5 Only a pauper whom nobody owns: reassessing the pauper burial

The previous chapters have argued that the rites of caring for and disposing of the corpse provided forums for the expression of feeling in the immediate aftermath of death. This chapter explores the implications of burial where those rites were prohibited or curtailed: the pauper burial. Antipathy to the pauper grave is well documented. Indeed, Anne Crowther suggests that it was the most 'familiar' aspect of hostility to the workhouse: it signified abject poverty and stigmatised both the deceased and the bereaved.[1] Yet for contemporaries and historians alike, the pauper burial was not only inseparable from the workhouse, but, also, from consumer culture and the language of respectability. Within the increasingly commercial society of Victorian Britain, suggests Thomas Laqueur, the pauper funeral 'became the final stamp of failure'. In contrast, the private grave signified cultural membership: the procession to the cemetery, the occupation of public space and the participation of family, neighbours and colleagues operated as rituals of inclusion and testified to a community identity. In this sense, the ability to save money for a private grave 'became the locus of enormous anxiety' because the economy of the pauper burial condemned the dead to 'dying bereft of the final signs of communal membership'.[2]

Laqueur's argument hinges on the growth of a capitalist economy, the commercialisation of death and the punitive principles of the New Poor Law of 1834. Prior to poor law reform, it has been suggested that antipathy towards pauper burial was rooted largely in the body-snatching scandals which culminated in the passage of the Anatomy Act 1832. As medicine became increasingly professionalised, the demand for cadavers with which to teach anatomy rose dramatically. The licit market for corpses was limited to bodies taken from the gallows. Alas, felons were hanged in insufficient numbers to satisfy the needs of medical education, so anatomy schools turned to illegal trafficking in cadavers. In principle, all graves were at risk from disturbance by grave robbers. In practice, the flimsiness of

---

[1] Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 241.
[2] Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', 109–31 (117).

131

cheap coffins and the presence of ten or more bodies in one pauper grave rendered the burial spaces of the poor particularly vulnerable. Waves of civil disturbance across the country in conjunction with a number of high-profile cases of body-snatching (the most notorious being Burke and Hare's trial for murders committed in order to bypass the need for grave robbery)[3] necessitated parliamentary action. The Anatomy Act, widely anticipated to resolve the crisis and remove the threat to the corpses of the poor, pandered to the demands of anatomists and protected the corpses of the affluent by sanctioning the dissection of unclaimed pauper corpses. As Ruth Richardson notes, 'what had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty'. Richardson perceives the Anatomy Act to be inextricable from the New Poor Law which followed two years later, not least because implementation of the Anatomy Act depended on the machinery of the Poor Law whilst both embodied a punitive philosophy towards poverty. As Richardson demonstrates, the gravity of body-snatching fears in the decades flanking the passage of the Anatomy Act through parliament should not be underestimated. By the closing decades of the century, however, the risk of anatomisation had dramatically decreased and Richardson introduces 'respectability' as the guiding principle behind popular antipathy to the pauper grave.[4]

This chapter contests the dichotomy between the pauper and the respectable burial and the rough and respectable poor. It also suggests that historical analysis must move away from a perception of the poor as passive victims of wicked anatomists and poor law guardians. Funerals were far from egalitarian affairs before the rise of respectable society or the growth of consumer markets (not least with reference to the burial of Catholics, Dissenters, suicide victims and/or felons). Pauper and respectable burials were not mutually exclusive and the working classes were not without agency. Undeniably, the pauper grave conferred a degree of disgrace on the dead and those who mourned for them. To a point, this hostility derived from the shame associated with material hardship and the appeal to charity. Importantly, however, the dishonour of pauper burial was inextricable from the anonymity of the grave, the inability to claim ownership of the dead and the denial of mourning rites. Hence, the

---

[3] B. Bailey, *Burke and Hare: The Year of the Ghouls* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2002).
[4] Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, xv, 270–1. See also V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 255–8, R. Richardson, 'Why Was Death So Big in Victorian Britain?' in Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, 105–17, M. Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) and Norman Adams, *Dead and Buried: The Horrible History of Bodysnatching* (Aberdeen: Impulse Books, 1972).

significance attached to burial insurance was not simply related to a desire for display but rooted in an impulse to fulfil obligations to the dead and claim mourning rites associated with the decent disposal of the corpse. Some families went so far as to inter the dead in a pauper grave only to apply for the exhumation of the corpse once they had accumulated sufficient finance to purchase a private grave. This would hardly cancel the initial stigma of the pauper burial, especially as the reinterment of coffins took place in the dead of night. It is suggested, therefore, that applications for reburial were motivated by the desire to claim the ownership and identity of the dead.

An overview of the indignities inflicted on the pauper corpse illustrates the extent to which mourning rites were circumscribed by parish guardians, municipal burial boards and some clerics too. This necessarily compromised the use of burial custom as a language of loss. In this light, the pauper burial is reinterpreted as the contested site for notions of respectable burial. Despite a comprehensive historiography concerning the fluidity of respectability as an identity, accounts of respectable burial have concentrated on the purchase of a private grave. This is not to dismiss respectability from an analysis of attitudes towards burial, but, rather, to recognise that respectability was invested with meaning beyond status. Families could take elements of the respectable burial and apply them, where possible, to the interment of the dead in a pauper grave. Historical analysis must, therefore, redefine the respectable burial as a fluid notion relating to the dignity of the dead. A pragmatic response to material privation need not annul grief or invalidate respectable burial; it simply necessitated a degree of flexibility in perceptions of paying one's respects to the dead. A family forced to inter the cadaver in a pauper grave could still inscribe rudimentary and private gestures of loss with personal sorrow and, in doing so, facilitate their own understandings of respectable burial.

Pauper and public burials

Perceptions of the private and pauper grave represent binary opposites in the cultural landscape of late Victorian and Edwardian England. Stripped of mourning and commemorative paraphernalia, the pauper grave carried the lowly taint of pauperism and suggested insufficient grief. In more concrete terms, it cast aspersions on the financial management of the bereaved to the extent that credit facilities with local shopkeepers might be jeopardised.[5] Conversely, the purchase of a private grave permitted the

---

[5] Ross, ' "Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep" ', 46.

bereaved to bury the dead in their chosen manner with all the trappings of mourning. As F. M. L. Thompson notes, the ability to finance this kind of funeral testified to thriftiness and, therefore, assured a family's respectable status within the community: 'The ultimate disgrace for a Victorian worker's family was a pauper burial. Having the means to avoid it and provide for a decent funeral that would preserve the family's standing in the community was the measure of basic respectability.'[6]

In practice, however, these binary opposites were not quite so neat. To begin with, there was, and is, a lack of clarity surrounding the term 'pauper burial'. Equations between the pauper grave and the workhouse are, to a point, misleading. The remains of those who died in the workhouse could be claimed by friends or relatives who undertook to bear the costs of interment. Therefore, death in the workhouse did not automatically condemn the dead to a pauper grave. What distinguished 'pauper' interment was not so much death in the workhouse but, rather, the inability of friends of the deceased to pay for burial, even (and especially) in cases where expiration occurred in the home. Neither was the pauper grave confined to the grounds of the workhouse. In the second half of the nineteenth century, most municipal cemeteries had spaces reserved for pauper graves and, increasingly, workhouse burial grounds were closed in favour of using municipal space. Finally, the term 'pauper grave' tends to be used interchangeably – by contemporaries and historians alike – with references to 'public' and 'common' graves. In a strict sense, 'pauper burial' is a direct reference to interment at the expense of the ratepayers. 'Common' and 'public' graves represented communal (as opposed to family) burial plots owned by the burial board whereby the bereaved could pay the nominal interment fee to bury the body; the grave did not belong to the bereaved and they held no exclusive rights of burial over that space. The common grave thus held bodies whose interment fee had been paid by the parish and those whose burial fee had been paid by relatives. In this sense, the 'pauper's grave' did not exist as a separate entity and it is probably for this reason that most cemetery authorities in the second half of the nineteenth century referred to such graves as 'public', 'common' or 'fourth class' graves. These graves were earthen (as opposed to bricked or vaulted); the families of the deceased were dispossessed of any right to burial in the same grave. Regardless of who paid the burial fee, the grave carried restrictions on memorial ornaments and coffins. In this chapter, public and common grave will be used as a general term; pauper grave will be used only where the parish guardians were directly involved in the payment of interment fees.

[6] F. M. L. Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society*, 200.

That the common grave catered for parish burials and poorer members of society raises a number of questions concerning the meaning of 'pauper burial'. The interchangeable use of the terms 'common', 'public' and 'pauper' indicates the insidious stigma attached to all interments in these graves. The terminology of the 'public grave' was, in itself, ambiguous: it could refer to the public purse of the ratepayer whilst simultaneously signifying the communal character of grave space. Importantly, the restrictions placed upon interments in common graves made no distinction between corpses interred at the cost of families and those at the expense of the guardians, thus penalising families who actually paid for interment. In this sense, references to interment in a public grave as a 'pauper' burial may suggest that it was the punitive measures against poverty rather than institutional pauperism that rendered the graves abhorrent. Why, then, would families pay to inter the dead in what was, in the abstract at least, a 'pauper grave'? Crucially, the payment of costs guaranteed that the bereaved could keep the deceased at home in the interim between death and burial without conditions imposed by the workhouse. Moreover, the gesture of having paid for burial rather than turn to the charity of the parish enabled families to retain a modicum of personal pride. Within the public spectacle of the funeral and burial space, however, the common grave retained its association with the pauper burial, not least because by-laws governing interments in common graves dictated the type of coffin used whilst curtailing access to mourning rites. This implies a process of decision making based upon a series of complex needs and desires; a process which cannot be explained through the juxtaposition of the pauper with the private.

The stigma of pauperism

The meagreness of pauper burial was consistent with the treatment of those who claimed indoor and outdoor relief. Families seeking outdoor assistance were forced to sell all possessions of any value before their claims were validated (and even then, some argued that a percentage of claimants were not really destitute) whilst those requesting admission to the workhouse had to surrender independence: married couples were separated, children were removed from the care of their parents, and all were forced to adhere to an institutional routine of life.[7] Describing his childhood in turn-of-the-century Knaresborough, Yorkshire, Philip

---

[7] Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 193–221. See also Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity*, 102–25, A. Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Historical Association, 1982), 14–18, and Rowntree, *Poverty*, 434.

Inman suggested that families would rather starve than apply for parochial relief. Such obstinacy went beyond a fear of social stigma: application to the parish prompted 'a profound sense of shame' and 'degradation' that was exacerbated by feelings of utter 'hopelessness'.[8] Joseph Barlow Brooks reflected that the 'poorhouse poetry' of Thomas Hood was widely derided by the relatively affluent as melodrama. Yet, for Brooks at least, the bitterness of Hood's observations held poignant meaning for those who faced the prospect of pauperism, especially in old age.[9] Jack London, in his survey of the 'abyss' of London poverty, suggested that those who committed suicide rather than enter the workhouse were not temporarily insane, as coroners' juries sympathetic to the stigma of self-murder tended to rule, but, rather, had assessed the grim alternatives between starvation, the 'spike' (workhouse) and death, and made a 'very rational and level-headed' choice.[10] London's observation may seem extreme. As a literary device, however, it illustrates the extent to which 'the Union' was, in every sense, perceived as a last resort. Indeed, Lynn Hollen Lees has suggested that much of the popular antipathy towards the workhouse demonstrated the success of the psychological myth of the 'bastille' which was, after all, created to 'enforce social distance between paupers and the rest of Victorian society'.[11]

The boundary separating security from poverty was fine. Florence Bell estimated that a third of ironworkers in Middlesbrough were 'so near the poverty line that they were constantly passing over it'. Even for those in relative comfort, the spectre of indigence loomed large: 'Most of the people at the ironworks are living under conditions in which the slightest lapse from thrift and forethought is necessarily conspicuous, and brings its immediate consequences.'[12] For Bell, these persons were 'deserving' of any relief or charity they received; they strove to avoid hardship and made efforts to maintain clean and tidy homes throughout periods of destitution. It seems unlikely that many families who fell upon hard times classed themselves as anything other than deserving. As Anne Crowther has observed, much of the stigma attached to the workhouse from the 1880s onwards stemmed not from the public acknowledgement of impoverishment but from being confined with the 'riff-raff' who had been denied outdoor relief. This stigma was far more acute for those who had managed to distance themselves from extreme poverty. In contrast,

---

[8] P. A. Inman, *No Going Back* (London: William & Norgate, 1952), 26.
[9] Brooks, *Lancashire Bred*, 17.   [10] London, *People of the Abyss*, 267.
[11] L. H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 150–1.
[12] Bell, *At the Works*, 47–52.

Crowther suggests, slum dwellers were consistently faced with the threat of the workhouse and could not, therefore, 'afford to be too mindful of social disgrace'.[13]

The degradation inherent in pauperism was tied to the punitive philosophy which informed and shaped the New Poor Law. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the status of the poor was changing. Increasingly, calls were voiced for the classification of paupers into categories according to moral worth, thus enabling union authorities to distinguish 'the moral and well-disposed' pauper from those of 'indifferent or vicious character'.[14] An article in the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1892 distinguished the pauper 'born and bred' (the 'vicious, the incurably lazy, the habitual beggar, the thoroughly degraded') from those who had fallen upon hard times through no fault of their own.[15] William Grisewood, organiser of a survey into the poor of Liverpool by the Liverpool Central Relief Committee and the Charity Organisation Society, seemed to suggest that the language of 'the poor' was too honourable to be applied to those better classified as immoral:

there are many most worthy people amongst the very poorest who are none the less upright, self-respecting, and even happy for being poor; but on the other hand, it is equally a mistake to class others as 'the poor' when their proper classification is 'the indolent', 'the vicious', and even 'the criminal'; persons who are frequently not only destroying every noble quality in themselves, but are bringing upon the young family dependant on them a heritage of penury, sin and shame.[16]

Reflecting on York workhouse in 1901, Seebohm Rowntree regretted that 'owing to want of space' no attempt had been made by the guardians to classify paupers according to their moral worth. Numbers of the poor were forced to turn to the workhouse simply because of old age and infirmity. They were obliged to associate, however, with those whose residence was on account of habitual drunkenness and vice.[17] Notably, the MP Chiozza Money estimated that the elderly represented over half those claiming indoor and outdoor relief between 1890 and 1903, adding that many of those who should have applied to the parish for assistance avoided doing so for fear of shame and lack of independence.[18]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, 'model' workhouses initiated strategies to separate the deserving from the undeserving

---

[13] Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 236ff.
[14] Classificatory categories taken from a local government circular distributed in August 1896. LVRO 353 SEL 10/14.
[15] *Liverpool Mercury*, 9 April 1892, 4.   [16] Grisewood, *Poor of Liverpool*, 6.
[17] Rowntree, *Poverty*, 427–8.   [18] Money, *Riches and Poverty*, 272–86.

poor, exercising more leniency towards those inmates they defined as respectable. Nonetheless, some commentators found the partition of inmates purely cosmetic: it did nothing to alleviate the brutalising effects of the workhouse regime. C. B. Hawkins thought the much-acclaimed Norwich workhouse doomed to failure. The entire regime was designed to 'destroy any latent capacity' individuals had: 'Whatever a man may be when he goes into the workhouse, he will have inevitably sunk to the level of the rest when he comes out.'[19] Indeed, after a spell in the workhouse as a child, Sam Shaw declared that it was institutional pauperism not poverty that deadened humanity: 'Family life, however poor, possesses the family ties of love. Pauperism cuts into the human love ties and mercilessly rips them asunder.'[20]

Claiming the dead

In the same way that admission to the workhouse deprived the poor of autonomy and self-respect, parochial and public burial were, almost without exception, undignified interments. Given the significance attached to the 'decent' funeral, it is not surprising that investment in burial insurance was so widespread. For those without the buffer of a burial policy, the services of a pawnbroker might provide the necessary finance to purchase a grave.[21] Alternatively, sympathetic friends might rally in a bid to raise the money for private interment 'even', as Violet Butler noted of the Oxford poor, 'if all other forms of thrift have been neglected' by the bereaved.[22] Burial authorities themselves were aware of antipathy to the public grave whilst retaining an acute sense of the financial straits of many families. Toxteth Burial Board in Liverpool, for instance, operated a scheme whereby a grave could be obtained on hire-purchase, an initial payment of half the cost securing the grave for use.[23] Similarly, Ramsbottom and Bacup Burial Board 'allow[ed] poor people three months credit when buying graves, rather than have public graves'.[24] At St James's Cemetery, Liverpool, graves were available for lease (for fourteen years) after which they reverted to the trustees of the cemetery for use as public graves.[25] This permitted families to claim

---

[19] Hawkins, *Norwich*, 149.   [20] Shaw, *Guttersnipe*, 27.
[21] See, for instance, M. Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit* (London: Methuen, 1983).
[22] Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford*, 187.
[23] LVRO TOX 354/21/2, 14 October 1875. In the event of defaulting on payment, ownership of the grave reverted back to the burial board.
[24] LRO UDCl 60/1, 26 November 1886.
[25] Retrospective on the cemetery in view of closure, 1932, LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.

autonomy at the time of burial without necessitating the full expense of a private grave.

A more unorthodox approach to securing burial in a private grave was to inter the corpse in a common grave immediately following expiration whilst family and friends rallied to accumulate resources. Once the necessary finance had been raised, the bereaved could apply to have the cadaver exhumed from the common grave to be reinterred in a newly purchased private grave. Initially, the family would petition the relevant burial authority (rather than the guardians) for the removal of the cadaver. If the board agreed to the exhumation, they would assist the next of kin in making a formal application to the Home Office for permission to disturb the dead. As Joseph Makin, a labourer, explained to Bolton Burial Board in 1886:

> I Joseph Makin not being in circumstances when we buried my son Robert Makin to purches [sic] a new grave but having purched [sic] one since hopes that it lies in your power to get Him removed from common grave to purched [sic] grave ... we will be very thankfull [sic] for your kindness.[26]

Similarly, in October 1889 George Argill requested permission from Bolton Burial Board to move his three children, who had all died within one week, from a common to a private grave. Explaining to the board that 'at the time of the funerals I was sick myself and unable to buy a grave', George had since saved enough money to purchase a private plot.[27] The language employed in the letters is quite formal, both in terminology and in their apparent conformity to notions of responsibility. Joseph Makin's letter began with an assertion of himself, one that implied his accountability for the accumulation of funds to purchase a grave. George Argill's application was, perhaps, more explicit in its attempt to utilise the language of the burial board officials: 'Sir I beg to make application to your committee for permission ...', and, 'I remain your obedient servant.'[28] In addition, both fathers were tentative in expressing hopes for their requests being granted. This not only suggests an awareness of a language separate from the colloquial, it also highlights a willingness to show deference in order to regain ownership of the dead. It seems likely that the two fathers were aware that they were expected to articulate shame in relation to the public grave if they were to be classed amongst the deserving poor. In this sense, 'respectability' provided a shared language for communication between the working classes and municipal officials.

Both letters are significant in that they articulate the hopes, in a very literal sense, of people generally consigned to historical silence. The

---

[26] BALS ABZ 3/1, 4 December 1886. [27] BALS ABZ 3/1, October 1889.
[28] BALS ABZ 3/1, October 1889.

letters are also unusual in that many of the written applications to have a body exhumed from Bolton cemeteries have only survived in the form of the corporation's copy of a formal Home Office document which left little room for personal detail. Other burial boards made only sporadic references to applications for exhumation in minute books (depending on how routine the requests were) whilst little has been retained concerning requests for this kind of exhumation and reburial in Home Office records. The apparent lack of historical record may well indicate the unexceptional character of the requests for exhumation; it may also, however, explain why this approach to the common grave has been so overwhelmingly neglected by historians.

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

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

Jones and her father, Isaac, trusted that their application would be brought forward for consideration 'at once without delay'. The sense of urgency in their application suggests that the public grave had only ever been perceived as a short-term measure. The licence for removal of the body was finally granted on 6 April.[29]

The Matot family were not so fortunate. Josephin and Joseph Matot died at the beginning of 1915 and were interred in a common grave 'to curtail the funeral charges, the parents having no money to defray the expenses'. In the period between burial and application for removal, however, eighteen more coffins had been placed over the two children. Thirteen of the nearest relatives of those interred subsequent to the Matots objected to

---

[29] Correspondence between family, board and Home Office in BALS ABCF 15/18, 13 March 1906.

the disturbance of their dead.[30] Some decades earlier, Anfield (Liverpool) Burial Board had resolved to offer families the opportunity of buying the remaining space in the public grave, or the grave immediately next to it, when applications for disinterment were refused on account of subsequent burials. That the resolution made no impact on burial practice suggests that the board had, to a degree, missed the point: partial ownership of a common grave (replete with other unidentified corpses) was not equal to claiming the identity and dignity conferred by the family grave.[31]

In Bolton, applications for exhumation and reburial were made for cadavers of all ages, including very young children, and both immediate and distant relatives. Richard Jackson applied to have his children, Rosanna (died aged fifteen months) and Maud (died aged two years), exhumed for reinterment.[32] Similarly, Sarah Ann Holt asked to have the remains of her twin grandsons, Francis and Edward Grundy, removed from a common grave: both babies had survived only sixteen hours before dying from congenital debility.[33] Elizabeth Hardacre removed her nephew from a common grave whilst James Hilcroft requested permission to disinter his friend, Arthur Warden.[34] Joannah Whittle, a spinster, requested that her 'intended husband' be reburied in a private grave as she did 'not like the idea of the body being intered [sic] in a common grave'.[35] Such concerns were not exclusive to the residents of Bolton. A young couple from East Farleigh, near Maidstone, applied in 1879 to exhume the body of their uncle, Samuel Mills (died aged eighty-six), from the workhouse grounds to a grave in their local churchyard. Before the man's death, they had promised to secure his interment by the side of his wife. The Secretary of State's observation that refusal of this application 'would be very hard, if not a mockery, to both these poor people' implies an appreciation of relatives' reluctance to leave the dead to rot ignominiously.[36]

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

[30] Correspondence in BALS ABCF 15/28, February 1915.
[31] LVRO 353 PAR 6/2/4, 17 January 1878. There was no indication that the families of those already interred in the public grave would be notified of this transaction.
[32] BALS ABZ 3/1/4, 12 November 1892.   [33] BALS ABCF 15/28, 27 January 1914.
[34] BALS ABZ 3/1/4, 19 December 1889 and ABZ 3/1/4, 14 April 1892.
[35] BALS ABZ 3/1/9, 8 May 1902.   [36] PRO HO45/9577/82750, April 1879.

from typhoid fever.[37] More significantly, perhaps, many families and friends found the cost of the private grave beyond their means, even with delaying tactics. It is worth noting that many of the families who approached the Home Office for the exhumation of a body had not actually purchased the grave at the time of their application. Rather, they claimed to have saved enough money to do so, and would purchase the grave if and when permission for exhumation was granted. George Argill is a typical example, claiming 'I intend to purchase [a private grave] if you can grant this request.'[38] Ann Dickens applied to Hampstead Burial Board in June 1885 for the exhumation of her husband Timothy as she was 'about buying a grave'. Timothy had been interred the week before when she was 'much grieved' and 'could not know what was best'.[39] It seems plausible to suggest that, moved by a sense of urgency, some families made an application for removal whilst still accumulating finance. Moreover, for those with scant resources, the expense of a grave was a luxury which only featured in financial calculations if there was a cadaver to place in it. If permission for exhumation were refused, any money saved for the purpose could be used for alternative, equally pressing purposes. Somewhat ironically, application for exhumation and reinterment not only protracted the process of laying the dead to rest, it also proved more expensive. Fees for application to the Home Office and for exhumation of the body were added to the outlay for the new grave and reinterment.[40]

Burial boards appear to have accepted petitions for exhumation as normative. Correspondence between the chair and clerk of Clayton-le-Moors Burial Board in December 1896 concluded that such applications were 'purely formal' and that they could consent to exhumations without calling special meetings of the board.[41] Similarly, members of Toxteth Burial Board agreed in 1895 that they were 'sympathetic' to the relatives who 'frequently' approached them with questions concerning the exhumation of their dead.[42] That the Home Office printed a standardised form of application for the removal of bodies from common graves also suggests that these requests were unexceptional. If the body lay in a grave in consecrated ground, permission for exhumation might alternatively be sought from the bishop of the relevant diocese. The Archbishop of York during the 1880s and '90s was consistently sympathetic to requests for exhumation from common graves in the Anglican portion of York Public

---

[37] BALS ABCF 15/18, correspondence during December 1905.   [38] BALS ABZ 3/1/4.
[39] PRO HO45/9654/A40146, June 1885.
[40] See, for instance, BALS ABZ 3/1/4, memo dated 8 July 1904.
[41] LRO UDCl 7/5, 7 December 1896.   [42] PRO HO45/9768/B1065, November 1895.

Cemetery, responding hastily and expressing a desire to consult relatives of other bodies interred.[43] The Home Office respected the prerogatives of the established church but could override a bishop's decision. Moreover, as Toxteth Burial Board noted in 1895, a 'faculty' for the exhumation of a corpse from the bishop cost five pounds, whereas applying for a licence from the Secretary of State cost only one penny.[44]

The apparently routine character of applications for exhumations implies that this somewhat unorthodox approach to (re)burial was, in relative terms, widely used. This is interesting for several reasons. First, it suggests a degree of resourcefulness in initiating procedures to alter the fate of the dead. It also implies a network of knowledge relating to the potential for the disinterment of cadavers. This may have operated among neighbours and friends, although some families approached undertakers or monumental masons for advice before contacting the burial authority.[45] Significantly, reburial in a private grave testifies to a desire to reclaim ownership of the corpse. More importantly, however, it is unclear how the reinterment of the dead in a private grave would reinstate respectability. The initial burial in a common grave had advertised to the community the family's lack of finance at the time of the funeral. They would, therefore, already have suffered the stigma associated with the pauper or public grave. In terms of repairing the damage to their reputation, Home Office regulations stipulated that exhumation and reinterment of the corpse had to be executed 'with due care and attention to decency'.[46] This requirement necessitated covering the exhumed coffin ('and any other matter that may be offensive') with ground lime or McDougall's Disinfecting Powder. Furthermore, the exhumation had to take place either at night or very early in the morning with no public witnesses, a specification included for hygienic purposes but also, perhaps, to prevent ghoulish interest.[47] These conditions redefined the exhumed corpse exclusively in terms of contagion. Yet they also meant that reinterment could not be accompanied by any secular or religious ritual: the bereaved were simply informed that reburial had taken place. If 'respectability' was reinstated by this process, it was done so very quietly.

[43] YRO Acc 107 66–75.
[44] PRO HO45/9768/B1065, November 1895. The Home Office did not charge for the licence once it had been granted. See BALS ABZ 3/1/4, memo dated 8 July 1904.
[45] PRO HO45/10311/123811.
[46] BALS ABCF 15/28. Standardised Home Office regulations attached to licence for exhumation.
[47] BALS ABCF 15/28 and PRO HO45/9768/B1065, February 1887.

In undertaking to pay extra costs for reburial and prolonging the process of laying the dead to rest, families articulated a desire to reclaim the corpse as their own. The application made to Bolton Burial Board for the exhumation of Elizabeth Jones explicitly stated a wish to 'claim our own grave', inferring a need to assert kinship beyond death.[48] Indeed, the language of the 'private' or 'family' grave is loaded with connotations of familiarity, identity and spiritual reunion. In contrast, the terminology of the common or pauper grave drew on notions of anonymity, poverty and bodies whom 'nobody owned' (or, by implication, loved). In claiming kinship, the bereaved were affirming the ownership and identity of the dead and ensuring that the cadaver lay in a recognised social space.

The public grave

The exhumation of corpses carries ghoulish connotations, not least because of association with grave robbery and the gothic novel.[49] Moreover, the disturbance of several coffins for the removal of one body was, as the Secretary of State noted in 1888, unpleasant: it created sanitary problems and was an 'annoyance' to the relatives of corpses obstructing exhumation.[50] That families consented to the disturbance of their dead to effect the removal of another corpse is surprising given the sensitivity surrounding accusations concerning the 'desecration' of public graves by cemetery authorities. Yet the sentiments which motivated families to permit the disturbance of their dead were far removed from the outrage occasioned by unsolicited interference with the corpse. The desecration of graves, a loaded phrase associated with improper inter-ference with the dead, evoked disgust whilst emphasising the powerless-ness of the poor. Conversely, those who permitted (and refused) the temporary removal of their corpse were exercising a legal right to claim some authority over the body. Likewise, families who initiated the exhum-ation of their deceased were acting within a conceptual framework which sanctioned the apparently undignified disturbance of the dead for the purpose of reinterment in a dignified grave. Only when the identity and dignity of the corpse had been established could the deceased and the bereaved rest in peace.

A series of articles in the Liverpool magazine *Porcupine* in April 1892, headlined 'Desecration of the Dead at Anfield Cemetery', highlighted both the vulnerability of the pauper/public corpse and the shoddy manner

---

[48] BALS ABCF 15/18, correspondence from March and April 1906.
[49] Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 52–72.
[50] PRO HO45/9955/V8622, March 1888.

in which it was interred. The first article made revelations 'so incredible' the author speculated that readers would be forgiven for thinking them a 'ghastly invention'. The demand for public graves at Anfield Cemetery had outstripped supply. An area of uncultivated land in the cemetery was available for the creation of new graves. Nevertheless, cemetery employees ('graveyard churls') were opening old public graves for the purpose of reusing them. Some of the coffins found in the graves were 'broken up and trampled down' whilst remnants of bones were deposited in a basket. Numbers of the exhumed coffins were, however, intact; one exposed a woman's head 'with the flesh of the face and long hair attached'. Conceding that 'it makes no difference to the dead' what atrocities were committed to their graves, the author maintained that such 'ghastly treatment' of the dead was deeply offensive to working-class people and made a mockery of the grave as a 'last resting place'.[51] A second article, published the following week, acknowledged that the burial board were within their rights to reuse public graves after a minimum of fourteen years.[52] This did little, however, to assuage the horror of desecration for bereaved families, especially when coffins and bones had to be smashed in order to accommodate new interments. Moreover, the author continued, the very character of public burial was 'simply a scandal to any community pretending respect for the dead': in 'frail deal boxes' corpses were 'packed like sardines'. The common graves in Anfield Cemetery resembled a 'sand pit' without the 'slightest sign' of cultivation or care; the land was a 'mere waste, an open chasm, in fact, where it would be very appropriate to place a notice to the effect that "Rubbish may be shot here"'.[53]

The damning allegations and inflammatory language of the articles exploited the sensitivity of the poor to the burial of their dead, a device which did not escape the notice of the superintendent of Anfield Cemetery, William Wortley, who complained that he was being held up for 'public odium and contempt'.[54] He 'felt deeply' that the articles accused him of 'a shameful neglect of duty and a callous disregard of the feelings and circumstances of the poor'. On the contrary, Wortley urged, the poor were treated with as much 'tender regard', reverence and sympathy as 'those in better circumstances'.[55] Undeniably, the public

---

[51] *Porcupine*, 9 April 1892, 8.   [52] These graves were twenty-eight years old.
[53] *Porcupine*, 16 April 1892, 8–9.
[54] Letter from Wortley's solicitors, 20 April 1892, cited in *Porcupine*, 23 April 1892, 8–9. Wortley's solicitors first wrote to the editor on 13 April 1892 offering him the opportunity to retract the allegations made before Wortley sued for gross libel. Also reprinted in *Porcupine*, 23 April 1892, 8–9.
[55] LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/11, Wortley's Logbook, 28 April 1892.

graves in Anfield Cemetery were being reused. They were, however, old graves and, where remains had been found, they were reburied with due respect.[56] *Porcupine* had, Wortley argued, not only exaggerated and distorted the procedure in 'ghastly sensational assertions', they had caused 'quite unnecessarily, great pain to poor people'.[57] As the editors at *Porcupine* were quick to note, Wortley's defensiveness and his attempts to align himself with the feelings of the poor missed the point. That the desecration of graves was 'legal' rendered it no less distressing to the poor.[58] Moreover, Wortley's acknowledgement that such work was 'disagreeable but necessary' implied that he himself found the reopening of graves and the removal of bones distasteful.[59] That he glossed over the general manner in which bodies were interred further suggested the potential disparity between his egalitarian rhetoric and the undignified conditions of public burial where corpses rested only in temporary peace.

Porcupine's comparison between common graves and rubbish tips was a useful metaphor. Often situated in obscure locations (notably by waste sites or behind 'back boundary walls') and deprived of memorial paraphernalia, the public grave signified the marginalisation of the poor.[60] In 1885 the registrar at Wigan Cemetery objected to the use of the 'best ground' for common graves. A piece of land which had recently been drained and was of little value was, he thought, more appropriate.[61] In October 1895 Joseph Moss, a member of the Liverpool Select Vestry, confronted his fellow guardians concerning the interment of Catholic paupers in common graves located in a stone quarry at the end of Anfield Cemetery. Noting that Protestant paupers were interred in the parish cemetery at Walton, Moss considered the Catholic graves 'inhuman' and loaded with 'unnecessary degradation'.[62] In 1906 a deputation of Anglican, Catholic and Nonconformist ministers petitioned Bolton Burial Board to curtail their shoddy treatment of the pauper cadaver. In particular, they called for an end to the desecration of common graves by the laying of pathways over them.[63] As late as 1925 the Vicar of Bolton protested that placing pathways over public graves, 'where anyone can walk over them', was tantamount to desecration.[64] The very denial of legitimate space implied that the common grave was a dumping ground for those at the margins of society, whilst provocative references to 'desecration' emphasised the lack of civility among municipal officials.

---

[56] *Porcupine*, 23 April 1892.   [57] LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/11, 26 May 1892.
[58] *Porcupine*, 23 April 1892, 8–9.   [59] *Porcupine*, 23 April 1892.
[60] LRO UDCl 58/1, Church and Clayton-le-Moors Cemetery, 18 January 1889.
[61] WRO A 10/1/Z, 19 February 1885.
[62] *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 October 1895, 3, and *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 October 1895, 5.
[63] BALS AB 13/1/11, 1 March 1906.   [64] BALS ABCF 15/39, 19 March 1925.

As if to compound the humiliation of interment in wasteland, by-laws for most municipal cemeteries prohibited the installation of a headstone over the public grave. As one Bolton woman (born 1906) noted, the idea that 'no-one would know there was a grave there' reinforced the anonymity and indignity of the public interment.[65] The prohibition of a headstone limited opportunities for commemoration, thus excluding the bereaved from a culture of mourning which utilised the grave as a site for the remembrance of the dead. As Elizabeth Roberts notes, the emotional distress this caused could last for years.[66] In addition, the absence of an identifying headstone made it difficult for descendants of the dead to locate their grave space.[67] As attitudes towards poverty slowly changed towards the end of the nineteenth century, some burial boards made concessions towards the memorialisation of common graves.[68] The superintendent for Cheltenham Burial Board suggested that small tablets of wood, metal or stone be permitted on common graves from the autumn of 1907. The tablets would cost five shillings and be inscribed with the name of the deceased, the date of their death, age and the number of the grave.[69] In 1903, Stretford Burial Board had advised anyone seeking to establish a memorial over a common grave to reinter the body in a private grave.[70] In 1910, however, they invited tenders for the erection of headstones over public graves whereby the family of the deceased could pay (9d per dozen letters in 1913) to have the name of the dead inscribed on a communal stone. The stone remained the property of the cemetery.[71] By 1903, Bolton Burial Board permitted mourners to inscribe the name and age of the dead and the date of death on a flat-stone which lay over the grave.[72] It is interesting to note, however, that in 1917 the board reviewed this resolution, concluding that 'due to lack of interest' inscriptions on public graves would only be available in one of the corporation's three cemeteries. Of 542 interments in common graves in 1920, only four families chose to inscribe the details of the dead on a flat-stone.[73]

---

[65] BOHT, Tape 32a, Reference: AL/KP/1c/013.
[66] E. Roberts, 'Lancashire Way of Death', 191.
[67] B. Murphy, 'Remembrance Remembered, Remembrance Observed: An Irishman's Daughter Visits His Grave', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 10, 4 (1997), 345–60.
[68] Although private cemetery companies, such as York, had long permitted inscriptions on a shared stone.
[69] GRO CBR D2/2/1, 27 September 1907.   [70] LRO MBS 2/20, 8 September 1903.
[71] LRO MBH 2/20, 8 February 1910 and MBS 2/21, 8 July 1913. A similar arrangement was in operation at St James's Cemetery in Liverpool. LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.
[72] BALS ABCF 15/30, Rules and Regulations and Tables of Fees for Bolton Cemeteries, 1903.
[73] BALS ABCF 15/39, taken from a table of 'Total Number of Interments in the Corporation's Three Cemeteries Over Five Years'.

Between 1880 and 1910, approximately only 15 per cent of those interring bodies in public graves in York Cemetery paid for inscriptions on the stone over the grave.[74] Of course, many families who interred their dead in a common grave would probably have found the cost of an inscription too expensive. Nonetheless, having access to this form of memorialisation was important in itself as the prohibition of remembrance on graves perpetuated the indignity of the public funeral even after burial had taken place.

The pauper funeral

Restrictions on mourning and memorial culture extended to include the manner in which the deceased were interred. Notably, parochial and municipal burial authorities reserved the right to dictate the kind of coffin used for interment. Families who turned to the parish for burial were required to use parochial coffins constructed of plain deal wood in the most rudimentary design. To a point, this was for environmental and economic reasons: flimsy wooden coffins decomposed quicker than those made of thick oak or lined in lead, enabling cemetery authorities to reuse the grave space after fourteen years or so. Yet parish and burial authorities also restricted the ability of the bereaved to inscribe gestures of identity or loss on the coffin. Even the simplest token of commemoration could meet with hostility from Union authorities. An article in *The Times* in 1878 chided guardians who moved pauper corpses from coffins provided by their families to parochial boxes of 'inferior value' and substituted tin name-plates with 'a piece of paper with a name and number'.[75] An article in the *Lancet* in 1884 attacked the 'petty tyranny' of the Cambridge guardians who, it revealed, removed all name-plates and small ornaments attached to parish coffins by the friends of the deceased: 'All those who have worked among the poor know the feelings with which they regard their dead, and how even the very poorest will strive to secure the means sufficient for a decent burial.'[76] For this author, then, even modest gestures of mourning and identity salvaged some decency for the pauper corpse. In denying such simple rites, the guardians exceeded the bounds of known misery and betrayed a lack of humanity.

That parochial coffins tended to be cheap and ineffectual can only have exacerbated the humiliation inherent in surrendering the owner-ship of the corpse to the Union. As Robert Roberts noted, guardians were notorious for commissioning the cheapest coffins available on the

---

[74] YRO Acc. 107 9/4–6.   [75] *The Times*, 28 November 1878, 12.
[76] *Lancet*, 3 May 1884, 812–13.

undertaker's sliding scale: 'The *Esk* casket, last on the list, was just the job for paupers and those amongst our poor who had foolishly backslid on their burial premiums. Fashioned in elm, it tended, like the cheap Macintoshes of the time, to split and let in water.'[77] In 1895, one Salford guardian described the pauper coffins commissioned by that union as a 'perfect disgrace': 'Their quality was so poor that they cracked when a nail was driven in, and unless bodies are carefully handled, they fall out of them.'[78] Liverpool Select Vestry had a history of contracting pauper coffins which were little more than 'rough boxes without handles' with the names of the dead 'written in chalk in a very illegible manner'.[79] In 1884 one guardian remonstrated that coffins with holes large enough to poke an umbrella through were unseemly, not least because they exposed the corpse to view. Indeed, there was not one member of the Vestry who would 'care to bury his dog in one of them'.[80] In 1891, another guardian, Mr Brooks, called for more 'liberality' with regard to expenditure on coffins. As it was, pauper coffins were made from flimsy wood whilst their uniform size meant that larger corpses were 'indecently' crammed in them.[81] Cracks and holes in the coffin were not only a danger to public health; they did little to assist the grieving process. Recalling one pauper burial, the guardian Mr Roberts described a coffin which had cracked to a width of over one inch. The effect was distressing: 'A poor creature put her finger through the crack and felt the body, and the result was a lamentation that was terrible to listen to.'[82] Such poor quality was particularly disappointing as only one month previous, tenders had been invited for a new contractor on account of the shoddy quality of coffins then in use. Indeed, a high turnover of contracts for coffins implies that the 'general character' of those supplied to the workhouse was unsatisfactory.[83] Moreover, such was the flimsiness of the parish coffin that suppliers were usually unable to sell them to anyone else. This not only points to their appalling quality, it implies that, like the workhouse uniform, they were readily identified as belonging to the parish.[84]

---

[77] R. Roberts, *Ragged Schooling*, 134–5.   [78] *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1895, 4.

[79] *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 October 1895, 3.

[80] [*Liverpool*] *Express*, 7 October 1884, in LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.

[81] *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 12 September 1891, 3, and *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 September 1891, 3.

[82] *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 October 1895, 3.

[83] See, for instance, LVRO 353 SEL 10/14, 19 September 1895 and BALS GBO 12/13, 8 July 1908.

[84] One firm of joiners complained to the Liverpool Workhouse Committee on losing their contract for coffins that no-one else would purchase the coffins already made for the workhouse. LVRO 353 SEL 10/16, 19 November 1903.

Subjected to such indignities, it is small wonder families wished to claim the corpses of those who died in the workhouse before committing them to the grave. In removing the corpse to the family home, relatives and friends could at least enact customs associated with viewing the dead and ensure that the deceased was treated with care and decorum. Friends could also attempt to ameliorate the ugliness of the parochial box. One of the most striking images in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* is that of the dainty, golden haired Fanny Robin 'nailed up in parish boards' with her name scrawled in chalk on the side of the coffin. The rude container provides a stark contrast to the pretty painted wagon, decked in flowers, which is sent to claim her.[85] In cases where the deceased remained in the workhouse, relatives were usually permitted to view the corpse before it was dispatched to the cemetery. This did not, however, guarantee against undignified treatment. An investigation in 1880 by Stow-on-the-Wold Burial Board, Gloucestershire, revealed that the sexton of the cemetery, James Beachem, had been opening parish coffins entrusted to his care and exhibiting the corpses to his family. Further enquiry exposed the slapdash way in which coffins were dispatched from the workhouse: some lids were fastened with only one screw whilst others were merely tied with string. Beachem resigned his post immediately, although it is unclear how far the guardians reviewed the security of coffin lids.[86]

Increasingly, however, the meanness of pauper interments was perceived as indicative of outdated attitudes towards poverty rather than as an acceptable way of treating the abject poor. When the guardians of Preston Union accepted a tender for the supply of cheap but allegedly good quality coffins in 1897, the *Lancet* suggested that any savings made could be expended on upgrading the pauper burial itself:

The Preston Guardians will, we hope, now that a coffin can be purchased for a penny, make the funeral of a pauper somewhat less of a perfunctory ceremony than it is at present and take some care to show that a body should not be huddled into the ground at the cheapest rate and in the most careless manner.[87]

Yet the 'huddling' of paupers into their graves went beyond a question of financial expenditure. Whilst the Christian burial service articulated egalitarianism in death (at least for the believer), entry into cemetery chapels was often barred to both the pauper corpse and mourners prior to interment. In 1891 Canon Carr, the Roman Catholic priest for Anfield

---

[85] T. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Ware: Wordsworth Classic, [1874] 1994), 222–4.
[86] GRO P317a PC31/1, 12 January 1880.   [87] *Lancet*, 9 October 1897, 930.

Cemetery, complained to the Liverpool Select Vestry that prohibiting admission to the chapel was an unjust practice. He qualified his appeal, however, by adding that access should only be encouraged for those paupers 'that were fit – not disagreeable or dangerous'.[88] At Walton Workhouse Cemetery, paupers were permitted into the cemetery chapel by 'special arrangement' and the payment of a small fee. Again, this only applied to those who displayed no 'unpleasant' or 'dangerous' characteristics.[89] Such language is richly suggestive: it points to a vision of the abject poor as unpredictable and perilous guests in the house of God. Moreover, whilst fears concerning the behaviour of paupers were no doubt justified in some cases, the policing of the church served only to reinforce the abasement of the common grave, especially for those who considered themselves 'respectable'.

The acting chaplain of Walton Workhouse (Liverpool) in the early 1880s, Hywel Smith, took a keen interest in mourners who attended parish burials, distinguishing between the reprobate poor and 'respectable', 'decent folks', some of whom were ratepayers.[90] Friends and relatives who thanked him for his ministry, articulated a degree of shame at the manner of interment or expressed anxiety for the soul of the departed all ranked highly in Smith's estimation. That such positive exchange warranted transcription into his logbook suggests, however, that they were the exception rather than the rule. Nonetheless, mourners who approached the chaplain in apparent humility actively distinguished themselves from 'rough' and 'dangerous' paupers and, inadvertently perhaps, demonstrated their right of access to spiritual rites.

As noted in previous chapters, the spiritual meanings attached to religious rites were inextricable from secular rights. Exclusion from church was offensive to the poor as much on account of the distinctions drawn between the pauper and non-pauper as from injured spiritual sentiments. For those who did seek spiritual balm in religious rites, some comfort could be taken from the reading of the burial service as the corpse was lowered into the grave. Yet even this concession to decency could appear slapdash and half-hearted. Scandals concerning failure or reluctance to read the burial service at paupers' funerals indicate a degree of clerical ambivalence towards the corpse, especially when no mourners were present. As the *Local Government Chronicle and Knight's Advertiser* noted in 1885, some members of the clergy were disinclined to perform the burial service for paupers who died in the workhouse but whose home parish could not be

---

[88] LVRO PAR 6/5/1, 15 October 1891.   [89] Ibid.
[90] LVRO 353 WES 14/3. Smith acted as chaplain at the workhouse on a temporary basis during the 1880s whenever the regular chaplain, Reverend Leslie, was ill.

traced.[91] When Stretford Burial Board dismissed plans to have the Anglican portion of the cemetery consecrated, the Bishop of Manchester expressed concern that he would be unable to 'compel' the rector of the parish to officiate at burials of the parish poor.[92] In 1882 the governor of Wigan Workhouse, Mr Lowe, issued a report criticising ministers for non-attendance at pauper funerals, noting that 'things like that are occurring pretty often here lately'. In the space of one week, two bodies from the workhouse had been interred without the appropriate clergy. The body of Julia Bray, a Roman Catholic pauper, was interred on a Monday afternoon yet no burial service was performed until two days after. Later that week, the corpse of Edward Edwards was also taken for burial in the workhouse cemetery. When no minister arrived to officiate at the interment, the sexton (the caretaker of the cemetery) read the burial service himself, despite having no authority to do so. Possibly doubting the wisdom of his actions, he then abandoned the coffin in the chapel for the duration of the night.[93]

The flippancy of the clergy towards the pauper corpse provided an opportunity for guardians to deflect criticism from themselves. On a visit to Walton Workhouse Cemetery in June 1883, Mr Beesley, a member of the West Derby Guardians, near Liverpool, witnessed the interment of a pauper in the absence of the chaplain, Reverend Leslie.[94] Reporting this 'defect' to his fellow guardians, Beesley called for Leslie to be reprimanded. In his defence, Leslie argued that the coffin in question had arrived at the cemetery after the appointed hour for the burial service. He had sanctioned immediate interment for sanitary reasons: the corpse had been found drowned and thus subject to post-mortem. In any case, continued Leslie, he read the burial service over the grave two days following the interment.[95] This rather missed the point. The board requested that, forthwith, Leslie contrive to remain at the cemetery one extra hour each day in order to conduct the burial service over any late arrivals. Leslie refused but, as a gesture of goodwill to the board, offered to read the burial service the day following the interment of any 'casuals'. This concession would, however, occasion 'personal hardship' and was, he considered, 'quite unnecessary'. Leslie then suggested the board remember that his salary had remained static since 1869, despite the steady increase in his workload, much of which was done 'voluntarily

---

[91] LRO UDCl 60/1.   [92] LRO MBS 2/18, c. July 1885.
[93] WRO A10/1/Z, 27 May 1882.
[94] LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883. Unless stated otherwise, all subsequent quotes derive from this source.
[95] Leslie argued that Home Office regulations demanded safe and speedy burial for bodies 'in all stages of decomposition'.

and unsolicited'.[96] The chaplain's lackadaisical approach towards the burial of 'casuals' encapsulated the humiliation attached to the 'pauper whom nobody owned'. Beesley, the champion of the cause, concluded his admonishment of Leslie, declaring he 'would not like one of his relatives to be put in a hole like a dog'.[97] Beesley thus seemed to imply that the burial service conferred Christian status on the pauper grave and, therefore, distinguished it from the uncivilised and indecent interment of a beast. That even this could be postponed until the day following interment when confronted with an obstinate chaplain indicates that any concern for decency was tenuous.[98]

It is impossible to determine the individual meanings invested in the burial service at a pauper funeral. It is plausible to surmise, however, that the nonchalance of clerics compounded the secular indignities of parochial burial. On Thursday 27 February 1908 a boy named Thomas Roberts died in the workhouse hospital on Brownlow Hill, Liverpool. His father informed workhouse officials that he would make private arrangements for the burial of his son on the following Sunday. When he had not returned to the workhouse offices by Saturday morning, however, the clerk authorised the interment of the body in a pauper grave. When Roberts arrived at the hospital later that day to finalise arrangements for the collection of Thomas's body, he was deeply 'grieved': not only had the burial already taken place, Thomas had been interred 'without so much as a prayer'. Whether Roberts considered confessional rites to be of spiritual significance is unclear. To a point, it was not the issue at stake. As Mr Reay, the guardian responsible for calling the Select Vestry to account for the mistake, succinctly stated: 'The boy should not have been taken away and buried like a dog, with no intimation being sent to his friends.' Reay's evocation of animal imagery referred to the unchristian nature of the burial, seemingly made worse by its taking place in the absence of the bereaved. The censures issued in regard to the mistake hinged, however, on inefficiency and incompetence rather than the wretchedness of the pauper burial itself. Indeed, the governor of the workhouse could only complain about the workload of

---

[96] Leslie noted that when the workhouse opened in 1868, it catered for 800 inmates. During the past year, however, the population of the house had reached almost 2,000. Following this confrontation with the board, Leslie received an increase in his annual salary of twenty-five pounds. See LVRO 353 WES, 12 July 1883. Beesley had opposed the increase. See LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 21 June 1883, and *Liverpool Daily Post*, 21 June 1883, 7.

[97] LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883.

[98] Indeed, Beesley retracted his charges of neglect of duty. See LVRO 353 WES, 28 June 1883.

his staff: 'the clerks have as much work as they can get through. I am only surprised that there are not more bungles than there are.' The only concession to the feelings of the family was a grudging letter of apology.[99]

Bureaucratic mistakes and oversights inflamed charges that the poor law guardians were 'mean-souled' and a 'board of bigots'.[100] As *Porcupine* noted early in January 1881, ineptitude was, all too often, inseparable from indifference to the feelings of the poor. Reporting that a young girl, Rebecca Scott, had died in Liverpool Workhouse Hospital and was subsequently interred in a parochial grave without any notification of either being sent to her concerned mother, the journal concluded that: 'The blunders, great and small, of our local parish are becoming a byword, and until the contemptuous and unfeeling manner in which the poor are treated is stopped with a firm hand, "mistakes" and "negligence", such as the above, will never cease.'[101] Again, this would suggest that antipathy to the pauper grave was rooted not so much in a preoccupation with economic status but in the concern to claim the ownership and secure the dignity of the dead.

Contesting respectability

If we are to retain the notion of respectability with reference to the working-class culture of death we must posit a more fluid understanding of the 'respectable' funeral. The exhumation of corpses from common graves for the purposes of reinterment indicates that dichotomies between stigma and respectability were not clear cut. The fixation with the pauper/private burial dichotomy has encouraged a tendency to overlook loose and more malleable definitions of 'respectability'. Notably, families who interred their dead in public graves strove to retain, where possible, a degree of dignity, as exemplified by attempts to fix cheap name-plates to pauper coffins. One of the most nuanced contemporary analyses of respectability and antipathy towards the public grave was Maud Pember Reeves's account of thrift and burial expense. Reeves challenged the notion that the money spent on working-class funerals could, with prudence, be halved. This was, she maintained, an 'erroneous idea' based upon ignorance concerning the 'real circumstances' of the poor. Rather, the expense incurred by the 'decent' funeral was a rational form of expenditure when set against an appreciation of the aversion to the pauper funeral. Parochial burial not only lacked dignity and respect

---

[99] *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 6 March 1908, 3. See also LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.
[100] See *Liverpool Review*, 3 January 1880, 11, and *Liberal Review*, 12 June 1880, 6.
[101] *Porcupine*, 22 January 1881, 684.

for the dead, it tarnished the entire family with the 'consequent political and social degradation' attendant on pauper status. Reeves was aware that antipathy to the common grave might be perceived as 'sheer prejudice'. Yet it was, she suggested, a prejudice 'even the most educated and highly born' of parents would share if their child were to be buried in the public grave. Reeves's study undoubtedly gestured towards an understanding of a working-class culture of death and values of thrift. This gesture was, however, strictly limited to the 'respectable, hard-working, independent' poor as defined by Reeves and her fellow surveyors. Moreover, Reeves's claim to know the 'real circumstances' of the working classes rested on twice weekly visits to families in Lambeth by members of the Fabian Women's Group between 1909 and 1913. The study was hardly representative (only thirty families were involved) and Reeves glossed over the problems inherent in members of one social group interviewing another.[102] As Ross McKibbin argues, external observers of working-class lives represented figures of authority who were unable to empathise with or rationalise the mentality of the poor.[103]

Nonetheless, Reeves's account posited a relatively sophisticated perception of the working-class funeral. By setting the impulse for burial insurance against antipathy to pauper burial, Reeves implied that interment in a private grave secured the 'decent' (and, therefore, respectable) burial. Decency in death was, however, flexible. For Reeves, excess expenditure compromised respectability as much as pauperism and public burial. Examining the bill for a child's funeral, she concluded that 'no display and no extravagance' were evident in paying for hearse attendants, a woman to lay the body out, flowers and a new black tie for the father of the deceased.[104] Rather, they represented modest and sincere expressions of loss. The child was interred in a common grave. Significantly, however, Reeves defined the funeral as 'respectable'. Thus, an appreciation of the social stigma attached to pauperism and public graves did not nullify the respectability of a funeral in terms of personal gestures of mourning. Between the ideal of the private grave and the shame of pauper burial, there was considerable scope for individuals to inscribe mourning rites, no matter how rudimentary, with profound meaning.

For some at least, therefore, interment in a common grave could be reconciled with notions of decent burial, especially if some autonomy could be exercised in the manner in which the dead were conveyed to

---

[102] Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, 66–72.   [103] McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, 167–96.
[104] Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, 70–1. Example taken from the burial of a child who died in August 1911.

the grave. Indeed, it was recognition of the significance invested in independence that increasingly prompted criticisms of guardians with a draconian interpretation of the punitive poor law. It is also worth remembering that despite the boom in burial insurance, interments in common graves accounted for a significant number of burials in most cemeteries. In 1892, Anfield Cemetery authorities had to reuse old public graves to accommodate more common interments. Burton-on-Trent Burial Board created almost 300 new common graves in 1896.[105] A survey of St James's Cemetery, Liverpool, in 1932 indicated that since the ground opened for interments in 1829, 5,789 private graves (holding, on average, five coffins) had been sold, and 1,728 common graves (holding around ten bodies) had been filled.[106] To suppose that the families of corpses interred in common graves were too 'rough' to care about decent interment (or their dead) or were in perpetual thrall to the stigma of pauperism seems simplistic, not least because it overlooks the potential to redefine decency. Indeed, the rudimentary effects of mourning could adopt extra significance as the locus for representations of loss when other rites were circumscribed. This did not cancel the indignity of common burial but, rather, allowed for its amelioration. As Liverpool Workhouse Committee noted in February 1884, bereaved families frequently removed bodies from the workhouse claiming their intention to bury them directly. They then performed mourning customs and organised wakes before returning to the parish authorities to request parochial interment. That burial policies were often drawn but evidently not spent on the purchase of a grave was a 'scandal' which, the committee agreed, required immediate 'suppression'. In future, bodies would only be released to families who undertook to buy a grave immediately.[107]

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

---

[105] PRO HO45/9921/B23268.   [106] LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.
[107] LVRO 353 SEL 10/11, 7 February 1884. See also *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 February 1884, in LVRO 353 SEL 14/3. The issue was raised again in 1887. See LVRO 353 SEL 10/12, 17 March 1887.

to propose strict measures which would necessitate an investigation into the private finances of any person committed to burial at the expense of the parish.[108] If the family and friends of the deceased had money to fritter away on clothing, food, drink and a hearse or two, they had sufficient means to buy a grave. A similar case arose in 1908 when the family of a woman who had died in the workhouse removed her corpse for burial. They then applied for a parochial burial. On the day of the funeral, however, the woman was 'conveyed to the cemetery in a hearse drawn by four horses, whilst there were three coaches, each drawn by two horses'. Alderman Brooks was furious: 'if anyone went to the workhouse, getting everything at the expense of the ratepayer and yet money was spent so lavishly on the funeral without interring the body in *anything but a common grave*, surely there should be some recompense to the Guardians for what they had done for the woman'. It transpired that the woman's son had insured her for the sum of forty pounds and, after her extravagant transport to the grave, was reportedly 'drinking the rest of the money as fast as he possibly could'.[109]

It may be that the relative extravagance of these burials induced the wrath of the board. Yet it is plausible to suggest that many families buried their dead with more modest mourning rites whilst still turning to the parish for a public grave. The guardians' objections towards the squandering of burial money on mourning paraphernalia hinged partially on a desire to recoup money spent on those who evidently had no need to burden the ratepayer.[110] Yet there was also reluctance among guardians to accept any rationale that permitted expenditure on the effects of mourning whilst committing the dead to the perceived disgrace of a public grave, paid for by the parish. Moreover, guardians made no concession to the possibility that decisions concerning the distribution of burial finance necessitated protracted and potentially antagonistic family discussion or that clothes were necessary items of expenditure. Likewise, the tirade against the 'tyrannical customs' of the poor revealed an absence of shared understandings concerning the meaning of burial ritual outside a fixed definition of 'respectability' which was rooted in antipathy to public burial.[111] As chapters 3 and 4 highlighted, giving the dead a good send off and opening the house to neighbours and relatives expressed immediate grief in a language which, as the next chapter will

---

[108] *The [Bolton] Daily Chronicle*, 15 November 1905, in BALS GBO 12/13.
[109] *Bolton Evening Chronicle*, 23 December 1908, in BALS GBO 12/13.
[110] At Liverpool, relatives could only claim the effects of those who died in the workhouse after the guardians had deducted the cost of the keep and interment of the deceased. See, for instance, LVRO 353 SEL 10/14, 353 SEL 10/16, 353 SEL 10/17.
[111] *The Times*, 27 September 1892, 9.

demonstrate, the final rotting place of the dead might fail to supply. It was, therefore, not respectability as defined and understood by the guardians which was at issue for such families, but the articulation of respect for the corpse and the ability to express loss through the familiar rituals of burial.

It must be noted, however, that the common grave did not command universal revulsion. Some paupers died in the workhouse, were interred in a public grave and later found to have saved a small fortune in the bank.[112] The expense incurred by a 'respectable' burial was also thought by some to be money foolishly spent. As Walter Greenwood's father suggested, far better to spend the money on the living:

A pauper grave wouldn't trouble me ... Come to think of it you can let my burial insurance lapse here and now and let's be having the pennies every week. If I sup it away in beer it'll be one in the eye for those insurance robbers [and] the right man will have benefited.[113]

On a more mercenary note, William Morris of Bridgeman Street in Bolton permitted the interment of his friend and distant relative, Jonathan Redford, in the grounds of the workhouse in the full knowledge that the dead man owned a grave space in Tonge Cemetery. Following the burial, Morris applied to Bolton Corporation to have Redford's grave deeds transferred to himself as his friend had given him his belongings prior to death and he was the only living relative of the dead man.[114]

Crucially, some people were unaware of the distinctions between private, pauper and public graves. Some families interred the dead in public graves in ignorance that the plot would not belong to them. Thus, Elizabeth Wright applied to Bolton Burial Board in 1883 to have her husband disinterred from a common grave as she 'was not aware at the time she made arrangements with the undertaker that the grave would not belong to her'.[115] Emily Barley interred her son Frederick Henry in a public plot in 1912 on the advice of the undertaker. Two weeks later, however, she wrote to Bolton Burial Board explaining that this was a mistake and she wished Frederick to be reinterred in a private grave.[116] Correspondence between Farnworth Burial Board and the Home Office in January 1909 further suggests that many relatives were unaware of the restrictions imposed upon public burial plots, giving rise to a significant number of bodies being interred (on the advice of undertakers) in public

---

[112] See, for instance, LVRO 353 SEL 10/16, 11 February 1904.
[113] Greenwood, *There Was a Time*, 23.   [114] BALS ABZ 3/1/1, 18 September 1886.
[115] BALS ABZ 3/1/4, 27 January 1914.   [116] BALS ABZ 3/1/4, 17 December 1912.

graves by 'mistake'.[117] Again, this would appear to suggest that it was the implications of the common grave for mourning and commemorative rites rather than a fear of social disgrace that motivated the impulse to claim one's own corpse/grave. That people were oblivious to the ramifications of interment in the public grave may indicate that the stigma associated with common burial has, to some degree at least, been mythologised. It might also, however, imply that popular associations of anonymous and collective interment were so inextricable from pauperism that bereaved families were misled into believing that the payment of burial fees secured a grave for private use. In this light, the neatness of the pauper/respectable burial dichotomy falters. It is only by recognising the fluidity of respectability that we can begin to appreciate attitudes towards the disposal of the dead and the fine distinctions between public and pauper burials.

Conclusion

One of the earliest studies to examine the relationship between consumer culture, funeral costs and social status, *Burial Reform and Funeral Costs* (1938), by Arnold Wilson MP and Professor Herman Levy, noted the importance of the respectable funeral for cementing a sense of social inclusion. In this context, the distinction between the private and public grave extended beyond straightforward notions of economic and social status to consider the wider cultural meanings invested in the interment of the dead. Thus, common burial was not only synonymous with the shame of poverty; it engendered social exclusion and offended the dignity of the dead and the bereaved by denying the assertion of individual identity. Noting the resolution by London County Council in 1930 to improve the standard of 'punctuality, decency and decorum' of pauper funerals, Wilson and Levy argued that antipathy to the common grave would persist so long as the bodies interred in such graves were related to each other only by the fact that all were poor.[118] The indecency of common burial rested on the perceived 'loneliness of the corpse, for whom nobody cares except the Poor Law Authorities'.[119] For those already socially marginalised by poverty, the inability to express attachment and identity in death and grief fostered feelings of guilt and shame which exceeded social jealousy.

---

[117] BALS AF 6/40, 19 January 1909. A cynical interpretation of this advice is that it was in the interests of the undertaker that the bereaved inter the dead in a public grave as this left more insurance money to be spent on mourning paraphernalia.
[118] Wilson and Levy, *Burial Reform*, 63.   [119] Ibid., 64.

This is not to suggest that Wilson and Levy ignored the importance of a culture of respectability. The common funeral was, they argued, only the negative side of the 'problem' of working-class funeral culture. Acknowledging that most commentators interpreted working-class funeral expenditure as symbolic of 'vanity and the love for show', Wilson and Levy argued that the 'proper' funeral was a complex expression of notions of self-respect and dignity.[120] In one sense, this was linked to a desire to display the fruits of burial club thrift. Of rather more consequence was the bereaved's wish to treat the dead with respect and the guilt they experienced if the dead were denied this dignity. It was this emotional vulnerability that rendered the funeral so expensive: the bereaved were exploited. According to Wilson and Levy, the canny undertaker capitalised on the fact that 'every human instinct' deterred the grief-stricken from comparing prices and haggling for cheaper burials.[121] Not only did undertakers refuse to print price lists, they issued unitemised bills. Moreover, many applied direct pressure on the bereaved to subscribe to associations between respect, dignity and expense: 'you cannot have anything else but polished oak in a road like this' and 'Your husband's noble figure is just fitted to a rosewood casket, and it is only suitable for him.'[122]

Wilson and Levy's proposed solution to such issues was for the state to assume control of the disposal of the dead, meeting costs from National Insurance. This would not only obliterate the public burial, but would also reduce inflated expenses associated with funerals.[123] Wilson and Levy's analysis highlighted the complexity of notions of the respectable culture of death, portraying the culture of 'extravagance' in a more sympathetic light. More recently, Melanie Tebbutt has asserted that the working-class commitment to saving for funerals can be read as a desire for status, but one which testified to a 'determination to be valued'.[124] In this sense, funeral expenditure was the most visible means of expressing sentiment. As Mark Drakeford argues with reference to late twentieth-century public burials, such visibility is particularly significant to those who feel their position within society to be marginal and threatened:

[120] Ibid., 71.
[121] Ibid., ix. See also J. Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London: Vintage, 1998), 20–33.
[122] Wilson and Levy, *Burial Reform*, 88. See also Puckle, *Funeral Customs*, 98, and L. Quincey Dowd, *Funeral Management and Costs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), 14.
[123] Wilson and Levy, *Burial Reform*, 169–79. They favoured cremation but thought the introduction of crematoria throughout Britain would prove inconvenient and expensive, p. vii.
[124] Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet*, 17.

'People who have not been accorded dignity in life need to seize it with particular urgency at times of death.' Attempts by county councils to market low-cost funerals to poorer families have met with limited success: 'cheap' funerals represent a 'genuine choice' only for those who do not feel their social position to be threatened by other assaults on their citizenship. For the poor, the funeral not only confirms their relationship with the deceased but reaffirms the 'meaning and purpose of a life where such qualities have been called into question'.[125]

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the 'pauper grave' remains a term loaded with connotations of social exclusion and anonymity.[126] That it has been renamed the 'social fund' grave is, perhaps, indicative of a wish to challenge the images associated with the Victorian and Edwardian terminology of impoverished death. The employment of euphemism in an attempt to rob the public grave of its stigma is, however, nothing new. In 1891 Urmston Burial Board described its common graves as 'fourth class' burial plots whilst Chorley burial authority preferred the phrase 'unpurchased graves'.[127] Awareness of the importance of language extended to include the term pauper. A resolution by Bedwellty Union in 1912 that 'in the opinion of this board, the time has arrived when the word "pauper" should not be used when speaking of the chargeable poor of this country' similarly indicates a move away from the early Victorian punitive philosophy of poverty.[128] On 5 March 1912 members of Liverpool Select Vestry voted to adopt the Bedwellty ruling, determining to use the phrase 'Person in receipt of parochial relief' in favour of 'pauper' in future.[129] As one guardian noted, the removal of the 'hateful word' from the language of the Union signified steps towards 'spar[ing] the feelings of the people who sought their aid'.[130]

Despite such changes, the implications of the public grave continued to be overwhelmingly negative. Cremation propaganda from the early decades of the twentieth century drew on the confusion between common and pauper burials by evoking the imagery of the 'pauper's pit' as a means of emphasising the egalitarianism of the crematorium.[131] Likewise, burial board records throughout the 1920s and 1930s highlight the persistence of applications for exhumation from families who 'were not in a position at the time' or who 'had not the means' to purchase a private grave in the

---

[125] Drakeford, 'Last Rights?', 522–4.
[126] See, for instance, *Guardian*, 15 February 1999, 6–7.
[127] LRO UDUr 2/26, 10 July 1891, and MBCh 29/15, Borough of Chorley Regulations, 1913.
[128] LVRO 353 SEL 1/14.   [129] Ibid.
[130] *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 6 March 1912, in LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.
[131] *The Cremation Society: Council Report 1933*, in LVRO 942 BIC.

immediate aftermath of death.[132] The public grave was, and is, invested with meaning beyond burial space: it condemned the dead to eternal anonymity and an ignoble funeral. The private grave represented the antithesis of this. The social aspirations of the poor may have found expression in the purchase of a grave, yet the private grave also represented the desire to exercise some control and dignity in life, even if, ironically, this be over the dead.

[132] BALS ABCF 15/28, 20 January 1919, and ABCF 15/40, 11 June 1923.