The *Great* Burial Ground at Chowringhee:
Reflections on the South Park Street Cemetery in Kolkata

Susan Hosking

> 'Death,' said Mark Staithes. 'It's the only thing we haven't succeeded in completely vulgarizing. Not from any lack of the desire to do so, of course. We're like dogs on an acropolis. Trotting round with inexhaustible bladders and only too anxious to lift a leg against every statue. And mostly we succeed. Art, religion, heroism, love– we've left our visiting-card on all of them. But death–death remains out of reach. We haven't been able to defile *that* statue. Not yet, at any rate. But progress is still progressing.'
>
> Aldous Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*

For most of my life I have avoided cemeteries. The first cemetery I visited with any sense of purpose was the South Park Street Cemetery in Kolkata. I had been invited to attend a conference in Kolkata and taken the opportunity to explore the city. Closer to the end of my life than its beginning, one of my intentions was to seek out long departed relatives, believing at the time that finding them interred in Indian soil would help me understand why the pull of India has been so strong for me. When my father died suddenly, at the age of fifty-two, his brother had sent my mother a copy of a family history that had been compiled 'from authentic sources' by my great-great-grandfather, William Albert Sheppard, in 1891. It was tediously titled *A Brief History of the Sheppard Family Formerly Seated at the Manors of Avening, Minchinhampton and Colesbourne in the County of Gloucestershire, England, With Pedigrees of the Elder and Junior Branches of these Ancient Families.* What caught my interest was the place of publication: Calcutta. William Albert Sheppard was a public accountant, employed by the East India Company. His father, George Albert, was a general trader and wine merchant in Calcutta, not such a good one, it seems, since he appears to have gone bankrupt in 1826, blaming those 'Gentlemen of the Indian Army, and ... a few on the Civil List' for failing to discharge their debts.[1]

The genealogical records for three generations of the Sheppard family who lived their lives or resided for short or long terms in Calcutta are incomplete and ridden with errors, but there were certainly members of the family who were buried in the South Park Street Cemetery. I imagined it would not be difficult to locate their graves and read whatever simple or quaint inscriptions might appear on their headstones.

The entrance to the South Park Street Cemetery is unmissable, though far from pretentious, befitting a Protestant ethic. Functional old iron gates span the roadway into the cemetery

---

[1] Shri Anil Chandra das Gupta (ed) *The Days of John Compan: Selections from Calcutta Gazette 1824-1832* (Calcutta: Government Printing, West Bengal, 1959) 180.

between two square pink pillars with grey-painted abaci and ovolos. A marble plaque on the left pillar declares that the cemetery opened in 1769 and closed in 1790, but in reality burials continued into the 1830s and for some time after that it was possible to inter deceased people in established family plots or in empty ground just inside the walls.

The South Park Street Cemetery is one of the oldest non-Church cemeteries in the world. In Calcutta, by the mid-eighteenth century, the old Christian burial grounds in the ruins of the first Fort William, established in 1665, were inadequate. Eight acres of relatively high ground in an uneven and swampy area were marked out for a new cemetery on what was then the southern outskirt of the town.

In the United Kingdom, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the use of cemeteries, rather than church-yards, became widespread.[2] The establishment of cemeteries in the United Kingdom followed the influential publication in 1842 (at his own expense) of Edwin Chadwick's graphic and groundbreaking report on '"the extent and operation of the evils" that contributed to the spread of disease in urban communities'[3] and the implementation in Britain of the Public Health Act of 1848, which secularised and municipalised[4] disposal of the dead.

It takes no stretch of the imagination to understand why a municipal cemetery for Christians was built so early in Calcutta. By the middle of the eighteenth century the overall population of the city (British and Indian residents, sailors, merchants, traders, workers brought in for industries with trading partners, workers servicing the British, British army and naval men, women seeking husbands, men and women who thought of themselves as answering the call of Empire) had risen rapidly. According to C.A. Bayley, in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, the overall population in Calcutta grew from an estimated 120,000 inhabitants in 1720, to 200,000 in 1780 and 350,000 in 1820.[5]

Those who believed in the civilizing influence of the British Empire would have been well aware of 'improvements' that might be implemented in the growing city of Calcutta. J.G. Farrell creates such a character in his Booker Prize-winning historical novel, *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Mr Hopkins, the Collector of the fictional Krishnapur, is often seen in Calcutta:

> standing at the roadside in the shade of a tree, he would be standing there lost in thought (thinking, people chuckled, of a way to get a new civilization to advance with the railways into the Mofussil to soothe the natives) ...[6]

Hopkins embodies Victorian belief in progress. He had spent two years in England in the early 1850s, as an 'active member of numerous committees and societies'[7] dedicated to good works and the promulgation of civilizing ideas. But he had gone further than most, returning to India

---

[2] Julie Rugg, '"A few remarks on modern sepulture": Current trends and new directions in cemetery research,' *Mortality*, 3 (July 1998) 111.

[3] John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburg: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1971) 6

[4] P.C. Jupp, 'The Development of Cremation in England 1820-1990: A Sociological Account,' unpublished PhD thesis, U of London, 1993.

[5] C.A. Bayley, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) 68.

[6] J.G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (London: Flamingo, 1985) 35.

[7] Farrell 34.

2

'full of ideas about hygiene, crop rotation and drainage.'[8] Real-life individuals like Hopkins would have been aware, as much as a century earlier, of the importance of 'sanitary burial.'[9] The connection between overcrowded burial grounds and outbreaks of fever had been made in France and developed as 'an orthodoxy on graveyard "emantions"'[10] as early as the 1730s. The rapid expansion of towns and cities was inevitably accompanied by concerns about the increase in waste materials created by 'industry and individuals.'[11] Changes in thinking about methods of disposal of human bodies developed in this context. Although eighteenth century writers were 'often relatively optimistic about the potential for European bodies to adapt to the "Asiatic" climate…the sense of Calcutta as a dangerous place for Europeans…was ubiquitous.'[12] In 1767 the Calcutta Council directed that 'the present burial ground being situated in the middle of the town, has, we have reason to believe, contributed greatly to its being unhealthy, we therefore intend to remove it to a more distant and convenient spot.'[13]

Scientific and pseudo-scientific investigation in the eighteenth century suggested that the human corpse was a source of life-threatening contamination, as were animal corpses and decaying fish. Whether the spread of diseases was a result of miasma or foul odours, brought about by dispersion of particles of decomposing matter through the air, or whether infectious diseases were spread by direct contact (early germ theory) remained a matter for debate for some years to come. Nevertheless, town planners and municipal developers in Europe (Paris in the 1760s, for example)[14] proposed the removal of slaughterhouses, hospitals and burial grounds from the heart of the city, believing that such facilities 'engender[ed] infectious miasmas.'[15] In Christian countries and settlements outside Europe, the establishment of municipal cemeteries tended to follow outbreaks of disease and the containment of infected corpses became a priority.

In Calcutta, the toll taken on human lives by tropical diseases, malaria (especially infection by the malaria-causing parasite *plasmoduim falciparum*), cholera and dysentery was substantial. In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, when the marriageable Lata, and Amit, one of her suitors, visit South Park Street in the rain, it is explained how quickly the cemetery, once established, 'filled up with European dead. Young and old alike–mostly victims of the feverish climate.'[16] Of course, although Europeans, especially women ('How true that English ladies do not prosper in the Indian climate!'[17]), were taxed by the climate, it was not only Europeans who succumbed to infectious diseases, nor were tropical diseases solely responsible for the numbers of deaths. Medical historians suggest that representations of Calcutta as a 'city of death' were greatly

---

[8] Farrell 34.

[9] Rugg 4-5.

[10] Rugg 4.

[11] Nina Kokayeff, 'Dying to be Discovered: Miasma vs Germ Theory,' *ESSAI* 10 (2013) 68.

[12] Robert Travers, 'Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India,' *Past & Present* 196 (2007) 85.

[13] Governor and Council to Court of Directors, 28 Nov. 1766, para 4; quoted in Travers 110.

[14] Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

[15] Rugg 4.

[16] Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (London: Phoenix House, 1993) 451.

[17] Farrell 39.

exaggerated.[18] Nevertheless, the fear of contagion persisted. Hindus in Calcutta, although not ignorant of the problem of contagion, regarded cemeteries as antithetical to their beliefs. Furthermore, as suggested in Satyajit Ray's *The Secret of the Cemetery* (2004), they may have been repulsed by the practice of burial. 'When the coffin was lowered into the grave, and they threw clods of earth … ugh, the sound they made was terrible!'[19] But the practice of cremation of corpses could not keep up with the deaths of Hindus in Calcutta and the very poor could not always afford wood to burn their dead. It was not uncommon to see corpses or partially cremated corpses floating in rivers or half-buried in riverbanks.

The Indian government was reluctant to pass regulations regarding the disposal of bodies, given that such regulations would interfere with religious practices.[20] As the British capital of India, Calcutta was one of the first municipalities to pass a by-law prohibiting the disposal of bodies or animal carcasses in the Hooghley, or in any river, canal or rivulet in town limits. But that was not until 1864, following a fever epidemic in 1862-1863, and the effectiveness of such a by-law is difficult to determine.

In the mid-eighteenth century in Calcutta there was obviously abundant evidence of how rapidly disease could spread. It was commonly said that 'two monsoons' was the average expected lifespan of a European living in India.[21] The toll on Europeans and their vulnerable babies and children was substantial. There are approximately 1900 burials[22] in the South Park Street Cemetery and the inscriptions on tombs, where they remain and when they are legible, make plain that the cost of imperial ambition in the 'second city of the British Empire,' hewn from jungle on a malarial swamp, was high.

The first thing you notice on entering the South Park Street Cemetery is the sheer mass of the funerary architecture. The weight of stone, marble, black basalt, bricks and mortar was memorably remarked upon by Rudyard Kipling in 'Concerning Lucia,' the eighth chapter of *City of Dreadful Night* (1899). The narrator, looking for South Park Street Cemetery, is told by a driver, pointing 'up a long and utterly deserted thoroughfare,' that 'nobody goes there.' Nevertheless, the narrator finds the cemetery and passes through its entrance into 'the heart of utter desolation.'[23]

> The tombs are small houses. It is as though we walked down the streets of a town, so tall are they and so closely do they stand—a town shrivelled by fire, and scarred by frost and siege. Men must have been afraid of their friends rising up before the due time that they weighted them with such cruel mounds of masonry. Strong man, weak woman, or somebody's 'infant son aged fifteen months,' for each the squat obelisk, the defaced

---

[18] Robert Travers, 'Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India,' *Past & Present* 196 (2007) 85.

[19] Satyajit Ray, *The Secret of the Cemetery* (Haryana, India: Penguin, 2004) 8.

[20] Janine Wilhelm, *Environment and Pollution in Colonial India: Sewerage Technologies Along the Sacred Ganges* (London: Routledge, 2016) 41.

[21] Tom Addyman, 'Two Monsoons: Survey and Analysis of the Scottish Cemetery, Kolkata,' *Past Horizons*, January 31, 2009) np.

[22] *Atlas Obscura*: http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/south-park-street-cemetery.

[23] Rudyard Kipling, *The City of Dreadful Night* (New York: Grosset & Co., 1899) np. https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kipling/rudyard/city/chapter8.html.

classic temple, the cellaret of chunam, or the candlestick of brickwork—the heavy slab, the rust-eaten railings, whopper jawed cherubs, and the apoplectic angels. Men were rich in those days and could afford to put a hundred cubic feet of masonry into the grave of even so humble a person as 'Jno. Clements, Captain of the Country Service, 1820.'[24]

The substantial funerary slabs and architecture testify to a preoccupation with 'sanitary burial,' emerging in the eighteenth century. In *A Suitable Boy*, the dead in The South Park Street Cemetery are described as 'compacted under great slabs and pyramids, mausolea and cenotaphs, urns and columns.'[25] The idea of compaction conjures up contemporary images of recycled waste, steel and paper products crushed into huge cubes that can only be moved by machines. The weighing down of the dead in Calcutta certainly ensured that whatever might cause disease in emanations from corpses was prevented from escaping into the air: the dead were a danger to the living. But in Victorian and pre-Victorian times, heavy grave slabs and funerary architecture also offered protection of the corpse: the dead protected from the living. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain there was considerable fear of body-snatching, an activity that 'violated Christian and folklore-based solicitude for the corpse.'[26] Certain belief in the security of a resting place for a deceased loved one was perhaps some consolation for bereaved English in an outpost of Empire. In *The Seige of Krishnapur*, the Collector's wife, Mrs Hopkins, explains why she cannot stop weeping:

> My nerves are very poor, you see, my youngest child, a boy, died just six months ago during the hot weather…ever since then I find that the least thing will upset me. He was just a baby you see…and when we buried him all we could think of was to put a daguerreotype of his father and myself in his little arms ... It was made by one of the native gentlemen and we had been meaning to send it home to England but we decided it would be better to put it in the baby's coffin with some roses ... You know, perhaps you will think me foolish but I feel just as sad to be leaving the country where his grave lies as I am to be leaving all my dearest friends ... [27]

In a city where so many died young, where burials took place 'after dark with the aid of lighted torches,'[28] in a space outside town, enclosed by a high brick wall and approached by 'a narrow, lonely, raised causeway or bund'[29] originally known as Burial Ground Road, it is unlikely that many of the bereaved regularly visited the cemetery to mourn the departed or to check the security of their grave sites. Few were willing to be reminded that the odds were stacked against a long life in Calcutta. Nevertheless, the comfort that the bereaved might seek through laying

---

[24] Kipling np.
[25] Seth 451.
[26] Rugg 6.
[27] Farrell 26.
[28] Harold Holloway, 'Reflections,' *The South Park Street Cemetery Calcutta*, 4th edition (Calcutta: British Association of Cemeteries in South Asia and business houses associated with the Association for the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries in India, 1997) 12.
[29] Holloway 12.

5

their dear departed securely to rest should not be underestimated. While Mrs Hopkins is a fictional character, her sentiments express those so often represented in diaries and reminiscences of colonial women around the world when circumstance determined that they must move on, leaving their deceased children behind in ground.

Until the British left India in 1947, The South Park Street Cemetery was at least kept in reasonable order. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, when the young English gentleman-poet Fleury arrives in Calcutta just before the siege of 1857, he visits his mother's grave in Calcutta. At that time, as the narrator suggests, 'the grass was cut and the graves well cared for.'[30] Even so, Fleury chooses 'not to overdo the lurking in graveyards.'[31] Comparing what Fleury would have seen with the contemporary appearance of the cemetery, Farrell's narrator, speaking presumably in the 1970s, when the novel was published, describes it in an aside as 'an astonishing and lonely place, untended and overgrown.'[32] Vandalism and looting are noted: 'the lead letters have been picked out of the inscriptions, a small tax imposed by the living on the dead.'[33] Homeless families are observed, huddling uneasily in huts made of sticks and rags. The narrator understands their disquiet: 'no wonder they are so ill at ease, for even to a Christian the atmosphere here is ominous.'[34]

After the Partition of India, the cemetery fell into such disrepair that it has been frequently and famously celebrated by bloggers, travellers, novelists and non-fiction writers, from within and outside India, for the unnerving effect it has on visitors. Since 1978, when the Association for the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries in India was registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, valiant efforts have been made to maintain the cemetery and its monuments. Nevertheless, given the overwhelming scale of its funerary architecture, much of it cracked or sunken, and given the high brick wall that encloses its mysteries and the iron gates that clang shut as darkness approaches, no wonder it remains a site for ghost stories and illicit activities. In Satyajit Ray's *The Secret of the Cemetery*, in the Adventures of Feluda crime series, Feluda visits the South Park Street Cemetery with a writer, Lalmohan Babu, who has made money from a film version of one of his stories. At the entrance to the cemetery, Lalmohan hesitates. He has to be reassured by Feluda not only that there will be no chance of witnessing an English burial, but that there has been no such activity in the cemetery for a century and a quarter. Following the private investigator, walking through the rows of tombs, heading for the place where a Bengali man had been injured suspiciously on the previous day, looking at the tapering columns, Lalmohan proclaims: 'These are spooks in burkhas!' The narrator suggests that although he is 'right in a way … [t]hey were more like spooky guards, protecting the being that was buried underground, encased in a coffin.'[35]

All this stuff in my head as I entered the South Park Street Cemetery, accompanied by my husband, not wanting to be on my own in this place. Yes, it's spooky. And no, I didn't want to overdo the lurking in a cemetery, even though I was aware of the growing trendiness of

---

[30] Farrell 36.
[31] Farrell 36.
[32] Farrell 36.
[33] Farrell 36.
[34] Farrell 36.
[35] Ray 9.

'graving' expressed by bloggers on the internet. Gravers do not only visit cemeteries, as 'tombstone tourists' or 'preservationist gravers.'[36] They spend time on websites such as *Find a Grave*, a database of more than 36 million burial records, where they search for famous and familial names, locate graves, enter details, leave virtual flowers and upload headstone photos. I'm not one of them. Nor do I think I'm a cemetery tourist, although perhaps I am kidding myself. Opportunities for Indian states to cash in on the Raj and its burial grounds have been promoted since the turn of the millennia.[37] Was I hooked? Yes, of course; just didn't want to admit it.

In 2008, my first visit to the cemetery, I was driven by an urge to find my father's family. My father had never mentioned the Indian connections and the only clues I find retrospectively that he knew of them are his fondness for Kipling's Mowgli stories, his old brass shaving bowl decorated in a stylized script that I later discovered to be Urdu and, sadly, his refusal to allow me to travel to India when I was eighteen, fearing that I would contract one of many terrible diseases. Although my mother was still alive in 2008, I had lost her to dementia. She had talked freely about her parents' history, but never about my father's. Realizing how little I knew about my father's family, suddenly it seemed urgent to recover that lost past. But there was more. I wanted to cement that connection with India, wanted to find the resting places of my paternal grandfathers, at least, however many greats might separate me from them. George Albert and William Albert, whatever else they were, were at least adventurers, border crossers surrounded by mystery and, dare I confess, a most attractive exoticism.

We passed through the gate of the South Park Street Cemetery on a day in December that threatened rain. Someone was sitting sleepily behind the open gate on a plastic chair alongside a small folding table on which sat a donations box. To the right was a caretaker's room. Behind a wooden desk, the wiry caretaker sat inscrutably attending to some papers. I wondered how he could see in such gloom. We exchanged the kind of pleasantries he had no doubt heard many times before from visitors seeking ancestors. We offered him our short list of names and a photograph of a death certificate we had bribed another caretaker to show us in the tower of the Church of St John, on the other side of Calcutta. The Sheppard historian's mother, Ann Byrn, had died at the age of twenty-eight, leaving her husband George with four young children. No, said the South Park Street caretaker, shaking his head, he knew nothing of my ancestors. He gestured towards a bench on the wall opposite his desk, indicating stacks of slim booklets produced by the Association for the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries in India. At 100 rupees per booklet (less than two Australia dollars) our purchase would contribute towards preservation work on existing grave architecture. If we found an ancestor in the cemetery we might be inspired to make a donation, said the caretaker, through the 'adopt-a-tomb' scheme. We bought three booklets and the caretaker smiled toothlessly, handing us an umbrella for our walk in the rain. Skimming through the booklet no familiar surname leapt out.

---

[36] Adrian Chen, 'I Spend My Free Time With Dead People: The strange hobby of graving,' 25 July 2016 http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2009/10/i_spend_my_free_time_with_dead_people.html.
[37] Moinak Mitra, 'India now tapping into cemetery tourism with fervour,' *Economic Times* Special Report, 5 July 2009, 25 July 2016 http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/sunday-et/special-report/india-now-tapping-into-cemetery-tourism-with-fervour/articleshow/4739273.cms.

Visitors to the South Park Street Cemetery invariably describe it as a 'modern-day necropolis,' a 'city of forgotten souls,' a place of 'crumbling colonnades, mossy mausoleums.'[38] They relentlessly comment on the 'gigantic monuments,' and the evident 'obsession with masonry.'[39] No-one has better described the atmosphere of the cemetery than Kipling or Farrell and it's impossible not to draw upon such memorable descriptions. I was certainly shaken by the sheer numbers of monuments and stones remembering young mothers who had died in childbirth and the children who died with or after them. Although the pathways or 'streets' of the quiet city were no longer as overgrown as early post-partition descriptions suggest, it was certainly true that parts of the cemetery were neglected and in disrepair. Some of the tombs were subsiding and dark with mildew. Many were cracked or crumbling. Emaciated dogs like dingoes had excavated deep holes in the dirt underneath neo-classical cupolas designed as shelters for the dead. I was afraid to inspect too closely the bones that the dogs had chewed in their lairs. We saw two monuments, one of them a moderately impressive tapered column, to two Sheppards, but neither of them was mentioned in my great-great-grandfather's history and neither had gained a mention in the official booklet of the Association for the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries. We checked off names in the booklet. Mrs Sarah Pearson: her monument is the oldest in the cemetery; Colonel Charles Russell Deare, 'slain by a cannon ball while fighting Tippoo Sultan in the Carnatic;' Colonel Monson and his wife Lady Anne, great-granddaughter of Charles II; celebrated Calcutta beauties Mrs Elizabeth Barwell and the ill-fated Rose Aylmer; Lt Col Robert Kyd, botanist and founder of the East India Company's Botanical Gardens; Sir William Jones, founder of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal: his is one of the tallest monuments; Major General Charles Stuart, noted eccentric, known as 'Hindoo Stuart;' Vivian Derozio, Anglo-Indian poet and reformer; baronet Sir John Hadley D'Oyly and his son Charles, artist. Doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs; civil servants, aristocrats with hereditary titles, socialites with connections. We found the 'bleeding tomb' of the ill-fated Dennison family who died within sixteen days of each other: Mrs A with her infant daughter first, followed by her husband, Captain E.S. The tombstone, an obelisk, is said to be haunted and to ooze something like blood, several times a year. It did not bleed for us and all that haunted us were questions.

When it started to rain heavily, we returned to the caretaker's room to take shelter, buying time and more booklets. The caretaker warmed to us and said he would look at his records. His disintegrating record books were unhelpful but he had some additional narrow rolls of parchment, also crumbling, held together with rubber bands. On a scrap of parchment he pounced excitedly on the reference points for George Albert's burial plot and insisted that we follow him.

Walking through the streets of the necropolis, silent except for the proprietorial cawing of Indian house crows (that's been said before too), it was a surprise to come suddenly into a clearing in which rows of terra cotta pots were arranged, some bearing brightly coloured flowers, mostly dahlias. I caught the eye of the caretaker who must have noticed my sudden intake of

---

[38] Gautham Ashok, 'City of Forgotten Souls,' 25 August 2016 http://roadsandkingdoms.com/2015/city-of-forgotten-souls/.

[39] Ghosh, Deepanjan. 'The South Park Street Cemetery,' *The Concrete Paparazzi*, 25 February 2015, 25 August 2016 http://double-dolphin.blogspot.com.au/2015/02/the-south-park-street-cemetery.html.

breath. 'It's a nursery,' he said, slowing down so that we could catch up with him. 'This land is rented to the nursery-man.' He pointed to a figure bent over pots in the distance: behind him was a tent hand-sewn from plastic and old cloth and there was a woman in the doorway, cooking something in an iron vessel over an open fire. The regular mounds in the ground suggested that this was an area of unmarked graves but the dignity of the gardener and the orderly rows of living colour seemed less incongruous here than the massive pyramids and ornate columns competing for attention above the rich, generative soil.

On the periphery of the nursery the caretaker stopped to consult his scrap of paper. 'Here,' he said. 'On the corner.' His arms formed a right angle. 'This is where your ancestor was buried. George Albert Sheppard. Died of fever at forty-three.' There was nothing there. No tomb. No grave slab or head stone. No remains of a crumbling cross. No pile of stones. Nothing. Nothing at all.

George Albert would have been buried after the cemetery was officially closed. At least he was not refused burial there, as some with dubious reputations were. The remains of George Albert's first wife, Ann, would also be somewhere in unmarked ground, inside the walls of the cemetery. Ann died before the new cemetery was built and was buried in the old burial ground in Fort William but transferred, as the records indicate, to the new cemetery in Park Street South. Exactly where she lies remains a mystery, but a suggestion that there was intermarriage in her family is intriguing: an explanation, perhaps, for the absence of a commemorative plaque. Neither Ann nor George were 'important.' George's second marriage took place in the church of St-Martin-in-the-Field in Westminster, London, two years after George had left Calcutta following his wife's death, 'partly for the benefit of [his] health, but chiefly for the purpose of re-visiting [his] native land.'[40] George was in fact born in Hallowell, New England, America, but his English parents, particularly his father, had never ceased hankering for the lost Manors in Gloucester and dreaming of England as home. Something else George did not offer publicly as an excuse for leaving his business for four disastrous years in the hands of a partner in Calcutta, was his intention to visit his children. Two years before Ann's death he had off-loaded his children on spinster aunts in England; his sons were subsequently transferred (as was common practice) to a boarding school, 'Cliff House Academy,' near Dover.[41] The fact that Ann languished in Calcutta until her death (was she ill or disenchanted?) while George sailed for England with two servants, one 'named Rose (of a *dusky* type),'[42] stirs my imagination. Two years after Ann's death, George made a much more prestigious marriage, probably calculated. Prestige and social recognition were conditions George aspired to. His second wife was the first daughter of a physician, 'reputed to be possessed of considerable wealth'[43] who became one of the senior medical staff at the Charing Cross Hospital, lecturing regularly in the Charing Cross school of medicine. The pair had two children, but George's second wife was back in England, living with her father, when George died. As for George's son, William Albert, the Sheppard

---

[40] Gupta 175.

[41] William Albert Sheppard, *A Brief History of the Sheppard Family Formerly Seated at the Manors of Avening, Minchinhampton and Colesbourne in the County of Gloucestershire, England, With Pedigrees of the Elder and Junior Branches of these Ancient Families* (Calcutta: Thos. S. Smith, City Press, 1891) 22.

[42] Sheppard 21.

[43] Sheppard 29.

family historian, he had returned to Calcutta after his English education. I found where he was living in 1887: an attached building in what was once described as the bachelor's quarters in the English residential area of Calcutta, currently occupied by mechanics repairing old auto-rickshaws and motor scooters: a building now held together by the aerial roots of Banyan trees. But I could find no sign of where, in Calcutta, William Albert or his wife or any of the five very young deceased children of their nine offspring, were buried.

The caretaker was looking at me expectantly. I had come from Australia to find an ancestor and he had helped me find one. How did I feel? I felt relief: relieved to find the connection, but strangely, more relieved to know that he was there unproclaimed, turned to dust on the periphery of a nursery. Looking back from the clearing where the dahlias glowed in their terra cotta pots, observing the towering obelisks, the ridiculous pyramids, the grand neoclassical mausoleums and leaning cuppolas rising drunkenly heavenwards in the silent city, I found more comfort in the wafting from the cooking pot where the nurseryman's wife was preparing to nourish the living.

What did it mean, all that funerary architecture? Once, it meant something, of course. It still means something, although the lenses through which we view such artefacts have changed and we may now want to read the cemetery in different ways. The East Indian chronologist John Hawkesworth (writing under the pseudonym Asiaticus in the early nineteenth century) described what is now known as the South Park Street Cemetery as 'the *Great* Burial Ground at Chowringhee' (my emphasis) in his *Epitaphs in the Different Burial Grounds in and about Calcutta,* published in Calcutta in 1803. This book could be purchased by subscribers for the price of twelve rupees, or for non-subscribers, twenty-four rupees. The fact that a collection of local epitaphs was available by subscription suggests the extent of untimely deaths in eighteenth and nineteenth century Calcutta. It also suggests an interest, on the part of the living, in what had already been said about the British in India who were important or wealthy enough to merit inscribed gravestones or tombs. If tragedy were to strike, it was best to know what was appropriate or *de rigueur* in the way of an epitaph, summarizing a life lost in service to the Empire. Two more significant collections of epigraphs were published after 1803, both referring to the 'new' Calcutta cemetery as 'the Great Burial Ground at Chowringhee.' William Urquhart, editor and perhaps owner of the *Madras Courier* between 1795 and 1807, produced a declaratory two volume book (a third was intended, but appears not to have been published) laboriously titled *The Oriental Obituary: or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of the Dead, Being an Impartial Compilation from Monumental Inscriptions on the Tombs of Those Persons whose Ashes are Deposited in These Remote Parts of the World since the Formation of European Settlements, to the Present Time, to Which is Added Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes etc. Illustrative of the Public Service, General Character, and Virtues of Departed Worth* (Madras, 1809-13). A third such collection, transcribing epitaphs from the churches and burial grounds around Calcutta, was printed by M. Derozario in 1815, reproducing descriptors of 'greatness' in an attempt to perpetuate the memory of British inhabitants of India who, through their services and virtues, contributed to the glory of the British Empire. The Great Burial Ground, in the British imperial capital of India, 'trumpeted its affiliations with the wider

community of empire.'[44] More than that, it emphasized the wealth and power of those who, directly or indirectly, served the projects of Empire. As Calcutta grew and 'British traders assumed the style of imperial governors,'[45] they built grandiose houses to live in, projecting a social status they could not have enjoyed in the 'old country' or 'their native land.' When they died in Calcutta, their memorials became 'tools for displaying the assumed aristocratic manner of the East India Company service.'[46]

By the time the South Park Street Cemetery was opened, the wealthy in commercial Calcutta would have been looking to keep up with European fashions, including grave architecture, which favoured neoclassical styles. Tombs came to reflect 'the growing stratification of Calcutta society.'[47] Professional men, high ranking officers and the wealthy (whether aristocratic or *nouveau-riche*) bought expensive funerals and paid to embellish their graves and the graves of their loved ones with architecture befitting the status by which they wished to be remembered. The silent city on Burial Ground Road, which later became Park Street, declared the presence of the British in Calcutta in no uncertain terms: we are here; we serve; we are important; even death will not erase us. It also testified to the greatness of the sacrifices empire builders had made: lives shortened by adverse reactions to the climate, tropical diseases, shipwreck, drowning, clashes with the 'natives' and other European companies in the interests of the Empire. Richard Becher, one of the longer-lived inhabitants of Calcutta, member of the Board of Trade and Council, is remembered as 'an honest man' who passed his life 'in the service of the Company./What his conduct was/The Annals of the Company will shew.' Becher retired to England in his early fifties where he lost his money to a deceiving friend and had to return to Calcutta, where he died in 1782 after a year 'Under the pang of Disappointment,/And the pressure of the Climate,' his energy spent on his previous service. Augustus Cleveland, Collector of Revenues and Judge, died at sea aged 29, having, so his epitaph says, 'civi-/lized a Savage Race of the Mountaineers who for Ages had/Existed in a state of Barbarism and eluded every Ex-/ertion that had been practised against them to sup-/press their depredations, and reduce them to obedience.' The Honorable John Hyde, appointed to the Supreme Court in Calcutta in 1774 where he served for twenty-two years, is remembered as the Public Records declare him: 'A Magistrate,/Whose Integrity in the Discharge of his/Public Functions,/Was only equaled by the Virtues of his Private Character.' On his death in 1802, Horton Briscoe, Major General of the Bengal Establishment, is commended on his tombstone for distinguishing himself 'by his Attachment,/to his Profession!/ever zealous in the discharge of its duties/fulfiling [sic] them/with fidelity and integrity to the State.'

Wealth, beauty and connections were highly regarded. Charles Weston, who lived an unusually long life in Calcutta (he died at 78), is remembered as much for his 'wise economical management of a Fortune' as for his charity. His epitaph also mentions his connection with Governor John Holwell, temporary Governor of Bengal in 1760. His tombstone describes him as 'an ornament to the British Name.' Women were celebrated as another kind of ornament to Empire. Beautiful young women, none more so than Rose Alymer, are celebrated as sacrifices.

---

[44] Travers 111.
[45] Travers 85.
[46] Travers 85-6.
[47] Travers 113.

Rose Alymer, daughter of an English Baron, died of cholera in 1800. Aged just twenty, she was visiting her aunt, wife of Sir Henry Russell, judge of the Supreme Court in Calcutta. Her tombstone reads: 'What was her fate?: long, long before her hour,/Death called her tender soul, by break of bliss,/From the first blossoms, to the buds of joy;/Those few our noxious fate unblasted leaves/In this inclement clime of human life.' Some years after her interment, an elegy by the English poet Walter Savage Landor was added to the tomb. Landor had met Rose in Wales, when he was twenty-one and she was seventeen. He had been smitten with her and represents her as a romantic ideal: a woman of noble heritage, beauty and virtue, her graces sacrificed, but her memory consecrated in stone.

> Ah what avails the sceptered race,
> Ah what the form divine!
> What every virtue, every grace!
> Rose Alymer, all were thine.
> Rose Alymer, whom these wakeful eyes
> May weep, but never see,
> A night of memories and sighs
> I consecrate to thee.

Women, of course, were presumed to be dedicated to 'growing' the Empire. Elizabeth Crisp (nee Marsh) went to India in 1771, following her husband who had become bankrupt after enjoying rather too good a life style in England for eight years. Their son, Burrish Crisp, 'First member of the Board of Revenue,' survived for 47 years until 1811. His epitaph alludes to his alternative education and fails to mention his numerous illegitimate children, but conventionally acknowledges 'the tender care of an excellent Mother,' buried next to him. Elizabeth's monument or gravestone has disappeared, but her extraordinary life, including capture at sea by Moors, about which she wrote in *The Female Captive*, published in 1756, suggests that she was far from a standard model of motherhood. Her son's epitaph reduces her to a 'patient Martyr/of a cruel and unrelenting Malady,' the malady being breast cancer, from which she died after a hideous operation.[48]

The service of women to the growth of Empire, risky at the best of times in the eighteenth century, was seriously risky in Calcutta. The shortened lives of mothers is heartbreakingly evident in the Great Burial Ground. Mrs Elizabeth Bruce died in 1793, 'aged 17 years 1 month and 15 days' leaving 'a husband and two infant sons to/bewail their loss, the one aged 1 year and 9/months, the other 4 days.' Catherine Bowers, 'beloved mother of 9 children,' died in 1794, aged 28 years, 'leaving a disconsolate Husand/and seven children ever to regret their loss.' The list is long and terrible.

The architecture of the cemetery also reflects the political interests of the British. Thomas Metcalfe suggests in *Ideologies of the Raj*[49] that public buildings erected during the Raj were

[48] 'Elizabeth Crisp (nee Marsh) 1735-1785,' 26 August 2016 www.jjhc.info/crispelizabeth1785.htm.
[49] Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj: New Cambridge History of India,* volume 3, part 4 (Cambridge, CUP, 1995).

designed explicitly to represent the power of the ruling empire. This applied both to cities of the living and cities of the dead. One of the ways the British sought to legitimize their rule was by establishing connections with and relating themselves to the Mughals, who asserted their political status in the Indo-Muslim world by building elaborate tombs (the most obvious being the Taj Mahal). The South Park Street Cemetery, then, is a curious mix of Gothic (traditional), neo-classical (fashionable) and Indo-Saracenic (politically strategic) funerary architecture.

The South Park Street Cemetery has a lot to say about the history, politics, social stratification and conventions of a population enmeshed in the business of empire-building in a foreign clime at a particular time in the past. Looking back on that time, one might be forgiven for wondering whether the English in India were in fact as mad as rabid dogs, as Noel Coward suggested in his song 'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun,' first performed in 1931. There's a story by John Lang ('The Meerut Graveyard') in which the narrator explains the difference between English graveyards in England and English burial grounds in India. In India, the narrator explains, the tombs are larger and differently constructed (mostly of *chunum* or plaster). While the grave architecture might convey the impression of 'ruins of stupendous antiquity,'[50] in reality the climate is responsible for rapid deterioration, accelerated by the droppings of birds that contain seeds that germinate to reproduce the jungle plants that had been cleared away. In the same story the caretaker says:

> A great deal of money is squandered in the churchyards in India. Tombs are erected, and at great expense frequently. After they are once put up it is very seldom that they are visited or heeded. Tens of thousands of pounds have been thrown away on the vast pile of bricks and mortar and stone that you now see within this enclosure; and, with the exception of a few, all are crumbling away. A Hindoo said to me the other day, in this graveyard, "Why don't you English burn your dead, as we do, instead of leaving their graves here, to tell us how much you can neglect them, and how little you care for them? What is the use of whitening a few sepulchres amidst this mass of black ruin?" I had no answer to give the fellow, sir. Indeed, the same thought had often occurred to me, while at work in this wilderness.[51]

In the new Kolkata, however one might read the significances of the Great Burial Ground in what was once Calcutta, however one might interpret the extravagance of expenditure on funerary architecture, the dead are dead, and the living are alive. That particular cemetery is a relic of the British Empire, and as such, worthy of preservation. It has historical value. It has value for genealogists. But the big questions remain.

How individuals relate to the dead is an intensely private matter. In the western world, dealing with the practicalities of death and dying has become a matter of systems management by professionals,[52] to the extent that most of us do not know how to face it. My desire to connect

---

[50] John Lang, 'The Meerut Graveyard,' *The Penguin Book of Indian Ghost Stories* edited by Ruskin Bond (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993) 4.
[51] Lang 8.
[52] Glenys Caswell, 'A Family Affair? Managing Death in the Twenty-First Century,' 29 August 2016 https://nottingham.academia.edu/GlenysCaswell.

with my long and safely dead relatives in Calcutta was my way of escaping from the fact that my mother was dying. Escape it may have been, nevertheless that visit to the South Park Street Cemetery was a valuable lesson in humility. My long gone Calcutta relatives were individuals struggling to make something of themselves: to make money, to win social recognition. They saw India as a land of opportunity. Whatever else they thought I can never know. Distance and hindsight enable me to pass judgement on the projects of Empire, but in doing so, I implicate my relatives, implicate myself. Cemeteries are places for reflection, as much on living as on death: as much on folly and mistakes as on greatness.

In the twenty-first century, as we contend for space to live on this planet, the expansion or even survival of cemeteries as future burial grounds is in question.[53] There is a view that burial-sites might become like a 'sub-sector of today's property market,' available only 'as long as someone can pay the rent.'[54] Such a view is depressing, but it should be remembered that the municipal cemetery, as such, has a relatively short history. Many of us will leave traces of our lives on the Internet, some better than epitaphs, some more embarrassing. The work of reading past lives in the contexts of history and other disciplines will remain for researchers, using the means available to them. The work of commemorating past lives and disposing of human remains will also continue. The living will make choices, for themselves and/or their dear departed. Some of us will exercise a developing ecological mentality, choosing to 'sustain the living' through 'natural burial, new cremation practices or new technologies' such as alkaline hydrolysis and freeze-drying. Such innovations might be conceived as 'positioning the dead body as a gift to the living and/or the planet.'[55] Others might decide on 'awe inspiring celestial services'[56] such as those offered by a company of space and funeral experts, founded by Thomas Civeit, a former NASA engineer. Through this company, human ashes can be launched into space where, after orbiting the earth for several months (orbits being trackable through mobile apps), they will burn up in the atmosphere as 'shooting stars.' The notion of such spectacular memorials may seem ultra-new in the age of technology, but it is also old: as old as the 'small houses' in the South Park Street Cemetery; as old as the Pyramids of Egypt; as old as the Monumental Temples of the Aztecs and Incas.

We will always need places (or spaces) to reflect on death. Such places 'add an emotional intelligence' to environments for the living.[57] There will not always be room for cemeteries like The South Park Cemetery in Calcutta. But there will always be a need for what John Troyer, Director of the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath calls 'a cemetery-like

---

[53] Ana Naomi de Sousa, 'Death in the City: What happens when all our cemeteries are full?' *The Guardian*, 21 January 2015, 29 August 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jan/21/death-in-the-city-what-happens-cemeteries-full-cost-dying; Rose Eveleth, 'The New Urban Cemetery,' *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014, 30 August 2016 http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/09/the-new-urban-cemetery/379802/; Lisa Murray, 'Death and Dying in Twentieth Century Sydney,' *Dictionary of Sydney*, 2013, 30 August 2016 http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/death_and_dying_in_twentieth_century_sydney.

[54] Rugg cited in de Sousa np.

[55] Hannah Rumble, John Troyer, Tony Walter and Kate Woodthorpe, 'Disposal or Dispersal? Environmentalism and Final Treatment of the British Dead,' *Mortality*, 19.3 (2014) 243.

[56] *Elysium Space*, 'Celestial Services,' 3 September 2016 http://elysiumspace.com/the-experience/.

[57] Rugg in de Sousa np.

space,' where people can 'connect with death.'[58] This might involve spaces for interactive technology, but as Troyer insists: 'Cemeteries are layer after layer of human invention' and technology is just another layer. The challenge is to find 'something that really connects with this idea of death' without falling into 'a language of innovation that isn't necessary.'[59]

I've changed my mind about cemeteries. I'll never be a 'graver,' but I shall go back to the South Park Cemetery in Kolkata in a different frame of mind. I'll be looking to connect not with departed relatives, but with a history shared with India. As for the 'idea of death,' there will always be ways and places to contemplate that, in conjunction with the wonders of human invention which, whether sublime or ridiculous, never cease.

_____

Sue Hosking is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. She has published extensively on Australian literature and life narratives, as well as on literary and cultural representations of life in Australia and India, with a particular focus on British imperialism.

---

[58] Quoted in Eveleth np.
[59] Troyer quoted in Eveleth np.