Death, burial and mutuality: A study of popular funerary customs in Cumbria, 1700-1920

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**Abstract:**
This thesis investigates the impact of modernisation upon popular death customs in Cumbria between 1700 and 1920. Specifically, it explores the role and nature of mutuality, arguing that despite the growth of individualism, the mutual ideal which had underpinned many popular death customs in the pre-industrial environment continued to play a crucial role in shaping working-class mortuary practices in the towns. This study challenges historical arguments that mutuality was simply individualism in disguise; it suggests that at its heart lay an internal tension: a conflict between self-interest and collectivism which was exacerbated by modernizing trends. Ultimately individualism was to triumph, but not in the way historians have claimed. Its success can be gauged, not by the apparent readiness of the nineteenth-century urban working classes to embrace a more materialistic attitude to death and burial, but in the growth of the burial insurance industry which capitalised on the collectivism of the majority to further the self-interest of an enterprising minority. The thesis begins by tracing the roots of mutuality in death through an examination of popular death customs in pre-industrial Cumbria. It reveals that although such practices were designed to alleviate individual distress, they also worked to cultivate an ideal of collectivism by encouraging community participation, and by publicly affirming a common notion of ‘decency’ which was rooted in powerful spiritual beliefs. Informal aid of this type was supplemented by that supplied by the guilds and friendly societies. In this more formal, premeditated setting, the contractual nature of mutuality was more pronounced, and a tension between collectivism and self-interest more clearly articulated. This conflict was exacerbated by the sanitary reforms of the nineteenth century, and in particular the passage of the Burial Acts of the 1850’s. The creation of the private grave, and the division of the cemeteries into areas of greater and lesser desirability, increased social discrimination while emphasising conspicuous consumption as a means of articulating individual social position. A consequence of such reforms was the commercialisation of the funeral. Many of those who could afford it now modelled their obsequies on much older aristocratic rites which were designed to indicate social standing. These materialistic rituals set a new standard in funerary protocol, and increased social pressure on the working classes to conform to elite norms. Despite greater stress on materialistic individualism, however, many working-class people continued to observe familiar death customs which were rooted in community participation. Familiar customs of long-standing were of value in many ways, not least because they symbolised values which helped sustain a distinct cultural identity. Thus, while individualism emerged as a powerful cultural force, collectivism did not vanish. Indeed, this thesis concludes by arguing that the continued potency of popular collectivism was most strikingly exemplified in the growth to prominence, in the early years of the twentieth century, of working-class burial insurance.

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1630s. For the very wealthy, several weeks or months of preparation might go into the elaborate and costly funerals orchestrated by the heralds, whose office in Ireland was founded in 1552, and this delay might necessitate the embalming of the corpse. Catholics increasingly wished to die or be buried in religious habit—that of the Franciscans was particularly popular—as a means of eliciting the patronage of important saints. Most people would have been buried in the shroud alone, although archaeological evidence suggests that coffin burial became increasingly common.