

Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı

Peter Ross, *A Tomb With a View: The Stories and Glories of Graveyards*, London: Headline, 2020

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To explain how graveyards, tombs and cemeteries affect us, our families, and the broader contemporary society and how they shape the built environment requires an insightful writer. Thankfully, Peter Ross's book *A Tomb With A View: The Stories and Glories of Graveyards* meet this task more than adequately. Ross has produced a rich historical study of British graveyards that is compassionate and sensitively written.

The book's research originates from the authors' travels around Britain and Ireland, face-to-face conversations and interviews and the use of secondary sources (books). In doing so, Ross has woven stories and descriptive writing that connect the living, the dead, the land and place. Ross says, '*One of the central ideas of A Tomb with a View is that*

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the dead and the living are close kin. We think of them, visit them, sometimes speak with them, and will, one day, join them' (p. xiv).

Furthermore, the study encourages the reader to consider aspects of the graveyard and communal funeral experience in the broadest context. In particular, the less sombre but insightful and celebratory and communal elements of contemporary cemeteries. *'This book, like the best sort of funeral, will be a celebration, not a lament, from grand city cemeteries to country churchyards'*, reports Ross (p. 5).

The text is an inclusive historiography because it investigates the lives of everyday folk who lived in some unique way. The author comments, *'But what draws me, personally to these old stories is not so much the famous dead as extraordinary tales of ordinary tales'* (p.5).

The book's structure has sixteen chapters, each with a subheading title associated with graveyards. The subheadings are worth mentioning because of their beauty and poignancy: 'Ivy', 'Angels', 'Cherubs', 'Lilies', 'Phoebe', 'Cedar', 'Unmarked', 'Anchor', 'Ankh', 'Dubliners', 'Lilias', 'Crescent', 'Skulls', 'Peter', 'Crows', and 'Beloved'.

Four well-known London cemeteries discussed in some detail are Highgate Cemetery, Brompton Cemetery, Kensel Green Cemetery, and West Norwood Cemetery. The aesthetic design and planning of these Victorian-era garden cemetery projects are explored. In particular, how they constructed the spiritual landscape. This vision changed after cremation was legally sanctioned in 1902 and when the First World War death toll meant large numbers of British casualties had to be buried (p. 108).

Another notable cemetery visited by Ross is Arnos Vale, Bristol, UK (chapter sixteen, 'Beloved'). There is much to say about this site and how the locals campaigned to keep it open while preventing the redevelopment of a seven-acre section of the cemetery into a housing estate. Today, it remains a cemetery but is also a multipurpose site.

Overall, the UK's graveyards and churchyards are about 14,000, *with nearly 3,500 predating the First World War.'* (p. 12). The lack of space within the UK's graveyards and the need for new burial sites is a problem, *'Many of Britain's burial grounds are full, or close to full'* (p. 13).

Each chapter contains thoughtful writing; a brief selection of some chapters follows.

Chapter four, entitled 'Lilies', exemplifies Ross's admirable writing skills. About cemeteries and headstones, the author speaks: *'Regard each stone as a story waiting to be told. Accept that to walk in a cemetery is both a privilege and a lesson in humility. We are here now to read the memorials and walk on, but one day it may be our names with moss growing in the letters'* (p. 82). Chapter five, entitled 'Phoebe', sees Ross visit a grave in Brighton, UK, to tell the story of Phoebe Hessel (nee Smith), who at fifteen 'enlisted' in the British Army to be alongside her sweetheart in the West Indies (or Gibraltar) (p. 99). Chapter seven, 'Unmarked', visits Crossbones Graveyard in Southwark, London and sees a Christian priest lead a congregation to consecrate a burial site used in the past to bury medieval sex workers, their children and the poor (p. 135). Chapter ten, 'Dubliners', contains one of the book's saddest stories. In Glasnevin Cemetery, Shane MacThomais, a Dubliner, took his life in 2014. Shane was a very popular local, colourful, intelligent family man and a tour guide at the same cemetery (pp. 219–228). This chapter brings to the fore the author's ability to make the story of an ordinary person and his struggles something we can all empathise with.

Chapter twelve, 'Crescent', studies one element of multicultural British society. It reflects a trend in modern writing about Britain to include significant minority communities. In this case, it refers to the nearly 3.9 million Muslims. The chapter starts with a visit to the East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road, east London. Here, Ross attends a *ghusl* of a Nigerian man (the ritual washing of the body before burial). The procedure is undertaken by employees of Haji Taslim Funerals, Britain's oldest Muslim undertakers. They inform the author, *'If you're keeping it real, you're buried without a coffin, wrapped in white cloth'* (p. 251). The next task is to get the body into the hearse and the cemetery. After the Muslim funeral prayers at the mosque, the *janazah* *'has none of the solemn melancholy... [of the] Christian or secular tradition...[the Muslim way] is noisy, busy, jostling.'* The intention is to bury the body in the earth – facing Mecca – as soon as possible (p. 251). Britain's first Muslim burial space, circa 1884, was at Brookwood

Cemetery, Surrey. Ross also visits the Gardens of Peace Muslim Cemetery, Hainault, Essex.

A Tomb With a View educates the reader and enriches their understanding of modern British and Irish cemetery history. It sensitively explains how sites used to bury the dead – sacred and liminal spaces – have evolved over the last 150 years. Indeed, now graveyards are referred to as ‘heritage spaces’. Consequently, the relatives and friends of those who have passed on have an ever more comprehensive choice of alternative funeral and remembrance ceremonies.