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Death in England: An Illustrated History

Clare Gittings
Peter C. Jupp
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Few people willingly think about death, but curious browsers who open this lively volume will be exceedingly well rewarded. Twelve scholars, including the editors, offer readers a seamless, unfailingly interesting account of how the English have managed dying, funerals and remembrance. The time-span runs from c. 500,000 B.C. to 1998. The Paleolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages receive clear, concise analysis: the record is rich but fragmentary; interpretation is necessarily guarded. From the Roman occupation forward, the evidence is ever fuller and more complex; deaths seldom draw uniform responses.

The authors track far-ranging social and attitudinal change in which the thrust of doctrinal reform was often slowed by local conservatism. In brisk prose and skillful quotation, they trace the continuing humanization, rationalization and secularization of death. Saintly intercessions, vigils and visitations disappear; devils and ghosts withdraw; prayers purchase pardons. Nonetheless, after Protestant England's final breach with Rome in the 1550s, Heaven or Hell became stark alternatives; gone was the useful halfway house of Purgatory. Fortunately, heavenly redemption gained over hellish suffering. Georgian pomp gave way to Victorian piety; more recently, priest and churchyard yielded to physician and cemetery-in this century, to nursing home and crematorium.

The authors? broad focus-from humble burial to state funerals, from single deaths to war's traumatizing thousands-and their perceptive integration of iconographic material supporting their analyses give the book great strength. Illustrations of funerary architecture and commemorative paintings are powerfully instructive. Inscriptions-Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval and modern-are telling, as are the many folkloric, vernacular and literary inclusions. The ars moriendi, the danse macabre and memento mori, respectively hopeful, baleful and admonitory, are rewardingly introduced. The authors? provision of research data on population, medicine and death rates securely anchors their text.

Death in England is a major contribution to social history and essential to all self-

respecting humanities libraries. Any enthusiast of Wither's Emblems, Young's Night Thoughts and Walker's Graveyard Gatherings will be a happy purchaser. The rewards include 142 fine illustrations (with prehistoric sites fairly represented), an up-to-date bibliography, discussion of exequies, obsequies and the roles of heralds, hearses and hatchments in funerals. Armchair travel to Wetwang Slack, Duggleby Howe and Foulmire Fen, together with pointers to the Lyke Wake Dirge and Mirk's Instructions to Clergy, will surely add to readers? pleasure in this first-class work.

Peter Skinner