan regions can be measured. It produces evidence which indicates very clearly that some of the processes which were set in motion during the previous century -- notably the abandonment of older, more traditional practises and beliefs contingent upon the commercialisation of the funeral industry nationally -- have had only a minimal impact upon the communities inhabiting this particular geographical area.

The study begins by describing the social, geographical, and cultural background of the area under scrutiny, on the assumption that only a thorough knowledge of the cultural context can facilitate a comprehensive appreciation of the nuances of the specific behaviours which will later be analyzed. Chapter one argues that the physical isolation of Cumbria, and the comparative idiosyncrasies of its social development, combined to produce a cultural backwater somewhat out of step with the norms of more sophisticated nineteenth-century society. Chapter two provides a chronology of customs related to death and dying, some of which seem to have a long history, and reveals extensive evidence that many nineteenth-century rituals endured well into the present century, apparently surviving the Victorian "invasion of commerce".

Chapter three augments this thesis by demonstrating that the Cumbrian funeral itself has maintained many of its traditional characteristics for far longer than might be expected in light of developments in urban parts of Britian. In attempting to discern the degree to which the funeral as status symbol became the prevalent ethos in Cumbria, this chapter assesses the way in which commercialism, in its stress upon the more "fashionable" Victorian trends, impinged upon local customs, and concludes that although the flamboyant

Victorian funeral certainly existed, it was not as prominent a feature of provincial death-culture as it seems to have been in the larger towns. Chapter four shows how continuities in death-bed and funeral rituals paralleled -- and were reinforced by -- traditionalism in undertaking. It illustrates the fact that the country undertaker has continued to provide a valued personal service, his reputation unsullied by the critical calls for reform which reverberated with such intensity from areas where the ethos of commercialism had much earlier begun to intrude into the relationship between craftsman and customer.

This thesis not only shows that the Victorian "revolution" in funeral rituals had only a minimal impact in Cumbria, it poses a more profound challenge to general theories of the evolution of mortuary customs. Despite its preoccupation with a specific geographical area, this study readily accepts the possibility that continuity in funeral customs may well have been characteristic of other regions where environmental factors also worked to retard modernising influences. The town/country dichotomy which emerges in this study raises some important questions about the relationship between the urban and the rural environments in this regard. It suggests that if varying degrees of congruity in mortuary customs can be shown to be commonplace in rural England for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then the

"Victorian celebration of death" currently regarded as having a major influence on "...all classes of the nation" must be understood as having a lesser impact than historians have so far cared to admit.[17]

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[17] Stevens Curl, p.21.

CHAPTER ONE

CUMBRIA AND ITS PEOPLE: PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY, SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

> The relative isolation of the small communities, and their rusticity....meant that in speech, ideas and social institutions the inhabitants were slow to change.[1]

The aims of this chapter are threefold. By examining physical geography, demographic development, and economic factors, the following discussion will explain how these influences combined to produce a society which displayed a staunch adherence to traditional behaviours in many aspects of daily living. Further, it will postulate that the nuances of social, economic and cultural development, which, over time, fostered a rather old-fashioned attitude to life, likewise encouraged a similar attitude toward death. In so doing this chapter suggests that the crucial issue here is not so much Cumbria's apparent "uniqueness" -- all micro-studies are in some sense distinctive -- but rather, that the cultural landscape described here differs from contexts which have more commonly been investigated. By weaving together salient elements of a seemingly disparate nature, this chapter emphasizes, by practical example, that only by meticulous

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[1] Bouch and Jones, A Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties 1500-1830, (Manchester, 1961), p.22.

probing into a variety of areas can a theory of regional diversity rise to challenge observations based on over-arching, "general" trends. The significance of the small-scale study in relation to the larger historical picture should not be underestimated, for the traditionalism so prevalent in Cumbria, may well have endured elsewhere.

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The history of the changing character of death-related rituals in England has been predominantly based on studies analyzing practises in the urban setting. Such examinations have tended to make general statements about broad trends implying that these developments should be understood as having equal validity for all parts of the country. The ostentation of the nineteenth-century funeral with its retinue of smart mourning coaches, plumed horses, and meticulously attired attendants, is certainly the image which springs to mind when one thinks of the Victorian attitude toward death and burial. Conversely, the widescale abandonment of death-related rituals in the present century has been lamented by sociologists, social anthropologists and historians alike. Yet regional variation has always been a prominent feature of British culture, past and present, and it would be as erroneous to assume a uniformity in the evolution of funeral customs as it would be to infer a homogeneity in other aspects of cultural development.

The geographical focus of the study which follows is an area of England which has been somewhat neglected by professional historians, although antiquaries and folklorists have been tireless in their efforts to celebrate its "unique qualities". Some indication of the appeal which this part of England had for the folklorists of the last century can be gained from a perusal of the wealth of literature presently available on local tradition.[2] Numerous volumes on Lake District lore reveal an enthusiasm for unearthing the quaint and idiosyncratic in both behaviour and speech, and such zeal seems to be rooted in a widespread belief that the lifestyle of this particular area has been as slow to change as the language which articulated it. Whereas it is tempting to dismiss such a view as sentimental idealism, the validity of the claims of local historians would seem to be endorsed, to a large degree, by the few historical works which have

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2 See, for example, J. Sullivan, Cumberland and Westmorland Ancient and Modern, the People, Dialect, Superstitions and Customs, (London and Kendal, 1857); J. Britton and E.W. Brayely, The Beauties of England and Wales, (London, 1802); S.H. Scott, A Westmorland Village, (London, 1904); John Russell Smith, ed., Westmoreland and Cumberland Dialects,(London, 1839); Robert Emblin, A History of Cumbria, (Clapham,1973); Marjorie Rowlings, The Folklore of the Lake District, (London, 1976); Gerald Findler, Folk Lore of the Lake Counties, (Clapham, 1968); W. Rollinson, Life and Tradition in the Lake District, (London, 1974).

undertaken more rigorous investigations. [3]

Such scholarship indicates that nineteenth-century Cumbria did indeed present a cultural climate at variance with the social milieu of the more cosmopolitan England with which most historians have been concerned. An area predominantly rural, relatively isolated and insular, it provides a stark contrast to those more populous and accessible regions which, until now, have secured and sustained the attention of historians of death and its rituals. This somewhat anachronistic cultural climate would seem to be ripe for analysis, and it is the purpose of this study to examine Cumbrian rituals relating to death and burial, in order that some correlations may be made with more general trends. Before the applicability of current hypotheses can be assessed however, it is first necessary to examine the historical development of this particular area at a more general level.

An underlying premise of this study is that the broader cultural context has interacted with death-culture in a number of important ways and on various levels, and thus it becomes imperative to understand more precisely what that cultural context -- in relation to Cumbria -- actually encompasses. The following overview of Cumbrian history and geography

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[3] See J.D. Marshall and John K. Walton, The Lake Counties from 1830 to the mid-twentieth century, (Manchester, 1981); J. D. Marshall, Old Lakeland, (Newton Abbot, 1971); C.M.L. Bouch and G. P. Jones A Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties 1500-1830, (Manchester, 1961).

attempts to describe and explain the evolution of this particular cultural landscape, and is a necessary prerequisite to a discussion of the manner in which environmental conditions fashioned social attitudes generally, and impinged upon death-rituals specifically.

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The county of Cumbria lies in the north-west of England (see Figs. 1 and 2). Until the national reorganisation of county boundaries in 1974 the area actually comprised four discrete administrative districts: the old counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, the Furness district of Lancashire, and a small area lying within the jurisdiction of the county of Yorkshire. Bounded on the north by the Solway Firth and Northumberland, on the west and south-west by the Irish Sea, and severed from the rest of the country to the east by the mountainous "backbone" of England, the Pennine Chain, its central core comprises a geographically distinct region of high, windswept uplands, and sparsely populated, pastoral valleys collectively known as the English Lake District.

The relative harshness of the Cumbrian landscape proved, until as late as the eighteenth century, a powerful deterrent to immigration, and an impediment to communication and transportation in general. Irvine Hunt writes that:

> Little more than two hundred years ago the Lake District lay remote and isolated, a mountainous corner of England difficult to traverse with rough roads and dales rarely penetrated by wheeled vehicles ...[4]

Crayston Webster, in 1868, informed his readers that:

> Till within a comparatively recent period there were no carriage-roads, and all the traffic of the county was carried on by pack-horses.[5]

Not only was travelling difficult, it was often fraught with dangers. For several hundreds of years south Cumbria's most commonly utilized means of access to the outside world was a treacherous way which negotiated the shifting sands and perilous tides of Morecambe Bay, a route which claimed a great many lives annually and discouraged all but the most adventurous or determined travellers.

If the difficulties of transportation and communication isolated Cumbria from the rest of England, the quality of the terrain it offered for human habitation was equally unpromising;[6] Cumbria encompasses some of the highest and most desolate land in England. Until the late eighteenth century, its inhospitable topography proved a serious deterrent to settlement on a large scale, and nurtured,

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4 Irvine Hunt, Old Lakeland Transport, (Rusland, 1978), Introduction.

5 Crayston Webster, "On the Farming in Westmorland", in Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, xix 1868, Vol IV, second series, p. 8.

6 Although, by the 1770s several turnpike roads had been established, access into the central and western valleys was still difficult.

instead, a sparse population of poor farmers whose simple wants made small demands upon an environment which had little to offer in material terms. But bleak as they were, the Cumbrian hills and dales came to sustain a society, which, closely bound by the precariousness of its very existence, inscribed on the Cumbrian landscape a way of life well suited to the severity of its natural habitat.

Agriculture, for several centuries, formed the mainstay of the Cumbrian way of life. Yet it was only in the seventeenth century that conditions became sufficiently stable to allow for the beginnings of a viable agrarian economy. The settlement of border disputes with Scotland saw the growth of scattered villages and the emergence of what would become the dominant social group of rural Cumbria, the "statesmen" or yeomen farming families. Largely tenant farmers operating at subsistence level, their hallmark became a distinctive blend of frugality, industry, and traditionalism.

In agricultural techniques, as in other aspects of their lives, farmers seem to have been fairly unsophisticated. Visitors to the area commented on the farmer's rough demeanour, his austerity and "quaint" habits. The proliferation of clog-wheeled carts, the use of sonks of green sods instead of saddles, and horse-collars made from hay and straw -- all of which continued to be used long after they

became obsolete in other areas -- also drew their attention. Progress was hampered not only by a lack of capital, but by a strong adherence to the familiar. Whether this tenacity was due to deliberate preference for old ways, or sprang from sheer ignorance is not clear. Bouch and Jones claimed the farmers "...rarely travelled to any distance and had few opportunities to see new practises or read about them...," [7] whereas Marshall sees it as perhaps one facet of a very traditional attitude to life in general. [8] Regardless of whether one interprets this tenacity as a sign of backwardness, or a pride in one's cultural heritage, there can be no doubt that Cumbria's physical remoteness and the difficulties of access, were of major importance in fostering such attitudes.

If poverty, sparseness of population, and poor communications reduced the potency of outside influences, the fact that the gentry class was under-represented may also have acted to impede the flow of ideas from further afield. The Lake Counties have been described as the "...least gentrified in England, with only a thin scattering of substantial estates and greater gentry..."[9] In 1500 the landowning class,

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[7] Bouch and Jones, p. 219.

[8] Marshall, p.46.

[9] J. D. Marshall and C. A. Dyhouse, 'Social Transition in Kendal and Westmorland', in Northern History, Vol. XII, 1976, pp.127-157, p. 131.

including wives and children, had amounted to no more than one per cent of the population.[10] Nor were things significantly different three hundred years later. Describing the Cumbrian populace of the Stuart and Georgian periods, J. D. Marshall has stated that:

> This was a society....which probably rarely saw a gentleman or a noble man for more than a few minutes or hours in the year.[11]

Not surprisingly:

> ...Recruitment to the Commission of the Peace, the magistracy, [and] finding suitable officer material for the militia, was a difficult and chancy business.[12]

In fact, the more affluent classes seem to have been conspicuous only by their absence: the larger landowners spent a great deal of time outside of the area, and showed little interest in providing either moral, technological, intellectual or financial initiative.

As a consequence, agricultural practises tended to be labour-intensive, and at its peak in 1851, 26.5 per cent of the combined employed labour force of Cumberland and

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[10] Bouch and Jones, p.23.

[11] J. D. Marshall, "Rural Society Before the Victorians", in ed., O. M. Westall, Windermere in the Nineteenth Century, Occasional Paper #1, Centre for North West Regional Studies, Lancaster University, 1976, p.7.

[12] Ibid.

Westmorland was agrarian. In fact, no other part of the country placed such a high priority on farming; for example in 1891, when the number of people thus employed for England as a whole was 61 persons per thousand, Westmorland could boast the largest proportion of agricultural workers of any English county with 143 per thousand, and Cumberland was also above average with 93.[13] Although agriculture was by no means the only type of employment in Cumbria, it provided the single most important means of livelihood in the region between 1830 and 1950. [14]

The coming of the railway heralded the first fundamental shift in the economic and demographic fabric of Cumbria. The period 1851-81 not only saw the development of heavy industry and an acceleration of trends toward urbanisation on the west coast, it witnessed major changes in population patterns as large numbers of unemployed agricultural workers moved out, and itinerant industrial workers and members of the urban middle classes moved in.

In contrast to the numbers in agriculture, the number of Cumbrians involved in industry prior to the middle of the nineteenth century had been the lowest in England. Until the 1840s, the local industries tended to be small-scale and scattered. Carlisle and Kendal boasted weaving trades, as

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[13] Marshall and Walton, p. 22.

[14] Ibid., p.22.

well as tanning and leather works. Basketmaking, small-scale quarrying and mining, sawmilling, the manufacture of silk, flax and wool, gunpowder, and later the manufacture of bobbins for the Lancashire mills, were all industries which thrived in a quiet way, some in very remote locations.

Not only was Cumbria's industrial revolution late in arriving, its impact was short-lived and regional. Although significant changes occurred in demographic patterns, these were more a result of improved communications than due to the establishment of a sound industrial economic base. Coal and iron ore mining, an evanescent steel industry, and the establishment of shipbuilding at Barrow-in-Furness all prospered from improved communications, most only briefly; and after 1880 a growing gulf was marked between the industrialised coastal area and the rest of the region. The social dimension of this growing economic disparity was accentuated by the immigration of workers into west Cumberland and Furness from such places as the Midlands, Scotland, Ireland and Cornwall and the growth of a small, though not particularly affluent, urban middle class.

Improved communications with the outside world had other, more long-term effects in other parts of Cumbria. Although the mid-nineteenth century saw only a slow rate of population increase throughout Cumbria generally, (in fact, the population of Cumbria has increased at only half the rate of England and Wales since 1801), the area immediately around

Lake Windermere saw rapid growth.[15] Drawn to the Lake District in search of the more tranquil lifestyle promised by the Romantics, members of a displaced middle class from the mill towns of south Lancashire created, in rustic surroundings, an enclave of genteel society. Large country villas suddenly mushroomed and, in 1885, one sixth of the inhabitants of the village of Bowness were affluent "offcomers". [16] By mid-century the south eastern part of Westmorland had become a "fashionable" place in which to live, not only for wealthy immigrants but for the locally-grown middle class, notably the businessmen of Kendal.

Easier transportation also facilitated large-scale and far-reaching trends in agriculture. After 1860, the increasing use of intensive methods, a greater emphasis on pastoral farming, and general consolidation of agricultural properties stimulated the widespread movement of labourers and dispossessed farmers out of the area entirely.[17] In 1891, 100, 000 people of Cumbrian extraction were living beyond its boundaries. This constant outward movement in part explains the low population density. In 1891, when the national mean density of population was 497 persons to the square mile, the

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[15] Marshall and Walton, p. 223.

[16] Ibid. p.182.

[17] Women went to the Lancashire textile towns, men to the mining industries in the N.E., and both men and women went to Liverpool.

figure for Westmorland was a mere 81. [18]

But probably the major impact of the railway came as a response to the needs of an increasingly urbanised English population's craving to escape, temporarily at least, from the oppressive environment which massive industrialisation had brought in its wake. Although the "leisured classes" had been fortunate enough to be able to take the air in the Lake District since the late eighteenth century, the growth of tourism on a wide scale was contingent upon the completion of the Windermere railway in 1847. Improved transportation suddenly made this remote and unspoiled area a feasible destination for thousands of day trippers from industrial south Lancashire, and thus was born what has become, since 1950, Cumbria's second major industry.

Until the widespread use of the motor car, Windermere remained the centre of the tourist trade, but since the middle of this century the entire area, even its most isolated cracks and crevices, have become temporary destinations for holidaymakers from all parts of Great Britain, Europe and North America. Cumbria, so long disdaining intrusion, has opened its doors to the world.

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18 Marshall and Walton, p.18.

In terms of its development over the past three hundred years, Cumbria has in many respects followed a course at variance with many other English counties. The economic dominance of a backward-looking agriculture remained unchallenged until relatively late, and because of the constant erosion of entrepreneurial skills and capital contingent upon steady outward migration of the indigenous population, most commercial and industrial enterprises were shortlived. Apart from itinerant miners, few were attracted into the area, and those seeking lavish lifestyles were in short supply. There was little in the way of local expertise, and in terms of large-scale investment, the larger landowners, like the yeomanry, showed a reluctance to commit themselves morally or financially, to the unfamiliar.[19]

The late arrival of industry, and its failure to exercise a major impact on the economy as a whole, meant that social structures were slow to change, although change most certainly did occur. In Westmorland, the slow evolution of an indigenous town-based merchant class was supplemented in the nineteenth century by the integration of an immigrant mercantile elite, leading to the formation of small pockets of displaced urban-dwellers who introduced a more sophisticated urban culture to one still overwhelmingly rural. In West Cumberland the growth of industrial towns and a consequent

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[19] It should be noted that the Duke of Devonshire, a major landowner, was an exception in that he invested heavily in shipbuilding and heavy engineering.

influx of semi-skilled industrial workers, created the beginnings of a working-class consciousness and a social structure more typical of the large industrial city. Nevertheless, class differences in the urban areas were somewhat muted by the fact that few members of the middle classes became either wealthy or powerful, and the class numerically remained rather small.

Despite the steady infiltration of "offcomers" over the last hundred and fifty years Cumbria remained, throughout the nineteenth and far into the twentieth century, an area largely cut off from the mainstream of development. It remains predominantly a region of small market towns, scattered villages, and isolated farmsteads. Although rural culture has been suffering the effects of dilution due to constant outward migration of local people, and is now under threat from the unprecedented growth of tourism, over the bulk of this century old ways have only gradually given way to the new, for the customs of the country are deeply embedded in physical realities which themselves have been slow to change.

It is only within the last thirty years, for example, that "...the physical isolation of the village ceased to be the dominant influence on village life."[20] Well into the twentieth century farmers and villagers would only travel into town once a week, on market day, for in general:

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[20] Emblin, p. 63.

> ...lack of transport kept people at home: it limited, equally the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the fertilizers they put on the land and what they fed to the stock.[21]

In the village of Murton-cum-Hutton, some houses were still without piped water and electricity as late as 1961. In another village, within living memory:

> ...the houses were lighted by lamps, hurricane lamps had to be used outside, water had to be got from the pump - and it was an old fashioned, village-green type of pump, too ... [22]

Villages were traditionally self-sufficient, providing to a very large degree for their own needs and those of the outlying farms, and relying upon knowledge, skills and institutions which had evolved over long periods of time in response to the exigencies of life in an often difficult environment. This village-based culture preserved, intact, a number of its customs until within living memory, and some up to the present day, in fact:

> ...there are those alive today who remember...when peats were 'graved' for fuel and bracken was sledged down the fellsides on wooden sleds, when butter and cheese were made in farmhouse dairies and when haver bread was baked on a girdle [sic] over farmhouse fires. Although sadly reduced in numbers, there are still Lakeland craftsmen who know the art of building a drystone wall, who can fashion a swill basket, construct a cartwheel, or

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[21] CRO(K)/WDY/39.

[22] Ibid.

> 'rive' a 'clog' of greenstone into wafer-thin slates. Fell farmers continue to rely as much on traditional weather signs and portents as on the Meteorological Office forecasts, and there are still dalesfolk who prefer to trust the well-tried folk medicine and hedgerow cures of their grandparents rather than the pharmaceutical preparations of the twentieth century.[23]

Clearly, Cumbria is a region where social and physical forces have worked to retard innovation in a variety of different areas. The provincialism which has been a marked feature of its general character, shaping behaviours and fashioning attitudes to life, has also had a marked effect on customs and attitudes to death. A relatively small gentry class, a modest sprinkling of not-very-influential urban middle classes, and the tenacity of strong traditions embedded in a culture sustained by an overwhelmingly agrarian lifestyle, meant that not only did the sophisticated funeral of the Victorian city fail to take hold to any great degree in this area, but that older, familiar, family and community-based behaviours relating to death continued to be practised here until remarkably recently. This is an area, for example, where some elderly women still hand-sew their own burial gowns, where clean white sheets for the death-bed are

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[23] William Rollinson, Life and Tradition in the Lake District, (London, 1974), Introduction.

carefully put away in advance, where the neighbourhood "layer-out" could still be found attending to corpse preparation as late as 1970, and where the vast majority of families, commonly keeping their newly-dead at home until the nineteen sixties, still regard the undertaker's "chapel of rest" as a very recent -- and not always welcome -- innovation.

CHAPTER TWO

CUMBRIAN RITUALS RELATED TO DEATH AND DYING

> Yet such broad brush strokes fail to come to grips with concrete situations and...frequently neglect heterogeneous elements existing in specific social settings.[1]

As we have seen, physical isolation, difficulties of transportation and communication, and an atypical social structure, combined to produce in Cumbria a culture characterised by a slow rate of overall change. It was a region where, throughout the nineteenth century, the village and the small market town remained the locus of social interaction and the mediator of local custom. A way of life nurtured by an archaic provincialism manifested itself in a variety of forms: from the continuance of traditional, agriculturally-based crafts, to the tenacity of out-moded ways of cooking, obtaining water, and lighting and heating the home, for example. As this chapter will demonstrate, it also revealed itself in ways perhaps less obvious -- in its preservation of old community-based customs connected with death and dying.

The following discussion, which offers a descriptive chronology of changes and continuities in Cumbrian mortuary rituals, documents behaviours which are characterised by their

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[1] Clark, p.127.

emphasis on active involvement of the family and community in a direct and immediate way. Close examination suggests that they are rooted in attitudes which Aries has linked to the "tame death": a quiet resignation on the part of the dying, complemented by the readiness of family and community to participate in most of the major aspects of post-mortem care. Aries has claimed that such family-centred rituals and the attitudes they embodied are typical of a very old way of death which had largely disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century. Aries' theory concurs with a general view that the Victorian era was the age which saw the spirit of free enterprise begin to encroach, in a decisive way, upon family and community-based rituals of long standing. Mass-production of burial clothing, for example, and the overseeing of various aspects of post-mortem care by the undertaker and his assistants, worked (so it has been claimed) to erode older practices. And as the professional undertaker increased his influence, and his profits, by commercialising observances rooted in popular culture, mourners became passive onlookers in a process which had once necessitated active participation.

The evidence produced in the following chapter, however, argues that these latter trends were not apparent to any large degree in nineteenth-century Cumbria, and that older ways prevailed until considerably later. The chapter describes ritual behaviours directly connected with death itself, and

also examines customs commonly carried out during the short span of time preceding interment. It is subdivided into two components: initially the analysis deals with rituals common in the early part of the twentieth century, and it reveals a marked degree of congruity with death practises of the nineteenth; it then turns to the mid-twentieth century, and suggests that the modification or abandonment of such rituals can be attributed to the major structural changes which only began to make themselves felt in Cumbria about forty years ago.

The customs considered here include practises which were undertaken individually: the making of a shroud, and attentions paid to the death-bed, for example; rituals which called forth family and community participation, including "laying-out" the corpse, and viewing the body; and methods of communicating the news of death to the neighbourhood: specifically the tolling of the passing-bell and the drawing of the blinds.

In pointing out that these customs were widely practised until about forty years ago, and that some are still extant, this chapter argues against the theory of a sharp disjuncture between nineteenth and twentieth-century death rituals put forward by Aries and Stannard. As it will show, rather than abandoning folk rituals and thereafter delegating responsibility to outside agencies, families in this area

continued to cope with death in ways which necessitated the active participation of family and community.

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Many of the Cumbrian customs historically associated with death and dying bear a strong resemblance to those once commonly practised in other parts of Britain, and current historians of British death-culture are indebted to the assiduity of an army of antiquaries, folklorists and early historians whose diligence in recording them has provided such a rich source of information for the nation as a whole.[2] Most mortuary customs cannot be dated with precision, yet numerous behaviours have been documented since at least the early eighteenth century, and in relation to other aspects of culture, Richardson has claimed that death rituals have been particularly "robust." [3]

Although richly informative, many works undertaken by early scholars are marred by cultural and class biases. A tendency to regard death rituals as quaint relics from a mystical past -- "mere superstitions" -- has diverted

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[2] See, for example, Thomas Dyer, English Folk-lore, (London, 1878); F. Moss, Folklore, (Didsbury, 1898); Christina Hole, Folklore (London, 1940).

[3] Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection, p.6; p.29.

attention away from the utilitarian nature which many rites manifestly possess. For not all death-related behaviours derive from beliefs purely and simply; many such customs often originated in response to the exigencies of the physical world. This point has been underscored by historians who have noted that a substantial number of folk ways of various kinds continued to survive for as long as material conditions rendered them functional.[4] It is the precise moment at which material conditions outgrew their related rituals which has been the focus of theoretical dissent. As the following discussion will show, not only did Cumbrian customs related to death and dying bear a very strong relationship to a broader cultural environment, that wider environment remained largely intact until remarkably recently.

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For most of recorded history, death has usually taken place at home. It was an event for which an individual would often make advance preparations, and this is particularly striking in the case of women. The details pertaining to personal appearance in death, and the aesthetics of the death-bed, seem to have played a prominent role in the arrangements made by the person about to die. Burial gowns were frequently made many years in advance, for example. Although the mass-production of shrouds has been a noted feature of the

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[4] Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen, (Stanford,1976), p.475; and J.D. Marshall and J. Walton, p.163.

commercialisation which took place in the nineteenth century,[5] recent scholarship indicates that in some places burial attire continued to be the personal responsibility of the individual throughout the nineteenth and well into the present century.[6] Poor women, for example, often took their hand-sewn shrouds and white burial stockings with them into the workhouse. [7] Likewise, many women in Cumbria continued to prepare for their ultimate demise until within living memory. Alice and Laura recall the nineteen thirties:

> ...they generally had that sort of thing ready, they always had their burial gown in a drawer somewhere... and they wouldn't wear it before.[8]

> And they had to wear a white nightdress and a pair of white stockings. There was a lady lived just above us and she lived alone and they found her dead behind the bedroom door, and she always used to have her stuff ready and she used to tell my mother where her things were, her nightdress and everything.[9]

The fact that such preparations have belonged exclusively to the world of women is substantiated by this rural undertaker:

> The old people used to knit bed-socks for when they passed away, and they might make a gown with their own crochet-work and embroidery, and bonnets, and all sorts of things...I've never known it for men.

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[5] Morley, p.31.

[6] Richardson, Death, Dissection,etc., p.21.

[7] Puckle, p.39.

[8] Int. # 4. Mrs. Taylor, Underbarrow, October, 1990.

[9] Int. # 8. Laura, Kendal, October, 1990.

> Ladies certainly seem to have given it a lot more thought. [10]

It has been claimed that death was regarded in such a matter-of-fact manner that in the north of England in the last century, shrouds "were sometimes included in the wedding trousseau".[11] This is borne out by the following testimony. Mrs. Sly's grandmother not only gave the matter a lot of thought, she actually seemed to relish the prospect of her forthcoming death:

> I can remember that for years she talked about it, I mean she almost talked with glee about her funeral and how she wanted everything done, and she had a great big garment, a shroud, it was like a very posh nightie in some sort of marvellous material with all the lace she had made herself and everything, and she used to show me this thing and it used to horrify me because I was only a kid then. I used to think,'How awful, I'm going to have to see her shroud if I go around there to see her.' But she almost took a delight in talking about it, and every detail,'Now I must be laid out in this,' you know. She had a vision of herself laying there looking so nice. She was married in the 1890's and she used to hand make lace, and she had her entire table linen, bed linen, and so on, and they lasted her entire married life and I suppose the shroud fitted in with this. It was all part of the same outfit, you were kitted out for life, and death at the same time.[12]

Arrangements for death also included the provision of clean bed-sheets. This, too, was often attended to in advance

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[10] Int. # 25. Mr. G., Sedbergh, April, 1991.

[11] Richardson, Death,Dissection, p.21.

[12] Int. # 7. Mrs. Sly, Bandrake Head, Nov. 1990.

by individual women with their own death in mind. Although this was a less personalised preparation, in that it did not involve the time-consuming labour of hand-sewing and embroidery occasioned in fashioning a burial gown, it also appears to have been a matter of some significance. Historians of death have not mentioned the importance of sheets for the death-bed, although black bed-sheets were used for mourning in the Stuart period.[13] As far as Cumbria is concerned, clean white sheets were a necessary accompaniment to the actual process of dying. Folklorists record that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the dying person would be laid on a bed "hung round and covered with the best linen". [14]

Marjorie indicates that the importance of having good quality sheets to hand was still recognised just prior to the Second World War:

> People would always have their sheets ready, so if anybody came to lay them out they wouldn't have patched sheets on. People always had these big chests or they would be in a drawer. You were always ready.[15]

References to white sheets were frequently made by respondents, as succeeding testimony will show; and as the quality and colour of the sheets seems to have been of some

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[13] Puckle, p.94.

[14] J. Britton and E. W. Brayley, The Beauties of England and Wales, Vol. 3, (London, 1802), p. 246.

[15] Int. # 14. Marjorie, Kendal, March, 1991.

concern, so was the type of mattress. Folklorists have noted that in the nineteenth century it was generally considered to be impossible for a death to take place on a mattress of pigeon feathers, and in fact a dying person lying on such a bed might be moved to the floor.[16] More recently a similar custom was recorded in Cumbria.[17]

A belief in the efficacy of feathers (pigeon or otherwise), to somehow detrimentally effect the wellbeing of the dying was certainly in existence in Cumbria until mid-century, as Sara, a retired home-help, somewhat humorously recalls. Sara used to routinely visit homes in the market town of Kendal in her younger years. The following incident took place in the nineteen forties:

> I went to a place on Aynam Road, and that lady knew she was going to die. She was on her own and she put her nightdress on, she put her stockings on and white sheets on the bed and laid herself on that bed and she died. Well, what she did, she didn't want to die on a feather bed, so she emptied all the feathers out of this feather bed all over the house...Well, they do say you don't die on a feather bed. And when I went to see her, I couldn't get in for feathers! That's true! Absolutely true! So I had to shut the door again and phone up the head person....When my mother died they took the feather pillows from under her head...[18]

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[16] See, for example, Christina Hole, English Folklore, (London, 1940), p.49.

[17] Rollinson, p.59.

[18] Int.# 8. Sara, Kendal, October, 1990.

The dying woman's preparedness for death is as striking as her apparently "superstitious" fear of dying on feathers. But although it may appear irrational, the following testimony intimates that qualms about dying on feathers had a basis in reality. In both these fairly recent incidents the type of feathers was not considered important, which suggests that perhaps a rational explanation was, at some point in time, grafted onto an older belief whose origin is now obscure. Elsie recalls a family bereavement:

> When my mother-in-law was dying I was at home with grandpa...well my brother-in-law was there, and I went upstairs, and she was on a feather bed, and I said,'I'll pull this feather bed from under her if you'll lift her.'...If I didn't the body would have bent. You know, feather beds were soft and you just sink into them, and her body wouldn't have been straight for the coffin.[19]

A prime concern of those preparing the corpse for burial has always been to straighten the body before rigor-mortis occurs. In the eighteenth century a particular board was used for this purpose.[20] In the village of Staithes in Northumberland the "streaking board" was commonly used until early in this century, and as soon as a death occurred someone would go immediately to the joiner's workshop to fetch it.[21] This type of board was also used in Cumbria to within living memory, as the following quote by an undertaker demonstrates:

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[19] Int. # 12. Elsie, Kendal, April, 1991.

[20] Richardson, Death, Dissection, p.20.

[21] Clark, p.128.

> The funeral director went out when there was a death with a laying-out board, because most of the beds were feather beds. We have the original board here. Sometimes people would come and get it, there was no secret about it.[22]

Although the inappropriateness of feathers may have been directly linked to the fact of rigor mortis, as Elsie earlier explained, of more critical concern is the fact that loss of bowel and bladder control at death would render a feather mattress a liability as far as hygiene and aesthetics were concerned. Death is a messy business, something we who are carefully shielded from it are apt to forget.

The customs discussed so far reflect the concerns which were of prime importance to individuals contemplating their own deaths, and exemplify the types of personal arrangements which could often be made years in advance. The calm resignation implicit in such preparations is suggestive of an attitude at odds with the discomfiture so typical of present-day society, which is more likely to avoid any such advance planning. What these personal preparations symbolise -- the idea of death as an inevitability to be faced squarely, and without undue anxiety -- is more typical of the "tame death"

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[22] Int. # 15. Mr.D. October, 1990.

than its successor, "death denied", which Aries has claimed to be the prevalent attitude of the twentieth century.

The "tame death" required the involvement of family and friends. It was not an experience to be faced alone. It is clear that in Cumbria in the first half of this century, a certain amount of help from family and community would normally be forthcoming, particularly at the time of death itself. The following customs, although often incorporating the personal wishes of the deceased, were behaviours more critically dependent upon the cooperation of family and community.

One of the most pressing concerns of the family of a recently deceased person, was that the body should be "laid out", or prepared for burial. Folklorists provide little information on who actually performed this ritual. Britton and Brayley mention that in the late eighteenth century neighbours were commonly called upon to assist the bereaved family just prior to the anticipated decease, but it seems likely that "neighbours" referred to women, as opposed to men.[23] Evidence from recent studies highlights the femaleness of the activity. In referring to death in Staithes in the early part of this century David Clark states:

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[23] Britton and Brayley, p. 246.

> 'Lying-out', ...was the charge of a handful of women who were recognised in the village as qualified to carry out the work and who, from their painstaking attention to detail, appear to have taken a considerable pride in their task.[24]

Similar observations have been made of layers-out in Lancashire.[25]

Laying-out consisted of washing and straightening the body, stopping bodily orifices with cotton wool, removing the deceased's clothing and dressing the corpse for burial. Eyes would be closed, often by placing pennies on the lids, and the mouth would also be closed by tying the jaw. This process, obviously a practical necessity, may also have been regarded as a symbolic act designed to cleanse the "unclean" corpse in preparation for its spiritual journey.[26] Water was believed to act as a protection against evil spirits, and to be a purifier of the soul, and washing the body may have represented a kind of baptism.[27] When performed by a relative, this ritual preparation may have had a therapeutic function, in that it may have helped to "demystify death" by providing a crucial task on which the bereaved could focus.[28]

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[24] Clark, p.128.

[25] Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death', in Ralph Houlbrooke, ed., Death, Ritual and Bereavement, (London and New York, 1989), p.194.

[26] Ruth Richardson, p.19.

[27] A belief that pennies were needed by the spirit in order to reach the underworld has also been noted. Curl, p.30.

[28] Roberts, p.194.

That laying-out in Cumbria was sometimes performed by family members is borne out by the following evidence. Elsie, from Kendal remembers the 1940s:

> And when my dad died I helped my auntie wash him and lay him out and get him ready for his coffin. I said to my auntie,'I've never done this,' and she said,'Well, come on my lass, this is the time to learn.' She was one of the regulars off Fellside, and she went out a lot. And my husband shaved him. He had promised my dad he would, because he knew he was dying six weeks before...People were fussy about who they wanted to lay them out. I promised my mother that I would lay her out. [29]

As previously mentioned, it was more common for a woman from the neighbourhood -- "one of the regulars" -- to be sent for. [30] Such women would frequently nurse the sick, and prior to the 1902 Midwives Act -- and for a good deal later -- they were also called in to confinements. These women had no formal training, and it is unclear why they were so designated. It has been suggested that skills were handed down from a mother, aunt or other female relative, but the present study indicates that this was not always so.[31] Layers-out were, of course, well known in their community, and their knowledge and skills were greatly valued. Mrs. Callaghan recalls the period prior to the First World War in Egremont:

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[29] Int. # 12.

[30] Roberts, p.193.

[31] Ibid. p. 194.

> As soon as anything happened,'You'd better go and tell Mrs. So-and-so to come, dad's died.' And, 'Yes, yes, alright.' And she put a big white apron on you know.[32]

Similarly, Marjorie, from a Kendal council estate, remembers:

> ...there were always women who did this sort of thing. I remember, there were quite a lot of deaths, of mothers and of children, and there was always one or two women that you could call on. [33]

Some of the women interviewed had performed such a role themselves. Mrs. Fawcett was not involved with confinements, but had been called upon on at least two occasions to lay out a corpse:

> This neighbour, he had died when I got there but I attended to him after. He had already had a bath, so I wasn't going to bath him, so I washed his hands and face and straightened the bed out and laid him flat. I said to Mrs. Harry, 'I want two shilling pieces to put on his eyelids so that his eyes won't open.' And I tied his ankles and his knees with a stocking or a piece of material of some sort. And I put his hands by his side, and Mrs. Harry said 'Shouldn't they be across his chest?' And there was an old man, a farmer, when we lived at Hutton, and I was washing the back doorsteps, and he says,'Isabella, can you come? My missus has gone!' And I had to see to her as well.[34]

The fact that there was some confusion over the positioning of

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[32] Int. # 3. Mrs. Callaghan, Dalton-in-Furness, March, 1991.

[33] Int. # 14.

[34] Int.# 1. Mrs. Fawcett, Underbarrow, October, 1990.

the arms perhaps suggests this particular woman's lack of experience, but Sara's evidence indicates the expertise of a "regular":

> I mean I've done it, yes, I've washed them and laid them out, many a dozen. Many a dozen have come for me. Oh yes, everything was ready. You take a bit of cotton wool, and you put a bit up their noses and into their mouth, and into their ears and up --- you know. I once did a woman in Park Avenue, and there was a friend or somebody, she was there, and as soon as ever she died, she was off for the death certificate. So I shouts out,'You come back here, there's plenty of time for a death certificate'. I said to her,'I want you here! I don't know where everything's at! I don't know where the sheets are at! I don't know anything!' And I washed her and I laid her out. Just the death sweat you wash, they sweat, you know, when they die, and they call it the death sweat. All over the body. You lay them on a white sheet and if their mouths are open you tie a thing round their head, to stop their teeth coming out. [35]

Some such women routinely charged a small fee, although several respondents stressed that they "did it for kindness". Elizabeth Roberts feels that laying out may have represented a "metaphor for relationships within and obligations to the neighbourhood".[36] In the working-class areas that formed the focus of her study, informal social networks of a reciprocal nature offered both emotional and practical support to families in times of need. The importance of "neighbourliness" was frequently stressed by interviewees in the present study, in the countryside as much as the town.

One major difference between death customs in this

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[35] Int. # 8.

[36] Roberts, p. 196.

district and those of larger urban areas was in the length of time between death and interment. In the nineteenth century the London poor often kept their dead at home so long prior to burial that decomposition was well under way by the time interment finally took place.[37] Prior to the last war the time between death and interment in London was between six and ten days. This delay has likewise been attributed to poverty.[38] In contrast, the interval between death and burial in Cumbria was, on average, three to four days, implying that poverty was not serious enough to warrant such a lengthy delay. During this period it was common practise, as elsewhere, to keep bodies at home.

After laying-out, the undertaker would be summoned, and the body would be put into a coffin as soon as arrangements could be made, usually a matter of hours. The corpse would be stored either in the parlour or a bedroom. It would lie in the coffin, with the head and shoulders exposed to view, although sometimes a cloth would be placed over the face.[39]

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[37] Morley, p.26.

[38] Ruth Richardson, Death in the Metropolis, unpublished, 1978, p.14.

[39] David Clark has referred to this covering as a "face cloth". Clark, p.128.

In all parts of Britain prior to the eighteenth century a watching period would have been observed. This consisted of, quite literally, sitting by the corpse until burial. This seems to have served a multiple function; folklorists have claimed that it discouraged ghosts, and from a therapeutic point of view, it allowed family members who may have attended the deceased through a long illness to gradually come to terms with the fact of death; it also served to ensure, in times of fallible medical techniques, that the deceased was actually dead. It was believed that in this liminal state between death and burial, the corpse might well have needs similar to those of the living, and it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect that one of these wants might well be companionship.

Watching can be traced back to the fourteenth century; some have claimed that the practise grew out of a prayer-meeting in the presence of the corpse, and that in some cases it developed into a kind of celebration involving large numbers of people, one person from each household taking his or her turn with the corpse. [40] In West Cumbria, in the eighteenth century, neighbours participated in this custom, the younger people keeping a vigil throughout the night, and the older people during the day.[41]

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[40] Puckle, p.62. Other writers have described how 'wakes' in Ireland and Scotland incorporated plays, food and drink and varieties of boisterous games, and became very loud, lively gatherings. See Hole, p.50.

[41] Britton and Brayley,p.246.

In this study, only one person interviewed could remember a family member watching the corpse overnight, and four people remembered the community-oriented "waking", a fact which would seem to dispute a claim by William Rollinson that Cumbria has no tradition of Irish-style wakes.[42] Yet the fact that in each case the 'waking' was related to a gypsy funeral indicates that no conclusions can be drawn about indigenous practice. [43]

One component of the above ritual which has been widely documented both for Britain as a whole and also for Cumbria is the custom of "viewing". Numerous folklorists have mentioned the custom of visiting the body prior to burial, particularly the morning of the funeral. It can be traced back at least three centuries, and was common to all social classes before the First World War.[44] The practice took place in Staithes in the early twentieth century; and in parts of Lancashire, "Far more people visited bodies than went to funerals". [45] As with waking, viewing was a community-oriented ritual and often involved the participation of large numbers of people in the neighbourhood, representing "part visit of condolence to close

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[42] Rollinson, p.59.

[43] Elizabeth Roberts' study reported a man of Irish extraction witnessing a rowdy wake in West Cumbria. Likewise, this evidence cannot be interpreted as indicative of local custom.

[44] Richardson, Death, Dissection, etc, p.23.

[45] Roberts, p. 198.

mourners and part of a last respectful visit to the dead."[46]

The custom of viewing took place routinely in Cumbria, as the following quotes indicate. Mrs. Callaghan remembers it in West Cumbria and the Furness district:

> They used to come and knock on the door and come in and lift the veil, there was a veil over the face, you know, and they just used to lift it, and have a look and put it back again.[47]

In Lancashire, children would commonly go in groups to look at bodies, particularly those of school-friends.[48] Although some were persuaded or compelled to go by parents, others actually seemed very willing, and even eager to view. Visits by children were common in Cumbria, too, as the following three extracts indicate:

> You know the children all went to see everybody when they were dead. I remember being sent to a boy who had died of consumption and he was out in a hut in the garden and he was in that hut and I remember we all had to go and see Alfie in his coffin. You all went to see the dead people.[49]

> I can remember the lady next door she had twins, and one died, and I can remember going in to see that baby, and it had all these little forget-me-nots, oh I shall never forget it, and it must be well over seventy years ago. And it had all these artificial forget-me-nots all over it. A little

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[46] Richardson, Death, Dissection, etc. p. 24.

[47] Int. # 3.

[48] Roberts, p. 199.

[49] Doc. AP/Ambleside Oral History Archive.

> baby only a month old. It was in the sitting room.[50]

Not all children were fully aware of what was going on, however:

> I remember there was a little boy about five or six and he said, 'There's something funny in that house at the end. They've taken Nana Cummings in a boat, I've seen a boat in that house'. [51]

Visitors were commonly expected to touch the corpse. Folklorists provide numerous reasons for this custom, but all seem to derive from an ancient belief that a murdered corpse would bleed if touched by the guilty party.[52] In the context of twentieth century, it has been seen as an expression of sympathy and good will, [53] and as a method of preventing the occurrence of dreams about the deceased. [54] Richardson has observed that the existence of so many interpretations suggests "a vigorous popular culture" associated with the practise.[55] In this study most of the respondents reported familiarity with the custom, often offering the reasons cited above. Two explained that if one touched the brow one didn't

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[50] Int. # 19. Mrs. Atkinson, Grange-over-Sands, April, 1991.

[51] Int. # 11. Francis, Kendal, November, 1990.

[52] Richardson, Death, Dissection etc., p.25.

[53] Clark, p.128.

[54] Roberts, p.200.

[55] Richardson, Death, Dissection etc., p.25.

dream about the dead person, and many others said that they had kissed dead family members, as a token of affection and as a gesture of farewell.

Obviously, the participation of the community in rituals related to death was contingent upon effective, and immediate communication of the decease to the neighbourhood. A custom which appears to have been utilized as a means of relaying the news to the community at large, was the drawing of the blinds or curtains in the home of the deceased. It is a practise which has been widely recorded in other parts of England, and it has been suggested that originally it may also have represented a way of warding off evil spirits. [56] In this study, another explanation offered by undertakers and layers-out is that it was done in order to keep the body as cool as possible, and thus delay decomposition. It also seems to have provided a way for the community to reciprocate. Neighbours would often express sympathy and respect by closing their own curtains and keeping them closed from the time of death until after the funeral. In other instances neighbours would close them at the time of the funeral only, particularly if they were on the funeral route:

> Always, when there was a bereavement, the family would close the curtains, while the funeral was on, until after the funeral, and the neighbours would close them as well.[57]

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[56] Ibid., p.27.

[57] Int. # 17.

> And you used to have to draw your blinds. Pull your blinds down when they had died and your blinds stayed down until after the funeral had gone by.[58]

A more effective way of informing the neighbourhood of a death, particularly in view of the scattered communities so common in Cumbria, was the sounding of the church bell. Thomas Dyer claims that this practise was referred to by Bede, and later by Shakespeare.[59] It has been claimed that it had been largely abandoned by the nineteen twenties, but there is reason to believe that it was still being done in the 1950s, and possibly later.[60] Originally tolled just prior to the moment of death, it was thought that the bell would frighten away evil spirits, and allow the soul of the departed to make its way to heaven, unmolested. For this reason it was often known as the Soul-bell. Popular belief had it that evil spirits were afraid of bells, and the larger the bell, the further the spirits would flee, thus the largest bell in the church was sounded. The bell also served as a prompt to all those hearing it to offer up prayers for the departing spirit -- a curious interweaving of folklore and theological observance.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and possibly

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[58] Int.# 3.

[59] Dyer, p.267.

[60] Puckle, p.82.

much earlier, the more practical function of the custom was emphasised. In the village of Moreland, about sixty years ago, an inhabitant recalls that:

> There was a special code of bellringing for announcing the death of a parishioner. It was once around the bells with a different number of tolls for a man, woman or child, and for other villages in the parish it was three times round the bells, so that on hearing the death bell the villagers knew immediately if the death was in the village, and the age and sex of the one who had died.[61]

In the village of Troutbeck, until 1846, the passing-bell would be rung nine times for a man, six times for a woman and three times for a child.[62] At Kirkby Lonsdale the passing-bell was still being rung in 1930, and the following testimony suggests that it was popularly observed until at least the outbreak of the second war, when it was stopped because the ringing of churchbells had been designated the official warning of enemy attack. [63] An undertaker relates:

> Oh yes, it was done here until the last war. It was mostly stopped during the war. When there was the threat of the invasion of Britain, it was to be the signal - all the churchbells all over the country

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61 CRO(K)/WDY/39.

62 S.H.Scott, <u>A Westmorland Village</u>, (London, 1904), p.137. There existed a common belief, although it is not clear to what extent it prevailed in Cumbria, that should the sexton mistakenly touch one of the ropes between strokes and thus sound another bell, that another death would soon occur. See D. Thomas,'Bells', in <u>Funeral Director</u>, Vol. 69, #11, Nov. 1989.

63 Alexander Pearson, <u>The Annals of Kirkby Lonsdale</u>, (Kendal, 1930), p. 179.

> would ring. It never really came back after that. Just the odd one. I remember the bells when I was a kid and when I was a teenager, just after someone had died. They went and tolled it as soon as someone had died, usually the sexton or someone. I always remember there was an old man who had died and the widow sent her two sons, because the sexton was at work. And they knew how long to wait in between but they didn't know how many times to pull it so they decided on one pull for each year, and this man was ninety years old! I remember that happening in the thirties.[64]

Although this undertaker seemed to find the idea of tolling the age of the deceased unusual and somewhat amusing, a woman from a neighbouring village described that it was normal to toll the age of the deceased, at a quicker tempo, after the initial toll to denote the sex.[65] Similarly, the writer was informed by a middle-aged friend that when he was young he was in the company of another boy in the village when the passing-bell began to toll. The youth could tell by the number of tolls sounded that it was his mother, who had been very ill, that had just died. Despite the interruption of the war-years, this would indicate that the passing-bell was still being rung in some places during the 1950s.[66]

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The above evidence indicates that many personal, family and community-based rituals relating to death and dying were extant in Cumbria within the first half of the present

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[64] Int. # 15.

[65] CRO(K)/WDY/39.

[66] Conversation with P.M., Ambleside, October, 1990.

century, and it is not unreasonable to assume a large degree of continuity with similar rituals which have been documented by folklorists and antiquaries for earlier centuries. Not only were individuals making active preparations for their own deaths until within living memory, but family members and neighbours displayed a readiness to be of assistance. Members of a close-knit community clearly expected to be informed of a death in their midst, and were familiar with the established conventions for expressing sympathy and respect.

This overview of rituals related to death and dying not only demonstrates the utilitarian nature of many death-related practises, it also argues that such rites were rooted in physical exigencies which continued to sustain them until relatively recently. The complex and far-reaching changes which were occurring in the city did not impinge on this village-based culture to any marked degree. Undertakers played only a peripheral role in the death-culture of this area in the early twentieth century, whereas family and community were central. An isolated, provincial way of life which placed much value on local custom, and continued to stress community involvement in many aspects of village life, also expected community participation in its rituals of death.

As David Clark and Ellen Badone have observed, changes in death customs were linked to transformations in other

aspects of life which came relatively late to some areas. [67] Although there is a great deal of overlap, the 1950s seems to have been the watershed in terms of many of the rituals described above. An analysis of the diminishing importance of community-based rituals since mid-century throws sharply into focus the relationship between culture generally and death culture specifically.

It was unanimously agreed by respondents, for instance, that the beliefs surrounding dying on feathers were no longer held, and it would seem that the replacement of feather beds by modern mattresses has probably contributed in large part to its redundancy. Connected to this is the fact that, even in cases where elderly people may have refused to relinquish their feather-beds, the increase in the number of hospital deaths, as well as deaths in residential homes, has also been of crucial import. In fact, the enlarging sphere of influence of the public institutions generally has been, as Aries pointed out, one of the major catalysts for change in death customs and attitudes to death in western culture generally. Badone has noted that the removal of the aged into institutionalised care of one form or another has worked to render death "peripheral in social terms". The fact that death far less often occurs at home has effectively banished it from

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[67] Clark, p.127.
Badone, p.19.

the popular mind. She reiterates Aries' thesis when she suggests that this marginalisation of death has contributed to its "denial" by modern society.[68]

Central to such developments has been the growth of the National Health service and the concomitant rise to power of the medical profession. The passing of the 1948 Health Act accelerated trends begun with the Midwives Act of 1902, in that it helped to consolidate the position of medical professionals whose power steadily impinged upon community responsibilities -- specifically the services rendered by local women -- throughout the course of the century. Over time professionally-trained midwives gradually usurped the position of the "unqualified" village women who had traditionally delivered babies, and the coming of the travelling district nurse in mid-century began to threaten their other main function -- the care of the dead.

Although Mrs. Atkinson remembers her sister eliciting the services of a local woman to lay-out their mother in the 1950s, it is significant that the neighbour was a trained nurse:

> My mother knew a young girl in Ashworth Street, and she was a nurse, and she always said that when she died she wanted this young girl to lay her out. Mother died before I got there, and when I arrived Ivy was rushing off, and I said,'Where are you going?' and she said she was off to get the girl that mother wanted. So she came and looked after

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[68] Ibid.

her. [69]

The deceased was obviously familiar with the girl who would attend to her final needs, but this was not always the case, as Marjorie from Kendal relates:

> I always remember, this is a long time ago, a woman saying,'Well, I went to see him, but he didn't look the same because she had parted his hair in the middle.' This was when nurses first started doing it. And she didn't know him, and she'd parted his hair wrong. It didn't look like him at all. [70]

This testimony calls attention to a problem caused by lack of familiarity with the deceased, something which became more common as professional qualifications began to take priority over "neighbourliness". The following memory highlights other difficulties experienced by institutionally-trained personnel. From the mid-fifties on, Mrs. Elland, a nurse employed in a Kendal hospital, was sometimes called out to private homes:

> And I always remember that when a death was in a hospital we always put a sheet over the face and I did this in a house and I realized afterwards it was the wrong thing to do. I asked the family if they wanted to see the body and when I went in afterwards they had pulled the sheet back so it was just showing the head, and I realized afterwards, yes this is what you do when you leave them in houses, so it just looks as though they are resting. I felt a bit unhappy about it. [71]

This nurse's distress at having "done the wrong thing"

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[69] Int. # 19.

[70] Int. # 14.

[71] Int. # 5.

emphasises her awareness of the importance of attention to detail implicit in family-oriented death ritual. Her unwitting transgression of local custom was clearly the cause of some personal anxiety. It seems likely that such details became confused or even ignored as the interests of the institutions gained ground -- concerns rooted in practical necessity rather than traditional lore. Mrs. Fawcett's evidence well-illustrates this, and raises questions about the ramifications, in emotional terms, of the erosion of traditional ways of coping with death's most intimate aspects:

> Well, my mother died in Kendal Green, so I said to the matron, that I'd like her to wear a special nightdress that I had made. It had lace across the front and the neck. But she said,'It doesn't matter. We have a certain thing' - I don't know what - 'a paper thing they are buried in.'So she didn't wear that nightdress. [72]

The appropriation of death rituals by the medical profession was facilitated by a parallel development in a related area. The removal of the corpse immediately after death to a purpose-built storage chamber -- a "chapel of rest" -- effectively removed responsibility for pre-burial care from the hands of the family, and accelerated change in a variety of areas connected with post-mortem ritual. The reasons for such a shift appear to reflect the growing professionalisation of the undertaking business nationally and internationally. From the undertakers' point of view, the switch to corpse-storage outside the home seems to have been rationalised in

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[72] Int. # 1.

the main by an appeal to pragmatic considerations:

> In this village about thirty years ago over half the population lived in small cottages, no bathroom, two up and two down. And it was a big job, was a death. And we started, my brother and I, to get a chapel, ... and we were the first in this area. As rather an old fashioned village we thought it would take some time to catch on, but it was immediate. People were asking before we had got the place finished. [73]

> I was the first to make a chapel around here. It would be in the early fifties. They hadn't the facilities at home. If you go into a modern housing estate, it's a living/dining room, all one, and you can't live for three days like that. [74]

Historians have revealed mixed reactions to this innovation. Many people were in favour, whereas others regretted the removal of the deceased from the home. The general response of those interviewed in the present study seemed to reflect the sentiments of the undertakers above: it was unpleasant and bothersome to have a body at close proximity for so long, and it was better to get it out of the way as soon as possible. Thus, the introduction of facilities for corpse removal seem to have been a welcome innovation.

The increase in hospital deaths after mid-century also had implications for family involvement in post-mortem care. Bodies already removed from the home were less likely to be

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[73] Int. # 15.

[74] Int. # 18.

brought back; instead they went from the hospital mortuary to the "chapel-of-rest", or directly from the mortuary to church, with nursing staff taking responsibility for laying-out. There are indications that the quality of such care has recently deteriorated in response to the increasing demands placed both upon the nurses' time and the institutions themselves. One undertaker complained of sloppiness in regard to corpse preparation;[75] this was supported by the observations of a nurse currently working in a hospital in Kendal:

> When they die we're supposed to lay them flat apart from one pillow under the head, close the eyes, keep the mouth closed, keep the hands straight and just tucked under the hips, and the legs straight, and leave them for an hour. And this was very rigidly stuck to when I was training, (the late 1940s), and for a good number of years, but I wouldn't say it was stuck to so rigidly now, because sometimes you have a patient coming in and you've got to keep people out of the way until you've got the body out of the ward and the bed clean and made up and somebody else in it. Some of that respect has had to go in a faster age I suppose.[76]

The above trends mirrored changes in procedures and attitudes which have been noted not only in Britain but throughout the western world generally. Numerous writers have lamented the impersonal way in which the dead and dying have sometimes been treated as a consequence of inadequate

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[75] Int. # 31.

[76] Int. # 5.

institutionalised care and the lessening of family and community involvement.[77]

Despite the fact that erosion of older ways has been a noticeable feature of death-culture over the last fifty years, in some localities older practises have, to some degree, managed to hold out against the forces of the outside world. Most respondents, for example, reported that until the late sixties and even into the seventies, family members had always been kept at home until interment. In some country areas "chapels of rest" have been even slower to gain acceptance, as the following undertakers relate:

> Chapels of rest only became popular about five or six years ago. Even now, you get country people who don't like bodies being taken away to chapels of rest. They keep the body at home. It's the old-fashioned way.[78]

> Some bodies are kept at home. We haven't done it for some time now, but there are still some. Some insist that they go back home, especially if you get out into the country.[79]

The custom of viewing, which has been largely abandoned elsewhere in Britain, is also still practised in Cumbria.

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[77] The sympathetic attention to this subject by writers such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has begun to have a beneficial impact, particularly upon care of the dying.

[78] Int. # 25.

[79] Int. # 30.

Over the course of the twentieth century friends and neighbours in larger towns were gradually excluded from the practise of visiting the corpse, which became a private family affair, and has since all but vanished; [80] David Clark has observed the demise of this custom in Staithes, for example.[81]

In cases where bodies were sent immediately to "chapels of rest" difficulties of accessibility might well mediate against such visits, which at the same time, would appear to lose some of their social meaning, in that the visit might not necessarily include sympathetic contact with the bereaved family. Historians have noted a growing squeamishness about viewing bodies, and it may be that changing attitudes to the physical aspects of death have been an important factor in the abandonment of this custom, (a contributory factor, too, in the desire to have bodies immediately removed from the home). A decline in the death rate over the course of the century meant that fewer people were directly involved in a bereavement, indeed, changes in demographic trends leading to a lessening of familiarity with death generally, have been seen as a crucial cause of changes in attitudes. Yet although the following memory reveals the subject's aversion to the prospect of viewing her neighbour's body, even as late as the nineteen sixties (and quite possibly even more recently)

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[80] Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection etc.,p.24.

[81] Clark, p.135.

neighbours were, in this locality at least, still being invited to view. Mrs. Sly remembers:

> I suppose around here there is a custom that isn't done in cities and towns, and more sophisticated places, and that is that the dead person is put in the best room, and visitors and neighbours are expected to go and view the body. I don't think that would be done now in the towns. Most sophisticated people wouldn't dream of it, they would be in the chapel of rest, hushed away from where the funeral is going to be. It has happened until fairly recently, in fact when my husband died, twenty years ago now, he was ill for a long time in the house and he died in the bedroom and we had the funeral from here. But before that there used to be a funny little old man, and when his wife died they laid her out in the cottage behind, and because I was a close neighbour I was considered privileged, and he came around here and he said, "I'd like you to come and see Dolly", and he had her in the room with flowers and everything. He was so proud of the way he had done it. It was amazing. And I really wasn't all that keen on this at all, but I had to do it,and I realized I was sort of expected to and also it was quite an honour, and it meant you were a friend or a neighbour he wanted you to be in on it. I think it's still done around here to a certain extent. He had her upstairs because there wasn't much room.[82]

This woman draws a sharp distinction between ways of the country and ways of the town, noting discrepancies in social conventions which she feels still operate today. Certainly, as mentioned earlier, country places have been slower to adapt to "chapels of rest" and this is obviously of great importance as far as visiting the body is concerned.

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[82] Int. # 9.

There are other ways in which Cumbria has been slow to relinquish family-based ways. In London, home-made shrouds disappeared in the 1940s, but in Cumbria, despite the fact that hospitals now provide paper shrouds for burial, and undertakers supply gowns as "part of the package", there are still elderly people, women in particular, who continue to make personal preparations for their deaths. Mrs. Atkinson was quite adamant about the fact:

> Oh yes, I know lots of people who have their nightgown ready, and they won't use it! [83]

And a nurse reports:

> I've known people come into hospital with a beautiful white nightdress and they've brought that in to be laid out in. [84]

These comments from an undertaker also indicate that some older people still like to prepare their shrouds:

> In the old days they'd say,'She put them away', and it still crops up. If they're in their eighties and nineties, they'll still have something put away. It's usually a white nightdress and white stockings. Twice this year I've come across it, they provided a gown,all crocheted around the wrists.[85]

Even in cases where women were not making their own garments, some families, until the 1970s, were still laying-out at home. One undertaker reported that the co-op in a nearby village sold shrouds until the 1970s. Layers-out like

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[83] Int. # 19.

[84] Int. # 5.

[85] Int. # 18.

Mrs. Burrrows, described in the following interview, may well have made use of such store-bought gowns. Mrs. Sly recalls the death of her husband in the 1970s:

> When my husband died, I didn't know what on earth to do really. He had died, and the doctor came. He got the district nurse initially, but there had to be somebody who officially laid him out for the coffin, and I discovered that a middle-aged woman who lived in the village over the hill, Spark Bridge, was the person to ask. Everybody seemed to know on the grapevine, although I didn't know until I had to find somebody. The district nurse said,'Oh, well, there's Mrs. Burrow in Spark Bridge, and if you ring her she'll come. I can remember ringing, and her husband answered, and she was out and he said,'Oh yes, I'll see that she comes straight away.' You know, it was considered top priority. So she came around, and I mean I didn't understand much about these mysteries, but obviously there were always women who did this, right up to recent times. I don't know that she had any connection with nursing, she kept the local village post office when this happened. This woman was younger than I was at the time,she was mid-forties.[86]

Clearly, despite the rise to power of the National Health Service and the growth of the undertaking profession, the village layer-out continued to offer her services in some areas until very recently. Whereas in urban areas elsewhere, laying-out has rarely been done by local women since the last war, one undertaker reported that there are still Cumbrian families who prefer to lay out their dead, even today.[87]

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[86] Int. # 9.

[87] Int. # 25.

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Many death-related rituals have enjoyed a long life in Cumbria. Although some family and community-based death customs have been abandoned over the course of the twentieth century, and others have undergone significant modification, there exists a strong current of continuity which has served to preserve until recently -- particularly in some country areas -- many aspects of home-based death. The overtly functional nature of most of the customs described here suggests that they successfully met the practical needs of those concerned for a considerable period, probably affording a certain amount of emotional satisfaction insofar as family and community were involved in a direct and necessary way.

It is particularly striking that women have played so prominent a part in popular death culture, a fact which has so far been ignored in any theoretical discussion of changes in death rituals. The evidence produced here suggests not only that women's role in death customs was more influential in the past, but also that women have been the predominant transmitters of specific aspects of oral tradition relating to death. Women in this study took a more active interest in preparing for their own deaths than did their menfolk, and they also featured more significantly in the bereavements and deaths of family and neighbours.

The rites described here, and the attitudes they embody, appear to have remained intact because the material conditions

in which they were anchored did not change to any appreciable degree until fairly recently. Thus, many aspects of the "tame death" -- a death which was calmly acknowledged by those about to die, and quietly dealt with in familiar ways by family and community -- have prevailed in many localities until mid-century.

The last forty years have brought about increasingly complex changes in many aspects of the broader cultural, social and economic environment, and under the increasing pressure of such developments this equilibrium has increasingly been disturbed, the rituals here described often becoming inappropriate in relation to changing circumstances. The professionalisation of health-care services and the enlarging sphere of influence of the undertaker have undoubtedly brought about the decline of many home-centred rituals, as has the dramatic fall in the mortality-rate, and changing attitudes to the dead body, which may well be linked to a lessening of familiarity with death in every day life.

Thus, Weber's argument for the functional nature of ritual would seem to be borne out. There is clearly a close connection between ritual and the practical realities of everyday existence. Yet, in terms of the period in which changing conditions made redundant such practises, theories which ascribe such developments to the nineteenth century are clearly not applicable. Attenuation of community-based death

rituals has come much later to this area than the theories of Aries and Stannard allow, and the relatively slow erosion of older practises in this locality concurs with the findings of other historians who have undertaken small-scale studies elsewhere.

Although some of the same customs have also persisted in twentieth-century London and Lancashire, it is noteworthy that the areas where they have been documented are working-class districts where a strong sense of community has also been an enduring feature of life. In these areas, however, certain customs were abandoned prior to mid-century. Laying-out has been uncommon in London and industrial Lancashire since 1940, the drawing of the blinds is less commonly observed today, and Richardson has been unable to find any evidence for the hand-sewing of shrouds since the First World War. The more general social changes discussed above had probably begun to erode these types of customs slightly earlier in working-class urban districts, and social dislocation caused by post-war rehousing may also have worked to break down the community-feeling in which these practises were anchored. [88]

It is the tenacity of tradition generally, rooted in a lifestyle which has remained stable for a prolonged period, which has enabled Cumbria to successfully maintain the death customs described above; yet it is in its conservation of somewhat more public rituals that resistance to change has

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[88] Richardson, Death in the Metropolis, p.31.

most decisively been demonstrated. This was highlighted in a compelling way during the nineteenth century, when Cumbria successfully kept at bay the "invasion of commerce" popularly described by historians. The remainder of this study will show that the Victorian "celebration of death" was a phenomenon which had less influence here than in areas where complex structural changes had much earlier created a more favourable ground for the seeds of commercialism to grow. It is to an assessment of the Victorian funeral, the focal point of most historical work on death, to which this study will now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FUNERAL IN CUMBRIA

Several historians have observed that the Victorian era saw the commercialisation of funerary ritual in Britain on a broad scale.[1] Held up as the quintessence of elitism, the extravagant funerals of the English middle classes have been compared to the medieval aristocratic funerals of Europe, rites which had political as well as religious and psychological ramifications, and from which, it had been argued, the Victorians took their cue. Such writers have claimed that this preoccupation with materialism was a phenomenon which grew largely out of a desire on the part of the more affluent to demonstrate social status, and Ruth Richardson has argued that it was emulated to a degree by poorer people whose main concern in having a "decent" funeral, was to distance themselves from pauperism and all the horrors which the Anatomy Act dealt out to those powerless to protest

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1 See, for example, John Morley, Death, Heaven and the Victorians, (London, 1971), pp. 19-31; David Cannadine, "War and Death in Modern Britain," in Joachim Whaley, ed. Mirrors of Mortality, (London, 1981). pp.187-243; and Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection and the Destitute.

them.[2] Thus the "respectable funeral" -- a ritual which emphasised material display -- became the grand send-off to which all social classes aspired.

There is reason to believe, however, that the fashionable funeral may have been less influential in Cumbria than such scholarship, based largely on urban trends, might imply. Oral testimony for the area under study describes in detail customs which seem to have coexisted alongside the sophisticated affectations of the Victorian era, practises which in some cases delayed or even inhibited the adoption of more flamboyant nineteenth-century trends, and which occasionally outlived them. Beginning with a detailed account of the "typical" middle-class funeral of the nineteenth-century, the following discussion compares and contrasts this materialistic display with the funerals of contemporary Cumbria. It demonstrates very clearly that although there was a certain degree of overlap, most Cumbrian funerals placed far less emphasis on spectacle and much more on community participation. It postulates, furthermore, that two aspects of Cumbrian ritual -- mourning dress and the funeral feast -- should not necessarily be seen as manifestations of a Victorian "revolution", but might more reasonably be interpreted as popular behaviours owing more to established practise than nineteenth-century excess.

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[2] Ruth Richardson, "Why Was Death so Big in Victorian Britain?" in ed., Ralph Houlbrooke, <u>Death Ritual and Bereavement</u>, (London and New York, 1989), p.116.

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The funerals of the Victorian middle classes have been described as meticulously orchestrated affairs, which depended for their smooth running on the organizational skills of undertakers who had a vested interest in providing as extravagant a send-off as possible.[3] Great stress was placed on attention to detail, and all participants were to a great extent concerned to fulfil their roles according to the conventions prescribed by a strict code of decorum.

Shortly after death, a formal notification in the form of a letter, and/or printed card summoned relatives and friends to the interment. Funeral cards were frequently very ornate; and might include symbols of death such as weeping willows, kneeling female mourners, inverted torches and the like. The age and name of the deceased would be included along with a short verse, and the cards would be sealed with black wax in black-edged mourning envelopes. Gifts were also distributed to those who would attend: crepe scarves and hatbands were commonly given to relatives; friends and clergymen might receive silk scarves, and all who attended would receive hatbands and black silk gloves.

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[3] Morley, pp.19-31.

On the funeral day suitably-attired mourners would assemble at the residence of the deceased where two "mutes" maintained a sombre vigil either side of the front door. The mutes, modelled on the heralds who had played a prominent role in aristocratic funerals of an earlier era, would commonly wear black coats and top hats bound with black crepe, and would brandish "wands" similarly adorned. The doorknocker and doorknob of the house might also be decorated with crepe. The most affluent families, or those intent on providing the most splendid display possible, would also employ the services of feather-pages, outriders, and all manner of escorts -- for the greater the number of attendants, the more prestigious the funeral.

The cortege of fine carriages, which proceeded from the family residence to the church and thence to the cemetery, was usually headed by an elegant, glass-sided hearse conveying an expensive coffin, and was pulled by a team of up to six black horses. The coffin, usually of oak, with expensive metal trimmings, might be enveloped in a dark coloured pall held in place with decorative nails, and it would certainly be decked with a vast array of floral tributes. Often it would be adorned with a canopy of black ostrich feathers, matching those on the bridles of the horses. In order to take advantage of the greatest number of spectators, the entourage would normally take a circuitous route through the town, and after the interment, the mourners would engage in a sumptuous

meal, where no expense would be spared to provide guests with a bountiful supply of dishes and liquid refreshment.

Such flamboyant obsequies were not unknown in Cumbria. The following extract, taken from the instructions written in 1840 by a certain Mr. Isaac Wilson in connection with the funeral of his late aunt, demonstrates an adherence to the norms of more affluent society:

> Scarf, hatband and Gloves to the Vicar, and Mr. Edmund Tatham and to Mr. Samuel Compstom...Agnes (evidently a servant) to be provided with mourning, and the nurse with a silk Handkerchief and Cap...Gloves to be sent to Mr. and Mrs. Roland Wilson, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Wilson, Mrs. Elizabeth Roxbury and her daughter, Mrs. Simpson, Miss Atkinson, Mrs. Scholick and Mrs. Whitehead...[4]

Similar instructions were given three years later upon the death of his uncle. Clearly, Mr. Wilson was a man of means.

So was Christopher Longmire who, in 1873, paid twenty two pounds nine shillings and one penny to bury one of his relatives.[5] In 1868, George Gibson was buried in an oak coffin with plate gold furniture and entombed within a brick-lined vault;[6] and in 1897 Jane Isabella Fleming bequeathed in her will a small sum of money to each of her servants in order

4 CRO(K)/WD/MM, Box 69, #6.

5 CRO(K)/WD/MM.

6 CRO(K)/WDX148/F97-132.

that they might purchase mourning. She also left an amount for the upkeep of the family vaults.[7]

There were obviously affluent people desirous of departing this life in grand style, and undertakers who were able to provide them with the accoutrements to do the job. Undertakers' account books testify to the existence of wealthy Cumbrian families who were prepared to spend a great deal of money to bury their dead. In 1842 the Reverend James Long, for example, was laid to rest in a Spanish mahogany coffin encased in a second one of lead, for a total of nineteen pounds; Mary Bigland's attendants received for their pains a total of nineteen silk hat bands, four crepe hat bands, five best black gloves, one silk hat and seventeen pairs of black silk gloves. Her funeral cost in excess of thirty six pounds at a time when the average funeral arranged by that particular undertaker was around four. [8]

Other instances of the "etiquette of mourning" are also in evidence; a custom which has been described by several historians -- the writing of letters on mourning stationery --

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[7] CRO(K)/WD/RY.

[8] Mr. Wren's accounts. The average weekly wages for agricultural workers in Cumberland and Westmorland in 1824, were 12s. 3d., and 12s. respectively. Bouch and Jones, p.339.

was not unknown in the area.[9] Mr. Thomas Garnett of Liverpool wrote frequently to Mr. Hugh Langhorn of Kendal throughout 1865, and both the business and personal correspondence of these two gentlemen testify to a recent bereavement in one of the families. Each letter was written on black-edged paper and was dispatched in an envelope sealed with black wax.[10]

Undertakers' accounts from the mid-nineteenth century until the nineteen thirties attest to the fact that horse-drawn hearses and mourning coaches were commonly used in the Kendal, Windermere and Broughton-in-Furness areas. The following recollection by Mr. Dennison of Kendal, refers to the nineteen forties and suggests that such carriages, still being used in some places, were sometimes rather elaborate:

> When we were kids, remember Wansfell Farm, Thompson used to have it, well, in a shed there, they used to have horse-drawn carriages, and they were beautiful. Black and silver and all gold, and the gold on the sides was all marked. They were absolutely magnificent! There was two, and they always had to be black horses didn't they? All decked out.[11]

A much older respondent, casting her mind back to the time of the First World War, recalls what she considered the "fancy" funerals of those days. Mrs. Callaghan's comments reflect, perhaps, an element of class awareness, if not antagonism:

> Mr. Ferguson he had a black coach, very old fashioned, just like a square, and him sitting on

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[9] Curl, p.15; Morley, p.69; Puckle, p.271.

[10] CRO(K)/WD/AG BOX 33.

[11] Int. # 8. Mr. Dennison of Kendal, October, 1990.

> the top with a black hat on...and even the horses hooves was black polished for a funeral. There were some posh folk, you know, that thought they were 'it', and had the money. They used to have a big do.[12]

Similarly, the elitism to which historians have attributed the emphasis on spectacle -- an integral part of the nineteenth century funeral -- emerges clearly in the following recollection:

> I can always remember my great aunts,there always had to be enough money for a good coffin, oak with gold plated handles, or brass or whatever. There was a lot of pride in having a good funeral, it was a status symbol. You always put your best clothes on, black or grey or navy blue, and this was all part of the status in a way. I remember my father always talking about black horses for funerals and you had very smart horses and carriages.[13]

The following quote, from a woman speaking about funerals on a council estate in Kendal in the nineteen thirties, suggests the way in which materialism became the measure of what many people, poor as well as wealthy, regarded as "decent"

> Everybody had to have a 'decent' funeral. It was like a tradition, you had to have a 'decent' funeral. You had to provide at least some carriages, and later on cars.[14]

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[12] Int. # 3. Mrs. M. Callaghan, Dalton-in-Furness, October, 1990.

[13] Int. # 5. Mrs. E., October, 1990.

[14] Int. # 14. Marjorie, Kendal, March, 1991.

The foregoing evidence would seem to suggest that the fashionable funeral did indeed make its mark in Cumbria, and that it had in itself become a tradition in the minds of some by the early twentieth century. Yet it is important to note that the costs of nineteenth-century funerals in this area did not approach the expenses incurred elsewhere in England. Morley has quoted official sources for 1843, which indicate that in London the average gentry funeral cost, for an adult, one hundred pounds, and for a tradesman, between twenty seven and fifty. [15] Even assuming a substantially higher cost of living and higher wages elsewhere, the discrepancy between London and Cumbria is quite significant, and it is not unreasonable to assume that simpler funerals may also have contributed to lower costs.[16] Certainly, undertakers' account books and extant personal documents with regard to funerals of socially prominent persons in Kendal make no mention of feather-pages, mutes, or the stylish trappings of one sort or another which seem to have been fairly standard in London. Hearses, for example were commonly pulled by only two horses,

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[15] Morley, p. 22.

[16] Although the Cumbrian farmers lived frugally, paradoxically, scarcity of labour meant that farmworkers in this area were among the best paid in England in the nineteenth century. Compared with the average weekly wage of 12s. 3d. for Cumberland in 1824, workers in Dorset, for example, received only 6s. Bouch and Jones, p.339. Marshall and Walton have also stated that,"The money wages of rural Cumbria were, indeed among the highest in England between 1861 and 1907." p.71.

in comparison with the teams of six described by Curl.[17]

A facet of urban ritual which is in evidence here, however, and appears, at first sight, to have exercised an enormous influence well into the twentieth century, were the stringent requirements with regard to mourning costume. Funeral dress was one aspect of mortuary ritual which lent itself particularly well to the ostentation of nineteenth-century obsequies, and although the custom of wearing dark clothing for funerals pre-dated the nineteenth century, personal adornment, particularly on the part of female mourners, reached new extremes as the Victorians went to great lengths to dress "correctly" for the occasion.

Women, we are told, were scrupulous in their attention to the detailed observances which fashionable death ritual demanded of them. Swathed in voluminous dresses of black crepe, complemented by black hats and gloves, their persons were cluttered with all manner of "appropriate" accessories. Jet jewellery was frequently worn, and black umbrellas, ostrich feather fans and black-edged handkerchiefs might be carried. Gentlemen, although somewhat more restrained, were as meticulous as their female counterparts. They would wear black suits and black ties and their top hats would be bound with bands of black crepe.

In order to meet the demand for funeral dress which

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[17] Curl, p.2.

escalated throughout the nineteenth century, mourning establishments, Magasins de Deuil, opened to cater to the demand. Jays of London opened its doors in 1841. Shortly thereafter every large store had its mourning department, and the firm of Courtaulds became Britain's leading supplier of crepe.

Were such fashions followed in Cumbria? Several older respondents did indeed remember their mothers and grandmothers prior to the turn of the century wearing the long black crepe dresses of "deep mourning", and also widows' bonnets which fastened under the chin. Similarly, the services of drapers and clothiers who provided mourning wear were in evidence in nineteenth-century Kendal. The Westmorland Gazette, for example, carried advertisements for mourning outfitters. One establishment proclaimed that "Mourning Orders of any Magnitude" could be "Completed on the Shortest Notice"[18] and in December, 1898, a large advertisement for Musgroves on Finkle Street in Kendal offered widows' caps. The paper also included an advertisement by a Manchester-based firm.[19] This eye-catching notice guaranteed that speed and efficiency were top priority:

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[18] Westmorland Gazette, Feb. 19, 1898, p.4.

[19] Ibid. Dec. 17, 1898, p.8.

Urgent Orders
Edward and Charles Dawson
Are Connected with the National Telephone System
No. 72
Funeral Orders
Promptly Attended to by Experienced Undertakers on receipt of
Telegram or Telephone Message
Dressmaker
Milliner
Cabinet Makers and Undertakers
Waterloo House
Kendal [20]

The following testimony by interviewees indicates that such businesses were still in operation within living memory. Elsie remembers that in the 1930s:

> There used to be a shop in Kendal, Brunskills,if you couldn't get it there, you couldn't get it anywhere, marvellous shop. [21]

And a village undertaker recalls:

> I remember my father telling me that when there was a death in the family, there was a tailor in the village and he used to make up black suits for the whole family. Brand new. [22]

There can be no doubt that some people went to a great deal of trouble, and expense, to equip themselves for a funeral. Mrs. Fawcett remembers the nineteen twenties:

> The gentlemen always had to wear black kid gloves and hard hats and a black tie.When my grandmother Townson died my mother had a black costume, and I

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[20] Ibid. Dec. 24, 1898. p.8.

[21] Int. # 12. Elsie, Kendal, April, 1991.

[22] Int. # 27. Mr. F., Milnthorpe, June, 1991.

> was only seventeen and I had a black costume, a black hat with a taffeta top and black plumes. It would have been expensive.[23]

It cannot be denied that many people probably spent a great deal of money purchasing new outfits, but not all mourners went rushing off to the tailors. For those who could not afford the expense of a new wardrobe, John Smith, "Dyer and Cleaner", of Worthington Street, Bradford, guaranteed:

> a good fast black and return orders, carriage paid, 48 hours after we receive them at the works...[24]

It should also be borne in mind that as dark colours were worn far more often in the past, it may well have been less of a burden to equip oneself for a funeral than it might at first sight appear. Certainly, as far as the twentieth century is concerned, some simply "made do" with clothes they already had. As Mrs. Taylor recalls:

> ...they wouldn't get new black clothes always. They would probably have them. A lot of people wore black in them days. [25]

Dark-coloured everyday-clothing might even suffice:

> You see, with nearly always wearing dark things, you could get away with it without going into black.[26]

Some, though, actually had clothes put away for the purpose:

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[23] Int. # 1. Mrs. Fawcett, Underbarrow, October, 1991.

[24] Westmorland Gazette, March 21, 1914, p.9.

[25] Int. # 2. Alice Taylor, Underbarrow, October, 1990.

[26] Int. # 14. Marjorie, Kendal.

> My father, when he got married, had a navy blue serge suit, and he had this best suit for years, and it came out for funerals, weddings and christenings. [27]

> Years ago, I mean this is really digging back now into early memory, most people seemed to have black clothes stowed away in drawers. Women would have a black hat and gloves, and men would have a black suit that they wore for donkey's years every time they had to dress up and turn out at a funeral. People tended to keep clothes for so much longer in those days. There wasn't these violent swings in fashion where last year's clothes had to be chucked in the bin.So I think most people kept a basic stock so you wouldn't have to rush out and do anything expensive. You'd just get your old black coat out of its mothballs, and get your black gloves and your hat. And I know there was quite a lot of borrowing from neighbours and friends to put the missing bits in that you didn't have, rather than go out and buy, because even people who were fairly prosperous before the Second World War, there wasn't the same amount of money around as there is now, and you had to be quite careful.[28]

Borrowing, in fact, seems to have been fairly common, as Mrs. Callaghan recalls:

> If you knew someone had died, you might say to the family, 'I've got a black coat, and I've got a black hat, and black gloves', you know.[29]

An elderly man from Kendal remembers watching mourners in the 1920s:

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[27] Int. # 5. Mrs. E.

[28] Int. # 7. Mrs. Sly, Bandrake Head, November, 1991.

[29] Int. # 3. Mrs. Callaghan.

> ...we were looking out of the window and they went up the yard, and they were dressed so nicely and I wondered where they got their things from,and my mother said, 'Oh, they can borrow those.'[30]

If one was unable to obtain a black wardrobe, a black armband could be worn instead. Some respondents recalled that in the twentieth century armbands were mainly worn by men. Others stated that either sex wore them. There was also some disagreement over the nature of the wearer's relationship to the deceased. Whereas some people felt that only more distant relatives or acquaintances would wear such a band, others strongly disagreed, one lady recounting that her sister had worn one for the death of her own child. The wearing of a black diamond sewn onto the sleeve also seems to have served the same function, although it was less commonly observed.

In the case of children, the standard black was sometimes waived altogether. Sara recalls:

> ...I was only twelve and I went to my grandmother's and we couldn't afford black, and my coat was a greeny one. And it was miles too big and my mother shortened it.[31]

Funeral dress incorporated many aspects of contemporary styles, changing -- albeit slowly -- in harmony with the fashion cycle generally. This, again, made it easier to get

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[30] Int. # 15. Gilbert Parkinson, Kendal, February, 1991.

[31] Int. # 8. Sara, Kendal, October, 1991.

away with wearing one's ordinary clothes. Veils, which were very common for funerals in the early part of this century, were also popular for everyday wear, as Mrs. Sly and Miss Roberts recall:

> It was very common to wear a veil. In the thirties veils were quite fashionable, so it wouldn't have been considered unusual anyway. Quite a lot of hats had veils on them so you killed two birds with one stone.[32]

> Everyone wore a veil.It was so common it was normal. It was a daily thing, when they went out. [33]

The Second World War seems to have represented a major transition in customs for mourning wear, as the rationing of food and clothing had an important impact on funeral dress. Several respondents explained that as coupons were needed to buy clothes of any description, people were often unable to get what they wanted. This may also have reduced the pressure on those who had previously felt compelled to conform to the standards of the day.

The 1960s, which brought relaxations in standards generally, was the decade which saw the end of funeral black to a very large degree. A more casual attitude with regard to dress was ushered in as women shed hats and gloves, men discarded their hats, and funerals became more colourful affairs.

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[32] Int. # 7. Mrs. Sly.

[33] Int. # 10. Miss Roberts, Kendal, November 1991.

At first sight, then, it would appear that, even in Cumbria, the Victorian middle class exercised a tremendous influence upon fashions for funerals, an impact which lasted until thirty years ago. In dictating certain standards of dress society appeared to create implicit pressures to conform; indeed, until the 1960s people neglecting to observe such standards would probably have been ostracised. [34]

But it should be stressed that what made the Victorian middle class unique in its attitude to funeral dress was its emphasis on quality and fashionability -- its insistence on crepe and elegant accessories -- rather than colour purely and simply. It should not be forgotten that black has been the colour for mourning in many cultures throughout history. In pagan tradition black made one invisible to the spirit world, and was thus a prominent feature of the traditional wake. In early twentieth-century Cumbria there were certainly those who went to great expense to appear suitably attired according to the dictates of funeral fashions, but equally significant, there were many others who either "made do" with what they already had or borrowed from friends. As most people were accustomed to attending a far greater number of funerals throughout their lives than is common today, they would often

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[34] Mrs. Sly recounted a story about an uncle who was considered rather eccentric, and was a source of embarrassment to his family because he refused to wear black for funerals.

be prepared. Black was more commonly worn in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in any case, and black hats, shoes and gloves were commonplace. In their observance of black for mourning the people of Cumbria -- in common with the less affluent in many other regions -- were actually carrying on a tradition with far older roots, one which may well have looked askance at the finer details which were so important to those financially advantaged, and which was, in some cases, satisfied by the simple display of an armband.

Victorian panoply was already on the wane by the early twentieth century, and thus the tendencies described above may simply be regarded as evidence of a lessening in ostentation generally. Yet it has also been noted that trends sometimes took time to cross class boundaries. Working-class funerals in London did not become elaborate to any degree until the early years of the present century, and it is not unreasonable to expect, therefore, that more signs of lower-class emulation of middle-class trends would be in evidence for the period recalled by interviewees. [35]

Although a limited amount of evidence makes it difficult to come to any firm conclusion on this issue, the remainder of the chapter, in arguing that numerous facets of the Victorian funeral were <u>not</u> adopted in Cumbria, and that continuity rather than change characterised funerals in this region, suggests that Victorian fashions pertaining to mourning dress

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[35] Richardson, "Why was Death so Big," p.116.

may have similarly failed to exercise a major influence on popular attitudes.

The following discussion will show that despite the sophisticated obsequies noted above, a substantial body of evidence exists to suggest that most Cumbrian funerals had little in common with the much-publicised commercial rituals. Many aspects of the early twentieth-century Cumbrian funeral -- the nature of the invitation, the character of the cortege, the type and location of interment, and the ambience of the feast -- attest to a continuity in funeral ritual which was little influenced by the Victorian "revolution". Reinforced by the family and community-centred rituals already discussed, this congruity afforded an effective challenge to the adoption of more cosmopolitan funerary conventions. It is to a closer examination of the specific features which exemplified the Cumbrian funeral, that this chapter will now turn.

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There is reason to believe that the sending of letters or printed cards -- the standard method of notifying friends and family of a bereavement and impending funeral in more affluent circles -- was less popular than other, less sophisticated, procedures in nineteenth-century Cumbria.[36] Folklorists record that when a death occurred in a Cumbrian community it

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[36] Invitation by letter was not unknown in Cumbria during the eighteenth century for persons desiring the 'greatest formality'; nevertheless, this practise was the exception rather than the rule. Pearson, p. 179.

was usual for people in the neighbourhood to be invited to attend the funeral by word of mouth.[37] Someone would be especially designated "funeral bidder", and it was their task to call on each household in the "laitin" or "biddin" (the area in the immediate neighbourhood) and also particular households of friends and relatives further afield, to summon guests. Sometimes a member of the family would do the bidding, but often the undertaker or his assistant would perform the service, and many undertakers' account books still extant refer to the fee routinely charged.

The "bidder" would deliver the message according to a prescribed form. He or she would knock on the doors of houses in the "biddin" and announce, in a "drawling, sing-song voice" the fact that the occupants of the house were invited to attend a funeral. They would be told the time of the departure from the funeral house, and the church where the service was to take place. In the more isolated valleys, it was usual for two or more people from each house to be invited to attend, whereas in the more densely populated places only one person might be summoned. [38]

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[37] Oral bidding took place in 1765 for the funeral of Mary Muckelt of Dalton-in Furness, and for Mrs. Benjamin Browne of Troutbeck in 1748, and may well have a much longer history; CRO(K)/WD/Rad/071; Scott, A Westmorland Village, p. 134.

[38] At the funeral of Mary Muckelt most households sent one representative. Ibid.

It was not uncommon for a vast number of guests to turn out. For example, bidding for the funeral of Mrs. Benjamin Browne of Troutbeck in 1748, drew two hundred and seventy-one mourners. [39] Indeed, the social role of the traditional funeral should certainly not be underestimated. It provided an opportunity for relatives and friends to get together, and for country people who often lived in isolated locations to exchange news and gossip.

Although J. D. Marshall has claimed that this style of funeral invitation was on the wane in Cumbria by the latter part of the nineteenth century, there is ample evidence to suggest that this was not, in fact, the case.[40] Bidding seems to have been the chief means of notifying people of an impending funeral, particularly in the remoter areas, until at least the nineteen twenties, as this elderly man relates:

> ...one thing that did happen, up until I suppose the twenties, was that when we got notice of a funeral, the youngest apprentice [of the undertaker] was provided with a bicycle and he had to go around to each and every house....to tell them when the funeral was, where it would take place, and at what time...[41]

Laura, an elderly woman from Kendal, recalls bidding at the same period:

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[39] Scott, p. 134.

[40] Marshall and Walton, p. 163.

[41] Doc. CC/A.O.H.A.

> When I was a girl, I think it was when the vicar's wife died, my father went round and invited them.[42]

Sometimes, the bidder was a woman. This inhabitant of Mauds Meaburn remembers that a particular woman, who was in demand in the village as an "odd jobs" person, performed this function on a routine basis:

> Martha, also, in deep black, went around the village and farms 'bidding' when there was a funeral. This custom died out between the nineteen twenties and thirties. [43]

The following evidence also indicates that this custom was carried out within the early years of this century, but it also suggests that in this particular locality it had appropriated more stylish trimmings. The crepe ribbons and black gloves mentioned here are probably reminiscent of what was considered "suitable" by more sophisticated nineteenth-century standards, and indicates the fusion of an old rural custom with a more trendy cosmopolitanism:

> Another old custom which has died out within the span of fifty years is that of the 'Bidders'. When a death took place, the appointed Bidder, suitably attired in black, with black hat adorned with crepe ribbons and wearing black gloves would go around bidding people to the funeral with the words,' Ye are bidden to the funeral of Mrs.....on (date), at (time).' After the burial the same bidder would

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42 Int. # 8.

43 CRO(K)/WDY/39.

> announce to the assembled company 'All ye who are bidden to this funeral will now repair to (Kings Arms assembly Room) to take such things as are there provided for you'.[44]

The following testimony by a man who, as a boy, was apprenticed to a joiner, indicates that oral bidding was sometimes supplemented by a written invitation:

> When I was first an apprentice if someone died I had to go around with notices to every house and hand them in to the effect that - or inform people that- of the day [of the funeral]...in the valley, and this end of the valley, the Grange end, seldom did I go further up the valley.[45]

Although this may imply once again, the incorporation of more refined practises into traditional rural culture, as far as Cumbria is concerned the custom of sending written invitations on occasion pre-dates the Victorian era and may in fact have long roots. In this particular locality, the central Lake District, distances between farmsteads were sometimes great, and it would seem only prudent for the bidder to have prepared a written notice in case the occupants were not at home.[46] Distance from the nearest printer, and the short period (three days) between death and interment suggest that in these remote areas such invitations would be hand-written.

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44 CRO(K)/WDY/39.

45 Doc. CC/A.O.H.A.

46 It is important to note that the literacy rate in Westmorland has historically been one of the highest in England. Marshall and Walton, p. 15.

As mentioned in chapter one, Cumbria is characterised by vast expanses of rough terrain and widely-dispersed communities, and this meant that in sparsely populated areas bidders sometimes had to cover many miles. They often received refreshments along the way, and this frequently took the form of an alcoholic beverage. One woman recalls seeing a bidder when she was a child "very merry indeed!"[47]

In the larger villages and market-towns another form of relaying the news was often used. The "bellman" (or woman) would be sent around to announce the death in cases where the bereaved family had decided against a "bidden" funeral. This practise has been recorded in the town of Kirkby Stephen in 1885, where a woman by the name of Betty Coates was responsible for informing the community.[48] Although it is not easy to date this custom, it probably derives from the days of the town-crier, and would appear to be a very practical method of getting the news out to the greatest number of people in the shortest time, with the minimum of effort and expense.[49]

Unlike the more personalised bidding, it was understood that this form of notification represented a general invitation, and that anyone who chose to do so might attend

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[47] Personal correspondence, Mrs. M. Russell, Manchester, June 1991.

[48] CRO(K)/WDY/276.

[49] Puckle has claimed that the ancient Romans used the funeral bellman. p.84.

the funeral. That this practise was still being carried on in West Cumberland in the early part of this century is indicated by Mrs. Callaghan's recollection of her childhood prior to the First World War:

> I don't know if there was any newspapers or not, because when anybody died the old bellman went around and he had a big bell, and he put it under his arm and I allus remember, us kids, you know, used to run to hear what he had to say. And we would run up to him and look up at him, and he would stand in the middle of the road, because, you know there were no cars hardly then, and he'd get this bell and give it a big ring and then fetch it down again and then another ring, and do that about three times, then he would put his bell back under his arm and he'd say, 'All friends and neighbours are invited to attend the funeral of Mr. So-and-so or Mrs. So-and-so. Corpse to be taken up tomorrow afternoon at half past two o'clock.' And then he would set off and say the same thing again right away around the streets.[50]

Another alternative to bidding was the displaying of a notice in prominent locations around the town. Mrs. Atkinson remembers:

> Another thing they used to do until about twenty years ago is put a notice on some gates about who'd died and when the funeral was. I've seen many of those. Very popular. They'd say,'So-and-so has died', and you'd see them all reading it. They did it until very recently, and I can remember them since I was sixteen. That was the most common way.[51]

The practise of displaying a public notice is still

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[50] Int. # 3.

[51] Int. # 19. Mrs. Atkinson, Grange-over-Sands, February, 1991.

carried out today, as the following statements from two undertakers in Sedbergh indicate:

> I never do a funeral without notices. Never. There would never be a funeral without those. Even for people who have come to retire round here. They like the traditional thing, you know. I haven't heard of it happening in other areas,it doesn't happen in Kendal. [52]

> [Notices would be put up in]...the butchers', paper shop, Sedbergh bakery. If it's a Sedbergh person I just send them out in Sedbergh. If I put them up in Dent nobody would know the person. But I have sent them to Garsdale, and 'appen put one up on the noticeboard outside the Black Horse.[53]

One undertaker's account book shows that the majority of funerals he arranged between 1912-1918 were "bidden" funerals and that in 1932 bidding was carried out at Anthony Wilson's funeral, and again in 1933 for Richard Cleasby.[54] The existing evidence suggests that oral bidding probably remained the most common method of notifying people of a death in country areas until the nineteen twenties, and that a form of public announcement, written or verbal, may have served the same function in more populous areas, the death notice surviving until the present day in some localities. Although the origins of the death notice are obscure, it would appear that bidding is a fairly old method of funeral invitation, and

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[52] Int. # 25. Mr. G., Sedbergh, April 1991.

[53] Int. # 30. Mr. B., Sedbergh, June, 1991.

[54] CRO(K)/WDB/58.

its persistence into the twentieth century implies a remarkable degree of continuity with earlier times.

Formal written invitations do not seem to have been widely used in Cumbria until the twentieth century. Printed funeral invitations, in the Victorian style, evolved from memorial cards which appear to have been sent or given out at some funerals in Cumbria throughout the nineteenth century. These were small, rectangular cards with a black edge, often very ornate, decorated with cherubs or a similar embellishment, and inscribed with a short verse. They normally gave the name, age, and date of the deceased, with the words "and was interred" followed by the name of the church and/or burial ground, indicating that their value was sentimental rather than functional.

By about 1900 they developed into folded cards which sometimes included more precise funeral details, and after about 1920 a significant number appear to have been either sent or given out in advance. The available evidence suggests that in some areas funeral cards formed an important method of inviting guests to funerals between the nineteen twenties and the nineteen sixties, after which the newspaper seems to have appropriated this function, supplemented, at about the same time, by the telephone.

The late arrival of the printed funeral invitation may indicate the unreliability of the postal service prior to the nineteen twenties, which is understandable given the difficulties of transportation and the isolation of some of the villages. Similarly, the newspaper's unpopularity as a medium for conveying funeral details is also grounded in material difficulties. Many Cumbrian papers were, and still are, weekly editions. Newspaper rounds in some areas were not motorised until the nineteen fifties, further compounding the problem for farming families who typically made only weekly visits into town.

Although death notices were routinely published in the Westmorland Gazette throughout the nineteenth century, such announcements commonly took the form of a simple statement of death, together with brief details of the deceased -- similar, in fact, to the inscriptions on the earlier memorial cards, and apparently serving the same function in a more public way. Funeral arrangements were seldom mentioned until the eighteen eighties, and then only occasionally; and as late as the nineteen forties only a minority were doing so. The sixties, however, saw a great surge in the number of death notices which included funeral details, indicating both the demise of the funeral card, and a probable shift to the telephone as the major means of communication.

There was a great deal of regional variation with regard to the abandonment of funeral cards as invitations, however,

and one undertaker recalled sending cards out until five or six years ago, although they were no longer black-edged. In the same area, though, a variation on the old black-edged cards still exists:

> On occasion, in the country, people will ask for funeral cards. Now we don't do them with the pictures, because we can't get them like that. But they still have a black edge. It's more in the form of a single sheet, and will say 'In Loving memory of so-and-so, and age,' and they are handed out at the church as you leave.[55]

Service sheets, the successor to the old funeral card, are a popular form of memento today. Most, however, differ from those described above in that they contain the funeral service, and no longer have a black edge. The above custom is an obvious and perhaps a unique throw-back to an earlier time. It is noteworthy, perhaps, that the area where the black-edged funeral cards are still sometimes used is the same area in which the public notice remains an integral part of the undertaker's service. Once adopted, customs here seem to enjoy a particularly long life.

As the above discussion has shown, there is clearly a continuity between styles of funeral invitation in the early twentieth century, and those of the nineteenth. The methods of informing guests of funeral details seem to be closely related to environmental considerations. The features noted in chapter one: difficulties of transportation and communication, a sparse and often widely dispersed rural

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[55] Int. # 25.

population, and the isolation of some of the remoter villages and farms, coupled, nevertheless, (and perhaps precisely because of these factors,) to a strong community spirit which drew large numbers to the funerals local people, had nurtured specific rituals well-suited to the context in which they operated. The prevalence of such behaviours was contingent upon the stability of the external conditions from which they derived, a stability, which, as we have seen, persisted until the present century.

The printed funeral card, by its very nature, communicated news of the funeral to a select group. In contrast, the journey from funeral house to church and from church to cemetery, was a more public gesture. Historians have claimed that this was the moment when the mourners, and particularly the bereaved family, could display to the world the precise nature of their financial (and social) standing. The funeral cortege summoned the reverent attention of all in the locality, and it provided an opportunity for the quality and style of coffin, hearse, coaches, costume, and so forth, to be observed, and admired. Whereas most of the literature on this subject pertains to grand displays which took place in the larger towns, where well-maintained thoroughfares and fairly long journeys to the new suburban cemeteries helped facilitate such pageantry, many Cumbrian funerals took place under rather different circumstances.

In Cumbria, the large size and the sparse population of some of the parishes, particularly those in the central Lake District, did in fact necessitate a considerable journey for the funeral cortege -- but often without the benefit of well-maintained streets. As we are constantly reminded, rough terrain and difficulties of communication and transportation made travelling difficult in Cumbria. Although many all-purpose roads were used for funeral processions, in some cases there was no easy access between farm, or village, and parish church, and a route was specifically established for conveying corpses, becoming known locally as the "corpse road". Coffins being transported thus would either be carried or strapped to the backs of pack-horses and mourners would walk.[56] Mrs. Sly describes such a road close to her home in the Rusland Valley:

> Colton church, which is up on a hill, serves two villages and the parish is enormous, and it's sort of on a hill between all the little settlements, and there's a place called the corpse trail, and it isn't a path you'd go down now, but I can remember Tilda telling me about the coffins being carried down the corpse trail. It was a special place, because it was so hilly, where it was easier to walk with the coffins. [57]

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56 Beliefs grew up around the use of such roads; for example, care was taken not to deviate from them as this was believed to bring bad luck. There are even accounts of fences being removed in order to preserve the right of way over fields at some point enclosed by an unwitting farmer! Scott, p. 134.

57 Int. # 7.

With the reduction in the size of parishes over time the corpse roads have fallen into disuse; most have not been used for their original purpose since the eighteenth century, and many were abandoned much earlier. But as late as 1910 the body of a well-known huntsman, Tommy Dobson, was conveyed by dogcart from Langdale, where he had died on a hunting trip, to the church at Eskdale several miles distant, involving a difficult climb over high mountain passes. Twenty men and women mourners walked the nine miles with him, and then walked back again in stormy weather. Although the route followed was not designated a corpse trail, and a cart rather than a packhorse was used, the fact that the journey was made in much the same manner as the earlier funeral processions, reveals that difficulties of transportation were still common in the early part of this century, and that some less accessible communities kept the old ways alive for much longer than might be expected. Clearly, in such instances the logistics of the operation took precedence over any attempt at pomp or panoply.[58]

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[58] Sometimes conditions proved hazardous for funeral participants. There are accounts of corpses going astray in foul weather, and the great grandmother of a lady still living, in walking over the moors to the next valley to attend a funeral, lost her way in the mist and died. She was not found for six days. From personal correspondence with Mrs. M. Russell.

Sometimes, as in the case of Tommy Dobson, a family cart would be used for coffin transportation; similarly, the farm horse might be called into service for the occasion. Mrs. Taylor describes a family funeral in the village of Underbarrow in the nineteen fifties:

> And my uncle that had the mill down there, he went to church on a flat cart with a horse, because it wasn't that far, you see... and old Joey, the horse, pulled him to church.[59]

Obviously, not all parish churches were difficult to reach, in fact "old Joey" seems to have had a much easier time of it than the horse which pulled Tommy Dobson!

Although some families made use of family-owned horses and carts, throughout the nineteenth century and up until the 1930s, it was very common to hire a "hearse and pair" from a local supplier. Occasionally, though, a church or parish might have its own hearse, as in the case of the village of Crosby Ravensworth, where the parish purchased one in 1861, replaced it in 1877, and continued to use it until at least 1918. [60]

It was less common to use mourning coaches, however, particularly in the countryside. Despite the references to

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[59] Int. # 2.

[60] CRO(K)/WPR/7.

hired mourning coaches in undertakers' records, indicating that many people did in fact ride to church, especially in Kendal, the majority of elderly persons interviewed recalled that it was only the coffin which was conveyed by wheeled vehicle:

> The bodies were always taken in a dogcart, or it might have been a hearse with the horses. Everybody else was walking. To chapel stile was two miles, if you went round by Elterwater which you had to do with a corpse.[61]

> As a boy I used to open the farm gates, if the hearse came through. I would open them to save them getting down, because they were so high up. There would be maybe four or five fields to cross. They would be going along a little cart track, the horses and the hearse and all the people walking. They used to throw me money down.[62]

In many cases even the hearse was dispensed with, and the coffin would either be transported on a wheeled bier; strapped to a hand bier and carried by bearers; or quite simply carried on the shoulders of the bearers. The following undertakers remember walking funerals where wheeled biers were used:

> Nine times out of ten they were walking funerals with the old wheeled bier, a big high thing with handles to pull it and you used to turn it out at Lockbank, about half a mile from Sedbergh, load the coffin on, walk it down to the church, pull it back and take it down to the cemetery. It stopped being used about fifteen years ago, and now I think it's in the Bowes museum.[63]

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[61] Doc. AP/A.O.H.A.

[62] Int. # 22. Thompson, Kendal, June, 1991.

[63] Int. # 30.

> We used to walk miles for funerals. Each church had its own wheeled bier, and we used to walk them on that. I've walked from the top of Bigland Hall down to Haverthwaite church, that's quite a stretch. It must be forty years since.[64]

> We always used to walk to the church in Sedbergh, with a hand-drawn bier and all the mourners walked all the way and walked back, I mean we've done it hundreds of times, up until 1966. We never used a hearse, we wheeled them about a quarter of a mile there, and the same back.[65]

In the following instance one undertaker devised his own variation:

> There was one fellow and he had a hand cart and he used to wheel it up to one or two miles, and there would be four men walking at the side.[66]

At some funerals the coffin was carried the whole way by bearers, usually one at each corner. Mrs. Atkinson remembers:

> My husband's family were farmers, and they walked all the way from Nibthwaite to Blawith. They did that in the old days, the people, they carried the coffin, and it would be about three miles. That was forty-one years ago. [67]

Mrs. Callaghan has a similar memory:

> The biggest part of funerals they used to carry them. There was always a relief in the company. They would stop and they would change. If one said, you know, it's getting a bit heavy they would pass it on.[68]

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[64] Int. # 20. Mr. W. Newby Bridge, February, 1991.

[65] Int. # 25.

[66] Int. # 15. Mr. D. November, 1991.

[67] Int. # 19.

[68] Int. # 3.

And this woman recalls coffins being carried in her village:

> The coffin was always carried to the church. Sometimes quite a number of bearers were needed to carry in relays and it was considered an honour to be chosen to carry the coffin into and out of the church. [69]

Where hearses were used, undertakers' account books, bills from coach and carriage repairers, and the recollections of undertakers themselves, indicate that motorized vehicles probably began to take over from horse-drawn hearses during the 1930s, although it seems to have varied from place to place, and there was a good deal of overlap. In 1930, an undertaker in Kendal, (where funerals often utilised a number of vehicles), billed the family for a hearse and pair as well as seven carriages and pairs and two motor cars; and even in 1952 a funeral called for four motor cars and a hearse and pair. [70]

In more remote areas, where walking funerals were more common, distances great, and particularly in inclement winter weather, mourners seem to have walked over more difficult stretches and then ridden where it became possible to do so. Thompson remembers:

> I'd be about fifteen years old, and we lived three miles off the hard surface road, and it was winter time and we had to put the coffin on the sledge,

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[69] CRO(K)/WDY/39.

[70] Martindale's accounts, Kendal.

> this would be up Appleby way. The horse pulled it, a farm horse. A place called Birkdale, Just one horse, and when they got to the hard road they put it onto a motorised hearse, and the people walked by the side of the sledge, they tramped through the snow. It was about eight miles to the church once you got to the road. There weren't many cars in those days. This would be about 1930.[71]

Even in the less isolated villages the switch to motorised vehicles did not apparently signify the demise of the walking funeral, as this undertaker recalls:

> Here in Windermere, Mr Longmire used to walk in front of the hearse and the two bearers at the back used to walk at the back wheels.. And we used to walk them from Heathwaite right through to the church, and to the cemetery. You didn't ride at all. You went walking speed right through the village and if there were cars they followed at the same speed. We did that after the war. I can't say just when we started getting in the vehicles and driving from the house to the church and the church to the cemetery. It would be in the fifties I should think.[72]

An important factor which probably accounts, in part, for the longevity of the walking funeral in rural areas, is the fact that country churchyards were used for burials for far longer than their urban counterparts. Indeed, it is generally agreed that the Victorian "celebration" of death depended to a large degree upon the establishment of the new cemeteries which offered a more congenial resting place than the overcrowded and unsanitary city churchyards. Often

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[71] Int. # 22.

[72] Int. # 18. Mr. D., Windermere, February, 1991.

located at the edge of town, the purpose-built cemeteries were usually at a distance from the church, too far to be reached comfortably on foot, yet served by paved roads along which a retinue of fine carriages could pass with ease, and, of course, with the added advantage of spectators en route.

In contrast, the graveyards in this area were not subject to overcrowding to the same extent. True, the larger Cumbrian towns may have been forced to expand their facilities earlier than the outlying areas (Kendal, for example already had a cemetery in the late nineteenth century and, as indicated earlier, undertakers routinely despatched impressive retinues of carriages to service them), but many villages were quite late to fill their traditional burial grounds. At Crosby Ravensworth, for example, the churchyard was considered adequate to meet the needs of the community until the 1930s, when an extension fund was established. [73] Many village churchyards have been extended in recent years, but are still being used today; in fact, local opinion is often adamant in its desire to maintain burial places of long-standing, as this village undertaker explains:

> The four churches I go to have all got churchyards adjoining them and people are still being buried there. At one time there was talk of closing our churchyard and anybody around here would have had to have gone to the council cemetery, and people didn't like it, and there was a fight to save it.[74]

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[73] CRO(K)/WPR/7.

[74] Int. # 24. Mr. C., Cartmel Fell, June 1991.

In this area the inhabitants show a distinct preference for the continued use of the churchyards which have been receiving bodies for centuries.

Perhaps the most obvious example of continuity with the pre-Victorian era is, paradoxically, a feature of the funeral which has been attributed to Victorian excess. The lavishness of the funeral feast has been cited as a blatant indication of Victorian materialism. While acknowledging that refreshments have always been features of funeral ritual, James Stevens Curl has claimed that:

> The humble symbolic meal became,in the nineteenth century, a huge feast, where the heavy mahogany groaned under loads of food. [75]

Whereas a magnificent feast certainly formed an important part of funeral ritual in nineteenth-century Cumbria, much as it did in other parts of England, there is ample evidence to suggest that rather improvident pre and post-burial refreshment is an aspect of death-ritual which has much older roots.

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[75] Curl, p.13.

Folklorists tell us that in the eighteenth century the typical funeral would begin with refreshments served at the house of the bereaved family -- probably a vestige of the traditional wake with its pre-burial festivities. The early eighteenth-century diary of the yeoman farmer, William Fleming, reports that in the town of Dalton-in-Furness the guests were divided into three classes, and that each class received different kinds of fare. The "richest and nearest relations" would have a warm dinner, the "poorest and more distant relatives and their richer acquaintance and friends" would have a cold dinner, and the farmers and people in the town who were not relations or "opulent acquaintances" would have bread and cheese.[76]

Even earlier, a certain William Stout, grocer, wrote in his autobiography that in 1691 he provided:

> ...much cheese to funerals in the country, from 30lbs. to 100 lbs. weight, as the deceased was of ability, ...[77]

So abundant was the supply of good things at the funeral of the Rev. Cork in 1786 that:

> ...we are informed by a gentleman who attended the jovial solemnity that by 90 of his appointed friends, 80 bottles of wine besides a large quantity of punch and ale was interred. At the usual time the corpse was brought to the door by two stout fellows, but who were so much affected on this solemn occasion, they let fall the coffin by

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[76] From the manuscript diary and commonplace book of William Fleming of Pennington,1798-1819, (Microfilm in Barrow-in-Furness Library), Vol.4, p. 1063.

[77] Pearson, p. 180.

> which accident the lid was burst open and was near discharging its whole contents into the dirty street...[78]

William Fleming records a vicar feeling decidedly worse for wear at a funeral at which he officiated because of "...too great a store of good things....More than the Receptacle could retain with ease" [79] Clearly the amount and type of fare served up at the funeral has been of some concern for quite some time, and those who were able always endeavoured to put on a good spread.

At some point the pre-burial refreshment gave way, in Cumbria, to the funeral tea which took place after the interment, although there are indications that for a period refreshments were served both prior to and after burial.[80] The pre-burial meal described by William Fleming at the beginning of the eighteenth century, coincides with reports by other sources of post-burial refreshment in the same town, for example. The Lonsdale Magazine records what it calls "a singular custom" whereby the parish clerk would apparently announce to all present at the committal that they should meet at a particular public house. Arriving there, the guests would sit down at tables in groups of four, and be served ale. One half of this was paid for by the host, and the rest by the

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[78] Ibid. p. 181.

[79] William Fleming Diary, Vol. 2, pp.328-329.

[80] J. Britton and E. W. Brayley, The Beauties of England and Wales, Vol. III (London, 1802), p. 246.

guests. While they drank, "arvel" bread would be served for them to take home.[81]

This latter custom involved the distribution of small, home-baked wheaten loaves.[82] Sometimes funeral biscuits were given out instead. William Stout mentions that these were commonly supplied to funerals in his time:

> And then it was customary at Lancaster to give one or two long biscuits called Naples biscuits, to each attending the funeral, by which from 20lbs. to near 100lbs. was given, according to the deceased's ability.[83]

Lancaster lies beyond the geographical boundaries of this examination; and this custom has been recorded in many parts of Britain. Most important from the perspective of this study, aside from the huge quantity of biscuits in question, is the fact that in Cumbria such delicacies continued to be made until relatively recently, as this elderly man relates:[84]

> And another custom of funerals was of course to make funeral biscuits. If there had been a pig-killing locally when the lard was rendered down, the bits and pieces that were left were ground up, and I presume with flour and water and other

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[81] Lonsdale Mag. Vol. III, p.326.

[82] Ibid. p.325.

[83] Pearson, p. 180.

[84] There are various explanations as to the meaning of "arvel". A definition offered by a Cumbrian folklorist of the early nineteenth century is that it derives from the Saxon ARFULL, which means "full of reverence", and has some symbolic association with holy communion bread. Lonsdale Magazine, Vol III, p. 324.

> additives, were made into a biscuit which was known as funeral biscuit. Now I don't remember that actually taking place, but I can remember my father and my grandfather speaking about it.[85]

Indeed, twentieth-century funeral teas seem to have much in common with the feasts of the eighteenth century. In the early part of this century the funeral tea was either a sit-down affair held at a restaurant or church hall, or a more informal gathering held at the home of the deceased. Ham seems to have been an important constituent of the meal, certainly within living memory, along with an ample assortment of other delicacies, and, of course, cups of tea.

In many places the organisation of the meal was as much a community event as the partaking of it. In the town of Kendal, for example, the women who laid out the bodies would also attend to the catering. Elsie remembers:

> The Angels of Mercy,the old ladies off Fellside,the old ladies who went to confinements, there would be about five of them, and they would see to funerals in this part of town. They all knew one another by Christian names. They were in and out of houses all the time.[86]

Today, although many people have a buffet-style meal at a cafe, in some places teas take place at home or in the village hall. In fact, in some of the remoter dales funerals remain the big social occasions they have always been. As one

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85 Doc. CC/A.O.H.A.

86 Int. # 12.

local undertaker explains:

> The ones you get up at 'Aggle, we've had some tremendous big ones. There'll be about two hundred people plus that come to these little village churches, and then they all go back and have a meal. They have a real tuck in!...It's a time when all the families get together and reminisce....They like to have a good natter. [87]

In Cumbria, the "humble symbolic meal" of byegone days was far from humble. There appears to be, rather, a striking degree of continuity between the days of William Stout with his prodigious supplies of cheese and biscuits and the present day funeral teas at 'Aggle. Against such traditions of hearty consumption the lavish Victorian meal can hardly be regarded as an innovation.

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There is ample documentary evidence pertaining to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to indicate that some of the more affluent Cumbrians indulged in the elegant displays for which the Victorians became so well-known, and that less well-off people tried to emulate the "decent" funeral. Sources suggest that these trends were more typical of the larger communities, however, and did not take place in the villages and more isolated valleys. It was not uncommon

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[87] Int. # 30.

for long retinues of carriages to wend their way along the streets of some of the larger market-towns, and their social meaning may have paralleled that of extravagant obsequies elsewhere, but there are indications that the panoply was less blatant, the message somewhat muted.

Oral evidence suggests, furthermore, that the village funerals were of an entirely different character. Country funerals sometimes incorporated practises described by folklorists and antiquaries as typical of a much earlier era. Although much of the information provided by respondents relates to the twentieth century, and some customs cannot be dated with precision, there are some obvious similarities between the customs of the early part of this century and those of the pre-Victorian age.

Old forms of funeral invitation such as bidding, for example, have been remarkably resilient, and did not give way to more fashionable trends until the nineteen twenties and thirties. Unpretentious walking funerals, often utilising farm carts and horses, and frequently without a hearse at all, have formed a major type of funeral throughout the twentieth century. Despite lack of firm evidence that this was commonplace throughout the nineteenth, physical and social conditions which have generally been slow to change in other ways, make it not unreasonable to assume a large degree of

continuity with the old walking funerals of the days of the corpse roads.

Continuity is apparent in another area. Rather than emerging as a vehicle for articulating wealth and status, the funeral tea has been, for at least three hundred years, an important social occasion in the life of the community. There are, it is true, suggestions that the feast may always have served the interests of the more financially fortunate to some degree, but just as it should not be seen as a phenomenon unique to the Victorian era, neither should its value be measured solely in terms of the benefits it bestowed upon an elite minority. The funeral feast provided an important social function long before Victoria's day, particularly for countryfolk, and in drawing the community together in the common acknowledgement of death, probably extended a degree of emotional support to the bereaved.

Rather than a material display for the advancement of social position, the country funeral represented, as it still does today in many places, an opportunity to come together with others to socialise and gain support from a community with an avid interest in all its members -- living and dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROLE OF THE UNDERTAKER

As we have seen, numerous inter-related factors deriving from the material environment help to explain why Cumbrians of the Victorian era disdained the protocol of sophisticated middle-class death-culture. It is particularly significant that village funerals maintained many elements of indigenous practise until very recently, for it is in the rural funeral that the specifics of physical geography and demographics previously discussed, can be seen to contribute to the tenacity of local custom in an extremely powerful way. Communication difficulties, sparsity of population, and closely-knit communities largely composed of indigenous farming families having only limited contact with the outside world, were all factors which argued for the preservation of customs which had evolved in response to local conditions.

Yet any attempt to account for Cumbria's rejection of the fashionable Victorian funeral is incomplete without an assessment of the role of the undertaker. The following discussion will first analyze the role of the urban undertaker in the commercial funerals of the larger towns; it will then turn its attention to the undertaker of Cumbria. The influence of the undertaker has been decisive in shaping mortuary rituals. Whereas in the cities he has been defined

as the zealous and often unscrupulous proponent of a new and booming commercial enterprise, in Cumbria, by contrast, he was the somewhat diffident advocate of conservatism. In contrasting two very different modes of operation, this analysis makes it abundantly clear that here too, the effects of the physical, social and cultural environment have been paramount.

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The ostentatious mortuary rituals of the Victorian city earlier described were not accepted by all elements of society. Indeed, repeated calls for reform came loud and clear against what was felt by many to be an unwarranted extravagance. Edwin Chadwick's Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Enquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns in 1843, added fuel to the fire when it outlined a broad spectrum of problems associated with death and burial in urban areas, particularly amongst the poor, and the issues it documented gave rise to vehement public response. Widespread criticism of the undertaking profession was particularly vociferous.

Historians like Puckle expound the predominant theme underlying the reformist view in claiming that the material extravaganzas of the nineteenth century were "carefully nurtured by the 'Dismal Trade'"[1]. Morley describes the

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[1] Puckle, p. 87.

devious ploys by which undertakers exploited the vulnerability of the newly bereaved. For example, "... a distracted widow would instruct the undertaker to provide what was customary and proper, and would then find herself committed to all the trimmings thought necessary to her husband's rank." [2] Morley goes on to tell how underhanded agreements of a distinctly dubious character were common practise, middle-men making extortionate profits out of those who could least afford it. He quotes a Mr. Wild, who, in giving evidence before the Commission in 1843, stated, "A confident opinion is expressed that interments might be performed, under general arrangements, at a rate of between five pounds and six pounds each funeral, instead of about fifteen pounds, the present average."[3]

That the undertaker was little more than an unscrupulous rogue, profiteering in an odious way from the personal tragedies of others, is the main thrust of an article which appeared in Leisure Hour, in 1862. The account deplored the scandalous behaviour of undertakers generally, protesting that the "price of services ...doubled or even quadrupled the fair remunerative charge". Noting the trial of a "recent miscreant" it explained that undertakers' unethical conduct frequently went unchallenged because the bereaved were

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[2] Morley, p. 24.

[3] Ibid., p. 25.

unwilling to make a fuss for fear of appearing disrespectful to the dead. "...We might revert to no end of examples in which the distress of the mourner has been made the stalking-horse to the unprincipled greed of the undertaker." [4] Far better the funerals of France, it advised, where customary obsequies were far less opulent.

The Victorian love of show was difficult to temper, however; twenty years later similar complaints were still being made. The Penny Magazine of 1882 admonished its readership:

> It is high time that our funeral customs were subjected to a strict scrutiny, and efforts made by the intelligent portion of the public to get rid of the superfluous sort of mockery which is imposed upon them under the plea of it being 'customary'...[5]

The outcry against the undertaker was part of a broader movement aimed at improving burial practises generally. Much attention had been focused on the despicable state of many urban churchyards which were so overcrowded that they posed a major threat to public health. Lack of space and shallow graves also promoted grave-robbery -- the removal of bodies under cover of darkness for sale to medical schools for dissection. It was to curb illicit trafficking in corpses that the Anatomy Act of 1830 was passed, thereafter ensuring

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[4] Leisure Hour, Aug. 9, 1862, pp. 761-762.

[5] Penny Magazine, March 9, 1884, pp. 94-96.

that the more affluent could rest in peace in the knowledge that only the poorest members of society would be called upon to offer up their mortal remains in the name of science. Simultaneously, the use of the older, overcrowded churchyards was discontinued as new intra-mural cemeteries began to be established in more congenial surroundings. Death -- for those who could afford to make it so -- became a much more agreeable business.

Ruth Richardson has claimed that prior to the Anatomy Act it was a desire to preserve their bodies from the predations of the bodysnatchers which, in part, accounted for the middle-class preoccupation with stout coffins and strong vaults. Thereafter, security in the grave being guaranteed to all except the very poor, the symbolic rather than the material quality of funerary paraphernalia came to the fore. Expensive accoutrements became a medium for making a public statement for all social classes; for there must be no possibility (no matter how narrow the margin in reality) of being mistaken for a pauper.

For if the urban undertaker of Victorian times has been accused of exploiting the rich, he has also been blamed for mistreating the poor. In stark contrast to the opulent funerals of the well-to-do, funerals of the destitute were usually undertaken with as little ceremony -- and often as little dignity -- as possible. Paupers were laid to rest in

cheaply constructed coffins made from flimsy material. They were often buried in mass graves in a separate part of the cemetery or churchyard, and were usually unmarked.

The stigma attached to pauper funerals was still strong in the early part of this century.[6] Some undertakers continued to perpetuate the fear and shame associated with pauper burial, with the result that even very poor families struggled to purchase the most expensive furnishings they could. The very poor were still experiencing such indignities within living memory, and they obviously had an effect on popular attitudes to death. One tangible result was that people would spend money they could ill-afford making weekly contributions to insurance clubs, in order that a "decent funeral" could be managed.[7] But as the more corrupt undertakers were often in league with the organisers of such clubs, this precaution sometimes provided yet another means of relieving the unsuspecting poor of even more of their hard-earned savings.

The urban undertaker fed upon the grandiose aspirations of the middle classes and the working-class fear of a pauper's grave, and there can be no doubt that the new mobility afforded by a more permeable social order led to the aggrandizement of funerals on an unprecedented scale.

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[6] Richardson, Death in the Metropolis, pp. 53-55.

[7] Elizabeth Roberts has also documented the tendency of working-class people to contribute to burial clubs in her studies of Lancaster, Preston and Barrow. The Lancashire Way of Death, p. 190.

Although the elite had always used death as an occasion for display, in the Victorian era the undertaker extended his influence into new social strata, a challenge he appeared to accept with relish, and a marked lack of principles. The commercialisation of burial practises effectively saw the transformation of traditional rites based on community and family involvement into a materialistic display where cash became the mediator of the proceedings, and within which the integrity of the undertaker was clearly suspect.

The situation in Cumbria contrasts starkly with that of the city. Cumbria's low population density and its resultant lower mortality rate, meant that deaths were not frequent enough to warrant the full-time services of professional undertakers. The typical Cumbrian undertaker was, like many outside the large industrial cities, primarily a joiner, for whom the making of coffins and the provision of funerary services was merely a sideline. The memoirs of Walter Rose, who describes the life of a village carpenter in nineteenth-century Buckinghamshire, outlines a wide range of carpentry jobs in which he would typically be involved. These included house construction, the manufacture of furniture, farm gates, and windmill repair, for example. His skills were much valued by the community to which be belonged, and he appears to have been held in high esteem. [8]

Various advertisements in local newspapers and magazines

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[8] Walter Rose, <u>The Village Carpenter,</u> (London, 1937).

for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attest to the fact that the Cumbrian undertaker performed a similar role. The Windermere Parish Magazine carried advertisements for undertakers with diverse talents. Among other things they built and stored boats, repaired antiques, removed furniture, and sold wallpaper, oilcloths and second-hand furniture.[9] The account books of a rural undertaker in the Broughton-in-Furness area which date from 1898 to 1930, indicate that the proportion of undertaking work as against general joinery work carried out by this particular tradesman accounted for less than five per cent of his total business. [10]

Even in larger communities the undertaker's emphasis on other aspects of his carpentry skills suggest that funeral organisation was not the major service offered. Whereas in 1914, Francis Chappell and Sons of Catford, just outside London, (with branches, it should be noted, at Lewisham, Eltham, Lee and Forest Hill), could advertise themselves as "Furnishing Undertakers" purely and simply,[11] Thomas Walton and Son, of Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria, were in 1949, still sending out bills which reflected their multiple services. They were, in effect: "Joiners, Cartwrights, Sawyers,

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[9] CRO(K)/WDX/995. Windermere Parish Magazine, April, 1907; June, 1908.

[10] CRO(K)/WDB/58.

[11] CRO(K)/WDX/964.

Undertakers, Builders, etc."[12] Likewise, G. F. Martindale of Kendal, called himself "House Carpenter, Joiner and Undertaker",[13] and Hays and Parkinson, the largest undertaking firm in Kendal, were "Joiners, Builders and General Undertakers".[14]

Undertaking was an obvious adjunct to general carpentry work as at that time all coffins were hand-crafted. As Mr. Martindale recalls:

> My grandfather started the business up more or less after he finished his apprenticeship. He was apprenticed to a joiner and wheelwright and he started the firm off in 1884 and added funeral work obviously because he was a joiner. [15]

Clearly, the carpenter was a man of many talents. This elderly inhabitant of the Langdale Valley describes the varied skills of village joiners of the nineteen twenties:

> ...they had to be so versatile that they could do anything. I mean they might have to make a sash window, or a casement window, or a swivel window, pivot window, or they would make a coffin, they would have to make a staircase...they had to be capable of making roof trusses, putting on a roof, putting in floor joists, laying floors, they were all round tradesmen.[16]

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[12] CRO(K)/WDX/316/2.

[13] Westmorland Gazette, Aug. 24, 1895, p.7.

[14] Ibid., Dec.31, 1898, p.4.

[15] Int. # 26.

[16] Doc. BZ/A.O.H.A.

In the village of Underbarrow, at about the same time, the joiner-cum-undertaker also shod horses:

> Mr. Chaplow was a real village joiner, making gates, wheelbarrows, cart wheels, etc. at Greenridge Mill. He also worked for the Argyles and Atkinson families who owned some of the farms. He also had a blacksmith's shop.[17]

The following description of a joiner in the Eskdale Valley shows not only his "Jack of all trades" character, but the extent of his community involvement, and casual familiarity with the local populace. As well as dabbling in journalism:

> ...He was also a joiner, and undertaker, Secretary of the Eskdale Show, M.C. at all the Whist Drives, and Rural District Councillor. He looked like Julius Caesar but was nicknamed 'Putty'. [18]

Carpentry and undertaking skills tended to be passed down from father to son, a fact verified repeatedly throughout this investigation, and those involved in the trade were usually on first name terms with their customers. This incident took place just prior to 1900; the village carpenter and his son were called out to a death:

> I can remember my father telling that he went with my grandpa to Side House Farm in Langdale. The farmer had died and they took the horsedrawn wagonette and when they got to the door, they were met by the farmer's wife, and my father took an end of the coffin, the butt end and my grandfather the head end; and when they got in the lady said, 'I've

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[17] CRO(K)/WDY/39.

[18] CRO(K)/WDY/39.

> put a lamp upstairs Joe, on the chest of drawers, (my grandad's name was Joe), and I wonder if you'd give 'im a shave when you're up there, he'll look better'...At the end of the session,after they'd put the body into the coffin and trimmed up the shroud and the linings, etc., he went downstairs and the farmer's wife said to my grandad,'You could do with a glass of rum Joseph?'[19]

Similarly, Mrs. Atkinson's husband, who was in partnership with another joiner in the village of Lindale, was on good terms with those in his locality:

> He worked for Gerald Whiteway who was a Lindale lad, and everybody liked Gerald. They used to make their own coffins, they were very busy.I remember Walter once doing a farm wheel, putting the spokes in, and we lived next door to Gerald, and they came from all over to see him make that wheel...People always had the undertaker they liked. Never a stranger. [20]

Village undertakers were members of face-to-face communities, in which much of their work was carried out under the curious eyes of watchful neighbours, and where privacy was in short supply. Unlike city undertakers, it is doubtful whether country joiners who resorted to dishonest practises could remain undetected for long, and as every aspect of their business would suffer if community norms were offended by profiteering, the risks to their livelihood were clearly very great. This point is implicit in the following testimony, where an undertaker suggests the casual scrutiny to which the fruits of his labour were routinely subjected:

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[19] Doc.BZ/A.O.H.A.

[20] Int. # 19.

> ...we never had a stock of coffins, because, as you know, each one was an individual size and part of the job when you got instructions from the relatives of the deceased person, was to take whatever measurements were necessary so that the coffin didn't appear too large in relation to the body. Otherwise people outside would have probably raised their eyebrows and thought, well, making a mountain out of a molehill in some cases.[21]

But the integrity of the undertaker was rooted in moral as well as pragmatic considerations. The business ethic which directed the procedures and attitudes of undertakers in larger towns was dependent on the severing of the more personal ties typical of village life, and called for a radically different type of relationship between the purchaser and the purveyor of services. The ethos of commercial enterprise was slow to gain a foothold in environments where craftsmen were repeatedly called upon to perform services for families they knew intimately, and where self-interest was subsumed within a complex web of reciprocal neighbourhood responsibilities. In such circumstances, conscience -- regulated by community norms -- dictated that one did one's best to help one's neighbour, particularly when called upon to render the final, and most personal service of all.

Such socially-sanctioned morality not only dictated that the making of unwarranted profit was unacceptable, but that all members of the community should be treated with due consideration. As we have seen, although there were richer

[21] Doc. BZ/A.O.H.A.

folk in the towns who desired more flamboyant affairs, most country people had simple funerals, where long-established practise took precedence over distinctions based on class or wealth. And as undertakers did not go out of their way to pander to the expensive tastes of the rich, neither did they deal less generously with the poor.

The evidence for this area suggests that the dire poverty which existed in London in the early twentieth century was not as widespread in Cumbria, and that where it did exist, it tended to be a feature of the town rather than the countryside. [22] In contrast to the studies of Ruth Richardson and Elizabeth Roberts, most respondents interviewed in this investigation seemed only vaguely aware of deaths "on the parish".[23] Most said that they had heard of them, but were not aware of any taking place in their locality. Several people, mostly women who had been town-dwellers for at least some portion of their lives, did have some direct knowledge of them, but more commonly they remembered neighbourhood collections being made to help out families in financial distress:

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[22] This evidence conflicts with that of Rose, who describes the pauper funerals of his village in nineteenth-century Buckinghamshire. Rose, p.125. Marshall and Walton have reported a low rate of pauperism in Cumbria during the nineteenth century, Marshall and Walton,p.6.

[23] Pauper funerals did take place in rural areas however. Dorothy Wordsworth records witnessing one in 1800. Dorothy Wordsworth, Grasmere Journals, p.20.

> Well, these people lived near us in Lancaster Street, and they were so poor, ...and because they had no money, they went around every house collecting for the coffin. [24]

Townspeople did remember burial clubs, however, in fact many are still operating. Thus it would appear that some people took the same kinds of precautions as those in London and the larger industrial centres. Similarly, it may well be that the stigma attached to the pauper funeral was the underlying motive for funeral collections. But the fact that a collection was made at all suggests that contributors possessed the financial means to take such a generous initiative.

Burial clubs do not seem to have been a feature of agricultural life. Farming people were apparently somewhat more favourably placed when it came to paying for a funeral, as Miss Prickett and Mrs. Fawcett emphasize:

> This is purely a farming community, people would be in a position to pay.[25]

> You worked hard, and that's what you spent your money on, a honeymoon or a funeral![26]

Clearly, the lack of burial insurance in the countryside, and the fact that few pauper funerals were remembered, implies that most people had money enough to afford funerals. But not

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[24] Int. # 19.

[25] Int. # 4. Miss Prickett, Underbarrow, Oct. 1990.

[26] Int. # 1.

only does this suggest a comfortable distance from the poverty line, it probably reflects the lower costs of funerals generally. This study has shown that funerals in Cumbria -- aside from the funeral feast -- do indeed seem to have been simpler and less expensive than those of the city. Their unpretentiousness in terms of the style of hearse, the character of the procession, the type of invitation and so forth, have already been discussed. But there remains another aspect of the funeral, which, as far as the rural undertaker was concerned, was his single most important contribution: a service which lay utterly within his jurisdiction -- the provision of the coffin.

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Julian Litten has stated that a recent examination of one thousand London coffins dating from 1729 to 1865, showed that the majority were drawn from stock, rather than made from scratch. Furthermore, he claims that since the seventeenth century the undertaker has supplied coffins according to the "social standing enjoyed by the family together with the mode and place of disposal".[27] Ruth Richardson has described the shoddy manufacture of pauper coffins in inter-war London, and the undertakers she interviewed have explained precisely how

[27] Julian W.S.Litten, "Not Lost But Gone Before,"in Funeral Director, Vol. # 12, Dec. 1989, pp.22-23.

these differed from the more elaborate coffins of those who could pay.[28] By contrast, Cumbrian coffins were not only hand-made until the latter part of the present century, they seem to have been more closely linked to the type of wood preferred by the carpenter, and to his particular expertise, than to the social or financial standing of their occupants.[29]

Although certain respondents could remember cheaper coffins being made for poorer people in some of the Cumbrian towns, all but one of the country undertakers interviewed pointed out that there had always been a standard procedure with regard to coffin construction.[30] Prior to the use of mass-produced chip-board coffins, which began in the 1950s, many undertakers offered two types of wood -- oak and elm -- for the purpose. Oak was the more expensive, and a thus a family with less money would probably purchase elm.[31] But in the vast majority of cases, coffin style, and trimmings were

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[28] Ruth Richardson, Death in the Metropolis, p.54.

[29] Mr. Wren's accounts, 1846-1991.

[30] The only undertaker who reported that he offered his clients a range of coffins to choose from, had recently sold the joinery side of his business to specialise in coffins. He supplies them ready-made to undertakers throughout Cumbria and north Lancashire.

[31] Elm has been the most commonly used wood for coffin construction since the seventeenth century. Litten, p. 22.

identical for each customer. This undertaker insisted, for example:

> It didn't matter how much they had or how little, we still gave them the same service.[32]

The following undertaker, who dealt with all the funerals in his village, worked only with oak, and all his coffins were identical:

> There was no choice of coffin. And I agree with that. Because even if you have a lot of money I don't think you should have anything any different from anybody else. You came in with nothing, you should go out with nothing. And so I would never make any difference in the coffins ...From our point of view, whether they were paupers, or whether they were the richest people there, they always got the same coffin...Even people who have no money get the same treatment as anyone else. I think they're entitled to it, and that's it![33]

The undertaker cited above went on to voice his disapproval of the system of burial fees:

> The thing I didn't agree with was that if someone became ill and had to go and live with relatives outside the parish, they charge double fees. So I used to buy the grave in my own name. I've enough land in Bowness cemetery to build a row of houses nearly.[34]

It was obviously in the interests of the undertakers interviewed to paint as positive a picture of themselves as possible, and thus one must regard the foregoing testimony with some circumspection. Yet independent opinion confirmed that the quality provided by village undertakers was, and

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[32] Int. # 26.

[33] Int. # 18.

[34] Ibid.

still is high. The assessment given by Mrs. Sly was typical of people's attitudes in general:

> They don't try to tempt you into having anything you don't want. I mean the man who came here he made it quite clear that it didn't matter what scale or not we wanted it on, he would do it. All these people, like the Armstrongs, and Wrens, they are part of the local community, they know everybody around them, and they know their exact financial circumstances and they wouldn't prey upon them at all, and they would give them an honest job for a reasonable sum.[35]

Most undertakers today, both in the larger communities and in the villages, are still joiners for whom undertaking represents only a small proportion of the total work done. The evidence provided by undertakers interviewed indicates that undertaking work amounts to between three and thirty per cent of their total revenue, with most businesses closer to the lower end of the scale:

> ...it's exactly the same way now. We're building contractors really, not funeral directors as such, but of course we have always done it and it has always been part of the business, although it has always been a small part.[36]

Although the undertaker quoted above operated a business in Kendal, where he has only known a minority of the clients who have come to him for funerals, in many villages undertakers still know the entire community:

> In a country district like we are we are always dealing with people we know very well. If I go to

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[35] Int. # 7.

[36] Int. # 26.

> the mortuary to pick a body up, it wouldn't matter whether it had the name on it or not. I'd know who it was.[37]
>
> Here you're on Christian name terms. People call me Eric, they might not even know my surname.[38]
>
> I must know eighty per cent. Others I know by name, but not personally.[39]

The influx of offcomers which began about thirty years ago as a result of the surge in tourism and improved communications, has made an appreciable difference to relationships within the village community. Many residents said that they no longer know everyone in the area, and natives are quick to make a distinction between locals and "people that have come from away". There is no doubt that communities have begun to change their character. As these undertakers relate:

> I've lived here all my life, and I know all the locals. But there are a lot of people I don't know now.[40]
>
> When I first started I knew everyone in the village, but it's different now. People come from away, and I don't know them. [41]
>
> I knew every man, woman and child in this village. I don't know a quarter of them now. You're dealing with people now that you don't know. We've gone from the time when someone went through the

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[37] Int. # 23.

[38] Int. # 18.

[39] Int. # 25.

[40] Int. # 20.

[41] Int. # 27.

> village,if they went through twice a month,people would say,'Who was that?' 'Oh, that's a visitor!' That's a bit of an exaggeration, but you know what I mean.[42]

Yet the integrity of the undertaker does not seem to have been compromised by the fact that he is now sometimes dealing with strangers. That the quality of the service offered is high, and his honesty beyond question was avouched by all the respondents interviewed.

The contrast between the character of undertaking in the larger industrial city and the rural environment was most strikingly illustrated in an interview with two undertakers, one of whom had recently moved to Cumbria from south Lancashire. In many instances, the city undertaker expressed astonishment at the differences in procedures and attitudes which had become apparent to him since his arrival in this part of England. He summed up his overall impressions thus:

> I think that the thing that is very different over here, and is very different from a town funeral, is the fact that Clifford knows everybody, and everybody knows Clifford. Whereas in town you often get an impersonal customer relationship, with Clifford you don't, it's very friendly. In the town, for want of a better word, we tend to be more professional, all due respect to Clifford. Here it's more personal.[43]

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[42] Int. # 15.

[43] Int. # 30.

It is clear that undertaking in the larger industrial towns has been of a different character from that carried on in Cumbrian communities. Yet undertaking did not take place in a vacuum, and the broader social context largely determined the direction it followed. Nineteenth-century urbanisation and all the related transformations it brought in its wake provided fertile ground for commercialisation of death-culture. Where there were large populations, new cemeteries waiting to be filled, an aspiring middle class, and poorer people desperately afraid of pauper burial, large-scale enterprises based on mass-production of goods and services had a ready market, and could clearly prosper. Conversely, in areas where such major demographic, economic, and social upheavals did not take place, there was no reason why undertaking should not carry on much as it always had, supporting ways of dealing with death which were in harmony with existing conditions.

As the above evidence shows, within living memory the country undertaker continued to provide a personal service for members of a close community by whom he was well known, and whom he knew very well. First and foremost a carpenter, his livelihood depended not only upon his skills as a craftsman, but upon his rapport with those around him. The circumstances in which he worked were very different from those in which the professional undertaker found himself, and as a consequence his mode of operation bore little resemblance to that of his

urban counterpart. A low death-rate in the countryside, and even in the larger towns like Kendal, meant that the Cumbrian undertaker relied more heavily on general carpentry work than on undertaking alone, and thus the limited scale of his operation precluded the use of mass-produced goods, and sustained, until as late as the nineteen fifties, a small-scale, personalised service. It was a style of operation that changed little until increasing communication with the outside world in the mid-twentieth century began to introduce new ideas, and in some locations it is, even today, supportive of older types of ritual.

CONCLUSION

> The detailed histories indicate everywhere that many old forms, old practises and old ways of feeling survived into periods in which the general direction of new development was clear and decisive.[1]

In the county of Cumbria a slow pace of social and material development has nurtured and sustained specific death customs which were abandoned earlier in environments more amenable to change. The contrast between the slow, agricultural lifestyle of a largely rural area, and the faster-paced, socially-stratified cosmopolitanism of towns beyond its boundaries, came into sharpest relief in the rituals of the funeral. Factors such as physical isolation, inhospitable terrain, poor communications, a small middle class, and the predominance of an old-fashioned farming populace, combined to sustain attitudes which continued to attach immense value to traditional funeral ritual throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century.

This is not to deny the existence of the "typical" Victorian obsequies. There were more lavish affairs in some of the market towns, and the immigration of offcomers of middle-class extraction together with the rise of an indigenous merchant class probably accounts for the more

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[1] Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, (London,1973), p. 35.

sophisticated proceedings. Indeed, there was a noticeable town/country split even within Cumbria itself, suggesting that conditions in the towns more closely paralleled those of the larger urban centres further afield. The greater population of Kendal, for example, meant a greater number of deaths, an earlier need for a cemetery, and thoroughfares better suited to the fine entourages typical of middle-class funerals elsewhere. Yet, despite the fact that certain more worldly people sent off their dead in style -- while the socially less prominent carefully took note of what was deemed "respectable" -- the panoply does not appear to have reached the dizzy heights of extravagance common in the big city.

As for the country funerals, they were characterised more by stress on community involvement than on expensive material trappings. Village obsequies were not so much concerned to put on a display for spectators as they were to actively engage participants, and the large numbers they frequently drew probably signified a sense of loss and respect on the part of the many locals who knew the bereaved family well. As an added incentive of course, particularly for those less closely related to the deceased, was the welcome opportunity for socialization promised by the funeral tea.

As the atmosphere of the country funeral was rather different from that of the larger town, so the role of the rural undertaker was at odds with that of his urban counterpart. Rather than a flamboyant master of ceremonies

whose chief value lay in his ability to co-ordinate the activities of an army of drapers, tailors, carpenters, upholsterers and so forth, the village carpenter was a craftsman whose prime responsibility was the fashioning of a coffin. It seems probable, in light of the rapport which still exists between the village joiner and his customers, that he has usually been a valued and trusted member of the community, an artisan whose sense of responsibility and pride in his personal skills, deemed the handling of a funeral as much a community service as a business venture.

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In terms of its theoretical underpinnings, this study supports Badone's thesis of the primacy of socio-cultural context in the fashioning of death response, while also accepting, in principle, the model of cultural evolution postulated by Aries. It also stresses that any discussion of changing attitudes to death must consider issues of gender. Few historians have made gender distinctions in their discussions of death culture. Aries and Stannard, and others discussing the breakdown of community networks as they pertain to death, have tended to gloss over the details of a transformation which, as this study has shown, effectively appropriated the traditional roles of women. The "tame death" -- the prevalent ethos for a considerable period of Western history -- seems to have hinged on the continuance of many customs which were not only family or community-based, but

were, in their enactment and in their transference, women-centred.

Equally significant to its historiographical contribution, this investigation illustrates the immense value of the small-scale study as an arbitrator of general theory. The hypotheses of Curl and Morley, which attribute the rise of the materialistic funeral to the Victorian era, and the "denial of death" which Aries and Stannard see as a natural consequence of commercialisation, professionalisation, and the widening spheres of influence of public institutions generally, may well depict the larger picture, but this study demonstrates that the overriding cultural climate does not necessarily preclude the possibility that pockets of anachronistic culture can be sustained within it. Indeed, given the paucity of studies of this nature, it is by no means certain that the continuities in death rituals described here were not more widespread. If the longevity of Cumbrian rituals can be attributed to a protracted state of equilibrium between culture and environment, then it is not unreasonable to assume that other relatively stable areas have perpetuated comparable death customs. As we have seen, rural areas elsewhere, and some working-class parts of larger cities, have maintained customs similar to those found in Cumbria. One wonders how "typical" the celebrated Victorian funeral really was.

The manner in which a society copes with death at a collective level has implications in terms of emotional response. Several historians have observed that the older ways of coping with death seemed to provide a context wherein death could occur "naturally", and Stannard has claimed that smaller, close-knit communities with a strong sense of their cultural autonomy and history, provided an environment within which death's impact, although traumatic, was nevertheless contained and eased.

It has generally been agreed by historians, anthropologists and psychologists, that where the bereaved controlled their own rituals such rites probably provided an effective therapy for individual mourners. As such rites have passed into the hands of specialists, this value has been diminished. Thus, although the practical side of death has increasingly been removed from the domestic sphere, paradoxically, in emotional terms death has increasingly became the "problem" of the individual family and its members. With lessening impact at the community level, the attenuation of traditional coping skills, and a loss of familiarity with death as a result of a falling death-rate and institutionalisation of the dying, the emotional vulnerability of the family appears to have increased.

To a large degree the outward signs of this process have now begun to take place in Cumbria. Its village-based culture has been transformed since mid-century, and many old traditions have been lost, replaced by practises dictated by public institutions - although, as we have seen, some customs are still managing to survive. Cumbria, having committed itself to the modern world in so many ways, is now susceptible to a myriad of influences from outside its boundaries.

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Ellen Badone has stressed that changing responses to death, "...cannot be seen in isolation, but must be seen as part of a complex pattern of mutually reinforcing and interdependent transformations in many different domains." [2] This analysis of the changes and continuities in death-related rituals of Cumbria offers a somewhat unconventional perspective on the process of socio-cultural evolution, and provides illuminating insights into social relationships and community values. Above all, in illustrating the fact that changes in death customs must always be seen as an indicator of related changes in other major areas, this examination makes it abundantly clear that any study of death and the dying, must ultimately be a study of life and the living.

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[2] Badone, p. 19.

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WPR/7. Papers relating to the Crosby Ravensworth Parish Hearse.

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APPENDIX A

Located at the juncture of social, cultural and anthropological history, this thesis probes some fairly delicate areas, dealing with personal and local issues of a type that have rarely been historically documented; in fact, to the writer's knowledge this is the first small-scale study to deal specifically with the history of mortuary customs in rural England. As such it has employed a methodology appropriate to the sensitive nature of the realms of human experience with which it seeks to deal. Although the works of folklorists have been used to access information on earlier periods, and archival material has informed the analysis for much of the nineteenth century, this study follows closely the methodological precedents set by several researchers who have emphasised the importance of oral evidence as a means of accessing historical knowledge which would otherwise remain unavailable.[1]

As Paul Thompson has pointed out, oral testimony is a particularly valuable source of knowledge for historians of rural areas. This thesis shows that as far as death rituals

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[1] See, for example, Elizabeth Roberts, A Woman's Place,(Oxford and New York, 1984); David Clark, Between Pulpit and Pew, (Cambridge, 1982); Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past, (Oxford, 1978); and Trevor Lummis, Listening to History, (London, 1987).

are concerned, oral evidence has much to say about the practices of both the countryside and the town. Whereas documentary sources for this region offer information on the funerals of the more affluent town-dwellers, archives remain largely silent on the rituals of those financially and socially less prominent, whether rural or urban. Thus, in this regard, "...given the inadequacy of other sources, oral evidence stands alone as the only major resource for large areas of experience." [2]

Although oral history has come under fire for its alleged "unreliability" and "subjectivity", such potential problems are by no means exclusive to this particular methodology. In fact, it can be legitimately argued that one of oral history's most important contributions to historiography is the attention it has drawn to the issue of bias in the interpretation of all historical sources. As oral historians have observed, documentary material was produced for any number of purposes, but historical study was certainly not one of them. Official reports, letters, newspapers and so forth, commonly reflect biases which are easily overlooked by a culture with an implicit, (and often unwarranted) respect for the written word.

Oral history reminds historians that documentary evidence is not the actual experience itself, but a human perception of

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[2] Trevor Lummis, Listening to History, (London, 1987), p.21.

that experience, and furthermore, that the perception often originated in an oral form. Inherently, it is no more "true" than evidence generated by an interview. It has been suggested, in fact, that as social pressures to record an event in an "acceptable" way may diminish with the passing of time, information gleaned in an interview situation and offered in retrospect, may be more reliable than documentary evidence contemporaneous with the event in question. [3]

A heightened awareness of possible sources of prejudice endows oral history techniques with some distinct advantages over documentary research methods. The traditional historian, lacking regular prompts from the real world, is more liable to be lulled into a false sense of academic neutrality. In contrast, the oral historian's constant interaction with human subjects sustains an acute awareness of the problems inherent in attempting any form of historical explanation. For the oral historian, aspects of the research situation which may have the potential to influence the results of the study: the physical location of interview, the age, gender, and class of respondent relative to the interviewer, and so on, are not easily ignored in a context where the dynamics of human discourse are paramount. The historian's awareness of sources of bias is the single most effective means of countering them.

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[3] This is particularly relevant in the case of private individuals with no vested interest in presenting a particular "image" to the public.

Oral history is certainly no less demanding of intellectual rigor than historical study in general. Oral historians are agreed that some basic principles and procedures must be adhered to if valid testimony is to be obtained, and careful, sensitive, questioning can to a large degree offset potential distortions. It is generally accepted that one of the best ways in which an interviewer can gain reliable information is by encouraging the interviewee to construct as complete a historical context as possible. Internal consistency and intrinsic coherence are vital clues to the authenticity of oral evidence, and the more details supplied, the greater the probability that evidence will be accurate. Testimony regarding concrete, first-hand, experience is apt to be more reliable than that which delves into attitudes and feelings, which are more susceptible to change over time; similarly, caution must be exercised in accepting generalisations about the past, as such statements frequently reflect social norms, and may in fact conflict with the details of lived experience.[4]

In the final analysis, the authenticity of oral evidence can best be deduced by corroboration from other sources -- written or oral. Clark and Lummis have stressed the value of correlating oral sources with documentary evidence where

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[4] Nevertheless, the recall of attitudes, even if mis-remembered, can be a useful indicator of the power of collective values and the way they can sometimes obscure or confuse individual memory.

possible as a way of either substantiating hypotheses or of drawing attention to discrepancies which might contradict generally held theories, and which can then form the focus of more comprehensive analysis.[5] In the current study correlation with written sources was attempted where possible, but, in view of the dearth of documentary material, in some cases verification was feasible only through comparison with other spoken testimony.

*

The oral component of this study is based on evidence derived from open-ended, loosely-structured interviews with forty persons indigenous to the area. The sample comprises two discrete groups: funeral directors, and elderly persons having no official connection with undertaking. Funeral directors were usually interviewed at their place of work; and the elderly respondents were visited either in their own homes or in their residential institutions. The respondents were located either informally through neighbourhood networks, (the writer resided for a year in a small community where it was relatively easy to make contact with locals), or through a more formal approach which involved either writing to or telephoning retirement homes, and arranging interviews through an intermediary.

With regard to cohort composition, two points should be stressed. In terms of the elderly participants, no

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[5] Clark, p.46, and Lummis, p.83.

deliberate attempt was made to construct a sample stratified according to socio-economic criteria, nor was religious denomination a factor which informed the selection of such individuals. The prime concern was rudimentary: to seek out elderly persons native to the area, who possessed the mental competence and alacrity to provide useful testimony, and who were comfortable with the idea of talking about death.[6] Nor was gender an organizing category; originally, an attempt was made to contact equal numbers of elderly males and females, but the difficulties inherent in locating elderly males precluded this type of sample structure. Although the majority of undertakers were males, most of the elderly respondents were females.

The original intent of the study had been to examine death-customs from the old county of Westmorland, but this also proved problematic, insofar as it became apparent during the course of some of the interviews, that many of the older residents who were initially contacted through a third person originated either from Cumberland, the Furness district of Lancashire, or west Yorkshire. Thus, although most respondents had lived most of their lives in Westmorland, a significant number grew up in other parts of what is now Cumbria, and consequently the geographical parameters of the

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[6] The sample did in fact mirror the broader social and religious composition of the area, in that a large number were from farming families, and belonged to the Anglican church.

study were broadened to encompass a larger area than had originally been intended.

Trevor Lummis has claimed that oral history produces the "underside" of history, and that the small-scale studies in which the oral historian engages provide "thick description" through which general trends are often revealed. Conversely, oral history can uncover the complexities of life which are sometimes masked by general trends. As such it can indicate "misconceptions in the dynamics of social change." It is the nature of this relationship between large-scale trends and the experiences of individuals, which this study of death-related rituals explores.

APPENDIX B

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

NAME	DATE OF BIRTH
Marjorie Noble	1918
Mary Noble	1914
Isabella Stevenson *	1907
Laura Dennison *	1906
Sara	1904
Eleanor Mackie	1910
Gilbert Parkinson	1913
Alice Taylor *	1918
Marjorie Prickett *	1912
Ernest B. *	1910
Mrs. Atkinson *	1913
Mrs. Minnie Callaghan	1898
Gladys Callaghan	1926
William Callaghan	1925
Bert Lambert *	1924
Mrs. E. *	1931
Mrs. Fawcett *	1905
Mrs Sly	1920
Miss Roberts	1908
Francis Ward	1908
Elsie Wilson	1903
Marjorie Duncan *	1914
Annie *	1896
Thompson *	1914
Grace	1920
Jenny *	1901
Alice Cross *	1912
Mr. D.	1914
Miss Wilson *	1910

UNDERTAKERS

Mr. Martindale
Mr. F.
Mr. C.
Mr. D.
Mr. Du.
Mr. Baines and partner
Mr. G.
Ms. Ridding
Mr. Wren
Mr. Dewhurst

* Indicates a respondent from farming background. Some respondents requested anonymity, therefore initials or first names only have been supplied.

FIG. 1 PHYSICAL FEATURES OF CUMBRIA AND SETTLEMENTS MENTIONED IN TEXT

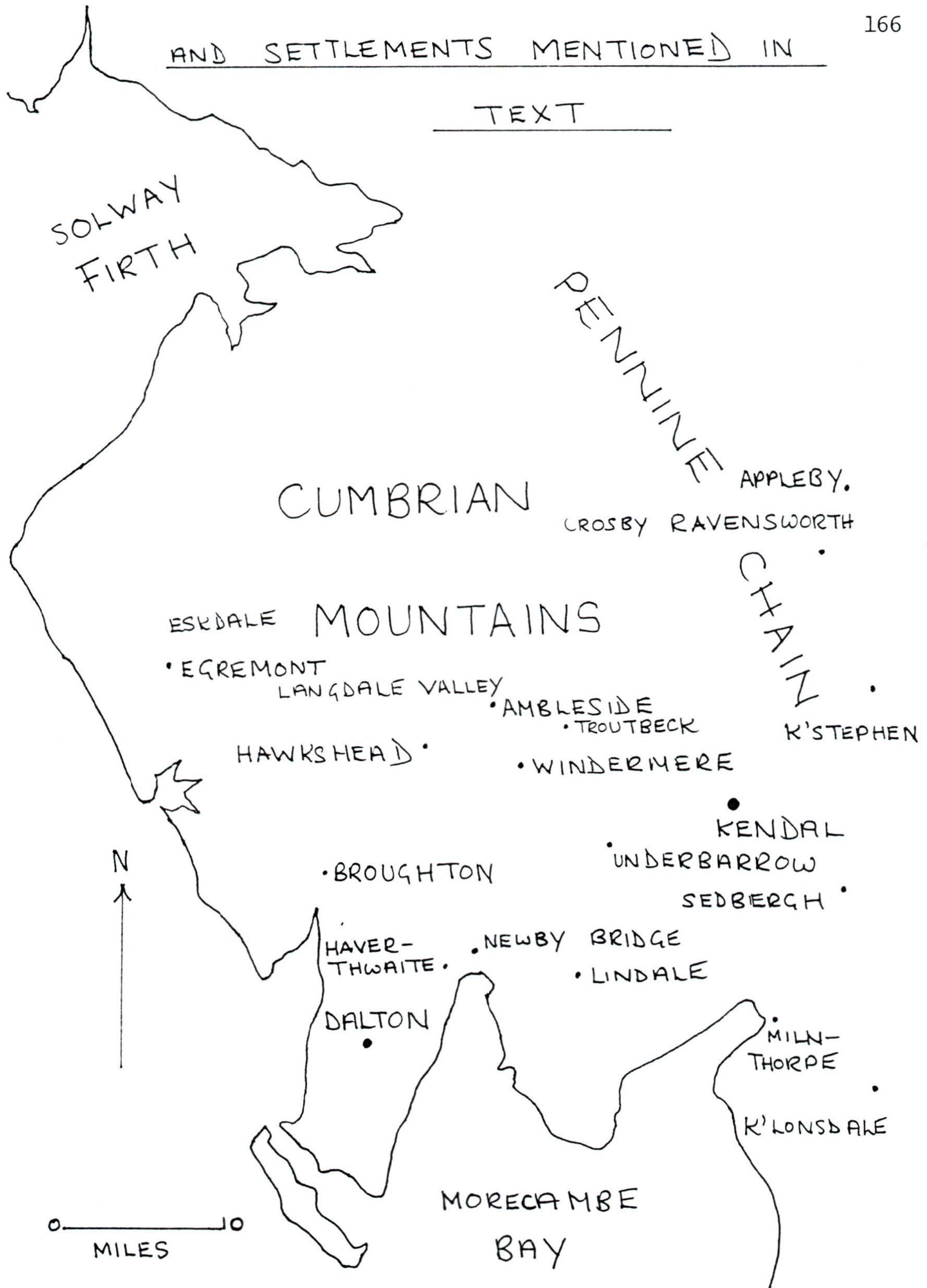

FIG. 2 CUMBRIA'S POSITION RELATIVE TO THE REST OF ENGLAND

VITA

Surname: Schorb Given Names Brenda Doreen

Place of Birth: Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, England

Date of Birth: 14 January 1951

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1984 to 1992
City of Leeds and Carnegie College (U.K.)	1969 to 1972

Degrees Awarded:

B.A. (Honours)	University of Victoria	1989

Certificates Awarded:

Certificate in Education	Leeds and Carnegie College	1972

Honours and Awards:

S.S.H.R.C. Fellowship (pending)	1992-1992
University of Victoria Fellowship	1989-1991
Canadian Daughters League Award (History)	1985

Publications:

'Mortal Remains', a review of Sylvia M. Barnard To Prove I'm Not Forgot: Living and Dying in a Victorian City (M.U.P., 1990), in The Local Historian (Journal of the British Association for Local History), Vol. 21, No. 1, February 1991.

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Title of Thesis: DEATH IN THE LAKE COUNTIES: Changes and Continuities in Rituals Related to Death and Burial in Cumbria, 1830-1990

Author

(Signature)

BRENDA DOREEN SCHORB

(Name in Block Letters)

31 August 1992

(Date)