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Erin-Marie Legacey, *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. xviii + 210 pp. Map, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$36.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1501715594.

Review by Jonathan Strauss, Miami University.

Despite unprecedented political turmoil, starting in 1786 and lasting into the first decades of the nineteenth century, a succession of Parisian authorities accomplished one of the largest forced displacements of a human population in European history. That epic undertaking is largely forgotten, undoubtedly because the displaced were all dead and their sufferings were overshadowed by the tumultuous events taking place above ground among their descendants. Erin-Marie Legacey's *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830* makes a strong case for remembering what happened among the deceased during those years and for reintegrating it into our understanding of the period. Drawing on abundant research, Legacey advances a focused and unusually powerful argument about the changes in Parisian cemetery culture during the Revolution and in its lingering aftermath. Places that had previously heaped corpses together, inspiring dread of miasmas and images of political violence, yielded to Elysian cemeteries, whose wooded, Romantic landscapes inspired respect, musings, and quiet social cohesion.

Legacey has decided, quite reasonably, to limit her study to Paris, and within the city to concentrate on three different institutions: the Père Lachaise cemetery, the Catacombs at Denfert-Rochereau, and the short-lived Museum of French Monuments, which opened during the Revolution and closed at the beginning of the Bourbon Restoration. While building upon documents that have already received attention from scholars over the last several decades, she has supplemented them with archival materials I have never seen studied before, including tourist guidebooks to Parisian cemeteries, the guest register from the newly opened Catacombs, and entries in an 1800 essay competition that posed two questions: "What kind of ceremonies should one have for funerals?" and "What regulations should be adopted for places of burial?" (p. 53). Although Legacey maintains a close watch over her argument, rarely allowing it to stray from her principal points, readers with a taste for material culture will discover choice details among her archival findings. For those curious about the relative states of decomposition among the dead monarchs unearthed by Revolutionaries at the royal necropolis of Saint Denis, from François I (sludgy) to Henri IV (well preserved) to Louis XV (pink-bottomed), Legacey provides answers (pp. 34 and 141). Readers will also learn that "Louis XV's body was disinterred on the same day, and possibly even at the same hour that his granddaughter-in-law [Marie-Antoinette]

lost her head in Paris” (p. 35), while the cemetery guidebooks themselves offer piquant glimpses into intimate moments of deep and contagious emotion.

The study begins by briefly recounting a now familiar story about the emptying of Parisian cemeteries and the removal of their contents beyond the city limits. Within the last forty years, Robert Vovelle, Armando Petrucci, Thomas Kselman, and Richard Etlin have all told variations of this tale, but it bears repeating.^[1] After centuries of cohabitation with the living, the dead became intolerable in eighteenth-century Europe. Outraged by the disorder and disrespect that reigned among the dead and armed with new theories about gases and deadly miasmas emanating from decomposing organic materials, civic authorities throughout France decreed the removal of corpses from urban areas, thereby forcing a reconceptualization of mortuary practices, institutions, and spaces. While multiple factors influenced this imaginative process, Legacey has chosen to concentrate on the upheavals of the Revolution and their aftermath, which, in her telling, shaped the cemeteries through a national longing for social stability and ideological concerns about the nature of the State. Primary among these ideological vectors were de-Christianization (at least in the beginning), the desire for reunification after the divisive history of the Revolution, and the need to find a balance between the opposing demands that all dead be treated equally and that individual merit be recognized. Most of these points have already been made by other scholars. Etlin, for instance, devoted substantial attention to the tension between equitable treatment and the recognition of merit.^[2] What is new here, at least for students of the period, are Legacey’s discovery and analysis of submissions to an essay competition on how the dead should be handled under a new social order.

In her third chapter, Legacey moves into her actual studies of specific sites by analyzing the historical and social significance of one of Paris’s most famous destinations, the Père Lachaise cemetery, which opened in 1804 as part of a larger project to create three *extra-muros* cemeteries to house all the dead of the capital. Legacey leads the reader through her interpretation with an innovative use of early nineteenth-century guidebooks to Parisian burial grounds. These texts have rarely been studied and they offer rich insights into contemporary reactions to these new institutions, often focusing on the moral issues that cemeteries raised and addressed while occasionally pausing for almost voyeuristic glimpses of individual suffering and grief among other visitors. The fourth chapter moves underground, to the Catacombs, where Legacey plunders the guestbook for comments. Here again, what predominates are questions about the moral lessons to be gained from these naked displays of human bones. In Legacey’s account, the most telling aspect of this space is its openness to divergent interpretations and, although she does not put it this way, one could say that its true significance results from the sustained deferral of any singular meaning. For her final study, Legacey turns to the Museum of French Monuments which opened in 1793, largely as a repository for artworks from Church properties nationalized during the Revolution, and closed in 1816, under the Bourbon Restoration. Under the guidance of a single director—the same Alexandre Lenoir who had observed the varying states of royal decomposition at Saint Denis—the museum used funerary monuments, according to Legacey, to create a coherent, post-Revolutionary narrative of French history. As an added attraction, the collection also included a small, Elysian-style cemetery with a handful of notable corpses, including Descartes, Molière, La Fontaine, Boileau, and the perennial crowd pleasers, Abelard and Heloise. Legacey’s insistence on the coherence of Lenoir’s historical narrative is a bit strange, given some of the details she recounts. He worked obsessively, and futilely, for instance, to acquire the tomb of Diane de Poitiers, so that he could place it in the same room as those of Henry II and his daughter. “If you permit me this monument,” Lenoir pleaded to the

Minister of the Interior, “I will reunite in my museum, the tombs of the lover, the mistress, and their daughter” (p. 133). Just how that reunification contributes to a coherent, post-*ancien régime* national narrative is hard to fathom, but it does seem to fit more smoothly within a different kind of structure, one that would also explain Lenoir’s fascination with the remains of another set of illicit lovers, Abelard and Heloise. The book closes with a brief description of the influence this new cemetery culture had on nineteenth-century France’s most famous historian, Jules Michelet, who was marked for life by childhood visits to the Museum of French Monuments.

The book should lead readers to reconsider this period, its institutions, and, more generally, the role of the dead in national history, but it is too often held back by a reluctance to challenge received interpretations. All too frequently, Legacey forces the meaning of these funerary institutions into compliance with a fairly standard and constrained understanding of French society at this time. I have already noted some of these repetitions and Legacey herself honestly acknowledges her debts. But even when she makes use of previously untapped archival materials, one must wonder what she has suppressed or neglected in them to repeat this same narrative of post-Revolutionary France: that it was dominated by a drive for stability and reunification. Is there nothing she found that shocks, disturbs, or contradicts that established narrative? There are clues in that direction, even among the elements she cites. For instance, the highly emotional tenor of reactions to the dead recurs throughout them. Powerful moments of intimate grief glimpsed in public places punctuate many of the anecdotes she cites (e.g. pp. 72-74, 94, 109, 121, 127, 156), echoing the *frisson* of desire inspired by a passing and anonymous widow in Baudelaire’s “A une passante.” What of Lenoir’s fascination with lovers and intimate bonds at his museum and elsewhere? Even in this unintended way, the Parisian relation to the dead during this period seems marked by a recurrent and scarcely dissimulated erotic element that Legacey barely remarks on. And while she ends by evoking the relation between Michelet’s historiography and his self-acknowledged interest in corpses, the image she gives of that relation is largely analytical and moral: “a century before Foucault, Michelet understood the cemetery as a kind of heterotopia. He marveled at its ability to hold in balance so many opposite conditions and understood this ability as the source of its power” (p. 156). And yet, on the same page, Legacey quotes Michelet repeatedly, referring to his “passions” in face of the dead. Elsewhere, unquoted by Legacey, he had described this same encounter in strange detail: “What these mysteries concealed, I couldn’t guess when I was a child. As a young man I sought it out with studiousness and good will, compassionate as I am towards all the dead. I met a lot of them, I studied their sarcophagi, I pulled aside their wrappings: I found their remains and the cold ashes from which their spirit had escaped.”[3] Erotic or not, there is a profound mystery, which separates child from adult, in this compassionate disrobing of the dead.

And while Legacey cites a desire to make sense of the past (e.g. pp. 127, 158) and to understand how the treatment of the dead reflected a larger social moment (e.g. pp. 111, 114, 115, 120), the image she offers of that moment is oddly limited. Legacey never answers, or even asks, the questions of what a corpse is, means, or does, and yet these were vexed issues of the period. By concentrating almost exclusively on ideological concerns of equality, stability, and reunification, she ignores a larger culture of human remains at the time—a culture exemplified by the rise of medical science and the central place of death within it. Much of the most important conceptualization of death during this period was performed by doctors, and that largely under the abiding influence of Xavier Bichat, whose field of clinical pathology dominated French medicine over the first half of the nineteenth century. Legacey seems to confine the idea of medicine to miasma theory and to rely almost exclusively on Alain Corbin—who treated it

indirectly—as her source for contemporary medical theory and culture. And what about the influence of contemporary aesthetic and literary culture on the meaning of these institutions? Legacey makes a nodding reference to the Gothic novel and identifies the new, post-Revolutionary cemeteries as Romantic, but she does not examine what that term means or try to integrate the irrationality, turbulent emotionalism, and eroticized, morbid melancholy that characterized the movement into her interpretations. What about the disruptive aspects of the dead? How, for instance, does the broad success, during this time, of Sophocles’s *Antigone*—a tragedy about the enmity between corpse and State—figure into Legacey’s depiction of cemeteries as instruments of social cohesion?

Overall, Legacey’s book draws attention to a fascinating aspect of French history, and, despite its narrower scope, it holds its place among recent works on material culture in nineteenth-century Paris by writers such as Maurice Samuels and Vanessa Schwartz.[4] For that very reason, it also raises questions about the current state of the historiography and our understanding of the ontological status of the past. Legacey claims that her “rich set of sources reveals how contemporary Parisians understood and used their new spaces for the dead...The relationship between the cemetery and its visiting public was a conversation that we can uncover and trace” (p. 76). Later, in her final discussion of Michelet, she writes that the “Otherness” of the cemetery “led to a strange alchemy by which he was able to unite his individual self with the collective people of Paris” (p. 156). We should note both the idea of a collective moment and the impulse to treat the past as a time that no longer exists but is stored somewhere. And it must be a somewhere, since it has disappeared as a time. Hidden in these passages is the governing precept that one can recreate the past, that it lingers elsewhere than in the archives and other traces that remain. But the culture that we recreate was lived by no one. It is a fantasy that we have invented about a collectivity whose impersonal force may have impinged on all individual lives of the time. What we construct in such an approach to the past is a phantasmatic view from nowhere and no one that is housed, now out of time, in a place. In an imaginary place that strangely resembles a cemetery. In the best of cases, a book on the institutions of the dead should force us to rethink our presuppositions about the physical remains of history and whether that history exists anywhere else than in the relation between those remains and the fantasies we project onto them.

NOTES

[1] See Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Armando Petrucci, *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition*, trans. Michael Sullivan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Michel Vovelle, *La mort et l’occident: De 1300 à nos jours. Précédé de: La mort, état des lieux* (Paris: Gallimard [NRF], 2000).

[2] Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, pp. 10, 63, 254–5, 258–9, 284, 300, 310, 310–22, 312 and Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France*, pp. 182–199.

[3] Jules Michelet, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), p. 727. My translation.

[4] See Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004) and Vanessa R. Schwartz,

Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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