

11th September 2022

## Funerals

**"The present is the funeral of the past."**

John Clare, *Title of a poem (1845)*

It's said that on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, Mark Twain was approached by a young reporter who asked him about reaching this age. Mark Twain replied, "The first thing I do each day is read the obituaries in the morning paper. If my name isn't there, I shave." This response is also attributed to the British actor, A E Mathews (still performing at 93) as well as various business tycoons, and it was used regularly by the legendary US comedian, George Burns, in his act. When *my* name appears in the funeral notices of the *Edinburgh Evening News*, I won't be around to see it.

Emphasised by the death of our Queen and preparations for her State Funeral, all of this has made me conscious of my mortality. And reflecting on that, I went back to a short poem by the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet, John Clare, who, in his time, was known as "The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet". The son of a farm labourer, he came to be known for his celebration of the English countryside and his lamentation of its disruption. His biographer, Jonathan Bate, says that Clare was "the greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced. No one has ever written more powerfully of nature, of a rural childhood, and of the alienated and unstable self". I don't know what made Clare's self to be "alienated and unstable", but the words from his poem, "The Present is the Funeral of the Past", have a powerful resonance with me in my reflections.

*The present is the funeral of the past;  
And man, the living sepulchre of life,  
Still in the past he lives – O would it last  
In its own dreams of beauty ...*

We can't live in the past, no matter how much we would wish it to last "in its own dreams of beauty". Good or bad, it is gone. We have memories of it, of course, but we cannot, and should not, live there. Today is the funeral of yesterday, and all the days that have gone before. As our Queen's funeral approaches, that's a part of facing my mortality I'll be reflecting on some more.

### **A prayer for today**

*A funeral today of past days ... I lay them to rest, complete and unchangeable.  
I place flowers on their grave. I celebrate them, but I let them go. They are no more.  
They will inform me, but they cannot own me. For, today, a new life is born. Amen*

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