



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## The Cemetery Tourist: Mourning with Authority in the Travel Writing of Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley

By [M.B. Hackler](#), University of Louisiana at Lafayette

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<1> When Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley set sail for the United States in the spring of 1849, she was a woman in mourning. The recent death of her husband and a beloved sister combined with the tragic loss of her youngest son set a somber tone for the journey which would inspire her best known work, the 1851 travelogue *Travels in the United States, etc., during 1849 and 1850*. The grief that accompanies her throughout her journey serves as an impetus for a kind of morbid tourism. In visits to the fashionable, new “rural” cemeteries being established in the United States at the time of her visit, Lady Emmeline finds the voice denied her in regard to other public institutions, space in which she may negotiate the gender conventions governing her work. Because of its association with the historically female occupation of mourning and its basis in what may be regarded as the more “feminine” aesthetic ideals of the picturesque, the rural cemetery movement provided Lady Emmeline the cultural sanction necessary for the serious social commentary typically denied female travel writers of her time. The rolling hills, meandering paths, and striking views of cemeteries such as Boston’s Mount Auburn and Brooklyn’s Greenwood provide critical spaces within which a Victorian woman writer might speak with authority about culture and reform as well as gauge the success of the “Republican Experiment” of the United States.

<2> The daughter of a prince and first cousin of Queen Victoria, Lady Emmeline was born into a position that guaranteed a thorough knowledge of the gender conventions operating at the most elite levels of her culture. Yet, like so many of her female traveling compatriots, her desire for travel and for the ability to create out of that travel forced her to strike a balance between personal ambition and cultural restriction. This negotiation is clear from the first page of her narrative. Kristi Siegel explains that gender conventions required female travel writers to negotiate “a delicate course” by adopting “a narrative stance that could be described as the decorum of indecorum, a fine balance in which they strained the conventions of femininity, but did not break them” (2-3). Siegel argues that in the prefaces to their travel accounts, women writers perfunctory apologies “affirmed their status as ladies and also served to reassure readers they would not be competing with men” (3). Lady Emmeline’s apologetic preface begins with the usual disavowal of literary intentions, insisting that the volume owes its publication to the entreaties of friends who “have pressed me strongly to print the letters which I had written during our excursion” (iii). In a move characteristic of the genre, she dismisses her work as “the gossip of travel” provided solely for the amusement of “that large class to whom gossip is welcome” (iii).

<3> As a travel writer visiting the United States, Stuart Wortley occupied a unique and problematic position. A member of the British royal family, she was granted access to some of America’s most celebrated citizens, including President Zachary Taylor, the noted politician Daniel Webster, and a host of artists, academics, and socialites. As a woman, she was bound to limit her writings about these experiences to descriptions of furnishings, attire, and hospitality. Writing about her visits to institutions, such as the Boston Blind Asylum made famous in an earlier travel narrative by Charles Dickens, Lady Emmeline is compelled to include only the most superficial assessment, in contrast to Dickens’ more thorough and critical one (68-69). It seems only fitting that Stuart Wortley would seek in the United States, a nation whose institutions were of particular interest to the English at this time, an institutional form on which she might comment with impunity. She found such an institution in the rural cemetery movement.

<4> Early on in her narrative, Lady Emmeline describes a visit with friends to Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, a space to which she lays claim in her writing. Her account begins with effusive praise of the landscape. Lady Emmeline is struck by the fall colors, whose “dazzling scarlet, the most golden and vivid yellows and Tyrian purples, and rich, deep, velvet-like

crimsons, and delicate pale primrose-tints and soft surviving greens, and rose-hues, such as flush the lips of Indian shells – all cast their sumptuous shadowings over the quiet graves, like the reflections from richly painted windows” (77). She is deeply impressed by the “sublime” views “from the heights of the cemetery,” by the sound of the nearby ocean “rolling and moaning” whose “melancholy, organ-like sounds, so near” sound like “a mighty mourner,” and by the “beautiful and solemn” paths and avenues which traverse the cemetery (77). Her praise of the cemetery’s picturesque setting is not particularly surprising, coming as it does from “a good Romantic” who exploits every opportunity in her narrative to describe “the influence of nature on man” (Mullen 144). What is surprising – and what suggests that Lady Emmeline’s textual claim on the cemetery is more than superficial – is the passage that follows. She concludes her praise of Greenwood Cemetery by expressing frustration over the absence similar institutions in her home country. She asks, “When will London have anything even *approaching* to this magnificent cemetery” (77) [emphasis in original], and in doing so challenges deeply held beliefs amongst her countrymen regarding death, tradition, and national prestige.

<5> A variety of social and political factors combined to create the institutional context for Lady Emmeline’s bold assertion. The nineteenth century in the United States was a period of rapid urban reform. New and innovative social institutions, including prisons, asylums, and schools, were established in America’s large cities, their methods drawing international attention: “Rather than merely correcting the imperfections of their predecessors, these institutions represented radically new solutions to the problems they addressed” (Sears 88). For the British traveler of the period, these institutions served as representations of the United States in miniature, and assessments of their success or failure carried powerful connotations. The extension of the franchise in Britain suggested to many that America might provide a model of what was to come at home. For the Americans and international travelers who made visits to them a part of their itineraries, the draw of these new institutions was a desire to affirm or deny their claim that in the United States, “progress was taking place on the moral as well as the material plane” (Sears 88). The most “popular and successful” (Sears 99) of these institutions-cum-tourist-attractions were the new, rural cemeteries being established outside of America’s large eastern cities.

<6> The rural cemetery movement in the United States grew out of a concern for public health and morality which transcended national boundaries. In rural cemeteries, the aesthetic ideals of Romanticism – as expressed through the tradition of English landscape design – combined with the growing prestige of Paris’ Père LaChaise Cemetery to foster the creation of burial spaces designed to reconfigure the relationship of the individual to death. The transferal of burials from the poorly tended, often foul-smelling urban churchyard to the idyllic rural locale helped to redefine “the boundary, beyond which the living cannot go nor the dead return” (Sloane 46). The increased desirability of graveside visitation at these new cemeteries contributed to the refiguring “by liberalized religion” of death as a natural, and not necessarily terrifying, part of life (Linden-Ward 168).

<7> Proponents of new cemeteries often argued for them based on purported public health benefits:

Overcrowded burial-grounds, described variously as ‘dangerous masses of corruption’, ‘injurious to the living’, and so on, were regarded as major contributing factors to ‘atmospheric impurity’ because of the foul ‘miasmas’ which escaped from the seething corruption of graves, and this was considered to be a contributing cause of outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. It was believed that trees and shrubs would help to ‘absorb deleterious gases’, and generally help to improve public health (Curl 73).

The most significant contributions of the new cemeteries, however, were to be cultural. In *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, James Curl argues that cemeteries were held to be good not only for “morals and public health” but also for “virtue, education, the development of artistic taste, sentiment, kindness, appreciation of sculpture and architecture, instruction in botany and landscape-gardening, and much else” (47). In the debates over cemeteries on both sides of the Atlantic, the benefits of the new burial spaces were often cited as sites for the development of characteristically feminine attributes.

<8> The ease with which she joins the cultural debate over cemeteries suggests that Lady Emmeline viewed them as accessible and appropriate venues for commentary. In her description of Mount Auburn, in 1831 the first of the rural cemeteries to be established in the United States,

she finds “a spacious and beautiful cemetery” (47) whose virtues are described in terms that are at once feminine and culturally significant. According to Stuart Wortley, the cemetery is “profusely adorned with a rich variety of trees, and in some places planted with ornamental shrubbery” (47). Vistas include graves and memorials interspersed with the “pretty sheets of water” distributed throughout the grounds. She is enchanted by the wandering paths and avenues given the names of trees and flowers as well as the cemetery’s “fine and extensive” views (47-48). By employing the language of the picturesque Lady Emmeline accomplishes more than mere description. She uses an elite vocabulary – one to which she has been provided privileged access both by her class and her gender – to assess the value of a cultural institution.

<9> For a woman traveling as a means of coping with grief and one eager to experience the most innovative aspects of life in the United States, Stuart Wortley’s attraction to these spaces might come as no surprise. While visiting the small island of Naushon in Long Island Sound, for example, Stuart Wortley spends a memorable afternoon touring the “lovely woods, valleys, and gentle eminences” of her hosts’ estate. Most memorable of the tour is time spent in “a still, secluded part of the forest, where in the midst of a sunny clearing...was a single grave, that of the only and adored son of our amiable hosts; indeed, their only child” (65). For Lady Emmeline, the situation of the grave of a loved one in such a picturesque locale seems appropriate: “All was beauty and enchantment! and there lay the lonely dead – who could dare to say in unconsecrated ground? where nature was so wild and beautiful, and Nature’s Creator seemed so nigh – and where that great untrodden ground with nothing to desecrate it, was ever bathed by the tears of hallowed parental affection?” The unorthodox situation of the child’s grave provides the impetus for Stuart Wortley to question beliefs still very much a part of her own culture.

<10> Despite the efforts of the small number of cemetery advocates in Britain in the early Victorian period, the English were more reluctant than Americans to revamp their burial practices. The medieval association of entrance into heaven with the proximity of the church to one’s grave continued to linger in the British cultural unconscious (Curl 41), and burial practices like that celebrated by Stuart Wortley at Naushon were criticized in the English press. One critic lamented, “I cannot conceive anything more irreverent than the Yankee fashion of burying in unconsecrated earth” (Boyd 48). At the same time, fees from churchyard burials were a major source of parish income, making the move to the cemetery a rebuking of ecclesiastical authority (Curl 52-53). Other critics of the new cemeteries recoiled at the incompatibility of garden settings and the grief of loss, referring to the new burial spaces as “huge joint-stock warehouse[s] for coffins” whose “ill-assorted images” of “death and prettiness” make a “mockery of all that is, and pretends to be real, in broken hearts” (Mudford 95, 92). Finally, opponents of the British cemeteries were adamant in their criticism of the profit motive in cemetery organization and the use of high interment fees to prevent the inclusion of the lower classes (Curl 45). Thus, in her simple assertion, Lady Emmeline does more than offer an opinion; she challenges a powerful cultural practice, one that may seem particularly surprising coming as it does from a well established member of the traditionally conservative upper class.

<11> That she does so without apology is telling. Victorian culture, with its clearly demarcated social spaces for men and women, may not at first seem a likely backdrop for such an assertion on the part of a woman. Investigation into Victorian ideas about death and mourning, however, suggest that women occupied a kind of privileged position in at least this one cultural context. In Victorian Britain, men’s roles in mourning may not have been so firmly entrenched, but “for middle class and elite women of the period,” there existed a “newly prescribed formalization through etiquette of mourning period and garb” (Linden-Ward 192). Women’s roles in mourning were public and pervasive. For Victorian women, the experience of the death of a loved one involved repercussions lasting much longer than those affecting Victorian men. For Victorian widows, for example, “Widowhood, as the end of marriage, was a devastating experience, entailing the loss of the central role of wife, which defined the identity and sense of worth of so many women” (Jalland 230). While Victorian widowers often remarried in time, for the majority of widows, “widowhood was a final destiny, an involuntary commitment to a form of social exile” (Jalland 231).

<12> The long-term impact of death is not the only cultural factor privileging women’s roles in mourning. So many of the ephemeral items associated with death in the Victorian period were feminized. Curl lists a number of them which have survived, including, “*immortelles* or artificial flowers protected by glass domes” and “embossed patterns around verses of a lugubrious nature” as well as “memorial-cards, embossed with weeping willows, sorrowing figures, and hovering angels – linen handkerchiefs embroidered with black borders and tear drops – a ‘Vulcanite’ ear-

argents...which handkerchiefs embroidered with black borders and tear drops, a valance or trumpet decorated with lace and ribbons, on a silk cord" and "mourning-fans of black silk with ebonised sticks" (195). The list of women's mourning attire is likewise extensive. It included "day- and evening-wear, mourning wedding-dresses (worn when the bride had lost a close relative such as a parent), underskirts, shawls...capotes, bonnets, veils, caps...boas...pinafores, aprons, parasols, bags, purses, mittens, coats, hats" and even "padded chest protectors for widows" (Curl 201). Accessories included mourning-jewelry, which commonly included "hair taken from the person commemorated, enshrined beneath glass in a gold or silver frame" or "arranged in designs to resemble plumes of feathers, bunches of flowers" and in one notable instance arranged in a brooch to create the picture of "a tombstone shaded by a willow" (Curl 201). If the material record is taken as evidence of cultural practice, the serious business of Victorian mourning was clearly the purview of women.

<13> The privileged role of women in mourning provides a supportive framework for Lady Emmeline's commentary. The particularities of the American rural cemetery provided still more support. These cemeteries were places of recreation. They were, as John Sears describes them, "America's first parks...intended from the beginning to be places of resort, not only for those who had friends or relations buried there, but for the general public as well" (100). Carriages of the middle and upper classes were common sights throughout the week, making the cemeteries not places of general recreation but for the greater part of the week specifically as places for *women's* recreation. In these visits, the etiquette of the home extended to the family plot, as women directed gardeners and artisans to create the right impression for the final resting place. David Sloane remarks of the first of the rural cemeteries that "Mount Auburn was a family-centered institution..." (53). As a family institution, however, it was better suited to the work of the hostess than to that of the industrialist, the family plots functioning as markers of culture and civility rather than as narrowly political or economic tools.

<14> One result of the prevalence of women in the day-to-day life of the cemetery is the natural development of a sense of female ownership. For the woman of letters, this ownership translates into textual authority, and for Lady Emmeline this means the opportunity to make Transatlantic cultural evaluations. Her rumination on the affect of such burial places leads the British traveler to an unfavorable comparison with graveyards on the opposite side of the Atlantic, of what she refers to as "our dead in crowded city church-yards," an "utterly detestable system" which she hopes will shortly be abolished (65). Near the close of the text, she describes British practice as "our detestable system of intra-mural interments" and London burial places as "fetid churchyards...(so frequently desecrated when fresh candidates for admission are brought to the reeking soil)" (402). Although "garden" cemeteries had been in existence in Britain for some time at the time of her travels – London had seen, for example, the consecration of Kensal Green in 1833 and Highgate in 1839 – they do not compare with what she finds in the United States. American cemeteries are "the most magnificent and beautiful cemeteries in the world" (415). Like the United States, Lady Emmeline imagines rural cemeteries as democratic spaces, as the promise of the United States in microcosm. Ecumenical and open to anyone with the money to purchase a lot, the rural cemeteries embody the promise of the young nation and suggest a model for Great Britain, assertions which were highly contentious at the time of her writing.

<15> As her commentary on cemeteries suggests, a lack of access to traditional institutions did not prevent the Victorian woman travel writer from making serious cultural commentary. In rural cemeteries, Lady Emmeline recognizes safe spaces for her narrative voice and locates a space amid what might be seen as the minefield of Victorian gender conventions in which she might speak with authority. Of course, Stuart Wortley was but one of a great number of British women writing about their travels to the United States in the nineteenth century. Future research might explore the ways in which other female writers made sense of spaces of death and mourning abroad – and what their commentary has to say about matters of life and death at home in Britain.

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