The Importance of Being Dead

Lord Frederick Cavendish and the Victorian idolization of deceased human heroes

Grief is not a disease. It is love not wanting to let go.

-Sandra L. Bertman[1]

Commemorative objects were an integral part of the Victorian display of grief. The Victorian period is famous for its love of knick-knack, and death provided an opportunity for exercising this passion. Like the lock of hair and the custom-made mourning jewellery, the post mortem likeness, whether in the form of a death mask, a drawing, a painting or a photograph, provided an object towards which the bereaved could direct thoughts and feelings for the deceased loved one whom it represented. It kept the face of the dead always fresh in memory, fixing the person's physical appearance in time. When Prince Albert died in 1861, the widowed Queen Victoria displayed a posthumous portrait of him in each of her residences. The deceased Prince Consort was the example of a man turned an icon; from his post mortem photographs to the Prince Albert Memorial, dedicated simply to darling "Albert", his memory was cherished to the extent that it became subject to parody as well as role modelling. While the queen became the epitomized widow, he in effect became the epitomized 'deceased loved one'. Lord Frederic Cavendish, the subject of the present study, underwent somewhat the same idolization as Albert after his death some twenty years later. He too was immediately sought representationally immortalised, and his death was turned into a national event. The objects that most strikingly testify to his idolisation are paradoxically also the ones that most conclusively define him as dead. Aesthetic post mortem photographs taken for the comfort of his widow; a drawing of the coffin at the funeral, brought in a newspaper; stained-glass church windows that compare him to Christ; all were produced to honour his memory. But while produced to praise his importance in life, these memorialising objects in effect made him emblematic of his own death, turning it into a noble sacrifice and him into a genuine Victorian hero who died for his country.

The death of Lord Cavendish was sudden and unexpected. The lord arrived in Phoenix Park, Dublin, on 6 May 1882, to take up his new position as Chief Secretary for Ireland. He was appointed to the job as conciliator in the settlement of the Irish question by the Liberal Prime

Minister W. E. Gladstone, the uncle of Cavendish's wife, Lucy Caroline.[2] Here, he was murdered by Irish extremists, leaving his 41-year-old wife and the entire nation in grief. In the time following his murder, his image became an icon. The tragedy of his death was surpassed by admiration for his sacrifice, and he was awarded with praise for his wholehearted devotion to his course. In a memorial sermon, Lucy's cousin Revd Stephen Gladstone proclaimed: "Oh, Irish hearts, he died for you, as well as by the hands of cruel men amongst you. Oh, English hearts, he died for the wicked tyranny, the awful selfishness, the bloody cruelty of many of your forefathers. Let both countries be conscience-stricken with a common shame and sorrow".[3] As a national sacrifice, his death seemed acceptable. Without having done much other than die, he was turned into a saint-like soldier who fought and died for his country. To some extent, the widow gained comfort from the symbolical significance of her husband's death. Immediately after his assassination her diary reads: "Across all my agony there fell a bright ray of hope, and I saw in a vision Ireland at peace, and my darling's life-blood accepted as a sacrifice, for Christ's sake, to help to bring this to pass".[4] On a long-term basis, however, she never got over her loss, even with the 'higher purpose' of his death to cling to.

In her lifelong grief, the post mortem photograph of Lord Cavendish played a great part in her dedication to his memory. The likeness enabled him to be a constant in her life, providing comfort and an opening for contemplation. Jalland writes:

> Lucy evidently found some comfort in dwelling on her memories of Frederick and contemplating the photographs taken in the Dublin hospital immediately after his murder, which were organized by Earl Spencer, the Irish Viceroy, as a surprise for her. Lucy and Mary [Gladstone, her cousin,] admired 'the dear beautiful photographs of sleeping Freddy' which Lucy found 'such a deep comfort' that she sent copies to relatives and friends. Lord Spencer had cut off a lock of Freddy's hair for Lucy, and she liked the idea of his 'dear hair…being enshrined in a beautiful diamond locket.[5]

The likeness as well as the lock of hair created a link between life and death, filling the void of the present with the idylls of the past, and made part of the beloved exist in material form, even though he was dead and buried. As Jalland shows, the likeness was appreciated and cherished almost as a substitute for the deceased husband. Estrangement – or 'healing' – was not an option, as the image of his dead body remained an essential element in the continual mourning. Susan Sontag talks about the ability of photographs, 'those ghostly traces', as she terms them, to "Memorialise, to restate

symbolically, the imperilled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life … [to] supply the token presence of dispersed relatives”.[6] Almost like a fictitious character, the deceased Lord Cavendish could continue a flat existence in the family via his photo. He was two-dimensional, but he was there.

In the public sphere, the event was given similar aesthetic outlet in the form of a drawing that was made of his coffin with surrounding mourners when he was lying in state in the chapel at Chatsworth House on 11 May, the day of his funeral. It was brought in the Illustrated London News as was practice then as it is now.[7] At Lord Cavendish's funeral, which was attended by 30.000 people, including half of the House of Commons, the body was in view to the attendees. How it appeared was of great importance to the mourners; Mary Gladstone observed upon seeing Cavendish in state that “one slight cut on his face [was] the only sign of his cruel death”[8], seemingly relieved by this fact. The ethereal beauty of martyrdom was distinguished from the harsh facts of life: the body was arranged and dressed to fit under certain criteria of beauty – visual signs of the brutality of the murder, and any reminder of the possibility that Nature, ‘red in tooth and claw’,[9] had once again taken a victim for no reason at all, were not welcome at the ceremony. The iconographic treatment of Lord Cavendish after his death shows some of the potential the post mortem had for manipulating certain sentiment. If the face of death looked clean and decent, so was the person behind it. External evidence of agony or horror could easily be erased if the situation required it.

In 1892, ten years after Lord Cavendish's murder, the widow visited the Gladstone family at Hawarden and “devoted her recreation time to the design of a memorial window for Freddy in Hawarden church…. [As a relative observed,] the intense grief of early widowhood still remained”.[10] Perhaps working on the design of the monument created an illusion of closeness to the husband who still preoccupied her thoughts. The window provided an altar, towards which she could canalise her energies of sorrow and longing.[11] Memorial church windows were, Jalland writes, ‘high on the list’ of useful and aesthetically pleasing commemorative objects, which were favoured by mourners. Dedicating such sacred objects to the departed was a practice imbued with religious meaning of great importance to the Victorians. Regaining popularity in connection with the Gothic Revival, the medieval practice of dedicating stained-glass windows to saints and icons was made accessible for lay idolatry.[12] In the Middle Ages, stained-glass pictures were used as didactic devices by theologians to educate the illiterate congregation on the life and teachings of Christ. The stained-glass paintings were introduced to English churchgoers as ‘windows to God’,

through which His messages would become understandable to humans. The multicoloured light, as it shone through the stained glass, was considered a manifestation of God's greatness, and the motifs illustrations of His divine words. Around 1200, the Lost Son was a favoured motif in stained glass.[13] He was reborn with the Victorian revival of the medieval style. The theme evokes the Evangelical canonisation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which affected all Christian religions but was particularly focalised in Evangelicalism. Lord Cavendish's murder and Christ's crucifixion share a common semantic of 'dying for the sins of mankind', which is expressively Evangelical. Both murders evoked the Evangelical thematics of Sin, Suffering, Sacrifice, Atonement and, on a good day, Salvation. The immortalisation of Cavendish and the saintly glorification of his death as seen in his death portraits and in the church windows, are evidence of a corporeal worship that is explicitly Christian in outlet, and has elements of human divination. Cavendish was treated as a prophet at the least, elevated to a being that deserved a space alongside Christ. His post mortem celebration supports the argument that the legend of the divine saviour was supplanted by that of the Human Hero over the century. As the church lost supporters, in step with the introduction of historical readings of the bible and general criticism from agnostics and the like, nature was praised for *its* power by biology reformers like Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley. The human race seemed to an alarming extent to be responsible for its own actions – and not just develop according to a predetermined plan. Lord Cavendish's window in St Margaret's Church, Westminster, compares him to Christ who was brought, the windows tell, "like a lamb to the slaughter". Lord Cavendish's own sacrifice, it is understood, was not inferior to that of Christ.

Because of the suddenness of Lord Cavendish's death, and the circumstances of its execution, it was not a 'good death' in the usual terms. As Pat Jalland has shown in her 1999 study *Death in the Victorian Family*, the Evangelical attitude to death was dominated by a sense of justice and trial. A death could be 'bad' if the subject died suddenly, not allowing the family to say their goodbyes or make proper funeral arrangements, and if the subject did not have time for atonement. Devout Christians, she notes, "preferred a long illness because it allowed time for devotional preparation by the sufferer and the family".[14] Alternately, it was considered a 'triumphant death' if the subject died in peace with the world and God, and hence enjoyed 'victory' over both death and the devil. The 'ideal death' typically had the following elements: it took place at home; the dying person made explicit farewells with each family member; the dying had time and physical and mental capacity for completing temporal and spiritual business, either signified by final communion or informal family devotions; the dying person was conscious and lucid until the end, resigned to

God’s will, able to beg forgiveness for past sins and prove his or her worthiness for salvation; pain and suffering were born with fortitude and welcomed as a final test of fitness for Heaven and willingness to pay for past sins; and finally, it was considered a ‘private affair’, usually limited to include only a few members of the immediate family, a nurse and/or a servant, and occasionally a doctor.[15] By all means, the dying should have an air of grace, dignity and honour, and not moan or complain. Modern experts in the *ars moriendi*, such as Professor Sandra L. Bertman of Medical Humanities at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, agree that the most dignified death has many of these elements:

> … the characteristics of … an ideal death seem to be timeliness, painlessness, consciousness, and preparedness. Death would come in later years; it would not be premature. We would be in control of our faculties, alert, and able to communicate. The occasion would not occur suddenly but rather eventually, with time for both philosophical and emotional preparation. We would be able to speak last words and receive the responsive farewells…. Dying the good death also means being spiritually prepared.[16]

However, in the sense that it can be likened to the death of a soldier, Lord Cavendish’s death is not altogether a bad one either. After World War I, it had become painfully evident that in war death, there is little dignity – but of horrors, there are plenty. Before World War I, however, dead soldiers were given a mythical air of grace and dignity for their sacrificial deaths. For Lord Cavendish’s contemporaries, war death was attributed with Arthurian grace and imperial dignity: although the death was sudden, it did not seem as meaningless as suicides or drowning accidents. The iconographic praise of Lord Cavendish resuscitates the masculine ideal of Arthurian legend, which was reborn in Victorian England as part of the medieval revival. Tennyson’s presentation in *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) of the mythological Arthur as a tragic hero can be recognized in the Victorian interpretation of masculinity and the male hero. He has to fight dangers at all costs, and not just from outside the castle walls: moral corruption, frequently personified in the shapes of deceptive women, lurks on the inside. Domestically and nationally, the Arthurian hero is under constant pressure. His life is a continual strife to rescue the needy with great risk to himself, and no other personal gain than knighthood and praise. The Irish conflict provided Lord Cavendish with a domestic problem to be solved, and the opportunity to be an epic hero. Even if there would be no

silent contemplation and no final moans on a sickbed that had been visited by family and friends, the Saviour would receive his spirit nonetheless, because of his dedication to earthly justice.

The hero worship of politicians like Lord Cavendish signifies an increased appreciation of individual independence. The economic surplus of the Victorian period allowed a greater number of people to be their own bosses, and as a result, individual capability at self-help became a masculine virtue – one of the finest in a gentleman. Among the advocates of individual accomplishment, one of the most widely read propagandists was Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), a doctor, journalist, railway executive and radical. In his book *Self-Help* from 1859, he stresses the importance of being able to handle one's own affairs, and exemplifies the helplessness of those who receive 'over-guidance' and 'over-government'. Men, he claims, "must necessarily be the active agents of their own well-being and well-doing; …. However much the wise and the good may owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers".[17] He does not speak in favour of the Evangelical notion of piety, but encourages every man to struggle for self-improvement, valuing gain according to effort. As Robin Gilmour has observed, the ideology of self-help appealed not only to ambitious industrialists, but also to the working class.[18] The new working class, that is, with the religious inheritance of the new industrial proletariat that came with the industrial revolution.

Smiles's work recognises the human crave for heroes and evaluates types of worship. He speaks of "Caesarism [as] human idolatry in its worst form – a worship of mere power, as degrading in its effects as the worship of mere wealth would be", and argues that " a far healthier doctrine to inculcate among the nations would be that of Self-Help". Essentially, he says, the "two principles are directly antagonistic".[19] He fails, however, to distinguish between *forms* of human idolatry, of which some apparently are acceptable, and not all are antagonistic with the principles of self-help. The individual achiever who does not rest on his laurels like certain Roman emperors, but has character, energy and uprightness, is to Smiles exemplary and worthy of praise – and hence not, paradoxically, simply one of the 'masses'. In the history of the English nation, Smiles writes, "Rising above the heads of the mass there was always to be found a series of individuals distinguished beyond others, who commanded the public homage".[20] The actions of men like these should inspire others to do great deeds.[21]

The power of the individual to change status quo belonged to Lord Cavendish, to the extent that his story, his name, his image and its symbolical value came to surpass him. As Smiles tells us, "Even the humblest person, who sets before his fellows an example of industry, sobriety, and upright honesty of purpose in life, has a present as well as a future influence upon the well-being of

his country; for his life and character pass unconsciously into the lives of others, and propagate good example for all time to come". Cavendish's martyrdom makes him an archetypal Smilesian individualist, a person who, due to his noble course, has been made able to inspire and change the lives of others, the masses. He is what Smiles terms a perfect gentleman:

> For Englishmen a real 'gentleman' is a truly noble man, a man worthy to command, a disinterested man of integrity, capable of exposing, even sacrificing himself for those he leads; not only a man of honour, but a conscientious man, in whom generous instincts have been confirmed by right thinking and who, acting rightly by nature, acts even more rightly from good principles.[22]

To those who made a martyr of Cavendish, he died as a gentleman, sacrificing himself 'for the people'. His Smilesian heroism is coloured by the irony of the fact that in his self-sacrifice 'for the people', he became in effect reduced to something as two-dimensional as an idolised aristocrat. His accomplishments had a certain air of Caesarism – he would probably not have been given his political position in the first place had it not been for his influential family relations. However, with the decrease in aristocratic power over the century, it seems safe to say that while good relations may have been the road to a profitable job, the job still had to be done.

At the same time as it brought instant comfort, the iconographic treatment of Lord Cavendish's involuntary 'sacrifice' may on a long term basis have slowed the process of healing rather than speeded it up, for the nation and the widow. Let's say, for argument's sake, that because of the glorification of the deceased, neither the widow nor the rest of the nation was allowed the opportunity to move gradually through what is identified by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross as the five stages of grief: "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance".[23] As Jalland points out,

> The manner of Lord Frederick [Cavendish's] death and the nation's response meant that his memory was universally idealized. This made it well-nigh impossible for his widow to review their lost relationship realistically and proceed beyond the initial stage of intense and exaggerated idealization. Negative memories of Lord Frederick would never have been allowed to surface, so he was never remembered as anything other than perfect, and the process of mourning remained incomplete.[24]

The 'intense and exaggerated idealization' might range somewhere between Kübler-Ross' stages of 'denial' and 'bargaining', but never reach the point of total acceptance. Roland Barthes notes that in this process, the photograph "is without culture: when it is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning".[25] In the photograph, he adds, "nothing can be refused or transformed".[26] While documenting his personal greatness, the photographs also fixed the fact that this precise greatness led to his death.

The criteria for becoming an icon were hard to meet with in the world of Smilesian self-help. Nonetheless, the Victorian was an age of individualist mini-icons, some of whom never went beyond the walls of the private household. As the case of Lord Cavendish shows, if a bereaved family had the means, there was no end to the possibilities for immortalisation of the 'family hero'. In Lord Cavendish's case, due to his social and political status, and the political circumstances surrounding his death, worship was not limited to remain within the family, but became a national affair. Any family, however, according to means, had increased possibilities for memorialising their dead. Love of individualism and a general focus on the individual made them do so. Time, it seemed, was one of the few things the Victorians could not control, delay or in any other way interfere with. Capturing the body on paper, canvas, photographic plates or in clay was as close as they came.

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[1] Sandra L. Bertman, *Facing Death: Images, Insights, and Interventions* (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1991), p. 200.
[2] *Née* Lyttelton
[3] Revd Stephen Gladstone, "A Life Given for Ireland", memorial sermon (1882), quoted in Jalland, p. 326.
[4] Lucy Cavendish, *The Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish*, quoted in Jalland, p. 327.
[5] Jalland, p. 329.
[6] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 9.
[7] Cf. for example the closed coffin funeral of Princess Diana on 6 September 1997 in Westminster Abbey, which was documented with pictures in all larger newspapers, magazines and TV news spots. Lady Diana was killed in a midnight Paris car crash on August 31, 1997, aged 36. The martyrdom of Lady Di is largely with her fans and admirers.

Statements like “If ever there was a Mother Teresa in the making, the woman who almost would be queen was it” ([Online, 13 September 2002] http://www.eonline.com/Features/Features/Diana) are typical of this group. Singer/songwriter Elton John dedicated his previous elegy to Marilyn Monroe, “Candle in the Wind”, to Diana, under the new title “Goodbye England’s Rose”—and Earl Spencer’s funeral oration “Earl Spencer’s Eulogy” asserted that “Diana’s Goodness Threatened the Media”. (“Earl Spencer’s Eulogy” is available at <http://www.geocities.com/wellesley/6226/funeral.html>.) From being a ‘Mother Teresa in the making’ to becoming an icon of Goodness, it took only her premature death.

[8] *Mary Gladstone: Her Diaries and Letters*, ed. Lucy Masterman (1930), quoted in Jalland, p. 328.

[9] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850), LVI, 4.

[10] Jalland, p. 332.

[11] The assassination was the inspiration for several other windows, including one erected by iron- and steel-workers in St James’s Church, Barrow-in-Furness, and another imposing window in St Margaret’s Church, Westminster. (Jalland, p. 291).

[12] The technique of stained-glass painting, although commonly attributed to the Middle Ages, dates back to Late Antiquity. In England, Canterbury Cathedral was one of the first to introduce stained glass when the church was restored after a great fire in 1174, and the great cathedrals of Salisbury, York and Lincoln along with Westminster Abbey followed during the thirteenth century. The style was brought back to life in connection with the Gothic Revival in the early nineteenth century, praised by architectural reformers like John Ruskin.

[13] For further reading on stained-glass painting, *see* Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz’s article on Gothic stained-glass painting in *Gotik. Architektur, Skulptur, Malerei*, eds. Rolf Toman et al. (Köln: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1998).

[14] Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28. Pat Jalland has gathered material relating to Lord Cavendish’s murder, including the personal diaries of members of his close family, and discusses it in *Death in the Victorian Family.*

[15] Jalland, p. 26.

[16] Bertman, pp. 16-17.

[17] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (1859), p. 38.

[18] Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (Harlow, England: Longman, 1993).

[19] Smiles, p. 21.

[20] Smiles, p. 22.

[21] The written word, although essentially redundant in the education of good men who learn from the ‘school of life’, could prove useful in the spreading of their ‘social gospel’ (Smiles, p. 23):

> Biographies of great, but especially of good men, are… most instructive and useful, as helps, guides, and incentives to others. Some of the best are almost equivalent to gospels—teaching high living, high thinking, and energetic action for their own and the world’s good. The valuable examples which they furnish of the power of self-help, of patient purpose, resolute working, and steadfast integrity, issuing in the formation of truly noble and manly character, exhibit, in language not to be misunderstood, what it is in the power of each to accomplish for himself; and eloquently illustrate the efficacy of self-respect and self-reliance in enabling men of even the humblest rank to work out for themselves an honourable competency and a solid reputation.

Smiles praises the individual achiever who, regardless of social status, has managed to set an example.

[22] Samuel Smiles, quoted in Asa Briggs, ”Samuel Smiles: The Gospel of Self-Help”, in *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Society*, ed. Gordon Marsden, London and New York: Longman, 1998, pp. 101-113), p. 112.

[23] Bertman, p. 198.

[24] Jalland, pp. 333-4.

[25] Roland Barthes*,* *Camera Lucida* (from the French *La Chambre Claire* by Editions du Seuil, 1980, translated to English by Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 2000), p. 90.

[26] Barthes, p. 91.

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