In Memoriam

Documenting Illness, Death, and Grief in the Book Inscription (1870–1914)

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Abstract

Throughout the long nineteenth century, individuals engaged in rituals of mourning to help deal with loss and grief. Objects were vitally important to Victorians and Edwardians as commemorative artefacts that clearly embodied the deceased and acted as a stand-in for their lived presence. For many people, books served as secular relics, with the safe confounds of the endpapers used to document the illnesses and deaths of loved ones, express feelings of anguish, or pass down books informally to other family members. Despite the high cultural value of these inscriptive marks, they have been surprisingly overlooked by researchers. Thus, this article is the first to shed light on these types of inscriptions in Britain (1870–1914), using a small dataset collected from a secondhand bookshop. Applying a combination of archival research and textual/multimodal analysis, I discuss the ways in which inscriptions helped individuals to manage loss, provided protection and therapy, and enabled relationships between the deceased and the bereaved to be maintained. I also draw attention to an inscriptive practice — the in memoriam inscription — that appears to have been predominantly used by the working and lower-middle classes. Overall, I argue that book inscriptions should be given equal importance to other relics of death, such as hair jewelry and memorial cards, as they were heavily embedded in broader rituals of mourning and served as aids in the process of grieving.

I. Introduction

David Stewart was a sickly child. Born in 1892 in the slum district of Fountainbridge, Edinburgh, he and his three sisters were at constant risk of contracting infectious diseases caused by contaminated water, poor diet, and unsanitary living conditions (Wise 2009). His father James worked as a boatman on the Union Canal, while his mother Euphemia was a housewife. Since the age of seven, David had suffered from pseudo-hypertrophic muscular paralysis — a genetic muscle-wasting disease that is known today as muscular dystrophy (Wall and Gardner 2017). In December

1903, he developed a persistent cough and fever, which doctors promptly diagnosed as tuberculosis. At this time, tuberculosis was a "fundamental destructive social force" (Barry 1998, 1) for which there was neither cure nor prevention. Just two months later, it had killed young David. He was only twelve years old (Wall and Gardner 2017).

Shortly after David's death, his sister Beth came across the book *Helps Heavenward* amongst his personal belongings. Its content of Christian parables likely provided comfort to Beth in the months following his death; knowing that David's hands had turned the pages of the book gave it the status of a "contact relic" (Lutz 2014), connecting the two siblings across the void between life and death. Beth subsequently inscribed the endpapers "in memory of" David, noting his date of death. Her raw emotion is captured in the heavy underlining of the inscription and insertion of "dear" next to David's name. Through her *in memoriam* inscription, Beth transformed the book from a material artefact into a living representation of her brother, keeping him alive even in death.

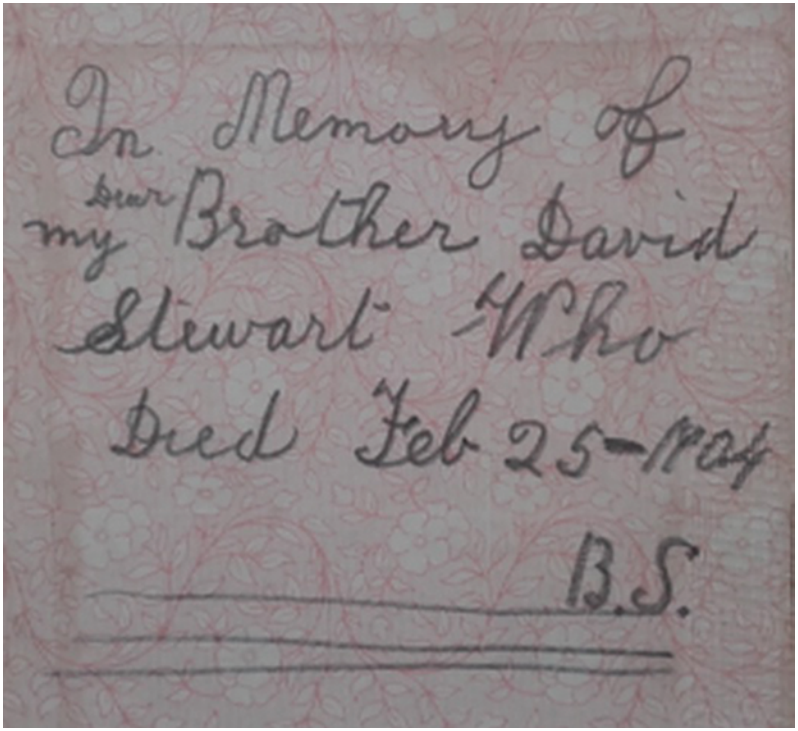

Figure 1. In Memoriam Inscription. By permission of Museum of Childhood, City of Edinburgh Council

The inscription in *Helps Heavenward* is among thousands of surviving examples that document how ordinary people dealt with death and illness in the long nineteenth century. Despite their high cultural value and potential for investigation, they have been thus far overlooked by researchers. To date, the only scholars to pay cursory attention to these types of inscriptions are Crain (2016) in her study of the relationship between children and books in nineteenth-century America and Grenby (2011) in his study of British children in the Romantic period. Therefore, this article is the first to shed light on the meanings and functions of these inscriptions within the long nineteenth century in Britain, using a small dataset collected from Bookbarn International. Drawing upon specific examples, I discuss the ways in which Victorians and Edwardians used book inscriptions to document illnesses and deaths and to memorialize lives. I argue, specifically, that these types of book inscriptions should be given equal importance to other relics of death, such as hair jewelry and memorial cards, because they were heavily embedded in broader mourning rituals and served as therapeutic aids in the process of grieving.

Lutz notes that the value of "secular relics" — by which she means personal belongings of a deceased person kept as objects of reverence — tends to be known only to a handful of people and, thus, over time, they can turn into "materialised secrets" or "dead letters of the object world" (2011, 129). Most of the inscriptions analyzed in this study have a highly fragile nature as they tend to survive in personal collections or secondhand bookshops rather than official institutions. Consequently, their timely study is necessary as the stories that they tell are at risk of disappearing and, with them, important new knowledge on death and mourning in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. By recovering these inscriptions, I seek to reactivate these "dead letters", reconstruct the stories of the deceased, and indicate their importance as relics for surviving family members.

II. The Materiality of Death and Mourning

As many historians have observed, objects were vitally important to Victorians and Edwardians as commemorative artefacts that "persistently called the dead into the sphere of the living" (Strange 2002, 160). However, as Jalland (1996) notes, there has been a tendency to dismiss (e.g., Morley 1971; Stevens Curl 1972; Cannadine 1981) these objects as morbid and distasteful symbols of exaggerated grief, neglecting their important role in dynamics of mourning. For most Victorians and Edwardians, such items

were rooted in intimate stories and personal relationships between the deceased and their surviving relatives, which gave them a value beyond their monetary worth. An 1853 article in *Family Friend* magazine characterizes these "secular relics" as "prized above gold or gems" because they are "not a mere purchasable gift, but actually a portion of [the deceased], present with us when they are absent, surviving while they are mouldering in the grave" (qtd. Lutz 2011, 135).

While holy relics can be traced back to the Roman Empire, secular relics evolved in Britain at the end of the Elizabethan era, with the weaving of hair into bracelets as tokens of friendship, familial affection, or love. According to Lutz, such objects served to root out the Catholic practice of worshipping saints' relics and fostered a new era of Protestantism in which the sacred moved "from the flesh of the saint to that of the beloved individual" (2011, 128). These relics grew in popularity around the middle of the eighteenth century in response to the Romantic fashion for sentimentality and emotional intimacy. Objects were believed to contain "a lasting sediment of their owners" (Pascoe 2006, 3) serving as a meeting point between life and death, materiality and selfhood, body and personality. By the mid-Victorian period, an entire industry had developed around relic culture, with mourners able to purchase hair jewelry, hair albums, mementos of teeth, handkerchiefs, pictures and wreaths, amongst other items. Memorial cards were also produced and mounted on ornamental stands to be displayed in the house along with *immortelles* (long-lasting decorative flowers) (Stevens Curl 1972). This increasing demand for relics is often attributed to the death of Prince Albert in 1861 and Queen Victoria's own use of mourning artefacts to console her sorrow. However, these items were not simply *memento mori*, but, rather, talismans that allowed their owners to dwell on and mourn over their loss, while also signaling that the death was not permanent as the deceased lived on through the object.

While most working-class individuals could not afford to turn precious locks of hair into jewelry or purchase handkerchiefs embroidered with the deceased's date of death, they, nonetheless, found resourceful ways to commemorate their loved ones. Strange (2005) notes that Alice Foley, who went on to become a trade unionist, was fascinated by a homemade memorial card featuring an image of angels blowing trumpets and her grandparents' epitaphs, while Zielke (2003) remarks on samplers created in working-class households, which were displayed on living room walls to honor the dead. Such home-made memorials show that even those with limited disposable income found inventive means of carrying out post-interment rituals to deal with grief.

As well as cheapness, home-made memorials had the advantage of excluding intermediaries from their production, and of being adulterated in the process. As the industry in relics developed, falsification became a major concern, with unscrupulous artists switching jewels in brooches or replacing the deceased's hair with an anonymous donor's hair of the same color that was coarser and, thus, easier to work (Lutz 2011). Therefore, these working-class relics had guaranteed authenticity, serving as a genuine "fingerprint" (Lutz 2011) of the deceased.

Upon a person's death, their belongings acquired symbolic meanings disproportionate to their everyday value. In so far as they had been touched or worn by the person in their lifetime, they became "contact relics" (Jalland 1996). While economic necessity led many working-class families to pawn the belongings of their loved ones, some were reluctant to part with particular items because of their deep association with the deceased. Strange (2002) records that Elsie Oman, a maid-of-all-work, treasured her late mother's collection of glass dishes because they recalled her "mania" for glass. Equally, Edward Wiffen, the son of a gardener, noted how his family would not get rid of any books, ornaments, or photographs that they had inherited for sentimental reasons. As a result, their living room was "chock a block" with piles of objects arranged around the table (Thompson 1970). Johnson (1988) argues that, in the face of persistent financial insecurity, ownership of such possessions served to broadcast and establish a working-class family's social worth. However, it is more likely that these items enabled the bereaved to develop a new identity shaped by loss and to create a symbolic space to express their grief and commemorate their loved one (Davies 1997; Waters 2011). Using objects as a private site of commemoration enabled working men and women, few of whom could afford to sacrifice work for public displays of grief or to pay for elaborate interments, to enact their own rituals of mourning (Walvin 1982).

As this article will demonstrate, by the end of the nineteenth century, book inscriptions were used across all class groups to cope with death and bereavement. Consequently, they represent an important unmediated source on people's experiences of mortality, grief, and commemoration and offer the opportunity to access the voices of many people whose experiences might not otherwise be heard. They are particularly valuable for revealing the innermost thoughts and emotions of individuals — something that has often been neglected in historical research due to a lack of available data, reliance on official documents, and the binary separation of "history" from the "history of emotions" (Plamper 2015).

III. Research Design

Using a combination of archival research and textual/multimodal analysis, this study investigates the ways in which Victorians and Edwardians documented illness, death, and grief in their books. It draws upon a dataset of 205 book inscriptions from a larger sample of 4,000 book inscriptions collected during six years of doctoral and postdoctoral research exploring class-based inscriptive practices in Britain (1870–1914). Its methodology and findings are also informed by seven years of professional experience as an antiquarian bookseller.

Because library acquisitions and cataloguing have historically been weighted in favor of upper-class, wealthy figures, official collections tend to provide a skewed view on book ownership and inscriptive practices. This bias is particularly significant for the years 1870 to 1914, when increasing literacy rates brought about by free, compulsory education and decreasing book costs due to improved manufacturing processes prompted the first period of widespread book ownership across all class groups (McKitterick 2009; O'Hagan 2021). In order to access a broader range of book inscriptions and develop a better understanding of class-based practices (Gillen and Hall 2010; O'Hagan 2020a), I collected my sample from Bookbarn International (BBI) — the largest second-hand bookshop in the UK — over a nine-month period.

BBI stocks over two million antiquarian books, with a heavy preference for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century books, since the opening of its Darwin Rare Books room in 2015. The shop trades books in all genres (fiction and non-fiction), providing that they are in a saleable condition. As a result, its collection ranges from periodicals and religious tracts at one end of the spectrum to limited editions and signed copies at the other, making it possible to collect inscriptions by individuals from all walks of life. Furthermore, despite its Somerset location, the books in BBI come from all areas of the UK and are sold to the shop by individual customers from a range of age groups and social backgrounds. Its stock thus represents geographical and social provenance.

Because BBI's online system only records information on bookplates or inscriptions by famous figures, I searched the shelves manually for any book — regardless of its genre, author, or publication date — provided that it was inscribed between 1870 and 1914. This also ensured that I did not collect a biased sample of inscriptions or that my sample was distorted by any preconceived ideas on the types of books or authors that were popular between 1870 and 1914 in Britain. Having identified an inscription, I

photographed all signs of ownership and recorded basic information on the book, inscription, and owner. Then, I classified the collected inscriptions by type and created a subset of 205, made up of those that constituted practices related to illness, death, or grief.

Using the information provided in the inscriptions as a starting point, I researched each book owner using archival sources. In total, it was possible to gather biographical data for 200 individuals.[1] I drew upon a range of documents for this purpose, including census returns, birth, marriage and death certificates, christening indexes, probate calendars, passenger lists, military records, school admissions, trade directories, phone books, university alumni databases, and valuation office surveys — all of which were accessed via the genealogical website Ancestry. I also consulted The British Newspaper Archive and Welsh Newspapers Online to gather additional details of individuals, whether relating to court cases, arrests, and workhouse entries, or philanthropic pursuits, public recognition, and recreational activities. In many cases, the circumstances of their deaths and any subsequent coroner inquests were also reported. For individuals with a London address, I used the digitized Charles Booth's Poverty Maps to gain a better understanding of their living conditions, while for other areas of Britain, I overlaid Google Maps on historical maps to assess changes to local landscapes over time. Additionally, I accessed Google Street View to examine owners' houses (in cases when they had not been demolished).

Drawing all of this information together made it possible to assign each inscriber to a class group — working-class, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, upper class — based on various criteria, including their educational background, their occupation (or father's occupation for children), their address, family size, the number of infant mortalities in the family, the number of servants in the household, and the size of their estate, if any, upon death. Although class designations, however densely described, risk oversimplifying Britain's social structure, they are useful terms for categorization if applied loosely to define people who share similar interests, social experiences, traditions and value systems and who, in Thompson's famous formulation, "have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways" (1963, 196). When I use such terms in this study, I do so with respect to the person's social situation at the point of inscribing a book and with an awareness that his/her class is not static and

1. The remaining five had only inscribed their first names, making it impractical to ascertain their identity.

is subject to change based on life circumstances and prospects of social mobility.

In order to ensure that class is understood as a dynamic and lived experience, not just a structure, category, or statistical analysis of a family's income, my analysis also draws upon supporting evidence of practices of illness, death, and grief documented in oral history records, particularly Paul Thompson's *Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918*, held in the British Library's Sound Archive. I also encompass theory from textual studies and multimodal studies to ensure that a detailed assessment is provided of the book inscription as an "active life presence" that signals elements of a person's lived experiences that might otherwise be hidden by only using archival evidence (Rowsell 2011). This interdisciplinary perspective also ensures that the collected inscriptions are considered as cultural artefacts, with attention paid to the social factors and cultural beliefs that govern their production, dissemination, and reception.

IV. Inscribing Illness and Death

Lutz describes the body and the book as interconnected. At a literal level, owners had for centuries hidden relics of the deceased within the confines of a bound volume: locks of hair, pinches of cremation dust, even mummified organs (Lutz 2011). However, this interconnection also worked on a metaphorical level, with inscriptions fossilizing moving life into static representations, active subjects into passive objects. From as early as the sixteenth century, family Bibles had been routinely used to record births, marriages, and deaths. Such was the importance of the genealogies recorded in Bibles that, for some time, they were accepted as approved sources for those applying for delayed birth or death certificates (O'Hagan 2021).

While users marked their Bibles with a list of names and dates to ensure that certain people and events were commemorated, they did not tend to share personal experiences or emotions tied up with these events, meaning that the information provided was purely factual. However, as the cult of mourning developed during the Victorian era, a change began to take place in book culture, with owners increasingly recognizing the blank endpapers of their books as safe spaces to impart private musings on illness, death, and grief. The protected covers of the book gave owners the freedom and security to articulate feelings that they may not have been comfortable expressing in real life (O'Hagan 2021).

While these expressions of grief were initially limited to those with a certain level of literacy and the financial means to afford a book, by the end of the nineteenth century, the democratization of education and book ownership meant that these practices were just as likely to be carried out by the working classes (McKitterick 2009). As we will see, cross-class practices of inscriptions gradually reshaped the meaning of books as objects rather than texts, to the extent that books came to mediate relationships between the living and the dead and, hence, to function as secular relics.

Unlike other forms of life writing, the hidden nature of book inscriptions means that they operated in a "permanently suspended state" (Crain 2016, 111), transforming events into artefacts. However, with the help of archival records, we can transform these artefacts into events once again. Mediating between the written inscription and the archive can also help piece together gaps in knowledge and indicate how inscribers often engaged with the book's content itself, using reading as a coping mechanism in their bereavement process. Reading a list of names and death dates in a family Bible can dehumanize individuals and detach us from their personal suffering and anguish. However, these types of book inscriptions bring us back in touch with their human side and provide us with a sense of the importance of inscribing as a mourning ritual and a strategy for dealing with death.

4.1 Inscriptions as Amulets

A significant body of surviving inscriptions commemorate the birth of infants or the loss of mothers and infants in childbirth. Throughout the long nineteenth century, pregnancy and childbirth were extremely dangerous for both baby and mother. Young women of all classes were at great risk of puerperal pyrexia, hemorrhage, and eclampsia, while newborns (particularly if born prematurely) could die as a result of atrophy, debility, and marasmus (Chamberlain 2006; Millward and Bell 2011). Despite the relatively common occurrence of illnesses or deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth (roughly 60 deaths per 1000 births in 1860), families by no means had an attitude of fatalism. As Strange (2005) points out, a familiarity with death and illness must not be confused with a devalued appreciation of life. When conducting interviews in the 1960s with those who had grown up between 1870 and 1914, Thompson not only found that most had personal experience of a maternal or neonatal death, but that they were still greatly affected by such death. Percy Hiscock, the son of a cowman, reflected that his mother "was a sweet lady, just 29" when she died

in childbirth, while Daniel Goodchild, the son of a walking stick maker, noted the devastating impact that his mother's death in childbirth had on the family: "The shock, of course, sent my father melancholy. And us children naturally were all put into an orphanage".[2]

The Sutcliffes were one such family to experience first-hand the perils of childbirth. On 16 February 1904, popular novelist Halliwell Sutcliffe had married Mabel Cottrell, the daughter of a draughtsman, in the Church of St Stephen, Twickenham. The couple moved to Halliwell's home county of Yorkshire, settling in the village of Embsay. Just a few months later, Mabel became pregnant with their first child. On 28 April 1905, she went into labor and they promptly called upon the services of Nurse Woodgate to assist with the birth. Nurse Woodgate likely did not have any formal qualifications in nursing but had past experience delivering babies in the local community.[3] Perhaps due to the fact that she was at an advanced maternal age for the period (37 years), Mabel had a challenging labor with some complications, but, miraculously, thanks to the expertise of Nurse Woodgate, she and her newborn son Derek survived. Just a few days after the birth, Halliwell presented Nurse Woodgate with a copy of his recently published novel *A Bachelor in Arcady,* taking to the endpapers to thank her for saving Derek's life.

Halliwell's choice of words deliberately skirts around any explicit mention of death, implying it euphemistically instead through the phrase that his son "could scarcely have been here" but for Nurse Woodgate. In his study of Victorian obituaries, Crespo Fernández (2007) found that euphemisms were frequently used to substitute taboo words related to mortality. The refusal to speak freely on death served to show tact and respect towards the deceased and surviving family members but was also influenced by superstition and the fear that mentioning the word would jinx them (Crespo Fernández 2007). Similar notions are at work in Halliwell's inscription: the avoidance of the word "death", coupled with the use of the qualifier "scarcely" and the strong epistemic modality of "could", intensify

2. See Thompson 1970; see also his "Interview with Mrs Moody" @ https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?id=q-8b9caa59-89c0-46a5-bdd6-8bb0945baa2c&q=moody; his "Interview with Mr Hiscock" @ https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?id=q-bd2c50fc-1ce3-4080-a872-d78c416c4671&q=percy%20hiscock; his "Interview with Mr Goodchild @ https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?id=q-45f72eea-5b26-4234-964e-16c16bd7cd5a&q=daniel%20goodchild.
3. She cannot be found on any nursing or midwifery registers, which started in 1898.

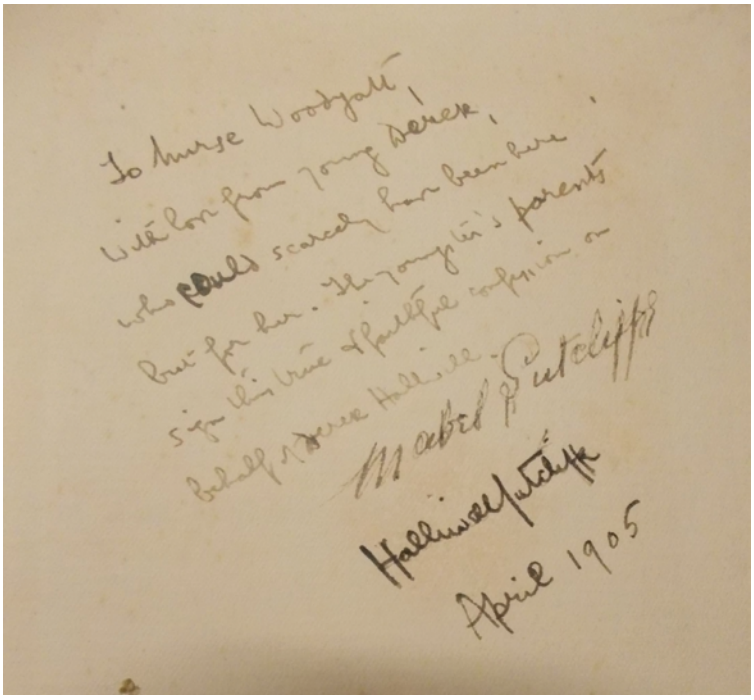

Figure 2. The Inscription as Amulet. Author's private collection.

the severity of the life-and-death situation without expressly recounting it. In doing so, Halliwell seems to imbue the book with an amulet-like quality, serving to build a protective ring around his newborn child and ward off any future threats to his health.

Although amulets have pagan origins, they, in fact, have a close kinship with Christian relics in terms of function: both inspire veneration, promote solidarity, and provide solace (Knight 2010). Furthermore, Skemer (2006) notes that, as early as the sixteenth century, amulets were used by followers of Christianity alongside religious artefacts like crosses or Rosary beads, indicating how religious and secular practices of guardianship were not always exclusive or carried out in opposition to one another. Bodenstein argues that, even by the nineteenth and early twentieth century, secular relics did not necessarily mean a loss of the sacred. Sacred is as an aloof or unattainable quality that "transcends daily life and fabricates a sense of social coherence" (Bodenstein 2011, 9). Thus, even secular relics can be considered sacred in their ability to provide material support in times of difficulty, even if their support is not directly connected with spirituality.

Halliwell's inscription is a clear example of how these religious and secular boundaries can blur. In the second line, he writes that he and Mabel sign the book "as faithful confession" on behalf of Derek. The notion of "faithful confession" is a key aspect of the Christian faith and is strongly linked to the Psalm of David in which he confesses his faith and trust in God after his life is saved. In evoking similar words, the Sutcliffes emphasize both their wholehearted gratefulness to the Nurse and the miracle of their son's survival. The broader dataset for this project shows that most gift inscriptions to doctors and nurses are from parents and relate to the theme of childbirth. This suggests that, in the long nineteenth century, inscribing books with messages of thanks to medical authorities could serve as a secular form of the Christian tradition of Churching, a ceremony in which mothers were blessed after recovery from childbirth. The practice also bears a resemblance to the ancient pagan traditions in Rome and Greece of *agalma,* where votive offerings were granted to gods to ask for protection and healing in times of illness (Hughes 2017). Thus, we see how Halliwell's inscriptive practice is part of a long tradition in both paganism (votive offering) and Christianity (Churching) associated with gaining favor with supernatural forces, but gains its sacredness from the ritualistic behaviors, attitudes, and actions that weave space and time and give the inscriber hope and reassurance in a time of crisis (Morris 2017).

While the main inscription is written in Halliwell's hand, his wife Mabel has also signed the page, her jagged and scruffy handwriting conveying the weariness that she felt following childbirth. Written shortly after Derek's birth, she was likely still "lying-in", as was recommended for a period of at least two weeks by the turn of the twentieth century (Jensz 2020). Marking the inscription with their signatures acts as an authorizing sign of authenticity, strengthening the argument that their "confession" is "faithful". Furthermore, the differences in pen ink also suggest that Halliwell revisited the inscription several times before finally giving the book to Nurse Woodgate (note the correction of "could", for example). As committing pen to paper gives the event a sense of permanence, Halliwell appears to have thought carefully about the information he wished to convey so that it appropriately captured both his suffering and thankfulness. This was particularly important as he was speaking "on behalf of" his newborn son, adopting the voice of authority. Jordan, Price, and Prior (2015) have found that parents who experience a child's illness go through a feeling of "liminality", where they are at a threshold between their previous and new way of structuring their life. The Sutcliffes seem to be at this stage, unsure of the long-term consequences of Derek's

near-death experience and, thus, inscribing as a powerful emotional response and ritualistic means of making sense of the incident.

4.2 Inscriptions as Diary Entries

According to Goldberg, many people turn to diaries in times of crisis, particularly when the outside is repressive and menacing, so as to "bring order to the chaos" (2017, 9). The diary acts as a private space in which individuals can note down their experiences, observations, and reflections with the aim of better understanding and dealing with them. The death or illness of a loved one is perhaps the most traumatic event that an individual can experience. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many people begin diaries at such times. Given the structural similarities between diaries and books, many Victorians and Edwardians repurposed the blank endpapers as reflective spaces to reflect on death and illness. Books had one significant advantage over diaries in that they enabled inscribers to navigate between real and imagined life, often seeking comfort from the book's content as much as the remedial act of inscribing. These private inscriptive practices sit firmly alongside other more public inscriptive practices of the period, such as memorial books and condolence books, which individuals used to express sympathy, share personal thoughts or memories, and write messages of remembrance (Brennan 2020).

The data collected for this research shows that these types of inscription appear overwhelmingly in prayer books, Bibles, and other religious texts, suggesting that, for many, faith continued to play an important role in managing the bereavement process. Such discursive expressions were particularly used in cases when a family member's death was protracted and agonizing, emphasizing the importance of writing as an embodied practice that calls the deceased to mind in ways that serve to "close up the gap between the living and the dead" (Brennan 2020, 224). Within my own family, for example, we treasure the pocketbook of my great-grandmother in which she documents her husband's diagnosis with a brain tumor and his subsequent decline and death over a one-year period. As his chief caregiver, she remained upbeat and stoic in front of her husband, yet within her book, she relieved her tremendous burden of responsibility and expressed her doubts and worries about life without him.

However, even in cases of relatively short periods of illness, inscribing could help people make sense of the event and come to terms with it. This was the case for Edith Buller. Edith lived in Bristol with her husband Herbert and their two children Audrey and Raymond. Since the death

of Edith's father James (an Anglican clergymen) in 1898, her mother Eve had also been living with the family. The family were originally from Shoreditch in London but had moved to Bristol in 1899 when Herbert had obtained the role of assistant headmaster at Clifton College. On 10 April 1913, Edith travelled to Camberley with her husband and mother to visit relatives. They took up temporary lodgings at Braeval House in Knoll Road, rented from the local businessman Nicholas Verran. Shortly into their stay, Eve fell ill, reporting a cough, sore throat, headache, and fever. A doctor was called and diagnosed her with bronchitis. One week later, Eve's condition worsened and on the afternoon of 26 April she passed away in her sleep with Edith and Herbert at her side. Her official cause of death was recorded as "heart failure" brought on by "acute bronchitis". Modern medicine now notes a strong link between congestive heart failure and bronchitis, which can lead to an increased risk of sepsis (Heuston and Mainous 1998; Henriquez-Camacho, Cesar and Losa 2014). This is likely the cause of Eve's death. The train ride back to Bristol without her mother must have been devastating for Edith. On arrival home to 16 Mortimer Road, she went upstairs to unpack and came across a copy of the prayer book *Ministry of Comfort* in her room. She picked it up, leafed through its pages, and began to write on its front endpapers.

In her inscription, Edith notes that the prayer book was brought into her room "by dear mother just before we went to Camberley on April 10th." She then records that her mother "died on Saturday April 26th 4.25 in the afternoon" and "was laid to rest on Thursday May 1st Ascension Day 1913." The immediacy of Edith's writing is apparent in her comment that when she "came home without her", she found this book, which "seemed a message from her as if she knew." This diary-like inscription acts as a form of "verbalised solipsism" (Ong 2006) that enables Edith to reflect privately on the recent agonizing events. We see her speculation over whether her mother knew that she was dying and, for that reason, gave her the book as a bereavement aid and went to visit their family in Camberley one last time. Jalland (1996) notes that, in the long nineteenth century, many dying people made self-conscious preparations for death by writing letters, gifting possessions to family members, or talking about funeral arrangements. However, in other cases, they internalized their knowledge of death and arranged their affairs secretly to spare the feelings of loved ones (Strange 2005). The latter seems to have been the case with Eve: while the onset of bronchitis was unexpected, she may have had previous knowledge of her heart disease and its risks. Although the book was originally a

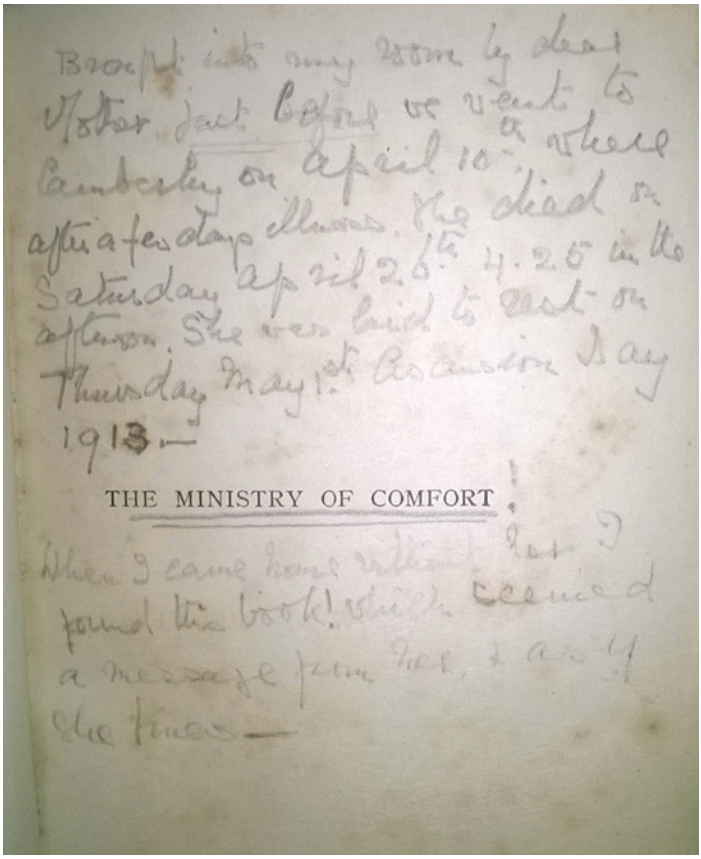

Figure 3. The Inscription as Diary Entry. Author's private collection.

simple gift from mother to daughter and the trip was a routine visit to see relatives, both acquire new symbolic meanings upon Eve's death.

According to Hertz (1960), death rites assist the bereaved in repositioning the deceased into an afterlife where they are not lost but transformed, while van Geenep (2019) claims that such rites aid in the transition between death, burial, and bereavement when individuals are most likely to feel isolated from society. More recently, Davies (1997) has stated that rituals can help individuals negotiate the challenge that death poses and control grief by aiding the transition of their relationship with the deceased. This is apparent from Edith's inscription through which her mother does not cease to exist, but rather, acquires a new surrogate identity, with the book serving as the intermediary between life and death. Edith's underlining of the title *Ministry of Comfort* and exclamation mark emphasize the link

between the book's content as a supportive device and her mother's act of gifting. Thus, in reading the book, the words of comfort become the words of her mother, keeping her voice alive and offering Edith her permanent support, even though her earthly body has departed.

V. Books as Heirlooms and *In Memoriam* Inscriptions

Up until now, the inscriptive practices I have discussed relate to how individuals expressed feelings of gratitude, hope, sadness, and anguish in their books in response to illness and death. This section moves on to consider inscriptive practices relating to bequests and heirlooms — that is to say, the ways in which books belonging to a deceased person were passed down to other family members or friends. Victorian literature is filled with deathbed scenes of the sick inscribing books to loved ones (Grenby 2011). However, in real life, books tended not to be inscribed by the dying, but rather transferred to loved ones upon their death, who subsequently added their own inscriptions.

In the dataset collected for this project, a range of practices have been identified that mark the transfer of ownership from the deceased to the new book owner. In some cases, new owners wrote their name above or below the original inscription, with a line of text illustrating their relationship with the deceased. The most frequent examples relate to grandchildren-grandparents and children-parents, but there are also instances involving spouses, siblings, cousins, friends, and even work colleagues. The original inscription was typically left untouched out of respect for the previous owner. However, it was relatively common for new inscribers to write the previous owner's birth and death date in brackets alongside or add a cross to indicate that he/she had died. If the book did not contain an original inscription from the deceased, new owners would often add a note stating whose collection it came from and their relationship to each other. Inscriptive evidence also shows some examples of reappropriation, whereby a book that was once gifted to the deceased was given back to the original giver upon his/her death who then transformed the gift inscription into an ownership inscription. Although crossing out the name of the deceased was generally considered to be distasteful, this practice can be noted, particularly on custom-made bookplates owned by upper-middle and upper-class Edwardians. At the time, a custom-made bookplate cost between £20 and £50 (roughly £2,000 to £5,000 today). Therefore, rather than pay to commission a new bookplate upon the death of a relative, new

owners would reuse the old one but update the first name with their own (Stimpson 2009). In other cases, some prominent upper middle- and upper-class figures chose to bequeath their books to universities or libraries rather than leave them to family members. This was undertaken with a clear awareness of the book's public nature and its function as a status indicator. Indeed, many individuals left strict instructions that their bookplates should not be removed from the endpapers so that future generations would recognize their benevolence.[4]

However, by far, the most common way to transfer ownership was the *in memoriam* inscription. These inscriptions were written from one family member to another who acted as a mediator, marking the book "in memory of" or "in remembrance of" the deceased. The book was often carefully selected because of its connection between the two people (e.g., shared taste in author or genre, shared memories surrounding its purchase or reading), but it could also be given simply as a stand-in for the person themselves regardless of its content. Based on the *in memoriam* inscriptions consulted for this research, no specific book genre was favored: marks are just as likely to appear in adventure fiction and history books as poetry volumes and music scores. Unlike the other means of transferring book ownership, the *in memoriam* inscription was meant to remain private and shared only by those in the deceased's close social circle in order to help them cope with their loss. Although it carried a sense of sadness, it was also tied to hope and survival, enabling the bereaved to adapt to the death yet maintain a relationship with the memory of the person.

The dataset for this study suggests that the *in memoriam* inscription was used across the United Kingdom by males and females of all ages, from children as young as six to adults as old as eighty. However, there is some indication that it was a practice carried out predominantly by working-class and lower-middle-class individuals. Although this conjecture requires further investigation, an exploration of the books held in the Janet Powney Collection at Cardiff University and the Edinburgh Museum of Childhood show similar patterns of use during the 1870–1914 period. There are several possible reasons that may account for this. First, as very few working-class and lower-middle-class people made a will at this time (Probert 2014) and many could not afford more elaborate memorabilia such as photographs to commemorate deceased loved ones, *in memoriam* inscriptions may have enabled them to pass on books informally to others and keep the

4. Interviews held with the 36 members of Research Libraries UK for the paper O'Hagan (2020), "A Voice for the Voiceless".

deceased's memory alive. The upper-middle and upper classes, on the other hand, were more likely to use wills to make formal arrangements for their personal possessions, including books, or leave specific instructions for their disposition in letters.[5] Another factor to consider is that books were a marker of respectability and, for many working-class families, they represented one of the few personal possessions they had, which gave them symbolic meaning beyond their actual material worth. For this reason, the books of deceased family members were not just a representation of them, but also a physical manifestation of their education, life experience, and personal growth, which gave *in memoriam* inscriptions special importance. As most studies of death and mourning in the long nineteenth century have been overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of the upper-middle and upper classes (with the exception of Vincent 1981 and Strange 2005), *in memoriam* inscriptions have the potential to offer a unique insight into how members of the working and lower-middle classes developed their own customs of dealing with death, transferal of property, and relationship rituals.

5.1 Memorializing the Elderly

When a person dies in old age, their death tends to come as less of a shock because it is anticipated and has a sense of inevitability. Consequently, feelings of grief are often also less intense and prolonged (Kafetz 2002). This was also the case in the long nineteenth century, where elderly deaths were considered to reflect a long Christian life and, thus, were easier to come to terms with. Jalland (1996) notes that Christian faith provided comfort to many elderly Victorians and Edwardians as they became increasingly aware of their own mortality and developed feelings of "anticipatory mourning" for their own death. By the end of the Victorian era, improved standards of living and diet and the impact of public health reforms on sanitation meant that older people were more likely to die of cancer, strokes, and heart attacks than infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, typhoid, and scarlet fever, as had been the case just a few decades earlier (Mitchison 1977). Newspapers noted that men over sixty were now more physically and mentally robust and "visibly younger than they would have been at the same age forty years ago" (*The Spectator,* 23 July 1881). In light of these changes, even though death in old age was viewed as inevitable, it could still cause surprise when it occurred with little or no

5. In *Death in the Victorian Family*, Jalland records multiple examples of upper-class figures leaving letters for their families with guidance on their finances.

previous warning, especially when the elderly person was perceived as healthy (Raphael 1984).

William Marshall Lennox was a former printer and Calvinist Minister who settled in Cardiff with his wife Lucretia in 1895 upon retirement from the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel in Cheltenham. Despite being in his 70s, William "enjoyed excellent health" and continued to carry out secretarial work for the Connexion (*Cheltenham Examiner*, 6 June 1906). On the evening of 30 May 1906, William left his house at 54 Connaught Road and walked to nearby Newport Road to catch a tram to Cardiff Central Station. He was planning to take the 22:30 train to London as he had a meeting early the next morning. As he reached the corner of Oakfield Street, William fell to the ground suddenly in a fit (*Evening Express*, 31 May 1906). An onlooker, Mr. Newbury, immediately flagged down a passing police constable and, together, they carried William to the house of Councillor Kidd who lived just a few doors away. Drs Phillips and Campbell were summoned and pronounced William dead on arrival (*Evening Express*, 31 May 1906). An autopsy was subsequently carried out and it was revealed that he had suffered from a fatal heart attack (*Gloucestershire Echo*, 1 June 1906).

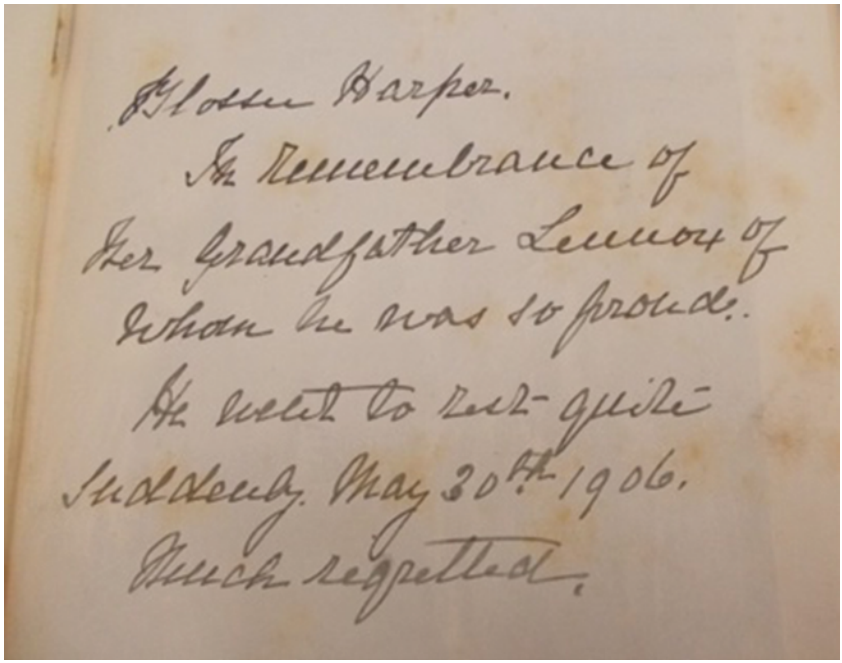

Figure 4. Memorializing the Elderly. Author's private collection.

Following William's death, wife Lucretia sorted through his belongings. Going through his books, she came across a copy of *The Great Composers* by C. E. Bourne — a compilation of biographies on such musicians as Handel, Bach, and Beethoven. Taking the book in her hands, she carefully inscribed the endpaper to Flossie Harper[6] "in remembrance of her grandfather Lennox", writing that he was "so proud" of her. Lucretia goes on to state that he "went to rest quite suddenly May 30th 1906" and that his death was "much regretted". As Jalland (1996) notes, transferring ownership of possessions from the deceased to the bereaved could be comforting as they served as symbolic reminders of the person. The act of inscribing imbues this transferal of ownership with additional meaning, turning the item into both a contact relic and a mourning artefact. On the one hand, being a material object that belonged to the deceased, the book carries its own "aura" (Danet 1997) which tells a history of the hands that have touched it. Yet, on the other, the new inscription added to the book acts as a frame in the process of loss, signaling the lingering presence of William yet moving him into a new relationship with his granddaughter that is mediated by Lucretia herself. The nature of not only his sudden death, but his sudden death *in public* may have been particularly traumatic for the family, leaving them feeling guilty, angry, and full of regret (Raphael 1984). The lack of opportunity for spiritual preparation or repentance would have also been a concern (Jalland 1996). Thus, Lucretia's *in memoriam* inscription enables the family to mourn privately over their loss, focus on William's relationship with his granddaughter, and, in doing so, ensure that he is never forgotten.

5.2 Memorializing the Young

Like today, the death of a child in the long nineteenth century was particularly distressing and incapacitating as it went against the natural progression of life. While mortality rates generally fell as a result of better living conditions, the statistics for infant mortality remained consistently high throughout the period (Jalland 1996). In their first year of life, children risked diarrhea, pneumonia, bronchitis, and convulsions, while older children were more likely to suffer from measles, whooping cough, and scarlet fever (Woods 2000). As they approached young adulthood, children were at increasing danger of catching tuberculosis, dysentery, and smallpox. Although death in childhood was far more common across the

6. 'Flossie' appears to have been a childhood nickname for William Lennox's granddaughter who was actually Margaret Mary.

working classes, familiarity with bereavement did not dull a family's pain or suffering. As Pollock (1983) asserts, despite lower expectations of their survival, there is no evidence to suggest that Victorian working-class parents felt less distress at their deaths than their middle- or upper-class peers. We see the lasting impact of this distress in oral testimonies taken roughly seventy years later, such as that of Louise Henton, the daughter of a gas inspector, who, talking about the death of her two siblings in childhood, stated, "I could cry now if I thought about it. I was fond of them all" (qtd. Thompson 1970).[7] Equally, Margaret Moody, the daughter of a stonemason, reflected on the death of her little brother at three years old: "[He had] diphtheria, croup. He had his cot at the bottom of his bed and [my uncle] said he'd do anything, but the doctor said all the money in the world won't save him . . . it was awful" (qtd. Thompson 1970).[8]

Thomas and Ann Dupre were just one of thousands of couples who witnessed the trauma of losing a child in the long nineteenth century. The Dupres lived at 4 Temperance Terrace in Altrincham, Cheshire with their five children: Joseph, Harry, Edith, Bertha, and Jane. They were a family who would have been described as being part of the "respectable" working classes. Thomas worked as an assistant draper in a shop on Altrincham High Street and helped run the local Conservative club in his spare time. By the mid-1880s, both sons were employed as a pupil teacher and clerk, respectively, while daughters Edith and Jane were working as domestic servants. Bertha, on the other hand, remained living at home without a job, which may be an indication that her health was not particularly good.[9] As the family welcomed in the start of 1886, Bertha began to feel unwell, reporting abdominal pains, loss of appetite, and constipation. Just over one week later on 9 January, she slipped into unconsciousness and passed away in her bed at aged sixteen with father Thomas at her side. Doctor W. J. Jones declared her cause of death to be "obstruction of bowels", which had led to a fatal "syncope".[10] Medical historians note that many patients diagnosed with bowel obstructions in the long nineteenth

7. See Thompson's "Interview with Miss Henton" @ https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?id=q-bf65566c-629d-47a6-bce8-a379fbf369da&q=henton.
8. See Thompson's "Interview with Mrs Moody" @ https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?id=q-8b9caa59-89c0-46a5-bdd6-8bb0945baa2c&q=moody.
9. As 'infirmity' was not a category on the census until 1911, we cannot be sure of this, but given her cause of death, this is a strong possibility.
10. This information can be found on Bertha Dupre's death certificate.

century suffered from Crohn's disease, which was not officially diagnosed until 1932 (Addison 1983; Drożdż, Włodzimierz and Budzyński 2012). Without treatment, Crohn's disease can result in life-threatening flare-ups, which is likely what happened to young Bertha.

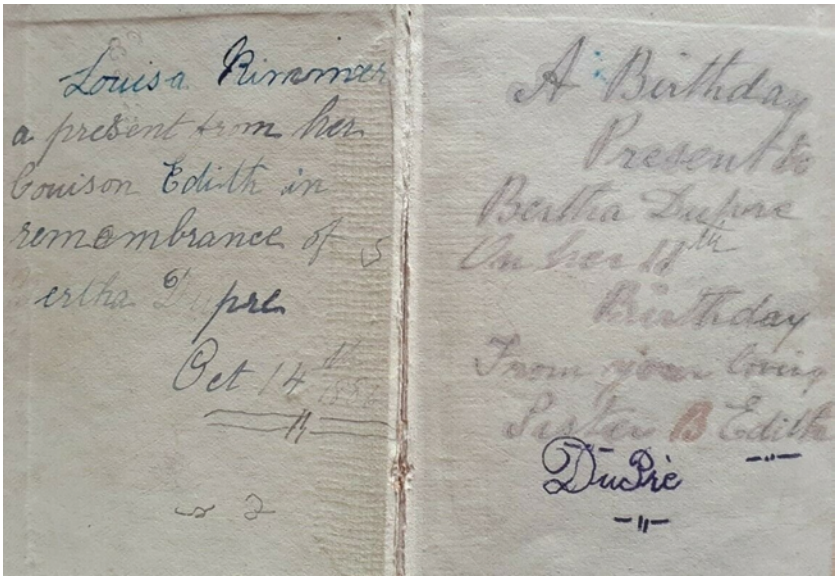

Figure 5. Memorializing the Young. Author's private collection.

Just as we saw with William Lennox, following Bertha's death, her family began the daunting task of clearing out her personal belongings. It was then that sister Edith came across the pocket-sized *Keepsake Scripture Textbook*, which she had given to Bertha on 16 September 1880 to mark her 11th birthday. Edith bought the book shortly after going into service and probably had to save hard to purchase such a resplendent gift edition. Nonetheless, its well-leafed pages, heavy underlining, and annotations show that Bertha was truly grateful for the present. Reencountering the book after Bertha's passing must have been an extremely emotional experience for Edith, as her happy memories of Bertha's birthday blended with the sad thoughts of her untimely death. Edith held onto the book for several months, before reinscribing it to her 16-year-old cousin Louisa Rimmer on 14 October 1886. Edith writes that she is gifting the book "in remembrance of"

Bertha. Being of a similar age, Louisa and Bertha were probably close to one another, so the book must have provided some form of alleviation, serving as a keepsake that acted as a clear embodiment of Bertha and a stand-in for her lived presence (Lutz 2011). Knowing that Bertha's hands turned the pages of the book and inscribed the front endpaper in ink emphasized its function as a contact relic, which connected her with Edith and Louisa. Furthermore, juxtaposing the original and new inscriptions alongside, as mediated by Edith's hand, increased their intensity as it spatially broke down the barrier between life and death, indicating Bertha's 'afterlife'. Jalland describes the death of a child as the "supreme test of Christian faith" (1996, 122) which parents and siblings had to accept as a trial that taught them to submit to God's will. The fact that Bertha's book was a daily scripture book may have given both Edith and Louisa additional comfort to the inscription within, using its content to reflect on their grief and seek guidance from God in their time of need. The short passage from the day of her death — "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" — for example, is circled.

Edith had little time for public mourning and had to resume her job as servant soon after Bertha's funeral. However, as Strange reminds us, just because members of the working classes appeared to live in "mute resignation" (2005), this did not mean that they did not develop personal ways to grieve. The *in memoriam* inscription clearly reminds us that this was the case.

VI. Concluding Discussion

For much of the long nineteenth century, people took to the endpapers of their books to document the illnesses and deaths of loved ones, express feelings of grief, or pass down books informally to other family members. Building upon the long-standing tradition of marking family Bibles with lists of names and death dates, inscribers used the private confines of their books to disclose information or emotions that they could not articulate in public life. By 1870, the greater availability of cheaper books, coupled with increasing literacy rates, meant that these inscriptive practices were carried out by individuals of all class groups, not just the elite or wealthy. Thus, these inscriptions represent a largely unmediated resource on death and mourning rituals that provides opportunities to encounter first-hand accounts of individuals whose voices are often neglected in histories of the period.

Despite the strong cultural value of these inscriptions, their often-serendipitous survival in secondhand bookshops or private collections means that they have not been previously explored in any depth. This article has offered a first attempt to understand the forms and functions of these inscriptions for Victorians and Edwardians, as well as their position within broader mourning practices of the period. By combining archival research with textual/multimodal analysis, it has been possible to tease out specific narratives that foreground the autonomous roles that individuals adopted to navigate the death and mourning customs of the period. The idiosyncrasies and imperfections of each inscriber's handwriting imbues these writings with an emotional immediacy not felt when just reading a name in an official record, thus demonstrating their important role as "psychological visiting cards" (Sassoon 1999, 76) that indicate "hidden" aspects of a person's lived experiences.

Across all classes, inscriptions could take on roles as protective amulets, used to ward off illness or problems in pregnancy and childbirth. These marks that often wished a person well, prayed for their survival, or thanked God or medical practitioners for saving their life carried a sentient force and show how people inscribed with the aim of gaining power or influence over something that was out of their control. They indicate how secular relics can still hold sacred qualities and draw upon both pagan (votive offerings) and religious traditions (Churching) in their purposes. In other cases, inscriptions acquired more diaristic functions, with writers documenting their loved one's illness, subsequent death, and burial in a bid to come to terms with it and make sense of their own emotions. These types of marks were often written in religious books, suggesting that writers navigated between the book, the inscription, and the event to draw therapeutic comfort from its content. Regularly returning to the inscription in the months following the bereavement also assisted writers in their transition to a new type of relationship with the deceased.

Inscriptions were also used by individuals of all classes to pass down the deceased's books to another family member or friend. This transfer of ownership could be marked by the addition of new names and their relationship to the deceased, death dates, visual markers of death (e.g., crosses), and updated bookplates. However, the most common method was the *in memoriam* inscription by which one family member (often the spouse in the case of the elderly or the parent or sibling in the case of a child) acted as a mediator between the deceased and the bereaved, inscribing the book to transcend the void between life and death and maintain the relationship between the two people. Marking the book "in memory

of" or "in remembrance of" the deceased turned it into both a contact relic and a mourning artefact because it carried an aura that embodied the deceased and, thus, helped the bereaved cope with their loss. Based on the current dataset, there is some indication that the *in memoriam* inscription was particularly favored by working-class and lower-middle-class people, perhaps due to their limited financial means to afford other commemorative artefacts (e.g. photographs), their low uptake in wills, and the symbolic worth of books to them. However, further research is required to verify this supposition. Nonetheless, these inscriptions provide evidence to challenge the belief that the working classes had an attitude of fatalism towards death and emphasize that, even though their public lives may have required them to be pragmatic or even stoic, they were by no means indifferent and showed their grief within the private sphere.

After war broke out in 1914, a number of changes took place in both the printing industry and society that had an enduring impact on the way in which book inscriptions were used for expressions of grief. Mass paper shortages, metal rationing, lack of access to new machinery, and a decrease in the number of skilled craftsmen resulted in fewer (and more expensive) books, while financial hardship across all strata of society led many people to defer any feelings of sentimentality and sell their family book collections in order to get by (O'Hagan 2021). Preliminary research currently being conducted on book inscriptions in inter-war Britain shows a sharp decline in their use in mourning rituals from 1920 onwards. Furthermore, such inscriptions become shorter and do not feature such soliloquized outpourings of emotions, while the use of death dates and crosses now occur far more frequently than *in memoriam* inscriptions when passing books down to loved ones. Inscriptions from the 1930s and 1940s also indicate a clear transition towards the mourning of public figures (e.g., King George V, Neville Chamberlain) and even include newspaper clippings, poems, and photos, suggesting an evolution towards parasocial forms of grief that were seen as less taboo. Their similarities with the way that people mourn celebrities on social media today is an interesting avenue for further research. Although at an early stage, these findings would seem to fit with other studies on how mourning practices evolved in the inter-war period in response to the War's "normalization" of death, increased secularism, falling mortality rates and rising life expectancy, becoming shorter, less fervent, more repressed, and more nationalistic and celebrity oriented (Walters 2008; Jalland 2014; Maddrell and Sidaway 2016). To add to this, in the context of inscriptions, one might also consider the replacement of writing with telephone calls, which left no written trace,

and the increase of will-making across the working and lower-middle classes, which may have lessened the need for *in memoriam* inscriptions to transfer book ownership.

Thus, in their singular ability to manage grief and loss, provide protection and therapy, and maintain relationships between the deceased and the bereaved, book inscriptions — particularly those between 1870 and 1914 — are important secular relics that should be given just as much value as hair jewelry, teeth, and wreaths when discussing the role of objects in Victorian and Edwardian mourning rituals. In reconstructing some of the stories behind their usage, we gain a better sense of the different ways that individuals of all classes expressed grief through writing, thereby developing a more refined understanding of mourning practices in the long nineteenth century and how individuals modified pre-existing traditions and developed new conventions with alternative artefacts. These inscriptions hold a wealth of knowledge about illness, death, and grief in the long nineteenth century that no living person possesses. Therefore, it is important to preserve and research them in order to keep these individuals' voices and stories alive.

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