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A New Urban Modernity? George Bernard Shaw's Written Recollection of His Mother's Cremation.

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Abstract

In a letter, written on Saturday, February 22, 1913, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw described to his actress friend Stella Campbell the eventful day of his mother's funeral and cremation at Golders Green Crematorium in London. From Shaw's recollection, two intertwined aspects of his experience emerge. One is internal—intellectual and emotional—and the other is external, informed by the environment in which this funerary experience took place. By retracing Shaw's steps, this article questions the extent to which his recollections of the spatial qualities of the crematorium, London's emerging metro system, and the newly planned suburb were signs of a new urban experience. I discuss the changing space of the city in the early twentieth century by drawing on urban history, death culture, and architecture. The intention is to highlight how these elements—transport, crematorium, and suburb—all embodied the notions of order and efficiency, which promised a new idea of urban living in early twentieth-century London.

Shaw's Letter to Stella Campbell, Saturday, February 22, 1913, Full Text

> Why does a funeral always sharpen one's sense of humour and rouse one's spirits? This one was a complete success. No burial horrors. No mourners in black, snivelling and wallowing in induced grief. Nobody knew except myself, Barker and the undertaker. Since I could not have a splendid procession with lovely colours and flashing life and

triumphant music, it was best with us three. I particularly mention the undertaker because the humour of the occasion began with him. I must rewrite the burial service; for there are things in it that are deader than anyone it has ever been read over, but I had it read not only because the person must live by his fees, but because with all its drawbacks it is the most beautiful thing that can be read as yet. And the person did not gabble and hurry in the horrible manner common on such occasions. With Barker and myself for his congregation (and Mamma) he did it with his utmost feeling and sincerity. We could have made him perfect technically in two rehearsals, but he was excellent as it was, and I shook his hand with unaffected gratitude in my best manner.

I went down in the tube to Golders Green with Barker, and walked to the crematorium; and there came also the undertaker presently with his hearse, which had walked (the horse did) conscientiously at a funeral pace through the cold; though my mother would have preferred an invigorating trot. The undertaker approached me in the character of a man shattered with grief; and I, hard as nails and in loyally high spirits (rejoicing irrepressibly in my mother's memory), tried to convey to him that this professional chicanery, as I took it to be, was quite unnecessary. And lo! it wasn't professional chicanery at all. He had done all sorts of work for her for years and was actually and really in a state about losing her, not merely as a customer, but as a person he liked and was accustomed to. And the coffin was covered with violet cloth—no black.

At the passage "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," there was a little alteration of the words to suit the process. A door opened in the wall; and the violet coffin mysteriously passed out through it and vanished as it closed. People think that door is the door of the furnace; but it isn't. I went behind the scenes at the end of the service and saw the real thing. People are afraid to see it; but it is wonderful. I found there the violet coffin opposite another door, a real unmistakable furnace door. When it lifted there was a plain little chamber of cement and firebrick. No heat. No noise. No roaring draught. No flame. No fuel. It looked cool, clean, sunny, though no sun could get there. You would have walked in or

put your hand in without misgiving. Then the violet coffin moved again and went in, feet first. And behold! The feet burst miraculously into streaming ribbons of garnet-coloured lovely flame, smokeless and eager, like pentecostal tongues, and as the whole coffin passed in it sprang into flame all over; and my mother became that beautiful fire. The door fell; and they said that if we wanted to see it all through, we should come back in an hour and a half. I remembered the wasted little figure with the wonderful face and said "Too long" to myself, but we went off and looked at the Hampstead Garden Suburb (in which I have shares), and telephoned messages to the theatre, and bought books, and enjoyed ourselves generally.

The end was wildly funny: she would have enjoyed it enormously. When we returned we looked down through an opening in the floor to a lower floor close below. There we saw a roomy kitchen, with a big cement table and two cooks busy at it. They had little tongs in their hands, and they were deftly and busily picking nails and scraps of coffin handles out of Mamma's dainty little heap of ashes and samples of bone. Mamma herself being at that moment leaning over beside me, shaking with laughter. Then they swept her up into a sieve, and shook her out; so that there was a heap of dust and a heap of calcined bone scraps. And Mamma said in my ear, "Which of the two heaps is me, I wonder!"

And that merry episode was the end, except for making dust of the bone scraps and scattering them on a flower bed.

O grave, where is thy victory?

(Dent 1952, 72, 74)

Introduction

On the evening of Saturday, February 22, 1913, George Bernard Shaw wrote to his friend Stella Campbell[1] a recount of his mother's funeral and cremation, which had taken place earlier that day at Golders Green Crematorium in North London. Shaw's letter is a rare written recollection of cremation by a writer and public figure. In it, precise descriptions of the funeral service and cremation processes conjure powerful visual images that are both evocative and emotionally loaded. Alongside this, Shaw also captured the spatial transformation taking place in London at the time: the metro transport network, the capital's first crematorium, and a newly planned suburb. The aim of this article is to analyse two intertwined aspects emerging from Shaw's letter. One is his internal journey, emotional and intellectual. The other is his physical—or spatial—journey across the city to the suburbs, its buildings, and spaces. The objective is to learn, through Shaw's account, how the built environment, emerging in the suburbs of London, integrated death in the urban life of the city, in a new and unprecedented way.

The playwright captured on paper the intensive dynamism of his day, which was punctuated by movement. Shaw travelled from home to the crematorium in Golders Green by public transport, entered the public-facing chapel and the hidden cremation furnace area, visited the Hampstead Garden Suburb, then, later on, proceeded to Oxford by motorcar. This dynamic movement between locations was made possible by mechanical innovations (metro transport system and motorcars) that emerged at the time, broadening the urban experience beyond the local sphere. The newly established Underground Electric Railway Company of London was starting to connect outer suburbs to the city centre. Golders Green station was opened in 1907 and was part of the Charing Cross, Euston, and Hampstead Railway also known as the Hampstead Tube. Golders Green Crematorium was a relatively new building, as it was opened in 1902. The mechanical processes adopted for the cremation of human remains made it efficient and precise, faster, and hygienically cleaner than the traditional earth burial. The

[1] The passionate yet platonic friendship of the two, dating back to 1912, is documented by an extensive exchange of letters (Dent 1952).

new, neighbouring Hampstead Garden Suburb started to get implemented in 1906 and was still in construction in 1913.

Shaw's mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw (née Gurly) was 83 when she died in February 1913. Shaw was 57 at the time. He lived with her in Fitzroy Square (Fitzrovia, London) until 1898, when Shaw married Irish political activist, fellow Fabian and co-founder of the London School of Economics (LSE) Charlotte Frances Payne-Townshend, and moved to 10 Adelphi Terrace (Gibb 1990, 428; Dent 1952, 72). About his relationship with his mother Shaw once said: "We lived together until I was 42 years old, absolutely without the smallest friction of any kind, yet when her death set me to thinking curiously about our relations, I realised that I knew very little about her" (Dent 1952, 72). At the time of his mother's death, Shaw was already a prolific writer and theatre reviewer, and throughout his life corresponded with friends and acquaintances. He is often described as a progressive thinker and supporter of social change aimed at eradicating inequality between classes and in favour of women's emancipation. He was an active member of the Fabian Society and a strong advocate of cremation. It is known that Shaw was also a proto-environmentalist and, in his writing and speeches, he advocated for green spaces in cities and public health connected with the air quality in urban areas (Dukore 2014).

According to his biographer Hesketh Pearson (2001, 338), Shaw had an innate passion for machines and knowing how things were made. Photography and image-making were one of his strongest passions. He kept photographic records of friends and locations he visited, as well as more experimental photographic studies that provide insight into his creative life and influences. With the development and availability of portable cameras, Shaw publicly promoted the medium and actively supported and influenced Modernist photography in the early twentieth century (Kearney 2010, 87–88). Shaw's image-making abilities complemented his writing skills, as the reader can experience in the letter to Campbell.

Shaw's life, work, and correspondence have been extensively studied and interpreted (Pearson 2001; Holroyd 1998; Laurence 1985), as has the history of

cremation (among others: Jupp 2006; Grainger 2005; Davies 1995) and Golders Green Crematorium (Grainger 2005). The Hampstead Garden Suburb and the history and the London Underground transport system have also been previously researched and studied independently mostly from the perspective of urban history (e.g. Mehalakes 2015; Kuster 2020; Bownes and Green 2008). This article, however, draws connections between all of them, as they cut across Shaw's experience of his mother's funeral and cremation. In addition to Shaw's letter, I include research and theoretical work by his contemporaries, who were also experiencing and writing about the changes London was undergoing at the time (Dennis 2008; Simmel 2006; Gorer 1965). I complement these sources with critical work that investigates the formation of space (Lefebvre 2009).

Shaw's letter documents the inner questions that he was faced with, as he visually and emotionally experienced the stages and processes of his mother's funeral and cremation. Shaw's tone and writing style are ambiguous and restless. He switched constantly between the objective and the subjective, and between the public and the private sphere. In some passages he adopted a more rational, journalistic voice, as if he was reviewing the events for a newspaper or magazine. In other passages, he appeared to be more reflective, introverted, and poetic. One is never quite sure which one is the "real" Shaw, and wonders whether he might have written the letter for himself, as a way to make sense of his own experience and to psychologically process his eventful day.

The emotional experience

Old and New

> Why does a funeral always sharpen one's sense of humour and rouse one's spirits? This one was a complete success. No burial horrors. No mourners in black, snivelling and wallowing in induced grief. Nobody knew except myself, Barker and the undertaker. (Dent 1952, 72)

The first few lines of Shaw's letter offer a sense of his contradictory feelings about what would have made his mother's funeral a perfect one, as well as the tension of not being able to change existing traditions that he wished to refuse. Shaw declared the funeral "a

complete success," as, in his view, it was free from the "horrors" of earth burial practices and the insincere "induced grief" of mourners in black, as "nobody knew" about the funeral. Shaw agreed to a Church of England service for his mother's funeral, even though they were both nonreligious (Dent 1952, 72). According to Pearson, one of the reasons that brought Shaw to select a religious funeral service was his wish to test its effect on himself (Pearson 2001, 337). He was deeply touched by the service. He wrote that "it is the most beautiful thing that can be read as yet." However, being a man of the theatre, he could not resist making suggestions for improving the clergyman's delivery of the actual service, so as to make the funeral technically perfect. One may question whether Shaw included this passage to make the events more visually engaging for Campbell, or to make an impression on her with his rhetoric.

Mourning practices in the early twentieth century were still entrenched in Victorian funerary traditions, which were mainly structured around earth burial practices. These were often a public display of private grief in the form of a funeral cortege, and later, at the cemetery, a display of privilege and social status, defined by elaborate gravestones or monuments. With the introduction of cremation, funerals were adapted to suit its processes. In the case of Shaw's mother, the horse-drawn hearse that transported her coffin was met by Shaw directly at Golders Green Crematorium, without any public cortege. This made the event private even if, by contrast, Shaw lamented not being able to have a "splendid procession with lovely colours" to contrast the Victorian traditions of using black for mourning.

Shaw was not alone in desiring change from Victorian societal conventions around mourning practices by means of embracing cremation. In the first decade of the twentieth century cremation was still associated with particular groups in society, such as non-religious free-thinkers, intellectuals and radicals (Holmes 1896, 270). An article titled "The Progress of Cremation," published in *The British Medical Journal* on February 25, 1911, stated: "Cremation is still almost entirely confined to the well-to-do classes, and the fact that interest in the movement is surely spreading among them is shown by the

number of inquiries on the subject addressed to the Cremation Society of England, and by the intellectual distinction or social position of the persons cremated" (448).

The article continued by making a roll-call of famous and great people,[2] from artists to writers and clergymen, who had been cremated since the crematorium at Woking first opened in 1895 and later Golders Green Crematorium in 1903. Despite the number of famous people that chose cremation in the early twentieth century, Shaw's letter is perhaps the only document that allows us to get an insight into the actual emotional experience of a funeral service and cremation at the time. Furthermore, through his writing we also get a sense of how the experience of his mother's funeral activated in Shaw an inner tension between liberal thinking and conservative forces.

Behind the Scenes

Shaw followed the coffin of his mother from the chapel to the cremation chamber: "I went behind the scenes at the end of the service and saw the real thing. People are afraid to see it, but it is wonderful" (Dent 1952, 72). Shaw was confronted with the technical processes of cremation, he captured with mesmerising intensity his emotional journey, and the physical transformation of his mother's corpse into fire. When Shaw entered the committal room he saw the coffin of his mother placed near "a real unmistakable furnace door" (Dent 1952, 72). Shaw also explained that people mistakenly think that the committal door in the funerary chapel is the door to the furnace. Unlike the chapel space, the committal room had a functional aesthetic that was not regulated by rituals but by technical processes, and, therefore, its aesthetics were rather functional and utilitarian. However, Shaw's description of the furnace is not technical but sensorial. In a passage he explained that there was: "No heat. No noise. No roaring draught. No flame. No fuel. It looked cool, clean, sunny, though no sun could get there" (Dent 1952, 72). Shaw could hardly believe that the clean and cool-looking space of the furnace was where the cremation of his mother was about to take place. The concealed heating system, the

[2] Among others: philosopher Herbert Spencer, author and historian Leslie Stephen (father of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf), the founder of the Cremation Society Henry Thompson, physician and author Benjamin Ward Richardson, and Scottish poet and writer George MacDonald.

absence of flames and the glow of the heat, the efficiency and hygienic neatness were the opposite of the earth burial horrors despised by Shaw. Although the precise technology that controlled the furnace was not visible, its absence defined the experience of the furnace by making it visually "pure". The glowing and clean space of the furnace was "plain," non-decorated, functional and simple. Instead of the technology, it was the actual materials—cement and firebrick—that defined the aesthetics of the experience. Only in the moment the coffin was inserted in the furnace the fire revealed itself to Shaw's sight, "...and my mother became that beautiful fire" (Dent 1952, 74). Shaw's words marked the climax of his emotional experience and captured the transformation of his mother's corpse into fire, into something elemental and mystical, which had a sensorial intensity richer than the funeral service.

With Shaw's passion for technological processes, as well as laboratories and microscopes (Pearson 2001, 338), we may presume that he had wanted to see with his own eyes the actual cremation process. His mother's cremation was the first one he witnessed in person. The experience had a cathartic effect on the playwright and convinced him about the efficiency of the method. Indeed, it had such a deep impact on Shaw that he financially supported the establishment of new crematoria (Pearson 2001, 337–38). Shaw's support of cremation started while working on the Health Committee of the Borough Council of St. Pancras. In that role, he often visited hospitals, workhouses, and other institutions (Holroyd 1998, 235), and was, therefore, used to seeing and inspecting the behind-the-scenes workings.

Shaw's praise of the cremation process extended beyond his letter to Campbell, and to some extent also influenced his Fabian Society circle of friends, including H. G. Wells and Beatrice Webb, among others. For example, in 1927, at the funeral service of Catherine Wells at Golders Green Crematorium, Shaw encouraged his friend H.G. Wells to witness his wife's cremation. In a passage of his introduction to *The Book of Catherine Wells* (1928) Wells recalls:

> I should have made no attempt to follow the coffin had not Bernard Shaw who was standing next to me said: "Take the boys and go behind.

> It's beautiful." When I seemed to hesitate he whispered: "I saw my mother burnt there. You'll be glad if you go." That was a wise counsel and I am very grateful for it. I beckoned to my two sons and we went together to the furnace room. (Wells 2004, 42–43.)

Wells and Shaw both associated cremation with cleanliness, particularly when describing the spatial quality of the committal room, where the furnace is located. Wells' mention of cleanliness could be interpreted as environmental, particularly in the following passage:

> I have always found the return from burial a disagreeable experience, because of the pursuing thoughts of that poor body left behind boxed up in the cold wet ground and waiting for the coming of the twilight. But Jane, I felt, had gone clean out of life and left nothing to moulder and defile the world. So she would have had it. It was good to think she had gone as a spirit should go.
> [...]
> Then in a moment or so a fringe of tongues of flames began to dance along its further edges and spread very rapidly. Then in another second, the whole coffin was pouring out white fire. The doors of the furnace closed slowly upon that incandescence. It was indeed very beautiful. I wished she could have known of those quivering bright first flames, so clear they were and so like eager yet kindly living things. (Wells 2004, 42–43.)

Wells seems to suggest that cremation was the most appropriate way of disposing of his wife's remains and the one that best suited her character. In the descriptions of his experience of witnessing the moment his wife's coffin was pushed into the furnace he is poetic without being romantic.

Through his long life, Shaw experienced the cremation of friends and family members including his own sister, Lucinda Frances (in 1920) and also his wife Charlotte in 1943. These were very different experiences from the cremation of his mother. The cremation of Shaw's sister was not an intimate event: he found himself among a congregation of people he did not know and to whom he delivered an elegy. He also recalled that due to the shortage of coal, the glow of the furnace was feeble, and resembled the white light of a wax candle (Pearson 2001, 338). When in 1943 his wife

Charlotte died he again wanted to view the cremation process as he had for his mother and sister. However, he reported with disappointment: "But cremation is not what it was," and further lamented that "you can't see the body burned: it is a very unsatisfactory ceremony these days" (Pearson 2001, 490). Shaw and Wells associated a corpse in a coffin being consumed by flames with beauty. In both cases, their experiences proved positive and uplifting. Yet, depending on the psychological circumstances of the individual witnessing the scene, the sight of a coffin being consumed by flames could be shocking and traumatic, or perceived as a brutal act.[3]

Two Heaps of Ashes

> Then they swept her up into a sieve, and shook her out; so that there was a heap of dust and a heap of calcined bone scraps. (Dent 1952, 74)

For Shaw, seeing the crematorium workers handling the ashes of his mother was not as sublime as gazing at the coffin becoming fire in the cremation furnace. He was not physically present in the space where the ashes were prepared, but he was looking down into an opening in the floor from above. It feels as if Shaw was observing something he was not supposed to see, something that was not suitable, perhaps too unsettling for mourners to see. There is something almost photographic in the way Shaw described to Campbell the moment in which his mother's ashes were separated from the calcined remains and the "nails and scraps of coffin handle" were taken out. The crematorium workers were so busy with their task that they did not realise that they were being watched. The focus of the action is the table in a "roomy kitchen." Instantly, the otherwise sanitised spaces of the cremation room became associated with the domestic settings of a kitchen. The comforting analogies to the familiar and the lighter tone used by Shaw may be part of a coping strategy to deal with the unsettling sight of his mother's transformed corpse.

[3] In sharp contrast to Shaw's beautiful experiences, it is important to remember that in the year Charlotte Shaw died, mass killing and cremation of European Jews across German-occupied Europe were taking place.

In witnessing all aspects of the process, Shaw realised that cremation was not fully mechanised. The final stages, dedicated to the preparation of the cremated ashes, were carried out manually by the crematorium workers. In a passage Shaw mentioned that the last mechanised part of the cremation consisted in "making dust of the bone scraps" (Dent 1952, 74), by using a machine called the cremulator, which grinded the larger pieces of calcined bones into dust. Shaw stated that it was "wildly funny" to watch over the preparation of his mother's ashes. It may be that the situation triggered his sense of humour and comedic anti-climax. Perhaps one can also interpret Shaw's reaction as disenchantment, as by then all the mysteries of cremation had been revealed to him.

Beyond his personal and emotional experience, Shaw's written recollections make us reflect on the absence of visibility and, indeed, the absence of rituals (either religious or secular) in Western cremation practices. This is in contrast to cremation practices in Eastern countries such as Japan, China, and India, where the family and other mourners are present and actively involved in the process. There, mourners' participation is structured around specific rituals and traditions connected to the different stages of the cremation process, including the preparation of the ashes. Instead, cremation in the Western context was adopted mostly as a rational solution (Davies 1990, 7). It was designed to deal with the hygienically safe disposal of human remains in large cities, in a way that would not affect the public health of city dwellers as earth burial did in the nineteenth century (Jalland 1999, 249). By contrast, rural communities did not have to address the sanitary issues of overcrowding and shortage of burial space and thus retained stronger connections with death through earth burial practices (Jupp 1993, 169–173).

The spatial experience

The Journey

> I went down in the tube to Golders Green with Barker, and walked to the crematorium. (Dent 1952, 72)

At the time of his mother's funeral, Shaw was living in central London, near the Strand and Covent Garden. This was a convenient location for him as most of London's theatres

were (and still are) located in the surroundings. The closest Underground station to Shaw's house was Charing Cross, so most likely the playwright travelled from there to the crematorium. Golders Green station opened in 1907 and was, at the time, the northern terminus of the Charing Cross, Euston and Hampstead Railway (CCE&HR). The coming of the Underground to that part of London contributed to the development of the suburbs and the shaping of the capital's metropolitan areas (see Image 1). The transport infrastructure also helped to promote new housing developments in the nearby areas, including the newly planned Hampstead Garden Suburb (Mehalakes 2015, 29).

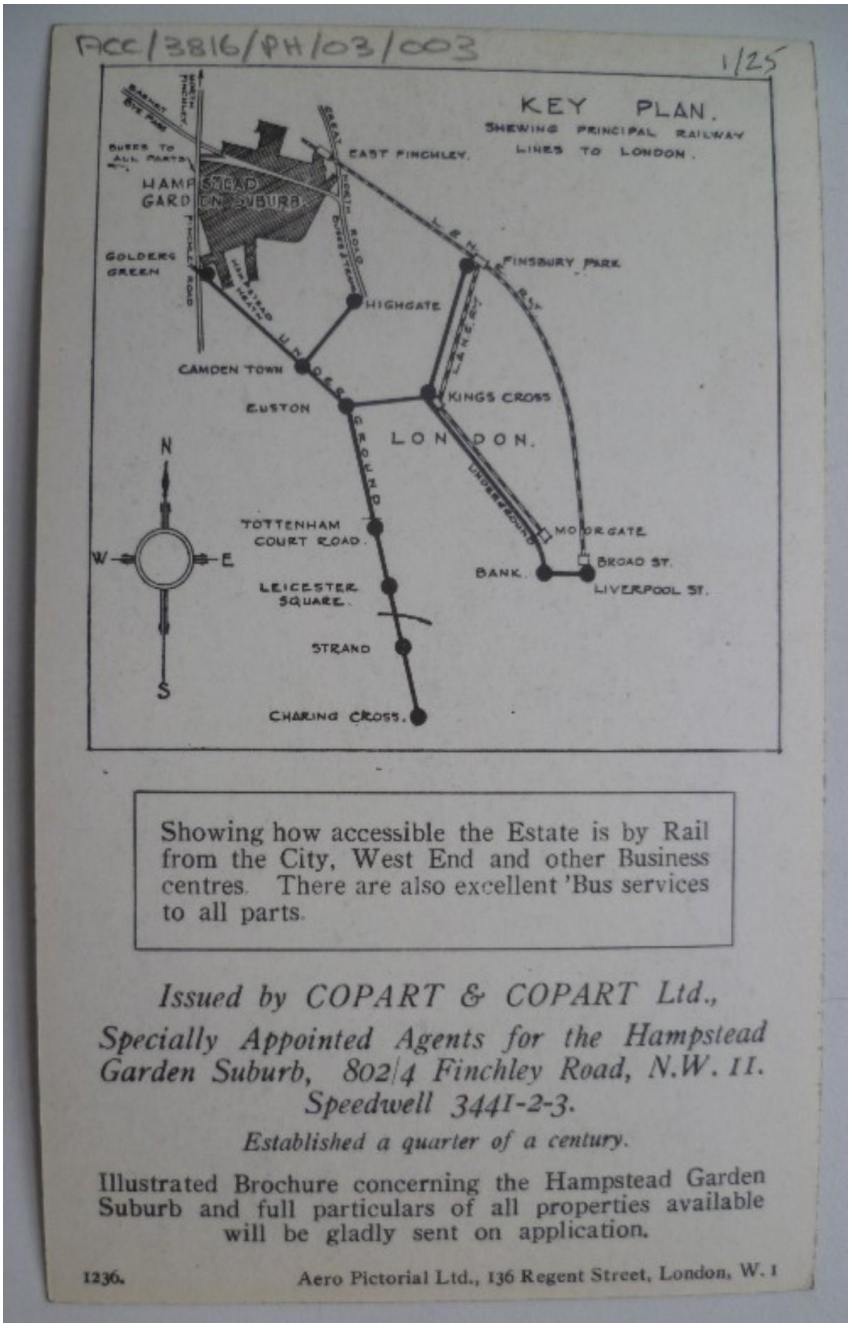

Image 1. Postcard: Transport links between Hampstead Garden Suburb and London. Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, 1914.

Shaw's journey by public transport from the city to the suburb is a testimony of the changes that were taking place at the time in terms of access to the city and the countryside. The expansion of the transport network into the semi-rural areas surrounding London provided an opportunity for urban dwellers to experience the countryside with its nature, open spaces, and fresh air. The walk

Shaw and Granville-Barker took from Golders Green's station to the crematorium must have felt like a stroll in the countryside, featuring views towards Hampstead Heath.

In the early twentieth century, the ideal of Arcadian pastoral harmony was actively promoted by the Underground Electric Railways Company of London Limited (UERL) through a programme of illustrated posters. The UERL commissioned artists and illustrators to stimulate the imagination of travellers, just like railway and cruise (and later air) travel posters promoted distant destinations (Mehalakes 2015, 28). The opening of new Underground stations particularly in northern areas of London, such as Golders Green, was already promising new prospects for the middle-classes that wished to escape the overcrowded urban city centre. Indeed, the expansion of the Underground lines helped to relieve London of the overcrowding and congestion that restricted the flow of movement on the streets of the capital (Hwang 2013, 75). The Underground Electric Railways Company of London poster programme promoted new suburban developments by shifting cultural assumptions about nature and by promoting new green spaces planned following modernist principles and aesthetics (Kuster 2020). Moreover, the posters suggested that the Underground provided fast and reliable connectivity and accessibility to both rural areas and the urban city centre. Londoners could benefit from both locations and live in the idyllic suburbs, but still be able to work in the city and access its amenities and entertainments.

Image 2. Poster: Golders Green. TfL - London Transport Museum Collection, 1908.

One of the early posters produced as part of the London Transport visual project was for Golders Green, in 1908 (see Image 2), which depicted an idealised version of the new developments taking place in the northern suburb. The posters made the areas desirable as they promised new homes, green spaces, and a healthier lifestyle. To make the poster even more evocative, it featured words by eighteenth-century poet William Cowper comparing the suburb to a sanctuary (Bownes and Green 2008). Cowper's poem served to link Golders Green to the romantic principles of eighteenth-century Arcadia, popular among English aristocracy at the time (Mehalakes 2015, 28). The arrival of fast public transport to Golders Green made the crematorium more accessible to Londoners. However, it is worth remembering that even when early Victorian suburban cemeteries were established on the outskirts of London in the 1830s, connectivity was considered a priority in order to make sure that the cemetery would be accessible to the public. This was the case of Kensal Green and Highgate cemeteries, connected via omnibus to the city centre. By the mid-1850s, Brookwood Cemetery was also connected to the city by a private railway station. Golders Green Crematorium was, however, the first to be connected to the city centre by a fast public transport system.

Metaphorically, the underground transport system made not only the space of the city more accessible, but also more democratic by allowing fluidity across the city in terms of geographical mobility but also across the class system in society (Hwang 2013, 72-3). The underground railway was a milestone of progress not only from an engineering and mechanical point of view but also because, by connecting the city to the suburbs, it opened to city dwellers new horizons of possibilities, aspirations and explorations beyond the urban space of the city. Victorian mechanised technologies and infrastructures such as the urban transport system were getting upgraded and expanded; when it started to be powered by electricity in 1902, it became technically more advanced than the railway. New and cleaner electricity was gradually adopted for lighting the streets, which contributed to further transform the experience of the urban space of the city. Although electricity was cleaner, it did not have any visible features of steam-powered engines.

Golders Green Crematorium

Shaw's descriptions of Golders Green Crematorium are solely related to its interior spaces, where the funeral and cremation took place. However, he briefly mentioned that he walked from the station to the crematorium. From a period postcard stamped March 5, 1912, and featuring Golders Green Crematorium entrance on Hoop Lane, we can get a sense of how the crematorium looked like at the time. One can clearly see in the distance the houses which are part of the planned Hampstead Garden Suburb and which overlook the crematorium's Garden of Remembrance. The postcard sender marked a spot on the postcard to show the location of their house: "our house is about where the x is" (see Image 3).

Image 3. Postcard: Golders Green Crematorium. Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, 1912.

As seen in the postcard above, there is a visual link between Golders Green Crematorium and Hampstead Garden Suburb. In fact, the site of the crematorium, on Hoop Lane, is close to Meadway Gate, one of the main entrances to the Suburb. The proximity between the station, the crematorium, and the newly planned suburb can be seen in the aerial photograph below.

Image 4 - Aerial photograph: Hampstead Garden Suburb. Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, *n.d.*

Indeed, proposing to reconfigure the disposal of human remains through man-made mechanised processes was challenging. The aesthetics of cremation needed to be configured in such a way that the technology was either hidden away or camouflaged. Therefore, many considerations informed the overall look of the crematorium, as well as the design of its interiors. This included the ante-chamber (or committal room) that Shaw mentions, which is the space between the chapel and the furnace room. In a book commissioned by the Cremation Society in 1931, Jones and Noble explain that:

> The ante-chamber should be designed, therefore, in keeping with the Chapel itself. All the appearances of the blazing furnace fire—the heavy iron door, the counterweights, and the necessary utilitarian appliances—should be removed or hidden so that those who are compelled to witness the committal probably for the first time, are not struck with horror and fear. All should be made peaceful and quiet. (Jones and Noble 1931, 10.)

Historical Archaeologist Lindsay Udall argues that the invisibility of the operations connected with the daily life of the cemetery was carefully thought through to uphold "the theatre of the funeral and the visitation of the graveside without interruptions of the realities entailed in the process" (Udall 2019, 257–258). Udall's interpretation is specifically related to earth burials taking place at Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol. However, her idea is also pertinent to the context of a crematorium, where there is a distinct separation between the spaces dedicated to rituals and processes. Access to those areas is regulated in different ways and the congregation is not able to move freely from one to the other. From a reader's perspective, Shaw's experience of the funeral and cremation of his mother offers a unique opportunity to understand those spatial qualities of the crematorium, as well as the restrictions and regulations that orchestrated the cremation rituals and its processes.

The implementation of a radical innovation such as cremation had implications not only on a socio-cultural level, but also in the actual physical manifestations of crematoria in the vicinity of cities. For Grainger, crematoria embodied the:

> expression of a movement that sought to provide a radical alternative to burial [...]. Cremation, therefore, called for a new building type, moreover one for which there was no architectural precedent. In that sense, the crematorium was analogous to the early-Victorian railway station. (Grainger 2005, 16).

Grainger argues that architecture had an important role to play as a mediator between the supporters and the sceptics of cremation. Architectural style came particularly into play during the commissioning process for Golders Green Crematorium, whereby the Cremation Society appointed the architecture practice George & Yeates to the task. According to Grainger:

> The choice of style was crucial. The London Cremation Company realised from the outset that a confident note had to be struck, especially after the criticism of Woking in 1888. Visitors would wish to take the leave of their loved ones in appropriate surroundings and the architectural style was paramount in creating the ambiance. While

> committed supporters of cremation looked for a dignified, but glorious departure, sceptics looked for reassurance. A delicate balance had to be struck. George & Yeates elected to adopt the Romanesque of twelfth-century Lombardy, where master masons had created a style which spread across north and central Italy. (Grainger 2005, 82).

With the Golders Green Crematorium example in mind, though, it seems evident that the selection of the architecture style underpinned the Cremation Society's desire to make cremation a commercial success before anything else. The project laid the foundation to make cremation accepted and eventually to become culturally normalised. The careful consideration was intended to strike a chord with the public at large and not only with a small social group or elite. The desire was not to keep cremation as a niche but rather to make it the main way of disposing of human remains in the years to come and throughout the twentieth century. Despite the complexities related to the technological aspects of cremation, Golders Green Crematorium was a success for the Cremation Society. Between its opening in 1902 and 1913, 3,556 cremations were carried out at Golders Green Crematorium—almost the same amount of cremations Woking had conducted since its opening in 1885. The figures for 1913 alone were 591, which made it by far the busiest of the 13 crematoria existing in England and Scotland at the time, followed respectively by Manchester with 149 and Woking with 125 cremations (The Progress Of Cremation 1913, 1279).

Hampstead Garden Suburb

> [...] we went off and looked at the Hampstead Garden Suburb (in which I have shares), and telephoned messages to the theatre, and bought books, and enjoyed ourselves generally. (Dent 1952, 74)

The Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust was initiated by Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta (philanthropists, social reformers, and members of the Fabian Society) in order to save Hampstead Heath from being exploited by commercial building speculators. Henrietta Barnett, in particular, had concerns about the provision of housing for the working classes, as well as a strong awareness of broader environmental

questions associated with the preservation of open spaces.[4] The Barnetts actively promoted and disseminated progressive urban planning ideas through the programme of lectures they ran at Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, in which Shaw was also actively involved.[5] Hampstead Garden Suburb (see Image 5) was a pioneering experiment based on the theoretical principles of Ebenezer Howard's book *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1898). The British urban theorist identified a new model of urban development that would bridge and combine urban and rural. There had been smaller-scale proposals by other philanthropists in Victorian London that attempted to test ideas in the emerging suburbs of the city in the second part of the nineteenth century.[6] However, the Hampstead Garden Suburb did not fully align with Howard's Garden City principles of detachment and independence. Raymond Unwin, the original architect and planner appointed to the project, aimed to "demonstrate that Garden City layout principles were equally valid for the suburban milieu." (Miller and Gray 1992, 46).

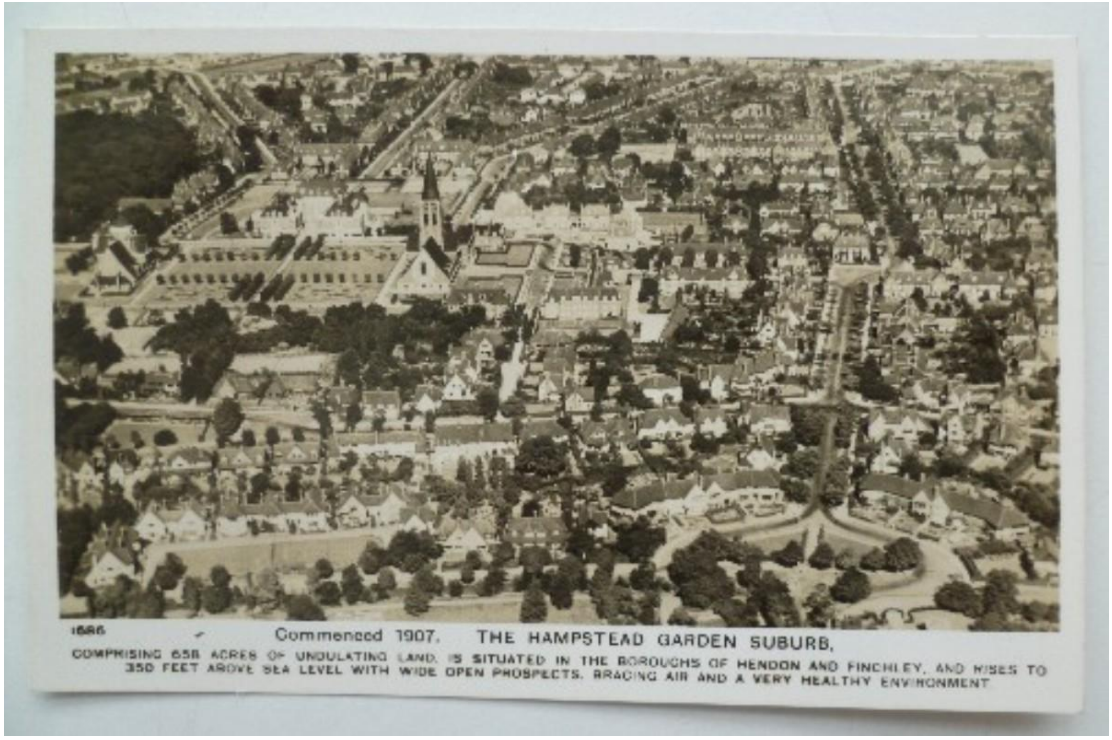

Image 5. Postcard: Aerial Photograph of Hampstead Garden Suburb. Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, *n.d.*

[4] This awareness emerged through her apprenticeship with Octavia Hill, one of the most influential Victorian women reformers that pioneered social housing in the second half of the nineteenth century (Miller 2002, 8).
[5] For example, in 1903 Shaw delivered a lecture as part of Toynbee Hall's 'Smoking Debates' entitled 'That the Working Classes are Useless and Dangerous and Ought to be Abolished' (Toynbee Hall Annual Report 1903, 24).
[6] Noteworthy examples include projects initiated by Octavia Hill (Southwark, Kensal Green), Sydney Waterlow (Highgate and various locations in East London) and the Artizans, Labourers & General Dwellings Company. The Artizans Company in the 1870s provided one of the largest numbers of new housing for the working classes living near the Kensal Green Cemetery and Kensal New Town, where laundries, small factories, and a large gas works plant were located (Amadei 2014, 96–100).

The novelty of Hampstead Suburb was how all the detailed aspects of its development were cohesively planned, from its architecture to the planting of trees and road layouts. Historically, London resisted any cohesive urban plans and, therefore, in the nineteenth century the growth of its metropolitan area was more organic and chaotic. Work on the Suburb's development started in 1906 and progressed in stages. However, the final results were far from the original ideals of providing a range of housing and street settings for people of all social classes, as the suburb instead proved to primarily attract the wealthy.[7]

The unprecedented growth of London through the nineteenth century urged a rethinking of its spatial arrangement and an upgrade of its infrastructures to accommodate these changes. The capital was the epicentre of cultural, intellectual, scientific, and technological life. However, along with material progress in the form of mechanical innovation, there was also social discontent and division. In his 1909 book *The Condition of England*, Charles Masterman denounced society for becoming more divided into rich and poor and for allowing material advances to supersede moral progress. He expressed his preoccupation for the complacent sense of security he perceived within society at a time when nations were gathering mechanised weapons of destruction for self-defence (Tuchman 1966, 382–83). It was in this tumultuous state of transition that the built environment of cities became a prominent stage upon which new modes of city life were redefining human relations, spatial arrangements, building typologies, transport, work environments, and public spaces. However, as Richard Dennis points out, "modernisation was not a straightforward replacement of the old for the new" but also involved a "revaluation of the old" as a counterpoint to the "truly modern" (Dennis 2008, 112).

[7] For example, the original philanthropic ideals that ignited the early development of the project were compromised by the economic uncertainties of the post-WWI period. The cohort of architects in the first phase included Edwin Lutyens, who contributed to the suburb with the design of the central square, which features both the church and institute by his design. The role of architectural consultant for the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust changed hands in 1915, when John Carrick Soutar took over from Raymond Unwin and kept Unwin's vision until his own death in 1951. Soutar contributed to the houses destined for the middle classes. These are the ones that give the suburb its identity in terms of street views and character in terms of materials and architectural features (Davidson 2015, 18).

The physical transformations that were taking place in London were affecting the psychology of urban dwellers. In his 1903 seminal essay "The Metropolis and The Mental Life," German sociologist Georg Simmel observed and contrasted the metropolis to the small town and rural life in order to understand the sensory foundations of psychic life. The experience of life in the metropolis in the early twentieth century was new and unprecedented and provided a powerful concoction of stimuli that influenced the psyche of urban dwellers. Simmel noted that, compared to individuals living in rural areas, city people developed a distinctive rationality and calculating character. This shift from emotional reactions to intellectualism was, in Simmel's view, "a way to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life" (Simmel 2006, 70). The combination of intellect, rationality, and money economy contributed to the formation of what he defined as the "calculating exactness of practical life" (Simmel 2006, 71–2). The technical precision of cremation processes suit the exactness of practical modern life that Simmel referred to in his essay. Cremation processes take place within a defined and controlled timeline, which is different from earth burial where the process is left in the hands of nature with less precise results.

Conclusions

Shaw's letter provides a rare and unusual written recollection of cremation by a writer and public figure. This record is a literary episode of social, anthropological and historical value. In Western cremation culture, witnessing the coffin being loaded into the cremation furnace—or seeing the remains being removed—is not common practice. Shaw's determination to experience the entirety of cremation processes provoked a series of emotional, intellectual and sensorial reactions that revealed his inner tensions in accepting cremation, as a new chapter in the history of death culture.

Through Shaw's letter, we see how the question of the dead is very much interlinked with the needs of the living. In his lucid and rational narrating voice, Shaw depicted in words a vivid sequence of images that punctuate his experience both of cremation processes and spaces (the journey by Underground, the crematorium, and a

visit to the suburbs). When examined in more detail, these images provide us with the opportunity to glance into Shaw's complex and multifaceted (objective, personal, rhetorical, rational, poetic) personality that we see emerging through his writing styles. His gaze had access to all spaces of the crematorium, from the public to the hidden. Whereas his attitude could be misunderstood as blasé or uncaring, his letter's rendering of the experience shows how deeply involved he was through his gaze and senses. Shaw superimposed his poetic narrative on to the rational functionality of the crematorium, which powerfully resonates with the complex questions of death. His description of what he saw has a vivid quality and, even with very few details, he captured the essence of space; as the actual cremation approaches, the description becomes even more minimal and precise and reaches its climax in the evocation of the cremation furnace. In a passage the playwright even imagined having a dialogue with his mother about her own ashes. The nature of the conversation bridged between the rational and the phenomenological, daydreaming and the supernatural.

Shaw's recollections are a testimony that change was indeed underway in early twenty-century London. The expansion of urban transport networks into the metropolitan areas, the crematorium, and the testing of some of the planning principles related to the Garden City Movement in the new suburban development at Golders Green,[8] give us a flavour of a new emerging connectivity between London's urban core and its suburbs. This condition was key to activate the development of London's metropolitan area and, by extension, redefined the experience of death and disposal in the context of the urban life of the city. Shaw's impressions also tell us that urban modernisation was increasingly facilitated by technology and mechanical processes that mediated life and death through order, precision and efficiency. Grasping the true nature and meanings of those innovative technologies was challenging, not only for Shaw, but more broadly for society.

[8] Hampstead Garden Suburb in 1914 was in the Borough of Hendon, Middlesex.

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