

Title: *Memories and the City: Havelock Ellis' Written Recollection of His Wife's Cremation.*

Main Text (2835 word count without bibliography)

On Monday 18 September 1916 the cremated ashes of the women's rights activist and writer Edith Ellis were scattered over the garden at Golders Green Crematorium.¹ Her husband - physician and writer - Havelock Ellis captured the event in his autobiography (*My Life*, 1940). His written recollections provide a glimpse into how this procedure was experienced in first person, and what were the reasons for choosing it in the first place. It also enlightens us on the emotional connection Havelock established with the garden of rest over the years that followed Edith's death.

The scattering of Edith's ashes took place three days after her funeral and cremation at Golders Green Crematorium. Havelock recalled the event in an extract: "*I came with two or three friends to the crematorium, to witness the scattering of the ashes over the quiet and beautiful garden.*"[...] "*The attendant with the basket of ashes on his arm walked slowly and gravely about scattering the ashes with his hand as he went. All that was volatile of her body had passed into the air, and I was glad that what remained would continue to live in the roses or even only the grass.*"² Commenting on the actual way of disposing of the ashes Havelock explained that: "*This method of disposal seemed to me far better than preservation in an urn, though it was only later that I learned from a friend that she [Edith] once had actually expressed a wish for her ashes to be scattered over the earth or the sea*".³ When opened in 1902, Golders Green was the first crematorium serving London, that provided a specially-designed garden, for the scattering of cremated ashes. This option however was not contemplated in a promotional pamphlet published by the Company in 1909 as the options made available at the time were for the ashes to be kept either in a columbarium or in private tombs or mausolea.⁴ From the scale of charges published in the "Transactions of the Cremation Society of England" dated 1919 it is possible to see that the charges for "*reducing Ashes to fine particles and scattering them over garden [10s*

¹ Grosskurth 1980, 272.

² Ellis 1940, 510.

³ Ellis 1940, 510.

⁴ Cremation in Great Britain 1909, 27.

6d],” was just slightly lower than the starting price for “Terra-cotta Urn (hand-made) to contain the Ashes [15s]“.⁵

At the time of Edith’s death, Havelock was in a very precarious financial situation, mostly due to the onerous medical treatments, and was not able to afford the expenses for a memorial plaque. In his own words he explained that: *“No memorial of this ceremony was set up at the crematorium at the time. I could not have borne the expense even if the wish to put up any memorial had occurred to me. But a few years later it was arranged that tablets might be set up in the clerestory to the memory of friends whose remains had here been cremated”*.⁶ A memorial plaque was eventually commissioned to commemorate Edith and installed, seven years after her death. Partly financed by Havelock, and Algernon West⁷ who was the executor Edith appointed before her death and after the couple legally separated early in 1916. This was Edith’s wish as she was aware of the difficult financial situation they were in and did not want to leave solely on Havelock the responsibility of dealing with creditors after her death.⁸ Edith’s plaque, which is still visible today in Golders Green Crematorium, consists of an octagonal marble tablet inscribed with a text composed by Havelock Ellis himself, surrounded by a polychrome ceramic garland.⁹ This was fashioned in the style of the fifteenth-century Italian artist Luca della Robbia, renowned for its colourful glazed terracotta statuary and sculptures. Havelock recalled: *“I had a tablet set up in the central position of a bay facing that part of the grounds where the ashes had been scattered.”*¹⁰

There is no mention about the design and style chosen for the plaque, and if this was a decision that Havelock took by himself or with the help of his, or Edith’s, friends. However, considering that this was one of the first memorial tablets to be installed in the Cloister at Golders Green Crematorium, it may be possible that the Cremation Society was directly involved in the selection process. Looking at a promotional pamphlet published in 1909 by the Cremation Society of Great Britain it was evident that the cloisters at Golders Green Crematorium was

⁵ Transactions of the Cremation Society of England 1919, 31.

⁶ Ellis 1940, 510.

⁷ Grosskurth 1980, 276.

⁸ Grosskurth 1980, 266-67.

⁹ Ellis 1940, 510.

¹⁰ Ellis 1940, 510.

available for memorials, tablets, plaques and monuments. In an extract we can read that: *“The cloister will be open on its garden side. In it the company proposes to make grants in perpetuity of space for the erection of monuments and family tombs, and thus afford a covered place where works of art may be set up as memorials to the dead without fear of damage from the weather.”*¹¹

The scale of charges published in the “Transactions of the Cremation Society of England” in 1919, indicated that for those clients interested in discussing a site for a private columbarium or mausoleum or a memorial tablet, they needed to enquire directly at the Crematorium office.¹²

When looking across the Cloister at Golders Green Crematorium it is evident that the same Della Robbia-inspired design was one of the preferred styles as in each archway section features at least two or three memorial tablets in this style. These are mostly positioned in a symmetrical way right on the top part of the Cloister back wall, so as to give a sense of continuity to the space, when one walks through it. Beyond the design Havelock also personalised the text featured on Edith’s memorial. He recalled how he came to it and why: *“The inscription I set up was one of the earliest, by its date apparently much the earliest, for people do not set up memorial to friends who died seven years previously. [...] The Formula of this inscription, sometime since imitated, was new when I devised it, the old tombstone formula previously used on crematorium monuments seeming to me unsuitable.”*

Around the time Edith’s memorial tablet was installed in the Cloister at Golders Green Crematorium the Cremation Society was undergoing a transition instigated by internal debates and discussions about what aspects of cremation should be communicated to the public. The numbers were still very low, therefore the new strategy aimed at encouraging new adopters to choose this disposal method. The “Transactions of the Cremation Society of Great Britain” published that year, included a report on the first conference on cremation held by the society on the 26th October 1922. Speaking at the Cremation Society conference held on 26th October 1922 at the Guildhall, H.T Herring, one of the members of the Council of the Cremation Society of England, made a clear point about the fact that the slow progress of cremation was also possibly to do with the fact that the Cremation Society propaganda was mostly on the sanitary aspects of

¹¹ Cremation in Great Britain 1909, 24.

¹² Transactions of the Cremation Society of England 1919, 31.

cremation. In his intervention he stated that: “...with regards to the propaganda, during the last forty years we have devoted our energies mostly to the sanitary side of cremation. It has been advocated on the lines by the Society and the Press, and today there are few who contradict the statement that cremation is the more sanitary method of disposing of the dead. Nevertheless, cremation has made slow progress. I think that may be from the fact that the public do not care about sanitation.” Herring went further to make a comparison between the principles behind earth burial and cremation. In his view: “The ideas of a cremationist are more beautiful. A dignified building, surrounded with a beautiful garden; a well-appointed chapel, not to a furnace, not to a fire but to a super-heated chamber, where the mortal remains are swiftly disintegrated and reduced to a mere handful of harmless white ashes, which can be preserved anywhere desired, or placed in an urn in a columbarium. Myself, I think it is better to scatter them on the ground, on God’s Acre, in ‘The Garden of Rest’; there to let them remain marked by Nature’s hand, and the fact recorded, if desired, by a simple tablet in the neighbouring building. For these reasons I think propaganda should be pushed from the aesthetics rather than the sanitary side.”¹³ What does this tell us? It tells us that while the Cremation Society was debating about how they could reframe their image, changes were already initiated by the actual adopters as they personalised the way they commemorated their lost ones.

Over the years that followed Edith’s death, Havelock visited Golders Green Crematorium, and established an emotional connection with the spot in the garden, where her ashes were scattered.¹⁴ Despite the fact that there wasn’t an actual physical marker, such as a gravestone to commemorate his wife, Havelock recollections of his visits are thoughtful and intense. In one passage he explained: “I know not if any of those who once loved her ever came to this garden. For my part I am glad to hasten year after year to the one spot where her mortal remains are still alive, if only in leaves or grass. It was in flowers that her restless and aspiring spirit sought peace and joy. Now she is among flowers and flowers have become her very flesh.”¹⁵ Havelock took consolation in seeing that over the years Edith’s ashes would have become nature, and that was, to his mind, the best way for Edith to be remembered. He relished contemplating nature as it manifested in the planted roses and flowers, in the area where Edith’s ashes were scattered.

¹³ Transactions of the Cremation Society of England 1923, 38-9.

¹⁴ Ellis 1940, 510.

¹⁵ Ellis 1940, 511.

Havelock's written recollection of his experience give us an insight into how the procedures of scattering ashes in one place, and the placing of memorial plaques in another, introduced a new paradigm of disposal and remembrance that was radically different from earth burial procedures, in which the resting place where the human remains were buried, was marked by a gravestone. There is something fascinating in how death and memorialisation was internalised in the case of Havelock and became a very personal thing. Havelock did not need a physical memorial or marker but it was his own experience, in his own mind and memory. This is a contrast when compared with Victorian death culture that was mostly preoccupied with social status, legacy and the importance of leaving a marker for future generations, in the physical form of a tombstone or memorial, in a cemetery.

Havelock's experience provides an insight into how a garden of remembrance worked both as a physical and emotional space. Beyond the actual description are making the reader empathise with him and also made one realise how the aesthetics of the garden and the lifecycle of nature, was a powerful metaphor of the human lifecycle. Also, in the garden of remembrance the areas are allocated in relation to a rotational programme usually organised by months or other, to allow the ground to absorb the scattered ashes. For this reason, the garden of remembrance is also the place where the ashes of more than one person are scattered, and therefore a place that over time acquires a multiplicity of meanings, for many people that most likely are not even related to one another. Cremation not only provided a new possibility to dispose of the dead but effectively proposed a new paradigm of disposal. Beyond its pragmatic technological aspects, cremation introduced a new aesthetics that was reflected in the - specially designed - buildings and open spaces. The garden of rest at Golders Green Crematorium was the vision of Irish gardener and Cremation Society member William Robinson. He was commissioned to design the landscape for the crematorium. Robinson outlined his ideas and theories in *God's Acre Beautiful*, first published in 1880. There he proposed a new paradigm of disposal that integrated architecture and nature in a new way. In a passage Robinson outlines the benefits of adopting columbaria versus earth burial: "*The design of these columbaria or tomb-temples would be worthy of the best efforts of the architect, and their formation in the most lasting and noble form would not be so costly as the system of deep burial of the body, the headstones, and the continual and laborious moving of the ground. These buildings would save all memorials from destruction*

*through exposure.*¹⁶ In the *publication* Robinson also outlined his vision of the future cemetery, in which nature was the main protagonist, rather than tombstones and mausolea. A vision that was also advocating a stronger connection with the elements and the senses through open views and fresh air. In an extract he explained that: *'The cemetery of the future not only prevents the need of occupying large areas of ground with decaying bodies, in a ratio increasing with the population and with time, but leaves ample space to spare for those open green lawns, without which no good natural effect is possible in such places. It is to be a national garden in the best sense; safe from violation as the via sacra, and having the added charms of pure air, trees, grass and flowers. The open central lawns should always be preserved from the follies of the geometrical and stone gardeners, so as to secure freedom of view and air, and a resting place for the eye.'*¹⁷ The innovation of Robinson's proposal is also in the way he reconfigured the arrangement of the memorial and resting place of the cremated remains, as they are effectively separated, which is what happened in the case of Edith as her ashes were scattered in one place (the Garden of Rest) and the memorial was located in another (the Cloister). We can say that Edith was commemorated simultaneously in multiple locations and forms, and both had meanings and a function. The place where her ashes were scattered was more private and personal, this was the place to which Havelock was possibly more emotionally connected. Edith's memorial plaque has a more public function, that speaks about Edith's legacy as a writer and reformer.

Beyond writing about his recollections when visiting the spot where Edith's ashes were scattered and her memorial, Havelock started to feel the emotive intensity of the locations around London that were of particular significance for both. In a passage from his biography Havelock explained: *"Whenever nowadays I go about London on my business or my recreation I constantly come upon them: here she stood; here we met; here we once sat together; just as, even in places where she never went, I come upon some object, however trifling, which leads, by a tenuous thread of suggestion, to her."* [...] *"A frequent meeting-place at this time was the Down Street Tube Station, just around the corner from the Lyceum Club in Piccadilly. Knowing my unsociable dislike of coming to the Club, she had thoughtfully fixed this conveniently near but retired spot,*

¹⁶ Robinson 1880. 16.

¹⁷ Robinson 1880. 28.

where we could meet to go together for lunch or dinner, or just to see each other for a brief space and talk over any plans of mutual interest.”¹⁸

From this we gather that Edith's memories are not only connected to one place, where the ashes are scattered and a memorial located, but she exists simultaneously in and around the city, in those places experienced together. For example, it was there at Down Street Tube Station that Edith on an autumn day in 1913 told Havelock about being diagnosed with diabetes, the disease that eventually killed her almost exactly three years later. We can say that the urban space of the city becomes a resting place, a receptacle, for memories, alongside the crematorium and the Garden of Rest. The connections between memories and places is poetically expressed by Havelock and makes one see the city not only as a series of spaces and places but a sequence of emotions and experiences. However it is not clear from Havelock how those emotions are triggered. Were they spontaneously happening by coincidence when passing by a location? Or were they happening following his visit to Golders Green Crematorium?

Whichever was the reason for Havelock's memories of Edith's to be set into motion, what we gather from his written recollections is that death culture and memorialisation was undergoing profound changes that were connected with the introduction of cremation as a practice of disposal of human remains. This new paradigm, as we also saw in Robinson's vision earlier, reconfigured death rituals. From Havelock's experience we get only a glimpse into what was taking place at the time, and although it is the recollection only of one individual, it is possible to understand how he experienced in such a deep and layered series of emotions and in different locations and spatial arrangements. Havelock's writing also raises more questions about which one of the places associated with Edith holds more significance to him? The final resting place? Or the urban space of the city which they experienced together in their lifetime? All of the places represent fragments and facets of Edith's life and they all shape the memory of the person she was in life and death.

References: (81 words)

¹⁸ Ellis 1940, 376.

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