

CCJWA Karrakatta Cemetery Walk 17 May 2009

A group of members and friends gathered at the entrance to Karrakatta on Sunday afternoon for a walk through parts of the Jewish and Christian sections of the cemetery. Ken Arkwright and Rowan Strong led us through the grounds and gave us a very interesting commentary as we learnt about the different approaches to funeral rites as well as changes in funeral and burial customs. The first burial in Karrakatta took place on 24-04-1899. The cemetery has been struggling to keep up with Perth's growing population and today has around 350,000 'residents'.

The first Jewish funeral in WA for Lionel Samson was conducted in the old Fremantle Cemetery (1878) by a Presbyterian minister in Hebrew, as there was no Rabbi in the colony. The large Jewish Orthodox area was opened in 1900 and the Jewish Progressive section started in 1952. It now contains approximately 450 graves. We saw the upright memorial stones favoured by Ashkenazi Jews and it was interesting to note that husbands and wives were now buried together, following the Christian tradition. In most medieval European Jewish Cemeteries the deceased are buried "with their fathers". Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Magen David (Shield of David) was said to have been a superstitious magical sign and it was never placed onto a gravestone until 1742 (in the Jewish Cemetery of Hameln-Germany). However, since the late 19th Century it is becoming more popular, as was evident on the gravestones today.

In the modern Orthodox Lawn section the gravestones were flat, and the small stones on the grave are a sign that family had visited the grave. In Judaism there is a structure of mourning beginning with the first 7 days (Shiva), where the family are expected to stay at home. The second stage lasts for 3 weeks (Sheloshim), where they return to work; however, there is no partying or enjoying life. The third stage ends near the first anniversary and this is marked by the first visit to the grave and the placement of the tombstone. At this stage the family should be able to face up to life without the physical presence of the deceased, but of course memories will be a lasting inspiration.

The words "Here is buried (Po Nikbar)" are on most tombstones. They are often abbreviated with the Hebrew letters P+N. Traditionally, the date of birth is not recorded, as it is the life you have lived that is important. Young children often don't have a tombstone, as they haven't lived their lives. There was a Jewish Prayer Hall used for conducting services and just outside were water taps. It is customary to pour water over your hands as you leave a grave so that you don't 'take anything' with you.

As we walked over to the Roman Catholic section, Rowan spoke of how, in the 1950s, there was an influx into Australia of Italian and Greek communities to Perth. We looked at various graves that were very richly adorned in religious iconography such as crucifixes, Jesus, Mary, angels and even the burial of Jesus. The graves were very elaborate and well tended. Each year on All Souls Day the family come and visit the grave, or even eat a meal at the graveside and a mass would be said for the departed. There was a marked contrast to these graves as we entered the Baptist area. Here we saw purely textual religious iconography, eg 'In God's care', 'Till He Come' and 'With the Lord he loved.' The gravestones varied from simple to ornate and this was dependent on the family means.

The Eastern Orthodox section was very different with lots of black marble gravestones. There was two-dimensional art only depicted in the iconography as seen in the crosses and photographs of the deceased, as Orthodoxy has rejected three-dimensional religious art. As we walked through the old Anglican area there was a noticeable lack of icons. A number of the graves had sentimental expressions of grief, such as weeping women, as the 19th Century was culturally influenced by the Romantic Movement which upheld sentiment and feeling as expressions of truth. Urns were used as decoration and there were some acorns that are symbols of the resurrection.

We finished our walk at the old Roman Catholic section and the influences of Ireland and Britain were very obvious. There was the occasional three-dimensional icon and quite a few shamrocks. Up until recently Roman Catholics were not allowed the option of cremation; however, there has been a slow development throughout the 20th Century and it is becoming more popular.

It was a very interesting afternoon and we were very fortunate to have the expertise of Ken and Rowan as they shared with us the rites, rituals and intricacies of Jewish and Christian death and funeral customs.

Ann Smith
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