

The Death of Queen Victoria

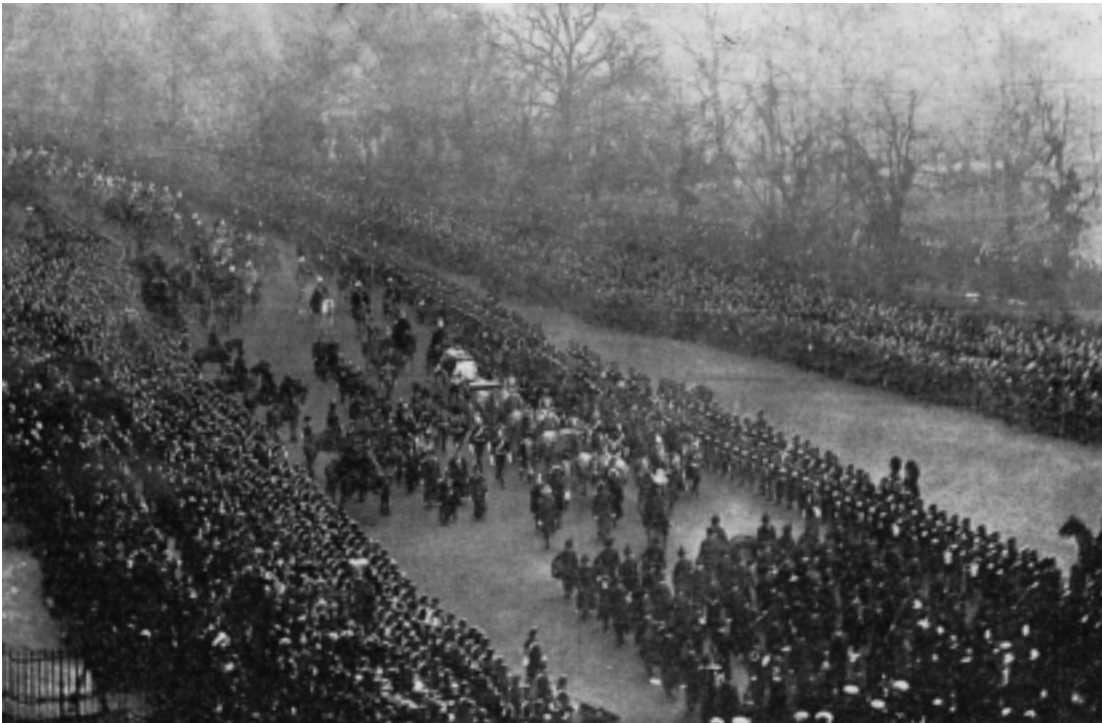
In edited extracts from his book *Great Deaths*, **Dr John Wolffe**, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the Open University, describes the demonstrations of public grief and mourning following the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901.

As the news of the Queen's death spread quickly around the country and the world during the early evening of 22 January, public reactions were immediate and tangible. Church bells shortly began to toll. Theatres and other places of entertainment abandoned their performances, without any indication of dissent from audiences, who quietly left. The streets were unusually crowded by people seeking and sharing news and impressions. In Dublin traffic in the city centre spontaneously stopped for several minutes. On the following day, financial markets were closed and emblems of mourning were almost universally worn. In East London, 'Wednesday was a day which will never be forgotten by those living. A feeling akin to despair came upon the people.' A similarly sombre mood and suspension of normal activity prevailed in all parts of the Empire. Foreign countries joined in the wave of sympathy and tributes, notably in the United States, where press and public interest was very strong, to a degree that even *The Times* New York correspondent evidently felt rather excessive. Although foreshadowed to some extent in January 1892 (death of the Duke of Clarence) and May 1898 (Gladstone), the strength and extent of the global response to Queen Victoria's death was on an unprecedented scale.

The Queen was judged to have been 'the symbol of Empire, the golden link of the race, the magnetic idea that drew the passionate affection and allegiance of her subjects to the centre.' It is striking how universal and inclusive her role in this respect was felt to have been. In Grahamstown, South Africa, a preacher portrayed her as a 'mother in Israel', holding together the Empire as it now existed. Memorial sermons and services in Australia shared the public appeal and immediacy of their counterparts in Britain, with only a passing acknowledgement that the death they were mourning had occurred 'far off across the sea.' Nor was her appeal limited to white Christians. In London as she lay dying, Muslims in the city who had assembled to celebrate Eid, the festival marking the end of Ramadan, also offered prayers for her, as 'the Sovereign of the greatest number of The True Believers in the world.'

Similarly in India the mood was intensified by the coincidence with Eid and 'great congregations' were led in fervent prayers. Hindus and 'other sects' also offered special worship and prayers. After she died, the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, told Edward VII that Indians had invested her with almost saintly attributes. 'To all of them', he wrote, 'she was at one and the same time the Great Queen and the loving mother.' Throughout the sub-continent memorial meetings of all races and religions were being held and telegrams of sympathy poured in. Maharaja Bahadur Sir Jotindra Mohun Tagore, a leader of the Bengal aristocracy, suggested that the Queen had strikingly shared in the attributes of 'the Great Universal Mother, who is worshipped as the Adya-Sakti of our [Hindu] mythology.' Similarly Surendranath Bannerjea, a leading moderate in the Indian National Congress, paid fulsome tribute to her 'fascinating influence' which made her seem to be a living representative of 'our own Seeta and Sabriti of legendic fame'. Indian Jewish and Parsi leaders joined in the chorus of adulation. On the day of the funeral a vast crowd gathered on the Maidan in Calcutta and sat in mourning throughout the day.

Awareness of the vast weight of symbolism and sentiment focused on Queen Victoria had its corollary in a sense that her death was an historic moment, the end of an era. For some it implied dark thoughts over the future of the Empire itself, a feeling that its very survival was in danger without the 'beloved Monarch' under whose rule it had largely been created. Marie Corelli feared that Victoria's death coincided with a national turning away from those values of Christian faith and 'pure and modest' womanhood that the Queen had so powerfully represented. Arthur Balfour, moving the Commons address of sympathy and congratulation to the King, attributed the deep-seated and universal nature of public grief not only to the loss of the individual, but also to a feeling 'that the end of a great epoch has come.' The *Spectator* felt that the Queen's passing had induced 'a distinct and unexpected diminution in ... [people's] faith in the stability of things.'



In the dim light of a dank early February day, Queen Victoria's funeral procession passes along Piccadilly in front of enormous still crowds. (Graphic, 9 February 1901)

The widespread reports of packed churches in the fortnight following the Queen's death suggest that many found their sense of national bereavement led them to turn to Christian ritual and language. Outside London and Windsor, religious services were generally the central focus of local observance on the day of the funeral itself. A Free Church mission to London that had chanced to coincide with the period between the death and the funeral proved to be unexpectedly successful.

The intense public mood reached its culmination on the day of the funeral. Even *Reynolds*, which had initially doubted whether the public really were deeply moved, referred on 3 February to 'the wave of emotion which has passed over the country on the death of the Queen – whose immense popularity there are too many evidences to doubt.' The mood on the streets of London on the day was not apparently one of unrelieved gloom and a few spectators cheered Earl Roberts and the King as they passed in the procession. Nevertheless the great majority frowned upon such gestures and a sombre atmosphere predominated, finding visual expression in the universal wearing of black. As the gun-carriage passed there was a sepulchral hush and the densely packed spectators stood absolutely still. Certainly the crowds in the capital and at Windsor were enormous, with the authorities experiencing

problems in controlling the flow in the Marble Arch and Edgware Road areas. Such a massive turnout was all the more significant in the face of the chilly early February weather. Elsewhere, notably in Birmingham, crowds gathered around statues of the Queen and left floral tributes. Meanwhile an overwhelming quantity of flowers was sent to Windsor Castle. The Labour leader Keir Hardie might criticise the cost of the funeral and suspect that it was being used to rally support for the war, but even he implicitly accepted the reality of the popular grief. Beatrice Webb wrote on 10 February:

'We are at last free of the funeral. It has been a true national "wake", a real debauch of sentiment and loyalty – a most impressive demonstration of the whole people in favour of the monarchical principle. The streets are still black with the multitude in mourning from the great ladies in their carriages to the flower girls, who are furnished with rags of crepe. The King is hugely popular and evidently intends to play his part well.'

If feelings of grief and loss were beginning to be overlaid by a sense of occasion and of new beginnings, the former reaction remained widespread, while the latter one was testimony to the success of the funeral itself in providing a resolution and a conclusion to the public sorrow.

Dr John Wolffe was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow 1988–1990.

For publication details of *Great Deaths*, see page 29.