

# Honoring our dead: text mining a century of academic obituaries in *The Lancet*

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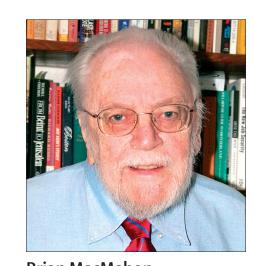
### Obituaries as a way to understand science

**Obituaries** offer a unique window into the values and social dimensions of academic life.

So what do we say when we talk about the dead?

**Data** is from the full-text of 5,069 obituaries published in *The* Lancet between 1850 and 2019

The Lancet, founded in 1823 in the U.K., is one of the world's oldest and most prestigious medical journals.



Brian MacMahon

in Sheffield, UK, he died after a stroke on and Surgeons, in 1946, Brian MacMahon tried his hand as a not, although it is true that the relative risks are reduced by recalled in a 2004 interview. So he enrolled in a public health of himself. But he was also stubborn when he had his own o into public health. But a trio of epidemiologists—Thomas statistics took away all the pleasure and the message of McKeown, Ronald Lowe, and Reginald Record—soon had epidemiology." MacMahon was a terrific mentor to students him under their spell. They convinced him to study pyloric who would go on to lead many epidemiology departments

invited in 1958 to be chairman of the department of that was also caring—just as an example, when he hit an animal MacMahon is perhaps best known for his work showing

that the risk of breast cancer is substantially affected by the He is survived by two sons, Michael and Kevin; and two age at which the first full-term pregnancy occurs. "It was daughters, Kathleen and Mary. His wife died in 2001. exceptionally important, although it may sound simple" said Dimitrios Trichopoulos, who knew MacMahon for Ivan Oransky 40 years, first as a graduate student and then as the ivan-oransky@erols.co

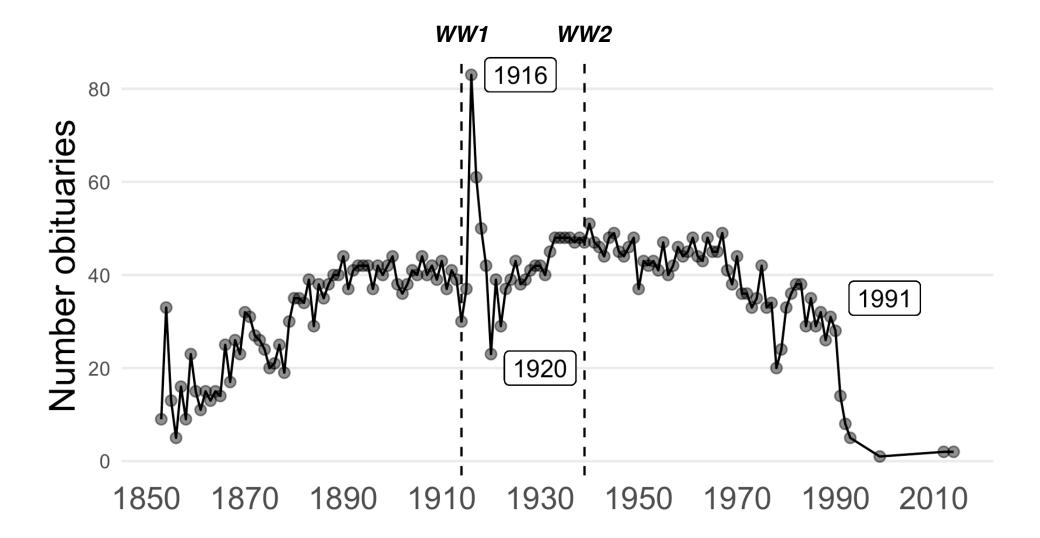
s later determined to be due to the fact that a full-term tudents, Walter Willett, shone more than he did." etween lung cancer and passive smoking. The effect as real, but MacMahon made it clear that the effect was ders less than that of active smoking He got several things right, and some things wrong, like ry scientist" Trichopoulos said. In 1981, the two were uthors, with colleagues, of a study in The New England urnal of Medicine purporting to show a link between coffee rinking and pancreatic cancer. The study was criticised ecause of its choice of controls, however, and was not onfirmed in subsequent work. Asked a few months

essor to MacMahon's chair at Harvard. The finding

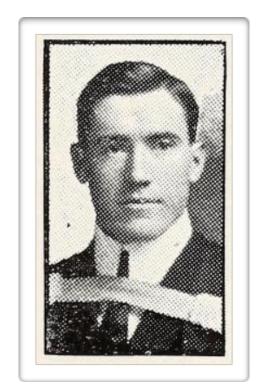
after publication about the choice of his control group, NacMahon said: "I'm satisfied with it." He acknowledged

to his house, which was a \$40 cab ride, and he would drive

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### Academic obituaries spiked during World War 1

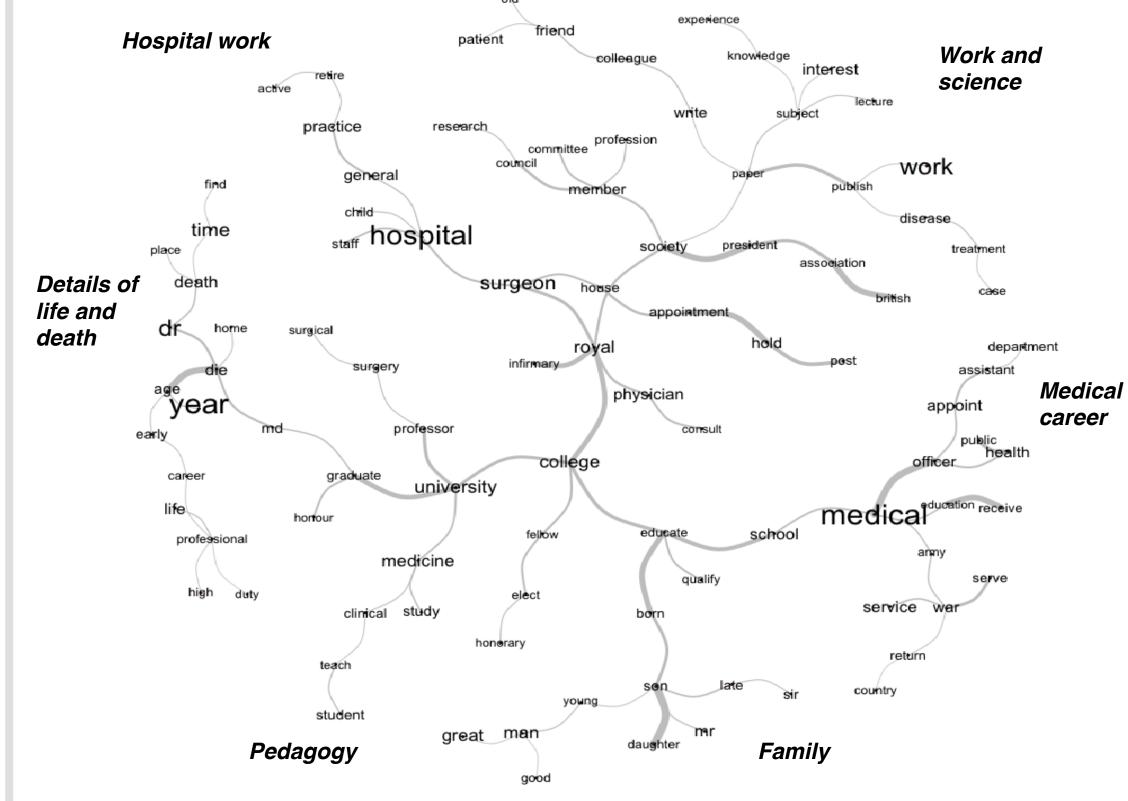


"The death is announced of Captain D. B. MacLean, killed in action at the front while attached to the East Lancashire Regiment

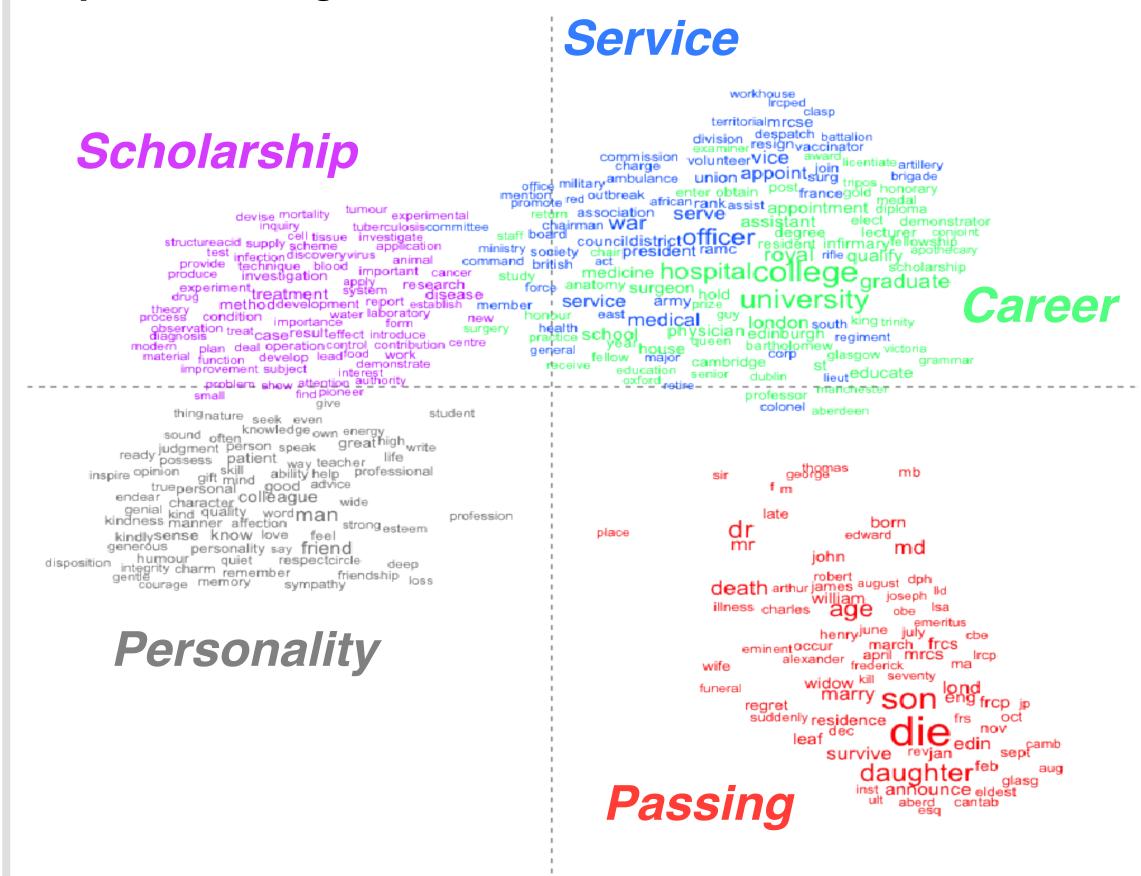
After being on sick leave till March Ist of this year he was sent to a military hospital, but while on duty there he succumbed to pneumonia."

### What is said in obituaries?

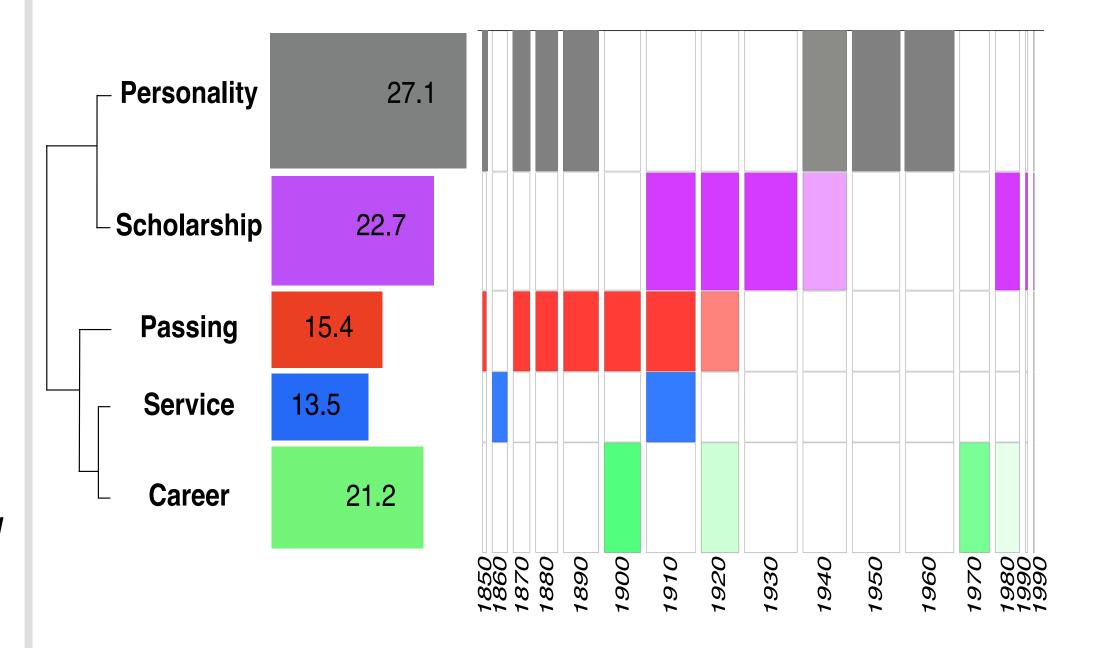
#### Word co-occurence



### **Topic modelling**



## How have obituaries changed over time?



The relative representation of topics has changed over time.

Details of family and Passing were over-represented until 1920.

Service was most represented during World War 1.

After WW 1, Scholarship and Personality became more common

Recently, Scholarship and Career are having a resurgence.

In Conclusion, Scientific obituaries reflect the importance of world events, professional career, and personality, but the genre evolves

Future work aims to construct a larger corpus of obituaries from popular and scientific venues

How has the academic obituary evolved, and what differences exist by venue, and the subjects's gender, discipline, and nationality?



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