

RESEARCH NOTE

Valuing lives? Obituaries and the life course

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents the outcome of a preliminary study of the various images of the life course that are conveyed in published obituaries. Following a review of recent developments in the obituary columns of national newspapers in the United Kingdom, we present our analysis of the 86 obituaries that were published in The Guardian in June 1995. We pay particular attention to the ways in which obituaries cover the biography, age, ill-health, death and personal relationships of the deceased. We conclude that, although the sampled obituaries as a whole feature the mid-life careers of men, they also reflect common expectations, fears and prejudices about age, illness and death. We would suggest that a more substantial study comparing obituaries in a wide range of contrasting publications and cultures would reveal important differences in dominant images of the life course.*

Introduction

In this paper, we explore some of the images of the life course that are conveyed in published obituaries. This seems to be an under-researched area, in Britain at least. The paper is premised on three beliefs. First, that media images in part structure how we think about the life course. Secondly, that obituaries are a kind of biography, providing both objective factual information (e.g. date of death) and a narrative which presents the subjective view of the obituarist. Finally, because obituaries are reporting deaths, they provide a valuable opportunity to reflect upon popular perceptions of the association between age, health and death in later life.

The national press

In recent years the obituary columns of national newspapers in the United Kingdom have been the subject of considerable attention. They are now recognized as a distinctive genre in literary journalism. The rise in their status is associated with the increase in competition among the quality press that followed the launching of *The Independent* in 1986. Its newly-appointed obituar-

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ies editor had the advantage of not inheriting a massive file of prospective obituaries on the still-surviving 'great and good'. Rather, in the words of Markham (1995), he 'took over an empty morgue and was able to dispose of corpses in his own style'. He used unconventional photographs and encouraged readers to submit obituaries of their friends. He urged them to write informally, believing that 'their exuberance' would be held in check by the fact that each obituary would be signed (Annan, 1991).

The *Daily Telegraph* also appointed a new obituaries editor in September 1986. He has described how he dedicated himself to 'the chronicling of what people were *really* like through informal anecdote, description and character sketch rather than merely trot out the bald curriculum vitae' (Massingberd, 1995, p. vi). His objective was to capture:

. . . for posterity some little-known, or half-forgotten, figure who has made a hitherto undervalued contribution to some aspect of our times. Those who complain that they have never heard of half the people in the Telegraph obits column are rather missing the point. The scope embraces all sorts and types (Massingberd, 1995, p. x).

The Features Department of *The Guardian* asked for similar support but their proposal was turned down at the time on financial grounds.

The Economist summarizes the nature of the modern obituary as follows:

The obituary is necessarily a *faut-de-mieux* of sorts, hurriedly assembled without the benefit of much hindsight, denied the depth of research that would be considered indispensable for any longer form of biography, and usually written with a degree of concern for those who will be mourning even as it appears. Yet, to be complete, it must attempt some indication of whether the subject was right or wrong in his handling of public affairs, whether he was good or bad as a person—and the more so if the implication of the material to hand is that the judgement is likely to be an unfavourable one (Anonymous, 1995, p. 55).

Although we might be sceptical about this defence of the obituarist, it provides a good indication of some of the powerful expectations that s/he could not ignore. The article also touches on some of the issues involved in the writing of an obituary and some of these relate to the portrayal of later life and death:

. . . questions of taste and judgement abound in obituary writing and delicacy remains paramount. There is debate, for example, about whether a cause of death should be mentioned, even (or especially) if it is suicide, or if—as with some deaths from AIDS—the person has clearly wished the nature of the illness not to be generally known. Is it kinder to omit the frailties at the end of a vigorous life, alluding at most to a 'long illness borne with characteristic good humour'? Should the

photograph be of the person in his prime, or close to his end?
(Anonymous, 1995, p. 55).

In this discussion there is a recognition that the publication of an obituary threatens to impose public judgement upon private grief. The life of the deceased becomes public property and readers become instant experts on the strengths and weaknesses, and the successes and failures of the deceased.

One of the consequences of a trend towards informality and the improved quality of the writing is that increasingly obituaries are included more because of the skills of the obituarist than because of the achievements or significance of the deceased. The priority, which is perhaps inevitable given the competitive market in which newspapers operate, is to engage the interest and loyalty of the targeted readership. Obituary editors are delighted to hear readers refer to their column as 'the best read in the paper' (Massingberd, 1995, p. xii). By shifting attention from the great and the good to the ordinary and the eccentric, they are providing readers with an opportunity to reflect upon the varied courses of modern lives. This contrasts to some extent with the kind of obituaries which are found in local newspapers or in the professional trade press where the focus is still on those who have made a notable contribution to the local community or to the profession.

Data set

We studied all the obituaries published in *The Guardian* in the month of June 1995. Like *The Independent* and *The Telegraph*, this is a national newspaper and it was selected simply because it was readily at hand. The main objective of the analysis was to assess the potential of this source of material for the study of life course images and to identify issues that warrant further and more detailed investigation.

Our sample consists of 26 editions of *The Guardian*. Each edition includes one page headed 'OBITUARIES'. This is indexed as such on the front page of the newspaper. Normally the page includes between one and four obituaries. Sometimes there are letters of appreciation or letters that elaborate upon or correct previously-published obituaries. Also on the same page there are a number of standard items that are given substantially less space: a list of birthdays, a few additional death notices, a small item called 'Another Day' (an extract from *The Guardian* several years ago), and a column called 'Jackdaw'—curious extracts from other publications.

The sampled 26 pages include 86 obituaries, plus 29 letters of appreciation (relating mainly to the same people as the 86 obituaries). This is the body of material that has been analysed for this paper.

The obituaries editor of *The Guardian* appears to maintain a clear set of rules regarding layout. An obituary always contains: (i) the name of the deceased at the top; (ii) a journalistic title immediately below; then (iii) the text. At the end of the text there is: (iv) the name of the obituarist; and then (v) the

full name of the deceased; (vi) a brief indication of his or her occupation; and finally (vii) full dates of birth and death. Often there is: (viii) a photograph or illustration always accompanied by (ix) a caption that includes the name of the deceased and some brief comment.

The text of the obituary normally occupies the greater part of the space allocated (although on occasions the size of the photograph is substantial). There appear to be few rules regarding the narrative. Two that are evident is that the first paragraph includes a statement of death, and that this usually includes the age of the deceased (there is only one exception to this among the 86). This paragraph also includes some implicit but usually clear indication of why the obituary of this particular person is considered worthy of inclusion.

Whose deaths are featured?

Table 1 indicates that most of the people who are the subject of these obituaries are men (70 out of the 86), the majority of whom have died in their 70s or 80s. Their ages range from 34 to 102 years. Nationality is not reported but, in regard to residence, about half had lived in Britain and half had lived abroad.

TABLE 1. Age and sex

Age group	Male	Female
30s	1	1
40s	5	0
50s	6	0
60s	9	3
70s	17	5
80s	25	3
90s	7	3
100s	0	1
Total	70	16

As already indicated, the concluding 'death notice' at the end of each obituary always included a brief (often one-word) indication of the primary occupation of the deceased. Table 2 presents a rough categorization of these labels. The category 'Politics' includes three 'politicians', but it also includes the labels: diplomat, freedom fighter, dictator and spy. 'Business' includes businessman, banker, executive and advertising copywriter. 'Education' is a varied category including librarian and anthropologist as well as academic and teacher. There is little ambiguity over the categories 'Music', 'Writing', 'Acting and Film', and 'Science'. 'Sport', however, includes not only two footballers but also a bridge champion. 'Miscellaneous' includes theologian, housewife, judge and cartoonist.

Notable omissions from these broad categories are the professions of medicine, law, religion and the military. The absence of such people may be due

TABLE 2. Occupation and sex

Occupation	Male	Female	Total
Politics	11	4	15
Music	10	0	10
Acting and film	5	4	9
Writing	7	1	8
Science	7	0	7
Business	6	0	6
Education	5	1	6
Journalism	2	2	4
Sport	3	0	3
Dancing	1	2	3
Art	3	0	3
Outdoors	3	0	3
Miscellaneous	7	2	9
Total	70	16	86

to the fact that the sample is small; but it may also reflect a preference for the established professions to publish obituaries in their own journals. The sample includes the obituaries of comparatively famous people such as David Ennals, Dilys Powell and Group Captain Peter Townsend. But we were surprised at just how few of the deceased we had heard of before. This indicates that *The Guardian* has followed *The Telegraph* in including obituaries of people who are little known or half-forgotten: arguably only the *very* famous are assured of space. Most of the other entries will have been included: (a) because someone thought that an obituary should be published in *The Guardian*; (b) because someone had sufficient knowledge and time to write it; and (c) because the obituaries editor decided that the submitted obituary was worthy of publication.

Only 15 of the 86 obituaries were published within two days of the death. Fourteen were published over 25 days afterwards, the longest delay being 62 days. There is no indication of when the obituary was actually written or when it was submitted for publication. But these figures confirm that, unlike much of the rest of the newspaper, the obituaries are not, by and large, news of the previous day's events.

Who wrote the obituaries?

The vast majority of the obituarists (like their subjects) are male. Fifteen were written by women—who wrote half the obituaries about women. A significant proportion were written by regular *Guardian* columnists such as Melanie Phillips, David Sharrock and Derek Malcolm. A total of 28 were written by 'repeat obituarists'—those who wrote more than one of those included in the sample. For example, Ronald Bergan wrote five obituaries on actresses or actors. Nine had been written by people whose personal connection with the deceased was made apparent through their including an autobiographical

element—to be precise, the first person featured in the grammatical construction of the obituary.

Illustrations

Most of the sampled obituaries were accompanied by an illustration. In 56 instances this was a photograph of the deceased. Of these, 27 could be described as a portrait which included little indication of occupation or the reason for fame. The other 29, however, portrayed the deceased in action, or with some of the accoutrements of their career; for example, an actress in a still from a film, or a lone sailor at the helm of his yacht.

In our judgement, only 17 of the photographs are of a person in later life. In contrast, 14 feature the person in their distant early adulthood; for example, a photograph of a footballer running onto the pitch in the 1950s. Only 14 of the photographs have captions that are specific to the photograph (thereby providing a better indication of when or where the photograph was taken).

The question warrants more detailed analysis, but it would appear that most of these photographs were selected either to symbolize how the deceased came to be known, or to present a familiar image. For this reason, the rule that the caption beneath the photograph always includes the name of the deceased indicates that the photograph is intended to be a named portrait, one that encapsulates something of the essence of the person's character.

Biography

With few exceptions the biographical details that take up most of the text relate to the career of the deceased. In a few instances an obituary features one notable incident which overshadows the rest of the career. For example, the obituary of Gordon Wilson begins:

Before the death of his daughter Marie in the Enniskillen Remembrance Day massacre, Gordon Wilson, who has died aged 67, had been a cheerful Fermanagh shopkeeper, a golfer, a respected member of his local Methodist church, famous for nothing. He would have remained so, were it not for a television interview immediately after the slaughter of 11 people in which he forgave his daughter's IRA killers. His words will never be forgotten by many because they defined a moment in the Troubles which seemed, even in 1987, to herald the end of a campaign of violence which has claimed more than 3,000 lives (*The Guardian*, 28 June 1995, p. 16).

There are one or two instances where it is the skill of the deceased (for example, that of an engraver) that is featured. The majority of obituaries, however, provide a sequential account of the involvement of the deceased in the career or social world with which they were associated.

Many of the biographies are peppered with dates, often those of the publication of books or the release of films. However, even the obituary of a businessman has 19 dates ranging from 1927 to 1974—the period of his life from age 15 years to 62 years. In contrast to this example, many of these sequences are limited to mid-life, often to a period of 10 or even fewer years.

With this emphasis upon career, it is not surprising that over one third of the deceased are described as ‘the best’ or ‘the greatest’, and that a further group are described as ‘the longest serving’ or ‘the last of a generation’. As already indicated, one of the ‘rules’ appears to be that an obituary makes clear why it is that the deceased was someone special, deserving of space in a national newspaper, and one obvious strategy is to make such claims explicitly. For example, the obituary of Dilys Powell begins:

She . . . wrote about them with an unequalled combination of enthusiasm and balance . . . No national press critic can have seen more, enjoyed more, or earned such universal affection and respect (*The Guardian*, 5 June 1995, p. 11).

and it ends: ‘the fairest of critics, in every sense’.

In some of these biographical accounts there is explicit reference to retirement or to some event—resignation, for example—which by implication marked a retirement. In most, however, there is simply a gap between the last dated activity and the eventual death. In short, most of the sampled obituaries feature the career or work of the deceased, and make minimal reference to age, illness or death.

Age

Apart from the first paragraph, in which a statement of age at death usually features, further references to chronological age appear in only 28 of the 86 obituaries. In most of these instances the cited age relates to early life—leaving school, going to sea, learning to play the piano, etc. Often they were exceptionally young at the time. In three instances age was considered relevant because of age difference in marriage or other intimate relationships.

Regarding later life, age is mentioned in relation to one instance of resignation from political office (at 66 years of age) and to two birthday celebrations (both the 80th). There are only three other mentions—all relating to expectations regarding age. Echoing the significance of age difference in personal relations, the obituary of Dilys Powell comments on her prospective retirement:

Perhaps the Sunday Times became nervous that films increasingly styled for the under twenties were being reviewed by a critic now in her seventies. Rumour had it that the then editor, Harold Evans, had taken her out to lunch to broach the question of retirement, but was so

charmingly sidestepped that the subject was never raised (*The Guardian*, 5 June 1995, p. 11).

The up-and-down career of the theologian, Yves Congar, dominates his obituary and, in the context of this, his age on being made a cardinal was considered worthy of comment:

Nevertheless, when he was already 90 he was made a cardinal by John Paul II . . . By the time he received this belated official recognition, Congar had already spent 10 years as a pensionnaire in the Invalides in Paris (*The Guardian*, 23 June 1995, p. 16).

The third instance of chronological age in later life being mentioned was of a screenwriter who, at the age of 91, re-adapted a play for a possible re-make.

Thus the emphasis on career and achievement in this sample of obituaries creates the image of an historically-contextualized drama in which the deceased acquires fame or power and then possibly seeks to maintain and develop it. The rest of the life is overshadowed by this, and age is only considered relevant if the deceased challenges certain age-specific conventions or expectations.

So later life is not a dominant feature of these obituaries. Occasionally, in the last paragraph, however, there is reference to familiar elements of the standard image of old age: retirement, continuing activity, involvement with younger people, bereavement and ill-health. For example, the last two paragraphs of the obituary of Tom Tomlinson, a National Park warden, read:

Tom retired in 1973, and threw himself into more church and community work in Hathersage. . . . Later, he lectured to visiting schools groups . . . reaching even more young people with his love of the countryside. In recent years Tom had been in failing health, and he lost his sight. His wife Hilda died two years ago and he is survived by their two sons . . . (*The Guardian*, 6 June 1995, p. 14).

Similarly the following last paragraph from the obituary of Alice Roughton evokes something of the stereotyped image of the vulnerable, self-neglecting widow:

Her husband, professor of colloid sciences at Trinity College, died in 1972. From then on her combination of unlimited generosity and ascetism became extreme. Food, like clothes, was not to be wasted, and it was not unusual to be served a meal that bore a striking resemblance in reconstituted form to the one presented some weeks earlier. When Professor Roughton provided a restraining hand she never actually achieved bankruptcy. Left to her own devices, her standing orders covered more charitable endeavours than most of us have knowledge of, while her bedroom and bathroom overflowed with books and paintings bought from needy artists and worthy causes . . . (*The Guardian*, 28 June 1995, p. 16).

It is exceptional to find the kind of sensitive juxtaposition of failing faculties with a continuing commitment to work that Dilys Powell receives in the last paragraph of Lindsay Anderson's appreciation of her:

In her later years Dilys was losing both her sight and hearing. She was also shaky on her legs. But she carried on with her task which was to make people love the cinema as much as she did—an almost impossible mission but one in which she succeeded much better than most (*The Guardian*, June 5 1995, p. 11).

There are a few for whom later life is featured in the obituary as a period of further achievement. For example, Charles Ritchie, a Canadian diplomat, retired in 1971:

For many career diplomats the story would end there, but Ritchie went on to publish four volumes of diaries. . . . 'The Siren Years' won him awards in Canada and was acknowledged as one of the best records of London society during the war (*The Guardian*, 24 June 1995, p. 30).

Others were 'rediscovered' in later life, having previously vanished from the public eye. For example, Estelle Brody, the film actress 'for three brief years one of the shining stars of the British silents', had not been heard of since 1957:

Recently, during their research for the upcoming BBC2 series on European silent cinema, Kevin Brownlow and David Gill discovered that Estelle Brody was living in an old people's home in Malta (*The Guardian*, 15 June 1995, p. 17).

Thus age has a low profile in the obituaries, certainly in comparison with the many references to dates.

Illness and death

In most obituaries there is some minor orientation to the present—the present in which death has occurred. This may simply be a reporting of a 'recent' event in the lives of the deceased, or to the 'last' time that they had participated in some event or completed a book or film. Of particular importance in this respect are the deaths of significant others, as in the case of Tom Tomlinson mentioned above. In seven of the biographies there is reference to such recent bereavement: in three this is to the loss of sons.

A number of obituaries describe the continuation of life, right up to death. In some instances this relates to the work for which they were known, continuing right up to the end (e.g. 'was still at work until a day or so before his sudden death'), but in others it implies a more passive form of stability (e.g. 'many friendships . . . lasted warmly until her death'). In four instances, this is contrasted with the fickleness of fame, and there is some reference to the deceased having been 'forgotten' or, as in the case of Estelle Brody, 'rediscovered'.

More closely related to the task of contextualizing and explaining death, there are 19 obituaries that make some reference to recent illness. In some instances, ill-health is represented simply by a diagnosis: stroke, kidney failure, thrombosis, motor-neuron disease, heart attacks, bone marrow disease, cancer—all these are mentioned. In other cases, the reference is less specific and reflects a more general decline in health and its consequences.

There are seven which include a history of how illness had eventually led to death. These included four of the 13 aged under 60 and only one of these seven was aged over 65 (Ernest Borneman who was the only person reported to have committed suicide). Arguably the other six were premature deaths which, the obituarist felt, had to be explained and understood. For example, the following degree of detail in the obituary of Gordon Greig, a journalist who died at the age of 63, is not to be found in those of older people:

Throughout his long stint in the Commons, his hours were immense and his energy seemingly unquenchable. That continued until the spring of last year when he became too ill to work. For a while the Mail left his job open, but in the end his title passed to his former deputy David Hughes. He was back at work in the autumn, though looking extremely unwell. His last substantial piece appeared in February. Lately there had been cheering reports that the worse might be over. After protracted treatment, he appeared to be on the mend and was on holiday at his flat in St Ives, Cornwall, when he fell. Surgery failed to relieve the blood clot on his brain and he died at Treliske Hospital, Truro (*The Guardian*, 15 June 1995, p. 17).

There was one other example of a history in which: (i) chronic ill-health had led to a withdrawal from work; (ii) this was followed by ‘good news’; and (iii) the prospects of recovery had then ended with an unexpected terminal crisis.

The anticipation of death featured in a number of ways. Ernest Borneman is reported to have made public pronouncements of his intention to commit suicide, and another obituary reported what the deceased had previously said about how he would like to die. In six cases the obituary makes it clear that the illness was known to be terminal and that the death had not been a surprise. For example, the obituary of Herta Ryder, a literary agent, was written by one of her writers:

... three months ago Herta sent a manuscript ... with a note saying this would be her last submission. ... I was scheduled to fly to London two weeks ago for a book tour. ... I knew it might be my last chance to be with her, I knew I might be saying goodbye. ... The last few notes from her came in John’s handwriting. ... I’m going to miss you, Herta! (*The Guardian*, 12 June 1995, p. 14).

Three of these six obituaries claimed that the deceased had succeeded in defying death beyond medical expectations. The most detailed example is that of the only Aids victim in the sample, James Anderson:

Written after James's Aids diagnosis, the book was to be a long-term project, deliberately cocking a snook at fate. It proved to be a factor in prolonging his life beyond the expected two years. He was keen to boast privately that he was the longest-surviving Aids patient at St Thomas's and his innings after diagnosis was a good seven years (*The Guardian*, 14 June 1995, p. 13).

The location of death is rarely reported. Nine obituaries identify a hospital and three deaths are reported to have occurred at home. One subject died in a car accident and another in a fire with her husband. The location of the other 72 deaths is not specified.

A number of obituaries report briefly the details of who had survived the deceased—16 out of the 86 do this formally in the concluding sentence and another 10 identify the bereaved. However, regarding who was actually with the deceased at the point of death, only one goes so far as to state this explicitly: when Colin Sweet 'finally gave up the fight, he was peaceful, at home with his second wife' (*The Guardian*, 22 June 1995, p. 15). Another subject, Philip Watkins was 'looked after in his last illness by his brothers' (*The Guardian*, 9 June 1995, p. 16). In contrast, Imam Eissa, an Egyptian musician, is reported to have died alone. Regarding traumatic deaths, Ernest Borneman was found at home by neighbours, and Paul Williams, a mountaineer, died in hospital following a tragic accident witnessed by his son. This suggests that many obituarists may have little detailed information about the later part of the deceased's life and actual circumstances of death. However, this is made clear in only one case, that of the yachtsman, Tristan Jones:

Cameron believes that in his last years Jones was befriended by senior people at the British embassy in Bangkok and by the families of the young people . . . Having lost his other leg by then, and probably short of money, he presumably failed to make a boat out of the stock of wood he had had maturing for the purpose for many years (*The Guardian*, 30 June 1995, p. 20).

One potentially important feature of an obituary is how it might report the immediate consequences of the death. Ten of the 86 indicate that the death had been an unexpected interruption of ongoing activities: a book left uncompleted or, in the case of Tristan Jones above, a boat unbuilt. Regarding events since the death, there are no references to funeral services, only one to a memorial service and two references to the 'final resting place' of the deceased.

More attention is given to what the deceased has left behind and the sense of loss of the bereaved. Of things left behind, most references are to books but, reflecting the role of survivors to sustain public interest in the deceased, it is interesting to read that Bettina Vernon devoted the last years of her life to:

. . . reconstructing Bodenwieser dances and organising exhibitions to show the young some achievements of the almost-forgotten Viennese

dance of the inter-war years. That Bodenwieser's name is known and revered today is very much thanks to Bettina Vernon, and for this dance the world owes her great gratitude (*The Guardian*, 19 June 1995, p. 14).

In a similar way, three other obituaries report that the deceased had influenced those who had followed them. Less seriously, the obituarist of Robert Dietz reports that 'he has left a mountain in Antarctica, a table-mount on the Pacific ocean floor, and an asteroid in orbit between Mars and Jupiter—all named in his honour' (*The Guardian*, 20 June 1995, p. 16).

Nine obituarists, including Herta Ryder's quoted above, convey explicitly their sense of loss. The loss was 'tragic', had 'left a terrible void', was of 'a shining light'. The translator of E. M. Cioran, for example, states that 'without him it is difficult to imagine the future' (*The Guardian*, 23 June 1995, p. 16). Two others indicate that the deceased would be difficult to replace: 'no one has yet emerged to take his place', and another two link the deceased to a wider history: 'the last living link with the Siege of Sidney Street', 'he may yet prove to be the last outsider to . . .'.

Although they are a minority of the sampled obituaries, this analysis suggests that those that do feature illness and death do so for a possible variety of strategic reasons: to indicate how active life continued right up to death; to explain premature death; to describe how death was anticipated; and to represent the sense of loss of the bereaved.

Personal relationships

Conventionally obituarists explain neither how they (rather than someone else) come to be writing the obituary, nor the nature of their relationship to the deceased. Massingberd, for example, refers disparagingly to signed obituaries in *The Independent* (as in *The Guardian*) which 'usually tells one more about the writer than the ostensible subject' (1995, p. viii). As mentioned earlier, nine of the obituaries are written by people who are explicit about their relationship to the deceased. Four were engaged in the same occupation and three had a friendship based on a business relationship. The translator of the works of Cioran revealed the fact only incidentally, and another similarly that he had covered the original news story through which the deceased had acquired fame. In the more autobiographical obituaries, there is often mention of their last encounter with the deceased. The clearest example of this is James Ellis writing about Joseph Tomelty. His obituary begins:

I don't know why the news of Joseph Tomelty's death at the age of 84 came as such a shock. Perhaps it was because at his 80th birthday celebrations he looked so strong, so well turned out—the mass of white hair had not altered in all the years I knew him (*The Guardian*, 27 June 1995, p. 16).

In contrast with his shock in hearing the news of Tomelty's death, there are those for whom death had been expected—as in the case of the obituarist of Herta Ryder, the literary agent. A more general example of the anticipation of death is in Antonio de Figueiredo's appreciation of David Ennals:

During that last conversation he told me that he had noticed how my comparatively early involvement in politics had meant that I wrote obituaries on some of the Portuguese and African leaders who had, for the most part, been murdered and more recently appreciations of British politicians who had supported the Portuguese and African struggles and had died of natural causes. Since he had already reached three score years and ten, he said, it might not perhaps be long before I would write about him. And he said it with a smile (*The Guardian*, 28 June 1995, p. 16).

Discussion

Despite the move from 'the great and the good' to the 'ordinary and the eccentric', this analysis has demonstrated that the obituaries page of *The Guardian* is primarily oriented towards men. The large majority of the sampled obituaries are written by men about men. In addition the greater part of the text of most is taken up with a biographical account of the career of the deceased in the social world in which he acquired a certain fame. This may reflect the fact that an entry in the current edition of *Who's Who* remains an important criterion for inclusion and a source of information for obituarists. Some of the very few obituaries written by women about women focus too on a narrow career. Although the sample is too small to make any general statement about gender differences, the obituaries of Herta Ryder, Alice Roughton and Dilys Powell, to which we have already referred, indicate a certain willingness on the part of the obituarist (both male and female) to feature some of the more personal aspects of later life—in particular those concerned with illness, frailty and disability. Also, some of the more autobiographical of the obituaries (of which Massingberd would disapprove) are written by women.

Nevertheless, these obituaries do include much material that casts light on the complex relationships between age, illness and death. It is this aspect which, we would suggest, has a greater impact on the majority of readers who, with few exceptions, will be unacquainted with the careers and achievements of the deceased.

What do regular readers make of their reading of the obituary page of their daily newspaper? Some who knew the deceased may share in the sense of loss or may gloat in their success in outliving a lifelong protagonist. Others involved in the same social world may be curious and indeed surprised to learn something from the biography of the deceased. Yet others of the same generation may compare their own career and experiences with those reported in the

obituary. This question should be the subject of further research. To date obituaries have been given little attention by sociologists in Britain, even in more recent texts on death (e.g. Walter, 1990; Clark, 1993; Dickenson & Johnson, 1993). In the meantime, it is interesting to consider a recent correspondence in the *British Medical Journal*. The editors of this, the main weekly publication of the British Medical Association, have recently reviewed their policies regarding the publication of obituaries. With the doubling of the number of British doctors over the past 45 years, pressure on the obituary pages had been growing since their policy was to include all obituaries of doctors who were or had been members of the Association that were submitted within 3 months of death.

In January 1995 they suggested that 'something will have to give' (Crossan & Smith, 1995). Although drawing on a 1992 opinion survey of readers, their proposals for reducing the space given to obituaries drew a horrified response from the letter-writing readership. 'The many letters that we received . . . confirmed their popularity' (Lock & Smith, 1995). Many of these responses supported the kinds of innovations that *The Independent* had pioneered: what was wanted, the correspondents argued, were well-written, 'vivid and frank assessments' of failings as well as achievements, and of 'ordinary' doctors as well as of the famous and successful. The editors conceded the argument and commented:

The best obituaries portray people as they really were and as they would have wished to be remembered. That is what makes an obituary section compulsive reading (Lock & Smith, 1995).

They had discovered, just as Massingberd had in taking over *The Telegraph* obituary column, that many readers of a weekly journal turn first to the obituary pages.

Why is there such interest? We would suggest that it is because there is a social world that revolves around any periodic publication. The readership of a newspaper is a body of people who, by engrossing themselves in it for as much as an hour every day, have a shared and intimate knowledge of this world. People who routinely read a daily national newspaper enter into a world which is in part that of news, events and famous people that all such newspapers attempt to document, but it is also a world that is structured by the shape, design and layout of the newspaper itself and characterized by its distinctive features: the crossword, the columnists, the cartoonists—and the obituaries page.

In turning to the obituaries, most readers are not expecting to discover that they are personally acquainted with the deceased, and they are not expecting a systematic and comprehensive coverage of the previous day's deaths (as they might of political or sporting events). What the obituaries offer, we would suggest, is a sense of being in touch with a world that is constantly being reconstituted through the processes of birth, life and death. Some of the obituaries will relate to people already well-known to readers and, in such

instances, the publication of the obituary constitutes an expected final honour, the last 'gong', to complement the funeral or memorial service that is subsequently reported as a news item. Alternatively, for people previously unknown to the editors of *Who's Who* and to the large majority of readers—the literary agent or the Egyptian musician, for example—the obituary itself might seem to the bereaved to be the unexpected and lasting achievement that rounds off a career that previously had received little or no public recognition. In the affection that most obituarists feel for their subjects, the readers are able to share both a sense of loss and the celebration of past achievements. In the accounting of whole—completed—life courses, readers are offered exemplary images of the nature of life from beginning to end. In addition to the ups and downs of possibly exotic careers, they also find confirmation of the expectations and prejudices about age, illness and death that we all tend to share.

One of the letters that the *British Medical Journal* published demonstrates the potential importance of obituaries for older readers. Although the correspondent includes what he acknowledges to be a much-repeated joke, the subtle way he uses it indicates something of the significance that the routine reading of a familiar obituary column has for older people:

For many years now, the first section of the *BMJ* that I read has been the obituary column. I justify this by making the old and rather feeble joke, that, in view of my great age, it is important to make sure that I am not in it myself, so that I can continue to take part in my usual daily activities (Kay, 1995).

In the same way, Antonio de Figueiredo was demonstrating in his appreciation of David Ennals that we are all implicated in this particular world of life and death.

What our review of this sample of obituaries has shown is that those of us who engage daily with the world of a national newspaper such as *The Guardian*, and who regularly read the obituaries, will be routinely absorbing stories of careers full of success and incident, of premature deaths due to accident, drama and tragedy. Some will also include post-retirement life, covering both the familiar story of activity, bereavement, disability and ill-health, and more exotic accounts of rediscovery, belated recognition and second careers. The obituaries of the high and mighty may have the polish of well-researched journalism written well in advance of the actual death, but there are many others that are less coherent and systematic, more intimate and affected; obituaries of a relationship as much as of a life (which may indeed say as much about the writer as the subject), and that reflect upon the ending as much as upon the beginning of life.

In conclusion, we would suggest that a more substantial study which compares rather larger samples of obituaries taken from a wide range of contrasting publications and cultures would reveal important differences in dominant images of the life course.

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Biographical note

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