

1

Introduction: The world we have lost

The history of death and grief is a significant part of human history which has been overlooked until recently. Death and bereavement come to us all. We must all confront the inevitability of our own mortality. A study of dying and grieving takes us to the heart of any culture and sharpens our understanding of the meaning of our lives.

My book, *Changing Ways of Death in Twentieth-Century Australia*, explores the features and causes of a profound cultural transformation in the history of death and grief. After the First World War a deep cultural shift occurred which lasted until the 1970s: emotional and expressive dying and grieving became less common than in the nineteenth century; thoughts and feelings about death were often avoided, ritual was minimised and sorrow became a private matter. Only since about 1980 have death and loss again become topics of intense public concern and discussion, stimulated by the AIDS epidemic, by debates about euthanasia and palliative care, and by a reaction against the medicalisation of death.

We can appreciate the full depth and meaning of these cultural changes over time only if we examine the contrasts between the two centuries. It is true that death in Australia was an individual and diverse experience in both centuries, with multiple modes of

(4) *A transformed culture of death and grief*

death and grieving, and considerable fluidity over time. Even so, it is possible to identify dominant contrasting models. In the nineteenth century the urban middle class and respectable working class were strongly influenced by Christian beliefs. But these values changed after the 1880s, to be slowly replaced in a more secular society which tended to privatise dying and grieving, and to minimise rituals.

Demography and religion

Two major agents of change affecting death and bereavement were common to both centuries, but their nature and relative influence altered. Demography was a significant common force for change, but its effects differ from one century to the next. The most obvious feature of this demographic transformation was that old age replaced infancy as the most likely time of death from about 1904. The nineteenth-century demographic pattern was marked by relatively high mortality, a short life expectancy and a high infant death rate. Between 1880 and 1920 a significant transition took place, displacing the traditional pattern with a new one. This was marked by a continuous decline in mortality, improved survival rates for infants and children, and increased life expectancy at birth. The infant mortality rate fell from the 1880s, with a steep decline after 1904, and by 1930 this rate had more than halved.¹

Parents today expect their children to survive at least to adulthood, and many people do not experience death until their elderly parents die. By contrast, colonial parents often had to suffer the deaths of their babies and children under five. These common tragedies sharply distance the experience of colonial families from those living today. In the 1880s, about 90 per cent of babies might live to twelve months, and only about 78 per cent reached adulthood.² The transformation was largely due to a decline in the diarrhoeal and intestinal diseases, and the infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, whooping cough and scarlet fever. The main killers

of the twentieth century were heart disease and cancer, which chiefly affected older people.

Christian faith was a profound influence on nineteenth-century attitudes to death, on deathbed scenes and rituals, on funeral practices, and on the consolations available in mourning. Many colonists brought with them from Britain and Ireland a rich Christian culture of death and elaborate mourning rituals which deeply influenced the urban middle classes and the respectable working classes. Some tried to recreate a European Christian ideal of a 'good death', which required devout spiritual preparation and submission to God's will, as well as fortitude in the face of suffering. The good death was expected to take place ideally in a Christian home, surrounded by a loving family, with the dying person farewelling family members. Families, like the Bussells in Western Australia, eagerly sought 'particulars' of family death scenes and circulated copies to relatives, with instructions to 'read and pass on'.³ Good death scenes were meant to be edifying, though they were rare in real life except among devout members of the comfortable classes.

Religious faith gave Christian families a model of acceptance of death as the will of God. It allowed them to express sorrow in overtly emotional terms, using the language of the Bible, the Prayer Book and familiar hymns: this Christian language of consolation permeated the vernacular in a way unimaginable to many people today. Children, often conditioned by the deaths of siblings, learned like adults to regard death as an inevitable part of life. Their understanding of death in devout Christian families came from family discussions of bible stories, and familiarity with the death themes of many hymns. Thus 15-year-old Edmund Cooke, dying from the nineteenth-century killer disease, pulmonary tuberculosis, in 1872 reassured his uncle Trevor Winter of Murndal, Victoria: 'I am dying but I am quite happy. My only thought is those who will be left to mourn for me ... But those who truly trust in Jesus and repent earnestly of their sins will soon join me.'⁴

(6) *A transformed culture of death and grief*

Devout Christian parents might be comforted on the death of a child by their faith, though it could be tested to the utmost. Many nineteenth-century parents believed that the death of their child was the will of God, who had removed the child from a world of pain, sin and temptation. Pious writers of condolence letters emphasised happy family reunions in the next life and the children's happiness in heaven as angels with God. When scarlet fever suddenly killed Charlotte Suttor's beloved four-year-old son Edward in 1850, she was frantic with shock and grief. The struggle for submission to God's will was so painful that she initially saw the blow as a punishment for the sins of the parents, but she was gradually reconciled by her belief that 'my darling child is now an angel before the throne of God'.⁵

Many immigrants to Australia were already unbelievers before they left Britain, and the Christian culture was fragile in early colonial Australia, especially in the bush and among the poor. Moreover, the Christian religion declined more fundamentally from the 1870s due to the combined impact of biblical criticism, evolutionary theory and a growing disillusionment with institutional Christianity. Yet despite the undoubted decline in Christian faith, many people retained a residual belief which affected their attitude to death. Christian forms of consolation, however nebulous, lingered well into the twentieth century, long after church attendance may have ended. Only from the 1950s did extensive Catholic and Orthodox immigration from southern Europe reinforce the surviving Christian sects.

The Catholic culture of death was more robust and enduring than the Protestant, and facilitated continuity between the two centuries. It relied on a vital combination of traditional ritual and comforting sacraments, backed up by private spiritual discussion between priest and dying person. Catholic Christianity was less vulnerable than individualistic Protestantism to the challenges of scientific rationalism and evolutionary theory. The Catholic belief in purgatory as an intermediate state between hell and heaven also

gave more hope of ultimate salvation to most sinful human beings than the stark alternatives offered by Protestantism. Moreover, time in purgatory could be reduced for the Catholic faithful through prayers of intercession and good works of others after an individual's death. At Catholic deathbeds the role of the priest and a clearly defined ritual made a sudden or delirious death less fearful than for Protestants, for whom dying confessions of faith were so important. The familiar sacraments of the Catholic priest could be deeply comforting at a time of physical and emotional anguish.

The correspondence and diaries of the women in the devout Catholic Rowe and O'Leary families from 1878 to the 1930s show how the familiar rituals of death and mourning could help to alleviate the initial shock and grief; and for many years afterwards these rituals allowed the families to believe they could assist the progress of their loved ones through purgatory. For several generations these families regularly visited the graves and memorials of their loved ones and went to mass to offer prayers for their souls, especially on birthdays and anniversaries. Visiting the graves of loved relatives was a vital source of consolation and an important part of the ritual of grieving for many. Graves served several purposes, as sites for remembrance and meditation as well as for Christian devotional ritual. They helped to associate the deceased with a particular place which became a shrine to preserve the memory of the loved one.⁶

In 1914 the deaths of two generations of the family – including Fanny O'Leary's aged mother and her husband Dennis – were remembered together in grave-visiting and church ceremonies. In 1919–20 the ritual was extended yet again to include a third generation, on the deaths of Fanny's two daughters and her sister. Fanny O'Leary's diary for 1921 was a record of intense grief for her two daughters, with cemetery visits twice a week in the first year, usually followed by confession or mass. Yet in all this anguished grave-visiting she did not neglect the anniversaries of all

her other loved ones. She also introduced younger generations of her family to the ritual of church ceremonies to pray for the dead, and grave-visiting to remember them.⁷ Throughout Australia in the twentieth century Catholic faith and ritual were reinforced by growing numbers of Catholics from southern Europe.

Memory and gender

Memory and gender had significant influences on death practices and attitudes in both centuries. Memory played a complex role in relation to death and bereavement, becoming more important in the twentieth century as religious faith declined. Memory has different meanings and can be interpreted in diverse ways. It has recently been perceived as an integral component of cultural history: popular memory in the form of individual oral testimonies is captured and recorded as a valuable source for history. Geoff Ely has defined this broader use of memory 'as a general name for the construction of the past's cultural meanings and the associated representational archive'.⁸ In relation to death and bereavement, memory was both a vital component in the dynamics of grief and a powerful force in the public commemoration of war. Historians such as Ken Inglis, Joy Damousi, Stephen Garton and Alistair Thomson have published outstanding work on the process of memorialisation and the role of national memory in sustaining the powerful Anzac legend. As Paula Hamilton and Kate Darian-Smith note, collective memories are reinforced through rituals and commemorative ceremonies, including Anzac Day parades.⁹ But collective commemoration and memorialisation are not the primary focus of this book, especially as they have now received so much attention.

Memory is a recurring theme throughout my book, though it plays a more subsidiary, albeit important, role – usually as a vital consoling force in individual bereavement and as a component in the dynamic process of grief. Its roots go back long before 1914. Certainly the power and significance of memory have increased in