

CREMATION: THE TREATMENT OF THE BODY AFTER DEATH

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Cremation: The Treatment of the Body After Death by Sir Henry Thompson

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SIR HENRY THOMPSON

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BODY AFTER DEATH**

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THE TREATMENT OF THE BODY AFTER DEATH

BY

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ETC.

THIRD EDITION

TOGETHER WITH A PAPER ENTITLED

'CREMATION OR BURIAL'

By SIR T. SPENCER WELLS, BART.

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

AND THE

CHARGE OF SIR JAMES STEPHEN

RECENTLY DELIVERED AT CARDIFF

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INTRODUCTION.

EARLY in the year 1874, I introduced the subject of Cremation to the English public by an article in the 'Contemporary Review.' It attracted a good deal of favourable attention, and also much adverse criticism; a notable example of the latter being an elaborate reply from the Medical Inspector of Burials for England and Wales, which was presented in the following number of the Review. And my rejoinder to this appeared in the succeeding issue.

My two Papers were shortly afterwards published in the form of a pamphlet, a large edition of which was soon exhausted, but no further reprint took place.

The result of the interest thus excited was the formation of the 'Cremation Society of England' in the year 1875. This Society has quietly but unceasingly pursued its objects; viz., the dissemination of information on the subject of Cremation; co-operation with similar Societies on the Continent, and the purchase of a freehold site (at Woking), with the construction of a crematorium there on the most approved principles.

Ever since its foundation, the Council of the Society has encountered serious opposition in certain official quarters, and for some years felt it therefore desirable to maintain a cautious attitude. By this means they escaped hostile action on the part of their antagonists, who had threatened to take steps to make the employment of cremation illegal, or at all events extremely difficult.

Recent events, however, have greatly altered the situation. Sir James Stephen's late decision has dispelled all doubts as to the legality of the Society's aims, and created a new interest in them throughout the country. A reprint of the two Papers referred to has been widely demanded. The Council of the Society, of which I have the honour to be President, have decided to republish them, together with a very able paper presented by Sir Spencer Wells to the British Medical Association at their meeting in Cambridge in 1880. They think it desirable also to publish the correspondence which took place between themselves and Her Majesty's Government in 1879-80, referred to in the preceding paragraph. And last, but not least, the elaborate judgment of Sir James Stephen is appended, appropriately completing a collection of material, which it is hoped may be useful to those who are seeking information upon this important subject.

HENRY THOMPSON.

April, 1884.

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CREMATION :

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By SIR HENRY THOMPSON.

AFTER DEATH! The last faint breath had been noted, and another watched for so long, but in vain. The body lies there, pale and motionless, except only that the jaw sinks slowly but perceptibly. The pallor visibly increases, becomes more leaden in hue, and the profound tranquil sleep of Death reigns where just now were life and movement. Here, then, begins the eternal rest.

Rest! no, not for an instant. Never was there greater activity than at this moment exists in that still corpse. Activity, but of a different kind to that which was before. Already a thousand changes have commenced. Forces innumerable have attacked the dead. The rapidity of the vulture, with its keen scent for animal decay; is nothing to that of Nature's ceaseless agents now at full work before us. That marvellously complex machine, but this moment the theatre of phenomena too subtle and too recondite to be comprehended; denotable only by phraseology which stands for the unknown and incomputable—vital, because more than physical, more than chemical—is now consigned to the action of physical and chemical agencies alone. And these all operating in a direction the reverse of that which they held before death. A synthesis, then, developing the animal being. The stages of that synthesis, now, retraced, with another end, still formative, in view. Stages of decomposition, of decay,

with its attendant putrescence; process abhorrent to the living, who therefore desire its removal. 'Bury the dead out of my sight,' is the wholly natural sentiment of the survivor.

But Nature does nothing without ample meaning; nothing without an object desirable in the interest of the body politic. It may then be useful to inquire what must of necessity happen if, instead of burying or attempting to preserve the dead, Nature follows an unimpeded course, and the lifeless animal is left to the action of laws in such case provided.

It is necessary first to state more exactly the conditions supposed to exist. Thus, the body must be exposed to air; and must not be consumed as prey by some living animal. If it is closely covered with earth or left in water, the same result is attained as in the condition first named, although the steps of the process may be dissimilar.

The problem which Nature sets herself to work in disposing of dead animal matter is always one and the same. The order of the universe requires its performance; no other end is possible. The problem may be slowly worked, or quickly worked: the end is always one.

It may be thus stated: The animal must be resolved into—

a. Carbonic Acid [CO_2], Water [HO], and Ammonia [NH_3].

b. Mineral constituents, more or less oxidised, elements of the earth's structure: Lime, Phosphorus, Iron, Sulphur, Magnesia, &c.

The first group, gaseous in form, go into the atmosphere.

The second group, ponderous and solid, remain where the body lies, until dissolved and washed into the earth by rain.

Nature's object remains still unstated: the constant result of her work is before us; but wherefore are these changes? In her wonderful economy she must form and bountifully nourish her vegetable progeny; twin-brother life, to her, with that of animals. The perfect balance between plant existences and animal existences must always be maintained, while 'matter' courses through the eternal circle, becoming each in turn.

To state this more intelligibly by illustration: If an