

BOOK REVIEW. TILL DEATH DO US PART: AMERICAN
ETHNIC CEMETERIES AS BORDERS UNCROSSED

Amanik, Allan and Kami Fletcher. 2020. *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 288 pages.

Funeral customs have never been directed only at the deceased, but have always been of great importance to humankind as one of the most effective means of ritual communication. In addition to their functions of manifestation and communication, burial sites associated with the cult of the dead (i.e. real or imaginary heroes) also have considerable ideological significance in society, marking the landscape around us and being reflected in the (oral) traditions, religious beliefs, faith and worldviews of different social groups. Rituals and narratives related to death encourage community solidarity and help protect the community from external influences. Thus, they act as important mechanisms of social memory that pass on oral history as well as values and beliefs from generation to generation. In poetic terms, we can speak of cemeteries as islands of the dead in the landscape of the living that, in addition to the above, remind 21st-century humankind – currently suffering in the coronavirus pandemic – of the timeless maxim: *memento mori!*

The collection of articles *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed* compiled by Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher (2020) takes us on a spiritual journey through the cemeteries of different ethnic groups/nations and on to the world of thought through articles by various authors, revealing and analysing the specific customs and funeral practices of the multicultural society that is the USA. The details are different because we are considering a variety

of funeral customs performed by different settlers, such as Jews, Poles and settlers from China, Africa and Arabia. However, despite the linguistic and cultural differences and different religious backgrounds, what might be called basic formulas follow familiar patterns and themes which seem to be relevant and timeless in almost all human cultures. The article by Kelly B. Archeart (“Monument Men vs Cemetery Superintendents: The Battle over Taste”, pp. 191–200) reflects on, among other things, the confrontations between cemetery guards and families of the deceased over taste and the designs of graves and memorials. The wishes of the deceased and the mourners are sacred. And who even has the right to make precepts in terms of taste when designing a final resting place? It is a familiar and timeless topic.

Some of the articles reveal stories from the 19th century through the death and burial customs of various ethnicities in America. One of the many reasons for going relatively far back in time like this is the recognition that emancipation and reconstruction, for instance, intended to revise drastically the relationship between black and white Americans.

In chapter 1, Allan Amanik gives an overview of the nation’s first Jewish rural cemeteries, created in the 1850s. Jewish people living in New York celebrated their costly new cemeteries as symbols of mobility and belonging. The old tombstones of the Jewish cemeteries symbolise prosperity, success, egalitarianism; on the other hand,

Jewish people in New York sought to temper that very integration into American life by emphasising physical and ritual borders in death (p. 16).

The article "Death Is Not a Wedding" by James S. Pula (pp. 35–84) reveals the power and relations of American Catholic immigrants (Irish, Germans) through Polish cemetery culture, and the inevitable need for ethnic differentiation through this culture.

The theme of death and the cemeteries of settlers opens up a variety of other societal problems that are sometimes as painful in the collective memory as the departure of a loved one from this world or confrontations over skin colour. After all, cemeteries are not only burial places, but also a piece of home for people living abroad, which must also be remembered in the landscape in which the cemetery is planned. In this way, the cemeteries of different nationalities in America are slightly reminiscent of China, Poland or some other corner of the world, and emphasise the cultural and religious affiliation of the buried. This is probably why it is often said that in order to get an initial overview of the history and culture of a country, one should visit the cemetery and the market. The market fixes the current state of the community with its life and movement, while the cemetery gives an idea of the past and of the eternal.

In the 21st century, we increasingly discuss immigration and the problems that accompany it. Immigration is not something that is happening 'over there', it affects us all. The Estonian Ministry of the Interior organised a small seminar on the culture of death some five years ago, where comprehensive trends in the culture of death in 21st-century Estonia were discussed. Among other topics, the discussion revolved around the fact that we see burial practices of new immigrants from very different cultures to ours that have not been discussed or given meaning (and certainly not legitimised) and can, therefore, cause

problems simply because they prove to be foreign and unusual. The graves of Lutherans, Orthodox, Catholics and secular people (regardless of nationality) are generally located in Estonia in the same cemeteries. In older parts of the cemeteries there are separate sectors, but more recently even that distinction has disappeared. The family cemeteries of some Baltic German landowners have expanded into community cemeteries (such as that in Ahja). Thus, it is safe to say that in some cases death unites people who have followed different paths or belonged to different social classes in life. Only Jewish cemeteries in Estonia are generally located separately, as is the custom for Jewish people in every corner of the world.

The range of topics related to immigration and the border in general (including millions of undocumented illegal settlers) is also one of the starting points for this collection of articles, as the authors themselves emphasise in the introduction. The border can be symbolic, political, cultural, physical or spiritual, separate the living from the living, the living from the dead, the dead from the dead. In Estonia, for example, in Setomaa region,¹ ancestral graves are on the other side of the state border, in another country where different laws apply. Or, briefly glimpse into history and think about who was allowed to be buried in the church, who in the churchyard and who was behind the churchyard fence. Or think about those whose graves were not allowed to be in history at all, and so cannot be remembered. In the Estonian case this includes the dead buried by the Soviet authorities and those whom we have reburied in home soil after they were brought back from behind the Iron Curtain.

An annual conference of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) was held in 2014 in Atlanta, Georgia. Scholars focused on the people who crossed nations over time, the cultural capital that accompanied that movement, and the ways that

this influx of bodies and ideas shaped the United States and its social climate. Less than a decade later, an exploration of cultural and political borders in the United States seems even more important. Borders, it would seem, remain a suitable analytical lens through which to focus on the American past and present.

The collection *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed* emerged from that OAH conference, but has reflected over the course of its development upon seemingly new (and surprisingly dormant) divisions in American society. It takes as its subject the tendency among Americans to separate their dead along community lines rooted in race, faith,

ethnicity or social standing and asks what a deeper exploration of that phenomenon can tell us about American history more broadly. In summary, it is a commendable and interesting academic read that should impress both academic and non-academic mortals.

Marju Kõivupuu
Tallinn University

Notes

1 The Setomaa region is divided between the south-eastern part of Estonia and the Pechory region of the Russian Federation. Located on the border of Eastern and Western civilisations, Seto culture has been influenced by both.