

Carl Büchsel, Memories of a Rural Death (1860s)

Abstract

In contrast to the relative anonymity of urban life, rural areas continued to afford a higher degree of social cohesion and participation in community life. In this passage from his memoirs, the rural Protestant pastor and theologian Carl Büchsel (1803–1889) describes how elaborate funeral rites could capture the attention of an entire village.

Source

Any death, whether sudden or long expected, always creates agitation within the parish, and much is said about it. Each time, it constitutes a penitential sermon to the living. At the noon hour following the death, three sets of [bell] strokes are tolled, lasting about an hour. Another three sets are tolled on the day the grave is dug; and on the day of the funeral, bells are tolled throughout almost the whole ceremony. Practically the entire village follows the coffin, wearing mourning clothes like those seen during Passiontide. Leading the funeral procession is the pastor and the sexton together with the school classes; they are followed by the pallbearers and the coffin, those closest to the deceased, and then the entire parish. The way in which the dead are laid to rest differs widely. Only the proper farmers (and especially the village mayors among them), court officials, and church and school principals were buried with a funeral sermon. The others were laid to rest with a funeral oration delivered before the altar. Only rarely was the deceased buried quietly and without bells and singing. Usually, the open coffin lies on a bier in the hallway of the house of mourning; the sexton, along with the school, and most of the procession gather in front of the door. They sing a funeral song, after which the sexton reads a section from the Holy Bible, usually the well-known epistle from 1 Thessalonians: “We shall not keep you ignorant, brethren, regarding those who are asleep,” up to the words, “Therefore, comfort each other now with these words.” Another hymn follows, after which the procession moves ceremoniously and slowly, accompanied by singing and the tolling of bells, toward the churchyard; a funeral sermon is held, the body is carried into the church, the coffin is set down before the altar. At the close of the sermon, it is carried, again with singing and bells, to the grave, where the sexton pronounces: “Let us now bury the body.” If no funeral sermon is given, the interment follows first, and afterwards everyone proceeds into the church, where an address and a prayer conclude the ceremony. In both cases, the so-called “glory sheet,” i.e., a brief curriculum vitae of the deceased, is read aloud. Any bystander who encounters the funeral procession stops until it has passed, holds his hat in front of his face and prays for a blessed end. If the deceased is a young person, his or her peers place a crown on the coffin; it is removed before the coffin is lowered and rests on the church altar until the following Sunday, at which point it is hung on the church wall. The pallbearers are from the same occupational stratum—the farmers carry the farmer, the coopers the cooper, etc. The procedure is rarely the same from one village to the next, but each respective tradition is strictly observed.

Source: Carl Büchsel, *Erinnerungen aus dem Leben eines Landgeistlichen* (1865–), 10th ed. Berlin: Gustav Warneck Verlag, 1925, pp. 274–75; reprinted in Werner Pöls, ed., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1815–1870. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 4th ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988, pp. 86–87.

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