Review Essays

DEALING WITH THE EARLY MODERN DEAD

Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England. By PETER MARSHALL. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp. xii+344. $74.00.

The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500-1670. By VANESSA HARDING. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi+343. $65.00.

All of a sudden, it seems, the dead are de rigueur among historians of Britain. Perhaps, demographically and psychologically, this preoccupation reflects the aging of the baby-boom generation itself, as it experiences the deaths of its elders and contemplates its own mortality. In reality, historiographically (and less glibly), death studies have flowered since a groundbreaking book by Philippe Ariès first appeared in French in 1977.[1] For example, there appeared in this journal in January 2000, a review article of three books that discuss death—by David Cressy, Ralph Houlbrooke, and Judith Maltby—and the list of major publications on the subject does not end there.[2] Ariès was a historical demographer with a penchant for social and cultural history, and his influence is still visible in the books under review here.

Peter Marshall's focus is on religious beliefs about the dead in Reformation England in the period from 1480 to 1630, whereas Vanessa Harding's book is on "social practice rather than interiorized experience" in dealings with the dead in

[1] P. Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977); translated as *The Hour of Our Death* and published in London, 1983.

[2] S. Hindle, "Prayers for the Dying in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 1 (January 2000): 99–105. See also the volume edited by B. Gordon and P. Marshall, *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000); C. M. Kolofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke, 2000). For earlier collections see Ralph A. Houlbrooke, ed., *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London, 1989); J. Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London, 1981).

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what were Europe's two largest cities by the mid-seventeenth century (p. 7). The result, in terms of methods, source materials, and even subjects, is two quite different books but ones that share certain strengths. Both are impressively researched, elegantly written, and well produced by their publishers. Both engage with questions of "change over time," which is a refreshing departure from a past generation's virtual obsession with structure and stasis in Tudor and Stuart political and religious life. Both authors, moreover, concern themselves with the question whether religious change played a role in redefining the role of the dead in early modern society. On this central issue they are not always in agreement, with Marshall emphasizing the amount of upheaval brought about by the abolition of purgatory and prayers for the dead, while Harding tends to stress continuity and order. It is a special irony of Harding's book that whereas Paris remained within the Catholic faith, she argues that "networks of order" relating to the dead actually worked less effectively there than in London, where the theology of death changed with the development of Protestantism but where the forms of burial remained much as before (p. 279).

In each of the books, the authors repeatedly observe that the dead and the living "lived" in close proximity in both physical and spiritual senses, which intersected in the parish churchyard. There is no question, as Harding shows, that the dead were omnipresent in early modern cities. She estimates that more than a million persons probably died in each of the two cities in the period, with deaths in Paris, which began as much the larger of the two, possibly approaching two million. In London between 1603 and 1665 approximately 880,000 people died; in Paris during the 1670s the monthly total was between 1,000 and 2,000. The chronicler John Stow claimed to know on good authority that when the charnel for St. Paul's churchyard was emptied in 1549 it required over 1,000 cartloads to carry the bones to Finsbury Fields. When the medieval hospital St. Mary Spital was excavated in 2001, the excavators found evidence of 11,000 interments (pp. 17, 91, 93–94). In both places infant and child mortality rates were huge, amounting to perhaps 40 percent of deaths. At times of crisis—epidemics, sieges, food shortages—these capital cities saw staggering numbers of deaths. Paris is thought to have lost a third of its population, or as many as 100,000 people, in the siege of 1589–90; on occasion, London lost as much as a quarter of its inhabitants to epidemics, such as during the plague year of 1563 (pp. 22–25).[3] How did the living deal with death on this scale? For how individuals coped with death, Harding refers the reader to the studies by Cressy and Houlbrooke; her main concern is with how cities managed the dead in terms of physical spaces and the larger impact upon their communities (pp. 6–7). For his part, Marshall examines the dead as markers of religious development but also in the consequences of redefinitions of their status for the larger process of the Reformation in England. In this sense his book is really about "the English Reformation as an agent of social and cultural transformation" rather than about the dead per se (p. 3).

The main thrust of Marshall's book is the demise of purgatory, which he paints in cataclysmic terms, observing that it "must rank as one of the most audacious

[3] See also Paul Slack, "Metropolitan Government in Crisis: The Response to the Plague," in *The Making of the Metropolis: London, 1500–1700*, ed. A. L. Beier and Roger A. Finlay (London, 1986), p. 62.

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attempts at the restructuring of beliefs and values ever attempted in England, a kind of collective cultural de-programming" (p. 100). There seems little question that the doctrine of purgatory was a vital element in late medieval religious life, forging a link between the dead and the living. For the dead it afforded them the opportunity to ensure that they were remembered by the living and the assurance that, with the intercession of prayers, masses, and alms left in bequests, the living would endeavor to ease the passage of their souls to heavenly salvation. There is an abundance of evidence—from people's wills, tombs, and parish bede rolls; from the popularity of chantry priests and parish guilds—that late medieval Christians in England took considerable spiritual satisfaction from the institution of purgatory. They believed mightily in the doctrine. It was widely assumed that the worlds of the living and the dead overlapped. The living recorded visions of journeys of their souls in the world of the dead. People reported direct encounters with the ghosts, or revenants, of the dead. The ambiguity of people's feelings is perhaps encapsulated in the celebration of All Souls, which was arguably a double-edged phenomenon, on the one hand designed to comfort the souls of the dead but on the other also intended to keep them at bay (pp. 7–17).

Of course, the historian's awareness of the central role of purgatory in late medieval Christianity is not new. Its importance was highlighted as recently as 1992 in two chapters of a blockbuster volume by Eamon Duffy.[4] But whereas the second half of Duffy's book was a wide-ranging examination of the Reformation's "attack on traditional religion" down to 1580, the great strength of Marshall's contribution is to focus attention on one key institution over a longer period. He documents in great depth the evangelicals' ferocious attacks upon purgatory, leading to its official demise in the reign of Edward VI, its limited revival in the reign of Mary I, and the tensions between survival, eradication, and restoration in subsequent reigns. After 1580 there was a synthesis of old and new, in which the dead were still memorialized but in which the official doctrine of purgatory, and most of its institutional forms, were eclipsed. The critical question then appears to be how thorough the removal of intercession really was.

From Marshall's account there seems little question that the evangelicals' attack on the institution was a vigorous one. He believes it was the most divisive issue of the early years of the Reformation in England, beginning with the assaults by Simon Fish and John Frith and quickly playing into Henry VIII's state-sponsored onslaught on the church (p. 47). In their sermons and manuscripts, reformers engaged in "do-it-yourself hermeneutics," deconstructing the doctrine and inveighing against "purgatory pick-purse" for enriching the church while robbing the poor. They pilloried the doctrine of "good works" in which purgatory had a central part and accused clerics of playing upon people's fears in "feigned" warnings of eternal damnation (pp. 53–64). The attacks found resonance in the policies of Henry's government, which was happy to see the papacy blamed for the allegedly spurious invention of purgatory and which in dissolving the monasteries put an end to the saying of masses there. The dissolutions in turn led to the wholesale removal of tombs, even including royal ones such as those of Stephen and Henry I. At London Greyfriars' Church Alderman Sir Martin Bowes led the charge, selling

[4] E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), chaps. 9–10.

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off seven score of marble gravestones and nine alabaster tombs for £50. Not surprisingly, there was a sharp decline, by as much as 50 percent, in bequests for masses and prayers for the dead from the 1520s to the 1540s (pp. 64–86, 88–89).

The campaign continued still more vigorously in the reign of Edward with the dissolution of chantries, which was the final official, doctrinal assault. Purgatory was officially proscribed, if not in the prayer book of 1549, then in that of 1552. Tombs and brasses were torn out of churches on a large scale, especially in London. The greatest devastation was probably at St. Paul's, which had a chapel, charnel house, cloister, and monuments removed (pp. 104, 107). In the reign of Mary I there was a revival of prayers for the dead, which was officially encouraged, but the restoration was incomplete, the word purgatory was employed less and less in the theology of the period, and the situation of dissenters turned extremely ugly. Those arrested as heretics persisted in their attacks on the doctrine, while the government undertook ritual disinterment of those already dead. The upshot was further polarization: "Far from being emblems of continuity with a shared past, the dead had become susceptible to appropriations and politicizations of a quite unprecedented order" (p. 123).

The Elizabethan and early Stuart periods saw further official efforts to eradicate prayers for the dead, especially by Puritans, but there was still significant, if mostly low level, resistance. The ringing of bells and observing of All Souls continued, as did the making of soul cakes and the hiring of the poor to attend funerals. Only gradually did masses and prayers for the dead die out, reflecting persistence in the belief in purgatory. The Laudians made an attempt to revive the practice, which produced a predictable reaction in a context in which all things "popish" were provoking suspicion and hostility. Revival failed, however, and by the mid-seventeenth century Marshall finds that the giving of doles to the poor at funerals was dying out (pp. 126–86).

There are many strong points to note about Marshall's book. In tackling the topic of purgatory, the book examines an important piece of the mental and emotional furniture of the late medieval and early modern world. The emphasis on long-term developments in funeral practices is a breath of fresh air, because it presents narratives of change as well as ones telling about resistance and continuities. Overall, it fruitfully extends the chronology to delineate a religious and cultural *longue durée*. Unlike the work of postrevisionist historians of the English Reformation, it begins before 1560; unlike that of revisionists, it does not end the story in 1580. The author's grasp of primary source materials, including theological tracts, sermons, and published parish and church court records, is impressive.

The only major question about the big picture that Marshall paints may simply be a paradox. If the demise of purgatory represented such a radical, gut-wrenching change for the English people, why was there limited resistance and conflict over the issue, particularly in the case of the dissolution of the chantries? The author himself notes the lack, with a few exceptions, of widespread opposition (p. 101), suggesting that in the localities people either chose to follow the government's lead or silently to resist through concealment, embezzlement, purchase, or by transformation of bequests into gifts to the poor (as the evangelicals themselves proposed). Perhaps another answer is that we should not expect a single issue to unite believers in large-scale resistance and rebellion. As Marshall observes, the "religious" rebellions of 1536 and 1549 were not monocausal or purely religious

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in nature (p. 101). One wonders, however, whether the author might have found more evidence of loyalty to purgatory if he had consulted unpublished as well as published church and court records. Certainly he produces sufficient instances of fidelity to the old beliefs to show that the phenomenon was around, which raises the question whether a deeper search might have turned up significantly more cases. A final quibble about this otherwise admirable book concerns the lack of a bibliography of secondary sources. In his introduction Marshall cites the copious literature on death and the dead since Ariès's book, and his footnotes extensively cite the historiography. The omission is particularly curious in light of the fact that the volume does include a bibliography of primary sources. Is it possible that one of the world's leading academic presses was cutting corners?

Vanessa Harding's book should receive high marks for originality as well as for the depth and rigor of its research. It examines the treatment of the dead, not through the lens of theology and religious practice as Marshall's does, but through the burial practices used in London and Paris, especially focusing upon the places where people were interred. This novel approach, while obviously owing something to Ariès, makes the book a most valuable addition to early modern urban historiography. The book's strength as a piece of scholarship is that it ranges beyond burial rites to connect them to demographic conditions, religious beliefs, civic government and ceremony, and issues of commercialization and secularization. Perhaps most thematically interesting is the author's attempt to link burial practices with questions of economic and political power. The achievement is particularly impressive because of its research, which encompasses manuscript materials from the Archives Nationales and Bibliothèque Nationale as well as from English repositories, above all London's Guildhall Library.

Harding sets the scene with two introductory chapters in which, using traditional demographic history, she delineates the great impact of the dead upon the two cities in question. Then she devotes four chapters to burial places—churchyards, civic and nonparochial sites, charnel houses, and chapels, vaults, and tombs. We are left in no doubt that the parish church and its surroundings ranked among the most desirable spots to be interred. Obviously this was because the churches were considered holy places, but it was also because they acted in some measure as community centers. There the living could commune with and pray for the dead, but in addition London wardmote meetings were held in churchyards, and in Paris children played games in them (pp. 54, 73). St. Paul's Cathedral is famous for the diversity of activities and people it welcomed—meetings of the watch, the terminus point of civic and royal parades, printers and stationers, public orators and official preachers.

Burials in and around the churches were socially structured, with the middling and wealthy laying claim to areas within the church and the poorer elements, including servants, in the churchyard itself. Fees were adjusted according to the person's social station. Because of pressure of numbers, London built the New Churchyard near Bishopsgate; Paris had long had the large, nonparochial cemetery of the Innocents and another for the poor, La Trinité. Harding argues that the existence of extraparochial cemeteries in Paris made burial there more depersonalized, but this seems open to question since she also states that most London churchyard graves were unmarked. In any case, we are likely to exaggerate the permanence of burial places for their denizens because, as she shows in graphic

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detail, graves were often emptied after a short period—sometimes too short in terms of decomposition—to make room for the next body (pp. 62, 83–84).

One of the most tantalizing features of Harding's book is the question of the relationship of burials to people's beliefs about the dead. Although she begins by stating that she will eschew issues of "eschatology and systems of belief" (p. 7), she actually makes frequent reference to the impact of religious change in the two cities, which naturally invites comparison with Marshall's findings. Both authors agree that the break with the past was particularly profound in London by comparison with the rest of England. Harding shows that changes were appearing in London as early as 1560, with shorter services and the elimination of lights and processions by the clergy (pp. 190–91). But in general Harding finds the impact of the Reformation to have been limited. She notes that although Protestants questioned the holiness of churchyards, they continued to conduct burials in them (pp. 55, 67). The London elites, moreover, continued to prefer burial within the church to outside after the Reformation just as they did before, and even some reformers did not dissent from this position. After the Reformation, as before, the chancel was still the most prized site (pp. 119, 130). There were also continuities in the experiences of the two cities, despite confessional differences after the Reformation. The many monuments that proliferated in churches in both cities in the period retained the belief in remembering the dead. In London requests for prayers gradually disappeared, and in private chapels in Paris the emphasis also shifted away from intercession (pp. 157–65).

There was continuity, too, in funeral customs. The impact of liturgical changes in England was limited. The poor tended to be included in processions to the burial place and continued to receive doles and gowns from testators. Candles disappeared but hearse cloths, sometimes elaborately decorated, continued to be used, and bells, although rejected by the Reformation, were still rung. The dying retained a strong interest in the arrangement of their funerals, and their families, neighbors, and communities took active roles in the actual rites. Large-scale, elaborate, and expensive funerals continued to be held for the elites. Even the years of religious radicalism between 1640 and 1660 saw extravagant obsequies—for John Pym in 1643, the earl of Essex in 1646, and in royal style, complete with regalia and effigy, for Oliver Cromwell in 1658. Even the Levellers Thomas Rainborowe and Robert Lockyer were honored with huge funerals (pp. 257, 265).

A major change in funerals was their increasing commercialization, which was common to both cities and which appalled both Catholics and Protestants. The last rites were increasingly secular, carrying meanings that were as much social and political as they were religious. Although London lost its parish guilds during the Reformation, other institutions stepped in to take their place. The City Companies regularly attended the funerals of members, and in both cities an effort was made to include clerics and children. It also remained customary to hold a feast after the deceased was buried (p. 216). Another major shift in English funeral practices was the rise of the memorial sermon, many of which were printed, which can probably safely be attributed to the influence of Puritans. Like the sermon, the proliferation of charities after the Reformation, often in the form of bequests and foundations for the poor, also had the effect of memorializing the donor. Harding discusses the civic significance of the funeral, arguing that it was designed to represent the community in the arrangement of members in the procession and thus reinforced the

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social order. These obsequies linked the individual to the community of the living, honoring the great in the grand civic funerals and even ensuring a measure of "immortality in human memory" for the obscure (pp. 171–72).

The weaknesses in Harding's account are few. A functionalist perspective may limit her vision because it inclines her to view the management of the dead through the lens of order versus disorder. Obviously dealing with great numbers of corpses posed a great challenge to the authorities, and funerals certainly presented opportunities for the affirmation of social bonds. But the functionalist view may underestimate the symbolic significance of beliefs about the dead, with the result that the impact of the Reformation's attack upon purgatory may be underplayed. A comparison with Marshall's account suggests the two authors might not wholly agree about how much weight should be given to the demise of the doctrine of intercession. Yet Harding is aware of the sharp conflicts that occurred in sixteenth-century Paris over the burial of Huguenots, which Catholics felt was a form of "pollution"; she also cites the rise of separatism in England as marking the first major departure from standard burials (pp. 77, 279).

A second possibly contentious point concerns Harding's comparisons of London and Paris. Again using the functionalist ontology, she concludes that burials in London tended to reinforce order more effectively there than those in Paris, which is presented as more religiously divided and more socially polarized (pp. 273–77). The author may well be correct, but she does not produce very much evidence in support of her position. She also suggests that Parisians were less caring toward their dead, stating that they were "inconsiderate" and "brutal" and treated the dead as "waste disposal" (pp. 281–83). Again, these appear to be impressionistic statements that are not well substantiated in the book. Were there no instances at all of uncaring behavior toward the dead in London?

The books by Marshall and Harding have rewritten the history of the early modern dead. Their points of agreement are more significant than their disagreements, and the results of their researches are highly significant. In sum, there seems to have developed a new culture of the dead in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In England, Marshall states, there was "a profound reimagining of the afterlife" and its relation to the living (p. 188). Purgatory was on the wane, and only heaven and hell remained. Salvation was considered to be widely available, despite the doubts of some Calvinists, even for babies who were not baptized. The preferred forms of commemorating the dead came to include sermons, monuments, tombs, and inscriptions (which became longer and longer in the period). Individuals were celebrated in stone as perhaps never before: heraldry, family histories, charitable acts, service to the crown and to one's community were all memorialized. Marshall perhaps correctly links the new style of commemoration to the "cult of fame" inherent in the Renaissance concept of *virtù* and a resulting tendency toward status seeking (p. 278). The upshot, as Harding shows, was the inflation of funeral costs and, more broadly, greater and greater commercialization of the process. In these respects the subject of the dead appears to have links beyond the realm of religion to the nascent world of possessive individualism.

Lee Beier, Illinois State University

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