

Essay Reviews

DEATH AND THE DOCTORS

PHILIPPE ARIÈS, *The hour of our death*, London, Allen Lane, 1981, 8vo, pp. xxii, 652, illus., £14.95.

ROBERT CHAPMAN, IAN KINNES, and KLAUS RANDSBORG (editors), *The archaeology of death*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, 4to, pp. 158, illus., £17.50.

JOHN McMANNERS, *Death and the Enlightenment. Changing attitudes to death among Christians and unbelievers in eighteenth-century France*, Oxford University Press, 1981, 8vo, pp. vii, 619, £17.50.

JOACHIM WHALEY (editor), *Mirrors of mortality. Studies in the social history of death*, London, Europa, 1981, pp. vii, 252, £19.50.

There is no more *universal* social fact than death (“never send to know for whom the bell tolls”). Yet death is the topic supremely difficult for historians to research, since, though all live under its shadow, none has experienced it directly for himself, and there are no scientific tests of its most momentous putative consequence, an afterlife, for which men have slain and been slain. It is, nevertheless, a fashionable subject of inquiry, gaining *éclat* first in France, and now, like so many other Paris fashions, being exported to Britain and across the Atlantic. One can chronicle death at the most metaphysical level (as in Norman O. Brown’s *Life against Death* (1959), a Freudian psychohistory of mankind, viewing civilization as a holding operation, keeping death at bay, a bid on immortality), or in the most personal terms, as in Victor and Rosemary Zorza’s *Kindertotenbuch, A way of dying* (1980), which offers a moving account of the agonies of coming to terms with the departure of a loved one. But when the historian tries to stare death in the face and penetrate to its essence, pure and simple, the subject vanishes before his eyes. For death always comes wreathed in culture. From earliest times, as Chapman, Kinnes, and Randsborg reiterate in their wide-ranging survey, extinction has never been left as a mere biological fact, but saturated with meanings, symbols, myths, and artefacts, from the weapons, the supplies, the adornments left around the Neolithic corpse, up to the *nunc dimittis* and the last words, the wakes and ale. So the historian has to stalk death by stealth, from an oblique angle. The death sentence is a fact that can be taken for granted, though its comparative timing will interest demographers and social and medical historians. But death’s language is a rich rhetoric, whose tropes – eschatology and soteriology, the viaticum and absolution, the formularies of wills, sarcophagi, hearses and steles, black crepe and the paraphernalia of grieving – give expression to the stories, the guilt, and fantasies of the living. How far decyphering the language of death will enable us to recover the experience of the dying person, or just the piteous or grotesque ceremonials of all that surround him; how far the history of death should, in fact, be about the dying person or rather about the survivors are issues dividing the approaches of the contributors to the books now under review.

The doyen of the historians of death, Philippe Ariès, is one who is confident enough

of his powers of *Verstehen* to make extrapolations from the cultural cavalcade of death to how it felt to be living or dying: “the truth is”, he can write, “that probably, at no time has man so loved life as he did at the end of the Middle Ages” (p. 132). Not only that but, drawing upon the *aficionado*’s nonpareil expertise about caskets and urns, burial regulations, Catholic devotionals (scholastic theology and Protestantism both get rather short shrift), prayers for the dead, horizontal and vertical tombs, he believes it is possible to chart a series of phases, unfolding over time, but overlapping, in the *conscience collective* of mortality. In the beginning, there was no fear of death, rather what he calls “The Tame Death”, a sort of Rousseauvian Eden in which untutored man, at one with himself and with Nature, could accept dying with equanimity, for it was as ordained as the fall of leaves or the cycle of the seasons. In this phase – and Ariès exemplifies it with the *Chanson de Roland* and with Tolstoyan peasants, and Christine Sourvinou-Inwood, in her ‘To die and enter the house of Hades: Homer, before and after’, in Whaley (ed.), exemplifies it with Homeric Greece – death is rest, an after-dinner sleep, and the dying person manages his own adieux within the bosom of the community.

This natural death was jostled out, from the twelfth century onwards, by a new kind of death, the “Death of the Self”, a response to the twin forces of humanist individualism and the encroachment of Medieval, sacerdotal Roman Catholicism with its elaborate eschatology, its legalistic approach to life and death expressed through the canon law in anticipation of the Last Judgment, and its zealous priesthood flexing its professional muscles. Humanist individualism, from Abelard to John Donne, no longer acceded to death but threw down the gauntlet (“Death, thou shalt die!”). For those who had joyously discovered life, death stopped being a repose and became the grisly, grinning enemy, a cunning stalker. But at the same time, the Church came to deliver man from the new terror, eternal perdition. Dying became the crisis point in an elaborate and terrifying Christian eschatology of sin and redemption, heaven and hell, atonement and resurrection, penance and absolution. To die and go we know not where was unbearable, but the Church moved in to pilot the journey. Deaths were taken out of the hands of the dying, and appropriated by clerics, who stage-managed the last dramas of the forgiveness of sins and extreme unction, backed eventually by the development of such instruments as pardons and indulgences. Moreover, the site of sepulture moved from Nature (burial in ground beyond town walls was traditional within paganism) to within the protective walls of the church. In church, tombs and macabre effigies became *memento moris* to the surviving remnant of the family, thus encouraging the annexation of death by the family as well as by priests. The entirety of life could be seen as one continuous *ars moriendi*: holy dying the continuation of holy living.

Ariès’s third stage (“la Mort Longue et Proche”) is perhaps less visible in its effects than its aims. He pitches it between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and argues that it was largely characterized by a desire to take death down a peg or two, and particularly to check the clerical ringmaster of death, to quench by reason the horrors of hellfire and the *danse macabre*, and to scotch the conspicuous consumption of ornate, pompous funerals (though, as Whaley points out in his essay, ‘Symbols for the survivors: The disposal of the dead in Hamburg in the late seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries', in Whaley (ed.), there is not much evidence that the rich and great were willing, in fact, to forego the glory of a dazzling exit, though gradually funerals grew less civic and more private). This is also the point at which new philosophical, medical, and scientific beliefs were taking hold, from Montaigne to Voltaire, to spiritualize and psychologize the afterlife, to "desacralize" the body. More and more corpses were dissected and anatomized, and Cartesian dualism reduced the body from being the holy image of God to a mere machine which would inevitably wear out some time. Death should be made hygienic, demanded health reformers. The period saw opposition mounting to burials in putrescent churches, and the demand for rural cemeteries (death at a distance). Vovelle, studying the retreat of pious formulae in wills, in his *Piété baroque et dechristianization en Provence au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1973), has spoken of the dechristianization of death at this time; "laicization" may be a more accurate term. But whatever word we use, the phenomenon is manifest in the Promethean hopes of *philosophes* such as Erasmus Darwin, Godwin, and Condorcet that progress would render death obsolete. It is evident also in a softening and retreat from Christian dogma in areas such as the crime and sin of suicide and a scepticism towards personal salvation; and it is also characterized by a dignified Stoicism in the teeth of death, as for instance in this report in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1733 of the obsequies for John Underwood of Whittlesea:

... At his Burial, when the Service was over, an Arch was turn'd over the Coffin, in which was placed a small piece of white Marble, with the Inscription, *Non omnis moriar*, 1733. Then the 6 Gentlemen who follow'd him to the Grave sung the last Stanza of the 20th Ode of the 2d Book of *Horace*. No Bell was toll'd, no one invited but the 6 Gentlemen, and no Relation follow'd his Corpse; the Coffin was painted Green, and he laid in it with all his Cloaths on; under his Head was placed *Sanadon's Horace*, at his feet *Bentley's Milton*; in his Right Hand a small Greek Testament After the Ceremony was over they went back to his House, where his Sister had provided a cold Supper; the Cloth being taken away the Gentlemen sung the 31st Ode of the 1st Book of *Horace*, drank a chearful Glass, and went Home about Eight. He left near 6000 l. to his Sister, on Condition of her observing this his Will, order'd her to give each of the Gentlemen ten Guineas, and desir'd they would not come in black Cloaths; The Will ends thus – *Which done I would have them take a chearful Glass, and think no more of John Underwood*

The *philosophes* may have thought they had death tamed. In fact, Ariès claims, they were deeper in the mire. Rather like Ivan Illich in his *Limits to medicine* (1976), Ariès believes that the movement which passed death off as merely the breakdown of bodily function (Ariès does not mention, but one could cite, Bichat here) rendered death absurd and so more traumatic than ever. Hence, he illuminatingly suggests, the spine-chilling fascination of the late Enlightenment with the obscenity of death, from the mingling of death with beauty in Gothic fiction, the union of death and the artist in the Romantic agony, and the sadomasochistic conflation of death with sex, Thanatos and Eros, in de Sade's necrophilia.

The nineteenth-century escape from these dilemmas was the sentimental celebration of death, "le temps des belles morts", a golden age of grief (Ariès calls this, his stage four, "The Death of the Other"). Death became once more a legitimate object of emotion and grief, and, largely freed from the constraints of orthodox theology and clerical dogmatism, grieving became a major family business, its aim to perpetuate and polish bright the precious memory of the departed one (archetypally, the brilliant young victim of consumption). Ariès would seem to agree with Lawrence Stone in his

The family, sex and marriage in England 1500–1800 (1977) and with David Stannard in his *The Puritan way of death* (1977) that the heyday of the domestic, affectionate, child-oriented family saw morbid, mawkish attitudes towards death at their most pathos-soaked, but whether this luxuriant lachrimosity was actually therapeutic in assuaging grief is strongly challenged by David Cannadine's 'War and death, grief and mourning in modern Britain' in Whaley (ed.), which sees the elephantine Victorian rituals of mourning as little more than ways of lining the pockets of funeral parlour directors and manufacturers of black gloves, black armbands, black crepe, mourning brooches, mourning parasols, mourning handkerchiefs, and the like. Death needed a meaning, but much of the intelligentsia found itself unable or unwilling to believe any longer with Jonathan Edwards in the eternity of hellfire torments, in being damned in Dr. Johnson's sense ("Sent to hell and punished everlastingly"). The God of damnation now seemed to many an immoral God (this was precisely the reason given by Charles Darwin in his *Autobiography* for his loss of faith:

Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct. I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.)

One popular answer to this conundrum lay in the emergence of spiritualism.

Lastly, the fifth stage of death, the modern age (what Ariès calls "The Invisible Death"). The old have lost their authority, death has lost its dignity (and there is no life after death), and dying has been deprived of its tragic theatricality, stifled by medical routine, the loneliness of the terminal ward, *sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, above all, *sans* consciousness, where people no longer even know they are dying and the dying are corralled off from the living ("The progress of the lie"). Death is banished because it is a scandal; mourning becomes an indiscretion, except in America where it is cosmeticized. Ariès quotes the bitter words of the Jesuit historian, Père Dainville, as he lay dying in an intensive care unit, infantilized, sanitized, and anaesthetized: "on me frustre de ma mort". Ariès's moral is obvious. We must try to regain the healthy paradise of the self-managed pageant of death (McManners enters a word of dissent: "I would wish to depart as painlessly as possible, and with a minimum of fuss").

Astonishing as is Ariès's erudition in cadavers, catacombs and catafalques, *ex-votos* and death masks, and numerous as are his cameo evocations of the moods of mortality, as a piece of rigorous analytical history *The hour of our death* leaves too many thorny questions unanswered. His selection of evidence is sometimes ill-balanced and wayward; counter-examples are not raised; neither are the questions of geography and of cultural determinants (is Ariès writing about Catholic Europe or about Christian Europe?). He makes no use of sociological and anthropological perspectives. Above all, Ariès does not feel obliged to explain the motor driving his series of stages. He does not seem to be a Hegelian, arguing that each moment of consciousness produces its contradiction and the means of its own transcendence. But he also says remarkably little about how material realities, such as demographic trends, social conditions, and the power of medicine, might have determined the meaning of death.

Working within much smaller chronological compasses, McManners and the con-

tributors to *Mirrors of mortality* might have excused themselves from the need to analyse the socio-economic and ideological configurations determining the ceremonials and rituals of death, but in fact many of them attack these questions of explanation more readily than Ariès. Thus, for example, David Cannadine poses the question: why was the flower of British youth so innocently eager to go off and fight in the First World War, so heroic about death? why was death so glorified? He suggests two answers. Major improvements in hygiene, living conditions, and health in late Victorian and Edwardian times had actually rendered death an occurrence relatively unfamiliar compared with previous generations; while at the same time, the British experience of war in the nineteenth century gave the young officer reasonable expectation that battle was something one did not die in. Death was glorified because it was something that did not happen to you. They were soon disabused: over one in four Old Cliftonians who volunteered were killed; thirty-one per cent of Balliol matriculants of 1913 were killed in the war.

R. C. Finucane, in his 'Sacred corpse, profane carion: Social ideals and death rituals in the later Middle Ages', in Whaley (ed.), shows – not surprisingly to us – that the degree of public elaboration and protraction of funerals was in direct ratio to the social eminence of the deceased (hence effigies had to be carved or cast to stand in for the rotting corpse). But C. A. Bayly, in his 'From ritual to ceremony: Death ritual and society in Hindu North India since 1600' (in *ibid.*) points out that in one respect the reverse was true in Hindu India: the lower you are on the caste ladder, the more protracted the rituals. Why? Because death was a pollutant. The further down the hierarchy, the greater the pollution, and so the greater the time required for the ritual purification.

But it is McManners's scrupulously researched, emphatic, and felicitously written book (marred only by a wretchedly miserly index!) which presents us with the most convincing total reconstruction of the public language of death in a community, from the apparently meaningless and motiveless street-corner throat-slittings that Richard Cobb has studied for Paris (where for a long while the Capuchin friars formed the only fire brigade), through to the majestic, solemn musings of a Bossuet and across to the popular spirituality of *Pensez-y bien*. Topic after topic – public executions, private and national mourning, suicide, graveyard poetry, the theology of the afterlife – gets illuminated by being subtly delineated in rich context. Drawing on a tradition of researches by French scholars such as Vovelle, Lebrun, Chaunu, and Favre, McManners most elegantly demonstrates the gigantic, glorious, sprawling, terrifying stage-apparatus of the Counter-Reformation scenario of death being corroded by an instinctive lay feeling for natural dignity and justice, and collapsing under the strains of its own machinery. Catholic doctrines of limbo and purgatory, of the indispensability of absolution, were increasingly felt to be arbitrary, cruel, and repulsive, and to involve riddles whose very solutions brought theology into ridicule: where was the bosom of Abraham? were all unbaptized children lost? why did a man's disposition in his dying minutes determine his destiny? did this not often save the wicked man and damn the just? There was less disposition to believe *Pensez-y bien*, the most popular handbook on death, when it noted that a single mortal sin could damn "the greatest saint", whereas the Penitent Thief had been saved.

Literate, respectable burgher families increasingly wanted to circumvent the Kafkaesque corridors of Counter-Reformation legalism, and find ways of dying and forms of comfort that were natural *and* Christian, simple, family-oriented, radiant (hence Voltaire's triumphant impish malice in stage-managing his own death so he could die a good Catholic but no Christian).

McManners's picture of death in the Enlightenment dovetails reasonably well with Ariès's: the fascination with the corpse as an anatomical entity, the retreat from dwelling on the macabre horrors of the charnel-house and the skull and crossbones, the impatience with the pious just-so stories of the priests; but McManners's account is wholly more sympathetic. Whereas Ariès views this demythologizing of death as a failure of nerve, McManners sees it as a courageous act of faith by a culture increasingly concerned with affirmation not renunciation, valuing the virtuous life rather than the pious scripted exit, practising the *ars vivendi* rather than the *ars moriendi*, oriented around the family rather than the church.

The works under review bring many aspects of death into illuminating focus: monumental architecture, manuals of devotion, the requiem mass, cemetery design, cortège protocol. What is rather conspicuous by its relative absence, except in discussions of the present century, is the medical context. This is not to presume that medical intervention generally made much difference till recently, as to whether people lived or died (as McManners indeed concludes in his ch. 2, 'Defences against death: Eighteenth-century medicine'). But it is to raise the question of whether, and how far, medical notions of the prognosis of death, the distinction between fatal and non-fatal disease, inoperable conditions, the signs of death, and so forth, had more currency in shaping lay lore and practice towards the acutely and chronic sick than these books generally presume, and whether the physician's clinical presence served to shape death-bed ritual rather in the way the priest's presence did. Obviously, the medicalization of death figures largely in Ariès's last stage, where dying ceases to be an active art and becomes a passive process of hospital routine, and McManners shows how medical knowledge underpinned certain Enlightenment trends (e.g. growing experience of deep coma gave credence to fears of being buried alive, leading to gadgets incorporating warning bells and signals connecting coffins with the overworld). But the occasional arresting cross-cultural comparison shows how deeply-ingrained, unconscious, basic scientific and medical notions determine our whole outlook and behaviour. Thus Bayly shows how in Hindu India the dying were frequently ejected from their homes, cast away by the family, taken down to the river to die. Cruel? Maybe; but Hindu physiology did not believe, with ours, that there was a clearly defined terminal point between life and death. Even though the heart and brain continued to function, once the signs of dying were on a person, he was as good as dead and was treated as such.

The history of medicine has always taken an interest in death – in the death-centred physiologies of Bichat and Corvisart, in the emergence during the nineteenth century of an autopsy-based pathology, in the changing signs of death, in the fatal diseases of celebrities. And some medical historians have pioneered new techniques in the horizontal study of death – one thinks of Ernest Caulfield's use of headstone evidence to chart the course of epidemics in Colonial America. But on the whole, medical

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historians' interest in death has been highly selective. None has yet given us a broad survey, grounded in the history of ideas, of how the medical profession's attitudes towards death and the treatment of the dying has been congruent with or divergent from those of other educated and professional groups such as judges and priests. Moreover, we also know little about how the practical and ethical problems of caring for and treating the dying have shaped doctors' beliefs on this issue. All such questions have major contemporary resonances in this age of spare-part surgery and life-support systems, with their attendant ethical dilemmas. It is an area where medical historians ought not to be caught napping and allow their clothes to be stolen by social historians and historians of ideas.

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"PROFESSIONALIZING MODERN MEDICINE" IN FRENCH HOSPITALS

TOBY GELFAND, *Professionalizing modern medicine. Paris surgeons and medical science and institutions in the eighteenth century*, Westport, Conn., and London, Greenwood Press, 1980, 8vo, pp. xviii, 271, [no price stated].

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A revised version has recently appeared, in the handsomely-produced "Contributions in Medical History" series published by the Greenwood Press, of the doctoral thesis of Toby Gelfand, available since 1974 in University Microfilms edition, and now entitled *Professionalizing modern medicine. Paris surgeons and medical science and institutions in the eighteenth century*. It will be warmly welcomed by a wide readership on a number of counts. First, it substantially enriches our knowledge of the organization of French surgery in the last century of the *ancien régime*. Second, it provides a more thorough account than has appeared before of the contribution of Paris surgeons to the institutional reorganization of French medicine in the Revolutionary decade – when the bases of the development of scientific medicine in early nineteenth-century France were laid, notably by the amalgamation of physicians and surgeons into a single category of doctors, and by the accompanying creation of three *écoles de santé* – in Paris, Montpellier, and Strasbourg – which for the first time were to orientate medical teaching around clinical instruction. Third, Dr. Gelfand's work holds out some hope of bridging the gap which seems to exist between the enthusiastic followers of Michel Foucault – whose *Naissance de la clinique* remains intellectually the most challenging account of France's "medical revolution" – and those suspicious of Foucault's message and his methods of writing history.¹

¹ M. Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, 2nd ed., Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972. Also available in English translation as *The birth of the clinic*, London, Tavistock, 1973. For a recent example of the hostility provoked by Foucault's work, see G. S. Rousseau's comments in G. S. Rousseau and R. Porter (editors), *The Ferment of knowledge. Studies in the historiography of eighteenth-century science*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 183 ff.