



# Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

## PORTFOLIO: 'Let Your Last Footprint Be a Green One'

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 37, No 1 (2016), pp. 41-45

ISSN 2374-2267 (online)DOI 10.5195/aa.2016.127



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## 'Let Your Last Footprint Be a Green One'

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Those of us residing in the United Kingdom will likely, at some point in our lives, encounter the successful and sustained advocacy by the 'natural death movement' (see Weinrich and Speyer 2003, West 2010) to take seriously 'greener' practices when funeral planning. Similarly, 'Let Your Last Footprint be a Green One'<sup>i</sup> is an advertising slogan used by one natural burial provider that epitomises the environmental rhetoric currently capitalised upon by 'traditional' and 'alternative' funeral service providers in the funeral industry more generally. Further, for those in Britain who have chosen natural/woodland burial or encountered it as a mourner, 'nature' appears to be a rich and multifaceted symbol through which these people are making sense of their own mortality and experience of loss. 'Returning to nature' and desiring to 'give something back' are commonly uttered idioms given in response when I asked people why they have chosen natural burial (Davies and Rumble 2012).



**Fig 1 A grave planted with wildflowers at a woodland burial ground in Cambridgeshire**

The 'returning to nature' discourse has also captured the imagination of writers and poets, including Pam Ayer's with her poem entitled 'Woodland Burial' (2006):

Don't lay me in some gloomy churchyard shaded by a wall,  
Where the dust of ancient bones has spread a dryness over all,  
Lay me in some leafy loam where, sheltered from the cold,  
Little seeds investigate, and tender leaves unfold,  
There, kindly and affectionately plant a native tree,  
To grow resplendent before God and hold some part of me,  
The roots will not disturb me as they wend their peaceful way,  
To build the fine and bountiful from closure and decay,  
To seek their small requirements so that when their work is done  
I'll be tall and standing strongly in the beauty of the sun.

This poem reflects a commonly-held perception of 'natural burial' by its supporters; that a natural burial allows a corpse to fertilize soil that, in turn, will nourish new life. Ayer's not only captures this sentiment of reciprocal nourishment, evident among many natural burial supporters, but also of the idea that by nourishing the earth one nourishes one's self before God or humanity. In Britain today, some people express the opinion that churchyards, cemeteries and crematoria have become inanimate places in which 'the dust of ancient bones has spread a dryness over all'. By sharp contrast, natural burial grounds are understood to consist of animate earth whose 'leafy loam' nourishes a multiple array of life-forms. This innovative burial practice is, then, not only replete with allusions to its life-giving potential, but also to a sense of dynamic reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human world. In all of this we find expressions of symbolic opportunities for gift-giving by the living in the context of death and bereavement. It seems that such allusions to gift-giving profoundly enhances the allure of natural burial and substantiates its therapeutic benefits for the bereaved. And it does so by providing a creative means for the pre-registered and bereaved to imagine continuity beyond death whilst, concurrently, affirming meaningful relations, memories, and values with the living.



**Fig 2 An establishing woodland burial ground in SE England that is affiliated to the Church of England**

Comparatively, Boret (2014) conducted ethnographic research on a similar burial innovation in Japan known as ‘tree burial’ (*jumokuso*) and similarly found that the Japanese who chose this contemporary burial form expressed how it was an opportunity to positively make death an outlet for the regeneration of life within a cycle of ‘nature’ for, as Boret argues, tree burial fits with new ideas of ecology where the individual’s corporality nourishes the earth and re-enters the cycle of life in ‘nature’.

For natural burial the dead matter, quite literally. It has been argued that in order to successfully transcend nature/culture dualism we need to fully accept (our) death as part of life, for humans (alive or dead) are food too (Kelly 2015, Plumwood 1993, 2008). Dead bodies as *matter* will decompose and rot down to elements that are sustenance and nourishment for other life forms assuming decomposition is not impeded by a corpse being hermetically sealed in a non-biodegradable coffin and placed in a cement-lined vault as commonly happens in the United States for example. Unlike the modernist funerary tradition that perpetuates a “yuck” factor in response to the decomposition of death and keeps corpses hidden and feared, the natural burial movement is a creative resistance to the modernist paradigm (Clayden *et al.* 2015) that seeks to celebrate decomposition and use motifs of ‘nature’ as a means to understand death and mortality.

For those who choose to pre-register a grave space at a ‘natural’ or ‘woodland’ burial ground, be it either for themselves, or when organising a funeral upon the death of a friend or relative, they very often express sentiments about natural burial like those below:

It's a comfort! The continuity of seeing things go on. You know, it makes dying just like leaves falling off a tree. It's all...circular...isn't it? (a widow who has pre-registered for a grave at a natural burial ground in England where her husband is already buried.)

Well, I just think it's natural that you go back to the earth. It's how things are: everything is born, lives, dies and they go back to nature. (a woman who is considering pre-registering for a grave plot in a natural burial ground.)

Environmental activists who have become involved in the American natural burial movement, such as Kelly (2015:97), declare "Decay is happening. And it's essential." As an anthropologist who has conducted research on the British natural burial movement I would simply add that a small proportion of the British population are choosing to be remembered not by a permanent inscription in stone, but by the seasonal growth and decay of the natural environment where their remains lie and where one's footprint is not in perpetuity. May we all rot in peace.



**Fig 3 A grave marked by a wooden plaque and planted primroses**

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## PHOTO CREDITS

- All photographs by Hannah Rumble.

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<sup>i</sup> Green Acres Woodland Burials. 'Planning Ahead and Paying for your Woodland Burial'. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> July 2015. <http://www.greenacreswoodlandburials.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Planning-Ahead-LATEST-AUGUST2013.pdf>