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Funerary practices in the Netherlands

by Brenda Mathijssen and Claudia Venhorst, Bingley, Emerald, 2019, 221 pp., £40.00, (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-78769-876-5

Mariske Westendorp

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Funerary practices in the Netherlands, by Brenda Mathijssen and Claudia Venhorst, Bingley, Emerald, 2019, 221 pp., £40.00, (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-78769-876-5

The aim of the book is to contextualise Dutch funerary practices in their wider legal, national and local contexts from historic, geographic, demographic, (multi)cultural and political perspectives. As described in the preface to the book, the Netherlands are pillarised, religiously and ethnically diverse, individualised, secularised, and technologically modern. These characteristics influence the Dutch funerary sector in such a way, that a single 'Dutch funerary culture does not exist' (p. xiix). Instead, the sector is marked by diversity and pluralisation.

Across the volume Mathijssen and Venhorst detail every aspect of the Dutch funerary sector, from its history to the present, and related to dying, disposal and remembrance. In only 200 pages, they manage to construct a rich repository which can be used to reference facts about the Dutch funerary sector by scholars and others with an (academic) interest in the topic.

Regardless of the amount of detail the book primarily offers generalisations which might not always look the same 'on the ground'. The difficulty of the task is clear: on the one hand, the authors were asked to write a book on 'the Dutch context'; on the other hand, they themselves admit that this context is very diverse and plural, making generalisations nearly impossible. For each broad stroke of description they make, regional and local exceptions can be listed. An example is the description of a 'typical' crematorium: a description that seems to apply mostly to the 'old-fashioned' crematoria and that many of the newer crematoria do not fit into.

In addition, contextualisation of the information given is generally lacking. Throughout the book, one continuously wonders whether the information one reads is typical to the Dutch context or the funerary sector in general. The book would be strengthened if Dutch funerary practices were compared to similar practices in other countries, in order to draw out both the particulars and the universals of 'doing death'. Alternatively, a conclusion could have been added to the book, in which the authors could have given an overview of the main funeral practices in the Netherlands (past and present), how these compare to other (European) countries, and a mentioning of what the future might hold. This would give the book a needed analytical framework.

A last small critique refers to the background of the authors of the book. Mathijssen and Venhorst, calling themselves the 'Death Sisters', are well known death scholars in the Netherlands. Knowing their work, I imagine that much of the information given in the book is based on their many experiences with the Dutch funerary sector. However, the background of the authors and the data remains unclear. Those who do not know the 'Death Sisters' might question the validity of their descriptions. The book would have been strengthened with a short paragraph or chapter (perhaps even an epilogue or afterword) on the positionality and rich academic achievements of the authors.

The small weaknesses listed above can be attributed to the Funerary International Series (edited by Julie Rugg) of which the book is part. It is the second book in the series and will be followed by books on the Czech Republic, Germany, Serbia, and Finland. A comparison between the book by Mathijssen and Venhorst on the Dutch context and by Rugg and Parsons (2018) on England and Wales clearly shows the intention of the book series. It aims

to provide, per country, 'a repository of basic facts about funerary practice in each country and the broader legal, governance and denominational frameworks for those practices which might serve to set more detailed research in context' (series description). The book by Mathijssen and Venhorst broadly follows the same themes as the initial book in the series (Rugg & Parsons, 2018), and most of the chapters are comparable (minor differences relate to order of the chapters, or contextual differences in emphasis).

The book series aims to provide a full repository on funerary practices in different European countries. One can imagine having a dedicated bookshelf filled solely with books from this series. If a series like this is ever develops, it is hoped that the individual books will be updated every few years. As Mathijssen and Venhorst attest, the Dutch funerary sector is rapidly changing in line with societal and technological developments. Obviously, the Covid-19 situation will also have its impact on the sector in the long run.

In conclusion, if seen as a book that one can use for fact-checking and looking up details regarding the contemporary Dutch funeral sector, it is very useful, well structured, and easy to navigate. One can start reading at any point in the book, and each section is self-contained. However, when wanting to get into the details 'on the ground', one is advised to read other works by the 'death sisters', such as *Dood* (2017; *Death*, in Dutch), or make one's own comparison between the books on England and Wales, the Netherlands, and the other books to come.

References

Rugg, J., & Parsons, B. (2018). *Funerary practices in England and Wales*. Emerald Publishing.

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Designs on death: the architecture of Scottish crematoria, by Hilary J Grainger, Edinburgh, John Donald Publishers Ltd, 2020, 352 pp., £ 50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-910900-307

In this comprehensive publication, Hilary Grainger builds on her already extensive knowledge and perceptive understanding of crematoria design, by providing biographies of the 31 crematoria built to this day in Scotland. Grainger contextualises each one of the case studies, revealing how the nature of the design and architectural aesthetics adopted, were the result of informed considerations that intended to enhance the sense of place of the existing context, topography and landscape typologies.

The book's format, its graphic design and specially commissioned photographs by Steve Wallace, offer to the reader an immersive experience into the subject, starting from the cover featuring the stunning 1967 design of Mortonhall Crematorium by Basil Spence. A reflective foreword by Scottish forensic anthropologist and anatomist, Sue Black, well complements Grainger's studies and prepares the reader to an immersive journey across this unique aspect of Scottish architecture and socio-cultural history.