

The Funeral in Scots

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Introduction

The Scots, like all other nations, have their own customs and rituals for marking the death and passing of loved ones. Before the mid-14th century depictions of, and attitudes towards death, were more readily embraced than today, but then the Black Death (1345-1350) struck Europe and changed everything. The culture around death began to focus much more on the individual person and depictions in art and literature tended to become more macabre giving rise to the mythology of *Baneshanks* ('the grim reaper') and a more acute awareness that we are *deidlike* ('mortal') - derived from the Latin *mortalis* meaning to be liable or subject to death. We cannot underestimate how much the Black Death has contributed towards our more pronounced fear of the finality of death.

But despite our ever greater focus on the individual, we have not always kept a good record of who died and when. In the early Christian period and Middle Ages, generally only the deaths of rulers and churchmen were considered worthy of noting down. But as early as the 14th century the Scottish Church enacted that each parish priest should return the names of the deceased each year to the bishop. This was because the Church exacted a *quot* or payment on confirmation of testaments. If this enactment was ever observed the records have certainly not survived and the earliest surviving registers of testaments now date from the 16th century. By that time the *quot* (from the Latin word *quota*) amounted to a twentieth part of the moveable estate of the deceased and was widely resented.

Because burial was not a sacrament in the Protestant Church after 1560 ministers took no official part in funeral rites and so there was little reason to keep a record of those who had died. Often the only record that someone had died is an entry in the accounts for *mortclaith* ('dead cloth') which provide only the date the payment was recorded and not the date someone died. Each parish kept *mortclaiths* which were hired out to the mourners to cover the coffin on its way to the funeral, a practice which survived from before the Reformation. For those who had no coffin the *mortclaith* covered over the body until it was placed in the ground. The quality of *mortclaith* – and payment – varied, though the poorest in the parish were often exempt and covered with the cheapest cloth. After the funeral the *mortclaith* was handed back and hired out again. The proceeds raised by *mortclaith* hire went towards paying poor relief maintenance. Often the *session clerk* ('parish council clerk') or schoolmaster kept these accounts which were subject to a variable sense of responsibility on the part of the record keeper.

Gradually some parishes also began to keep actual burial registers noting the names of those who had died, the farms or places where they lived, date of burial, sometimes the date of death, and even their supposed ages. Causes of death were sometimes noted too. For example, the Presbytery of Stirling passed the following enactment in 1583:

Item, ane act made on the xxvj day of Merche 1583 Commanding ilk minister to register all mariagis, baptezain of bairnis, personis that deis within the parrochum and almws collectit to the pure with the distributone thairof, as lykwys to produce thair buikis of disceplein with the register of the foirsaidis befor the presbytery twys ilk year to be veseit...

(Item, an act made on the 26 day of March 1583 commanding each minister to register all marriages, baptising of children, persons who die within the parish and alms collected for the poor showing how it is distributed, and also to produce their books of session proceedings with the above register twice each year to be examined by the Presbytery...)

But generally these registers were erratically kept and only provided a minimum of information. By the mi-19th century traditional structures in Scottish society began to buckle under the demands of a highly mobile, industrialised culture and the Church of Scotland, in fact, split apart in 1843. It was clear that for a number of reasons, such as a greater awareness of public health, the care of the dead needed to be better organised. Large new, municipal cemeteries were being opened from the 1820's and 1830's which kept detailed lair registers recording a mine of statistics and from 1 January 1855 it became law in Scotland that death certificates were to be issued for all those who now deceased. These certificates recorded for the first time in a systematic way across Scotland the name, age, profession, time, date and place of death, cause of death, parentage, spouse(s) and names of informants of the deceased.

The Passing of the Loved One

In the Scots-speaking regions of Scotland there are distinct terms associated with death, burial and bereavement. Depending on the dialect of Scots, you might speak about either *deith* (sounded with an 'ee') or *daith* (sounded with an 'ae'). It might be that a person died peacefully and in Scots we would say they *slippit awa*, but if they suffered towards the end we might say instead that they *won awa* which is a way of saying they finally obtained release. It is usual in Scots to say that a person *dee'd a fair strae deith* if they died naturally at home in their bed. We might also speak about the cause of death and in Scots we express this as the person having *dee'd wi* ('died from or as a result of'). So we might say "Jock Stewart dee'd wi auld age" (John Stewart died from old age). Until relatively recent times it was common for those who knew they were dying to draw up a will. This was known as the *testament testamentar* because it contained both an inventory of the deceased's *guids, geir an plenishings* (possessions and household furniture), together with debts due to, or by, the deceased, and finally the *latter* or *breive will*. There is a vivid picture of the making of such a will in the novel *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* by William Alexander written in the 1870's and it is appended to this feature. If the deceased were to die without making a will then the inventory of goods and debts was known as the *testament dative*. The family and friends left behind now became *murners* ('mourners') in a state of *murnin(g)* ('mourning').

In Pre-Reformation and Catholic Scotland it had always been desirable for the loved one to receive extreme unction from a priest immediately prior to death. This involved confession, and anointing with holy oils as a sign of the forgiveness of sins. After 1560 a hot debate raged between Catholics and Calvinists on this very point. In

1580, for example, the Scottish Jesuit John Hay argued against the Calvinist viewpoint:

Quhy deny ye the Sacrament of extreme vnction, sen the Apostle saint James Speikes sua manifestlie of it, sayand: Is any seake amang you lat him call for the preistes of the kirk, and lat thame pray wpon him annoincting him with oyle, in the name of the lord.

(Why do you deny the sacrament of extreme unction, since the apostle St James speaks so manifestly of it, saying: Are any among you sick, let him call for the priests of the church, and let them pray upon anointing him with oil, in the name of the lord.)

However, the Calvinist church took the view that confession and extreme unction were not necessary to salvation. In earlier times, and certainly among Catholic communities, the body of the deceased may have been lain out for family and friends to pay respect over several days before burial. Among Presbyterians burial usually took place within a couple of days lest people's grief encouraged a show of old practices which the authorities regarded as superstitious. In the 19th century places for resting, examining and preparing the body prior to burial began to be built and were termed *deid-hooses* in Scots, which is an apt description of a mortuary derived from Latin *mortuarium* 'place of death'. The building of *deid-hooses* was greatly encouraged by the fear of body snatchers who were selling the dead for medical experiments. By resting your loved one in a *deid-hoose* for a period of time – perhaps a few months – the deceased became of much less use to the grave robbers and could safely be interred later.

The Funeral Formalities

Since ancient times the death of the rich and powerful has been marked with pomp and circumstance. Before the 19th century the kings, queens and nobility of Scotland were taken for burial in staged-managed funeral processions, accompanied by hired mourners and alms often distributed to the poor to ensure that the deceased was received with favour in the afterlife. It was common in these earlier times for a cast of the face of the deceased to be made in order to create a death mask which was painted and placed over the body while it lay in state. A few examples of these, including that of Mary I (1542-1567) queen of Scots, have survived. The custom of wearing black for mourning and funerals appears to have been inspired by French example though there is little evidence of the custom in Scotland before the 16th century. So far as we know, the first high profile adoption of black mourning by the Scottish royal court was in 1537 for the death of Queen Madeline de Valois, wife of James V (1513-1542). George Buchanan (1506-1582) claimed that this was the first time such public mourning was observed in Scotland while the Lord Lyon and poet Sir David Lindsay (d.1555) said that the courtiers "...turnit into sable..." their gowns and robes. The most lavish funeral ever to have taken place in Scotland was that of John Leslie 6th earl and 1st duke of Rothes who died in 1681. Rothes had been a lord treasurer and chancellor of Scotland and was given a state funeral. The procession, which included armed soldiers, hired mourners, musicians, trumpeters, carriages, horses, hundreds of heraldic banners and prominent nobles and personages had to cross from Holyrood in Edinburgh by way of Leith, across the Firth of Forth to Leslie in Fife. The whole procession stretched for 17 miles and as a result almost

bankrupted the Rothes estate. His son in law had to contract afterwards for £68,000 debts and his daughter Margaret Leslie had to sell lands in four out of five counties. Such are the wages of vanity.

But the idea that the passing of every subject or citizen should have been marked by a large and formal funerary procession was one that would have struck people of earlier times as odd. For a start, the cost of such a staged event would have been beyond the means of most people and in any case the Reformation of 1560 resulted in death and burial being excluded from the sacraments. This meant that sincere Presbyterians tended to downplay pomp and emphasize simplicity preferring a *douce* ('sober or respectable') ceremony over *flumgummery* ('superfluous or extravagant show'). It was common custom in communities throughout Scotland on the death of a person to send out the *bellman* ('town crier') who went around with his *deid-bell* (also known as a *mort-bell*) which he rang and intimated the passing of the deceased and that they would be buried at such a time in such a place and that people were invited to attend. In some places the kirk session appointed the bellman, and so he was equated with the English sexton, and in others the town council made the appointment. We have an example of the bellman's style from a satirical libel *A Modern Account of Scotland* written in 1679 which was intended to show how customs differed in Scotland. The writer reports the bellman's formulaic speech made at the decease of a parishioner:

Beloved Brouthrin and Susters, I let you to wot that thir is an faithful Broother lautlie departed awt of this present Warld, awt thi plesuir of Almoughti Good (and then he vails his Bonnet) his Naum is Volli Voodcok, thrid son to Jimmoy Voodcok a Cordinger; he ligs awt thi Sext Door vithin the Nord Gawt, close on thi Nawthuer Rawnd, and I wod yaw gang to hus Burying on Thursdau before twa a cloak, etc.

(Beloved brothers and sisters, I bring to your knowledge that a faithful brother lately departed from this world, at the pleasure of Almighty God (and then he veils his Bonnet): his name was Willy Woodcock, third son of Jimmy Woodcock a shoe maker; he rests at the Sixth Door within the North Way, right next to the Lower Limit, and I ask you to go to his burial on Thursday before two o'clock.)

This basic text was repeated in some 18th and 19th century works with some variation. The names and places change and some of the spellings. The author was at pains to satirise the different orthography of Scots in that period, hence the unfamiliar look of the text. It is clear that the bellman announced a death had occurred, lifted his bonnet down over his face, gave the name of the deceased, where the deceased presently lay, and when the *burrial* or *burrying* (funeral) was to be held. Since the mid-19th century, however, and the expansion of the printed newspaper press, people in Scotland have increasingly resorted to the obituary. This derived from the Latin *obitus* meaning 'to go down or end' and appeared in chronicles during the Middle Ages that recorded the deaths of individuals under the term *obit* or 'end'. Originally only people considered of certain rank or social status had an *obit* in the 18th and early 19th century journals and papers but from the later 19th century anyone who paid for an obituary could announce the death of a loved one. Accompanying this from the late 19th century onwards was the rise in the *murning letter* ('funeral invite') and *murning caird* ('condolence card') no doubt encouraged through increasing literacy and formality.

Before the 19th century the idea that the deceased should be borne to the grave in a hearse or carriage was uncommon, this rather being reserved to people of a certain social status. Instead most were carried by their *murners* to the grave on *spaiks* which were wooden bars. As the *murners* proceeded they might take turns to convey the body or coffin if it was a long distance. The Glasgow bellman and writer Dougal Graham (c.1724-1779) described this and other common practises during the late 18th century and an excerpt from his text will be found in this feature.

As far as the general population is concerned it was during the 19th century that things began to change. As the middle class began to grow and aspire to greater social pretension, they sought to mark the passing of their loved ones with appropriate monuments, and ceremony that reflected the dignity and pomp of their class as they saw it. Their disdain for the bellman fuelled the rise in newspaper obituaries and led to the decline of the *deid-bell*. And so the modern-style funeral professional came into being. They were called undertakers, those who undertook to conduct the dead to their final resting place, or funeral directors because they directed the proceedings. It is from this mid-19th century funeral business that we derive our modern, classic image of the funeral directors in black suits, top hats, wearing *murning strings* ('black armbands'), armed with wreaths and leading a cortege of black cars or carriages to the municipal cemetery.

Because death and burial were not sacraments in the Church of Scotland, ministers did not attend funerals except in a private capacity. The old Catholic church had said mass and prayers for the dead but Presbyterians did not wish to appear superstitious contrary to Calvinist theology. The *First Book of Discipline* (1560), which sought to establish the rules of the new Calvinist church, enacted that while the body of the deceased should be accompanied to burial by members of the church, there should be no singing or prayers and that the whole should be sober and earnest. In these earlier times there were some variations in formula, though little detailed evidence has survived to illustrate this. One exception, though, is the *Forme and Maner of Buriall Usit in the Kirk of Montrois*, probably written in the 1570's. In Montrose the local session attempted to produce a formula that could be followed, declaring:

The Bodye being reverentlye brocht to the graiff, accompaneit with the Congregatioun, the Minister or Redare sall say as fallowis...

(The body being reverently brought to the grave, accompanied by the congregation, the Minister or Reader will say as follows...)

So in the case of Montrose, it was intended the minister should lead the proceedings and say a set piece on death, sin and resurrection in which people in life are described as 'travellers, pilgrims and strangers' in search of the city of God. The idea of sin is central to the text:

Quhowbeit be the Spreit of God and uther godlye exercise, syn is mortefeit and haldin doun in the faithfull during this present lyfe, zit it remanis and workis, and is nevir put away nor clene rutit out bot by death. Syn is sa rutit in our flesch that it deis nevir quhill the flesche die, quhen the corps departs it deis: swa by death are we delivered and maid fre fra syn...

(By the Spirit of God and through our keeping to godly rules, sin is benumbed and kept in subjection by the faithful during their life, but it always remains, working

on us, and is never banished or rooted out except by death. Sin is so rooted in our flesh that is never dies until the flesh itself dies: when the corpse dies sin departs. So by death we are delivered and made free from sin...)

The Montrose formula not only had the minister central to the burial rites but there was also a proposed funeral hymn which ended:

Christ, for thy mycht and celsitude,
That for oure synnes sched thy blude,
Grant ws in faith to leve and die,
And syne ressaive oure sawlis to Thee.

*(Christ, for your might and majesty,
That for our sins shed your blood,
Grant the faithful live and die,
After which receive our souls to you.)*

Despite this early attempt to reconcile former funeral practices with Calvinist theology, the ministry in Scotland did not play a central role in the funeral thereafter and continued to take a dim view of any prayers and music. Funerals were always held at family homes and never at the church. By the 1830's, however, some ministers were saying a grace or giving some appropriate reading from scripture during the funeral gathering held either before or after the burial and from that time onwards things began to change a little. Throughout the period since the Reformation some ministers had continued to preach in Scots – the language best understood by their congregation – but the hierarchy had not set out any formal prayers or translations in the language. Despite this, a number of scholars and churchmen began to publish Scots religious texts during the 19th century which included themes related to death and resurrection. Perhaps one of the best known is *The Psalms: Frae Hebrew Intil Scottis* translated in 1871 by Peter Hatley Waddell who was first a Free Church and then an Independent minister. Of particular interest is Waddell's Scots version of the 23 Psalm in which he describes the valley of the shadow of death, rendered in Scots as the *dead-mirk-dail* (pronounced as *deid* with an 'ee'). The text is appended to our feature. One example of the kind of minister who began not only to reach out to his parishioners in their native tongue, but also provide readings and prayers on themes such as mortality and death, is David Gibb Mitchell (1863-1921). Mitchell was Free Church minister (later United Free) of Cramond from 1890 onwards. He is noteworthy for two books of collected sermons called *Sermons in Braid Scots* (1910) and *The Kirk i' the Clachan: Sermons in Braid Scots* (1917). In the first book Mitchell declared:

“I gathred my flock about me an' spak to them i' the tongue o' their faithers. It was the gude auld Doric: it was their ain couthie words. It was sib to their fancy, an' gaed far ben into their herts. Nane were huff't at hearin their ain tongue preached i' their ain kirk.”

In his second book, published in 1917, Mitchell further describes his intention to reach out in the mother tongue:

“I've a bonnie Kirk in my Clachan here, and on Sabbath my folk gathier round me

for the breid o' life. I whiles win at them throwe the auld Scots tongue. The hamely words gang far in, and I see tears fa' an' faces smile. Mony a han' grips mine at the skailin, an' buirdly men thank me wi' trem'lin voice. There's a cry in mony lands for the truth i' the mither tongue."

Examples of Mitchell's preaching on death and resurrection will be found appended to this feature. In 1940 the Book of Common Order published for the first time guidance for Presbyterians at funerals. Some music was now permitted and readings from scripture at the burial too. The Presbyterian attitude to funerals has continued to evolve. Catholic and Episcopal funerals always retained prayers for the deceased and the priest played a central part, giving communion and absolution to the dying and directing the funeral ceremony. Any formal speech accompanied by prayers at the funeral might be described as the *oration* – from the Latin 'to speak'. Texts relating to the themes of death and resurrection have existed in Scots since the Middle Ages and in 1901 William Wye Smith translated *The New Testament in Braid Scots* from the English version. In 1983, however, William Lorimer's masterpiece *The New Testament in Scots* was published which was translated straight from the original Aramaic, Greek and Latin versions. The Lorimer Bible contains a number of relevant texts in Scots on the theme of death including, Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 11. These and other texts have continued to form the basis for the occasional use of Scots in funerary and other religious rites of passage.

Burial Practice

The way we treat the deceased in Scotland has changed over thousands of years as religious beliefs have come and gone. The first people settled Scotland some 12,000 years ago and by 4,500 BC elaborate burial practices had evolved. Some of these seem strange to us today. For example, at Cladh Hallan in South Uist four bodies were found in the foundations of houses dated to c.1000 BC. A man, who died c.1600 BC, had had his upper teeth removed. A woman who died c.1300 BC was placed with some of her teeth in each fist. They were subject to a process of mummification, probably involving peat bogs, the bodies kept aside for a few hundred years, and then around 1000 BC buried under houses, perhaps because burial beliefs had changed. The burials of people in a crouched position under foundations or at certain sites evidently served to emphasize the continuity of the family group and claims to ownership of the land the ancestors had held. Others dead were left out in the open to be dismembered by animals and the elements, and then the bones gathered up and placed in chambered tombs, similar bones being placed together in neat piles, as at Quanterness in Orkney. Then came a long period in which the deceased were usually cremated and the remains deposited in a funerary urn and buried in the ground as at Loanhead of Daviot in Gordon, Aberdeenshire. The Romans also practised cremation, but once they had adopted Christianity, which believed in burial of the deceased intact for resurrection, this practice became normal in Scotland with the spread of that religion during the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries AD. Since the 8th century all the indigenous peoples of Scotland have been nominally Christian, with the exception of areas which practised Norse religion for a time, or Hindu, Jewish or Muslim communities who arrived in more modern periods. This means that modern burial practice in Scotland, among the indigenous Scots and Gaelic-speaking communities, has been largely shaped by Christian belief over a long period.

Until relatively recent times most people were probably buried in what Scots speakers came to term *deid-claes*, that is, a shroud or simple covering, and laid directly into a grave. In former times it was the younger women in the family who spun these cloths and kept them ready. To be *happit or sweeled in deid-claes* was to be covered or wrapped in a shroud. For those with a little more means it was desirable to be laid to rest in a coffin. This was known most commonly in Scots as the *deid-kist*, though there were later variations such as *mort-kist* (influenced by Latin) or *deid-box* (influenced by English). Indeed, it was only during the 19th century – when funerals came under the control of state-sanctioned professionals – that burial in a *deid-kist* became universal.

In the Middle Ages wealthy people in Scotland had tombs constructed within the walls of parish churches or cathedrals. These often had their family arms carved into the sides, and sometimes an effigy of the deceased in dressed stone. Connected with these tombs were chapels or chantries where priests and monks were endowed with rentals to say masses on behalf of the deceased and their relatives. The idea was that the more masses were offered up the less time a soul had to spend in purgatory. They called such a mass in Latin *anniversarius* (Scotticised as *anniversar*) from the Latin word for ‘yearly’ because they were generally offered up each year on the date the person died. After 1560 the reformed church in Scotland abolished masses and prayers for the dead. Wealthy people continued to construct tombs but the Calvinist church was concerned to take control of where burials took place. In 1611 the Synod of Fife enacted “Na burial to be in the kirk, vnder pane of xx lib. Na licences to be granted for burial, bot be the advyse of the minister and the Sessioun.” (*No burials in churches under penalty of £20. No licenses to be granted for burials except with the advice of the minister and parish council.*) But now the more ordinary people – burgesses, merchants and lairds – began to invest in modest monuments over their graves, called in Scots *heidstanes* if they stood upright, or *thruchstanes* if they were flat or on four legs. These burial markers date largely from the 1560’s and 1570’s onwards and are often written in Scots and Latin, with English inscriptions becoming prominent from the mid-17th century onwards. At one time *heidstanes* were usually placed in *kirkyairds* (‘churchyards’) but by the 19th century they could also be found in the new *burrial grund*s (‘cemeteries’) maintained by a *burgh cooncil* (‘borough council’). In fact, the idea of general cemeteries, not connected with particular churches, comes quite early in Scotland. Perhaps one of the most famous of the older grounds is the Howff in Dundee, formerly part of a monastery. Queen Mary in September 1564 granted a license to the burgh of Dundee to take over the site having as her example practice in France. The queen stated:

WE, understanding that the kirkzarde of oure burgh of Dondie is situat in ye myddis yairof, quhairin ye comone traffique of merchandice is usit: And als ye deid of oure said haill burt is buryit: And throu occasioun of ye said buriall pest and uther contagius seikness is ingenerit: And efter infectioun it maks ye sam to perseveir and continue to ye grit hurt nocht onlie to ye Inhabitants of oure said burt bot alsua of ye haill Realme.

(We, understanding that the churchyard of our said borough of Dundee is situated in the middle of the said town, in which the day to day business of trade is conducted, and also that the dead of our said whole borough are buried, and because of these burials the plague and other sicknesses are produced. And after

infection the burial place causes the same to linger to the great hurt not just of the people in the borough but of our whole realm generally.)

So Queen Mary, as a solution to infectious diseases, allowed the opening of a new cemetery removed from the centre of the town. It was a matter of public health. The word *howf* or *howff* is originally a common Germanic word and probably came into Scots through the Dutch *hof* which meant enclosed place. However, in Scots the word *howf* retains the more general meaning of a resting place or shelter which is why today most Scots speakers use it in the sense of a public house. But the idea that the cemetery in Dundee is a (final) resting place shows *howf* used in its wider sense.

For the vast majority of people until recent times the deceased in Scotland was buried with Christian ceremony in the hope of resurrection. This is why the introduction of the crematorium, at the end of the 19th century, caused an outcry among some of the population as the belief was that the body needed to be buried intact for resurrection to take place. Since then, however, more have chosen cremation for their last rites and it has become an accepted funerary practice in our society.

Some Funeral & Related Terms in Scots

Scots Word	English Equivalent
Baneshanks	Grim Reaper
Beddal	Gravedigger
Bellman	Town crier
Bliss <i>see also sain</i>	Bless
Beerial (NE Scots)	Burial
Burrial / Burry <i>see also yird</i>	Burial / Bury
Burrial or Burying	Funeral
Burrial grund	Burial ground / cemetery
Dee(in)	Die / Dying
Dee'd	Died
Dee'd wi	Died from/as result of
Deid-claes	Shroud
Deid-bell	Funeral bell used for announcements
Deid-hoose	Mortuary
Deid-kist; Deid-box <i>see also mort-kist</i>	Coffin
Deidlike; Undeidlike	Mortal; Immortal
Deith / Daith	Death
Dwyne	Fade away
Graff / graft / grave	Grave
Haly ghaist / spreit	Holy ghost / spirit
Heidstane	Headstone
Kirkmaister	Church officer
Kirkyaird	Churchyard
Lair	Burial plot
Lig	Recline, rest or lay
Meenister	Minister
Mort-kist; <i>see also deid-kist, deid-box</i>	Coffin
Murning / Murnin	Mourning
Murning caird	Condolence card
Murning letter	Formal invite to attend a funeral
Murning string	Black sash or armband
Oration	Formal prayers offered for the deceased
Priest	Priest
Sain <i>see also bliss</i>	Bless or make sacred
Skailin(g)	Ending of, exit from, ceremony or service
Slip awa (slippit awa)	Die peacefully
Thruchstane	Large flat gravestone, sometimes on four feet
Win awa (won awa)	Die after suffering
Yird (noun and verb) <i>see also burry</i>	Earth (noun); bury (verb)
Yirdit	Buried