

## **In Search of Unity: Learning from Headstones**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores a small anomaly of Irish history. Despite the large-scale re-organisation of the state at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, and the divided society created by the civil authorities, the old parish cemetery escaped this segregation and continued to be used by all members of the community, irrespective of Christian denomination. This came to be regarded as a right which, if not actually protected by law, was at least protected by custom. For this reason, researchers and local communities have a rich resource from which they can learn about the past and draw lessons for the future.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Writing in 1829 to the Archbishop of Armagh (Primate of the Anglican or Episcopal church), an enraged minister, Revd. E Stoppard, complained that Roman Catholic priests were performing burial services according to the rites of the Catholic faith within certain graveyards in the archdiocese, and with blatant disregard for the Church of Ireland authorities:

They next determined to attack Head Quarters, and a Priest came to the Cathedral Churchyard in Armagh and performed service with his book in his hand and his stole on – the Protestants of the town were very anxious that the Priest should be prosecuted.<sup>2</sup>

He was not the first Anglican minister to complain about the lax approach to funerary arrangements or the scant regard paid to such matters by the populace generally. In 1755, the recently arrived rector, Revd. Bracegirdle, from the parish of Taplow in England, gave the following reason for the fact that only nine entries had been recorded in the burial register for his new parish of Donagheady in County Tyrone:

The reason so few burials are entered is an indecent custom of interring without sending to the minister to attend. That the papists should always and the Presbyterians generally omit is not to be wondered; but it is astonishing that those who are of the established church should choose to bury their deceased friends like dogs.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both ministers would have been very much in a minority as the Church of Ireland then, and in subsequent rulings, made clear the views of the church authorities with regard to burial rights of other denominations.

### **Policy and Practice**

A memorandum dating from April 1894,<sup>4</sup> made the following statements of policy:<sup>5</sup> “Every parishioner or person dying in a parish had a common law right of decent

burial in the church yard...”<sup>6</sup> and “The minister of a religious body other than the church of Ireland has a right to use any form of Christian Burial Service ...”<sup>7</sup>

Although Anglican ministers like Reverend Stoppard and Reverend Bracegirdle would continue to complain, by a simple oversight of history, the common law practice of a local right of all parishioners to bury in the parish churchyard was maintained throughout the last 300 years.

The value of cemeteries to a study of conflict resolution scenarios is that many of these old graveyards survive today and they have taken on a new life as sacred ground. Their survival has enabled local communities in Northern Ireland to find a common identity and develop bonds of citizenship through education for mutual understanding. They have celebrated the local character of their hallowed ground and they have been empowered by the act of preserving and cherishing the old cemetery.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century began with the enactment of legislation designed to reform religion in Ireland. Laws were passed to establish an administration that was robust. Central to this was the role of the Church of Ireland. The bishops of the Established Church became the policy formers and the lawmakers in the country. Their clergy became the tax collectors, the census enumerators and the bean counters of the state.

Between 1692-1800<sup>8</sup> the old Irish Parliament passed some 184 pieces of legislation relating to the practice or administration of religion in Ireland. Significantly 44 acts of parliament were passed in the early period 1692-1725, which demonstrates how active the parliament had been to establish a church that would espouse the philosophy of a landed ascendancy.

The Church of Ireland has never represented more than 10% of the total population of Ireland. It assumed a position which far outweighed its numerical strength – a situation that made it all-powerful in society and yet suspicious in government. This left the two other major Christian faiths disaffected in their own country. A Presbyterian church numerically stronger in Ulster than the Anglican community there, but emasculated in influence; and a Catholic community which constituted the majority of the population on the island of Ireland but which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was powerless in the political sphere.

The outcome of the upheavals of the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw the Established Church as sole custodian of the unreconstructed pre-reformation diocese and parishes. The Presbyterian church which came to Ulster in the early 1600s maintained a congregational structure which was unrelated to the parish unit. The Catholic church, as a legal entity, disappeared in the Elizabethan era and it was not until the Emancipation Act of 1829 that it was able, in a proper sense, to assume visible structures of organisation, including a parish system that was altered markedly from the medieval network.

With this pre-reformation order of church administration came the old parish graveyards. In the six counties of Northern Ireland, there are at least 269 pre-reformation churchyards where interments continued into the late 19<sup>th</sup> or well into the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of these, 81 are linked to a church which is still used for worship

today.<sup>9</sup> The graveyards, and also the associated church where it survives, in all cases belong to the Church of Ireland.

### **Ardkeen and Ballyphilip**

It is not difficult to understand why the people retained a strong attachment to the parish churchyard. The civil parish unit is made up of a small number of townlands. This land division, the townland, is unique to Ireland and in origin predates the Norman Conquest. In terms of size it measures from only 100 acres to, at the most, several thousand acres. There are some 64,000 townlands in Ireland, these go to make up some 2,500 civil parishes.

Within one small area - the Ards Peninsula - in County Down, in the Barony of Ards, we can take as example two parishes with pre-reformation churchyards: Ardkeen and Ballyphilip, both sit on picturesque locations on the shores of Strangford Lough.

According to *Lewis's Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (1837), Ardkeen is a parish of some 4800 statute acres containing 2176 inhabitants: "The church is situated on a peninsula ... a small ancient edifice..."<sup>10</sup>

The Ordnance survey indicates that the parish of Ballyphilip comprised 2430 acres, and with the small post-town of Portaferry, contained 3090 inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> Clarke notes that the origins of the church and graveyard are unknown. The ruins are possibly as old as the sixteenth century but there was an older parish church which was destroyed about 1784.<sup>12</sup>

They are small and unremarkable country parishes and with quite typical gravestones; the inscriptions depicting simple lives. Yet within each can be found Irish, English and Scottish names, or more simply the headstones of Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians all buried within one churchyard.

Ardkeen, the smaller of the two cemeteries, contains names which can be accurately identified as of Irish (Catholic), Scottish (Presbyterian) and English (Anglican) origin. For example, names recorded, such as Branniff, Dorrian, McGrath, McGrattan, McNamara and Pray (O'Prey), are all known to be Irish; Boyd, Chalmers, Donaldson, Echlin and Prince are Scottish; and Carpenter, Hughes, Hutton, White and Wiley are of English extraction.

In Ballyphilip the range of names is much broader than in Ardkeen. Here they not only identify the different faiths but the inscriptions speak of the trade and commerce of a small rural and seafaring community.

### **Tombstones, names and historical interpretation**

Seldom will the church burial records tell us the religion of the dead. Because the Anglican minister did not officiate at their burials, dissenters and papists are rarely recorded in the church burial records. Yet, even these records can also give up vital information confirming the multi-denominational and even multi-cultural nature of these burying grounds. In Ardkeen CI, there is an entry recording the burial of Caesar Augustus Willey Dobbs Savage, who died February 18<sup>th</sup> 1828 reputedly 90 years old, a black manservant of the late Major Henry Savage.<sup>13</sup>

It is the absence of Presbyterians and Catholics from the burial records which makes the gravestones so significant for the purposes of genealogy or local history, for it is in the names recorded on stone in the old churchyards that we really discover the religious diversity of the occupants. Evidence of this practice of different denominations being buried within a single cemetery is there to be found in Ballyphilip and Ardkeen. One of relevance to this study reads:

The body of the Revd. James Armstrong A.M., lies here...He died the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Oct. 1779 in the 70<sup>th</sup> year of his age. Renovated by Portaferry Presbyterian Congregation, 1909.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed important clues exist in the iconography of the stones, and the phraseology of the actual inscriptions. From these, the researcher, armed with local knowledge, can draw further insights. Knowledge of surname derivation and population migratory patterns from pre-Norman to post-Plantation times enables remarkably accurate identification of the religious breakdown of the deceased interred in a cemetery. The names on the headstones confirm for us what by tradition has taken place, a fact that is supported by evidence from other historical sources.

The Griffith Valuation of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century confirms surname variety in the area: Murray, Smith, Dorrian, Gibson, McNamara, O'Pray, Donaldson, Miller, Jones, Echlin all appear.<sup>15</sup> The availability of civil records of births, deaths and marriages for all denominations from 1864 would enable the religion of the individual families to be clearly identified. The fact that many of these names are still alive within the locality today demonstrates how, for the visitor, a strong sense of belonging can be triggered simply by entering the cemetery.

It is in understanding and celebrating the ethnic-religious diversity where the cemetery can act as a mechanism for conflict resolution, and from where the forging of a more harmonious community environment takes its strength.

The study and usage of the cemetery at the local level is the vehicle through which a shared understanding of the past can begin. Smyth points out that:

The formation of an understanding of cultural diversity is a valued goal, but it needs to be done carefully and should arise naturally from the sources... Conflict and community harmony are both present in the past.<sup>16</sup>

### **Tombstones, names, historical interpretation and reconciliation in action**

In a study of the work of the Killeter and District Historical Society in Tyrone which included the restoration of the Magherakeel graveyard, Ray Cashman of Indiana University observed the process of reconciliation in action in this project. His study provides evidence of how the community sought to resolve conflict by redefining community consciousness in local terms rather than in province wide sectarian terms.<sup>17</sup> The restoration of Magherakeel cemetery was central to this. As Cashman observed:

[This] was a self-conscious attempt to re-interpret the graveyard as a place emblematic of coexistence, a place where both traditions share common ground, sacred ground no less. The restoration turned the graveyard into a

signifier of a more complicated past.<sup>18</sup>

In overcoming mistrust, fear and a simplified pre-programmed sense of the past, the benefits accruing from the experiment were significant. He goes on:

Attention redirected to that which is local and shared, challenges the impulses to segregation and difference . . .<sup>19</sup>

Viewed from the wider perspective of genealogy, there is a danger that such studies can be used to satisfy self-perpetuating myths about racial purity and exclusivity. Just as genealogy can become life enhancing it can be wholly destructive. In the course of her studies, Catherine Nash has found that “family history can be used for problematic as well as positive purposes”.<sup>20</sup>

And yet on the whole her experience has demonstrated that the outcome is generally positive:

Even if researchers start with fairly neat models of ethnicity and cultural difference, doing genealogy in Northern Ireland can lead to a greater sense of the interconnected and shared histories in Ulster.<sup>21</sup>

In assessing the success of local projects, Nash’s research confirms the valuable and lasting impact it can bring:

Yet forms of local and family history that engage with diversity and interconnection in the past can challenge narrow versions of community and ethnicity and encourage more open versions of belonging . . . [In] one sense, the content of local or family history is less important than its true value as a social practice that brings people together and creates social relationships that challenge division.<sup>22</sup>

The programme for Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) in Northern Ireland has sought to develop learning aids to promote tolerance. An exemplary model is *Two Acres of Irish History: A study through time of Friar’s Bush Graveyard and Belfast 1570-1918*. This textbook used an ancient burial ground in Belfast, the only Catholic cemetery in the city through the Penal era, to develop a learning resource that challenges students to use rigorous research techniques to understand their history.

Such is the success of Friar’s Bush graveyard, Belfast City Council now manages it as a popular heritage attractions. Cemetery tours can also be taken in the Clifton Street burying ground and the City Cemetery.

In southwest Ulster, the Killesher Community Development Association were provided with financial assistance by Fermanagh Council and the Rural Development Council to restore the walls of Old Killesher graveyard and to improve visitor access.

In 2003, the Ulster Historical Foundation, with assistance from the New Opportunities Fund, will launch an educational website called *History from Headstones Online*. It will use inscriptions from 800 local cemeteries as a learning resource and it is hoped that this will promote a greater level of understanding of

cultural diversity among local users.

The value placed on cemeteries as a community learning resource is not peculiar to Ireland. In the USA, a New England schoolteacher, Dean Eastman, has developed a programme called *Tiptoeing through the Tombstones*. Initially devised to demonstrate a method of archaeological dating by studying the gravestones in a local colonial Puritan cemetery, it has taken on a life of its own, enthusing not only school children but the parents who often accompany the children on field trips.

The study of graveyards is not unique but using the cemetery as a means to resolve conflict is an interesting new approach. The application of rigorous research methodologies matched to locally supported community development programmes can be of help in bringing social cohesion and community harmony.

It is important that we champion the positive legacy given to us by the past, because examples exist to remind us of how divided that past has been:

One of the more absurd relates to how when the plans for a new City Cemetery in Belfast were being laid, the Catholic Church, insisted that the area set aside for their burial plots should be divided from the rest of the cemetery by a sunken wall. As Scott commented: "It seems that the intention was to keep Catholics and Protestants apart even after death."<sup>23</sup>

After it opened, Belfast Council initially prohibited raising gravestones in the Jewish section of City Cemetery, and this despite the graveyard being renowned for its lavish and ornate monuments.<sup>24</sup>

The Presbyterian church, opened a separate cemetery in Belfast, at a time when it was illegal for them to do so, as a result of obstructionist tactics of a local rector. This separate burial ground for those of the Presbyterian faith became Balmoral Cemetery.<sup>25</sup>

The Rural Development Council 1997 Annual Report commented that "the actual creation of a sense of belonging is probably still the most demanding challenge for community groups."<sup>26</sup> That sense of belonging exists in local graveyards and the communities have realised their potential.

## Conclusion

The value of Irish graveyards to a study of conflict resolution lies in the practical appeal they have to people of all ages and backgrounds. The very nature of a cemetery encourages calm reflection amongst visitors and consequently makes it an ideal location from which to develop a community based process of conflict resolution.

## Endnotes

1. Paper presented at the *International Centre for Cultural Studies, 7<sup>th</sup> Joint Conference on Conflict Resolution and Globalisation Scenarios*, University of Waikato, Hamilton New Zealand, 22-24 November. 2002.
2. PRONI T/2772/1/11/31.
3. *Donaghedy parish: a history*.
4. The Glebes Committee of the Representative Body.

5. The right existed by custom and tradition if not by actual law.
6. *Burial Grounds: Memorandum*, point no.3
7. *Burial Grounds: Memorandum*, point no.12. The point in full reads:  
 The minister of a religious body other than the church of Ireland has a right to use any form of Christian Burial Service, provided (1) that twenty-four hours' notice be given to the Incumbent by such minister, and (2) that such service is not held during the celebration of divine Service, or any rite in connection with the Church, or the catechising or instruction of young persons, or whilst the Burial Service of the Church shall be proceeding elsewhere in the churchyard.
8. For the life of the old Irish Parliament 1692-1800, see *History of the Irish Parliament*.
9. Pre reformation graveyards in Northern Ireland:
- | County      | Now Abandoned | Containing a functioning church |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Antrim      | 51            | 15                              |
| Armagh      | 16            | 7                               |
| Down        | 38            | 27                              |
| Fermanagh   | 19            | 5                               |
| Londonderry | 32            | 8                               |
| Tyrone      | 32            | 9                               |
| TOTAL       | 188           | 81                              |
10. *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Ardkeen parish, p.53.
11. *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Ballyphilip parish, p.161.
12. *Gravestone Inscription*, Co. Down Vol.13, p.34.
13. PRONI T/1065/28.
14. *Gravestone Inscriptions*, Co Down Volume 13, p.35.
15. Primary Valuation of Tenements, Union of Downpatrick, Parish of Ardkeen, townland of Ardkeen.
16. Dr W J Smyth National University of Ireland at Maynooth, 12 January 2001.
17. *Towards Reconciliation: The Uses of Local History in a Northern Irish Border Community*, 2000.
18. *Towards Reconciliation: The Uses of Local History in a Northern Irish Border Community*, 2000:  
 The full excerpt reads: ‘...[this] was a self-conscious attempt to re-interpret the graveyard as a place emblematic of coexistence, a place where both traditions share common ground, sacred ground no less. The restoration turned the graveyard into a signifier of a more complicated past – one capable of complicating the present, in which oversimplifying the past in binary terms can lead to fear, distrust, even murder.
19. *Towards Reconciliation: The Uses of Local History in a Northern Irish Border Community*, 2000.
20. *Genealogy identities*.
21. *Genealogy identities*.
22. *Genealogy identities*.
23. *Breath of Fresh Air*, p. 43.
24. *Breath of Fresh Air*, p. 45.
25. *Gravestone Inscriptions*, Belfast Vol 3, *Balmoral Cemetery*, p.viii, The decision to establish a Presbyterian cemetery was taken due to “irritation following an incident in the 1850s, in which a Presbyterian funeral conducted by Dr Cooke and the Rev. Joseph Mackenzie was obstructed by the local rector”.
26. RDC Annual Report 1997, p.17.

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