

the corpse in the  
**GARDEN:**

**BURIAL, HEALTH, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LONDON**

**ABSTRACT**

Between 1875 and 1900 advocates of green space in London converted nearly a hundred graveyards into public gardens or playgrounds. This article examines why and how this transformation in urban land use occurred. Incorporating changes in ideas about the body, disease, environment, and religion, it argues that a radically new understanding of the corpse and of burial emerged in Britain during the late nineteenth century. Instead of regarding the disintegration of the corpse with horror and trying to arrest it, many came to see the process as essential to the balance of nature. They argued that the planting of grass, plants, and trees was necessary not only to purify the air of unhealthy gases, but also to speed the transformation of the human body into its constituent elements and thus complete the circulation of matter between the animal and vegetable worlds. Although some critics maintained that the creation of recreation areas in burial grounds was both disrespectful and unhealthy, the proponents of graveyard conversion secured both popular support and parliamentary sanction for their efforts.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, nearly a hundred old burial grounds in London became public gardens or children's playgrounds. The public-health reformer Edwin Chadwick proposed this idea as early as the 1840s, with a view toward increasing the amount of open space available

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for public recreation in densely populated areas. The idea of converting cemeteries into parks found a number of enthusiastic advocates, but it also encountered considerable resistance, for it involved important questions of public health, law, and religion. Ultimately, the transformation of these places could not have occurred without fundamental changes in ideas about the relationship between the environment and human health. Instead of considering decomposing animal or vegetable matter as something that would contaminate the environment and thereby harm people, many adopted a new paradigm in which decay played an essential role in the cycles of life. Those who took this view concluded that most illnesses resulted not from too much contact with the natural world, but from too little. By working in harmony with nature rather than in opposition to it, reformers insisted that London's crowded and dilapidated burial grounds could be reclaimed as places of health and recreation.<sup>1</sup>

The Victorian alteration of graveyards into places of recreation has given rise to two sharply distinct schools of scholarly interpretation. The first group, composed mainly of social and medical historians, views this change as a boon to the majority of Londoners, particularly those who were poor. While arguing that the elites who led the movement to expand working-class access to green space did so for reasons other than simple altruism (many activists hoped to head off imperial decline or social conflict, for example), these historians conclude that their actions had a beneficial effect in that they made London a more egalitarian, healthy, and pleasant city in which to live.<sup>2</sup>

Most landscape and architectural historians, however, consider the late nineteenth-century conversion of many of London's burial grounds into public gardens to have been misguided, ignorant, and wasteful. James Stevens Curl, who refers to the advocates of this policy as "graveyard destroyers," condemns them for causing "immense damage" and for achieving nothing of value in the process. In his view, these reformers "did not want monuments at all as they were troublesome to remove, and hindered the inexorable drive to 'give the people grass' which was thought, somehow, to be beneficial." Reappropriating the language that many Victorian advocates of graveyard conversion used to describe decaying burial grounds, Curl argues that such places were far superior to "the bleak, bald wastelands" of grass that replaced them.<sup>3</sup>

This article adopts a different perspective. Rather than focus on the consequences of these transformations in land use, it explores why they took place. Offering an interpretation based on the history of mentalities, it argues that changes in attitudes toward death, decay, and disease enabled reformers to envision a transformation of London's derelict graveyards, whether conceived as sacred spaces or sinister ones, into places where adults might reconnect with the natural world and children might play.

## THE CORPSE

Throughout the nineteenth century, most public-health experts considered Britain's cities to be unhealthy places. Edwin Chadwick, one of the first to study the issue statistically, concluded in 1842 that life expectancy at birth was only half as long in urban as compared to rural areas. The main reason for this disparity, he argued, was because cities contained large quantities of decomposing matter. According to the dominant medical theory of the time, decay contaminated the air with miasma, and miasma caused disease by introducing decay into the bodies of those who breathed it. The larger the city and the denser its population, the greater the risk. London, the most populous city in the Western world, seemed particularly hazardous. Every day, its inhabitants transformed vast quantities of oxygen, food, water, and other materials into sewage, garbage, and other foul-smelling wastes. The best way to make cities healthier, argued Chadwick, was to remove these sources of miasma before they could cause disease.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time that many physicians, chemists, and reformers were growing concerned about the effects of these substances, others focused



**Figure 1.** Like many “disused” churchyards in late nineteenth-century London, that of Saint James, Pentonville, was crowded with tombstones. Reformers who wished to turn such places into public gardens argued that the stones had to be moved out of the way. The corpses could stay where they were. Credit: Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 223.

attention on another “waste product” that large cities generated in abundance: the human corpse. Because the corpse occupied a liminal category—sometimes viewed as human, sometimes not—the discourse to which it gave rise reveals a great deal about how people in nineteenth-century London understood connections between nature, culture, and health. During the 1830s several prominent experts condemned the practice of burying human remains in densely populated areas. Informed by changes that were taking place on the European continent, they criticized this practice as repugnant, expensive, a poor use of urban space, and, above all, unsanitary. The London surgeon George Alfred Walker, author of an 1839 book on graveyards, asserted that the decomposing body possessed an unrivaled ability to cause fever. The situation had reached a crisis, he warned, because “the burying grounds of the metropolis are literally saturated with the dead.” “Can we ... wonder,” he asked, “that disease and death are making frightful ravages, when millions of human bodies are putrefying in the very midst of us?”<sup>5</sup>

Walker’s writings attracted the attention of many of his contemporaries, including the sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick. In 1843, one year after the release of his influential *Sanitary Report*, Chadwick issued a lengthy supplementary report that focused entirely on the dangers that he thought dead bodies posed to the health of the living. In it, he argued that “all interments in towns, where bodies decompose, contribute to the mass of atmospheric impurity which is injurious to the public health.” The pronouncements of Walker and Chadwick convinced many, but some dismissed their claims as alarmist. Among the skeptics was the author of an article in the *Eclectic Review*. Although conceding that isolated cases of ill health might be traced to burial grounds, this anonymous writer insisted that “the health of towns has in no case whatever been demonstrably affected by the existence of open burial grounds.” Instead, graveyards, “by preventing the areas they enclose from being built upon, promoted the healthiness of towns.” If few shared this perspective in 1843, even fewer did so in 1848, the year that Britain’s worst cholera epidemic of the nineteenth century began.<sup>6</sup>

By the time that the outbreak ended in 1849, sixty thousand victims lay dead across Britain. London was particularly hard hit, and many health experts blamed the crowded burial grounds of the metropolis for magnifying the intensity of the cholera “visitation.” As one observer declared shortly after the epidemic had passed, “The modern and unnatural practice of interring the multitudinous dead in the midst of the still more multitudinous living ... is alike inconsistent with public health and public decency.... The churchyard is literally full, and not another corpse can be interred in it without exposing the remains of the dead and poisoning the atmosphere with pestilential miasmata.” Primed by the writings of Walker and Chadwick and shaken by the magnitude of cholera deaths during the 1848–49 episode, the government responded with a series of laws, the Burial Acts, which soon brought a stop to most interments within central London.<sup>7</sup>

The closure of London's burial grounds was intended not only to protect the living from the unhealthy effects of exposure to dead bodies, but also to protect the dead from desecration. Given the high cost of urban land and London's rapid population growth, even small sites could contain an enormous number of bodies. In the half-acre burial ground of Whitfield's Tabernacle, located on Tottenham Court Road not far from the British Museum, thirty thousand burials reportedly took place between the 1750s and the 1850s. Such overcrowding often forced gravediggers to disturb the remains of those already buried. As Walker explained, "It often happens that every opposing obstacle is cut through, and that the legs, the head, or even the half of a body are frequently dissevered." Even worse than such mutilation, he asserted, was the prospect that "the bodies of our wives, our daughters, our relatives, are to be exposed to the vulgar gaze, the coarse jests and brutal treatment of men" who had no right to so intimate a glimpse of the departed. John Simon, the medical officer of health for the City of London, echoed Walker's complaints. In an 1853 report, he charged that "public decency has been outraged—here, in the centre of civilisation, by the spectacle of human remains being tossed about like offal."<sup>8</sup>

This indignity no doubt struck many contemporaries as reminiscent of a problem that they thought had been solved: grave robbery. Prior to 1832, Britain's medical schools had found it difficult to obtain sufficient numbers of cadavers for anatomical study. The primary legal source was condemned criminals, whose bodies, after execution, were handed over for dissection—a sort of postmortem crucifixion that compounded the horror and shame of the death sentence. If they were unable to obtain cadavers in this manner, some anatomists made it known that they would pay substantial sums to anyone who could supply them with fresh corpses—no questions asked. This demand sparked a thriving trade in dead bodies, supplied by so-called resurrection men, who surreptitiously disinterred the recently deceased. To remove the financial incentives that led to body snatching and sometimes—as in the infamous case of Burke and Hare—to murder, Parliament passed the Anatomy Act in 1832. This law made available for dissection a vast new source of cadavers: the unclaimed bodies of poor people who died in a workhouse. As contemporaries and social historians alike have observed, the Anatomy Act in effect criminalized poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The Anatomy Act ended the market for disinterred corpses, but a fashion for heavy, tamper-resistant coffins persisted—at least among those who could afford their extra cost. The rich spared no expense to be buried in strong metal or wooden caskets, which were often encased in a sturdy vault for good measure. "The wealthy," explained one London sexton in 1838, "bury mostly in leaden coffins, or deposit their deceased friends either in vaults, or in brick or deep graves." He suggested that this method of burial would both shield the dead body from earthworms and prevent the corpse from poisoning the living. Praising middle- and upper-class burial practices as hygienic and respectable, he asserted that "the mode employed by them is not obnoxious. Whereas the poor, who comprise two thirds of the mortality of the metropolis, continue to

bury, and to be buried, in the crowded church yards and parish burying grounds.” He went on to point out that the bodies of poor people were often heaped together in mass graves—a point that echoed, perhaps unconsciously, widespread anxieties about the moral and sanitary effects of common lodgings packed with large numbers of working-class men, women, and children.<sup>10</sup>

During the late nineteenth century, many medical authorities came to believe that heavy coffins and burial vaults accentuated rather than reduced the risk that corpses posed to the living. Dr. Benjamin Ward Richardson, one of the foremost public-health experts of the day, did much to promote this perspective. In 1875 he warned that burial grounds posed a very real danger to the living, but that this could be prevented easily if people worked with nature instead of trying to thwart it. Denouncing the tightly sealed coffins still used long after the risk of corpse snatching had faded to insignificance, he insisted that “what evils arise are due to the ceremonial we follow of partitioning the body from the earth in slowly-destructible investments of wood or of metal.” These attempts to shield the corpse from the earth prolonged the time required for it to decompose and release the substances that plants required to grow. The solution, in Richardson’s view, was to abandon the use of waterproof caskets and to bury the body in a simple cloth shroud. If a corpse were so buried in “good carboniferous soil,” he predicted that it would decompose completely within ten years.<sup>11</sup>

Appearing almost simultaneously with Richardson’s pronouncements on burial were those of another sanitarian, Sir Francis Seymour Haden. A respected surgeon who is today best known for his artistic accomplishments as an etcher, Haden reached a wide audience for his ideas through three lengthy letters published in *The Times*. In them, he told readers that the “dead population—these festering tenants-in-perpetuity of the soil—outnumber by hundreds of thousands the living population above them.” Haden argued that a new means of disposing of the dead, which he called earth-to-earth burial, was necessary to eliminate the foul conditions found in graveyards that contained “hermetically sealed coffins, brick graves, and vaults.” In his view, any barriers that came between a corpse and the soil interfered with the earth’s ability to transform dead bodies into harmless substances. “We cannot thus outrage Nature with impunity; ... whenever it may please us to bury our dead properly ... Earth will be found competent to do her own work and Nature to carry out her own laws.”<sup>12</sup>

Both Richardson and Haden were no doubt influenced by the ideas of Dr. Henry Letheby, the medical officer of health for the City of London. Speaking in 1873 before the Society of Medical Officers of Health, of which he was president, Letheby asserted that exposure to air and soil was essential to neutralize the danger posed by putrefying substances. By “hurrying onward the changes of decomposition and oxydation [*sic*], ... the particles might quickly arrive at their final stage of decay, and be brought to rest.” He maintained that “in the case of old burial grounds which were offensive ... the best means of



**Figure 2.** This photo depicts the churchyard of Saint Botolph, Aldgate, after the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association removed its tombstones, leveled its surface, and added benches. Interestingly, the group decided to leave a sarcophagus in place, which can be seen on the left. Credit: Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 234.

disinfection was the covering of the ground with fresh earth to the depth of several inches, and the planting of trees and sowing of grass.”<sup>13</sup>

Haden suggested that if corpses were simply buried in biodegradable coffins made from wicker or papier-mâché, the complex and potentially harmful molecules that had once been part of a living body would be broken down into pure and inert elements. The author Samuel Phillips Day, who ostentatiously declared that thoughts of London’s “loathsome, putrid, pestilential depositories of ever-augmenting corruption” made his “soul sick,” praised Haden’s methods for stripping “grim death” of terror and allowing people to contemplate it “without alarm or peril.”<sup>14</sup> When the artist and writer William Morris died in 1896, he was buried in a simple wicker basket. While few departed as drastically as he did from custom, many shared his disdain for the expensive airtight caskets that had characterized the funerals of the wealthy earlier in the century.

In contrast to Haden’s belief that the soil possessed the power to neutralize decaying matter, others dismissed this idea as wishful thinking. As one critic put it in 1899, “the cemeteries of this country are rapidly becoming crowded



with coffins containing dead bodies, potential sources of decomposition and putrefaction. These bodies are often those dead from infectious diseases and contain the germs of these diseases. These germs frequently find their happiest breeding ground in the soils of cemeteries and from this soil they may be, and frequently are, conveyed by water or other means to infect the living.” The writer went on to condemn Haden’s earth-to-earth system as no better than traditional burial: both were a source of contamination and pollution. The only way to avoid this danger, he argued, was cremation, by which dead bodies would be “rapidly and effectually transformed into harmless compounds instead of undergoing the revolting process of decomposition in the earth.”<sup>15</sup>

The leading proponent of cremation in Britain was Sir Henry Thompson, who founded the Cremation Society of England in 1874 and led it until his own death—and cremation—in 1902. Thompson argued that burial, regardless of the method in which it occurred, blocked the air from fulfilling its God-given role of oxidizing harmful substances. He believed that it was dangerously naive to assume that the soil would neutralize putrefying corpses, particularly if they belonged to people who had died from communicable diseases. Thompson argued that the earth was made for the living, not for the dead. He frequently pointed out that every acre dedicated to burials was permanently lost to agriculture, and that earth-to-earth burial required at least as much land—and probably more—as traditional burial. For his part, Haden criticized Thompson’s view that the earth was incapable of safely breaking down the human corpse as an indictment against the wisdom of the Creator. Haden declared that he had complete confidence in the power of the earth to transform decaying organic matter into inert substances. In his view, soil was “the chief factor in the great cosmical design” by which plant and animal life continued to flourish.<sup>16</sup>

While Thompson warned that microorganisms were always harmful, Haden suggested that they might serve important functions. In an 1882 letter to Queen Victoria’s personal physician, Sir William Gull, Haden wrote that he “should like to hear something of the friendly germs and the good they do. If it should come to be proved, which is possible, that the great operations of Nature, destructive as well as constructive, are carried on by germs, all I can say is that I am prepared to think as highly of germs as I do of chemical action, or of any other of those forces, physical or vital, by which Nature is pleased to work.” Contrary to those who feared the products of animal decay, Haden suggested that the resulting gases in fact helped to rid the air of pollution. Alluding to the celebrated reciprocity between the respiration of animals and the transpiration of vegetation, he argued that the Earth’s plants, “the ultimate purifiers of the air,” depended upon the decomposition of animal flesh for some of the nutrients that assisted their growth.<sup>17</sup>

Although Haden and Thompson were fierce rivals and engaged in often heated public debate, they had much in common. Separated in age by only two years, both had studied at University College London and both were members of the Royal College of Surgeons. Most importantly, the two men



shared a remarkably similar outlook toward the natural world. They agreed that the corpse had a vital role to play in nature's economy; for this reason, they condemned the practice of burying the dead in impermeable caskets. Finally, both Haden and Thompson expressed themselves using the language of natural theology, arguing that God had designed creation to work harmoniously without human interference. Disease and ill-health, they asserted, were always a result of ignoring nature's laws.<sup>18</sup>

To test his theories, Haden buried a veritable menagerie of dead animals in the ground—"calves, swine, cats, dogs, geese, &c.," which he exhumed once a year to track what he called the "progress of nitrification." Thompson similarly conducted detailed observations about what happened to a body during each stage of the cremation process. Intentional or not, Thompson's writings carry a hint of gallows humor, such as when he raised the prospect of being buried alive. Given the uncertainty that prevailed about how to tell definitively whether someone had died, this concern was not as strange as it might sound today. Thompson suggested that it would be far worse to resume consciousness and slowly suffocate in a dark grave than to wake up during cremation. As he put it, "The completeness of a properly-conducted process would render death instantaneous and painless if by any unhappy chance an individual so circumstanced were submitted to it."<sup>19</sup>

Although it often appeared that the disagreement between the two approaches was over the means rather than the end, deeper disagreements existed. Cremation, argued Haden, was incapable of the complete transformation of the body into its basic constituents. In contrast to earth burial, in which "the solid residuum is wholly resolved and disposed of, by the furnace it is left upon our hands; ... one process, in short, is perfect and final, the other is incomplete." Others faulted cremation for being *too* efficient. In 1874 the journal *Nature* reported on a scientific article that had appeared recently in Germany. In it, Professor Mohr had revealed that ammonia, one of the compounds produced when bodies decomposed in soil, was not found in the gases that were expelled from crematoria. Paraphrasing Mohr, the article explained that "in the ordinary course of nature a continuous circulation of ammonia between the animal and vegetable kingdoms is ... kept up: if we stop one source of supply of this substance, we destroy the equilibrium." The article predicted that future generations would suffer from inadequate levels of ammonia, "just as we have had to suffer through the shortsightedness of our ancestors, who destroyed ruthlessly vast tracts of forests." Making a similar point a year later, Benjamin Ward Richardson declared that ammonia, "that intervening chemical link between the organic and inorganic worlds," could not survive the intense heat of cremation. If the latter became universal, he warned that it would constitute "a direct robbery from the resources of the planet—a robbery as great ... as that of the coal-fields which is now so extravagantly in progress." Richardson's opposition to cremation evidently waned, however, for when he died twenty years later, his remains were cremated at his request.<sup>20</sup>

At a time when growing numbers were expressing doubts about literal interpretations of the Bible, particularly in reference to the resurrection of the body, the chemical transformation of the body after death suggested reassuring parallels. Speaking at the 1885 congress of the Sanitary Institute, the honorary secretary of the Church of England Funeral Reform Association asserted that in earth-to-earth burial, the body “underwent, not merely decay, but a process of transformation, until at the end of seven or eight years it had literally risen again in the form of carbonic acid and ammonia, which had mingled with the air and nourished plants, leaving behind nothing but organic matter.” Haden used similar language in lectures that he delivered before both religious and medical audiences. Speaking at the Church Congress held in Manchester in 1888, he asserted that when a body is buried properly, the air “oxidizes it, that is to say, resolves it into new and harmless products; and then these new products ... re-enter the atmosphere and become the elements of its renewal, and of the nourishment and growth of plants. The body ... literally as well as figuratively, ascends from the dead and fulfils [*ἀΐϛ*] the cycle of its pilgrimage by becoming again the source and renewal of life.”<sup>21</sup>

## LANDSCAPES OF DISORDER

When George Walker condemned the state of London’s burial grounds in the late 1830s, he was troubled not only by decomposing corpses that lay beneath the surface, but also by the ramshackle conditions above ground. The Drury Lane graveyard of Saint Martin-in-the-Fields was particularly objectionable in his estimation. Filled with countless bodies, its narrow confines were “luxuriant in rank vegetation high as men’s shoulders—its surface broken, uneven, and its general aspect repulsive.—It is a shabby, unchristian depository for the dead: an abomination to the living.” Paradoxically, the Burial Acts encouraged such neglect, for without the prospect of attracting new business, those responsible for burial grounds lacked the incentive—and the cash flow—to pay for their upkeep. Decades later, even suburban cemeteries such as Highgate would face similar problems as the number of burials that took place in them declined.<sup>22</sup> By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many complained that London’s disused burial grounds were unkempt, dirty, and unhealthy.

Reporting on a visit to Bunhill Fields burial ground in 1866, one writer described it as “a desolate wilderness; most of the inscriptions on the grave-stones are illegible, many of the tombs have fallen to pieces, the slabs lying broken on the ground; the grass is uncut, and the paths are overgrown with weeds; a host of cats who ran away at my approach, yelling at me as an intruder, appeared to be the only creatures who cared for the place.” In subsequent years, many other observers issued similar complaints about the state of London’s burial grounds and churchyards. In one article after another, contemporaries portrayed burial grounds as sites of disorder. Half a century after Walker’s jeremiad appeared, the editors of *The Times* employed nearly identical language to



**Figure 3.** Prior to being transformed by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, Victoria Park Cemetery was “a dreary waste of crumbling tombstones and sinking graves.” Credit: Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 199.

decry the state of the capital’s disused burial grounds, describing them as full of “mouldering gravestones, gaping, we may almost say yawning, graves, rank vegetation, and accumulating rubbish and refuse.”<sup>23</sup>

Victorians frequently associated derelict burial grounds not only with disordered nature, but also with crime and immorality. Referring to the disused burial ground in the parish of Saint Bartholomew, Bethnal Green, its vicar complained that truants often congregated there, “breaking windows, destroying trees, and daily and hourly outraging all decencies.” London’s burial grounds, asserted one member of Parliament (MP) in 1881, “were a perfect disgrace.” Many of them, he alleged, had become places “of nightly desecrations and depredation.” According to a vicar in the East End of London, his churchyard had by the 1860s become “a popular ‘cat’ promenade and trysting-place.” Conversely, many believed that well-maintained green space would not only improve public health, but also reduce antisocial and illegal behavior. Comparing crime to a parasite, *The Times* declared in 1885 that “nothing is more inimical to the growth of that depraved and expensive organism than the free access of light and air.”<sup>24</sup>

The thought that decomposing human remains might become visible to the gaze of the living simultaneously appalled middle-class notions of decency

and instilled potent fears of disease. On a visit to one of London's burial grounds in 1884, an observer was horrified to come across three brick tombs that had broken wide open. "Into one an old mattress had been thrust; a second seemed a receptacle for rubbish generally, a jam bottle being its most prominent furniture; while a third appeared to have been cleared out entirely, one bone lying just outside it." Even more disturbing was the presence of an open-sided dissection shed in the burial ground of Saint George the Martyr. Located a short distance from the Foundling Hospital, Dr. Cooke's anatomy school was visible to all who visited the adjacent public garden. According to an anonymous piece published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1884, this "chamber of horrors" rested directly on top of several tombstones, and beside it sat large jars that were used to hold organs and viscera. Its author deplored the fact that this place, which had been "hallowed by the grief and tears of many mourners, should become an abomination of desolation, and a horror to those who know of its perversion." The vehemence of this reaction suggests that the prospect, however unlikely, of innocent passersby witnessing the surgical dismantling of a corpse posed a disturbingly vivid reminder of the disintegration that all bodies undergo after death. Like the execution of criminals and the slaughter of animals, both of which had been banned from public view by this period, most people viewed dissection as a necessary evil that threatened to degrade anyone who participated in it, even if only as an observer. When a fire destroyed the building a short time later, many hoped that it was gone forever. To their dismay, by 1886 Dr. Cooke had rebuilt it on an even larger scale.<sup>25</sup>

## GREEN SPACE

During the late nineteenth century, the work of Pasteur and Koch convinced many that germs, not miasma, were the source of disease. Germ theory transformed the way people thought about decay, for instead of being the source of all disease, decay might be nothing more than an aesthetic concern. At the same time, a growing number of scientists, medical experts, and ordinary people came to think of good health as something that consisted of more than the absence of infection. Public-health measures such as improved water quality and the controversial mandatory vaccination against smallpox reduced significantly the number of people who contracted—and died from—a wide range of illnesses.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these important developments, many people continued to believe that cities exerted a detrimental influence on their inhabitants. Many of those who adopted this perspective argued that it was not exposure to decaying substances that made cities unhealthy, but rather insufficient amounts of pure air, sunlight, and exercise. A belief in the healing power of nature was on the rise, exemplified by the profusion of open-air sanatoria for the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis. In this context, many people in Britain blamed modern life, particularly in large cities, for a phenomenon called physical degeneration.

As an anonymous article in the *Daily Telegraph* put it in 1883, “In all our large towns at the present day we are multiplying short-sighted, narrow-chested, weak-spined, stunted, and ill-developed children, all for want of play and fresh air.” This problem appeared particularly acute in London, one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Two philanthropic groups led the campaign to increase Londoners’ access to green space. The first was the Kyrle Society, begun in the mid-1870s by Miranda and Octavia Hill, granddaughters of the public-health reformer (and Chadwick associate) Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith. Its vice president was Queen Victoria’s fourth daughter, Princess Louise, and it received a great deal of support from the Duke of Westminster, who owned more land in London than anyone other than the Royal Family. The Kyrle Society, which aimed to cheer the lives of the poor by making their surroundings more beautiful, quickly established an open spaces branch, led by Octavia Hill.<sup>28</sup>

By writing articles, pressuring local politicians and religious leaders, and seeking influential supporters, Octavia Hill played a key role in bringing about the conversion of many graveyards into places where Londoners could relax and enjoy the outdoors. In her role as treasurer of the Kyrle Society, she frequently called on the public to support the group’s efforts to transform the burial grounds of London into places of public recreation. In one such appeal, she asserted that “the sooner these closed wildernesses of churchyards are set in order, handed over to the local authorities, and opened to the public the better. Hidden by walls, covered with rubbish, closed to the inhabitants of stifling courts in their neighbourhood, if they are not soon rescued for those who live near them, they may become the prey of the commercial speculator or the railway company.”<sup>29</sup>

At the urging of Octavia Hill, the Saint Pancras vestry (local government) opened the burial grounds of Old Saint Pancras Church and Saint Giles-in-the-Fields as public gardens in 1877. Over the next dozen years, all of the other disused burial grounds in the parish of Saint Pancras were similarly transformed into gardens. Following a suggestion from Hill, the vestry of Saint Martin-in-the-Fields allocated £250 to transform the Drury Lane burial ground that George Walker had denounced four decades earlier into a garden for the use of the poor people who lived in the neighborhood. Speaking at its dedication in May 1877, the vicar of Saint Martin’s expressed thanks that the grounds had been “rescued from weeds and prowling cats.” Another speaker was the Liberal MP George John Shaw-Lefevre, chairman of the Commons and Open Spaces Preservation Society. In his remarks, Shaw-Lefevre praised the efforts of all who sought “to make the burial-places, which once spread disease around, sightly and wholesome.”<sup>30</sup>

Five years later, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat, ardent imperialist, and urban reformer Lord Reginald Brabazon formed a group of his own. Known initially as the Metropolitan Public Garden, Boulevard, and Playground Association, Brabazon’s group soon adopted a shorter name, the Metropolitan Public



**Figure 4.** In 1894 the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association raised £3,000 to convert an eleven-acre site in the East End, formerly known as Victoria Park Cemetery, into gardens and playgrounds. The London County Council, which took responsibility for maintenance, renamed the place Meath Gardens in honor of the founder of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, Reginald Brabazon, who in 1887 became the twelfth Earl of Meath. Credit: Basil Holmes, “Open Spaces, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds,” in *Town Planning Conference, London, 10–15 October 1910: Transactions* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1911), 491.

Gardens Association (MPGA). Like Octavia Hill, Brabazon believed that contact with nature was essential to health. Because many city dwellers could not afford to visit an Alpine spa or a seaside resort, urban parks and gardens might provide an alternative way to experience the physical and emotional benefits that such places conferred. Speaking at the opening of a new garden in 1884, Brabazon asserted that the question of green space was not one of aesthetics, but something that was “of vital consequence to the nation.” Declaring that “physically the population of our large towns was degenerating,” he attributed the problem of biological degeneration not to hereditary causes, but to environmental ones. In his view, many people in London and other densely populated cities “suffered physically for the want of pure air, exercise, gymnastic training, and because of confinement in their dwellings.”<sup>31</sup>



According to a statement that the MPGA issued, “London is yearly becoming more and more packed and populated and extended to a degree that must fill every reflective mind with concern and apprehension. The ever widening girdle of bricks and mortar, the ever increasing height of dwellings and warehouses, the tendency that there is for the current of human life from all directions to flow towards the metropolis as a centre, can have but one possible effect, and that is to render London less and less the place where the bodily functions can have full and natural play, where bone and muscle in the young may be developed, and where constitutions are able to ward off disease and decay.” Brabazon’s wealth and social prominence allowed his group to attract a great deal of support. Within the first year of its founding, the MPGA attracted a large number of leading aristocrats, politicians, and religious leaders. Its membership included Catherine Gladstone (wife of the prime minister), the Irish physicist John Tyndall, the economist and Liberal MP Henry Fawcett, and Princess Frederica of Hanover.<sup>32</sup>

In 1884 Brabazon persuaded W. T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to make room in his newspaper for an article that would promote the aims of the MPGA. After Stead agreed, Brabazon commissioned the novelist Walter Besant for the job.<sup>33</sup> Less than a month later, Stead published Besant’s eloquent plea for green space. In his article, Besant observed that although some residents of London enjoyed convenient access to green space, not a single park or public garden lay within a mile of King’s Cross Station.

To the children and the old people, therefore, of that vast region which lies north of the old London wall—a densely populated district inhabited almost entirely by the working classes—London might almost as well be without any parks at all. There are, therefore, for all these people no gardens or pleasant walking places for them; there are no playgrounds. There are no open spaces where they can sit down and talk at their ease; there is nothing at all but the streets. The children play in the streets; whenever it is not raining they live in the streets; the old people take their walks abroad in the streets; the working men in the evenings lounge and smoke their pipes in the streets. There is no quiet for anybody; no rest from the continual din, traffic, and bustle of the crowded streets; no escape from the suffocating air in summer; no place where the children can play without danger of being run over.

Even before the advent of the automobile, street accidents frequently proved deadly. On a single tragic summer’s day in 1890, multiple calamities involving horse-driven vehicles killed three children near King’s Cross. According to a contemporary report, “The victims were playing in the roadway when they were knocked down and fatally injured, and the accidents occurred within a few hours of one another.”<sup>34</sup>



Although London contained a large number of parks and squares, they were not distributed evenly. Many areas in central, southern, and eastern London contained no public parks, and most of the open spaces that they did possess consisted of private squares and churchyards enclosed by locked gates. “In many crowded districts,” noted one observer, “the parish churchyard or the unconsecrated burial-ground is the only space still unbuilt upon, and this often contains the only trees which are to be found in the neighbourhood.” Yet most graveyards did not welcome visitors. In an effort to prevent vandalism, the disposal of garbage, and other nuisances, they remained locked much of the time. A survey of London’s burial grounds conducted in 1884 found that 210 of them denied access to the public. Reformers insisted that they should be planted with shrubs and flowers and opened to the public as places of rest and recreation. Such a transformation, they argued, would improve the health of poor urban residents and make them more civilized and law abiding. Designed and supervised by middle- or upper-class individuals, these open spaces would expose visitors not only to wholesome fresh air, but also to a domesticated form of nature where both people and plants were subject to supervision and control. As an anonymous writer put it on the occasion of the opening of the disused burial ground in Drury Lane as a public garden, its superintendents recognized the necessity of “providing a sufficient force for keeping order in the garden among a population not yet trained to very civilized habits.”<sup>35</sup>

## POLITICS

In 1881 Parliament debated a bill that its sponsors hoped would simplify the process by which churches or other parties could give permission for burial grounds to be converted into public gardens. Addressing his colleagues in the House of Commons, one member of Parliament raised health concerns about the bill. In his view, “The air surrounding graveyards ... was far from wholesome. In fact, no places could be worse for children to play about in than disused burial grounds.” He further implied that the bill was dangerously egalitarian: by conferring an undeserved benefit on the poor, it might induce them to make additional demands at a time when Britain was “trembling on the brink of a democracy”—a remark that was answered with supportive shouts of “Hear, hear” from some of his fellow MPs. Speaking in favor of the bill, the Liberal MP Leonard Courtney declared that he “did not share the views of the noble lord opposite that graveyards would be desecrated by throwing them open to the public.” He reminded his fellow lawmakers that burial grounds “would not be converted under the operation of this Bill into places of amusement, but into places for walking and for quiet recreation.” A majority voted in favor of the bill, which became the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act of 1881. This law removed the previous requirement that a special act of Parliament be obtained for each burial ground to be transferred to local authorities for use as a place of

public recreation. Among its provisions was a clause that specifically prohibited “the playing of any games or sports” anywhere within them.<sup>36</sup>

Some custodians of graveyards welcomed the opportunity to donate them to the community. After all, they cost money to maintain but had not brought any income since their closure decades earlier. Most held on to their control, hoping perhaps that they might find a developer who would pay a large sum for the land as a building site. Over the course of the nineteenth century, approximately one hundred former burial grounds in London disappeared to make way for railroads, streets, and buildings, including such landmarks as Saint Katharine’s Dock, the Royal Mint, and the National Gallery. The British Library at Saint Pancras, which opened to the public in 1997, occupies land that once held a graveyard known as the Somers Place Burial Ground. In 1884 workmen removed a large number of late eighteenth-century coffins from this site during the construction of a large new railway freight depot. Eleven decades later, the depot long gone, workers came upon additional coffins while excavating the deep basements needed for the new library.<sup>37</sup>

In 1883 the London and North-Western Railway Company sought parliamentary approval to build on two acres of the burial ground of Saint James, Hampstead Road, near Euston Station. If company officials had thought that no one would challenge their request, they were to be sorely surprised. They faced a powerful and articulate adversary: Lord Brabazon. In a strongly worded letter to *The Times*, he asserted that “burial grounds constitute the only open spaces outside the public parks which up to the present the builder has been forced to respect in the metropolis.” Brabazon claimed that he sought merely to prevent this tradition from being overturned. If Parliament allowed this land to be taken, he warned, a new precedent would be established, one that would “not be overlooked by impecunious trustees of other burial grounds, or by building companies and others desirous of advancing private at the cost of public interests.”<sup>38</sup>

Brabazon’s argument was somewhat misleading, for as we have seen, many burial grounds—particularly ones that were not controlled by the Church of England—had already disappeared to make way for railways, new streets, and construction projects. As the editors of *The Times* sardonically noted, “Railway enterprise is not, of course, to be checked by any sentimental considerations, and a railway engineer cannot be expected to alter his curves in order to avoid disturbing the dead. On the contrary it may be anticipated that he will lay out his line so as to utilize as many graveyards as possible, for they will be much cheaper to acquire than houses.”<sup>39</sup> Despite Brabazon’s attempt to inspire those who read his letter to oppose the incursion near Euston Station, few others seemed to care. People were accustomed to the railroads appropriating land, and many no doubt realized that existing stations and tracks often dictated where future developments could occur.

A far different response occurred just a few months later when developers sought permission to construct a large block of apartment buildings in the



**Figure 5.** Closed to additional interments in the 1850s, the Peel Grove Burial Ground in Bethnal Green eventually became a storage yard for building supplies. Credit: Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 198.

working-class neighborhood of Bethnal Green. The site that they proposed to use was known as the Peel Grove Burial Ground. Although it no longer resembled a graveyard, as it had become a storage yard for lumber and other building supplies, many believed that its buried corpses made the site unsuitable for houses. Addressing a meeting of concerned area residents at a school in Bethnal Green, the Rev. T. Temple asserted that any who assumed that these “bodies had long gone to decay” were mistaken. “The cemetery was very damp and the water rose fast. Those who understood the nature of the soil would know that corpses would remain for many years when interred in damp ground. Happening to be present at the opening of a public vault, he himself saw the coffin beginning to float out, the place was so full of water.” Dr. Bate, the medical officer of health for the area, concurred. He asserted that a “body 50 years after burial will, if the coffin be intact, be found in the same state of advanced, but almost unprogressive, putrefaction as when first laid in the earth.” Quoting this statement in 1883, Brabazon argued that this danger should lead to a general prohibition against new construction in burial grounds.<sup>40</sup>

*The Times* soon sided with the protestors. In an unusually strident editorial, it declared, “It is obvious that subsidence of the ground would take place,

fissures would appear in the concrete, and noxious emanations must arise from the terrible subsoil." "It is repugnant to every feeling of decency and propriety," continued the piece, "to invite human beings to live in densely-packed crowds over a charnel-house. The only proper treatment for such spots as these burial grounds is to cover them with vegetation which will absorb and neutralize the rising gases, and to leave the winds of heaven to blow as freely as may be over their surface."<sup>41</sup>

Influenced by such arguments, Parliament enacted the Disused Burial Grounds Act on the final day of its 1884 session. This law made it illegal to build a structure over any disused graveyard in England without special permission from the Home Secretary. With the passage of this law, Brabazon and his associates achieved two important victories, for in addition to ensuring that land owners could not erect buildings in such places, the law brought an immediate and drastic reduction in the market value of such land. No longer would those who sought to acquire land for gardens and recreation areas be forced to compete against property developers. The 1884 act contained several weaknesses, however. It did not apply within the City of London (the "Square Mile"), it did nothing to prevent disused burial grounds from being used for commercial purposes that did not require permanent structures, and it applied only to graveyards that had closed as a result of the Burial Acts of the 1850s.<sup>42</sup>

## TRANSFORMATIONS

In the course of their successful effort to ban construction within burial grounds, the advocates of green space had emphasized the dangers that decomposing corpses posed to the living. Paradoxically, they also maintained that the same places would make ideal public gardens. Many wondered how, if burial grounds were too unhealthy to use as building sites, they could possibly be used as gardens or playgrounds. The Rev. Septimus Hansard, rector of Bethnal Green, warned that "old graveyards are so saturated with human remains that it is dangerous to the public health to disturb them, even to dig them into public gardens." Isabella Gladstone quickly responded. She argued that the "deadly exhalations" that some feared were "far more likely to be found in the 'unconverted' burial grounds, where rotting food, dead cats, and unsavory rubbish of all kinds is too often allowed to accumulate, or in the dirty courts and alleys from which the 'converted' burial grounds are pleasant and wholesome retreats." Some years later, after her marriage to Basil Holmes (secretary of the MPGA), she noted that "it was twenty years after they had been shut up before any of the disused graveyards were converted into public gardens. It must, of course, be borne in mind that, when first closed, these grounds were very unwholesome, but twenty years did, at any rate, a good deal towards ameliorating their condition, and now that another twenty years have passed we may safely say that no evil effects can accrue from letting

people walk about in them, people, that is, who already live with these grounds in their midst.” Further qualifying her remarks, Holmes went on to point out that “the burial-grounds are there—in the midst of crowded streets—whether we like them or no, and they become far more wholesome when fresh soil is imported, good gravel paths made, and the ground drained, and when grass, flowers, trees, and shrubs take the place of rotting rubbish.”<sup>43</sup> Transformed into places of public recreation, they would become neat, tidy, and airy.

Another participant in this debate was the medical journalist and public health reformer Ernest Hart. In an 1885 letter to *The Times*, he identified himself as editor of the *Sanitary Record*, chairman of the National Health Society, and vice president of the MPGA. He assured readers that the latter group had taken great care to ensure that converted burial grounds would be healthy places.

To cover them with garden mould, to plant them with grass, to gravel the walks, and to clothe them with shrubs and trees are the means which nature has indicated and which science explains of robbing them of any ... possibilities of evil.... This is the true alchemy of nature. There is no disinfectant so effectual, if any were needed, as a few tons of mother earth laid over the surface; there is no chemical agent so potent in transforming dead organic matter hidden beneath the soil into living and health-giving tissue as the physiological power which is proper to herbs, shrubs, and trees, absorbing nitrogen and carbonic acid. They build up the elements into healthful vegetable tissue, and they pour into the atmosphere gases which are necessary to life.... The theory that it is dangerous to allow aged people and children to come into these open spaces to rest upon the benches, sit beneath the trees, and play among the shrubs is one which is not only far-fetched, but ill founded.<sup>44</sup>

The challenges that reformers faced in turning burial grounds into wholesome and uplifting places of recreation were not confined to convincing people that they were safe. Many urban churchyards and burial grounds were so full of tombs and gravestones that no space remained for paths, benches, or open areas. As part of their program of conversion, reformers maintained that it was essential to clear the ground as much as possible. Ostensibly, this was necessary to allow additional soil to be added to the ground, flowers to be planted, and paths to be laid out. Yet doing so also served less pragmatic ends. Each gravestone, crypt, or mausoleum served as a lasting marker of social distinction and a somber reminder of mortality. As society became increasingly secular, fewer people wished to be reminded continually of their own mortality, and many believed that symbols of class privilege and death had no place in the recreation areas that they hoped to establish for children and poor people in the most densely populated parts of the metropolis. Finally, the removal of

gravestones allowed the new users of these places to superimpose a new identity on them and to expunge not only symbols of class difference and of death, but also reminders of the decomposing corpses that lay underfoot.

During the campaign to pass the Disused Burial Grounds Act, Brabazon donated one pound to a group called the National Society for Preserving the Memorials of the Dead. Although this society and the MPGA both believed that it was disrespectful and unhealthy to use graveyards for commercial purposes, they disagreed about whether the same reservations applied to their use as public recreation areas. When its secretary wrote to ask Brabazon whether this donation meant that he was making a permanent commitment to its work, Brabazon instructed his secretary to make it clear that this was not his intention.<sup>45</sup>

Although few challenged the goal of preserving London's remaining open spaces from being built upon, some contemporaries argued that it was wrong to turn burial places into recreation areas. Writing to *The Times* in 1883, "A Curate" commended Octavia Hill and the Kyrle Society for their work to "rescue ... open spaces from railway companies and commercial speculators," but he took issue with their campaign to turn graveyards to a new purpose. He mourned the fact that an acquaintance in the East End had recently learned that the gravestone of a family member was to be removed so that the site could be converted into a recreation ground. If such places were to be opened to the public as gardens, he argued that "their original character should also be conserved, and games, meetings, &c., be prohibited in them, as well as the entry of dogs." Speaking on behalf "of the feelings of those who ha[d] secured (often at a very high price) a burying place for their dead, which they had every reason to believe would be safe from intrusion," he appealed to the authorities to prohibit "the conversion of these burial grounds into gardens and recreation grounds except under stringent regulations designed to preserve their original sacred character."<sup>46</sup>

In answer to her critics' arguments, Holmes asserted that anyone whose relatives had been buried in a particular graveyard had the right to prevent the removal of their tombstones. She also noted that careful records were maintained of the original location of stones and the inscriptions they held. If opponents of the conversion of urban graveyards into public gardens would simply visit such places, she believed that they would alter their opinions. "It is only necessary to take these objectors (though they will never come) into a neglected ground, to point out to them the sinking graves, to help them to pick their way so that they may avoid the dirty rubbish lying about, and the pitfalls into which they may stumble, in order to convince them that the ground, if turned into a public garden, would be treated with more reverence and in a more seemly manner." Holmes further argued that many of the tombstones had become illegible with time, and others listed the names of people whose last descendants had long since died. Unless a grave marker referred to a famous individual

or commemorated someone with a relative who objected, she saw no reason to leave it in place.<sup>47</sup>

Following the 1884 passage of the Disused Burial Grounds Act, the MPGA faced a flood of requests to transform graveyards into public gardens. This change sparked a backlash on the part of those who wished to see burial grounds left as they were. Articulating the latter concern in 1885, one opponent declared that the opening of churchyards for public recreation was unconscionable, for instead of allowing those buried in them to rest in peace, their “tombs [were to be] made rocking-horses for children.” He predicted that “as time rolls on and vestries get callous, and philanthropists grow old, die, and are buried in neat and trim churchyards in their ancestral parks, carefully excluded from the squalid ones, the garden will be gone, but the playground will remain squalid, fetid, and dirty as its little occupants.”<sup>48</sup>

The author of these mean-spirited words may have had an ulterior motive in attacking the MPGA, for as the group’s secretary pointed out in a rebuttal letter to *The Times*, his address in Bedford Row meant that he enjoyed privileged access inside the gates of Bedford Square, a piece of land that this group hoped to open to the public. *The Graphic*, a popular weekly, also gave considerable coverage to the debate. The anonymous author of an article in its pages argued that there was no need to worry that children might “make rocking-horses of the tombstones,” as there existed “plenty of suitable old men willing to act as custodians.” In any case, it added, “no sensible person” had any desire to turn cemeteries into playgrounds.<sup>49</sup>

Anxious to distance themselves from accusations that they were promoting sacrilege, most green-space reformers agreed that calm and quiet should be maintained in converted burial grounds. By accepting this restriction, however, reformers defeated one of their main goals: to provide children and other city residents with places for play and exercise. As one contemporary noted with frustration in 1885, “Nearly all the disused and converted Golgathas and other waste sites recently opened as gardens, or places of what is called ‘recreation,’ for the people, are strictly defended against all sports and pastimes involving muscular exercise, or any bodily action beyond a sedate, meditative walk.”<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to those who shuddered at the idea of children playing near graves, others maintained that it was unreasonable and impossible to prevent them from doing so. Beyond the “immediate purview of the beadle and the policeman at the gate,” noted the *Daily News* in 1886, “there comes a whiff of the turf and blossoms, and then all thought of behaving is over.” Even if their parents tried to restrain them, children would “fly, open mouthed like the swallows, for an evening meal of air. They are foolishly happy, and that is just what one would wish them to be. There is no thought of measure or reserve; these are for people who can look on trim grass plots and smell sweet flowers every day.”<sup>51</sup>

One year later, the Open Spaces Act of 1887 repealed the restriction against using former burial grounds for play and replaced it with a clause that left this decision in the hands of the donors. Defending this change, the *Paddington and*





**Figure 6.** Robert Browning Garden, York Street, Walworth. Located south of the Thames in Southwark, this disused burial ground opened as a public garden in 1898. As this highly posed photograph makes clear, visitors were not allowed on the grass. Credit: Basil Holmes, "Open Spaces, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds," in *Town Planning Conference, London, 10–15 October 1910: Transactions* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1911), 485.

*West London Mercury* asserted that "surely 'God's acre' cannot be desecrated by the innocent play" of children. Continuing in this religious vein, the article implied that exposure to parks, even in the midst of London, could help children retain the very innocence that Adam and Eve had experienced before their expulsion from the Garden of Eden: "It is their childish play which most helps to keep them childlike, and holds them aloof from the evil influence of a knowledge of the world beyond their age."<sup>52</sup>

Despite this change in the law, very few disused burial grounds permitted games or sports during the nineteenth century. One of the few exceptions was in the graveyard of the London Hospital in Whitechapel. An early example of an employer providing on-site exercise facilities for its staff, the hospital turned part of this site into a tennis court for the use of its nurses. Isabella Holmes found it amusing, not gruesome, to note that its grass sometimes gave way beneath the players: "an ordinary occurrence when the subsoil is populated by coffins!" Other burial grounds that allowed play included Tothill Fields (a mass grave for plague victims in Vincent Square); the Drury Lane burial ground of Saint Martin-in-the-Fields (Holmes noted that it contained



**Figure 7.** Supervised by a uniformed attendant, children use swings provided by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association for the playground that it established at Spa Fields. Approximately eighty thousand interments took place on this small site in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To make room for them, the operators of the burial ground exhumed coffins and burned them surreptitiously in the “bone house” that stood here. Credit: Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 275.

“gymnastic apparatus for the use of the children”); the additional burial ground in Russell Court of Saint Mary le Strand; and the Spa Fields Burial Ground, infamous for the greed and insensitivity of its operators. Holmes credited the outcry over its “disgraceful overcrowding”—revelations that “newly buried bodies and coffins were burned and treated with quick-lime” to make room for new arrivals—with sparking the movement to close graveyards in central London and shift burial to less crowded districts.<sup>53</sup>

While most critics objected to the conversion of graveyards into recreation areas because of sentimental or sanitary concerns, some protested on the basis of political economy. Writing to *The Times* in 1885, James W. Lambert heaped scorn and ridicule on both poor people and those who sought to make their lives more pleasant. “There is no philanthropy so cheap,” he wrote, “as that which is obtained by taking your neighbour’s property ... and giving it to others as a free gift from yourself.” Referring by name to leading members of the MPGA, Lambert suggested that “Lady John Manners, Lord Brabazon, the

Duke of Westminster, and the modern philanthropists should try their work on the graves of their own ancestry, open out their own mortuary chapels and graveyards, and turn their own parks and gardens into places for the poor, before they indulge their philanthropy at the expense of the feelings of ... the middle class."<sup>54</sup>

The thing that bothered Lambert above all was what he saw as the disingenuous nature of the campaign to transform burial grounds. Two weeks after *The Times* published the letter quoted above, Lambert penned another diatribe against the work of Brabazon and his associates. Implying that he had been misunderstood the first time, Lambert wrote, "I want to ask again—Are graveyards intended for resting-places for the dead, consecrated for that purpose, or are they not? Do people when they bury their dead with all reverence and put up memorials intend that some after generation shall, with philanthropic ardour, seize upon their burial places, remove tombstones, level the graves, turf over the levelled surface, and make of them recreation grounds?" In response to the repeated argument of his opponents about the state of graveyards, he maintained that this was a red herring. "I will admit at once, and frankly, that the neat, trim garden is better than the uncared-for churchyard to the eye and the other senses. But that is beside the question, which is—Were graveyards intended as resting-places for the dead or for recreation grounds for the multitude?" This letter prompted a sharp response from an anonymous letter writer, who declared that "Mr. Lambert does not seem yet to have learned that churchyards, like other institutions, must submit to the stern conditions which the march of time and events bring with them. The moral and physical welfare of those in great cities—of the young generation that will people the future London, is of vaster importance than all the sentimentality which Mr. Lambert or any others can stir up."<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

London's burial grounds, which many people in the first decades of Queen Victoria's reign had seen as the unhealthiest of places, came by the end of the century to be thought of as ideal places for picnics and children's play. Part of this transformation in attitudes came from the fact that new burials had long ceased to take place in the graveyards of central London. Both sanitarians and the public assumed that the dangers associated with putrefaction and decay had lessened over time. Yet the passage of years was not the only factor that made corpses seem less threatening. If this had been the case, there should have been no medical reason to oppose the construction of houses or other buildings in disused burial grounds. In fact, however, the same people who argued that graveyards would poison the air of those who lived above them maintained that such places would make ideal gardens and playgrounds.

For a society that had recently discovered the principle of entropy and that was haunted by the specter of biological degeneration, the corpse served as an important reminder of the links between human beings and the wider

environment. Both burial and cremation entailed the dissolution of the human body into its constituent elements, which were then recycled by plants and animals. If the annihilation of the body represented human frailty in the face of nature's laws, the transformation of burial grounds into gardens can be seen as an attempt to rebel against death and decay and to reconcile the city with nature. The melancholy appearance of neglected graves, overgrown vegetation, and perpetual shade also had theological significance to many reformers, who wanted visitors and passers-by to be inspired by thoughts of resurrection instead of depressed by thoughts of mortality and decaying corpses.

Green-space reformers emphasized that it was not enough to allow the public access to graveyards. Careful garden management, based on scientific principles, was needed to counteract any dangerous substances that might be emanating from buried coffins. Adopting religious language, they asserted that they could redeem such places and convert them from places of desolate, fallen wilderness into islands of Eden, saved from the commerce, accidents, disease, and moral dangers that lurked in the city. They believed that the planting of flowers, shrubs, and trees would not only purify the air of unhealthy gases emanating from buried corpses, but would also close the cycle between the animal and vegetable worlds.

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## NOTES

1. It should be noted that the terms *cemetery*, *churchyard*, and *burial ground* were not synonymous in nineteenth-century Britain. The word *churchyard* referred exclusively to a place under the control of an Anglican church or cathedral. Most churches at one

- time possessed an adjacent churchyard. As these places became full, many churches established additional churchyards elsewhere, where land was less expensive. A cemetery was a for-profit enterprise, but part or all of it might be on land that had been consecrated by the Church of England. The terms *burial ground* and *graveyard* each had two meanings. In the first, more restrictive meaning, these were places of burial operated by neither the Anglican Church nor a private company. Many people, however, used these words more broadly to mean all places in which bodies were buried, irrespective of religious affiliation or governing authority. This article follows the latter usage. See Isabella M. Holmes (née Gladstone), *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 237; Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain: A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns, Made at the Request of Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department* (London: HMSO, 1843), 191; James Stevens Curl, "The Historical Background," in *Kensal Green Cemetery: The Origins and Development of the General Cemetery of All Souls, Kensal Green, London, 1824-2001*, ed. James Stevens Curl (Chichester: Phillimore, 2001), 1-20, esp. 14-17.
2. S. Martin Gaskell, "Gardens for the Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure," *Victorian Studies* 23 (Summer 1980): 479-501; Howard LeRoy Malchow, "Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* 29 (Autumn 1985): 97-124; Harriet Jordan, "Public Parks, 1885-1914," *Garden History* 22 (Summer 1994): 85-113; Peter Thorsheim, "Green Space and Class in Imperial London," in *The Nature of Cities: Culture, Landscape, and Urban Space*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 24-37.
  3. James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 178-79. See also Chris Brooks, *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery* (Exeter: Wheaton, 1989); Catharine Arnold, *Necropolis: London and Its Dead* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
  4. Bill Luckin, *Pollution and Control: A Social History of the Thames in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1986); Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain, 1800-1854* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Brown, "From Foetid Air to Filth: The Cultural Transformation of British Epidemiological Thought, ca. 1780-1848," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82 (Fall 2008): 515-44.
  5. George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards* (London: Longman, 1839), 197-98. On the role of putrefaction in sanitary thinking, see Christopher Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction: Victorian Sanitarians and the Natural Theology of Health and Disease," *Victorian Studies* 28 (Spring 1985): 381-411; Christopher Hamlin, "Good and Intimate Filth," in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 3-29.
  6. Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, 31; "Art. VI," *Eclectic Review* n.s. 13 (1843): 219-29, quotation on 223, emphasis in original.
  7. "Art. IX," *Eclectic Review* n.s. 27 (1850): 760-74, quotations on 761, 769; E. Ashworth Underwood, "The History of Cholera in Great Britain," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 41 (1948): 165-73; Margaret Pelling, *Cholera, Fever, and English Medicine, 1825-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 34; Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 118; Deborah Elaine Wiggins, "The Burial Acts: Cemetery

- Reform in Great Britain, 1815-1914," PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1991; Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 199.
8. Isabella M. Holmes (née Gladstone), *Return of Burial Grounds in the County of London* (London: London County Council, 1895), 7; David Owen, *The Government of Victorian London, 1855-1889: The Metropolitan Board of Works, the Vestries, and the City Corporation* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 295; Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards*, 213; John Simon, *Introductory Report Suggesting the Outline of a Scheme for Extramural Interment* (1853), reprinted in John Simon, *Reports Relating to the Sanitary Condition of the City of London* (London: J. W. Parker, 1854), 289. Dissection, particularly of the bodies of women, sparked similar concerns as those raised by insensitive gravediggers. On allegations of sexual impropriety during dissection, see Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 95-96.
  9. 2 & 3 William IV c. 75. For an insightful analysis of the punitive character of the Anatomy Act, see Nadja Durbach, *Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.
  10. *Weekly Dispatch* (London), December 23, 1838, quoted in Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards*, 216-17. These attitudes may have been influenced by the feelings of fear and disgust that some middle- and upper-class Victorians exhibited toward the bodies of working-class and poor people. See Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge, 1987); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
  11. Benjamin Ward Richardson, "On the Disposal of the Dead," *Popular Science Review* 14 (1875): 164-77, quotations on 170, 173.
  12. *The Times* (London), January 12, 1875, 10; *The Times* (London), January 13, 1875, 7; *The Times* (London), February 3, 1875, 10; *The Times* (London), May 20, 1875, 10; *The Times* (London), June 17, 1875, 12.
  13. *The Times* (London), October 20, 1873, 7; "Dr. Letheby," *British Medical Journal* 1 (April 8, 1876): 451. This group, established in 1856, was known until 1873 as the Association of Metropolitan Medical Officers of Health. See Amanda Engineer, "The Society of Medical Officers of Health: Its History and Its Archive," *Medical History* 45 (January 2001): 97-114, esp. 98.
  14. Haden credited Julian Larkman as the inventor of the papier-mâché coffin, patented and sold by the London Necropolis Company. See Francis Seymour Haden, *The Disposal of the Dead: A Plea for Legislation, and a Protest against Cremation*, 2d ed. (London: Bemrose, 1888), 7; Samuel Phillips Day, "A Serious Peril to Health," *Victoria Magazine* 35 (1880): 7-14, quotations on 11, 12.
  15. L. A. Parry, "The Claims of Cremation: A Reply to Sir Francis Seymour Haden," *Lancet*, June 17, 1899, 1661-62; Maria Koskinen, "Burning the Body: The Debate on Cremation in Britain, 1874-1902," PhD diss., University of Tampere [Finland], 2000; Joanne Paula Cryer, "Cremation: An Incentive to Crime? To Bury or to Burn? A Controversial Debate (1832-1920)," B.Sc. diss., University College London, 2003; Brian Parsons, *Committed to the Cleansing Flame: The Development of Cremation in Nineteenth-Century England* (Reading: Spire, 2005). In recent years, earlier claims about the modernity and superiority of cremation have come under new scrutiny. When burned, both corpses and refuse release heavy metals, highly toxic compounds like dioxins and furans, and other invisible pollutants. Following passage of the Environmental Protection Act of 1990 (1990 cap. 43), the design and operation of



- crematoria in Britain became subject to stringent air quality regulations. See Peter C. Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 173-75. For a comparative perspective, see Ellen Stroud, "Dead Bodies in Harlem: Environmental History and the Geography of Death," in *The Nature of Cities: Culture, Landscape, and Urban Space*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 62-76.
16. Henry Thompson, "The Treatment of the Body after Death," *Contemporary Review* 23 (January 1874): 319-28; Henry Thompson, *Cremation: The Treatment of the Body after Death*, 3d ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1884); Francis Seymour Haden, "Remarks on Proper and Improper Burial, with an Examination of the Claims Made for Cremation," *Lancet*, May 27, 1899, 1411-15, quotation on 1414.
  17. Haden, "Proper and Improper Burial," 1414; *The Times* (London), May 20, 1875, 10.
  18. On the role of decay in the economy of nature, see Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction"; Erlend Mårald, "Everything Circulates: Agricultural Chemistry and Recycling Theories in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Environment and History* 8 (February 2002): 65-84; and Sabine Barles and Laurence Lestel, "The Nitrogen Question: Urbanization, Industrialization, and River Quality in Paris, 1830-1939," *Journal of Urban History* 33 (July 2007): 794-812.
  19. *The Times* (London), August 16, 1897, 6; Haden, "Proper and Improper Burial," 1414. On fears of premature burial, see George K. Behlmer, "Grave Doubts: Victorian Medicine, Moral Panic, and the Signs of Death," *Journal of British Studies* 42 (April 2003): 206-35; Thompson, "Treatment of the Body," 326. For an earlier version of this argument, expounded by a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, see [Charles Cobbe], *Burning the Dead, or Urn Sepulture ...* (London: George Philip, 1857), 53.
  20. *The Times* (London), January 12, 1875, 10; "The Chemistry of Cremation," *Nature* 11 (November 12, 1874): 33; Benjamin Ward Richardson, "Health and Civilisation," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 23 (October 15, 1875): 948-54, quotation on 953; Richardson, "On the Disposal of the Dead," 171; *The Times* (London), November 23, 1896, 6.
  21. *The Times* (London), September 26, 1885, 10; Haden, *Disposal of the Dead*, 9. Haden's views attracted considerable attention from both the religious and the medical establishment. In an address before the British Institute of Public Health in 1894, he repeated verbatim much of what he had said to the Church Congress six years earlier. See Francis Seymour Haden, "Notes on the Disposal of Dead Bodies," *Lancet*, August 18, 1894, 381.
  22. Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards*, 235; Brooks, *Mortal Remains*, 99.
  23. *The Times* (London), October 16, 1866, 10; *The Times* (London), July 2, 1884, 9.
  24. *The Times* (London), August 8, 1884, 13; *The Times* (London), March 31, 1881, 6; Harry Jones, *Fifty Years, or Dead Leaves and Living Seeds* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 80; *The Times* (London), August 28, 1885, 7.
  25. Christopher Otter, "Cleansing and Clarifying: Technology and Perception in Nineteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 43 (January 2004): 40-64, esp. 42-45; "The Anatomist in the Graveyard," *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 16, 1884; *The Times* (London), July 27, 1880, 4; *The Times* (London), September 6, 1884, 4; Isabella M. Gladstone, "Monthly Record of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association," *Eastward-Ho!* 5 (1886): 487. A decade later, the rebuilt school remained. See Holmes, *Return of Burial Grounds*, 7.
  26. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Alan Sheridan and John Law, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Michael Worboys, *Spreading Germs:*



- Disease Theories and Medical Practice in Britain, 1865-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
27. "School Board Playgrounds," *Daily Telegraph* (London), November 16, 1883. On the history of this concept, see J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
  28. Although some sources state that the Kyrle Society began at the end of 1875, the logo atop its annual reports in the 1880s declared that it had been founded in 1877. See "The Kyrle Society," *Woman's Gazette*, June 1878, 87; Owen, *Government of Victorian London*, 295; Gillian Darley, *Octavia Hill* (London: Constable, 1990), 179-84.
  29. *The Times* (London), July 10, 1883, 8. For further examples of her voluminous advocacy on this issue, see Octavia Hill, "Space for the People," *Macmillan's Magazine* 32 (August 1875): 328-32; Octavia Hill, "Our Common Land," *Macmillan's Magazine* 33 (April 1876): 536-39; Octavia Hill, "Colour, Space, and Music for the People," *Nineteenth Century* 15 (May 1884): 741-52; Octavia Hill, "The Open Spaces of the Future," *Nineteenth Century* 46 (July 1899): 26-35.
  30. *The Times* (London), January 26, 1877, 12; *The Times* (London), May 2, 1877, 13; James Winter, *London's Teeming Streets, 1830-1914* (London: Routledge, 1993), 162.
  31. *The Times* (London), September 27, 1884, 7.
  32. *The Times* (London), September 11, 1884, 8. Upon the death of his father in 1887, Reginald Brabazon became the twelfth Earl of Meath. On his life and effect, see John Springhall, "Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 4 (1970): 97-111; and F. H. A. Aalen, "Lord Meath, City Improvement, and Social Imperialism," *Planning Perspectives* 4, no. 2 (1989): 127-52.
  33. Walter Besant to Reginald Brabazon, February 25, 1884, and W. T. Stead to Reginald Brabazon, February 29, 1884, Brabazon Family Papers, J/1/11 (privately held). I am grateful to the right honorable Earl of Meath for allowing me to consult these documents.
  34. Walter Besant, "The Social Wants of London: V. Gardens and Playgrounds," *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 18, 1884; "Children's Playgrounds," *Evening News and Post*, September 4, 1890.
  35. Isabella M. Gladstone, "Graveyards as Recreation-Grounds," *Sanitary Record*, n.s. 7 (September 15, 1885): 96-97, quotation on 96; *The Times* (London), December 29, 1884, 8; *The Times* (London), May 2, 1877, 13.
  36. *The Times* (London), March 31, 1881, 6; 44 & 45 Victoria c. 34; Gladstone, "Graveyards as Recreation-Grounds," 96. In light of the clause in the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act of 1881 that prohibited games within transferred burial grounds, it is interesting to note that the House of Lords authorized the London School Board to build a playground on part of the burial ground of Saint Dunstan in the West that very year, despite opposition from both its vicar and churchwardens. See *The Times* (London), June 29, 1881, 12.
  37. Basil Holmes, "Open Spaces, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds," in *Town Planning Conference, London, 10-15 October 1910: Transactions* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1911), 478-98, esp. 484; Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 321-28; Walter E. Brown, *St. Pancras Open Spaces and Disused Burial Grounds, with a List of Interments of Eminent Persons Therein, and a Brief Sketch of Old St. Pancras Church, in St. Pancras Road*, 2d ed. (London: Metropolitan Borough of

- St. Pancras, 1911), 64; “Three Coffins Uncovered during Site Excavation at British Library Site on Wednesday 5th and Thursday 6th February 1992,” PSA Projects News Release, February 7, 1992, Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, London. Developers in the United States also sought to build in burial grounds. See, for example, Tamara Venit Shelton, “Unmaking Historic Spaces: Urban Progress and the San Francisco Cemetery Debate, 1895-1937,” *California History* 85, no. 3 (2008): 26-47.
38. *The Times* (London), April 23, 1883, 10.
  39. Robert Bard, *Graveyard London: Lost and Forgotten Burial Grounds* (London: Historical Publications, 2008); *The Times* (London), December 18, 1883, 4.
  40. “Alleged Desecration of the Dead,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), October 12, 1883; *The Times* (London), December 22, 1883, 10.
  41. *The Times* (London), December 18, 1883, 4.
  42. 47 & 48 Victoria, c. 72; *The Times* (London), September 29, 1884, 4; Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 337.
  43. *The Times* (London), June 4, 1884, 8; *The Times* (London), August 26, 1885, 13; *The Times* (London), June 6, 1884, 4; Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 223-24, 242.
  44. *The Times* (London), August 20, 1885, 8. During his long career, Hart served as editor of both the *British Medical Journal* and the *Sanitary Record*. He played a leading role not only in the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, but also in the National Smoke Abatement Institution, which he cofounded with Octavia Hill. See Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2006), esp. 89-96.
  45. William Vincent to Reginald Brabazon, November 12, 1883, and November 17, 1883, (the latter includes the annotation by Brabazon to his secretary), Brabazon Family Papers, J/1/8 (privately held). I am grateful to the right honorable Earl of Meath for allowing me to consult these documents.
  46. *The Times* (London), July 13, 1883, 4.
  47. Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 248-49. Historic preservationists take a dim view of this attitude. Chris Brooks, for example, argues that Isabella Holmes’s “conviction that Victorian and Edwardian cemetery art and design do not matter” led to the destruction of a significant part of London’s historical fabric. See Brooks, *Mortal Remains*, 88.
  48. *The Times* (London), August 6, 1885, 13.
  49. *The Times*, August 18, 1885, 13; “Disused Churchyards,” *Graphic*, August 22, 1885, 203.
  50. *Daily Telegraph* (London), August 17, 1885.
  51. “An Appeal for the Country,” *Daily News* (London), June 28, 1886.
  52. 50 & 51 Victoria c. 32. Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 339; “St. Mary’s Disused Burial Ground,” *Paddington and West London Mercury*, August 30, 1890.
  53. Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, 175, 237; Holmes, *Return of Burial Grounds*, 3-17.
  54. *The Times* (London), August 6, 1885, 13.
  55. *The Times* (London), August 22, 1885, 3; *The Times* (London), August 25, 1885, 8.