DEAD SERIOUS?
FUNERAL DIRECTING IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of funeral directing in New Zealand and highlights a number of significant shifts in occupational orientation. The first identifiable transition involved the shift from undertaker to funeral director in the early twentieth century. Attempts to professionalise the occupation during this period parallel similar developments in the United States, and illustrate the increasing bureaucratisation and rationalisation of human disposal. A more recent shift has occurred in the past three decades. New Zealand funeral directors focused their attention primarily on grief management and emphasised the psychological value of funerary ritual. Funeral directors also played a significant role in personalising funerals and offering 'life-centred' funeral options. Despite the important influence of international industry developments, funeral directors in New Zealand have purveyed and promoted personalised post-mortem practices and attempted to distance New Zealand funerals from perceived 'impersonal' British practices, as well as the 'excesses' of North American obsequies.

INTRODUCTION

Even a cursory glance at the available literature suggests a significant level of recent interest in the areas of death and dying in New Zealand. The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of death-related discourse, encompassing a diverse range of topics and disciplines. While funeral directors regularly feature in media reports and journalistic exposés, there are limited studies that critically analyse the role or development of this occupational group. Funeral directors constitute a significant component of contemporary post-mortem processes in New Zealand. In addition to preparing the corpse for disposal and facilitating funeral services, funeral directors increasingly offer a variety of personalised funeral options and 'aftercare' services. Drawing

on a detailed analysis of the occupational journal, *The New Zealand Funeral Director* (NZFD) (later known as *Funeralcare*) from 1939 to 2004, as well as 65 semi-structured interviews with funeral directors and related occupational groups (clergy, council workers, and medical professionals), this paper explores the historical development and continuing professionalisation of this post-mortem specialist.

Funeral industry developments in both Britain and North America[1] have had a significant influence on the occupation in New Zealand. There are numerous studies that document the development of funeral directing in Britain (for example, Howarth 1996, Litten 1991, Parsons 1997). The study by Howarth (1996) is particularly relevant, exploring the historical transition from undertaking to funeral directing and the professionalisation of the occupation. She propounds that professionalisation is evident in the increasing bureaucratisation of funerals during the twentieth century and in the control that funeral directors exert over the corpse (Howarth 1996: 97). These elements, she argues, not only distance the bereaved from death, but mystify and obscure deathwork procedures. Embalming was increasingly utilised by funeral directors who, like their counterparts in North America, appropriated the rhetoric of hygiene reformers and gradually presented 'hygienic treatment' as an important element of the grieving process (Howarth 1996: 147–169).

The professionalisation of funeral directors has received considerable attention in the academic literature in the United States. In their voluminous history of funeral specialists, for example, Habenstein and Lamers (1955) document the increasing control of the funeral director in the nineteenth century and the shift in funeral directing to service provision. They note that this development was closely linked to the advancement of arterial embalming and funeral director establishments associated with urbanisation (Habenstein and Lamers 1955: 440). During the twentieth century funeral directors in the United States attempted to simplify and abbreviate funerary rituals and an early emphasis on sanitation was superseded by a stress on sympathy (Farrell 1980: 182). In a more recent study, Laderman (2003: 104) reiterates the important correlation between embalming and professional status in the United States, but also stipulates that emphasis has progressively been placed on the funeral as an instrument of psychological healing and the funeral director as a grief specialist. This last development has been particularly relevant for the occupation in New Zealand.

The following discussion begins by tracing the early continuation of nineteenth century British post-mortem practices and the gradual appropriation of North

American mortuary innovations. Particularly evident in this transformation is the pursuit of professionalisation, the adoption of embalming and funeral chapels, and an increasing focus on psychological elements of funerary ritual. North American mortuary practices were always regarded with some degree of ambivalence, however, and the introduction of a North American multinational in the mid-1990s allowed people in the industry to explicitly define and promote what they perceived to be a distinctive New Zealand approach to funerals. Attempts to distinguish New Zealand funeral traditions from practices in the United States became evident in the trade journal after the scathing exposés of Harmer (1963) and Mitford (1963), and more vociferously with the arrival of a multinational. North Americans tended to 'glamorise' funeral customs (*NZFD* December 1964: 51) and the arrival of a multinational threatened to homogenise and depersonalise post-mortem practices through a process of 'McDonaldisation' (Howarth 2000: 90). While New Zealand funeral directors apparently provided many of the 'less bizarre' North American funeral services, they also asserted that New Zealanders were not obsessed with prestige or extravagance (*NZFD* December 1964: 51). Instead, the New Zealand way of death was characterised by a 'realistic acceptance of the fact of death' (*NZFD* June 1970: 3). These responses were reiterated by funeral director participants in the current study and highlight a significant shift in funeral director discourse; a discourse that initially identified North American funerary influences as progressive and enlightened but gradually equated these same practices with homogenisation, depersonalisation and insincerity.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY UNDERTAKER

The New Zealand European[2] treatment of death during the nineteenth century was similar in many regards to the treatment of death in Britain, North America, and Australia. Communities were usually small, with minimal legislative requirements for recording disposals (Ninness 1989). The causes and events surrounding death were publicly announced in newspapers, and death and dying were very much a part of everyday nineteenth century life (Cleaver 1996; Dickey 1980).[3] Death usually occurred at home, which remained the centre of death until the 1970s in some rural areas (Calder 1998: 36). Even when deaths occurred in institutions, the body was usually returned home before burial, and viewing of the remains was an obligatory social duty.

The funeral service was held one to three days after death and was commonly organised by family members with assistance from members of the community. One central element of the nineteenth century funeral was the procession, which would leave the residence where the remains had been displayed and

move to the local graveyard. Ministers of religion were present at adult burials,[4] where they read a brief burial service at the residence of the deceased before proceeding to the final site of disposal (Arbury 2001; Cleaver 1996: 49). The Church remained prominent in death related practices in the early twentieth century, with denominational distinctions evident in the content of services and place of burial (Dickey 1980: 36).

While specialist undertakers certainly existed in some of the larger urban centres,[5] in most cases undertaking remained a secondary occupation: usually limited to supplying the coffin and transporting the corpse to the graveyard (Porter and Macdonald 1996: 451–481). Many participants in the present study recalled the duties of the nineteenth and early twentieth century undertaker:

> [*People*] would die at home and the undertaker would come to the house with a coffin and he would do some rudimentary sort of preparation, dress you, put you in the coffin and put you in the front parlour. Then he'd go away…come back three days later and the cortege would go from the house, to the church, to the cemetery (Henry, funeral director).[6]

Participants also stressed the secondary role of the undertaker and reiterated the connection between carpentry and undertaking:

> I was actually a carpenter by trade and a lot of the old builders were undertakers, and having said that, the building always came first and the funeral work was something you did after-hours (Timothy, funeral director).

At this time funerals were important public and social events, and a number of trends associated with the 'respectable' funeral filtered down from the upper classes and undertakers of Victorian England (Hera 1995: 174). A report in the *New Zealand Funeral Director* (December 1944: 54), for example, notes that the history of the undertakers during this period closely followed the history of the occupation in Great Britain.

The duration and extravagance of mourning reflected the importance of the family, and demonstrated social and economic status (Dickey 1980: 37). Mourning customs were particularly pronounced for women at this time, whose lives were restricted by elaborate etiquette. This 'cult of mourning', however, began to wane at the end of the nineteenth century, when overt expressions of mourning were increasingly considered morbid and excessive (Coney 1993: 87;

Hera 1992: 261). Funeral reform movements were established in at least two urban centres (Dunedin and Christchurch) in the 1870s (Cleaver 1996). These reformers – like those in Britain and North America – believed that material elaborateness in funerals was unnecessary and that the financial expense associated with this elaboration created difficulties for poorer families. Public hygiene also became a prominent concern during this period and attempts to separate the living and the dead were evident in the cemetery legislation at the end of the nineteenth century (Wood 1997). A number of earlier mourning customs came to end with the outbreak of World War One, when it was considered bad for public morale to have masses of women in mourning dress (Coney 1993: 87).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN FUNERAL DIRECTOR

The changes briefly outlined above were an important indication of significant societal changes occurring in New Zealand at the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition to accelerating urbanisation during this period (Hamer 1993: 139), occupational specialisation and division of labour also became more complex before the First World War (Cleaver 1996: 36). Death in general became increasingly medicalised in the twentieth century and responsibility for dying and disposal progressively became the realm of the expert. These changes were evident in the developing identity of the funeral director, as the traditional undertaker of the nineteenth century was superseded by the modern funeral director of the twentieth century. Funeral directors offered a variety of essential services, utilised specialised funeral premises, and possessed expert knowledge – all of which enabled them to provide greater comfort and service to the bereaved (*NZFD* June 1959: 1). These developments also provided the basis for the occupation's claim to professional status.

PROFESSIONALISATION

Funeral directors in New Zealand aspired to attain a higher degree of status and prestige, and the history of funeral directing in this country is intrinsically bound to the pursuit of professional status. One of the key developments in the history of the New Zealand funeral industry was the establishment of a national association. Four Provincial Associations were established in 1936 in response to industrial legislation introduced by the first Labour government (*NZFD* March 1957: 75), and an inaugural national meeting of funeral directors was held in Wellington one year later. At this meeting it was resolved to form the New Zealand Federation of Funeral Directors. Annual conventions were held from that year forth, and the first issue of the quarterly journal – *The New*

Zealand Funeral Director (*NZFD*) – was published in June 1939. In addition to the pragmatic tasks of protecting their business interests (*NZFD* June 1939: 2), and dealing with war time exigencies (*NZFD* September 1943: 25), the early association was dedicated to promoting a new role and a less stigmatised status for the funeral director.

One of the initial aims of the Federation was to distance the modern funeral director from the undertaker of the past. Funeral reform movements in urban centres had condemned nineteenth century mourning customs as extravagant and excessive, and Dickensian images of the undertaker remained enduringly entrenched. The funeral directors of the twentieth century, in contrast, were described as clean, proficient, and scientific. These new funeral directors were urged to turn their backs on 'old unsanitary methods' and implored to 'cleanse' and 'revivify' the 'craft' of funeral directing to prevent it from regressing to old standards (*NZFD* September 1941: 23).

The term 'undertaker' was condemned as 'ambiguous' and 'objectionable', (*NZFD* December 1941: 45), and the Federation focused on the presentational image of the funeral director as a manifest way of distancing it from the undertaker of the past. Funeral directors were beseeched, for example, to monitor their speech to prevent any possibility of educing unsanitary undertaking images: 'When a careless slovenly voice answers the telephone the caller may mentally picture the funeral director's place of business as dirty, careless and ill kept' (*NZFD* June 1942: 2).

Similarly, funeral directors were warned against wearing old-fashioned frock coats and bell-topper hats used by the previous generation of undertakers, and urged to avoid the wearing of black when not engaged in professional duties. The *NZFD* (September 1941: 24) noted with some alarm that a significant number of funeral directors had 'fallen into the habit of wearing black in their leisure hours or when going about their social affairs', emphasising that this habit was a tactless proclamation of their employment.

In addition to these peripheral presentational changes, the new Federation promoted registration of the occupation and education as two fundamental developments that would raise the status of the occupation.

REGISTRATION

From the inception of the Federation there were continuing attempts to achieve governmental registration for the occupation. The reasons for registration

usually centred on the need to protect public health and maintain standards of funeral service. Dead and decomposing bodies were identified as sites of disorder and disease during the nineteenth century (Wood 1997: 260–283), and funeral directors appropriated discourse that emphasised the physical danger of the dead. The case for registration presented before the Health Bills Committee in 1939, for example, emphasised the need for funeral directors to be able to contain the 'offensive conditions' which arose after death, eliminating the risks of contagion and infection (*NZFD* December 1939: 15). Embalming was thus increasingly incorporated in the selection of services provided by funeral directors, allowing them to emphasise the indispensable and altruistic nature of their occupation.

Registration was also seen as an effective method of eliminating undesirable competition, particularly 'cheap, ignorant adventurers' (*NZFD* June 1941: 1), 'backyarders' (*NZFD* September 1964: 24), and 'cowboys', who were portrayed as having a complete disregard for service ethics and funeral standards. Association members lamented this perceived lack of 'ethical standards' and 'morality', and accused these recusants of providing exiguous, substandard service that generated an undiscerning, disreputable public image for funeral directors.

The occupational journal highlighted the advances achieved by the association, emphasising the unity of the profession and the degree of co-operation that increasingly characterised it. In 1973 the newly formed Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand (FDANZ) established its own register of funeral directors. This development did not preclude the pursuit of regulation, and the quest for registration continued in the 1980s and 1990s. On the recommendations of a public relations audit, and the recognition that the occupation remained unregulated, the FDANZ launched its *Griefcare* quality assurance program in 2000. Although the FDANZ and *Griefcare* continue to maintain and promote disputes resolution procedures, membership in these associations remains voluntary.[7]

EDUCATION

The introduction of formal education was seen by many as an integral element in the pursuit of registration and the development of a funeral profession. Early discussion emphasised the notion that training would allow funeral directors to 'defeat the price-cutting adventurer' (*NZFD* September 1941: 23) and raise the standard of the occupation. Readers of the funeral journal were implored to complete the newly established Course for the Preservation and Presentation of Bodies (*NZFD* March 1957: 76), and a national course for funeral directors

was developed in 1973 (*NZFD* June 1973:10). The Funeral Service Training Committee (FSTC) was established in 1981 to investigate educational requirements for funeral directors, and led to the establishment of courses in embalming and funeral directing during the 1980s. Year long certificates in funeral directing and embalming were introduced in 1990 and a National Diploma in Funeral Services is currently available from a training institute in Wellington.

Although education has clearly been a significant development in the field of funeral directing and embalming, all funeral service education remains voluntary. Numerous participants felt that this lack of apprenticeship, tertiary training, or other entrance qualification created widespread ambivalence about the professional status of the occupation. One funeral director participant explained:

> I don't think [funeral directing] is a profession…to me a profession has a much higher education qualification standard. To me professions are the medical, the law, the accounting. These are the professions and then you come down to industries and trades…how can you call it a profession if you can become a funeral director just by buying a piece of property, putting a building on it, and putting a sign up, and saying, 'I'm a funeral director'…Is that a profession? (Martin).

ROLE REDEFINITION

One of the themes clearly identifiable in an examination of British and North American funeral director literature is the focus on role redefinition. Numerous authors including Parsons (1997) and Thompson (1991) have examined the stigmatisation of funeral directors and the strategies employed by these functionaries to minimise the effects of this stigma. The observations of Sudnow (1967) and Lesy (1987) suggest that death workers have become symbolic markers of death in modern Anglophone society, and that the close association of the funeral director with death and dead bodies has clearly contributed to the creation of a 'deeply discrediting' attribute (Goffman 1968:13). Funeral directors in a number of geographical areas consequently de-emphasised or delegated their backstage 'dirty work', focusing instead on the provision of services to the bereaved (Farrell 1980:148).

Similarly, New Zealand funeral workers shifted their focus from the dead, and explicitly concentrated their efforts on the needs of the living. In addition to furnishing a coffin, providing transport, and merely 'directing a funeral' (*NZFD*

June 1942: 1), funeral directors helped and supported the mourners, advising them in what was 'desirable' (*NZFD* December 1953: 137). The funeral directors of the Federation era attempted to modernise funeral customs by providing services that no longer presented a 'hazard to the mental health of the bereaved' (*NZFD* September 1951: 25). To 'lessen the sorrow' (*NZFD* June 1943: 1) of the people they served, funeral directors needed to eradicate the excessive and inefficient traditions of the undertaker. Families had to be afforded more privacy, for example, to avoid the 'maudlin sentimentality' that could potentially destroy the prescribed composure required for such situations (*NZFD* September 1951: 25). The body was increasingly transferred to specialised funeral director premises before disposal, and there were proposals to abandon old English style coffins because they were too 'funereal', and reminded mourners of the remains inside: 'Is there anything so poignantly futile as the present shaped coffin with its outline so carefully following the outlines of the body, shouting every moment what it is, and what it is enclosing?' (*NZFD* June 1946: 1).

North American-style lawn cemeteries with discrete bronze plaques were suggested as alternatives to 'cold', 'grim' graveyards (*NZFD* September 1948: 35), while comfortless words such as 'coffin' and 'body' needed to be replaced by more appropriate terms such as 'casket' and 'remains', which produced 'pleasant' memories. The term 'coffin' was particularly coarse because it implied 'simplicity', 'rough construction', and 'lack of ornamentation'. 'Casket', on the other hand, signified 'beauty', 'elegance', and 'expert finish' (*NZFD* March 1946: 73).

Funeral directors reframed their occupation and cloaked themselves in a 'shroud of service' (Thompson 1991: 421), describing themselves as 'servants of humanity' (*NZFD* September 1950: 111), carrying out a 'sacred social task' (*NZFD* March 1955: 75). The Code of Ethics adopted by the Association correspondingly emphasised the need to protect public interests (*NZFD* March 1973: 18), while articles and editorials in the Association journal outlined the personal sacrifices involved in the vocation of funeral directing. Funeral directors were portrayed as integral members of society and many joined philanthropic community organisations: 'The Funeral Director is no longer segregated from the public by reason of his work, and his society is actually sought after and the average successful Funeral Director is a leader either in church, civic or fraternal circles…'(*NZFD* September 1943: 24).

The emphasis on altruistic service became particularly evident in the discernible shift from rationalised funeral practices to psychology and grief in the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, grief was increasingly medicalised and transformed into a disease with a particular symptomology (Archer

1999). Following similar trends in the United States (Laderman 2003), funeral directors began to emphasise the therapeutic needs of the bereaved, prioritising their role as 'counsellors and comforters' (*NZFD* September 1968: 39–40).

The emerging construct of grief reinforced a cultural notion, 'that grief could be healthy or unhealthy, resolved or unresolved, transcended or forever present' (Laderman 2003: 118). New Zealand funeral directors – in keeping with this development – highlighted the positive psychological value of the funeral in an efficacious grief process. Funeral directors specifically underlined the significance of acknowledging the 'reality of death' and expressing emotion. In a shift clearly reminiscent of earlier twentieth century attempts to dissociate modern funeral directing practices from undertaking, late modern funeral directors endeavoured to highlight the progressive practices associated with a new understanding and treatment of grief. The rationalised funeral practices enthusiastically endorsed by the occupational journal during the 1940s and 1950s were increasingly portrayed as detrimental to the health of the bereaved. A more sensitive approach to bereavement and grief now informed the work of the funeral director.

Elements of the grief process were included in funeral director education in the 1970s, and participants emphasised the importance of this development in their training:

> I went reluctantly to the first course [*in the early 1970s*] and it was the biggest change during my whole career, for me personally. From a person who was getting disgruntled with the job…and looked at my job as picking up a body, bringing it to our premises, embalming, dressing and placing it in a casket, going to a church and then burying or cremating it…After the course, I saw it as looking after people and I became much more satisfied with my work. None of us…had had anything to do with psychology…We were taught… some elementary psychology and behavioural science and that just made all the difference to me and I've loved my job ever since (Ian, funeral director).

Some postulated that this pastoral role was particularly important in the secular New Zealand context because the established church played an increasingly inconsequential role in ministering to the bereaved (*NZFD* September 1974: 10).

The obvious emphasis on service to the bereaved distanced the New Zealand funeral director from a key source of stigmatisation. Although funeral directors de-emphasised their contact with the corpse (*NZFD* June 1965: 2), and attempted to distance the occupation from other death workers and trades, many funeral directors continued to handle the dead, and few funeral firms experienced the degree of specialisation observed in Australia, Britain, and the United States (see, for example, Foreman (1974) and Parsons (1997)).

One final element of role redefinition concerns the economic environment of funerals. From the foundation of the Federation, funeral directors were eager to outline their selection of services, not only to raise the status of the occupation, but to legitimise the expenses associated with the provision of these services. Funeral directors proficient in all elements of mortuary science and legal requirements, for example, were considered to have an 'incontestable right to expect a remuneration in line with the quality of service' (*NZFD* December 1944: 46). Funeral directors were acutely aware of criticisms concerning cost, and continuing efforts were made to inform the public of the significance and quality of funeral service – particularly after exposés of the funeral industry in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Public relation campaigns including advertising, community seminars – and more recently – funeral home 'open days', have emphasised the specialised role of the funeral director and the importance of funerary ritual (see for instance the *Press* 26 February 2003: 16).

EMBALMING IN NEW ZEALAND

One of the most conspicuous changes in the role of the funeral director is evident in the introduction of embalming. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embalming was offered by a small number of urban funeral directors (Cleaver 1996: 32–33), and a few nineteenth century funeral workers even acquired international embalming training and certification (*Funeralcare* September 2004: 23). The practice was limited before the second half of the century, however, and even in the 1960s was often reserved for bodies that required transportation between towns and cities in New Zealand (Morris 1968: 28). Funeral practitioners initially promoted arterial embalming as an important public health measure that prevented 'obnoxious odours' and 'gases', and allowed bodies to be presented in a 'wholesome' and 'beautiful' manner (*NZFD* June 1940: 1; *NZFD* March 1943: 84). Early accounts thus emphasised the importance of ameliorating death and *reducing* the effects of grief in survivors. One article, for example, stipulated that it was the 'instability' of dead human tissue that resulted in the retention of 'many pagan customs', and that the

adoption of embalming would allow for a modernisation and rationalisation of funerary ritual (*NZFD* March 1953: 71).

Reports in the occupational journal during this period recognised the importance of embalming in the United States, with some funeral directors predicting that the Second World War and arrival of United States army personnel would revolutionise the practice of embalming in New Zealand (*NZFD* March 1943: 84). Republished articles from North American trade journals emphasised the significance of sanitation, preservation, and cosmetic effect, while the benefits derived from the creation of a 'memory picture' were increasingly considered (*NZFD* December 1964: 53).

The embalming process was initially described as an uncomplicated procedure that required only an elementary knowledge of human anatomy: 'To embalm a body there are certain rules to be observed. They are simple in the extreme, and once knowing them, you will never forget them' (*NZFD* June 1940: 1). It was not long, however, before a number of New Zealand funeral directors became aware of international advancements in embalming technique, and recognised the significance of this procedure as a key development in the pursuit of professional status. One report in the *NZFD* (December 1947: 62), as a case in point, stated that embalming was the funeral director's 'chief claim to recognition as a professional man', and increasing emphasis was placed on promoting embalming as a specialised *technical* skill.

The promotion of embalming was given significant impetus by members of the industry who trained in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, with numerous participants recalling the relevance of this early development:

> I am old enough to remember the days when you put the lid on the casket and didn't have any skills to counteract the decomposition of the body. And if a body became offensive, you just lifted it out and put it in a bigger coffin which was made water-proof by pouring pitch around all the joints inside…and that was your only method of doing anything. Then after the war, elementary embalming started in New Zealand and then later in the 1950s and early '60s, some of our people went over to the States and were trained properly and brought the knowledge to New Zealand (Jim, funeral director).

It was not until after the formation of the New Zealand Embalmers Association (NZEA) in 1971, however, that embalming or 'hygienic treatment' became increasingly widespread. Despite some resistance to the routinised practice

of this procedure, embalming was progressively utilised in New Zealand: by 1977 almost seventy percent of disposals handled by FDANZ funeral firms were embalmed (*NZFD* December 1978: 5), and most funeral director participants in this study estimated that they presently embalmed in excess of ninety percent of all cases.

Embalming has become intrinsically linked to the practice of viewing the dead before disposal. After the establishment of the Funeral Directors Federation in 1938, viewing was considered to be an irrational tradition, associated with undertakers, that would damage the mental health and fortitude of the survivors. Despite continuing ambivalence about the value of the practice in the 1970s, viewing was increasingly promoted by funeral directors as a practice with psychological benefits that would aid the grieving process. This return to viewing was clearly influenced by the aforementioned changes in the understandings of grief, North American funerary practices, and a growing awareness of 'traditional' death customs (Calder 1998; Hera 1995). The Maori approach to death, in particular, was seen to represent a healthier, more 'honest' approach to death and one that contrasted with the increasing European 'denial' of death in the twentieth century (see, for example, Dew and Kirkman 2002).

FUNERAL DIRECTOR PREMISES

The utilisation of funeral director premises became increasingly important in the twentieth century. By 1910, the dead were increasingly stored at undertakers' premises before burial, particularly if the person had died in an institution (Cleaver 1996: 32–33). Removing the body to funeral director premises after death was regarded as efficient and sanitary. Taking the body home, in contrast, was portrayed as inconvenient, 'old-fashioned', and a threat to the mental well-being of the bereaved (*NZFD* December 1955: 136). This was particularly important with the increasing practice of embalming, where relatives of the deceased were 'well advised' to allow funeral directors to remove the deceased to the 'specially equipped preparation theatre at the funeral director's establishment' (*NZFD* September 1960: 27).

A few undertakers modified their facilities to include small chapels that could be used for funeral services but until the 1970s most firms continued to use local churches. Many families, particularly those without church affiliation, were finding it increasingly difficult to find an 'appropriate' venue for the funeral and an individual to conduct the service. A declining number of New Zealanders belonged to the four main Christian denominations and an increasing number professed to have 'no religion' in the census statistics. A partial solu-

tion was offered by city councils around the country who built crematoria that included alternative funeral establishments. One participant interviewed for a research project in the late 1960s estimated that by 1967 one third of all funerals were held in crematorium chapels (Morris 1968: 28). The crematoria chapels also eliminated the need for a cortege and resulted in an increased number of single service funerals, where the committal was included in the service. These funerals were a sign of increasingly simplified and functional funerary rites, which in turn reflected rationalised approaches to death.

These changes were of increasing concern to funeral directors who felt that councils were 'dictating the format of funerals' (The Funeral Directors of New Zealand 1997), and that with increased crematoria involvement, there would be no need for a funeral director. In response to these concerns a number of funeral directors began building multi-purpose funeral premises. These new funeral home chapels could be used for religious or non-religious funerals and were particularly well adapted to the emerging life-centred funeral conducted by funeral celebrants. Most of the new premises also included catering facilities for refreshments after the service. Participants in the present study felt that this development reflected increasing privatisation and the modern desire for 'one-stop-shopping'.

These new premises were promoted as 'reflecting the more enlightened practices surrounding death and the grieving process' (Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand 1997), and, as with viewing, this 'traditional' component of the funerary ritual became one particularly well suited to the emerging interpretation of the grief process. Despite busy modern life-styles, funeral directors noted that the funeral was an integral part of acknowledging death and helping the bereaved 'deal' with their grief. A number of funeral directors felt that having the funeral and social gathering at the funeral director establishment effectively fulfilled these needs.

SECULAR FUNERAL CELEBRANTS

Funeral directors in the present project emphasised that the emergence of secular celebrants marked a significant shift in the provision of funeral services in New Zealand. Participants noted that unlike the North American innovations of embalming and funeral home chapels, funeral celebrants represented a New Zealand response to a changing societal situation. During the last two decades celebrants promoting life-centred funerals have become a fundamental feature of personalised funeral practices. Although there is marked regional variation in the availability and utilisation of celebrants, study participants estimated

that these funeral functionaries currently conducted between 40 to 70 percent of all funerals in urban areas.

Marian Barnes pioneered this development in New Zealand in the late 1970s. Barnes believed that funerals focused exclusively on religious interpretations of death and that these interpretations were often incongruous with the life and personality of the deceased. Unlike humanist or rationalist funerals, however, celebrant funerals did not specifically challenge religious beliefs, but instead provided an alternative for the increasing number of non-church-going individuals (Barnes 1991). Celebrants are usually lay-people with no formal, institutionalised role, and many promote themselves as ritual specialists, fulfilling the sociological and psychological needs of an increasingly secular society (Schafer 1998). The life-centred ceremonies conducted by these individuals attempt to provide meaning at the death of a particular individual, as well as legitimisation for this life in terms of secular values.

Nearly all the participants in this study regarded the development of the celebrant 'alternative' as an augmentation of funeral services. Participants frequently stressed the importance of employing competent celebrants that complimented their firm's standards and reputation, and funeral directors often emphasised the importance of recommending 'appropriate' celebrants to client families. Some of the larger funeral firms around New Zealand currently employ their own specialised funeral celebrants, while funeral directors occasionally function as funeral celebrants in a few of the establishments surveyed in this study.

CREMATION

Cremation has also become a central component of the New Zealand funeral industry and is closely correlated with the contemporary focus on personalised post-mortem practices. Cremation was first intimated by the funeral reform movements in the nineteenth century where it was promoted as a sanitary, cost effective, and aesthetically satisfying form of disposal. Cremation was described as a scientific process that eliminated deadly diseases, utilised valuable land more effectively, and was generally cheaper than burial. Cremation was also promoted as a method of disposal that precluded the possibility of being buried alive, and the 'discomfort' associated with graveyard services (Dunedin Cremation Society 1903). The first crematorium in New Zealand was erected in Karori, Wellington, in 1909 but cremation was slow to gain widespread public acceptance. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the rate of cremation increased significantly, accounting for approximately sixty percent of disposals

by 1970 (Ninness 1990).

Funeral directors striving for professional status in the 1940s and 1950s utilised rhetoric in their trade journal that reflected the cremationists concern with hygiene and efficiency. New Zealand funeral directors promoted cremation as a convenient and rational form of disposal that would have little impact on the provision of other services. Unlike the situation in the United States where cremation was initially promoted by the anti-traditional funeral lobby (see for instance Mitford 1963), there was little correlation between the type of funeral service and the method of disposal.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, municipal crematoria began to build funeral chapels (*NZFD* June 1961: 1). This development culminated in the proliferation of single-service funerals (*NZFD* June 1977: 9) and intimated the trend towards one-stop funeral shopping noted earlier. Some funeral directors realised the potential for cremation authorities to integrate vertically and include funeral directing services. A significant number of funeral directors during the 1960s and 1970s were also concerned by the time restrictions imposed by crematoria and the subsequent abbreviation of funeral ceremonies. It was partly in response to these concerns that a number of funeral directors constructed multi-facility funeral venues in the 1980s that included funeral chapels and reception lounges for refreshments after the funeral service. Some funeral directors also installed their own cremator units during this period and began offering a wider range of disposal services.

Although incineration after the service is usually witnessed only by crematoria staff, the final disposal of ashes has also undergone a recent transformation. The disposal of ashes was initially considered to be a 'regrettable' development that irrationally prolonged the 'grief of bereavement' by some funeral directors (*NZFD* March 1977: 6–7). In line with the general shift from functional and efficient funerary rites discussed above, however, monumental masons and funeral directors began to offer more personalised memorial options that allowed greater mourner involvement. Ashes can currently be scattered by crematoria staff or funeral directors, deposited in columbaria, or buried in cemetery ash plots with plaques or headstones. Alternatively, cremated remains can be taken by family members and buried or scattered in locations with personal significance. Burial and personal placement of ashes have superseded institutional scattering in the last two decades and some funeral directors and celebrants provide ceremonies for this final treatment.

MULTINATIONAL FUNERAL CORPORATIONS

One recent development in the New Zealand funeral industry, that has accentuated the aforementioned shift to personalised ritual, has been the arrival of a United States-based multinational funeral corporation.[8] Stewart Enterprises Inc. was one of three North American companies that embarked on an international acquisition campaign in the 1990s, entering the New Zealand funeral market in 1996. During their one-year acquisition program, Stewart Enterprises acquired a total of 24 funeral establishments in New Zealand, from Christchurch in the South, to Orewa in the North.

The arrival of Stewart Enterprises was generally regarded by the media, funeral industry, and consumers, with varying degrees of suspicion and antagonism. Magazine articles, for example, described the arrival of the multinationals as 'mega-death merchants' (Macdonald 1996: 65). This particular article considered the changes the corporation might instigate in the funeral industry and the impact of such changes on the consumer (Macdonald 1996). One television documentary emphasised the increasing prices of funerals after the arrival of a multinational corporation in Australia (*Assignment* 29 June 1997). Newspaper articles primarily expressed the concerns of the funeral industry. One article in the *Dominion* noted that the arrival of Stewart Enterprises had been met with 'a mixture of alarm and acceptance' (23 July 1996: 1), while a report in the *Press* (29 May 1997: 20) stated the traditional funeral industry was rapidly 'becoming an outpost of the global death business'. This view was reiterated by a report in the *Independent Business Weekly* (Heeringa 1997: 20), which asserted that Stewart Enterprises acquisitions had 'sent a shiver' through New Zealand's '200 or so, mainly family owned, undertaker businesses'.

The majority of participants in this study felt that the arrival of Stewart Enterprises was detrimental to the funeral industry. Most of the concerns expressed focused on the 'Americanisation' of funerals. For many participants 'Americanisation' was generally synonymous with higher funeral prices, extravagant merchandising, and decreased personalisation. One funeral director, for example, contended that funerals in the United States focused on profit, while New Zealanders were generally a 'very friendly, very caring and appreciative race' (Bone 2003: 32). New Zealand attitudes were similarly described as 'understated', 'money conscious' and 'simple, middle-of-the-road' by participants.

One funeral director noted that the Stewart approach was simply a sales pitch, going 'totally against the grain of the traditional New Zealand funeral' (Brian). Another funeral director (Anthony) was particularly concerned with the em-

phasis on merchandising in the United States: 'In many cases I think funeral directors in America are more casket salesmen than funeral directors'. One funeral director (Margaret) emphatically expressed her belief that Stewart Enterprises was not going to be 'good for New Zealand families'. One Anglican minister (Karl) shared these concerns, stating that Stewart Enterprises simply commercialised funerals to an unprecedented extent and that this corporate approach neglected personalised service. A number of New Zealand owned firms, specifically those in areas where Stewart Enterprises had acquired funeral homes, emphasised local ownership: 'New Zealand Owned' and 'Family Owned' were features increasingly promoted by companies who felt that such advertising would be advantageous in an increasingly competitive market.

Staff at all eight of the Stewart funeral homes included in this study noticed some changes after acquisition. These changes were apparent in decreased funeral numbers, staff movement, and antagonism from New Zealand owned establishments. Some employees also noticed changes in administration and increases in funeral prices. Both New Zealand funeral directors and Stewart Enterprises employees attributed the decline in funeral numbers to the marketing by New Zealand owned firms and media publicity. One Stewart Enterprises funeral director (Michael) stated that funeral colleagues 'took it upon themselves to let the world know' that a multinational had arrived on New Zealand shores, while another (Carmen) asserted that significant 'negativity and prejudice' had been generated by the industry.

Many funeral directors in this study perceived there to be a significant level of consumer resistance to Stewart Enterprises, and most participants were able to cite examples of anti-American feeling from the public (see for instance the *Daily News* 17 June 1997: 3). One funeral director (Anthony) explained:

> We get many phone calls where they [the consumer] clarify at a very early stage, 'Are you still owned by New Zealanders or are you owned by those horrible Americans?'…It's almost as blunt as that. So you could be the best funeral director out, but if you're owned by Americans they will not touch you.

Another funeral director (Martin) stated that he promoted New Zealand ownership because of the 'widely held belief that American funerals are brash' and 'cost a lot of money', and felt that advertising New Zealand ownership was in some ways 'pandering to the fears of the people'. In addition to this anti-US sentiment, participants noted a public parochial disposition, which they felt was incongruent with the North American approach to funerals. One funeral

director (Ian) stated, for example, that Stewart companies had 'taken a loss because of the parochialism against overseas companies owning New Zealand businesses'.

Ultimately, Stewart Enterprises sold its Australasian division to a Brisbane business consortium in August 2001 (*Herald-Sun* 25 August 2001: 95). The legacy of this development, however, was that it helped elucidate the 'New Zealand funeral', allowing funeral directors to emphasise the significance of personalisation in New Zealand post-mortem practices. This distinction has similarly found recent expression in discussions of the television drama series *Six Feet Under*, which focuses on the fortunes of a Los Angeles funeral firm. While the popular HBO series was credited with portraying funeral workers as 'normal' people by funeral directors (*Otago Daily Times* September 14 2002: A9; *Press* 7 September 2002: 1), the drama also reiterated that the New Zealand way of death was 'different', with significantly less emphasis on 'the slickness and sales orientated nature of dealing with death' (*Evening Post* June 22, 2002: 25–26).

SUMMARY

The developments outlined above indicate a significant shift in funeral director focus and provision of services during the twentieth century. Although many in the industry acknowledged the historical link between Britain and New Zealand, English funeral customs were increasingly represented as antiquated undertaking practices no longer appropriate for the New Zealand situation. In contrast, North American funeral practices were initially portrayed as progressive and modern. The replacement of British hearses by US-built vehicles after the mid 1920s, for example, intimated this transition (*NZFD* December 1944: 54). US-style lawn cemeteries with inscribed, ground-level, bronze plates (barely hinting at the bodies buried beneath) were considered to be a significant advancement from the old style cemeteries that apparently repulsed New Zealand individuals (*NZFD* September 1948: 35). Other significant innovations borrowed from the United States included arterial embalming and specialised funeral premises. The *NZFD* also made many references to professionalisation and the high standards of funeral service in North America, reprinting many of the articles that appeared in North American trade publications.

Despite this emphasis, however, the precise definition and manifestation of professionalisation remained contested. Many in the funeral industry felt that the implementation of modern North American innovations was incongruous with New Zealand attitudes and 'national temperament'. In the last two decades

this emphasis on 'realistic' and 'pragmatic' New Zealand approaches has been amalgamated with a general shift to personalised post-mortem practices.

Funeral director discourse is pervaded by explanations of personalised ceremonies and services that 'effectively' fulfil the sociological and psychological needs of the bereaved. Funeral celebrants conducting life-centred funerals have become an intrinsic component of this new 'New Zealand approach' to death. While the concept of celebrants is relatively unknown in North America, funeral directors believed that this particular development was of fundamental significance in personalising funeral practices in New Zealand. Similarly, cremation (specifically the final treatment of ashes) allowed for personalised funeral options that recognised the individuality and personality of the deceased. The personalisation rhetoric became particularly pronounced with they arrival of Stewart Enterprises in the mid-1990s. Although this US-based multinational sold its Australasian division only five years after entering the funeral market, it was this development that enabled funeral firms around the country to emphasise and elucidate the significance of personalised New Zealand funerals. While this contemporary focus on the personalisation of mortuary practices represents an obvious departure from earlier attempts to rationalise traditions and import innovations from the United States, it also clearly highlights the occupations continuing pursuit of professionalisation.

NOTES

1 The term 'American' was often used by study participants and industry sources in a colloquial New Zealand sense to denote the United States of America. While retaining the use of this term in direct citations of participant and industry journal material, I have identified whether reference is being made to North America generally – or the United States specifically – in my discussion.

2 This article focuses on the European (Pakeha) treatment of death in New Zealand. For an overview of Maori funerary practices see Oppenheim (1973) or Sinclair (1990).

3 It is important to note that familiarity with death does not imply ambivalence and/or fatalism. See for example Strange (2002: 145–147).

4 It was less likely for a minister to be present at the funerals of young children. Arbury (2001) notes that there was often no minister at the funeral of a young child and that it was the sexton's responsibility to obtain the Registrar's Certificate of Death.

5 The first recorded undertaker was J. A. Langford who arrived in Wellington (from England) in 1840.

6 All individuals and funeral firms included in this study have been assigned pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of informants.

7 It is important to note here that numerous negative participant responses to these recent developments highlight the contested nature of professionalisation within the funeral industry. Although industry literature might suggest a unified body of funeral practitioners, it is clear from interviews with participants that there is a discernible degree of dissent within both the FDANZ and the wider funeral industry. Non-FDANZ participants frequently described the dominant association as pretentious and imperious. Some of the smaller funeral companies stipulated that the FDANZ not only restricted access to the association, but that member firms often dominated the funeral market and restricted access to funeral supplies. One formal response to the perceived exclusivity of the FDANZ was the establishment of a new association in 1993 (Funeral Services Council of New Zealand).

8 The establishment of multiunit funeral firms during the 1960s and 1970s allowed some companies to achieve greater economies of scale and utilise costly fixed overheads more efficiently. Service Corporation International, the Loewen Group, and Stewart Enterprises Inc. were three companies that utilised the centralisation of resources and acquired funeral businesses throughout North America, embarking on an international acquisition campaign in the 1990s. Many independent establishments perceived this expansion of death care companies as a threat to 'traditional' North American funerary practices, and began to contrast their post-mortem practices with those of the publicly traded corporations (Laderman 2003:190–91).

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