3 Obituarial Lives

Martin Farr

I

> [A] journalist, an intellectual, a drinking man, a gossip, a high churchman, a liturgist, a homosexual, a friend of Lord Beaverbrook, an enemy of Lord Beaverbrook, an employee and biographer of Lord Beaverbrook, a politician of the left, member of Parliament … an unreliable man of undoubted distinction. He looked and talked like a bishop, not least in the bohemian clubs which he frequented. He was the admiration and despair of his friends and acquaintances. He died yesterday in London at the age of 71.[1]

12 August 1976 could be given as the date at which the traditional, defining, ethos of the obituary – *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* – breathed its last.[2] That day, Lord Bradwell (1905–76), as Tom Driberg had only recently become, became the first person to be 'outed' in theirs, an obituary in, of all places, the *Times*, *soi-disant* journal of record. Its passing did not seem to discourage the obituarially minded from quoting the dictum, and invariably in Latin, in such reflections on necrological writing as there were. When Driberg's heart gave up on a broiling morning in the back of a black cab *en route* from Paddington Station to his flat at the Barbican, the *Times* chose to be proactive, and spurn well-established codes of obituarial norm, precisely ten years before, as it is here christened, the 'obituarial turn': when pointed portrayal came to complement – and then threaten to overwhelm – mere record.

Even given the relatively rarefied realm in which they exist – the 'serious' newspapers – and the length of time over which they may have been written – political careers often lasting decades – political

[1] 'Lord Bradwell', *The Times*, 13 August 1976, 14.

[2] *De mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est*: 'Of the dead nothing but good is to be said'. Obituaries were the first genre of political writing to enliven the author, perhaps because of denial: the family newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, did not carry them. He is grateful to the editors for the opportunity to animate further, for their comments, and those of Ben Copeland, Cathrine Degnen, Harshan Kumarasingham, and Tony Spawforth on drafts of this chapter.

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obituaries, as well as being of their subject, necessarily reflect their time. Matters of race and gender came to obtain, but historically, class predominated, not least as obituaries were written about, by, and for, the same 'public'; *The Times* was, after all, the newspaper that 'Top People' took.[3] Indifference to the obituary for most of the century reflected broader social change: the questioning not only of those 'born to rule', but the very notion of such birthright; the mainspring for their resurrection towards its end was as much through prurience as egalitarianism. Change was marked in death. Just as the tone of piety and lamentation had changed, so had the vocabulary, and what it connoted.

As the temperature rose yet further, at that day's editorial conference Louis Heren (1919–95), deputy editor of *The Times*, was shown a yellowing proof of Driberg's notice that had been on the stocks for years. As was the norm, it was only a little more than a *Who's Who* entry rendered in prose, so Heren and his editor, William Rees-Mogg (1928–2012), wrote a new proem.[4] Driberg had been preparing to fly to Italy and a writing vacation with his friend Gore Vidal (1925–2012), a 'pansexualist' ardent that Driberg's much-flaunted memoirs, *Ruling Passions*, should be sensationalist. But there was no mention of Driberg's sexuality in the *Daily Telegraph* or *Daily Mail* obituaries; nor, for that matter, in that of the *Guardian*.[5] Henry Boyne (1910–97), the *Telegraph's* political correspondent, who would have known not only that Driberg was gay, but that his life as a gay man was so central to his being, archly polished boilerplate obituarial euphemism. ('His marriage at 46 came as a surprise to friends who had come to regard him as a confirmed bachelor.')[6]

Driberg's *Times* obituary was as explicit as those of others remained opaque. Anthony Blunt (1907–83), another septuagenarian with a public profile whose sexuality was consequential, received a substantial obituary ('most extraordinary of double lives') almost devoid of personal information.[7] Blunt's partner, John Gaskin (1919–88), was mentioned, though as a 'friend'. Even the *Guardian*, foregrounding Andrew Boyle (1919–91), who had revealed Blunt's spying four years earlier, neither mentioned nor

[3] 'Top People Take the Times', *Times* marketing campaign, 1956–60.
[4] Francis Wheen, *Tom Driberg, His Life and Indiscretions* (London, 1990), 3.
[5] *Daily Mail*, 13 August 1976, 9; *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 August 1976, 10; *The Guardian*, 13 August 1976, 20. Driberg's own paper ran only a short news item: *Daily Express*, 13 August 1976, 3.
[6] *Telegraph*, 13 August 1976. Hugh Gaitskell thought Driberg unappointable. 'He's bound to be arrested in some loo.' Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest* (London, 1995), 200.
[7] 'Professor Anthony Blunt', *Times*, 28 March 1983, 12.

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intimated his treachery for all that it was germane to Boyle's own specialism.[8] Bob Boothby (1900–86) departed on the very cusp of the turn: though it was widely known, the *Telegraph* chose not to mention that for years Boothby ('belonged more to the 18th than the 20th century') had, in the *argot* of the time, cuckolded Harold Macmillan (1894–1986) through his long-standing affair with Dorothy Macmillan (1900–66).[9] For the *Times* obituaries editor John Grigg (1924–2001), allusion sufficed ('he had earlier done Macmillan a grave personal wrong').[10]

Driberg's *Times* obituary was the hyphen which joined the eras: though its indiscretion was without precedent, it was also about a matter of fact, and inasmuch as it was both true and not widely known (publicly of a public figure), constituted 'news'. Newspapers were perforce concerned with news, and an obituary – as distinct from a death notice – was the opposite. Yet the public disclosure was both news and comment, the coexistence of which foreshadowed their blurring. Such matters were of more usual interest to that section of the press – in 1976 almost all of it – which did not routinely carry obituaries. They became of greater sensitivity, precisely ten years later. The 'obituary aesthetic' – euphemism in peccadillo, anonymity in authorship – meant that mentioning the cause of death of even the relatively young had long been eschewed, and the new, unknown, AIDS pandemic meant that many who perished – the relatively young especially – might wish to conceal the identity of their illness; some, partly in consequence, were outed in life.

The historic maleness of obituaries – both subjects and writers – was even more notable than their apparent heteronormativity. In that political obituaries concerned those who had occupied prominent public office in the living past, obituarial women were largely final-paragraph spouses – a sentence, even; a matrimonial clause – in the notice of their esteemed husband. Or were merely agents of reproduction, with those to whom they may have had issue often given greater prominence. In Lord Birkenhead's substantial – for its time – obituary, his wife, Margaret (against whom he had earlier done grave personal wrong), exists in nine words, as many as his father-in-law.[11] Hence, perhaps understandable, overcorrections. (Florence Horsbrugh [1889–1969], the first Conservative woman Cabinet minister, over-eulogised for her 'many victories for feminism'.)[12] Patriarchal norms persisted. Ninety years later, the *Guardian*, historically the most feminist newspaper, alone,

[8] Andrew Boyle, 'Fall of a Fellow Traveller', *Guardian*, 28 March 1983, 13.
[9] *Telegraph*, 17 July 1986, 4. [10] 'Lord Boothby', *Times*, 18 July 1986, 14.
[11] 'Lord Birkenhead', *Times*, 1 October 1930, 17.
[12] 'Baroness Horsbrugh', *Times*, 8 December 1969, 10.

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decided to print an obituary of an infamous serial killer of women – the prolonged failure to apprehend whom caused embarrassment for successive governments – and was excoriated.[13]

It was both the challenge and the reward that, despite the pressure of an often unexpected deadline, the obituary is expected to endure. One Labour MP elected in 1964, aged 35, died three years later. Harold Evans (1928–2020) thought that the *Times* ought to carry an obituary, and asked another Labour MP to write it. Though grieving at the loss of his friend, Roy Hattersley would be pleased he agreed.[14] In the future, 'PhD students from mid-Western universities, biographers of politicians who lived longer and therefore did more, amateurs who are just interested in the past – will stumble across the name Christopher Rowland and, if I did my job half-adequately, realise that he might have played a greater part in British history.'[15] Other than Hattersley's – anonymous – obituary, all other notices of Rowland's death were more concerned with how unwelcome the consequent by-election would be for a beleaguered Harold Wilson (1916–95).

Political obituaries were a specific branch of obituarial genre, albeit one that once constituted the overwhelming majority of provision. The American culture of newspaper obituary – dozens at a time, an International Association of Obituarists, conferences – being democratic (or, indiscriminate) did not apply to political lives, the conventional subjects of whom were the antithesis of the voiceless. As is not uncommon with practitioners as distinct from observers, there was little self-reflection; Rowland's was a commission. Even so prolific a political obituarist as Anthony Howard (1934–2010) or Tam Dalyell (1932–2017) barely mentioned them in their own writing, or in their writing on others. Obituaries of obituarists similarly tended to not take note. Reflections on so *recherché* a genre of political writing were rare, both before and after the turn.

II

> [O]bituaries editor … [was] a job which gave full scope to his interest in the minutiae of political history; to his curiosity about humanity and its weaknesses; to his fascination with the way society works; and to his not inconsiderable delight in making mischief.[16]

[13] Duncan Campbell, 'Peter Sutcliffe', *Guardian*, 20 November 2020, 7; Elisabeth Ribbans, 'Was It Right to Give Peter Sutcliffe a Guardian Obituary?', *Guardian*, 23 November 2020, 4.
[14] *Times*, 6 November 1967, 20.
[15] Roy Hattersley, *The Times, Lives Remembered, Obituaries from 1993* (Blewbury, 1993), iv.
[16] 'Anthony Howard', *The Times*, 20 December 2010, 46.

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Obituaries, in both quantity and quality, extent and form, have always been a particular interest for the British press, part of a broader national proclivity for biography, as Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) and Lytton Strachey (1880–1932) contrastingly demonstrated. Truistically, though newspaper journalism was a trade, obituaries came to be held to be an art. Rees-Mogg's predecessor, Sir William Haley (1901–87), an expansionary, egalitarian, editor between 1952 and 1966, reflected that though '[e]pitaphs, eulogies, elegies, threnodies, panegyrics are now in disuse', obituaries persisted.[17] They were, from the outset, imbued with values and assumptions of the day; the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which first dealt in the currency from 1778, made such concerns titular. But the *Times* became the principal publisher, recording significant deaths ever since its birth in 1785. Elsewhere obituary coverage was inconsistent, at times but a list ('Death has been busy during the past twelve months.')[18] The Victorian appetite for life-writing meant that John Delane (1817–79) was the first editor to prepare authoritative accounts written when the subject was alive (his obituary of Victoria [1837–1901], at 60,000 words, remains the longest). Biography mattered to the people, obituaries mattered to the paper, and the *Times* mattered to that eminent monument of Victorian necrology, Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) (1885). But obituaries were still a matter for news pages; only in 1920 was there an obituaries editor, and a daily page came later still. One evening during her father-in-law's wartime coalition – beset as the Prime Minister was, markedly, by the *Times* – Cynthia Asquith (1887–1960) found Geoffrey Dawson (1874–1944), its editor, ruminating about obituaries, and 'how awful it was when he was taken by surprise and had to sit up all night at ghoulish writing'. Dawson went through them every few months, 'but all the same, Jo Chamberlain's the only case in which they were fully prepared'.[19]

Haley was the most obituarially engaged editor to that point.[20] Obituaries editors at the *Times* by the 1950s were well-established, well-known, indeed even famous, journalists. The first, Frederic Lowndes (1868–1940), Rupert Hart-Davis (1907–99) recalled, 'was extremely deaf, and every day one of the sub-editors would fling open the door of his room and bellow: "Any OBITS today, Lowndes?".[21]

[17] William Haley, 'Rest in Prose: the Art of the Obituary', *The American Scholar*, 46:2 (1977), 206–11; 206.
[18] *Telegraph*, 31 December 1872, 5; 'although the roll is swelled by no name of absolute greatness'.
[19] Cynthia Asquith, 24 June 1915, *Diaries 1915–1918* (London, 1968), 47.
[20] Haley, 'Prose', 207; Iverach McDonald, *A Man of the Times* (London, 1976), 126.
[21] Rupert Hart-Davis to George Lyttelton, 22 January 1956, *The Lyttelton Hart-Davis Letters, Correspondence of George Lyttelton and Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955–56* (London, 1978), 64.

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Unable to hear, but not to see, Lowndes spent days in the Athenaeum, scrutinising fellow members for intimations of mortality (Pall Mall and St James's might be considered a cordon of obituarial antechambers). Colin Watson, appointed by Haley in 1956 with no prior experience or even special interest, survived as obituaries editor until 1982, tasked 'in addition to preparing each night's deaths, to a survey of perhaps 100 or more obituaries to see what was up to snuff and what wasn't', he recalled. 'How fared HM? Was the PM up to date?'[22] When, owing to industrial disputes, the *Times* was not printed for most of 1979, there was no obituary column in British newspapers. Absence offered opportunity for the *Telegraph*, which already had a much larger circulation, but its editor, Bill Deedes (1913–2007), told Hugh Massingberd (1946–2007), whose suggestion it was, 'Rather bad form, dear boy, to take advantage of the absence of "Another Newspaper"'.[23] Moreover, its owners, the Berry family, were 'not that keen on death'. So *Telegraph* obituaries remained news items, and shortish ones at that. Deedes averred: 'stick strictly to what's in the cuts – "In 1934, he was appointed Postmaster-General. In 1937, he was arrested for indecent exposure" – you know the formula?'.[24]

There was an inverted solipsism to the authorial anonymity which prevailed. The traditional belief was that an unsigned obituary was more likely to be read without preconception, and also written with that freedom: an account of the subject's life, and not of their relations with the author. It was also deemed to confer an authority befitting an obituary of record. 'The tradition that *Times* obituaries are anonymous is sound and not to be transgressed', Grigg stipulated, indeed, it 'was essential to their character'. 'The authorship of particular pieces, in whole or part, should not, therefore, be betrayed, even long after the event.' Unsigned notices 'can communicate a sense of magisterial objectivity while still embodying a distinctive editorial voice'.[25] Greater historical veracity there may have been in someone being 'accountable', but authority was accorded by being the word of the paper: form was, almost, content. Given the timescale of composition, many became 'elaborate composites', regularly updated, by more than several authors.[26] Anonymity was the authorial convention in the British press generally until the practice of by-lines came from the American; 'The Thunderer'

[22] Colin Watson, 'Obituaries', *The Times, Past Present Future* (1985), 107.
[23] 'Hugh Massingberd', *Telegraph*, 27 December 2007, 31.
[24] Hugh Massingberd, *Daydream Believer: Confessions of Hero-Worshipper* (London, 2001), 248.
[25] John Grigg, *The History of the Times: VI, The Thomson Years, 1966–1981* (London, 1993), 350–51, 347.
[26] Ian Brunskill, *The Times, Great Women's Lives, A Celebration in Obituaries* (London, 2014), 13.

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was the last to acquiesce, reluctant to relinquish 'that almost mystical concept', the idea, as Louis Heren put it, 'of *The Times* as a corporate body'.[27] So anonymity for obituaries was retained, and authorship embargoed for a century.[28] One who traversed Westminster and Fleet Street more than most, Woodrow Wyatt (1918–97) – a stranger to confidences – confessed, 'I have never met anyone who disclosed himself even confidentially as a *Times* obituarist'.[29]

At Printing House Square, the *Times*'s obituaries department had a separate room – 'the morgue' – to protect confidentiality of the files. The 'names of some people whose work for the feature was frequent and of exceptional value' Grigg would permit, 'provided there is no specific attribution'.[30] For politicians and journalists, the principal obituarists were, from the right, Peter Utley (1921–88), formerly of the *Telegraph*; from the left, John Beavan (1910–94) historically of the *Guardian*, and, to his left, Margaret Cole (1893–1980), an academic. For historians' obituaries, the *Times* used Roger Fulford (1902–83) and the storied A. J. P. Taylor (1906–90); for service personnel, Basil Liddell Hart (1895–1970) and Cyril Falls (1888–1971) (land), and Stephen Roskill (1903–82) (sea). Grigg recalled beneficially that *Times* obituarists 'worked with an indifference to financial reward matched only by contributors to the *Dictionary of National Biography*'.[31] One pound and one shilling per 100 words. Many writers refused payment. Only the letters page cost less to produce. Monetising, and further consecrating, *Times* associate editor Godfrey Smith (1926–2017), in a four-year paroxysm under Rees-Mogg, published over 2,500 pages of large-format hardcover books of old obituaries, almost as a rival *DNB*, decades before more commercially minded, themed, volumes proliferated.[32]

Watson was intent on simplifying the language of the articles for readers, while upholding accuracy and – pagination permitting – completeness, for historians and biographers. He established 'forward planning': 'who could best write a memoir of so-and-so which could join the others on the files, ready for use when the day came', as Iverach McDonald (1908–2006), a *Times* Director, had it; 'or, if the unexpected happened, he knew whom to ring at short notice'.[33] But it was not enough to have obits written, they needed regularly to be revised without

[27] Louis Heren, *Memories of* Times *Past* (London, 1988), 182, 173.
[28] Philip Howard, *We Thundered Out: 200 Years of the Times* (London, 1985), 164.
[29] *Sunday Times*, 11 January 1976, 37. [30] Grigg, *History*, 352. [31] Ibid.
[32] Frank C. Roberts: *Obituaries from 'The Times', 1961–1970* (Reading, 1975); *1971–1975* (Reading, 1978); *1951–1960* (Reading, 1979).
[33] Iverach McDonald, *The History of the Times, V: Struggles in War and Peace 1939–1966* (London, 1984), 231.

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exceeding whatever space was thought appropriate. Tip-offs were no less helpful on the obituaries than on the sports desk. A Peer's butler phoned. 'His Lordship does not expect to survive the night.' His Lordship's obituary appeared the next morning.[34]

Content reflected changes. With advances in printing, photographic illustrations of the dead became more prominent, but whether of the prime of life or nearer publication date had to be decided: the longer the life, the more inexhaustible the images. Before e-publishing, error was not only easier, but harder to efface. Such was the expected success of the Boxer rebellion in Peking in 1900 that Sir Robert Hart was granted an obituary on the grounds that 'we have unfortunately no reason to think that he has been spared'.[35] It was much longer than that printed when he did meet his end, eleven years later, in Berkshire.[36] Labour MP John Stonehouse (1925–88), dead too briefly to have been obituarised in 1974, had to wait fourteen years, when the fraudster's condition was permanent. On 7 October 1993 Ivor Bulmer-Thomas (1905–93), *inter alia* Labour, Independent, and Conservative MP for the same constituency in the same year (and obituarist for the *Times*), had only just posted a letter to the *Telegraph* when he suffered a fatal heart attack. The letter was published the next day in the same edition as his obituary. Which was illustrated by a photograph of Sir Ivor Broadbent Thomas (1890–1955).[37] In a marmalade-dropper, thick-cut, on 2 December 1920 the former Conservative MP Lord Desborough read about his death, 'which occurred very suddenly in Birmingham last night'. Lord Bessborough, the former secretary to the Commons Speaker, had, in fact, expired; 'the mistake arose owing to a confusion of similar sounding names on the telephone', the newspaper subsequently explained.[38]

Rather than 'immediate comment' – what the subject was, rather than what they did – and chronological convention, published sources were used; and even the yet-to-be deceased. The *New York Times* carried formal obituaries only from 1965, and Alden Whitman (1913–90), its chief obituarist, was also the first to interview his subjects, including Anthony Eden (1897–1977). Eden initially declined ('I have never given a private interview'), but assented on being told when it would be published.[39] Hugo Vickers thought the highest praise of a *Times* obituary was that it 'sniffs of an inside job'.[40] Still-rarefied obituaries were

[34] Haley, 'Prose', 208. [35] *Times*, 17 June 1900, 4. [36] *Times*, 23 September 1911, 9.
[37] *Telegraph*, 8 October 1993, 20, 23; 9 October 1993, 21.
[38] *Times*, 2 December 1920, 14; *Mail*, 3 December 1920, 5.
[39] Alden Whitman, *The Obituary Book* (London, 1971), 17–18.
[40] Hugo Vickers, *The Spectator*, 17 March 1984, 22.

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'savoured by connoisseurs who read between the lines of the traditional orotund language as though solving the cryptic crossword'.[41] In obituarial code, of Cambridge dons 'he died at Northampton' was a euphemism for having 'crossed the Styx' at Fulbourn mental hospital. Political journalists' obituaries of political journalists were saturated with euphemism.[42] She was 'vivacious'; he an 'unreliable after-dinner speaker'. And beware the 'tireless raconteur'.

The 'object of biography is to fortify self-confidence', H. H. Asquith (1852–1928), 'the last of the Romans', was said to have pronounced, monumentally; 'object of obituary notices is to increase caution'.[43] Not that the subject would know though. The key was immediacy. 'An obituary can impress itself more on the mind than later memorials', Haley maintained. 'Its subconscious influence can be great.'[44] Context was easier the more significant the figure. Praise could be authenticated by countervailing criticism, or questions posed. ('When the importance of that social revolution and the smoothness with which it was effected are set beside the surface qualities of the man who presided over it there emerges the paradox that lurks in all assessments.')[45] A formal print obituary elevated, and controversial ones benefitted from, contextual reporting. Possessed of broad historical sweep and telling detail, the model political obituary practised storytelling and accuracy, and desired balance and subtlety of judgement. Haley may have advocated 'judicial detachment', but, almost in premonition of the turn, also said he did not want the *Times* to be 'too damned courtierly'.[46] Obituaries became better written, reflecting 'the convergence of other, wider trends in journalism, notably an increase in competition at the "quality" end of the market'; indeed, they aspired to be the finest writing in a newspaper. Yet, imbued with the mortuary as they were, it was inevitable that obituaries of obituaries would eventually be mooted. 'Obituary writing is a dying art', was one view in 1971, befitting that nascent declinist decade.[47]

Then, on or about September 1986 obituarial character changed.

[41] James Fergusson, 'Hugh Massingberd', *The Independent*, 27 December 2007, 42.
[42] Michael White, 'When I Go – Just Say 'Cheerio'!, *British Journalism Review* 12:3 (2001), 21–25.
[43] Robert Bruce Lockhart, 15 September 1930, *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, 1915–1938* (London, 1973), 125.
[44] Haley, 'Prose', 211.
[45] 'Earl Attlee, O.M.', *Times*, 9 October 1967, 11.
[46] Massingberd, *Confessions*, 245.
[47] Clive Barnes, 'Introduction', in Whitman, *The Obituary Book*, 7.

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III

> Yet however irritating, or, in certain circumstances, despicable, he might appear, his intimates knew that underneath he was a sensitive, perceptive person.… It was because of something original, something distinctive, perhaps clownish, in his own disposition that he failed so signally, and honourably, to profit from his father's fame and influence. This … is what many people will miss: not the poor echo of parental braggadocio.[48]

The 'Obituary Revolution' was the hyperbolic designation for ten months that shook the road. But it was not as if, unlike the rest of Fleet Street, obituaries had resisted change. 'The obituary arrangements at *The Times* are haphazard and unsatisfactory', Rupert Hart-Davis complained, pre-empting one revolution of the turn by thirty years. 'The smallest civil servant', he reproached the editor, 'has at least a half-column about him in standing type in the office, but writers and artists are not provided for until they are eighty'. Chastened, 'Haley promised to wake the department up'.[49] Indeed, 'on becoming editor I ruled that neither titles, nor rank, nor heredity, nor mere wealth should any longer be qualifications for an obituary notice in *The Times*, but only achievement'.[50] The illusion that the post of obituaries' editor was 'held by the Recording Angel was, therefore, to a surprising degree, maintained'.[51] But there remained no serious obituarial competition to the *Times*, in 'subfusc prose style' its daily page still 'favoured a relatively narrow selection of subjects', still mainly politicians.[52] Much derived from the historic concentration of newspapers, their proprietors and journalists, uniquely, perhaps, to a single thoroughfare – a most concrete example of form informing content – and it was no coincidence that the obituarial coincided precisely with a locational revolution. At the beginning of 1986 News International journalists and printers decamped with manifest – if secret – destiny all of two miles from the western edge of the City to the East End. Violent though its consequences at times were, Rupert Murdoch's *Times* was the dignified face of digitisation and the convulsions of de-unionisation. But refugees soon appeared, heading west. A third of the *Independent*'s launch journalists came from Wapping.[53]

[48] 'Mr Randolph Churchill', *Times*, 7 June 1968, 10.
[49] Hart-Davis to Lyttelton, 22 January 1956. [50] Haley, 'Prose', 207.
[51] Grigg, *History*, 347.
[52] 'The Obituarists' Art: Lives after Death', *The Economist*, 24 December 1994, 54.
[53] Michael Crozier, *The Making of the Independent* (London, 1988), 52.

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The *Telegraph* still published only intermittent, often brief, obituaries, largely the recounting of doings; its obituary page, as such, began on 2 September 1986, when Hugh Massingberd convinced Deedes's successor to guarantee two columns daily. 'God knows we need someone', Max Hastings told him. 'We can't hope to compete with the *Times*, of course, but it's worth a try.'[54] Inspired by John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, between 1669 and 1696, between 1986 and 1994 Massingberd went on to redefine the genre.[55] 'I determined to dedicate myself to chronicling what people were really like through informal anecdote, description and character sketch.'[56] It transformed 'the Obituary column', as Hastings put it, thereby also affirming the wisdom of his decision, 'from a musty backwater of the paper into the most brilliant feature of its kind in the business'.[57]

Obituaries being an expression of 'the higher journalism', it followed that the new, idealistic, *Independent* felt that it constituted, as it did in other areas, something of a *tabula rasa*. For one thing, there were no pre-existing obituaries. From its birth on 7 October 1986, the *Independent* foregrounded obituaries, on a whole page, up to four a day, the day after death was announced, signed, written not as a journalistic exercise but by experts, with reference to published sources and interviews with those who knew the deceased. 'We sought to change the rules by signing obituaries, to give them a new dimension, and genuine authority', obituaries editor James Fergusson reflected.[58] He looked back to the *DNB* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* as the *Independent* sought to 'write a new agenda. Transparency would confer 'historic worth and veracity'.[59] They were also boldly illustrated, and so was created, as one of the paper's three founders, Stephen Glover, put it, thereby also affirming the wisdom of his decision, 'one of the most distinguished and original parts of the newspaper'.[60]

Though only marginally younger than the *Times*, the *Guardian* had an obituary page only as old as *The Independent*. Initially in its G2 features and entertainment listings tabloid, its daily, newly authored, expanded, obituaries, not unlike those of the *Telegraph* (if for somewhat different reasons), made less of Westminster-centric political obituaries *per se* and sought to be representative of public life more broadly. (The prevailing

[54] Massingberd, *Confessions*, 264. [55] *Telegraph*, 27 December 2007, 31.
[56] Fergusson, 27 December 2007.
[57] Max Hastings, *Editor: An Inside Story of Newspapers* (London, 2002), 94.
[58] Fergusson, 27 December 2007.
[59] James Fergusson, 'Death and the Press', in Stephen Glover (ed.), *Secrets of the Press* (London, 1999), 154.
[60] Stephen Glover, *Paper Dreams* (London, 1993), 85.

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gender imbalance became perhaps the more notable at a time when the country had for the first time a female head both of state and government.) In response, the *Times*, too, expanded. There had long been post-obituary 'appreciations'; they evolved into 'Lives Remembered', with feedback solicited and corrections offered. Reflecting more demotic times, the genre became one connected with readers. *The Economist* did not carry an obituary for 150 years until Bill Emmott became convinced of the need for history and humanity in its anonymously austere pages, and so 1,000 perky words appeared weekly, at the back.[61] But with coverage spread over pages, overkill threatened the impact of the obituaries page: excess was a measure of decline. There was the encroachment of entertainment, both in tone – even by 1984 Gavin Stamp sniffed 'a degree of sensationalism' – and subject – for John Grigg that the length of the obituary for Richard Burton (1925–84) conspicuously exceeded that for Arthur Koestler (1905–83), was not merely 'grotesque and insulting', or even a 'scandal', but 'a betrayal'.[62]

The ending of the Cold War coincided with something of an obituarial arms race. Ominously, the genre took the form of what the visiting American writer Marilyn Johnson dubbed 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse': *Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*.[63] The first, trying perhaps a little too hard to lead, could overstep. Anthony Howard's 'stiffs' page' (1993–99), included his own execratory obituary of Brian Masters (1932–98), Bishop of Edmonton ('One of the last relics of Graham Leonard's ten-year rule over the London diocese'), whom he reproached ('stiff and rigid views') for his opposition to women priests, and length of homily ('the best that could be said for his sermons was they tended to be short'). Complaints ensued.[64] Fred Mulley (1918–95), when Defence Secretary, famously fell fast asleep at a public event whilst sat alongside Elizabeth II (1926–2022). The *Times* presented the scene as his obituarial illustration. Objections from readers exacted a fulsome apology to Lady Mulley from the paper, as, no doubt, had the transmission of displeasure from the Palace.[65]

Indebted more to Strachey than to Stephen, seen from across the Atlantic British obituaries were now 'gossipy, contentious and cutthroat';

[61] Anne Wroe, Introduction, *The Economist Book of Obituaries* (London, 2008), 1.
[62] Gavin Stamp, *Spectator*, 3 March 1984, 13; John Grigg, 'Profile of The Times', *Political Quarterly*, 56:3 (1985), 253–61; 256.
[63] Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat: the Perverse Pleasure of Obituaries* (London, 2006), 146.
[64] 'The Right Reverend Brian Masters', *Times*, 24 September 1998, 25; 1 October 1998, 23.
[65] 'Lord Mulley', *Times*, 16 March 1995, 19, 21 March 1995, 19.

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for Elaine Showalter American obituary writing remained a matter of news 'rather than an aspect of *belles lettres*'.[66] The British were also *belles pages*: 'works of art'.[67] Given how America can appear to British eyes generally to be in a bigger font, so the pagination of its newspapers which could accommodate (encourage) prolixity. But where Fleet Street's physical density had almost been manifested in its writing, digitisation and de-unionisation made for change that was as much physical as cultural: increased pagination. The first material turn was soon eclipsed by the second. The internet – no medium could be better suited to the age of mass politics – was the transformational continuation, to which the obituary 'adapted itself seamlessly'; sprouting, for one editor, 'evergreen content'.[68] All told, the British obituary, rather than a prosaic *résumé* the timeliness of which was all-important, had become 'an opinionated gem of a biography, informed by all kinds of history, high and low, including gossip' (such indeed as had for some impugned the merits of a certain sort of high-political scholarship).[69] Anecdote peppered sketches ('On one occasion …'); notwithstanding conventions, colour encouraged each obituary to differ ('On another occasion …').

'I believe the dead have rights', Tam Dalyell had written in an introduction to his memoir – in feel an extended obituary – of his friend Richard Crossman (1907–74) 'and one of these rights is, where possible, the right of fair treatment by posterity and certainly by their friends'.[70] (Grigg was not to know quite how much longer Koestler's obituary might have been had the writer lived another ten years, or predeceased Jill Craigie (1911–99).)[71] After the turn, it needed to be said, and, online, could be: obituaries were forever revisable. Idiosyncratically and independently, they mutated. More subtle yet less euphemistic, most obituarial innovation related to genres other than the political; political obituaries looked stale by comparison, and became less common (abetted by their, living, relation, the 'profile'; a *portrait*).[72] The

[66] Johnson, *Dead Beat*, 145; Elaine Showalter, 'Way to Go', *Guardian*, 2 September 2000, B7. Nigel Starck, 'Posthumous Parallel and Parallax: The Obituary Revival', *Journalism Studies*, 6:3 (2005), 267–83.

[67] Johnson, *Dead Beat*, 146.

[68] Georgia Powell, *Telegraph*, 31 August 2016, 20.

[69] Johnson, *Dead Beat*, 148. The 'gossip' of Maurice Cowling: Ross McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–1924* (Oxford, 1974), 112, n.1.

[70] Tam Dalyell, *Dick Crossman: A Portrait* (London, 1989), 2–3.

[71] Koestler's sexual assault of Craigie was revealed publicly by her husband (*Financial Times,* 8/9 April 1995, ix); obituarists rendered it as rape: *Guardian*, 15 December 1999, 22; *The Independent*, 15 December 1999, 7.

[72] Politics ranked fourth or lower in appearances: Nigel Starck, 'Death can make a Difference: a Comparative Study of 'Quality Quartet' Obituary Practice', *Journalism Studies*, 9:6 (2008), 911–24, 917–19.

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Telegraph saw itself as having established a 'new style of honest obituary'.[73] Yet innovation perpetuated the opacity of authorial anonymity. Thus the *Independent* (which for the same reasons had eschewed parliamentary lobby journalism), intent on challenging the *Times* ('whose primacy, looking back, we perhaps overestimated')[74] as the newspaper of obituarial record. Six years after its launch, Murdoch did his best, waging a cross-subsidised price war to ensure that one day the *Times* would publish an obituary of the *Independent*. Eventually, it did.[75]

IV

> [His] political life involved a long dwindling, without there ever having quite been a solid achievement to dwindle from … furious contradictions and some force as a speaker were never enough to make Shore interesting … not halfway sensible … career less than the sum of his eloquent, serious-minded, parts.[76]

There was the obituary as revision. Edward Pearce (1939–2018) on Peter Shore (1924-–2001) provoked protests ('grotesque caricature … vindictive and petty', 'carping and mean-spirited … borderline racist').[77] By contrast, Anthony Bevins, in an obituarial commentary – an ob-ed, as it were – of Eric Heffer (1922–91) recoiled against the effusions Heffer's death had elicited.[78] 'Middle-class Labour leaders are recaptured by the Establishment', Tony Benn (1925–2014) lamented; 'Attlee is "forgiven" for being a socialist and the past is forgotten'.[79] But propinquity carried with it its own risks. After Iain Macleod (1913–70) suffered a fatal heart attack one month into his Chancellorship of the Exchequer, Rees-Mogg thought the *Times* obituary too critical, and had another written. But for so strong a personality, it privileged reverence ('statesman of spirit and conviction') over perceptiveness (not so the *Guardian*: 'Acid tongue, kind heart').[80]

There was the obituary as coeval. The death of Roy Jenkins was for Benn 'a reminder that you're at the end of the road, and if you survive, your main function is to do obituaries of people you know'.[81] Having worked as a journalist at the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1950s, Lena

[73] Editorial, *Telegraph*, 25 February 2016, 19. [74] Fergusson, 27 December 2007.
[75] 'Out of Print', *Times*, 13 February 2016, 27.
[76] Edward Pearce, 'Lord Shore of Stepney', *Guardian*, 25 September 2001, 18.
[77] Letters, *Guardian*, 10 October 2001, 24; 27 September 2001, 24.
[78] *Independent*, 6 June 1991, 27.
[79] Tony Benn, 7 November 1967, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963–67* (London, 1987), 512.
[80] *Times*, 22 July 1970, 10; *Guardian*, 22 July 1970, 4.
[81] Tony Benn, 5 January 2003, *More Time for Politics*, *Diaries 2001–07* (London, 2007), 76.

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Jeger (1915–2007) continued to write political obituaries as an MP and peer; the trades unionist Jim Middleton (1878–1962), whose journalism was part of his activism, carried on obituarising trades unionists long after he retired. Given that it seemed to the former Conservative MP Sir Edward Clarke (1841–1931) 'that an obituary notice of a man should be written by himself', he sent his own to the *Times*.[82] Sir Gerald Nabarro (1913–73) – a stranger to reticence – sent his to the *Telegraph*.[83] (At the very least) one ex-MP was personally munificent towards anyone he suspected of having the slightest influence over obituaries of ex-MPs at the *Times*.[84]

There was the obituary as critique. Cold War ideologies provided an opportunity for more sharply critical obituaries than was then the norm. The communist trades unionist Jack Dash (1907–89) both 'fought for decent wages' and managed 'to destroy a whole industry'.[85] Of Hugh Gaitskell (1906–63) and John Smith (1938–94) – the only party leaders to require obituaries – most of the conservative newspapers were laudatory as each had kept the left at bay. (It was ever thus, as seen from that left. 'The papers today are jampacked with obituaries and tributes to Tony Crosland [1918–77]'; Benn despaired at 'an emotional spasm.')[86] John Strachey (1901–63) wrote an obituary of Gaitskell – 'The unreaped harvest' – as political point settling.[87] As much applied to Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960) ('regret was not inspired by the proverbial "*de mortuis*"').[88]

There was the obituary as continuation. Rees-Mogg's Rab Butler (1902–82) was sanitised by the paper mentioning neither mollification in 1938 nor defeatism in 1940, merely the subject's '[a]ssociation with the controversial appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain', and his 'surprisingly' delayed departure from the Foreign Office in 1941.[89] Elsewhere, he 'played a prominent part', this 'Man of Munich'.[90] Butler's role in education policy however was measuredly appraised, as was that of Bridget Plowden (1910–2000), though for Edward Boyle (1923–81) the controversies of comprehensivisation were elided.[91] Macleod, additionally, received a 'leader' and tributes, as, thirty years earlier, did Sir John Gilmour, Minister of Shipping ('the first casualty of the war in the ranks of the Government').[92] As too did John Maynard

[82] *Times*, 27 April 1931, 17. [83] *Telegraph*, 19 November 1973, 3.
[84] Ian Brunskill, 'Death on file', *Times Online Obituaries*, 9 February 2006.
[85] *Financial Times*, 9 June 1989, 14; *Telegraph*, 9 June 1989, 25.
[86] Tony Benn, 20 February 1977, *Conflicts of Interest, Diaries 1977–78* (London, 1990), 42.
[87] *Sunday Times*, 20 January 1963, 25. [88] *Telegraph*, 7 July 1960, 19.
[89] *Times*, 10 March 1982, 14.
[90] *Telegraph*, 18 March 1982, 17; *Financial Times*, 10 March 1982, 7.
[91] *Times*, 2 October 2000, 19; *Times*, 1 October 1981, 16. [92] *Times*, 1 April 1940, 9, 11.

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Keynes (1883–1946) (arguably the last casualty of the war in the ranks of government).[93]

There was the obituary as recitation. For John Profumo (1915–2006), the *Telegraph* and *Times* recounted his eponymous scandal of scandals in dedicated detail.[94] 'If an obituarist dwells on these events', Dalyell added to that by Dennis Kavanagh in the *Independent*, 'it must be because it is they, not his otherwise estimable life of 48 years before, and 43 years after, 1963' that made Profumo 'a person of lasting public fascination'.[95] Anthony Eden's indulgence of Alden Whitman may also have been from feeling – at least to the Countess of Avon (1920–2021) – that the Suez Canal was less likely to flow through an American obituarial drawing, room though there was.

There was the obituary as narrative. '"*De mortuis nihil nisi bunkum*" is a comment sometimes made on politicians' obituaries', the *Telegraph* reminded readers. 'Once dead, the most disastrous politician is so often found to have had remarkable saving graces.' Apart from Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937), that is (for whom A. J. P. Taylor's literal littoral – 'died at sea' – was almost the last word).[96] The *Telegraph* used the occasion of a new public memorial to pronounce that 'Time has been unfair.' MacDonald 'was a man in an impossible situation', as a socialist trying to govern a capitalist country. 'Ineffective compromises and bitter internal conflicts become inevitable. Mr Wilson, like Mr MacDonald, is now wrestling against the facts of life.'[97] The following week Mr Wilson lost Mr Rowland's by-election.

There was the obituary as augury. Imperialist orthodoxy in notices in the *Times* around 1900 provided a self-congratulatory thread teleologically tugged decades later ('he found it a land of danger and left it a land of hope').[98] The appeal for obituary pages in celebrating imperial lives were conceivably to offer succour of an idealised past against an ignominious present. Moreover, where the press had once been a culture reflective of micro-geopolitics – in London EC4 – the *fin de siècle* fracturing of the United Kingdom – from London SW1 – into different parliaments may have segregated readerships, and obituaries increasingly became (sub) national lives. Donald Dewar (1937–2000), connecting the two, was in almost every notice 'father of the nation'.[99] Paternity was not contested

[93] *Times*, 22 April 1946, 5, 7.
[94] *Times*, 11 March 2006, 76. And forgiven. Christine Keeler (1942–2017) fared less well.
[95] *Independent*, 11 March 2006, 41.
[96] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), 28.
[97] *Telegraph*, 13 March 1968, 16.
[98] 'Lord Howick' (Evelyn Baring), *Times*, 12 March 1973, 14.
[99] 'Donald Dewar', *Times*, 12 October 2000, 25; *Guardian*, 12 October 2000, 22.

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with his reputationally sullied duellist Alex Salmond (1954–2024) who was in almost as many notices 'towering but divisive'.[100]

There was the obituary as satire – the facetious turn. (Smith may well be dead, but would 'still beat Major'.)[101] With the passing of the Commonwealth Immigration Act 1968 *Private Eye* mocked-up a *Times* obituary for the Labour Party.[102] Later that year, trying perhaps a little too hard to stay on-trend, *Punch* ran an awkward series of 'coming obituaries' for public figures in peril.[103] Indeed, the most common usage of 'political obituary' came to become as a real-time shorthand for a career in difficulty, at risk of premature termination. There came, in less forgiving times ('[He] enjoyed more power than almost any other British politician of his era. The only problem was he did so in a country other than his own'), the snide turn.[104]

There was the obituary as memoir, such as Kingsley Martin ('I had a tremendous row with him') on William Beveridge.[105] There were the near-self-obituaries of (inevitably) newspapermen. The *Telegraph*'s notice of its erstwhile owner Lord Hartwell (1911–2001) blamed on him 'the true state of the *Telegraph*'s affairs', that the present owner Conrad Black had set himself selflessly to save when he bought the title in 1985.[106] At the *Sunday Express* John Junor (1919–97; 'room for debate about [his] success as an editor')[107] recoiled when the *Telegraph* published what he regarded as a 'vitriolic and cruel obituary' of the wife of Lord Stevens, proprietor of Express newspapers.[108] Applying the ornamental turn, Woodrow Wyatt defended her honour ('not often that attractive women make so great a success out of life').[109]

There was the obituary as manifesto. A political career cut short by death was by definition also an opportunity. Roy Jenkins, bereft, having just heard of Gaitskell's death, was phoned by the *Daily Express* for a tribute, the journalist expressing disapproving surprise when the deceased's disciple felt unable. 'Harold Wilson, who is in New York, was able to give us a very moving one without difficulty' Jenkins was informed. '"Yes," I said bitterly, "but you have to remember that he was very fond of Gaitskell," and rang off.' Weapons-grade sarcasm betrayed a revulsion

[100] 'Alex Salmond', *Times*, 14 October 2024, 46.
[101] *Private Eye*, 20 May 1994, 1.
[102] *Private Eye*, 15 March 1968, 8.
[103] *Punch*, 31 July–25 December 1968.
[104] 'Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon', *Times*, 24 December 2018, 38.
[105] *New Statesman*, 22 March 1963, 413.
[106] 'Lord Hartwell', *Telegraph*, 4 April 2001, 25.
[107] 'Sir John Junor', *Telegraph*, 5 May 1997, 21.
[108] 'Lady Stevens of Ludgate', *Telegraph*, 21 February 1989, 23; John Junor, *Memoirs* (London, 1990), 328.
[109] Lord Wyatt, *Telegraph*, 24 February 1989, 18.

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that a man he 'deeply distrusted' might succeed as leader a man 'I loved and revered'.[110] Gaitskell's deputy, George Brown (1914–85) was able not only to give a very moving tribute without difficulty ('a giant among men')[111] but also to resume his own publicity tour ('I think I know the man well enough to know he would want me to.'[112] Dalyell received an urgent phone call from Fergusson. 'Would you do an obituary for John Smith for tomorrow's paper?' 'Five hundred words top-up?' Dalyell asked, assuming, not least as it regarded a party leader who had already suffered a serious heart attack, there was a draft on file. 'No, the cupboard is bare. Three thousand.'[113] Legend was that Gordon Brown spent too long writing his obituary of his mentor – who a year earlier he might have expected to succeed – whilst Tony Blair was off on his own publicity tour.

There was the obituary as agency. Macmillan's death, at the peak of Thatcherism, was thus viewed through that prism. Illustrated incongruously by a photograph of Thatcher, trying perhaps a little too hard – as Elizabeth II herself regularly experienced – to genuflect, at his feet, the tone of the *Telegraph* obituary was anything but reverent ('animated long after it had ceased to be relevant with the generous urge to defeat the scourge of unemployment … helped to weaken the defences against the more imminent threat of inflation').[114] Wilson expired during the juvenescence of Blair's own leadership of the Labour Party, and was epitaphically so cast.[115] V. S. Pritchett's George Orwell was the 'wintry conscience of a generation'.[116]

There was the obituary as moment. Before Wilson became Prime Minister, Peter Hill commissioned a journalist to prepare a *New Statesman* obituary. 'You can't say that about him when he's dead', Hill told the author. 'Well, it's all true', Gerald Kaufman (1930–2017) replied, 'and I can't say it when he's alive'.[117] Kaufman shortly thereafter joined Wilson's press team. Of Wilson's *Times* obituary, three years later a young man went to the *Private Eye* office on Greek Street and showed Richard Ingrams a galley proof ('Revised and updated Oct. 1966'). Ingrams paid £10, and it led the next issue of the magazine. 'It is always difficult when a man is in high office and still comparatively young to

[110] Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London, 1991), 147.
[111] *Telegraph*, 23 January 1963, 20. [112] *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 January 1963, 15.
[113] Tam Dalyell, *The Importance of Being Awkward: the Autobiography of Tam Dalyell* (Edinburgh, 2011), 245.
[114] 'Macmillan', *Telegraph*, 30 December 1986, 11. [115] *Times*, 25 May 1995, 21.
[116] *New Statesman*, 28 January 1950, 36.
[117] Peter Hill, 'Bringing the Dead Back to Life', *British Journalism Review*, 7:3 (1996), 11–15, 13.

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allot him a length', the chief of the *Times* obituary department had pondered. 'At the moment I am inclined to think that we need 5000 words.' They included:

> The Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson, P.C., O.B.E., died _____ at the age of ___, as reported elsewhere in this issue … pettiness and double dealing … carefully retained, for certain purposes, a northern accent … betrayed socialism … deserted the Africans in Rhodesia … done nothing to help the sufferings of the Vietnamese … ready to twist words … little principle except the retention of power….[118]

Ingrams subsequently discovered that the proofs had been stolen, by a young acquaintance, from the residence of Tom Driberg.[119]

And there was the obituary as anachronism. An effective Royal Prerogative of Mercy temporarily pardoned the newspaper political obituary, on paper, and with expansive souvenir supplements at that. The lavishly illustrated editions were less profitable than when they had been planned, given the explosion in the cost of newsprint (and the age of the subject), but still sold out, despite extra printing, as the second Elizabethan age finally passed.[120]

V

There were political obituaries before, and there were political obituaries after, the obituarial turn. But their place in long-form political journalism, and, in another genre, life-writing – the end point as a starting point for biographical political writing more generally – had changed. The effects of obituaries in the real-world political process as a whole, before and after that change, was reflective. The shift – wrought as it was by the Thatcher revolution – was one both of form – more paper, then no paper – and also of content (diversity, as also evinced in 2004's *ODNB* when compared to 1885's *DNB*; Massingberd was to obituary what Strachey was to biography) but also of tone. Political obituaries necessarily self-select those who die full of years, and thereby necessarily convey change over time. While it is not so neglected a genre that it is not pregnant with *cliché* (the last word on obituaries, the art of the obituary, the living and the dead; concerned with life not death, death

[118] *Private Eye*, 27 February 1970, 3.

[119] Rees-Mogg had commissioned Driberg to revise the overly hostile notice, Wheen, *Driberg*, 384–85. Ingrams misattributed – persistently – authorship to Driberg. *The Observer*, 24 July 1988, 14, and 28 May 1995, 20; *Independent*, 31 January 2009, 47.

[120] 'Queen Elizabeth II. Register your interest to receive a printed copy of Friday's edition of *The Times*', *Times* online, 12 September 2022.

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as merely the peg for publication) but with political lives, death leaves legacies, and invites successors. Overtly humanistic, qualitative, necessarily partial, often impressionistic, even anecdotal, obituaries can reflect a life, or at least a political career, more accurately more succinctly than in other genres; individual agency is prominent, and subject to the attentions of journalists and other politicians. Their appeal is their idiosyncrasy, subjectivity; that they exist more by example than precept. As may here have been proven, this can make scholarly treatment – and not slippage into the merely diverting or the antiquarian – challenging. Unlike other subjects, political figures have also been assessed in life, with less likelihood of obituaries being radically outdated by subsequent revelations. Allusion would not have shielded Bob Boothby and Dorothy Macmillan for very long, and certainly not after Boothby and Harold Macmillan both died. In 1986.

Political obituaries rest at the crossroad of journalism, politics, and historicism. They provide passage to writers who were of more than one, or wished to be of another. In that, they bridge the gap between journalists, politicians, historians, and the public. That the obituarial public is not a mass one in part may explain the overlooked disregard of them. But political history and biography ignore them – the more curiously still given how important obituaries are as a source, and even a subject – as do newspaper histories. As life-writing, even more so than with biography, there is an imposed neatness of narrative throughout the collective process: from obituaries editor to obituarist to sub-editors and then editor. Much of their appeal – the personal; the art, the craft, of them – is as the appeal of political journalism (a slightly bigger genre of political writing): colour and personality; Cromwellian warts; the shift from piety to entertainment; an obituary for lives not worth a biography; stringency lost to colour; the ephemeral confronting the permanent. The latter was true in another respect: the exodus of newspapers from Fleet Street that began at the beginning of 1986 was complete within thirty years.

To the passing of piety, and patriarchy, there is also that of the press. The obituarial spring was sprung by an unholy alliance of the old – newsprint – and the new: the internet. The transformation in political publishing is particularly pertinent to political obituaries. The authority of print dwindled. Fewer and fewer readers read a physical newspaper, the obituary's natural habitat; the clipping, the cutting, unalterable but for discolouration, that lives forever even when its perspective is mutable. No genre of political writing is more prone to be discredited or outdated, as no other purports to be the last word; the obituary appears once – its subject, after all, is over – and unlike biography was not open for re-evaluation. And for all that there seemed a sense of permanence – that

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that first draft of history would always be with us – without physicality the life span of what was adjudged at the time is short. The online iteration endlessly can be modified, for myriad reasons, but a changeable historical record is also an unreliable historical record. (How anachronistic page numbers in citations came to look; how absurd the laboured physical distribution of days-old 'news'; and that it was *paid* for!) It was brief, that *fin de siècle*, when aesthetics augmented the experience, before the deadening sequence, as on a darkling plain, of price wars, tabloidisation, and digitisation. Before the obituary of print.

There has always been obituarial change – reinforcing the apparent contradiction that a paper of news could also expressly be about the past – and the latest, for once, really was also the most significant. The normalisation, and then the fullest expression, of the obituary coincided with the end of the newspaper, while the popularisation of its tone and contents coincided with a broader decline – or at least a broadening – of high politics in public discourse. The *Independent*, rather than the *Telegraph*, was the more auspicious for the political obituary (and indeed for newspapers, in being the first to cease to exist in print). But that promise, familiar to many political careers, was equally familiarly to be lost. The new centrality of the once marginal militated against orthodox political obituaries, the subjects of which remain the faces of the nation's (and nations') past. The obituarial turn bypassed political obituaries, except in that, by definition, being generally neither fun nor diverse, they simply became fewer. There was a pattern, one seen more widely in the public realm. Levity, entertainment, 'likes', parliamentary sketches rather than parliamentary reporting, comedians on panel programmes: a long, withdrawing roar, heard by the melancholic, as out of touch as the old marmoreal political elite of a predevolution national polity. Obituarial lives, as unreliable in their undoubted distinction as some were, may come to be regarded as a peculiarly British genre of writing politics.

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