



Bereavement in the arts

Birth and death? Maternal memorabilia in Scotland

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Abstract: This paper draws on a range of artefacts to rectify the limited attention given to historical memorials recording the death of women in childbed in Scotland. These works of art were part of societies which recognised the likelihood of maternal death. The effect of both the possibility and the reality of the death of a mother is shown to be profound for the grieving widower and for other family members. The wide range of artefacts reflects the uniquely individual nature of loss in childbed and the ensuing grief.

Key Words: Childbed death, maternal death, Scotland, artworks, memorials.

In this paper we examine some historical artistic artefacts which record or are associated with the death of a mother around the time of childbirth or 'childbed', currently known as 'maternal death'. The role of these artefacts will be examined in the context of the ongoing debate about the purpose and form of memorials in the twenty-first century. We consider the meaning of maternal death to the family of the woman who has died.

In this paper we have made Scottish memorials our main focus, although we have been able to identify only a limited literature on memorials to women in Scotland dying in childbirth. Although there are plentiful memorials in England and other countries, our research suggests that there are fewer of these memorials in Scotland; this may be due to what Penny refers to as the 'squeamishness' which developed around the subject of maternal death (Penny, 1975, p322). It is more likely, though, that the Reformation in Scotland is at least partly responsible for the dearth of effigies, because Presbyterian churches considered ecclesiastical images to be 'popish' and therefore unacceptable.

The significance of memorials

The process of mourning following the death of a loved one is likely to take various forms, which are largely determined by the culture in which the death occurred. These cultural factors include ethnic and geographical aspects, as well as temporal or even historical influences. What is unlikely to be affected, though, is the need of the bereaved to search for the meaning of their loss in order to attempt to make some sense of what may appear a pointless tragedy. As Robert Niemeyer (2005) observed, finding meaning in the loss tends to be associated with more positive adaptation to grief. Because death in childbirth is likely to assume the proportions of a particularly pointless tragedy, mourning and the associated search for meaning become especially significant, not only to the bereaved, but also to other childbearing women who may or may not contemplate the possibility of a similar demise. The memorials which are created and the artefacts which are retained serve to facilitate this search for meaning, as well

as assisting moving through grief and, by making public the loss, locating helpful emotional support.

In the same way that certain people have been shown to act as 'mediators' to help understand the narrative of the dead person's life, death memorials 'produce a story that works' (Walter, 2006, p25). Additionally, such objects may also achieve other ends, which are outlined by Avril Maddrell, when she discusses memorials in terms of providing 'spaces' which constitute places, not just for remembrance, but more proactively to offer 'spatial triggers for emotional responses' (Maddrell, 2012, p46). She goes on to show how memorials are becoming less likely to take the form of park benches, roadside crosses and floral tributes and more likely, with the advent of the internet, to be virtual spaces.

In this paper, unlike Maddrell's looking forward, we are looking back at historical memorials to women dying in childbed. These memorials tell us about the family grief in response to the woman's death and also of the changing attitudes to women, marriage, childbirth, motherhood and family structure (Penny, 1975; Hurtig, 1983).

Some examples of representations and other memorials

In general terms there are a number of well-publicised and familiar examples of different forms of memorials to women who have died in childbirth. Literary memorials may be found in the poetry of John Milton (1608-1674) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82) and the novels of Charles Dickens (1812-1870). The almost mythical Taj Mahal (1631) represents a more tangible memorial.

The memorial to Princess Charlotte in St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle (1796-1817) was erected by public subscription and reflects her well-loved status at a time of variably-regarded monarchs.

In Chevening, Kent, the Hon James Hamilton Stanhope, the grieving widower of Lady Frederica Louisa Murray (1801-23) commissioned Sir Francis Chantrey (1827) to create a poignant memorial. By the time of its completion he had, in despair, hanged himself.

In contemplating what these memorials tell us, Jean Wilson shows that each has its own story, not to mention its own agenda (Wilson, 1993). The emotions which are aroused vary between solemnity, tenderness and dire forewarnings (Penny, 1975). As well as the usual reminders of our own mortality, we may be being encouraged to celebrate both the minor enjoyments of our earthly existence as well as the prospect of major delights in the next world. More likely, we are reminded of the personal assurance which family brings, through its social and religious unity. Judith Hurtig combines the late sixteenth century trend towards monuments depicting death in childbirth with 'the desire to prevent death in childbirth [as reflected in the] publication and popularity of new treatises and handbooks of obstetrics' (Hurtig, 1983, p614).

Memorials in Scotland

We have identified a few memorials to women dying in childbed in Scotland, despite concerns about Presbyterian attitudes. From these memorials and from other materials it is possible to gain helpful insights into the impact of childbed death on family members.

Gravestones

It is now quite unusual to find a gravestone indicating that a woman died in childbed, but in the seventeenth century and possibly later there were Scottish gravestones commemorating women who had died in such circumstances. The actual gravestones have disappeared with the passage of time, but we have identified two because they were recorded in a book of epitaphs (Monteith, 1704). The first is an epitaph relating to a gravestone which had at one time been in Greyfriars Churchyard in Edinburgh. It testifies:

'To the memory of his dearest wife Elizabeth Gillespie, daughter to the most learned Mr George Gillespie, minister at Edinburgh, and who was learned far above her sex: and having brought forth no daughter, died in the birth of the seventh son, 5 March 1681 and of her age then 33 years' (Monteith, 1704, p13-14).

The same volume includes the following similarly sorrowful story, from the undated epitaph of Robert Douglas, Viscount Belhaven:

'In his youth, he enjoyed the sweet society of Nicola Murray, daughter to the Baron of Abercainey, his only wife, who lived with him not above 18 months and died in childbed with her child.' (Monteith, 1704, p39).

That the aristocratic Robert Douglas never fully recovered from the loss of his wife and child is evidenced by the fact that, even though he was 66 when he died in 1639, he had never remarried.

Further, documentary evidence of the effects of childbed death on the family is found in a poignant letter of 2 August 1733, in which John Campbell writes to his father, Patrick Campbell of Barcaldine, about the death of John's sister. She had died the previous evening after giving birth to a stillborn baby. They must console themselves, he said, by thinking of 'the character and the pretty familie of children she has left'. The funeral was planned for the following Tuesday, and her husband, 'poor Ardchattan' is described as 'inconsolable' (NRS, Campbell of Barcaldine Papers, GD170/793).

Lady Margaret Clerk (?-1701)

The death of Lady Margaret Clerk as a young woman, the wife of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, is significant not only for the grief which it aroused, but also for the artefacts which serve to record this grief. John Clerk of Penicuik (2nd Baronet 1676-1755) was an eighteenth-century polymath, who, as well as being a lawyer, antiquary and architect, composed baroque music. At the age

of twenty five he was introduced to and married Lady Margaret Stewart, daughter of the third Earl of Galloway. Their idyllic marriage lasted only for the duration of her first pregnancy, as she died of a primary postpartum haemorrhage due to a retained placenta, having 'lost a vast deal of blood. The placenta ... was adhering to the uterus and [was removed] by force' (Gray 1892, p40). Margaret died despite the ministrations, which her husband considered 'too hasty', of three eminent medical practitioners; these included James Hamilton, who subsequently became President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh (1702-3).

The memorials to this young woman take four different forms. The most immediate, and perhaps the most unusual memorial, is a tress of Margaret's long brown hair (Figure 1). After



Figure 1. Lady Margaret Stewart death mask and tress of hair (In a private Scottish collection)



Figure 2. Lady Margaret Clerk portrait Posthumous portrait by Sir John de Medina (In a private Scottish collection)

her death family members cut off a strand of her hair which was treasured by her grieving widower, and which has survived and is retained by the family. The next most immediate artefact to record Margaret's demise is a death mask (Figure 1). Her family followed the custom of that social group at that time and had a wax death mask cast. This was later used to provide the basis for a third memorial, which was the portrait (Figure 2) of 'Lady Margaret Clerk' by Sir John Medina (1702), commissioned by her grieving husband.

The final memorial may be found in the memoirs of Margaret's widower, which record many aspects of his life from youth through to old age, including his grief at the loss of his wife:

'No Tongue can express the sadness of my condition. In misery I returned to bed, but in such a plight as no body could well decern whither I was dead or alive' (Gray, 1892, p37-8).

Fanny Bruce (1856-1881)

A much more recent group of memorials relate to the death of a young Edinburgh woman in 1881. Born in 1856, the second child of a family of five, Fanny was brought up in relatively affluent circumstances in the fashionable New Town. On 28 July 1880, Fanny married Robert Thomas Hamilton Bruce, a 33-year-old flour merchant from a similarly prosperous family, in St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. Just over a year later Fanny gave birth to a daughter, who was probably stillborn. Five days later, on 8 August 1881, Fanny died of 'childbed septicaemia'. Her older brother John was present and registered her death. The certificate was signed by the future Sir James Halliday Croom, who began as an assistant to Sir James Young Simpson and was yet to become Professor of Midwifery at Edinburgh University (Death certificate of Fanny Hamilton Bruce, Scotland's People).

The memorials to Fanny Bruce reflect not only the family's affluence and their grief at her untimely death, but also the circles in which her husband, and presumably she, moved.

The portrait. This oil painting, measuring 91 by 70cm, was painted by William Brassey Hole (1846-1917); he was more noted for his industrial, historical and biblical representations and must have produced this painting as a special commission for his long term friend, the grieving widower (Figure 3). It is undated and we have not yet been able to find out when it was painted, but this is definitely a portrait of Fanny as a wife. An unmarried woman would not have been depicted in this rather matronly pose, wearing a hat indoors. Her pregnant condition is not obvious, although that is less important. This painting carries a melancholy air, due partly to the subdued colours, which strongly suggest that it may have been a posthumous portrait; a suspicion only strengthened by Fanny wearing a black fichu. The air of melancholy draws the viewer's attention to Fanny's red-rimmed eyes, as if tearful, which may be related to the teacup and saucer in her hands. She holds the teacup at the angle used by those who 'read' the future in tea leaves, and so the artist might have been delicately indicating the heartrending outcome of her pregnancy.



Figure 3. Fanny Hamilton-Bruce (1855-81) (oil on canvas), Hole, William Brassey (1846-1917) / Private Collection / Bridgeman Images

The stained glass window and memorial plaque. A memorial window, with a plaque (Figure 4), was erected in St Giles' Cathedral. The Great West Window, entitled 'The Prophets', was created by the leading stained glass artist Daniel Cottier; it was commissioned through a Glasgow art dealer by Fanny's husband, Robert, and erected in 1886. Since the Reformation, the Cathedral windows had all been plain glass, but during and after the major restoration scheme of the 1870s and early 1880s, the Cathedral authorities were approaching prosperous people to



Figure 4. Fanny Bruce plaque (St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh; photograph © Peter Backhouse)

see whether they would like to put in a stained glass window in memory of a relative.

The delay in putting the window in was probably because no one had liked to approach Robert about it in the aftermath of his painful bereavement. The artistic explanatory plaque was placed on the wall to the left of the window. By 1985 the window had deteriorated so badly that it had to be dismantled and removed, but the plaque has been preserved *in situ*.

The bronze memorial plaque, measuring 58cms by 38cms, which accompanied the window, represents a very attractive art object in its own right. Its imaginative arts and crafts-style lettering creates Fanny's monogram. We consider that the plaque must have been the work of John Rhind (1836-1889) the Scottish architect and sculptor; the lettering is almost identical to that on his memorial in the Cathedral to William Hay, which also features a shamrock.

Discussion: the meanings of representations associated with a maternal death

Although it appears that these memorials are not plentiful in Scotland, their very existence does raise certain issues relating to the death of a woman in childbirth. Difficulty in identifying such memorials is aggravated by the fact that cause of death is very rarely recorded on memorials and gravestones. These artefacts demonstrate the impact of childbed death for the bereaved.

The creation of these memorials shows very clearly that the impact of the death on the surviving kith and kin was sufficiently dire to warrant recording their sad loss. An example of such dire effects is found in a newspaper report, albeit from a rather different stratum of society from those who create memorials (The Scotsman, 1930). John Arnott, a mineworker in Fife, was found guilty at Dunfermline Sheriff Court of neglecting his six children after his wife, their mother, died in childbirth. This man's bereavement was said in Court to have affected him so badly that he quite lost interest in life and in his young family. It is necessary to question how being sentenced to one month in prison benefitted either him or his children. The experience of James Stanhope (see above 'Some Examples') appears to bear comparison, although John Arnott did survive to go to prison.

Of the four memorials to Lady Margaret Stewart, the wife of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (see above), his memoirs detail his experience of bereavement, and bear particularly eloquent testimony to the depth and duration of his grief. These memoirs include a poem in Latin which he composed (Gray, 1892, p38) and the following graphic account of the effect of his grief on his physical health (Gray, 1892, p43):

'I recovered weakly from the indisposition I was in, and even the small degree of health I enjoyed was disagreeable to me. My Father saw me often, and took much pains to comfort me, but to little purpose, for I got no rest in the night time but by taking pretty large doses of Laudanum, and at last, by meer mismanagement of my self, I fell into a Hectique

Feaver. It was then the month of May, when the country Aire was in its perfection; by my Father's advice, therefore, and that of the Doctors about me, I retired to Pennicuik.'

Margaret's son survived, being described by John Clerk as 'My poor unfortunat Son, like a phenix from the ashes' (Gray, 1892, p38). The baby was raised by his father's Aunt, Mrs Margaret Aikman of Cairny, and his father visited at least twice weekly.

These artworks show that the surviving family were keen that their grief should be made visible. It may be that, like other forms of mourning, there was an assumption that sharing grief may render it less intolerable. Thus, the memorials may have assisted the bereaved in locating the support of community members.

The memorials demonstrate, further, that death in childbearing did not just affect those who were impoverished and undernourished. These memorials show that maternal death also visited those who were sufficiently wealthy to be able to employ distinguished attendants at the birth and to commission artistic representations. The memorial to Princess Charlotte (see above) serves to show that even being royal did not give immunity to the grief caused by maternal death. It may be that the graves of paupers who died in childbirth tend to be disregarded, but Thomas Laqueur (1983) has begun to correct this neglect.

What do the artefacts not tell us?

Although the significance of paupers' graves may be becoming recognised, it is necessary to admit that maternal memorials were able to be created only by those with sufficient funds to finance them. Despite this, though, there is no reason to believe that the experience of loss was any different among those too poor to pay for memorials (Marshall, 1983). As we have intimated already, despite their having been divided by a century and by huge social differences, the grief of John Stanhope in Chevening may still bear comparison with that of John Arnott in Fife.

Conclusion

The historical works of art and other Scottish artefacts which have been discussed in this paper indicate the profound depth of grief experienced by family members when a woman died in childbed. Memorials to women who died thus have been accorded limited attention generally and even less in the Scottish setting. Thus,

this paper has illuminated a much-neglected form of memorial. It has shown that memorials, as has been shown to be the case currently, may take a variety of forms. This variety gives a sense of the personal and individual nature of both the experience and the grief which follows it. ■

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