Ah, lovely appearance of death!
What sight upon earth is so fair?
Not all the gay pageants that breathe
Can with a dead body compare.

And:
Rejoice for a brother deceased
Our loss is his infinite gain.

These verses are by Charles Wesley (1707–88) but they survived in the Wesleyan Methodist hymn book until 1875. Admittedly, Wesleyans were conservative creatures and their hymn books even more so. Even Wesleyan taste was beginning to change by that date. To us, such sentiments seem like voices from a vanished world, as bizarre as Victorian widows’ weeds and black ostrich plumes at funerals.

Critical studies of the history of beliefs and customs concerning death have proliferated in recent years, yet little attention has been paid to evangelical approaches to the subject. Remarking on this omission, Ralph Houlbrooke asks whether the Evangelical Revival reinvigorated old patterns of concern for ‘dying well’ which elsewhere were tending to weaken. The question is worth asking, since...
evangelicalism was so pervasive in nineteenth-century Nonconformity and had a party in the Church of England. It therefore probably had some influence on up to half of Victorian churchgoers. The accounts of death-beds in biographies of evangelicals reveal most of what they thought about death and the future life and I shall try to bring out what was distinctive in their beliefs and practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with some reference at the end to other religious groups by way of comparison and contrast. We have also to allow, however, for the continuing influence of older traditions and the force of social and cultural pressures which affected all Victorians: for example their sentimentality and conspicuous display at funerals, the roots of which will not be explored here.

The pressures of convention and how evangelicals resisted them can best be seen in funeral ceremonies. A typical picture in a book entitled *The Victorian celebration of death* shows a funeral procession with six black horses adorned in black ostrich plumes to draw the hearse; mutes with wands and batons; and an immense black canopy of ostrich plumes on the hearse. Mourners wore black crepe bands on their hats; women wore jet and silver jewellery and carried black fans. Mourning cards were sent round with black edges and elaborately decorated designs. Deep mourning could persist for months with women wearing black and veils and streamers, only gradually modulating through grey, and so back to normality. If the poor could only ape their betters within limits, they notoriously dreaded the humiliations of a pauper funeral 'on the parish'. Much of this ceremonial display had little to do with religion, and a modern critic

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1980). Farrell distinguishes Puritan, Enlightenment, Unitarian and Romantic styles and claims an 'Evangelical era' for the 1830s marked by the newer type of revivalism then emerging. (For which see William G. McLoughlin, *Modern revivalism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959) but also Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic revivalism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978) and John Kent, *Holding the fort* (London: Epworth Press, 1978)). Although changes in the English tradition of evangelicalism can be related to some extent to the American pattern, England's 'Puritan era' has to be confined to the seventeenth century so far as it existed. Its relationship to the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century is problematical; and in any case English evangelicalism lacked the kind of constitutional continuity and social influence from the old Puritanism which can be traced in New England. For Evangelical Anglicans and death see Elisabeth Jay, *The religion of the heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 154–68. The present essay draws mainly on formal biographies and denominational periodicals; and to some extent on hymns. For these the following abbreviations have been used: AM = Arminian Magazine (later MM = Methodist Magazine and WMM = Wesleyan Methodist Magazine); BM = Baptist Magazine; CM = Congregational Magazine; CO = Christian Observer; EM = Evangelical Magazine.

2 This was suggested by the Religious Census of 1851, but it should be noted that the firm percentages often quoted derive from the speculative estimates of Horace Mann for individual attendances which cannot be calculated from the figures collected. In any case, mere attendance figures do not fully reflect the overall strength and influence of denominations, particularly of the Church of England. On the other hand, the main Nonconformist denominations were predominantly evangelical, and to these has to be added the substantial Evangelical Party in the Church of England.

has said that it was rather a 'bonanza of commercial exploitation'. Certainly it provided much lucrative business and was criticized for this by some at the time.  

This kind of display, though varying with time and class, was much older than the eighteenth century, and there had always been those who sought to reduce it from motives of humility or fear of expense. Evangelicals were especially likely to urge restraint. Thus Augustus Toplady (d. 1778) had forbidden the usual gifts of mourning rings, scarves and hat-bands, a monument or even a funeral sermon. William Grimshaw (d. 1763), the Evangelical curate of Haworth, asked to be 'wrapped in a poor man’s burial suit' and placed in a 'plain poor man’s coffin of eldern boards only'. His coffin was carried over the moors on a horse litter with the congregation singing hymns. The funeral feast was restricted to two dishes plus cheese, cakes and tarts, though each mourner was given a pair of black gloves, funeral cake and two helpings of negus (a wise precaution in that bleak area). 

John Wesley had laid down in his will that £6 should be given to six poor men to carry his body to the grave, and his wishes were carried out in 1791. (This was an interesting reversion to pious ancient custom: Thomas Ken the Nonjuror had done much the same years before. Charles Wesley was characteristically more ecclesiastical: his coffin was borne by eight Anglican clergymen.) John’s will continued: ‘I particularly desire that there may be no hearse, no coach, no escutcheon, no pomp, except the tears of those that loved me and are following me to Abraham’s bosom. I solemnly adjure my executors in the name of God, punctually to observe this’. They were to receive ‘no recompense till the resurrection of the just’. 

It was in fact difficult for eminent evangelicals to avoid all show. Despite William Wilberforce’s wishes, his family yielded in 1833 to a parliamentary request for him to be buried in Westminster Abbey. They felt that they had to allow ‘a request so gratifying to the feelings’ though they ‘thought it fitting to avoid all such parade as was inconsistent with the situation of a private gentleman’. But they added: ‘It was his characteristic distinction that without quitting the rank in which Providence had placed him, he had cast on it a lustre peculiarly his own’. The attenders included bishops, royal dukes, high legal functionaries and many others around ‘his unpretending bier’. It

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6 David Cannadine in *Mirrors of mortality*, 147.
7 For pre-nineteenth-century conventions see Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual*.
was described as a 'plain' funeral except for the Abbey choir. 12

However, it was the conventions of the death-bed which revealed evangelical preferences and beliefs most clearly. It is true that we only glimpse obliquely what the dying person really felt and thought through the formal and stereotyped conventions of evangelical biography, which tended to reduce individuality, though sometimes the tension between convention and reality shows through. 13 There is a delightful example in the otherwise very conventional account of Elizabeth Fry's death-bed. Her daughter wished to read to her from a pious biography. 'No', said Elizabeth firmly, she felt too ill. She then added that when she was ill she sympathized with poor sick women who had 'good ladies to visit them' – a particularly devastating comment from this source. 14 Yet the conventions are revealing. One obvious feature – shared in a general way with others of the time and in other periods of history – is the sombre detailed care with which the last sufferings, sayings and attitudes of the dying person are recorded. But what did evangelicals particularly wish to record at a death-bed? What worries did they reveal?

The basic convention was that the dying person should die in peace and express confidence of salvation at the end. It was, however, recognized that the physical and mental ravages of illness could distract the sufferer and had to be allowed for in assessing his or her spiritual condition. Bouts of doubt and temptation were not concealed, although there was an evident concern to show that peace came at the end. 15

This evangelical attitude was a legacy of the Revival which began in the 1730s, and the deathbed conventions it favoured persisted in full force for over a century and in some respects half a century longer. But behind this lay a substantial legacy from seventeenth-century Puritanism, and behind that still older beliefs, particularly the teaching of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Traditional Christian teaching, Catholic as well as Protestant, pictured the future life as being more important than life in this world; and it promised heaven for the saved, hell for the damned. 16 Both Catholic and Protestant

12 Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, Life of William Wilberforce (London: John Murray, 1838), v, 373-6. Another 'plain' funeral except for the academic pomp was that of Charles Simeon, the Cambridge Evangelical: Charles Smyth, Simeon and church order (Cambridge: University Press, 1940), 3-5.
15 For attempts to explain such fears in godly people by natural causes while also allowing for the remembrance of sins past, see CM, iii (1820), 427.
16 It is true that belief in hell was sometimes being questioned privately by the end of the seventeenth century and more in the eighteenth, but it became a matter for public debate in the nineteenth. See D P. Walker, The decline of hell (London: Routledge, 1964); Geoffrey Rowell, Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: University Press, 1974). It died very hard, however, among the evangelicals.
were concerned for a holy life here and now, and both thought preparation for death important. Yet there were important differences. For Catholics, an elaborate network of last rites offered the penitent the assurance of the church's well-tried means for easing the soul's passage to the next world. Friends and relatives could shorten pains in purgatory by masses, indulgences and prayers for the departed, though Catholic preachers could invoke hell-fire as luridly as any Protestant. Protestants certainly omitted much that could have eased the soul's passage and assuaged fears of final damnation. Purgatory was denied; nothing more could be done for the soul after death, not even by prayer. The Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith meant that good works could win no merit in the sight of God and could not contribute to salvation. All that one could do was place one's faith in the mercy and grace of God. Most of the comforting rituals of the Catholic death-bed were removed, although some remained in the conservative Anglican version of Protestantism. The Calvinist version of Protestantism added to the anxieties of the death-bed, for it taught that God had mysteriously elected some to salvation and left some to damnation. There was nothing that a person could do to alter this decree and strictly speaking none could be sure that they had been elected to salvation.

This was too much for anxious human nature. By the end of the seventeenth century most Anglicans had rejected predestination; the dying person was comforted by recollections of a pious life and this, together with due preparation for death, offered a reasonable guarantee of salvation. Even the Puritans who believed in predestination developed systems of self-analysis by which one could detect hopeful signs of election. The stages of conversion, from conviction of sin to the experience of faith and forgiveness, were carefully charted and formed the framework of Puritan biography and autobiography. Yet although the ideal Puritan death-bed should have been one of assurance and peace at the end (and often was), there remained always the possibility that one had been deceived. It was unwise to trust in the evidence of rapturous feelings of joy. A degree of godly doubt was

17 For the details in French Catholicism, see McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, chapter VIII.
18 For some of the more severe Catholic approaches to death and criticisms of them, see McManners, 201f.
best, for this forced one back to dependence on the grace of God which alone could save one in the end. The children of pious parents raised special problems, since they had often not had time to show hopeful signs of the accepted pilgrim’s progress. Increase Mather, of the famous American Puritan family, had often spoken of longing for death as better than life, but on his death-bed in 1723 he was afraid of being deceived in his hope of bliss. The best judges teach (he said) that ‘going to heaven in the way of repentance is much safer and surer than going in the way of ecstasy’. Earlier, he had anxiously questioned his own dying son about salvation: ‘Do you believe it and rejoice in views and hopes of it?’ ‘I do! I do!’ came the reply. His daughter Katherine was a notable saint, yet at the end she asked: ‘Is my soul safe? will my Saviour accept me?’ ‘Probably,’ answered her cautious father.21

To these religious tensions were added ordinary human feelings of loss and grief. These were often exacerbated by the belief that premature death came by God’s will. It might well be a case of the parents’ sins being visited on the children; but in any case heaven was seen as in principle preferable to earth. One can still be moved by accounts of the agonies of Puritan and evangelical parents and spouses whose human grief conflicted with their inherited theology here. In the early seventeenth century, Nehemiah Wallington was so devastated by grief from the loss of a child that his wife said: ‘Husband, I am persuaded you offend God in grieving for this child so much. Do but consider what a deal of grief and care we are rid of, and what a deal of trouble and sorrow she is gone out of; and what abundance of joy she is gone into’.22 This mixed attitude survived or revived among evangelicals. Although John Wesley could be remarkably unfeeling in his responses to the family losses of his preachers and even his own sister, it is more common to find Methodists administering human comfort as well as spiritual admonition to each other.23

Puritan concentration on the last days and death-bed concern for the soul’s fate, and a desire to edify the spectators and the church, were all to be repeated in the evangelical tradition, though with some variations and fresh features. In a particularly clear account of the reasons for recording death-bed events, a writer in the Methodist Magazine in 1800 viewed them as a test of piety, ‘a display of the power and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’, ‘designed by God to awaken us to see the necessity of being ready also’, ‘to encourage us to meet the King of terrors without fear’. The death of a minister of Christ (he adds) is particularly important. ‘Were his sun to set under a

21 Stannard, Puritan way of death, 82.
23 Rack, Reasonable enthusiast, 542f.; collection of commiserating letters to John Pawson in his Some account of the life of Mr John Pawson, Methodist Church Archives (MCA) MS in John Rylands University Library, fos. 22–5. It is fair to add that Wesley occasionally wrote in a similar vein, e.g. to Samuel Bradburn (14 February 1786) in Letters of John Wesley, ed. J. Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), vii, 314f.
cloud, it would considerably weaken the testimony he had borne, in
his public ministrations and private instruction'. For, though he drew
these from scripture, he was supposed to have 'realised that truth in
his own soul'. A triumphant death 'is the most authentic seal he can set
in this world, to the truth of his own testimony'.

In the 1820s, the evangelical Congregationalist J.B. Williams
edited the life of the seventeenth-century Puritan Philip Henry and
wrote a biography of Philip's son Matthew (the author of a famous
Bible commentary) who had died in 1714. In a more gushing style
than the Wesleyan, Williams enthused: 'How singularly, how deeply
interesting the communications of an expiring believer. Every
advance towards the final hour receives new and refined excit­
ements'. 'It concentrates the mind in immediate prospects of eternity'.
He deplored the 'indifference' and 'stupidity' of those who
failed to 'improve' the occasion. Williams's comments on funeral
sermons also summed up a good deal of what evangelicals expected
from holy deaths: 'They are admirably calculated to perfume the
name of the deceased; to console surviving mourners; to gratify
descendants; and to instruct and edify the church'. What Williams
termed 'perfuming the name of the deceased', of course, included
drawing out evidence from their last words that they had died in a
state of faith. In all this, it may be felt, words were all-important,
indeed all too important, for those Protestants who had cut out so
much of Catholic ritual.

Ironically, Philip Henry's last words were scanty through painful
illness and in any case offered a striking contrast in their sober
simplicity to Williams's overblown style. He voiced what he had often
said earlier: 'See to it that your work be not undone, when your time is
done, lest you be undone for ever'; and 'follow peace and holiness'.
What had intervened to alter the style was partly the ecstasies of the
Evangelical Revival, but even more, in Williams's case, the growth of
popular romanticism.

Philip Henry's dying words are also of interest because they show
how the usual process of interrogation of the dying person could be
reversed, the sufferer turning the tables by interrogating observers
about the state of their souls. Henry was addressing godly 'professors',

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24 M.M., xxiii (1800), 291. James Obelkevich recognizes three main themes in Primitive
Methodist death-bed accounts: triumph over affliction and temptation, joyous entry into heaven
and 'sheer exaltation', expressed in biblical and royal imagery of a more or less highly-coloured
kind. James Obelkevich, Religion and rural society: south Lindsey 1825-75 (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1976), 235f. He does not examine the Wesleyan version which tends to be rather more
restrained in tone and imagery.

25 Life of Philip Henry by Matthew Henry, ed. John B. Williams (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth
Trust, 1974), xxvii (originally edited 1825); J.B. Williams, Life of Matthew Henry (Edinburgh:
Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 164 (originally 1828). Dying words of Philip Henry: Williams,
Philip Henry, 222. Williams is a good example of the shift from an 'Enlightenment' to a
'Romantic' style in evangelicalism argued for by David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in modern
but nineteenth-century examples seem more often to be of masters haranguing unconverted servants from their death-beds. 26

Sudden deaths posed a special problem because they gave no opportunity for evoking testimonies and a clear assurance of the dying person’s state. Biographers of all denominations tended to resolve this difficulty by showing that the deceased had always been ready for death; that his past life created a presumption in his favour; and that something in the manner of his passing or in signs of response to questions showed that all was well. John Hepworth, an Evangelical merchant, was prevented by fever from ‘expressing either his hopes or his fears’. If he had been judged for his ‘Christian character and future home’ by his dying sayings ‘we might consider both as dubious’. ‘But who that was well acquainted with this godly and faithful man . . . will hesitate in pronouncing him to have been a child of God and an heir of salvation?’ 27

Uneasiness of this kind about sudden death, and similar solutions for such unease, persisted to the end of the nineteenth century even when, as we shall see, in other respects less exacting and more sentimental conventions were creeping in. Thus David Hill, a Wesleyan missionary in China, died (it was lamented) without one farewell to the anxious watchers or absent friends, or any benediction to the churches he had founded. But ‘when they saw the lines of care and pain smoothed from his face in death, and the quiet, serene smile come back to the silent lips, they required no heavenly vision to assure them that he had passed through triumphant home.’ This was as late as 1896. 28 When the liberal evangelical Congregationalist R.W. Dale of Birmingham died suddenly in 1895, it was felt to be significant that he had left an unfinished sermon on the Christian Hope, breaking off in mid-sentence: ‘There is a larger, fuller, richer life in — ’. 29

Within the evangelicalism springing from the Revival a distinction has to be made between the Anglican Evangelicals and Dissenters (especially Calvinists), and the Arminian anti-Calvinist Methodist followers of John Wesley. 30 Both were concerned about ‘holy dying’ and needed to be reassured about the fates of themselves, their families and friends, but it may be suggested that disbelief in predestination

26 Examples in EM, viii (1800), 313–14; EM, New Series x (1868), 224.
27 CO, i (1800), 813f. In other cases a sign of assent to questions sufficed: EM, viii (1800), 117.
30 Jay, Religion of the heart, 160 says that for Calvinists the death-bed ‘provided both an illustration and a vindication of the doctrine of Final Perseverance’, the opposite perception to that of the Wesleyans. I have confined attention here to the contrast between the Wesleyan Methodists and Anglican Evangelicals, though what is said here of the Wesleyans would also apply to the other Methodist bodies. There were also Calvinistic versions of Methodism in Great Britain, while Anglican Evangelicals were generally classed as ‘Calvinists’. Moderate though their ‘Calvinism’ generally was, there were deeply-felt differences between all these people and the Arminian Methodists. See Rack, Reasonable enthusiast, 290, 459–61; John Walsh in History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, ed. R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), i. 290.
made a difference to the last scenes. In general, Evangelical Anglicans tended to trust less to feelings and were inclined rather to fall back on God's grace and mercy and the hope of election. This was no accident, since a number of them had been converted by reading old Puritan books. But the Methodists following Wesley believed that all people were open to salvation and were free to choose it, even though salvation for them, as for all evangelicals, was seen as ultimately coming from the grace of God. Evangelical Anglicans, however, were more prone to a heightened stress on human helplessness and total dependence on grace. Methodists often laid more stress on the evidence of feelings and looked for a specific 'assurance' of salvation. Asked about his state of mind, George Bainbridge the Wesleyan said he had 'not the shadow of a doubt respecting my acceptance with God'. 'I hope you feel the Lord is precious to you?' he was asked. 'Yes, I have great peace of mind'. Evangelical Anglicans would not have been happy with the dying claims of a Methodist preacher that he felt 'as far from condemnation as if he had never sinned at all'.

Most Methodists expected that salvation would come to them in a sudden, more or less ecstatic moment of conversion. Not only was this confirmed by an experience of 'assurance', but many followed Wesley's favourite teaching that they could hope for a further stage of cleansing from sin in an experience of 'Christian perfection'. But these expectations placed a special stress on the feelings of believers and, what was worse, they believed that salvation might be lost as well as gained at any time. Thus a good man might lose all by a sin or loss of faith at the last moment, although equally a bad man might be snatched from hell at the last moment. This was why some Methodists specialized in saving condemned criminals.

All this meant that Methodist death-beds, more than most, were the scenes of special probings and questionings, and this gave rise to numerous biographies, some of them little more than a description of the last scenes with only slight preliminaries. It is true that the


32 For a specialist in this area see The life of Mr Silas told by himself (London: Epworth Press, 1954) (originally 1786). He was not deterred by doubts about death-bed repentances or cautionary tales about reprieved and repentant criminals embarking on a second career of cheerful crime. For doubts see Wakefield, Puritan devotion, 145; Stannard, Puritan way of death, 87f.; and similarly among Roman Catholics. McManners, Death and the Enlightenment, 191–7. Methodist rejoicings at criminals saved from eternal (though not temporal) death might be regarded as the evangelical equivalents to the carnival atmosphere often accompanying eighteenth-century executions and the celebration of last-minute reprieves: see Albion's fatal tree, ed. Douglas Hay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 43–9, 111–15. Neither spiritual nor secular dramas of this kind could easily survive the ending of public hangings in the mid-nineteenth century.

33 For examples, see Jackson, Lives and many others in A.M., M.M., W.J.M. There appears to be a dearth of accounts at this relatively low social level for Anglican Evangelicals although they occur for Nonconformists.
dominant note in the end tended to be one of triumph, joy, or at least peace; and some accounts were rapturous to the point of describing experiences of visions anticipating heaven. The very fact of death itself could be portrayed in the ecstatic terms of Charles Wesley's hymn quoted earlier. John Wesley said ‘Our people die well’, and the importance of this was partly explained by John Gaulter in an early Methodist biography: ‘It is no small honour to the cause in which we are engaged that most of our brethren have met death, not only with unshaken fortitude, but with the most lively prospect of the fruition of heaven, of seeing the Redeemer face to face’. One reason for this concern was the apologetic one referred to earlier, for holy dying seemed to prove the truth of the message preached by the dying saint. Correspondingly, the godly liked to believe that notorious infidels died in the horrors of hell – hence pious but inaccurate accounts of the unedifying ends of infidels like Hume and Paine. John Wesley’s own death-bed was predictably unclouded by distress or doubt, and in his last hours he tried to sing Isaac Watts’s hymn ‘I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath’. Even Wesley, however, did not entirely escape pressures to reassure the onlookers that he still felt what he had taught.

A good example of badgering the dying is recorded by Mrs Hester Rogers about a poor man in 1792. He had heard the Methodists and was ‘enlightened respecting the way of salvation’. In his last illness he ‘earnestly sought the Lord but his evidence was never clear until a little before his death’. His wife, though a backslidden Methodist herself, pressed him too: ‘My dear, how is it with your soul? Have you confidence with God?’ He answered ‘I am not happy, I have no assurance’. ‘Do you not think that he has power to save you?’ ‘Oh yes, but I want to know he died to save me.’ There was a ‘cloud’ over his mind until shortly before his death, when, after crying out ‘Lord, save thy servant this night’ he received peace. ‘Now I am happy. Now I know Jesus has forgiven me all and I shall be with him for ever’.

Some Methodists of great saintliness did suffer severe doubts during their lives and at the end, and this was often taken to be a sign of the direct attack of the devil, permitted by God, and there always seems to be some final sign given of peace.

These Methodist death-bed conventions persisted with consider-
able force during much of the nineteenth century. They were much to the fore in 1831 when the Reverend John Smith felt himself to be literally assaulted by the devil, and to the surprise of the witnesses delivered a tremendous, detailed confession of faith, both theological and personal. His biographer suggested that those weak in faith were probably given more joy at the end than those strong in faith. No-one doubted Mr Smith's 'final safety', as he put it.42

The more sober and restrained Evangelical Anglican tradition was especially evident up to and including the generation which died out in the 1830s. These men distrusted Methodist emotionalism and excessive claims for 'assurance', but also the more gushing and 'romantic' style of a section of the younger members of their own party as well as some evangelical Dissenters. (The case of J.B. Williams, quoted earlier, is a case in point). Charles Simeon was particularly outspoken against this. Those who expected 'high excitement' at his death-bed did not know the man. "Let me", he said, "die alone". "A scene! a dying scene! I abhor a dying scene." "I lie before Him – the vilest of the vile – the lowest of the low – the poorest of the poor." But his end was 'perfect peace'.43

There were even doubts about excessively peaceful death-beds. Despite the contrasts made between the death-beds of 'good' and 'bad' people, judicious observers nevertheless acknowledged that saints might have difficult experiences and infidels might die in self-deceiving peace. John Bunyan, in the older Calvinist tradition, had not been surprised at the apparently undisturbed death of 'Mr Badman'. True believers, he warned, might suffer from remembrance of their sins; needed to repent of them; and must rely on grace at the end.44 For Evangelical Anglicans, too, the stress, at least for the sober Simeon generation, was less on ostentatious raptures than on the sense of being sinners dependent solely on the grace and mercy of God.

John Newton, the ex-African slave trader who died in 1807, observed with his old whimsicality: 'I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post'. But he was characteristically Calvinistic near the end in saying: 'My memory is nearly gone; but I can remember two things: that I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour'. Asked if his mind was 'comfortable' he said 'I am satisfied with the Lord's will'. Like some other Evangelicals he composed his own epitaph to avoid fulsome tributes.45

Rowland Hill, who died in 1833, was an eccentric in the pulpit but reticent about his personal feelings to the end. 'I have no rapturous

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43 CO. xxxvi (1836), 814.


joys, but peace - a good hope through grace - all through grace' - a very characteristic Calvinistic note. 'Modest words before God always become us best' he had often said, and his biographer added that he was 'better pleased with living evidences of an interest in Christ than a few dying expressions however pleasing they might be to survivors' - a salutory rebuke to the conventions observed by some of his younger contemporaries.46

But some, while sharing the same theology, were more emotional, more pressing on the state of the soul, perhaps more touched by popular romanticism. Thus Legh Richmond, the author of the best-selling *Dairyman's daughter*, used the death-bed of his son in 1825 as an opportunity to urge a friend to catechize the boy on his 'hopes'. 'Can you pass through the valley of the shadow of death and say with David "I fear no evil?'" 'Yes, I trust so'. 'What is the ground of your hope?' 'My hope rests in Christ alone' and so on. But in 1827 Richmond was reproached by a friend for still visiting and grieving at the grave of his son. This was thought to be 'indulging a grief beyond its proper bounds'. He confessed at his own end in 1827 that he was 'in great darkness' and tempted to believe the gospel a delusion, so when all else failed 'I cast myself on the sovereign free and full grace of God . . . there I have found peace'.47

Visits to death-beds by children in all denominations were intended to edify but also, if possible, to precipitate repentance and conversion as well as the sense that the future life is to be preferred to the present. This lesson was driven home in numerous hymns and poems. One of the most popular collections was Isaac Watts's *Divine songs* written early in the eighteenth century specifically for children but reprinted throughout the nineteenth.48 In addition to such charming if hackneyed pieces as 'How doth the little busy bee?' there was much on death, hell and judgement:

There is an hour when I must die  
Nor do I know how soon 'twill come  
Sinners must with devils dwell  
In darkness, fear and chains.

Watts was not in the least sentimental about death. The Evangelical sisters Ann and Jane Taylor's very popular *Hymns for infant minds* (1840) is credited with deliberately setting out to modify Watts by dwelling on love rather than fear, mercy rather than judgement, in their efforts to influence children. Yet they made a good deal of use of

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the sense of guilt, and several of their hymns were about death and dying:

Tell me, Mamma, if I must die
One day, as little baby died;
And look so very pale and lie
Down in a pit-hole by its side?

Or:

Shall I leave dear Papa and you
And never see you any more? 49

It has been argued that the old Puritans and evangelicals emphasized death and hell to children as things to be feared, as an incentive to conversion. But in the nineteenth century (it is claimed) the emphasis was less on physical death and above all less on separation than on the reunion of the family; on the joy of eternal life rather than on fear of hell. 50 The family reunion is a point well made, but hell did remain, at least as a threat of separation, with or without eternal flames. There were signs of the shift in the Taylors, and some late Victorians, we shall see, took it much further.

By the end of the nineteenth century, it is clear that the tone and style of death-bed descriptions had markedly changed, even among evangelicals, though here and there the ghosts of the past persisted. In her study of attitudes to death as expressed in nineteenth-century children’s magazines, Diana Dixon has noted how in the last years of the century there was less physical description of death-beds and child obituaries were dropped. Even the religious press recognized the need for entertainment to sugar the pill of instruction and exhortation. Death was glossed over as part of the process of change except in the stricter Nonconformist magazines. 51 Yet it is a matter for nice discrimination to say how far and fast this process had proceeded for evangelicals. Roy Porter’s bold contention that already by the end of the eighteenth century the doctor with his opiates for producing a peaceful death like sleep, was tending to displace the minister and his religious challenge, was certainly not true of evangelicals at any stage of the nineteenth century. 52

What is much more obvious is the encroachment of sentimental language and conceptions of heaven, gradually eroding and softening


51 Houlbrooke, *Death, ritual and bereavement*, 147, 149-50.

52 Ibid., 84
the harsh challenges of death for fearful believers and giving a saccharine quality to the persistent religious preoccupations of evangelicals. Fear of hell does seem to have retreated in favour of expectations of heaven, increasingly seen in terms of 'home'. 'His trust in the merciful one was firm and unshaken' ran a long Wesleyan obituary in 1870, but the question asked was 'Are you resting on Jesus?' 'Yes, resting on Jesus'. Rather closer to the old pattern was the question to another: 'Are you now proving the truth of what you have preached to others?' 'Oh yes! Divine consolation in the time of need'. Of another it was said that he 'disclaimed all merits of his own and relied fully on Christ', much like an old-style Evangelical Anglican.

Early nineteenth-century Calvinistic Baptists and Independents had been much like Anglican Evangelicals. For example: 'All my hope arises from the work of the Saviour'. Or, 'He is not with me', to which came the reply 'Not sensibly with you'. Or, 'I feel reliance rather than triumph'. An Independent said: 'All my hope and all my comfort spring out of the mercy of God as manifested in the mediation of Jesus Christ'. But at a later date, when softer notes were creeping in, James Hamilton, a Congregationalist, was described as going down 'quietly into the clear, deep waters'. In a manner rarely found earlier except from notorious and controversial eccentrics like Rowland Hill, Hamilton even punned about his water-bed as providing 'unlimited liability'. But his last message to his congregation was on the old lines: 'If any inquire the ground of my confidence, it is in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ, and in that blood which cleanseth from all sin. I wish to go into God's presence as the rest have gone - a sinner saved by grace'.

In 1880 the *Baptist Magazine* acknowledged that 'it may be that death-bed experiences are not always the most profitable duty. Possibly, in a past generation, too much has been made of them, and possibly, by a kind of reaction, we have gone to the other extreme'. Yet the writer then proceeded to contrast the deaths of two eminent scientists, the 'infidel' W.K. Clifford and the Christian Clerk-Maxwell. By 1900 the magazine included few obituaries and the biographies no longer dwelt on the last scenes.

What stands out in all the magazines in the later years of the century, however, is the image of heaven as 'home', even when mixed with versions of the old concerns. As late as 1890 the Wesleyans sometimes mixed sentimental imagery with an old-style interrogation. In reply to a question by his son one sufferer said: 'I know Him whom I have believed and can trust Him now'. This note is most marked (perhaps significantly) in an old-fashioned Lancashire man. The suggestion was made that perhaps he was self-satisfied or self-
glorifying and he replied: ‘I know it – but what is that to do with it? It
does not depend on what I have done’. Then, in the newer style, he
was asked: ‘Do you realise that you are almost safe home?’ He cried
vigorously ‘Home! home!’. By 1900 this note had become more
insistent and still more embalmed in sentiment. Mrs Bell desired ‘to go
home’, adding ‘the carriage is waiting’. And so ‘the angel convoy took
her away’ and she was ‘at home with the Lord’. Jessie Dyson ‘went
home in perfect peace’ and ‘she will live as a “white flower” in many
mansions’. 56

The encroachments of sentimentalism are even clearer in the
words of the American revivalists Sankey and Moody during their
English campaign in the 1870s. Sankey’s hymns and harmonium
produced a kind of religious drawing-room ballad effect, in some cases
indeed not far from the music-hall (suitably cleaned up). For men,
Sankey sang ‘Hold the fort’; for women ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus’. At
mass prayer-meetings there were requests for prayer for sons abroad
on imperial business, clerks in the sinful city, prodigal sons and
daughters far from home, and unbelieving husbands. These themes,
together with the popularity of hymns like ‘The lost sheep’ and the
virtually secular ‘Where is my wandering boy tonight?’ betrayed the
deep anxieties of the Victorian family about its children: and, for
evangelicals, continuing anxiety about their souls as well. 57

In these circles, family and home as images for the future life
became particularly compelling. Death was a temporary interruption
of family relationships; heaven was a place for family reunions; hell
was final separation. This view, common among Victorians of all sorts,
sentimentalized the older, more biblical picture even for evan­
gelicals. 58 A favourite hymn in Sankey’s Sacred songs and solos called
‘Little Mary’ was supposed to be based on the true story of a child who
said to her mother ‘I was always in your way, mother; you had no
room for little Mary. Shall I be in the angels’ way?’

Mother, in that golden region,
With its pearly gates so fair;
Up among the happy angels,
Is there room for Mary there?

Chorus:
Yes there’s room.
Room in that beautiful heavenly land.

56 W.M.M., Series VI, xiv (1890), 247f., 234; xxiv (1900), 236, 473.
57 For a discussion of the Sankey and Moody techniques and the significance of the hymns, see
Kent, Holding the fort, especially chapters 5 and 6; W. H. Daniels, Moody and his work
(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), 362 on requests for prayer.
58 Examples of this ‘domestic’ imagery can be found as early as Philip Doddridge in the
eighteenth century, along with more biblical images, but they may in his case reflect the
Dissenters’ sense of the ‘family’ of the enclosed ‘gathered’ church: see Philip Doddridge, ed. R.L.
Greenall (Leicester: University Department of Adult Education, 1981), 40; Lionel Adey, Hymns
and the Christian ‘myth’ (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 144, 146.
There was a very large section on heaven in Sankey’s book, often seen as ‘home’. 59

By way of contrast, and to bring out the distinctiveness of evangelical attitudes to death, I will conclude with a few examples from other traditions. There is a good specimen of the continuity of solid eighteenth-century non-evangelical attitudes in Sir Walter Scott, novelist and Episcopalian. In 1821, when Scott believed he was dying, he called his children round his bed for a last farewell. His biographer Lockhart says that he asserted that he was not conscious of ever doing a man an injury or of omitting any opportunity of doing a man a benefit. But he balanced this with a confession of religious faith: ‘I well know that no human life can appear otherwise than weak and filthy in the eyes of God, but I rely on the merits and intercessions of our Redeemer’ – almost, though not quite, an ‘evangelical’ sentiment. 60

In strong contrast to this attitude, as well as to evangelicalism, is the renewed and sharpened High Church tradition of the Oxford Movement which developed into a sometimes extreme Anglo-Catholicism. For moderate High Churchmen the consolations of the Prayer Book and communion administered to the dying were important. (Evangelical Anglicans usually valued communion but it was not common for them to see it as a necessary accompaniment of the death-bed.) 61 This sober Anglican atmosphere rose to virtually Roman Catholic heights of ritual in the spectacular funeral of Father Stanton, an Anglican ‘ritualist’ slum-priest who died in 1913. By his bedside as he lay dying there was a crucifix with a palm from the Palm Sunday procession. He sent money especially for the undeserving poor who did not attend church (a nice, and probably self-conscious contrast between traditional Catholic holy charity and nineteenth-century Protestant concern for the ‘deserving’ poor). The coffin lay in the church while people lined up to kiss it. Flowers were laid at the foot of the statue of the Madonna outside the church. A vigil was held all night; vespers were said for the dead; also Masses and a solemn Requiem. The burial procession was headed by a crucifix and (as at many other funerals by now) the grave was lined with flowers. 62
Different again was the so-called ‘Broad Church’ tradition. Thomas Arnold of Rugby was struck down with angina and had only a short terminal illness, though one marked by much pain. His biographer, A.P. Stanley, noted as unconsciously significant the last entry in Arnold’s diary, in which he reflected on his life and work and thanked God that ambition had at last been mortified in him. During his short last illness he was able to respond with an emphatic ‘Yes’ to many of the assertions in the Prayer Book Office for the Visitation of the Sick.63

Benjamin Jowett, the celebrated Master of Balliol, advanced ‘liberal’ theologian – and descendant of an Evangelical family – met his last illness calmly. ‘I am not afraid of this which is coming upon me... This morning I felt just in the calm frame of mind in which I would wish to pass away. I think over the past and see much that was wrong, but it does not overwhelm me’. At the end he repeated ‘I bless God for my life’.64

Significant for what could happen to the evangelical tradition was the last illness of Leslie Stephen, a descendant of one of the famous Clapham Sect Evangelical families whose Evangelicalism had changed to agnosticism. Stephen spent his final bedridden days in quiet reading and letters to friends. There is no sign of concern about his soul, but the remarks of some of his visitors are significant. As F.W. Maitland, his biographer, summed it up, they remarked on ‘what was very beautiful: Leslie Stephen with the evening light upon his face, gazing into the sunset from his bed, which is the highest point of view’. Such visitors noted how his character mellowed, and commented on the calm serenity and patience with which he bore his sufferings and waited for the end. He was, one said, ‘teaching us all’; and, said another, he was ‘like Socrates in the calmness of his wisdom’.65 This pagan stoicism (perhaps implicit in Jowett but certainly explicit in Stephen) was far from the concerns about one’s eternal fate and the dependence on grace which had characterized the evangelical tradition in all its forms.

In a rather different vein, yet equally remote from that tradition, is the case of the ‘desupernaturalized Theist’ Mrs Humphrey Ward, the niece of Matthew Arnold and author of the celebrated novel of loss of faith, Robert Elsmere. She died in 1920 and it is recorded that ‘as her mind advanced ever nearer to the verge, one felt it was swept, ever and anon, by far-off gusts of poetry’. She repeated a verse of Emily Bronte’s and said ‘That is what I was thinking of’:

quarter of the nineteenth century. It was noted (as unusual or simply as appropriate to the deceased’s interest in natural history?) at the funeral of Charles Kingsley: Life of Charles Kingsley, edited by his wife, abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1883), 351 (in 1875 i. M Arthur P Stanley, Life of Dr Arnold (London: Ward, Lock, n.d.), 459, 461.
O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity!
Life – that in me has rest
As I – undying Life – have power in Thee.

At the end (says her biographer) she looked into the unknown with a most wonderful look on her face. ‘I think that at that moment her soul crossed the bar’ (no doubt an echo of Tennyson).66

At this point, perhaps partly following the example of Matthew Arnold himself, the consolations of religion had been transmuted into the consolations of poetry – a situation as remote as can well be imagined from that of the evangelical death-bed, even in the softened forms it had come to assume by the end of the nineteenth century.67

66 Janet P. Trevelyan, Life of Mrs Humphrey Ward (London: Constable, 1923), 307. Tennyson’s ‘Crossing the Bar’ was written in 1889 and came to be used as a hymn.