This review calls attention to two classics which challenged me to grapple anew with fundamental questions: why do we have cemeteries, and what they are about? So many different things go on in cemeteries beside disposal and mourning. Why? And how do these various activities influence how we define and think about cemeteries?

In 1930, W. Lloyd Warner brought the anthropological research model developed during his study of the Australian aborigines to his research on Yankee City, a New England community selected as a microcosm of the larger American society. The fifth volume in the Yankee City series interpreted the collective symbolic life of the city and included a section on the cemetery. The book’s initial chapters dealt with the economic and socio–political symbolism ordering the community, while the concluding chapters integrated Freudian symbolism and Christian iconography. This review concentrates on those chapters where Warner presented a theoretical and methodological model, exploring the characteristics and multiple meanings of the cemetery as a cultural landscape.

Drawing on Durkheim’s theoretical lead, Warner analysed the cemetery as a ‘collective representation’, a sacred, symbolic replica of the living community that expressed many of the community’s basic beliefs and values. Materially, the cemetery is a specific type of socially bounded space where daily funerals and Memorial Day celebrations ritually order relationships between the spiritual dead and the secular world of the living. The funeral symbolically removes the
individual from linear time and translates the profane person into the eternal sacred realm. The material signs of the cemetery (lots, graves and markers owned by specific families) locate these transformed dead in living time and ordered space, and so symbolically help to maintain their on-going individual identities and affirm their continued social existence through memory. Warner thus provided an annotated map defining the material properties of the cemetery as a specifically demarcated, internally ordered space (often a grid) where grave plots are precisely located, clearly delineated and identified by markers with specific living families and their individually named and departed kin. Warner’s definition of the cemetery as a material artifact enables historical and cross-cultural comparison; and it supports a deeper level of analysis: ‘The symbols of death say what life is and those of life define what death must be’ (Warner, 1959: 320).

The cemetery is the appropriate sacred space where the living and the dead are separated and symbolically joined as one people through the performance of transition and memorial rites. The annual Memorial Day rituals, a modern cult of the dead, integrate the various faiths, associations, ethnic and class groups of the city into a unified community; and as a sacred collectivity they confront and triumph over anxieties about death through common action. Warner’s analysis of these annual remembrance ceremonies remains unsurpassed in the literature and defines the sacred purpose of the cemetery as the site where the living confront the reality of their own death and possibly receive comfort. ‘The cemetery is an enduring physical emblem, a substantial and visible symbol of the agreement among individuals that they will not let each other die’ (Warner, 1959: 285).

For Warner, the social and status structures which organize the living community are reflected and expressed in the forms and arrangement of the cemetery’s cultural landscape. The family is the primary unit of American society and is collectively represented in the cemetery through separate family plots, outlined with stone borders. Class, age and ethnic differences, conflict between families of birth and marriage as well as strains between communal values and the autonomy of the socially mobile individual are marked by permanent mortuary symbols. The size of plots, placement, type and size of headstones, inscriptions on markers, greater use of the American flag to decorate graves, disinterment and transfer to another burial ground all signal the significance of the cemetery as both a performance stage and a material artefact which reflects the social hierarchy of the community, the shared hope for immortality and the private sentiments of its members. Cemetery landscapes mirror the past life and historic eras through which the community has passed. Attention must also be paid to transition rites, which reveal how death influences the relations of privilege, power and prestige among the minister, the doctor and the undertaker as family members withdraw their customary attendance to the dying and dead.

Warner’s composite analysis of a Yankee City cemetery in the 1950s revealed how the upper and middle-class Protestant burial ground, consecrated in the early 1800s, underpinned the power structure, symbolic traditions and feelings for social continuity of a stable community during a period of socio-economic mobility and a decline in the role of the church. The cemetery reflects both
political continuity and socio-economic change. But for what other specific purposes beyond disposal were these burial grounds originally founded? By expanding Warner’s analysis of the burial ground as a material artifact to include its aesthetic philosophy symbolized in design, monuments, trees and shrubs, David Charles Sloan, writing thirty years later, revealed how the evolution of cemetery development reflected, expressed and influenced the multiple and complex processes of urbanization.

Sloane’s pioneering history of the development of American cemeteries concentrated on the attitudes of the Protestant middle-class toward death and burial from 1790 to 1980. The study focused on four paradigmic cemeteries which served as models for American cemetery design and management: New Haven Burying Ground; Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Spring Grove in Cincinnati, Ohio; and California’s Forest Lawn. The designed landscape, which mirrored changing attitudes towards death, art, nature and society, as well as urban business and managerial practices, was the centre of analysis. In each case, the landscape was used to sell the cemetery and was the marketing and management strategy. In America, Sloane argued, private ownership and commercial activity were both the creative forces behind the re-establishment of the cemetery as a cultural institution, but were also significant factors in its decline as a sacred place of communal meaning and as a repository of local history and shared memories.

As the nineteenth century approached, changes in funerary landscapes were part of the evolution in customs of tending and burying the dead. In 1796, a voluntary association of private, civic-minded individuals (not ministers, sextons or government officials) offered an alternative to the crowding and spacial confusion of colonial churchyards and community graveyards. The New Haven Burying Ground was situated in an accessible location outside the built-up portion of the city. Unlike the city graveyards, frequently located in the centre of the commercially rising town, this new prototype offered a permanently secure, attractive and sacred space, suitable for the expression of private feelings of affection. The landscape revolved around the family lots, and the introduction of ornamental nature was viewed as a moral virtue destined to make city life less harsh. Americans, however, remained temporarily uneasy with the separation of burial from the churchyard and rejected the ordered funerary landscape as cold and formal. Legal incorporation gave the private lot-holders ownership and control and, significantly, this organizational structure furnished the model for the founding of Mt Auburn and other rural cemeteries.

New religious ideas, which offered more optimistic faith in salvation, industrial manufacturing and the veneration of horticulture impacted people’s thinking during the first half of the nineteenth century. The popularity of Mt Auburn, located far from the dense city of Boston, represented this change. The cemetery’s carefully created garden setting, symbolizing domestic tranquility and the hope of immortality, helped to alter the conventional perspective of the grave and to re-establish the cemetery as an important cultural institution. The rural cemetery movement expanded the motivations
for establishing a cemetery beyond the simple need for disposal or because old
graveyards were neglected and/or filled.

Mt Auburn’s founders were horticulturalists, who purposely designed an
aesthetic landscape of serpentine roadways and wide paths where visitors could
lose themselves in the secure naturalistic setting, which was totally different from
city life. Having cleared the wilderness, urban Americans now celebrated the
rustic and venerated the moral instruction of nature. The large, ornamented rural
cemetery became an essential element of, and a didactic counterpoint to, the
commercial society it mirrored. While founders articulated a philosophy of
equality, only the middle and upper classes could afford family lots. Democratic
rhetoric masked distinctions in burial practices. The continuing desire for
singularity and displays of expense by the class-conscious led to more ostentatious
monuments and plantings. Cemetery landscapes, according to Sloane, expressed
the central paradox of equality and exclusivity: Americans believe in democracy
and equality, but go to extremes to differentiate themselves in death.

In 1855, to counter increasing criticism that rural cemeteries had grown
crowded and cluttered, Adolph Strauch transformed Spring Grove Cemetery,
Cincinnati, into a garden–park cemetery. His more formal, artful design with
open sections of lawn, artificial lakes, carefully placed monuments and sweeping
drives mirrored the new urban parks and suburban estates. Importantly, Strauch’s
plans for a more unified landscape curtailed the voice of lot-holders in cemetery
design and maintenance, marking a major shift in the individual lot-holder’s
relationship to the cemetery. A professional superintendent became the overseer
of the landscape: all plantings had to be approved and the height and placement of
monuments were regulated.

Lawn–park cemeteries, like parks, were an aspect of the struggle by urban
residents to control their increasingly chaotic environment—to give order and
rationalized efficiency to their surroundings, and to ease conflicts and bring a
community together according to the ideals of the ‘City Beautiful’ movement.
Olmstead was an admirer of Staunch, and the success of New York’s Central Park
brought pastoral landscape concepts to the public’s attention and influenced the
wider acceptance of lawn–park cemeteries.

Sloane noted that Spring Grove’s rational, efficient design also coincided with a
cultural distancing from death. Americans were handing their dead over to
strangers: doctors cared for the dying, morticians handled the corpse and
cemetery superintendents beautified the grave. This trend opened the way for
entrepreneurs to commercialize the cemetery. In creating Forest Lawn Memorial
Park in Glendale, California, the entrepreneurial Hubert Eaton saw the
opportunity for financial gain. By using business methods to sell plots pre-need
and by streamlining the processes of burial to combine the functions of the funeral
director, cemetery superintendent and monument dealer, sizeable profits could be
made. In designing the cemetery, Eaton reacted to and reinforced the commercial
spirit of the early decades of the twentieth century.

Sloane argued that at Forest Lawn the cemetery was redefined away from
communal sacred space toward a private, secular commercial enterprise. The
visually accessible, familiar landscape incorporated elements of the surrounding suburbs; flush memorials obscured the morbid connotations of a cemetery. Nature did not tear visitors away from the commercial world, but served as a muted backdrop to the artistic statuary evoking middle-class Christian values of religion, patriotism and family. The Memorial Park presumed that people wished to be buried with others like themselves. Sections of the cemetery were marketed exclusively to ethnic and religious groups; exclusionary clauses kept out people of colour. Forest Lawn focussed on the survivors, the dead no longer needing the ministrations of the living.

In discussing the history of Forest Lawn and twentieth century burial practices, Sloane posited a decline in the cemetery as a significant cultural institution and attributed its weakening to changes in American customs, demographics, modern methods of health-care and attitudes toward nature and death. The isolation of the cemetery, restructured families, as well the rise of cremation and continuing alienation from death (both furthered by rising prices and strict management policies that discouraged the involvement of mourners) dictated that the grave had less cultural importance than a century ago. But America is too diverse for such broad generalizations. By concentrating on the Protestant majority, Sloane’s conclusion lacked the nuanced complexity that inclusion of regional, ethnic and religious variations in cemetery practices and memorialization rituals would have produced.[1]

Yet by confining his argument to tracing the complex relationship between death and private enterprise, Sloane broadened the study of cemeteries as cultural landscapes beyond the history of death to reveal how their establishment both correlated with, and also influenced, major transformations (for example, urbanization, secularization and commercialization) in American cultural history, as well as affected and reinforced changing practices and attitudes toward death. Both Sloane and Warner revealed that funerary landscapes do not simply reflect and express the cultural continuities and transformation of their communities, they also help to write that history. Each study invites cross-national and cross-cultural comparative research, which will further illuminate cemeteries as symbolic landscapes, enrich the contemporary investigation of memory and memorialization and advance the necessary revision of the history of death.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to express appreciation for helpful conversations with David Sloane, Tom Laqueur and Richard Meyer.

Notes

REFERENCES


Biographical note

Doris Francis is an anthropologist who is presently living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she teaches university courses in ageing and conducts material culture research through the Museum of International Folk Art. The Secret Cemetery, her ethnography of cross-cultural London cemeteries and mourning practices, written in collaboration with Leonie Kellaher and Georgina Neophytou, is scheduled for forthcoming publication by Berg Press.