

Elegies written in a local graveyard

Poets on - and in - cemeteries

EDWARD PLATT

THESE SILENT MANSIONS

A life in graveyards
JEAN SPRACKLAND
226pp. Cape. £16.99.

THE EAST EDGE

Nightwalks with the dead poets of Tower
Hamlets
CHRIS MCCABE

236pp. Penned in the Margins. Paperback, £9.99.

CENOTAPH SOUTH

Mapping the lost poets of Nunhead Cemetery
CHRIS MCCABE

364pp. Penned in the Margins. Paperback, £9.99.

THERE IS A SHIFT OF PERSPECTIVE about three-quarters of the way through *These Silent Mansions: A life in graveyards*. Having spent the first part of the book studying the writing engraved on the headstones, Jean Sprackland brings in a “hand-lens” and begins to examine the lichen mottling their surface. Magnification reveals unexpected dimensions: “I’m instantly relocated to a different world”, she writes. “A desert, criss-crossed with dusty roads. A patchwork of brown and golden forests. An old industrial zone with open chimneys, blasted and crumbling. A vast reef of silvery coral.”

Yet it is not just the texture of the lichen that yields riches: Sprackland, who is a poet, recognizes the beauty of their names - “woodscript, peppered moon, false map, gnome fingers, thrushwort ...”. The list goes on, memorable and evocative. She is not alone in her enthusiasm: “for those who really know and study lichen, churchyards are key sites, because they contain numerous separate microhabitats”, she writes. Churchyards, municipal cemeteries and private burial grounds are “key sites” for her in other ways as well: they allow her to orientate herself - “when I move somewhere new, going to the graveyard is a way of learning where I am” - and to lose herself as well. “All are places of escape, somewhere to walk and think, and to notice things which are generally overlooked or forgotten.” Above all, they “are the places where the stories are kept”.

Characteristically, the idea for *These Silent Mansions*, in which she goes back to places where she used to live, comes to her as she stands, shivering, in a “dilapidated churchyard” one November afternoon: “I am past the middle of my life, I heard myself say”, she begins. Yet such out-loud assertiveness is not Sprackland’s style, and the voice promptly changes: “It was one of those moments where you see your life as something actual and finite: a long walk, perhaps, and you the walker with more than half the distance covered. A parent has recently died. Your children are living as you once did, as if there were no tomorrow. And then there’s you, somewhere in between, wondering how you got here ...”.



The way she uses the second person as cover for her confessional suggests the nature of the memoir that is to follow: thoughtful, wide-ranging, and unusually sparing in personal detail. She will go back to her “old hometowns” but not in a spirit of nostalgia: “What mattered to me was what the place itself remembered of its past, and what it had forgotten. What remains, and what has been erased ... And when I arrived in a city and walked out of the railway station into its altered and indifferent streets, where would I begin? The graveyard, of course.”

Each chapter is introduced by a brief prose-poem meditating on graveyards in different seasons and at different times, and continues with explorations of some of their common features - the lichen, which precipitates the dizzying shift in scale, and more visible features as well, such as fog, headstones, or the luminous gunk called nostoc, which blooms in gardens and churchyards. These passages, which are fascinating in themselves, frame her personal reminiscences.

She begins in a churchyard in Clissold Park, in Stoke Newington, a suburb of north London, where she has recently settled, and where she finds an echo for her sense of rootlessness in the local graveyard: “No place owns me, and I like staying free, staying lost”, she writes. Yet she also regrets not knowing where the bones of her ancestors are interred and fears what would happen if the displacement became widespread: “Cities need their graveyards”, she writes, as places of memorial, and “green spaces of refuge”. Subsequent chapters take her back to other places she has lived: in Crosby, a suburb of Liverpool, where she began married life, she explores a recusant graveyard; in Oxford, where she worked as a teacher, she tells the history of the village of St Ebbes, which was obliterated to make way for the Blackbird Leys estate, through the story of two children whose bodies were sold for medical research; and in Canterbury, where she was a student, she retells the legend of Agnes Gibbs, a “court dwarf” known as the Fairy Queen, who became a celebrity in her short life.

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She doesn’t say much about what took her to any of these places, or what happened to her when she was there; but the memories she does supply are so vivid that they make the places, and the stories they contain, seem very real. The method yields the greatest results when she returns to the Midlands village where she grew up. She doesn’t even name it for several pages, yet she still conveys a rich sense of it as one of those “essential and immutable” childhood places. She also retells the story of a drowning that had preoccupied her since she was a child, and through patient but remorseless digging establishes that the accepted version was wrong. It is a remarkable story in itself, and it also deepens the nature of Sprackland’s inquiry, by revealing that it is not only memory that is fallible: sometimes, the “hard facts” engraved on headstones are wrong, undermining her faith that “the small scrap of detail on a grave-stone can make it possible to retrieve the individual”.

She also re-examines her desire to find a family grave, which she recorded in the first chapter. She goes in search of her mother’s paternal grandmother, Ethelind, and is disappointed to discover that she was buried in a common plot in Manor Park with seven other people, without a headstone. Yet a story that has passed into family legend shows how life continues, even when it is not memorialized. Twelve years after Ethelind’s death, her second son came to London and went to a house near the cemetery to look for lodgings. “The door was opened by a young woman called Elsie. She had eyes the same colour as mine ... It was not the past that mattered now, but the moment on the doorstep: the moment when he and my not-yet-grandmother saw one another for the first time, and the future began again.”

Chris McCabe has a comparable sense of the significance of graveyards, though he does not tease out the textures of his own life through the stories of their inhabitants in the same way as Sprackland. He has a different goal: he wants to find a great lost poet buried in one of the so-called “Magnificent Seven” - London’s Victorian graveyards - and he is working his way through them, one by one, driven by his faith in the redemptive magic of poetry. His search began with *In the Catacombs: A summer among the dead poets of West Norwood* and continued with *Cenotaph South: Mapping the lost poets of Nunhead Cemetery*. In the third instalment, *The East Edge: Nightwalks with the dead poets of Tower Hamlets*, he reaches Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park. Looking back at Nunhead, he says he was “so he lost inside [it] that only writing *Cenotaph South* could get me out”, though in fact, he spent two years walking around the cemetery, mapping out the woods, pubs, colleges and houses of south-east London’s dead poets. He tried to locate the tree in Peckham Rye where William Blake saw an angel, sought out the ghost of Barry MacSweeney, the “greatest poet of the late twentieth century”, at Dulwich College, and considered B. S. Johnson as a poet through his involvement in the Dulwich Group.

The East Edge is comparatively contained: McCabe only steps outside the gates of the cemetery through a series of intriguing digressions called “The Disembodied Essay”, which are attributed to a character called William - the name of many of the poets he is tracking down. Tower Hamlets proves less fertile territory than Nunhead, which McCabe called “the richest landscape of poetic activity in London”: there is “scant evidence for buried poets”, and he isn’t even certain that some of the people whose graves he is hunting are poets at all. Yet he still discovers some great characters, such as William Onions, a notorious drunkard and petty criminal, who began writing poems to perform at his trials. The newspapers reprinted them, and he became “the Pam Ayres of his day”. He is not McCabe’s great poet, but he earns a place in the canon of “eccentric, outsider poets” McCabes has discovered in the Magnificent Seven. More importantly, perhaps, his story confirms McCabe’s belief that poetry can “govern the direction of a life with a force stronger than fate”. ■