

MORTALITY

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ISSN 0898-2603



Mortality

Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Armin Arias and Professor Erica Bourgouin
ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cmrt20

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To cite this article: Chris Miller (04 Nov 2024): A century of Canadian obituaries: transforming ways in which people commemorate the deceased, *Mortality*, DOI: [10.1080/13576275.2024.2421928](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2024.2421928)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2024.2421928>



Published online: 04 Nov 2024.



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A century of Canadian obituaries: transforming ways in which people commemorate the deceased

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ABSTRACT

Obituaries represent one of the many rituals that the bereaved conduct following someone's death. Like any ritual, these texts transform over time, and assume different forms depending on context. This study applies content and textual analysis to 3,300 obituaries, collected from six Canadian newspapers and spanning the years 1900–2021. This paper shares preliminary findings concerning transformations in the form and function of Canadian obituaries over time. Major changes in form include an immense growth in length. Relatedly, greater details shared about the deceased – including their family, occupation, and hobbies – indicates a functional shift from texts that announce death to ones which construct a life legacy. Finally, this paper attends to the importance of context in the study of obituaries, by highlighting major conventions in Canadian obituaries and comparing how they differ by region across Canada.

KEYWORDS

Obituaries; death discourse; content analysis; memorialisation; narrative; tribute

Introduction

Obituaries are one of the rituals that accompany death (B. Fowler, 2007, p. 12; Phillips, 2007, p. 330; Starck, 2006, p. xvi). Like any ritual, obituaries fulfil many purposes. Some of these are pragmatic, such as announcing that someone died and sharing the funeral date and location. Other purposes are more symbolic, as details shared about the deceased construct their life narrative. In addition to information about the deceased, obituaries offer insights into the people and societies that produced them (Moses & Marelli, 2003). If obituaries are a ritual, then we can expect that they will transform over time and across contexts. Analysing obituaries published between 1900 and 2021, this paper explores the typical format of obituaries in Canada and charts transformations over time.

By offering a broad overview of the changes obituaries have undergone over the past 120 years, this paper contributes to understanding how people memorialise the dead. Despite the growth of social media as a conduit for these announcements (Murrell et al., 2021), obituaries published in print newspapers persist as an outlet for memorialisation. This paper demonstrates that obituaries have also undergone significant transformations over time, in terms of format, content, and perceived function.

This study recognises that obituaries assume different forms around the world. Some argue that obituaries represent a stable genre (P. C. Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016; P. C. Heynderickx et al., 2019; Moses & Marelli, 2003), and there are indeed some broad similarities between countries. Yet there are also significant differences in how these texts are produced. In Iceland for instance, many obituaries are composed as letters that address the deceased directly (Árnason et al., 2003). In New Zealand, one publication differentiates between 'main notices' (written by the family) and 'secondary notices' (from co-workers or friends) (Nairn et al., 2017). In some countries, obituaries are published for free, or at minimal cost (Árnason et al., 2003; Marks & Piggee, 1998), yet this is not the case in Canada. Obituaries are sometimes written by professional editors, while in other contexts, families have licence to compose these texts as they wish. While German and Dutch obituaries resemble each other at first glance (similar length, format), there are important differences in terms of the information that they contain and details that they emphasise (Susanne et al., 2014). Studies from Iran, Africa, and Turkey stress that religious beliefs shape how texts are composed (Aliakbari & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016, p. 190; Bonsu, 2007, p. 202; Ergin 2010, p. 195). An in-depth exploration of Canadian obituaries therefore offers a better understanding of the diverse forms these texts can assume.

Local context also shapes what 'counts' as an obituary. In some research, obituary refers exclusively to pieces written about notable figures, generally written by professional writers, and appearing 'higher up' in newspapers (B. Fowler, 2007; Starck, 2006). However, this meaning of the term no longer reflects conventions in many North American newspapers. Obituaries now often appear in a dedicated section near the Classified advertisements. In general, the bereaved write these notices (perhaps with assistance from funeral directors or editors). While Starck disparages paid obituaries and suggests they represent 'compromised' source material for scholars (2008, p. 444), this study rejects that view to capture how the average citizen is commemorated.

Relatedly, scholars often distinguish obituaries from death notices. However, the line separating these seems blurry. Anderson and Han suggest that obituaries contain 'much more detail' than death notices (2009, p. 336), but fail to specify a requisite level of detail. Ergin challenges whether these distinctions are "universal" across different cultures' (2009, p. 177). Finally, the distinction does not reflect how newspapers publish these texts. In Canada, one man was memorialised (with identical text) in one newspaper under the heading 'Obituary', in another under 'Death Notices', and under 'Deaths' in a third paper. These distinctions are therefore not analytically useful. The 'obituaries' analysed in this study come from a dedicated section of newspapers and reference someone who died in the preceding days/weeks.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of regional diversity. Barth, Van Hoof, and Beldad (2014) call for greater investigation into how mourning rituals differ across national cultures. Many countries are also marked by distinct intranational variation, as environmental, political, and social factors influence outlooks and practices (Geert et al., 2010; Minkov & Hofstede, 2011). Save for a few exceptions (L. Mcneill, 2004, 2006), most research on obituaries has been conducted outside of Canada. By comparing obituaries published in different regions across Canada, this paper draws attention to the need for both inter- and intra-national comparison, and contributes to mapping trends over time in this national context.

Studying obituaries

Scholars have analysed obituaries from a range of perspectives. Starck's (2006) approach is historical, analysing the genre from the very first obituary to more recent examples from England, America, and Australia. This paper builds on Starck by observing how these texts change over a long period in a given area. While Starck primarily focuses on the types of figures who get remembered and the overall tone of texts, this paper applies a historical lens to understand shifts in the micro sections or 'stages' that make up obituaries (Marzol, 2006).

Applying a Bourdieusian analysis, B. Fowler (2007) suggests that obituaries are a form of collective memory that allow people to tell stories about the past. Rather than objective life details, Bonsu argues that obituaries are 'carefully orchestrated presentations', allowing the bereaved to present the deceased in their preferred manner (2007, p. 200). Building on the idea that obituaries function to craft life narratives, this paper attends to the specific ways in which these stories are told. Observing what information is included and the level of detail in which they are described, this paper explores how legacy is constructed, and how this has changed over time. I argue that obituaries have shifted from being informative on urgent, practical matters (who died, where to visit the body) to become texts that construct life legacies. In contrast to older obituaries, modern obituaries place considerably less emphasis on how a person died, and instead speak more to that person's broader lifetime.

As constructed narratives, obituaries may not necessarily represent the deceased's life with complete accuracy. However, this does not make these texts bereft of insights. Indeed, as understood through the lens of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), as attempts to construct desired identity images, obituaries can enrich understandings of the deceased, the bereaved, and the societies in which they lived. As indicators of what constitutes desirable identities, this paper explores what elements or life details receive more attention over time.

This paper attempts to provide an in-depth walkthrough of obituaries across time. While previous studies have explored changes over time, one distinguishing element of this study is a large sample size. Many studies have limited samples of several hundred obituaries (Barth, Van Hoof, and; Susanne et al., 2014; Bytheway & Johnson, 1996; Ferraro, 2019; K. A. Anderson & Han, 2009; D. A. Matcha & Hutchinson, 1997; Phillips, 2007).¹ While such studies raise noteworthy findings, it is unclear how representative any of the examples shared truly are. For instance, Phillips' study across the twentieth century is based on 470 obituaries, meaning that each time point analysed (1899, 1959, and 1999) is only represented by around 150 obituaries. Expanding the number of data points in a sample reduces the likelihood of outliers distorting apparent trends and captures a more complete map of the terrain.

Other studies have large samples but are limited by a shorter time span (Campbell et al., 2021; Kastenbaum et al., 1977; D. A. Matcha, 1995). Such studies capture a snapshot in time, but fail to account for the more gradual way in which patterns transform. Even K. A. Anderson and Han (2009), who attempt to capture changes over a 30-year period, only capture data at 10-year intervals. Rather than simply 'check in' on obituaries every 10 or 50 years, this in-depth walkthrough

includes multiple data points in every single year from the period in question. This approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of when certain innovations first appeared, and when trends took hold.

The period this study covers – the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – represents a time of major social change in Canada and North America, marked by two world wars (Finney, 2010; Reynolds, 2013), major advances in civil rights, gender, and racial equality (Behnken, 2016; Clement, 2008; Heinemann, 2012; Pomfret, 2011), and technological and cultural innovation (Black, 2002; Smil 2006; Umphlett, 2006). These changes shaped how death is understood, experienced, and commemorated (Ariès, 1981; Cadge, 2012; Laderman, 2003). Most broadly, the twentieth century witnessed a shift through three approaches to death – traditional, modern, and postmodern (T. Walter, 1994, 1996) – which reflect death being variously influenced by family/community, science/medicine, and the technological vision that death can be overcome (Phillips, 2007). More specific transformations include longer life spans (Statistics Canada, n.d.), death moving from the home to medical settings (Wilson et al. 2009), and a decline in religious affiliation (Clarke & Macdonald, 2017; Isabella et al., 2023). These transformations impact how people perceive and respond to death.

Doron Taussig argues that obituaries contribute to constructing collective memory, and urges paying attention to which specific experiences or memories are included and how they are described (2017). Exploring a similar genre of bereavement literature – eulogies – Davis et al. (2016). Drawing on classical theorists of framing (Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1986; Luckmann, 1970), the authors explore how people compose grieving texts in order to construct particular identities; identities which are familiar to the bereaved, but which are also comprehensible to audiences of these texts. The life story model of identity suggests that throughout their lives, people conceive of their past, present, and future as an overarching narrative (D. P. McAdams, 2021). Specific scenes within these stories are emphasised to better define the individual, their values, and place in the world.

Building on this work, I explore how the various stages of obituaries have transformed over time, including how often certain elements are present, what details are highlighted, and how lives are described. Over time, obituaries have increasingly adopted detailed, narrative forms, which reveal the externalisation of the life story model of identity. Since this theory was introduced, debates have circulated concerning whether people develop a single, life-long narrative (D. P. McAdams, 1985), or whether people construct different stories across social situations (Gergen, 1991; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Regardless of how these narratives develop internally over time, obituaries mark a moment when life stories are cemented. Obituaries are the site of countless decisions about how the living want the deceased to be remembered. Over time, the changing choices in obituaries have evolved to foreground life legacies through narratives.

Methodology

This paper is based on content and textual analysis of 3,300 obituaries published between 1900 and 2021. This research was undertaken as part of the Nonreligion in a Complex Future project, which explores the social impacts of religious transformation. The project followed a multi-step content analysis process (A. F. Carmon, 2021), with steps including collecting a sample, coding the data, and performing quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Data collection

The sample consists of six newspapers from across Canada: The Globe and Mail, Vancouver Sun, Calgary Herald, Toronto Star, Montreal Gazette, and Chronicle Herald (from Halifax). These represent the highest-circulated English-language dailies in five Canadian cities, and the largest national newspaper (Newspapers Canada, 2016). Capturing regional variation across Canada, this sample includes cities on the East and West coasts, the prairies, and Canada's two largest cities. Using microfiche and microfilm collections at several archives, as well as online repositories, research assistants collected the obituaries section of each newspaper from the last Saturday of September for each year.

Coding

Once all obituaries were collected, researchers developed a coding framework through open inductive coding. Our coding scheme drew partly on models provided by previous studies, which account for the visual elements (e.g. length of text, inclusion of images) and textual aspects of obituaries (e.g. listing surviving family members, announcing funerals, burials, and memorial services) (P. C. Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016; Susanne et al., 2014). To capture the nature of Canadian obituaries, open inductive coding also involved identifying further categories of information shared in obituaries. This method allowed for recognising elements included in obituaries which are not present in other contexts, or not accounted for in other studies.

Once the coding framework was established,² researchers manually coded the first five obituaries appearing in each paper every year.³ The coding process involved two separate approaches, performed simultaneously while reading each entry. Reflecting previous studies (End et al., 2009; Phillips, 2007), coding involved noting the presence or absence of certain details (demographic information, occupation, end-of-life rituals). Researchers also transcribed certain parts of the obituary to be used in further analysis. There was little room for subjectivity in this coding process, and a high degree of inter-coder reliability was established through training with the coding framework, discussion amongst coders, and supervision by the author.

Analysis

Marzol (2006) uses the term 'stages' to describe the different sections within an obituary. A stage can be several words or several lines long. Analysis focused on how frequently certain stages are present, when new stages appear, and how the content of stages varies by time and publication. Once coding was completed, the author carried out analysis in two phases. Certain quantitative measures were analysed using R v4.3.1. This helped determine, for instance, the mean length of obituaries or the number/proportion of obituaries that mention children. Analysis also determined how findings varied across different factors, including by year, publication, and gender. Qualitative content analysis focused primarily on language used in obituaries. Analysis attended to dominant trends in how texts were composed and transformations over time. This analysis explored, for

instance, the difference between people who are ‘survived by three children’ and others who are ‘lovingly remembered by their cherished children’.

As noted, this paper emerges from a larger study that explores the impact of rising nonreligion on the way that people understand and confront death. Details in obituaries which are relevant to religion include, for instance, stating the deceased’s religious affiliation or the locations where end-of-life rituals are held. This paper reflects more broadly on the sample of this study, and offers an in-depth walkthrough of the typical format of obituaries, how these texts have changed over time, and how memorialisation varies by publication.

Findings

Given this study’s emphasis on national context, it is worth outlining what the typical Canadian obituary ‘looks like’. Obituaries appear in the ‘Classified’ section of each newspaper, alongside announcements for Births, Weddings, and Anniversaries. Most obituaries include the deceased’s name at the top, while other details (e.g. nicknames, maiden names, date of birth/death) are optional. The first stage generally describes when (and occasionally how) a person died. Subsequent stages are dedicated to describing the deceased’s family, upbringing, education, occupation, and hobbies, though the order of these stages can vary. Obituaries typically end with a stage describing if/when/where a funeral, memorial, or burial is happening.

Average length

One of the most significant changes in Canadian obituaries over the last 120 years is that they have grown consistently longer (see [Table 1](#)). We determined length of obituary by counting the number of lines in each entry.⁴ Between 1900 and 1919, the mean obituary length was 8.89 lines. Obituaries of this length generally list the deceased’s name, when/where they died, their partner, and where an upcoming funeral/burial might be held. The

Table 1. Mean length of obituary sorted by year, publication, and gender of deceased.

Category	Sub-Category	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Overall Publication		17.99	14.33	1	134	3300
	Vancouver Sun	16.99	10.59	3	100	507
	Calgary Herald	16.81	13.23	1	101	516
	Toronto Star	14.55	10.91	2	134	598
	Montreal Gazette	15.84	12.16	4	102	574
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	25.91	15.65	2	103	527
	Globe & Mail	18.37	18.71	2	134	578
Gender of Deceased	Man	18.46	15.82	1	134	1834
	Woman	17.48	12.19	2	101	1454
Year	1900–1919	8.89	7.45	1	61	332
	1920–1939	11.87	8.94	3	102	537
	1940–1959	12.48	7.39	4	59	585
	1960–1979	16.65	8.29	4	75	591
	1980–1999	19.85	8.97	4	64	600
	2000–2021	32.03	21.35	3	134	655

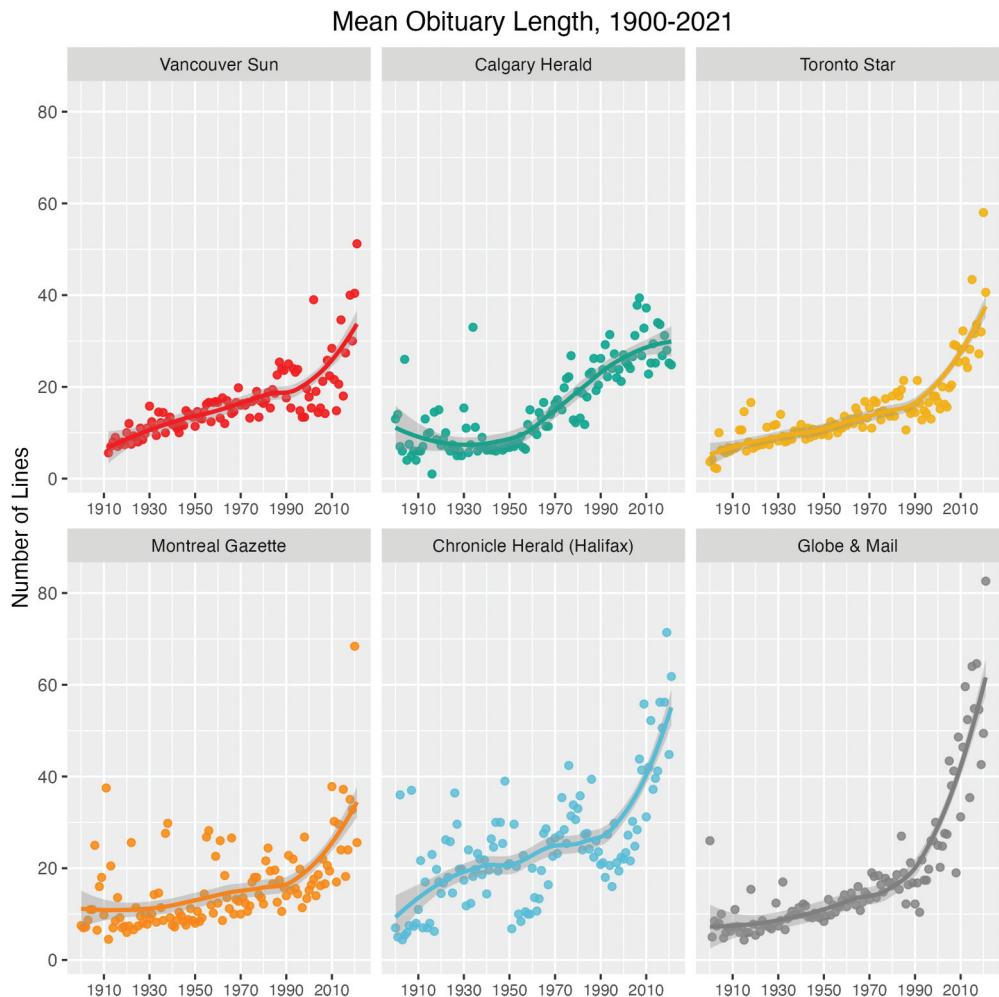


Figure 1. Mean length of obituary, 1900–2021 (measured by number of lines).

mean length grew gradually over the twentieth century. Longer obituaries (roughly 15 or more lines) might also include a cause of death or the deceased's occupation, and allow for more descriptive language.

While the number of lines in obituaries has increased throughout the last 120 years, a substantial proportion of the growth occurred around the end of the twentieth century (see Figure 1).⁵ From 2000 to 2021, the mean length was 32.03 lines. Since 2016, the mean is closer to 40, with several obituaries reaching over 100 lines. Recent obituaries are much more thorough, both in the details included and their descriptive language.

Family relations

To chart how family appears in obituaries, we tracked all instances of relatives being mentioned and analysed the language describing these relationships. We distinguished between four 'levels' of family relations: partners, children, grandchildren,⁶ and other

family members.⁷ Overall, the frequency of family members mentioned reflects the relative differences one would expect based on the proportion of people who are married, have children, and live long enough to have grandchildren (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Over time, there have been sharp increases in obituaries mentioning family members (see Table 2). The rate at which partners were mentioned rose sharply until the 1940s and has remained fairly constant since (see Figure 2). Concerning children, grandchildren, and other family members, the rate of inclusion grew more steadily throughout the twentieth century. From the Spartan notices of the early 1900s, families are now mentioned in around 80% of recent obituaries. This gradual rise speaks to a change in how people memorialise the dead, as obituaries chart connections with an expanding number of family members.

Another key change is how family members are described. The early twentieth century is marked by short obituaries, which may note, for instance, that Mary Birkenthal was ‘widow of the late Rabbi Herman Birkenthal’ (Star, 1909).⁸ By the 1960s however, relationships are described with greater detail. Readers learn, for example, that Harry Birnbaum was a ‘beloved husband’ to his late wife and ‘loving father’ to four children” (Star, 1968). In addition to a growing array of adjectives, lengthier obituaries also share stories about how the deceased met their spouse or activities they enjoyed with their children.

Table 2. Family members mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Partner	Overall	3300	2262	68.55
	1900–1919	332	121	36.45
	1920–1939	537	326	60.71
	1940–1959	585	410	70.09
	1960–1979	591	423	71.57
	1980–1999	600	477	79.50
	2000–2021	655	505	77.10
Children	Overall	3300	1905	57.73
	1900–1919	332	52	15.66
	1920–1939	537	170	31.66
	1940–1959	585	300	51.28
	1960–1979	591	402	68.02
	1980–1999	600	449	74.83
	2000–2021	655	532	81.22
Grandchildren	Overall	3300	1113	33.73
	1900–1919	332	2	0.60
	1920–1939	537	16	2.98
	1940–1959	585	76	12.99
	1960–1979	591	228	38.58
	1980–1999	600	349	58.17
	2000–2021	655	442	67.48
Other Family	Overall	3300	1933	58.58
	1900–1919	332	127	38.25
	1920–1939	537	211	39.29
	1940–1959	585	230	39.32
	1960–1979	591	376	63.62
	1980–1999	600	462	77.00
	2000–2021	655	527	80.46

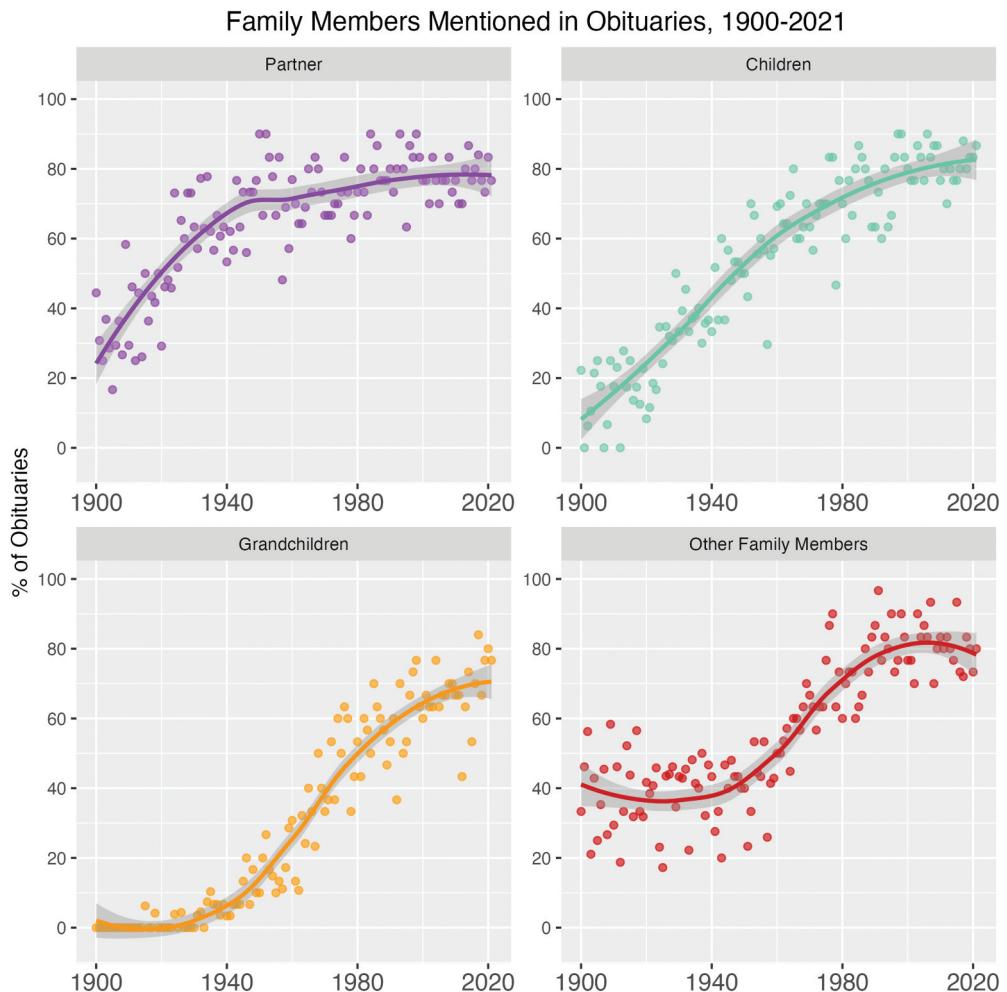


Figure 2. Family members mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

The level of detail provided tends to decrease by generation. Spouses are generally described with the greatest depth. While obituaries frequently describe the relationships the deceased had with their children (especially in recent years), it is also common to simply name surviving children.⁹ While grandchildren are sometimes named individually, it is also common to simply write that someone is ‘survived by … 14 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren’ (Sun, 1978). Finally, rather than naming more distant relatives, it is common to note that someone ‘will be sadly missed by many nieces and nephews’ (Star, 2005). In other words, the level of detail reflects the relative closeness of the deceased’s relationships.

Professional accomplishments

While obituaries historically reflected society’s elite (Starck, 2006) and emphasised professional accomplishments to mark prestige (Bytheway & Johnson, 1996), this is not always

Table 3. Occupation mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Overall Publication	Vancouver Sun	507	88	17.36
	Calgary Herald	516	122	23.64
	Toronto Star	598	87	14.55
	Montreal Gazette	574	111	19.34
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	215	40.80
	Globe & Mail	578	125	21.63
Year	1900–1919	332	62	18.67
	1920–1939	537	80	14.90
	1940–1959	585	76	12.99
	1960–1979	591	96	16.24
	1980–1999	600	168	28.00
	2000–2021	655	266	40.61

Table 4. Education mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Overall Publication	Vancouver Sun	507	22	4.34
	Calgary Herald	516	30	5.81
	Toronto Star	598	9	1.51
	Montreal Gazette	574	32	5.57
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	38	7.21
	Globe & Mail	578	51	8.82
Year	1900–1919	332	9	2.71
	1920–1939	537	8	1.49
	1940–1959	585	11	1.88
	1960–1979	591	24	4.06
	1980–1999	600	37	6.17
	2000–2021	655	93	14.20

the case in Canadian obituaries. Overall, 22.67% of obituaries ($n = 748$) mention occupation and 5.52% ($n = 182$) mention education (see Tables 3 and 4). However, both of these elements get mentioned more frequently over time, beginning especially around the 1980s (see Figure 3).

Reflecting the overall length of obituaries, occupation was often mentioned cursorily in the early twentieth century. A typical example reads: ‘At Bayfield, 18th inst. William Leyden, painter, aged 54 years’ (Chronicle, 1904). Over time, in addition to being mentioned more often, descriptions also became longer. Recent obituaries include such details as someone’s position, the company where they worked, and for how long. Some obituaries even chart a career path, explaining, for example, how James Balfour worked in the stock room of a department store, then managed several locations, before moving to head office and becoming CEO (Globe and Mail, 2009). Education and occupation are often intertwined in obituaries, and the school one attended or degree they obtained are recalled as steps along their life path.

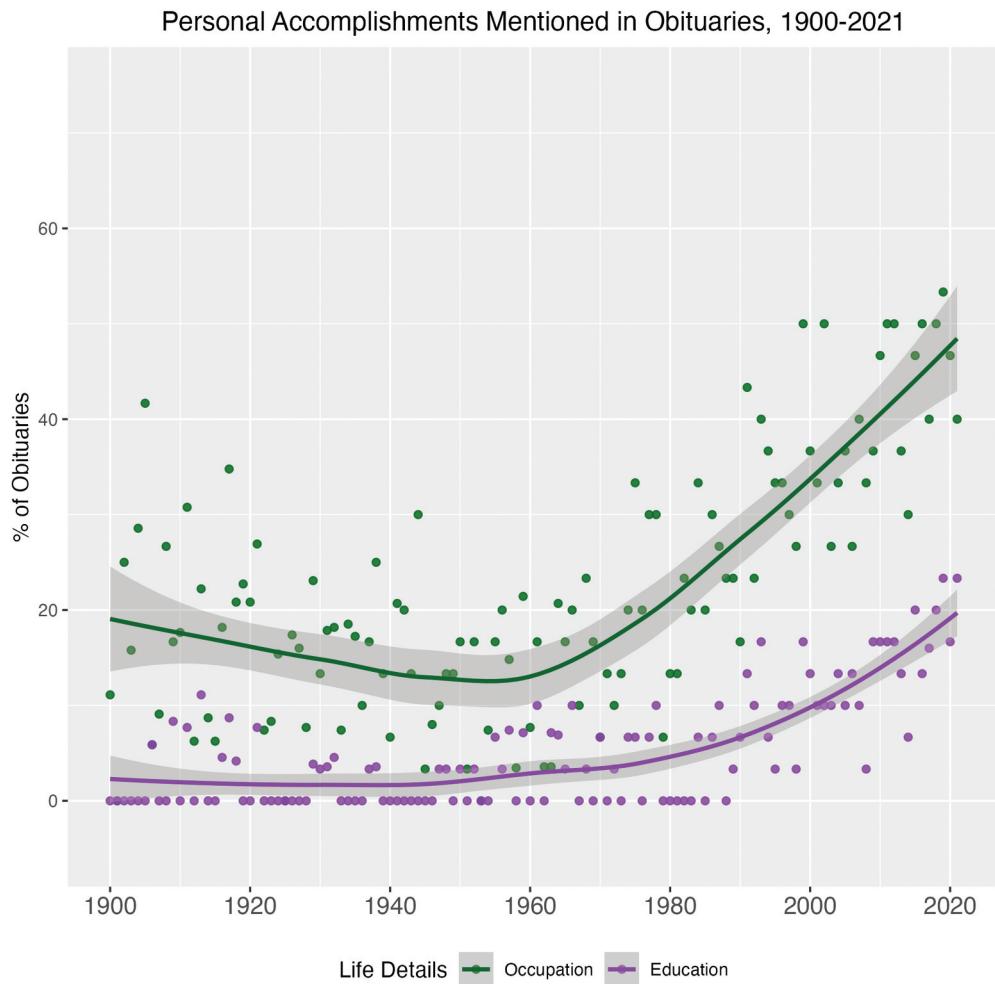


Figure 3. Personal accomplishments mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

In recent years, occupations are not listed as mere accomplishments but used to highlight one's values. Lesli-Ann Kimberly's obituary notes: 'her clients will remember her professionalism, warmth, humour and overall commitment to thoughtful design' (Sun, 2016). Whether someone was a 'brilliant business man' (Globe and Mail, 2010) or brought 'kindness to his patients' (Montreal Gazette, 2018), jobs are used to paint a more complete picture of the deceased. Similarly, one's education is described not as an accomplishment, but for its connection to one's relationships. While attending UBC, for instance, Thomas George Andison 'met Fran [his wife], and the two of them forged many special and enduring relationships' (Sun, 2018). While education and occupation both still connote prestige, they increasingly become pieces in a larger life story, and are referenced to reflect particular values or connections.

Past-times and traits

Among all the stages of the obituaries analysed, the sharpest increase concerns one's hobbies (see Table 5). Overall, only 13.30% ($n = 439$) of all obituaries mentioned the deceased's hobbies, but this element witnessed a sharp rise around the 1980s, and is mentioned in 40–50% of obituaries in recent years (see Figure 4).

In addition to the quantitative rise in how frequently hobbies are mentioned, there have been subtle shifts in which activities are most common. In the first half of the twentieth century, dominant pastimes included belonging to formal organisations, such as fraternal societies or churches. Sara Pennylegion, for example, 'was an active member of St. Paul's Church and prominently identified with its societies' (Star, 1918). Other popular organisations include the International Order of Odd Fellows, Shriners, Rebekah Lodges, and the Canadian Legion. A larger range of activities appear around the 1980s, including gardening, playing cards, golfing, sailing, or simply spending time with family.

Over time, there was also a qualitative change in how hobbies are described. Older obituaries treated hobbies quite succinctly, often simply listing the organisations to which one belonged. Even by the 1970s, descriptions remained brief, such as noting that Alice Bur 'was an ardent reader of good literature' (Calgary Herald, 1974). Over time, accounts begin to take on narrative forms. Vincent Mark Bjorndahl's obituary is representative of these rich descriptions: 'Vince loved to travel and had many adventures, visiting exotic and faraway places with both his family and his friends. He enjoyed sports and loved to golf, curl and throw his kids around in the pool. With the narrowest excuse, Vince enjoyed filling his home with people, food, stories, music and laughter' (Calgary Herald, 2006). Packed with several activities, this passage also highlights the deceased's rich social bonds. Relatedly, by the 2000s, descriptions of hobbies also allude to the deceased's character and personality. Traits are usually woven into one's hobbies or occupation, calling someone a 'dedicated' swim coach (Calgary Herald, 2008) or a 'caring mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister, aunt, friend, and crib partner' (Calgary Herald, 2009). As one might expect, traits are nearly always positive, and speak to how well-liked the deceased was by family, friends, and their community.

Table 5. Hobbies mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Overall Publication		3300	439	13.30
	Vancouver Sun	507	75	14.79
	Calgary Herald	516	85	16.47
	Toronto Star	598	57	9.53
	Montreal Gazette	574	38	6.62
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	113	21.44
	Globe & Mail	578	71	12.28
Year				
	1900–1919	332	11	3.31
	1920–1939	537	29	5.40
	1940–1959	585	27	4.62
	1960–1979	591	47	7.95
	1980–1999	600	78	13.00
	2000–2021	655	247	37.71

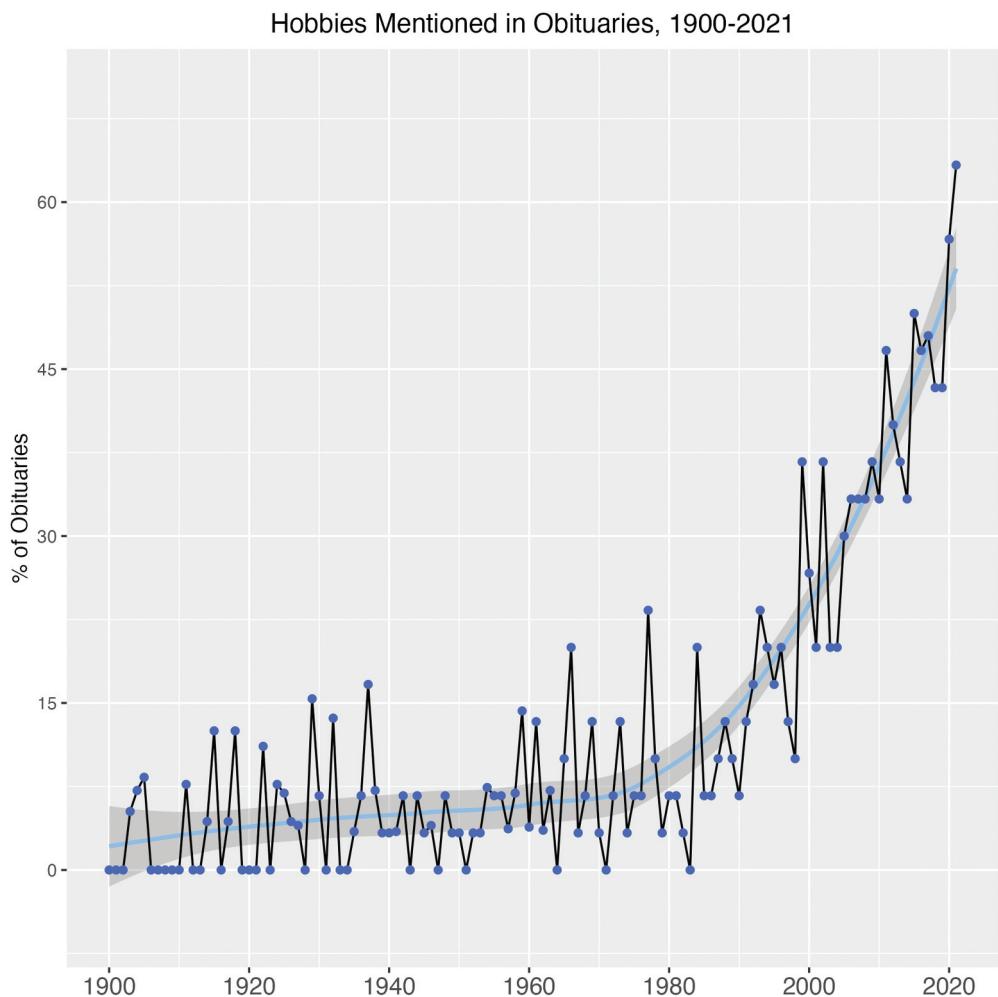


Figure 4. Hobbies mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Table 6. End-of-life rituals mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Overall Year		3300	3026	91.70
	1900–1919	332	227	68.37
	1920–1939	537	468	87.15
	1940–1959	585	549	93.85
	1960–1979	591	582	98.48
	1980–1999	600	588	98.00
	2000–2021	655	615	93.89

End-of-life rituals

Reflecting the practical purposes of obituaries, end-of-life rituals are nearly always mentioned (see Table 6). In our sample, 91.70% of obituaries ($n = 3026$) refer to events like funerals or burials, and this rate has remained fairly constant since the 1920s. Despite

consistently being present, there is some variation in how events are described. In most cases, announcing a funeral is also meant as an invitation to attend. At times however, families note that a ‘private service’ will occur. This section of the obituary therefore functions as directions for people who knew the deceased, and may potentially be interested in attending a funeral.

Labels for events also vary slightly. Funeral is (and has been) most common, followed by memorials, visitations, and graveside services.¹⁰ Though not appearing at all before 2000, ‘celebrations of life’ have become increasingly common. This term reflects broader shifts in the death industry (Beard & Burger, 2015; T. Walter, 2007), as people shift from sombre, formal rituals to more celebratory, even joyful events.

Obituaries also reveal changes in where rituals are held (see Figure 5). Funeral homes are the most common location, and have been since the 1940s. Churches and cemeteries are the next most popular locations, though both have declined in recent years. Events hosted in someone’s home were once the most popular location, but have declined

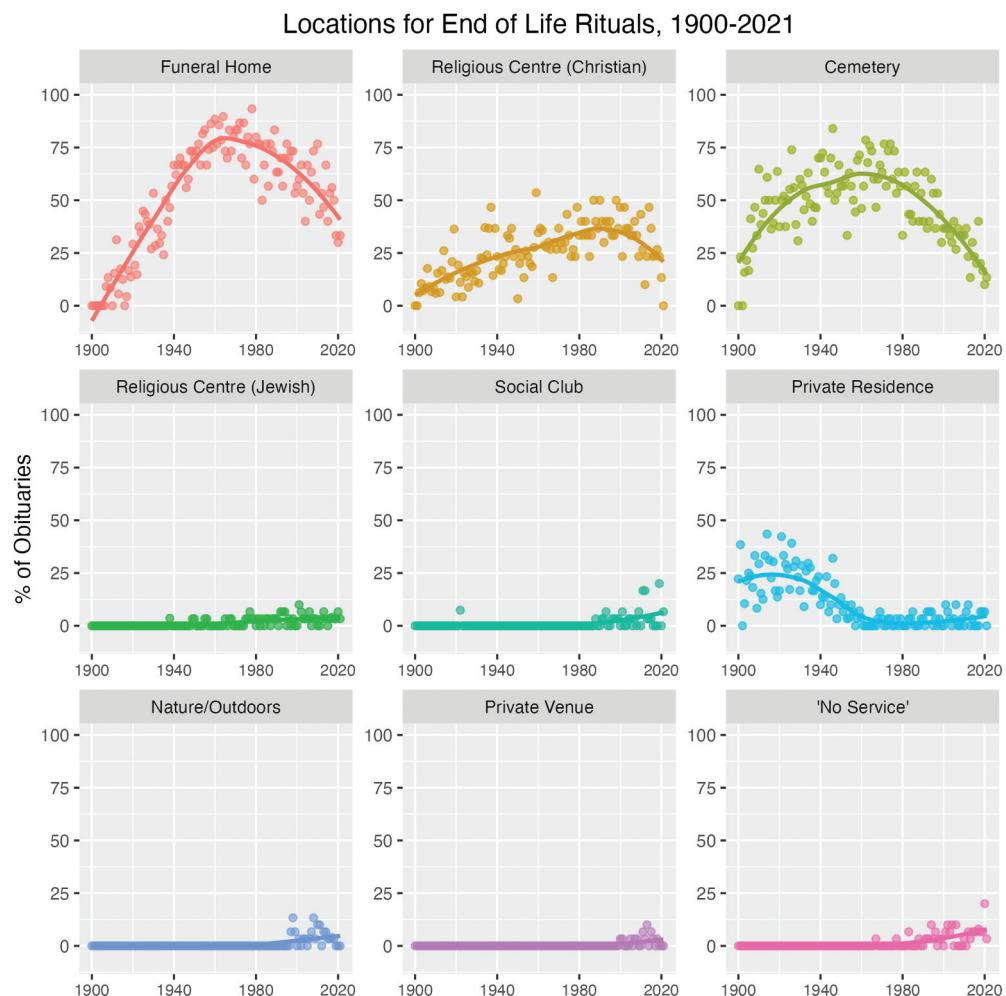


Figure 5. End of life ritual locations mentioned in obituaries, 1900–2021.

precipitously since the 1940s. Recent obituaries indicate a rise in alternative locations including ski clubs, country clubs, restaurants, and even the St Lawrence River. Again this shift reflects broader changes in the death industry, as people re-imagine traditional rituals as more personalised.

Pictures

Historically, photographs accompanying obituaries were reserved for elite members of society (Bytheway & Johnson, 1996; Marks & Piggee, 1998; Spilka et al., 1980). In Canada, photographs are uncommon, only appearing in 8.00% of obituaries ($n = 264$). Photos were especially rare in the first half of the twentieth century. Reflecting the growing accessibility of technology, photos are more common post-2000, appearing in 38.47% of obituaries ($n = 252$) since that year.

While traditionally used to reflect/denote prestige, the content of photos in Canada suggests this is not necessarily the intention. Portraits which connote prestige, such as the deceased wearing formal attire or a military uniform, appear occasionally (see Figure 6). However, candid photos of the deceased in their own home are just as common. Photos also occasionally reflect the deceased's hobbies, such as being in nature or playing music. Candid, informal photos become especially more common over time (see Figure 7). These photos may partly reflect greater accessibility of technology and its immersion into daily life. However, they also indicate a shift away from formality, as candid moments of laughter or wearing bunny ears are considered fitting ways to capture someone's identity.

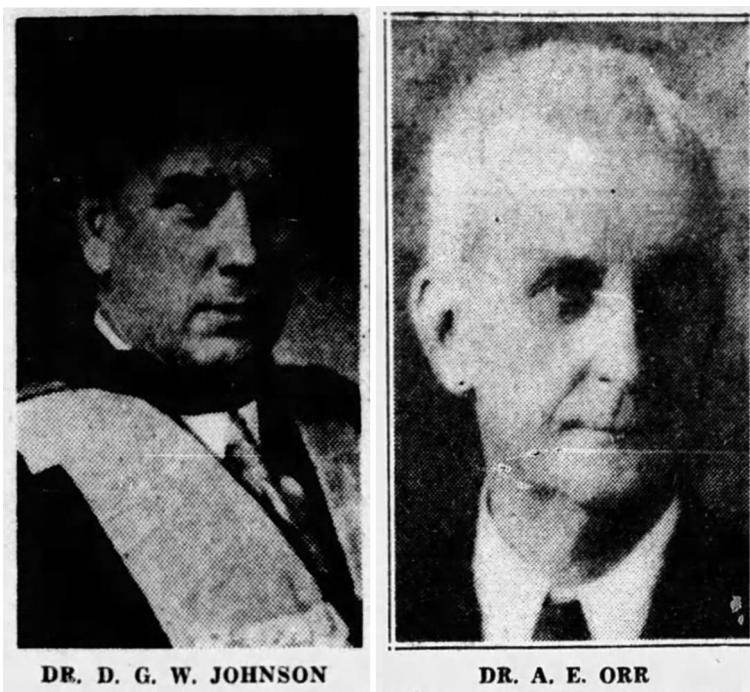


Figure 6. Two photographs typical of obituaries prior to the 1960s. From left to right: John Guy Watts Johnson (Montreal Gazette, 1955), Alfred Elias Orr (Montreal Gazette, 1938).



Figure 7. Three typical photographs from recent obituaries. From left to right: Gilbert Bradner (Sun, 2021), Hazel Barker (Sun, 2019), Barbara Amos (Sun, 2009).

In addition to photographs, Canadian newspapers occasionally place symbols within obituaries. In the Chronicle Herald, several obituaries include an emblem of the Canadian flag, presumably indicating the status of a veteran.¹¹ The Vancouver Sun and Calgary Herald include a more diverse array of icons. Some seemingly reflect military service, such as a Canadian flag, Union Jack, or crest of the Royal Canadian Legion. Other symbols, including crests of Masonic orders or trade unions, likely reflect one's profession. Finally, some icons reflect voluntary organisations like the Rotary International. While these symbols are quite rare (included in only 36 obituaries), they are another way to signal the identities and causes that were important to the deceased.

New additions

The basic stages of Canadian obituaries have remained fairly stable over time. However, two additional elements – in memoriam donations and messages of thanks – represent relatively new conventions. I wish to briefly discuss each of these.

In the early 1900s, obituaries often published the residential address where the deceased's body was resting. This encouraged people to either visit or send their condolences. Over the twentieth century, the statement 'flowers gratefully declined' became more common. This eventually led to the common phrase: 'In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to ...' an organisation the family listed. With the first such message appearing in 1959, 26.88% of obituaries ($n = 887$) include requests for donations. The practice has steadily risen in popularity, and since 1990, requests are made in between 50% and 90% of obituaries (see Table 7). Organisations listed most frequently include charities related to specific diseases or hospitals. These likely reflect the deceased's cause of death or – in the case of hospitals – where they died, though they might also simply be causes about which the deceased was passionate. Also, common are humanitarian organisations and religious communities. Reflecting the increased personalisation of obituaries, recent years see more diverse types of organisations, including scholarship funds, humane societies, or charities that support nature. The increase array of organisations better reflect specific causes that were important to the deceased. At the same time, a number of obituaries encourage readers to select 'a charity of your choice'. This suggests that donation requests are

Table 7. Donation requests included in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Overall Year		3300	887	26.88
1900–1919		332	0	0.00
1920–1939		537	0	0.00
1940–1959		585	3	0.51
1960–1979		591	98	16.58
1980–1999		600	341	56.83
2000–2021		655	445	67.94

becoming a standard element of modern obituaries, even when there is no particular cause to support.

Virtually non-existent throughout the twentieth century, messages of thanks are becoming more common in North American obituaries (A. F. Carmon & Rothrock, 2023, p. 9). Often near the end of an obituary, this stage thanks people or organisations who cared for the deceased towards the end of their life. Appearing in only 6.33% of obituaries ($n=209$) overall, only one message appeared before 1970, and less than thirty before 2000. Their inclusion has grown steadily throughout the 2000s (see Figure 8). A typical message reads: ‘We would like to thank all of mom’s doctors, nurses, and our local pharmacy who all took great care to treat our mother with kindness and utmost respect’ (Calgary Herald, 2021). The most frequent recipients of gratitude are doctors, nurses, and other medical staff. Other people listed include family members or friends who played a role in providing care.

These new stages reveal that transformation of obituaries over time is largely additive. Obituaries seemingly contain certain ‘obligatory elements’ (Fries, 1990, p. 544) as well as some other information which is not obligatory (L. Mcneill, 2004, p. 153). However, it appears as though the list of obligatory elements grows over time. The basic components found in older obituaries are still present in recent ones. The major difference is greatly increased length/detail. Aside from minor exceptions,¹² obituaries have changed over-time simply by adding more information.

Major death events

Reflecting research on the AIDS epidemic, obituaries often function as time capsules of major events (Alali, 1994). Several anomalies which appeared ‘out of nowhere’ in this study bear mention. The first is the impact of two World Wars. Between 1914 and 1918 and 1939–1945, ‘Killed in action’ appears prominently as a cause of death in 18 obituaries. During this time, some newspapers even made a separate sub-section of obituaries exclusively for those who died in active service. The second notable event is the COVID-19 pandemic. Though never appearing as a cause of death in this sample, the pandemic dramatically impacted end-of-life rituals. In 2020 and 2021, several obituaries note that no service will be held, as a result of the pandemic. Other obituaries indicate that a service will be held at a future date. Finally, some gesture to public health guidelines, and indicate that guests must be vaccinated or masked in order to attend.

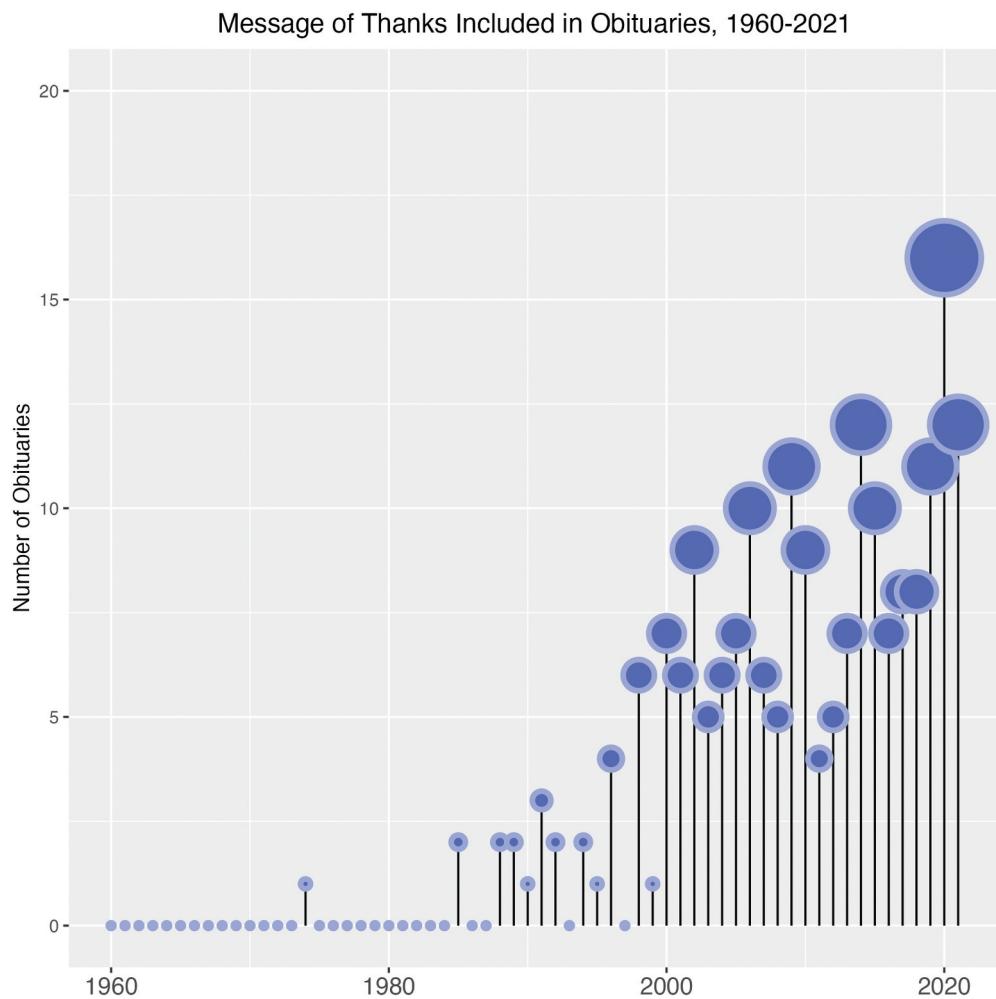


Figure 8. Messages of thanks included in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Though most of the changes this paper observes are gradual, it is also important to recognise the influence of singular moments in shaping how people commemorate death.

Gender variation

B. Fowler (2004) argues that obituaries have been used to enact and uphold societal power dynamics. More specifically, obituaries have historically reinforced gendered inequality. This may involve describing men and women using different languages (or images), devoting more attention to men's careers, education, and achievements, or simply that men are more likely to be commemorated (Bytheway & Johnson, 1996; Ferraro, 2019; Kastenbaum, Peyton, and K. A. Anderson & Han, 2009, Ergin 2009; Kastenbaum et al., 1977; Ogletree et al., 2005; Spilka et al., 1980). In several instances, gender inequality and perceptions persist in Canadian obituaries.

Most notably, men are slightly over-represented (see Table 8). This proportion was heavily skewed towards men in the early twentieth century but has levelled off in recent years. Men also typically receive longer obituaries (see Figure 9).¹³ Although the difference in mean length is small, men are memorialised more often and with more detail.

Table 8. Gender of deceased in obituaries, 1900–2021.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Man		Woman	
			N	%	N	%
Overall Year		3300	1834	55.58	1454	44.06
1900-1919		332	204	61.45	124	37.35
1920-1939		537	277	51.58	259	48.23
1940-1959		585	326	55.73	255	43.59
1960-1979		591	345	58.38	244	41.29
1980-1999		600	332	55.33	267	44.50
2000-2021		655	350	53.44	305	46.56

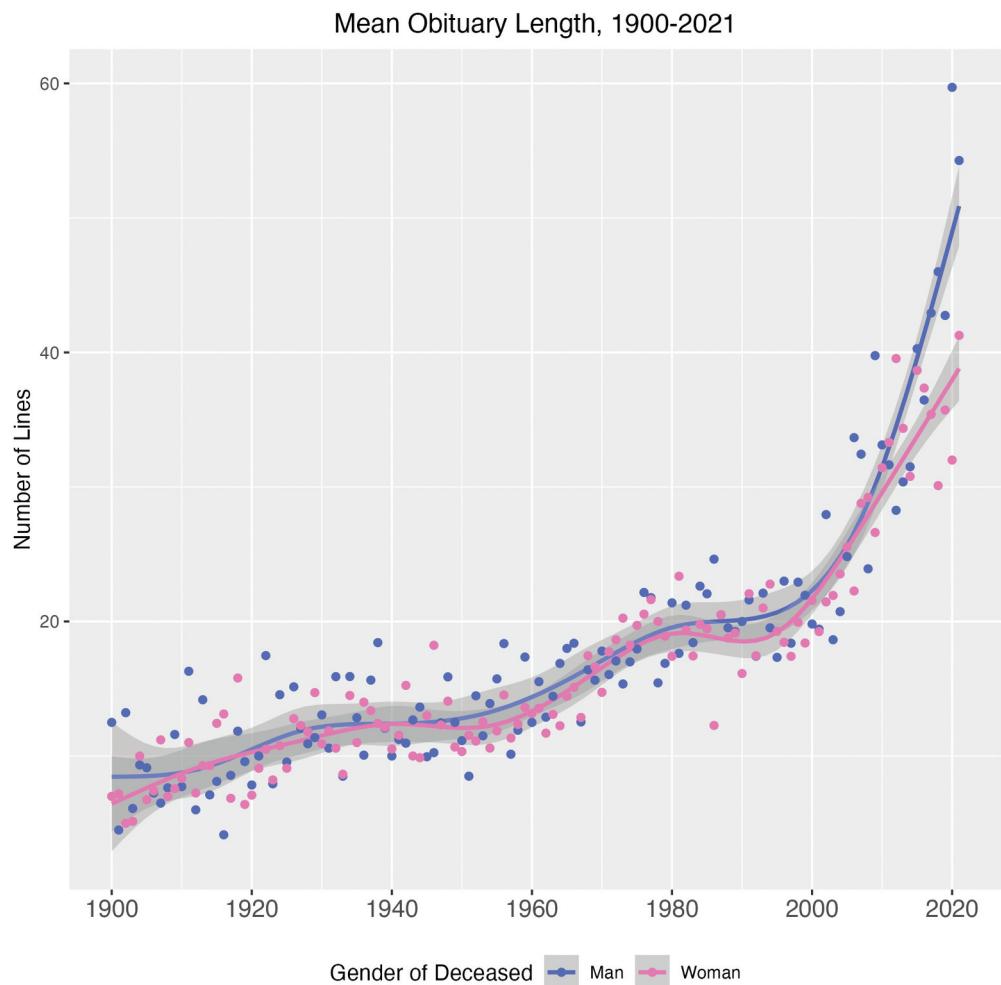


Figure 9. Mean length of obituary sorted by gender of deceased, 1900–2021.

Table 9. Life details mentioned in obituaries, sorted by gender of deceased.

Category	Gender of Deceased	Mentioned	
		N	%
Partner	Man	1179	64.29
	Woman	1083	74.48
Children	Man	1020	55.61
	Woman	883	60.72
Grandchildren	Man	567	30.91
	Woman	544	37.41
Other Family	Man	1053	57.41
	Woman	880	60.52
Occupation	Man	588	32.06
	Woman	159	10.93
Education	Man	110	5.99
	Woman	71	4.88
Hobbies	Man	262	14.28
	Woman	177	12.17

Gender bias also persists through the details that obituaries share (see Table 9). For instance, women's obituaries are more likely to mention their partner, children, and grandchildren. In contrast, men's obituaries are more likely to mention their occupation and education. This focus reflects a perception that men are defined by their career and other achievements while women are relegated to the domestic sphere (Spain, 1992; Williams, 1995).

Regional variation

Comparing newspapers from across Canada highlights regional differences in memorialisation. Overall, obituaries across Canada consistently include the same stages. However, each newspaper also has stylistic differences. For instance, some publications print a year of birth and death below every name, while others do not. More significantly, recall that three publications (Vancouver, Halifax, Calgary) include emblems for certain figures, while the others do not.

Since Canadian obituaries generally follow a consistent style, more subtle differences concern how much space each publication devotes to certain details. An obvious and important difference is that length varies by publication (see Table 1).¹⁴ Entries in the Toronto Star and Montreal Gazette were generally shorter, with mean lengths of 14.55 and 15.84 lines, respectively. In contrast, Halifax's Chronicle Herald was the longest in our sample, with a mean of 25.91 lines.¹⁵

Different publications also place more or less emphasis on certain details. In terms of frequency, for example, family is most often mentioned in Vancouver and Halifax, and least often in Calgary and Montreal (see Table 10). There are also qualitative differences in how these details are described. Beyond simply listing relatives, obituaries from Halifax

Table 10. Family members mentioned in obituaries, sorted by publication.

Category	Sub Category	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Partner	Overall	3300	2262	68.55
	Vancouver Sun	507	305	60.16
	Calgary Herald	516	300	58.14
	Toronto Star	598	427	71.40
	Montreal Gazette	574	418	72.82
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	384	72.87
	Globe & Mail	578	428	74.05
Children	Overall	3300	1905	57.73
	Vancouver Sun	507	347	68.44
	Calgary Herald	516	230	44.57
	Toronto Star	598	341	57.02
	Montreal Gazette	574	291	50.70
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	355	67.36
	Globe & Mail	578	341	59.00
Grandchildren	Overall	3300	1113	33.73
	Vancouver Sun	507	226	44.58
	Calgary Herald	516	153	29.65
	Toronto Star	598	185	30.94
	Montreal Gazette	574	161	28.05
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	205	38.90
	Globe & Mail	578	183	31.66
Other Family Members	Overall	3300	1933	58.58
	Vancouver Sun	507	344	67.85
	Calgary Herald	516	254	49.22
	Toronto Star	598	326	54.52
	Montreal Gazette	574	278	48.43
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	426	80.83
	Globe & Mail	578	305	52.77

often indicate where family members live. A typical entry notes that Terry William Boulton is survived by a daughter who lives in Cole Harbour and two sons living in South Korea and Brookfield (Calgary Herald, 2019). To a lesser degree, this style was also apparent in Calgary, but largely absent in Toronto or Montreal. In contrast, education is more likely to be mentioned in the Globe & Mail.

Discussion

This paper analysed a sample of 3,300 obituaries across six Canadian newspapers from 1900 to 2021 to understand how these texts have transformed in terms of form, content, and function. Scholars argue that obituaries represent a 'stable genre' (P. C. Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016; P. C. Heynderickx et al., 2019; Moses & Marelli, 2003). However, this paper complicates this claim. Taking a broad look at these texts reveals that most obituaries within any 10-year span possess a stable set of conventions. However, obituaries from 1920 look much different than ones from 1960, just as those look different from ones published this year. The genre is constantly developing, in terms of its format and content, and by extension, function.

The biggest transformation which occurred is an ongoing increase in length. This represents the most significant change because it impacts all other aspects of obituaries.

The fundamental stages that comprise an obituary have remained unchanged. However, this theoretical checklist of what an obituary *could* include has become more like a roadmap defining what obituaries *should* include. Further, each stage within obituaries have been greatly expanded. Descriptions of family, for instance, have grown to mention several generations, use more descriptive language, and describe relationships each person had with the deceased.

Some of the trends observed in this study simply reflect broader shifts in society. For instance, the fact that educational achievements are mentioned more frequently in the 2000s than in the early 1900s reflects higher rates of university enrolment over time (Fallis, 2015; Trow, 1973). Similarly, women's obituaries being more likely to mention an occupation since the 1970s reflects the growing presence of women in the workforce (Goldin, 1990; Macy, 2022). Even the growth of obituaries thanking medical professionals echoes the increasing medicalisation and professionalisation of death (Abel, 2013; Stolberg, 2017). These trends simply reinforce that obituaries reflect the societies that produce them.

More significantly, the changing format of these texts reveals transformations of the perceived function of obituaries. The oldest (generally much shorter) obituaries in this sample functioned primarily as practical and informative texts. They announced that someone had died, briefly situated who they were, and shared where one could visit the body (or grieving family). While succinct obituaries are still present to a degree, most have become mini biographies sharing rich details about the deceased. This style of writing has long been applied to obituaries, but was previously reserved for the wealthy and elite (Starck, 2006). Now, this treatment is given to average Canadians from all walks of life. This suggests that obituaries have assumed a slightly different role, which I suggest is legacy-making. Reflecting the life story model of identity, legacies are constructed by composing obituaries as narratives featuring significant events, virtues, and relationships.

One detail which makes this new function apparent is that, beginning around the 1990s, several obituaries each year indicate that no funeral service will be held (see Figure 5). This first indicates the diminished role of obituaries as informative, since there is no funeral that readers need to know about. More importantly, this reveals that obituaries may increasingly be the sole form of public remembrance for some people. While eulogies delivered at funerals may have formerly fulfilled the function of narrating a legacy (Kunkel & Davis et al., 2016; Kunkel & Robert Dennis, 2003), the obituary is now the arena where this plays out for many. This elevates this text's importance as an outlet to commemorate the deceased. As a ritual becomes more important, it follows that people would make it more elaborate and detailed.

This shift from sharing information to constructing legacy is partly connected to the internet. As studies of online obituaries or memorials note, social media has become a desirable way to quickly and easily share news that someone has died (Hume & Bressers, 2010; McGlashan, 2021; Murrell et al., 2021). Obituaries published in print newspapers (though they may also be shared online) need not be as concerned with the immediacy of sharing news, and can therefore devote more attention to crafting the deceased's life story.

Concerning online obituaries, it is also possible that this less expensive medium contributes to shifting outlooks on suitable length and style. If cost is no longer an issue, one might expect to find longer, more detailed obituaries. However, it is important

to note that many of the trends observed in this study pre-date the advent of the internet. In other words, even before one could post a notice on Facebook, newspaper obituaries were already becoming longer and more detailed. Relatedly, while it has become more affordable to share lengthy obituaries online, the length of obituaries has grown in spite of rising costs. Publishing a notice in the Toronto Star in the 1930s, for instance, cost \$1 total, and 40 cents per line by the 1950s. This means it would cost \$8 to publish a 20-line obituary in 1950 – or adjusting for inflation, roughly \$99.84 today (Bank of Canada, *n.d.*). In reality, running an obituary of that length today costs roughly \$228. Despite rising costs, newspapers continue to publish anywhere from 20 to 80 obituaries daily, and the mean length of obituaries continues to grow. This suggests that this medium remains a popular means of commemorating death.

As noted, this sample's time span captures significant transformations in society's relationship with and outlook towards death (Ariès, 1981; T. Walter, 2020). The increasing medicalisation of death, for example, results in people living longer, but also leads to people being more likely to die in hospital away from family, or for death to be seen as a 'failure' rather than a natural event (Stolberg, 2017). Due to these changes, some suggest that Western society has become 'death denying'. Although transformations have led to people having different relationships with death, scholars have begun pushing back against the suggestion that death is sequestered in the modern world. Stolberg, for instance, points to the ubiquitous presence of violence and death in news and entertainment (2017, p. 191). Koksvik suggests that death denial functions more as a rhetoric or narrative among the death-positive movement, in order to advocate for the type of initiatives this movement provides (2020, pp. 956–8).

Concerning how death aversion may impact memorialisation, scholars have explored gravestone inscriptions and suggested there is an increase in death-denying language over the last century (K. A. C. L. S. Anderson et al., 2011). In contrast, this study gives reason to re-think the 'death taboo' thesis. That obituaries have grown progressively longer is one indication that people are in fact more comfortable discussing death. Rather than brief, terse texts that dominated the early twentieth century, modern obituaries speak in greater detail. Whether speaking specifically about their death or simply reflecting on what the bereaved will miss about the deceased, greater depth in writing suggests greater acceptance of death. The increasing number of obituaries that request donations for specific charities – especially ones related to diseases – reflect a growing comfort with discussing death, disease, and related issues. Similarly, sharing messages thanking medical staff reflects a greater acknowledgement of the dying process.¹⁶

Rather than a death-denying society, I argue that these obituaries reflect a new outlook on how death is understood. While older obituaries dedicated more attention to the immediate circumstances leading up to someone's death, this attention has shifted in favour of the deceased's legacy. Likewise, there is a shift away from the bereaved focusing on transcendent understandings of death (in other words, the deceased going off to 'some other place'). Instead, obituaries commemorate death by focusing on things that person did while they were alive. Stages of obituary that have seen marked growth from about the 1970s onwards, such as hobbies and family, reveal the life aspects through which legacies are constructed. Emphasising these elements in particular reflects an immanent understanding of death. In other words, life and death are understood through the lens of the here and now or the natural world rather than a transcendent plane.

In addition to increasing comfort with death, the above details also reflect shifting understandings of death over the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, reflecting a traditional understanding of death (Phillips, 2007), many obituaries named the clergy presiding over a funeral. In these older obituaries, end-of-life rituals also frequently involved visiting homes of the bereaved. Relatedly, it was not uncommon to note that the deceased had died either in their home, or that of a family member. In contrast, recent obituaries draw attention to the role of technology in the dying process. This includes thanking medical institutions and professionals for their care, and calling for donations to healthcare organisations or charities battling diseases. Obituaries therefore further reveal the increased medicalisation of dying, as death shifts from the home into the domain of modern science. Importantly, this does not necessarily suggest a denial of death, so much as a new understanding of when and under what circumstances it is best to die.

Transformations in obituary composition also reflect the increasing prevalence of continuing bonds as a response to death (Klass & Steffen, 2017; Mroz & Bluck, 2019). Continuing bonds describe a reformulated approach to grieving. As opposed to the previously dominant outlook (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005), in which the bereaved proceed through stages of grief until eventually ‘accepting’ their loss, continuing bonds suggest that the bereaved maintain physical, mental, and emotional connections with the deceased (Klass & Steffen, 2017). The memorialisation trends found in the Canadian obituaries – clearly outlining the many generations of family to which the deceased was connected as well as describing detailed stories of activities that the deceased used to enjoy – reflect a continuing bond approach to memorialisation. Writers of obituaries construct stories with reference to people and activities with which the bereaved can continue to connect and thereby preserve memories.

Concerning the regional variation in obituaries, most noteworthy is a greater emphasis on family in Halifax and Calgary. This composition may reflect that smaller cities hold a stronger sense of place and community compared to the sprawling metropolis of Toronto or Montreal. Some also suggest that Canada’s Eastern provinces (often designated ‘the Maritimes’) are ‘rooted in deeper family lineages and local loyalties’ (Friesen, 2001, p. 535), which may partly explain the focus on family in Halifax obituaries.¹⁷ Meanwhile, The Globe is considered part of the prestige press in Canada (Antecol and Michael & Endersby, 1999). An emphasis on education – as opposed to family or hobbies – reflects this orientation. Likewise, Toronto had the shortest obituaries on average, and the lowest frequency of inclusion (or among the lowest) for several elements. While not technically a prestige newspaper, the Toronto Star has the largest circulation and boasts a “big-spending, well educated, affluent” readership (Martin, 2008, p. 182). Being considered more prestigious may explain the focus and orientation of obituaries in the Star and Globe. It is finally worth noting that in addition to having the longest obituaries on average, Halifax has the highest rate of inclusion for several different stages. As the smallest city among the included publications, this suggests that urban density may have some impact on memorialisation, with bigger cities adopting a more terse and restrained obituary style.

Though differences are relatively small in some cases, they are noteworthy since studies comparing reporting across several Canadian newspapers found no differences (Collins, 2013, 2014). While distinct cultural regions across Canada are discussed offhand

by many Canadians, there is little empirical research on the topic. Several studies have explored political differences across Canada and have confirmed that distinct regional differences exist (Baer et al., 1993; Cochrane & Perrella, 2012; McGrane & Berdahl, 2013). Unfortunately, finding that the Prairies are more conservative and Ontario and Quebec more leftist fails to explain the differences in how communities memorialise the dead. Scholars have similarly sought to map religious differences, either within specific Canadian regions (Bramadat et al., 2022), or across the country (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2023). Despite highlighting important differences (e.g. lower affiliation on the West coast, higher Christian devotion in the Prairies and Maritimes) this work also fails to explain different priorities apparent in commemoration. For this reason, further research into regional forms of memorialisation would be useful.

Limitations and future research

This study sought to provide a wide-angle view of transformations in obituaries over time in Canada. Recognising that context shapes how people compose these texts, future work should continue to observe regional variation. This includes mapping the format of obituaries in other countries, but also comparing publications and cities within countries.

To better identify when new trends emerged, this study adopted a wide 120-year span. This approach revealed that several key shifts, such as major rises in certain elements being mentioned, emerged between the 1960s and 1980s. Future studies could confine their sample to the seemingly pivotal moment from 1960 onwards. Constructing a large dataset within this narrower time range would provide more data points to key in on, say, specific professions mentioned most often in obituaries.

Finally, this study sought to provide a comprehensive walkthrough of all stages contained within obituaries. Due to a broad focus, truly in-depth analysis of any one element was beyond the scope of this paper. Future studies could expand on any of the transformations highlighted here, by selecting specific stages and analysing them in greater depth.

Conclusion

This paper explores changes in Canadian obituaries over the last 120 years. Based on an analysis of 3,300 obituaries from six newspapers, this study outlined what elements are included in a ‘typical’ obituary, and how this has transformed over time. Over time, obituaries have increasingly become longer and more detailed. This paper argues that this reflects a transformation from obituaries being primarily informative to sharing life narratives, or in other words, being more concerned with crafting legacies. More specifically, narrative legacies are constructed by drawing attention to relationships with family, traits that brought success in one’s career, or hobbies which the deceased enjoyed. These elements reflect an immanent understanding of death which preserves continuing bonds among the bereaved.

For the most part, Canadian obituaries mirror those from other countries in terms of format and content. Despite broad similarities, context nevertheless impacts length of text, who composes these texts, who pays for publication, and what specific details are included. Over time, the stages that Canadian obituaries will potentially include have

remained fairly constant. Accompanying a gradual increase in length, obituaries generally include more details about the deceased over time, such as their occupation or hobbies. Relatedly, facets of one's life are described with greater detail. Some new stages have also emerged in the past 30–40 years, and these may become more common over time. Finally, comparing five local and one national Canadian newspaper illuminates local variation. While a pervasive national style is pervasive across texts, local context influences which details receive more attention.

Notes

1. In some cases, a small sample is necessitated by a target population which does not produce a large number of obituaries (see for example Alali, 1994; Cole & Carmon 2019; P. C. Heynderickx et al., 2019; P. C. Heynderickx et al., 2022). The noted limitations of smaller sample sizes applies to studies that attempt a broad survey of a given region or period.
2. In the interest of space, I will not outline every element of obituaries that were evaluated for inclusion. To briefly summarise, our framework included the following broad sections: demographics; cause of death; religious affiliation; family mentioned; personal/professional life details; end-of-life ceremonies; visual elements. Each of these had nested sub-sections, many of which will be discussed in the results and discussion sections.
3. In the early twentieth century, some newspapers did not print five obituaries on a given day, meaning that our total sample size is only 3,300 obituaries.
4. For reference, in the newspapers in this study, obituaries are printed in narrow columns, with several obituaries spanning the width of a page. The typical 'line' includes between 4–8 words, or an average of 5.90. This format was remarkably consistent across all years in the sample, and across all publications.
5. To better understand the changes in obituary length over time, while taking into account between-publication differences, a multilevel growth curve model was estimated with obituary length modelled as a function of time, and individual observations clustered within publications. Publication origin explained 7.7% of the variance in obituary length (ICC = 0.077). Both linear and quadratic models were fit to the data, with the quadratic random-intercept model displaying a better model fit, $X^2(1) = 232.24$, $p < .001$. Across all obituaries within all publications, there was an average trajectory curvature increase in obituary length over time ($B = .30$, 95%CI [0.26, 0.33]). The rate of change increased over time, specifically, in the end of the twentieth century. For example, in 1960, the mean linear slope was a positive change of 0.3 lines per decade, but in the year 2000, on average, obituaries were increasing by 1.5 lines per decade.
6. This category includes obituaries that mention great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren, since these generations are rare, and always accompanied by descriptions of grandchildren.
7. This latter category included parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, and other relatives. Acknowledging that this category is quite broad, and that some relationships are more intimate than others, we elected to collapse these relatives together since they generally cohere in the same obituaries.
8. For simplicity, all quotes from obituaries will be cited by noting the year and city of publication.
9. Similarly, children-in-law are often simply included in brackets following the family member they married.
10. It is worth noting that some obituaries will list several types of events.
11. Notably, there are some obituaries in the this newspaper which describe the deceased serving in the Canadian military, but do not display the Canadian flag. This suggests the icon is an additional element that families can request to include, rather than a default element included by the newspaper.

12. The lone element that obituaries no longer include is tracking the body's movement. In the early twentieth century, obituaries often indicated that the body was resting at a particular location, and would be travelling to subsequent locations for various funerary rites. In some cases, the remains had to travel long distances to their final resting place, and obituaries occasionally indicated that they would be leaving one city by train at a given time, before arriving at their final destination. This procession and mode of transportation clearly marks those obituaries as coming from a different era.
13. Overall, mean obituary length for men was 18.46 lines ($sd = 15.82$), while mean length for women was 17.48 lines ($sd = 12.19$).
14. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess differences in mean obituary length between publications. The results of the omnibus test indicated statistically significant difference between groups, $F(5,3294) = 45.9, p < .001$. Results of post-hoc pairwise comparisons showed statistically significant differences between the Halifax newspaper and all other publications, with the Halifax paper being longer than all other publications on average ($p < .001$ for each comparison). The other significant differences between publications included: the Montreal Gazette and Globe and Mail ($p = .02$), the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail ($p < .001$), and the Vancouver Sun and Toronto Star ($p = .04$).
15. Even in recent years, these trends remained fairly stable. Between 2000–2021, the mean length of obituaries in the Toronto Star and Montreal Gazette were 27.84 and 25.29 lines respectively. In contrast, the mean in Halifax was 41.05 lines.
16. Relatedly, another indication of greater death acceptance – though not discussed in-depth in this paper – is an increase in obituaries that list a cause of death. Obituaries include this information with greater frequency since roughly the 1960s.
17. This explanation does not, however, account for the greater focus on family in Calgary.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge that this paper emerges from broader conversations and research among members of the Health Working Group of the Nonreligion in a Complex Future Project (<https://nonreligionproject.ca/>). The NCF project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Dr. Lori Beaman and members of this project for their input on the larger study of obituaries. I wish to thank the Research Assistants from the Health Working Group of the NCF team for their efforts in helping to code the data.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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