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# The Zoroastrian burial ground at Brookwood Cemetery

Sarah Stewart

IN contrast to the populous character of Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, if you visit Brookwood Cemetery, as I did, on a sunny afternoon in late July you will be struck by its vastness, emptiness and its magnificent foliage. You are also likely to get thoroughly lost in the maze of paths leading through glades of evergreen trees and shrubs. But the sense of being in a park or a garden remains whether you are passing through the national zones that were laid out in the 1920s and expanded after World War Two; or the ground put aside for particular London parishes; or the landscaped areas containing grand mausoleums; or burial plots belonging to religious minorities such as the Ahmadiyya, Islamis and Shias, or the un-landscaped heath with its sparsely scattered graves.

The idea of a great metropolitan cemetery for London took shape in the mid 19th century in response to the growing public concern over how to deal with the volume of the city's dead. In 1852 the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company was established by Act of Parliament, and, after acquiring the 2,000-acre site in the vicinity of Woking in Surrey, Brookwood Cemetery was consecrated and opened to the public. In keeping with the grand scale of the project, the London and South Western Railway was employed to transport coffins and funeral parties from a designated station in Westminster Bridge Road. The train made daily round trips conveying up to 35 parties per journey – a service that continued until 1941, when both train and station were hit by an air raid.

The Zoroastrian burial ground is tucked away in the north-west corner of Brookwood Cemetery. Occupying only a fraction of the whole space, close inspection of this cemetery shows it to be a remarkable testament to the

history of one of Britain's smallest religious minorities. From its roots in ancient Iran, through the British colonial period in India down to the modern diaspora in Britain, the Zoroastrian story is told through architecture, epitaphs, and ornamentation. The interweaving of these histories is summed up in the inscription on one side of the mausoleum dedicated to the textile entrepreneur and philanthropist N. N. Wadia:

*I am Nowrosjee Nashirwanjee Wadia  
Of the ancient Aryan race of Persia  
A citizen of the loyal town of Bombay  
Who lie here peacefully under  
The far off sky of wide famed Britain.*

By the 1860s, Parsis were travelling to England to study and to work, some of them bringing their families with them. Since they could not be given last rites in a Christian cemetery, the acquisition of a separate burial ground became a pressing need and one of the primary concerns of the newly formed organisation, Religious Fund of the Zoroastrians of Europe. Money was raised to secure a plot in Brookwood Cemetery of 2,500 square yards, which was planted with trees and laid out with a *sagri* or chapel built for funeral services. At the time, both in Iran and India, Zoroastrians disposed of their dead by exposure in a *dakhma*, or tower of silence. This practice, still in existence in India and Pakistan but no longer in Iran, ensures that the body, which is considered the worst source of pollution, does not come into contact with any of the good creations, including those of plants, earth, fire or water. Purity laws have both a theological significance



and a practical application in Zoroastrianism insofar as keeping them helps to sustain the battle against evil. It is this moral imperative to overcome the forces of evil in all possible ways that gives meaning to life. As soon as a person dies, it is essential to bring the body to its last resting place without delay. Last rites, including the washing and preparation of the body, are performed by corpse-bearers at the site of the *dakhme*, while family members stay in the nearby pavilions – known as *banglis* in India and *khailas* in Iran. The transition from exposure to burial required some rationalisation in order to meet the requirements of Zoroastrian purity laws. The use of stone sarcophagi was one way of addressing this issue, though nowadays wooden coffins are commonly used. When in the early 1900s space became an issue, further debate ensued over whether to adopt the practice of cremation. It was argued that modern crematoria are more efficient and, being enclosed, less offensive to religious sentiment than the traditional Indian method of consigning a body to flames in the open air.

The specifically Persian features of the Zoroastrian cemetery were introduced by the Orientalist and polymath, Sir George Birdwood, who was asked by Lady Jerbai, widow of N. N. Wadia, to arrange for the building of a mausoleum in memory of her late husband. Drawing variously on the Avestan text of the *Vendidad*, the epic *Shahnama* and his knowledge of the sites of Persepolis and Pasargadae, Birdwood's ambition was to create a Persian paradise in the form of an enclosure or garden in keeping with the description of the dwelling place or *var* of King Yima who, according to one version of his legend, fell from grace and became the first of men to die. Accordingly, the cemetery was to be planted with herbaceous plants and flowering shrubs that were natives of Persia. Birdwood enumerates them at some length together with the Greek and Latin names through which they have come down to us. They include asparagus, gherkin, jasmine, myrtle, peach, rose, spinach, narcissus, cypress and lemon. The mausoleum itself lies at the centre of the burial ground with four pathways leading from it. It is a replica of the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, which Birdwood described in 1901 as 'a square sepulchral chamber, set on a base of seven steps, and covered with a pent roof and gabled at either end'. The sarcophagus is of alabaster inlaid with *lapis lazuli*, and the wall is decorated with alabaster replicas of reliefs from *Naqsh-e Rostam*.

Apart from the landmark mausolea, there are many ordinary graves that depict Zoroastrian themes. Most display the characteristic winged disc in one of its various forms. The inscriptions on early Parsi tombstones often mention association with the British, while many of the later ones have elaborate ornamentation, including a fire vase made of alabaster or marble complete with flames, or a picture of the same etched into the tombstone itself. Apart from fire, the sun and moon are also commonly depicted, as well as the sea and plants. Irani Zoroastrian graves tend to be less ornate but often contain a picture of the deceased and sometimes a poem engraved on the headstone. On one such grave there was a cup containing a red residue that my Zoroastrian companion informed me had once been filled with wine. Evidently wine was commonly sprinkled over the grave in the old days but in Iran has been replaced by rosewater.

Although there are no Parsis or Irani Zoroastrians among the 'necropolis notables' listed by the Brookwood Cemetery Society, members of all the prominent Parsi families are

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buried at Brookwood. The three mausolea of the Tata family stand in a row near the entrance of the site. Sir Dorabji and Lady Meherbai Tata's mausoleum is finely decorated in the Persian style with brick glazed friezes depicting Median and Persian guards. Next to it stands the mausoleum of Jamshedji Nusserwanji Tata, a philanthropist who became known as the 'Captain of Indian Industry'; next to him is the mausoleum of Sir Ratan Tata, the Parsi financier and industrialist knighted in 1916 known, among other things, for his patronage of the arts and for his assistance

to Ghandi in his struggle against racial discrimination in South Africa. Two other graves belonging to distinguished Parsis are those of the Sir Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownaggee (1851-1933), a barrister and MP for Bethnal Green North East from 1895 to 1905 (nick-named 'Sir Bow and Agree' for his pro-British views), and the socialist-turned-communist Shapurji Saklatvala (1874-1936), MP for Battersea North from 1922 to 1923 and from 1924 to 1929 who went to prison for his support of the General Strike of 1926. There is also the grave of Dr Cowas Lalcaka, a Parsi doctor who died in 1909 while trying to save the British official Sir Curzon Wyllie from assassination. The murder was planned and executed by a young revolutionary called Madan Lal Dhingra at an annual celebration of the National Indian Association in London. While Parsis recall Dr Lalcaka as something of a hero, Madan Lal Dhingra is celebrated by others as the first Indian patriot to be executed on British soil. The memory of Sir Curzon Wyllie seems to have vanished without trace.

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**Wadia Mausoleum, Brookwood Cemetery (opposite); Sir Ratan J Tata (1871-1918) (below)**



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