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THE PROGRESS OF CREMATION IN ENGLAND.

By

SIR SPENCER WELLS, BART.

ADDRESS ON

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Delivered at Hastings at the Health Congress.
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Mr President, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Twenty minutes have been allotted to me in order that I may ask for your attention to that mode of disposal of the dead known as Cremation - and I do not propose to spend many of these precious minutes in refuting objections - religious or sentimental - legal or medico-legal- which have been made to this alteration in the long established custom of burial in the earth - nor in proving that burial of the entire dead body, either in vaults or graves, in coffins, or after the simpler method advocated so ably and earnestly by my old friend Mr Seymour Haden, is the worst of the many modes of disposal of the dead. Cremationists assert that earth burial is and must be injurious to the health of the survivors. I take this as proved - certain - undeniable - becoming every day as population increases more and more dangerous to the public health - and I will confine myself to the attempt to inform you how any one who wishes to dispose

of his own body, or of the bodies of friends or relatives after their death, may do so without any risk of injuring others - and may do it easily, reverently, and economically. All this the Cremation Society of England enables any one to do now - and will in a very short time do it still better and at a smaller expense.

That you may place confidence in the promises of this Society, let me first say that it is not a commercial association - not, like a Cemetery Company, paying a dividend to its shareholders upon its profits - but a purely scientific society established to reform the present mode of disposal of the dead and to promote the objects set forth in this Declaration. "We disapprove the present custom of burying the dead, and desire to substitute some mode which shall rapidly resolve the body into its component elements by a process which cannot offend the living, and shall render the remains absolutely innocuous. Until some better method is devised, we desire to adopt that usually known as Cremation."

The Conditions of Membership are very simple; first, Adhesion by signature to the above declaration, and secondly, The payment of an Annual Subscription of One Guinea, or a life subscription of Ten Guineas.

The Governing body, or Council of the Society is elected

annually. The present members are the President, Sir Henry Thompson, to whose writings and influence the rise and progress of modern Cremation is more indebted than to any other man in this or any other country. Then, naming the Council in alphebetical order, we have the venerable Lord Bramwell, now as distinguished a member of the House of Lords as he formerly was at the Bar and on the Bench./ Mr Budgett, a landowner and magistrate who resides near Woking, Treasurer of the County Hospital, takes much interest in the improvement of the buildings and grounds. Dr Cameron, who represents Glasgow in the House of Commons,- who induced 79 of his colleagues in the House to vote in favour of a Bill for the better registration of the causes of death, and which would have removed some doubt felt at the time, but since dispelled, as to the legality of Cremation,' and who has this session given notice of a somewhat similar measure. His masterly article on "The Modern Cremation Movement" is here on the table and is well deserving of careful study. - Next comes a lady - well known as an enlightened philanthropist and philogynist - if such a word can be wanted by anyone - or if anyone can suppose that the love of man does not include the love of woman - Mrs Rose Crawshay- a liberal benefactress, not of her own sex only, but of mankind in its widest sense. Next comes another Scotch Member of Par-

liament - Dr Farquharson, the able and active member for Aberdeenshire - Then we have Sir Douglas Galton, representing not only the Army and the Royal Engineers in which he has long served with great distinction, but the Civil Service of the Government and the Sanitary Institute of Great Britain of which he is the respected President - Then we have a wellknown member of my own profession, Mr Ernest Hart, who has done good service to the State, in organising an attempt to abate the smoke nuisance and to prevent the adulteration of food, in the support of the National Health Society, in the establishment of Coffee Taverns, and in efforts to improve the education and add to the sources of rational recreation for the people. - Next come two clergymen, Mr Haweis and Mr Brooke Lambert, who have been with us from the first, and by their writings and preaching have taught that it is not from the Clergy of the Church of England that Sanitary Reformers need fear opposition. Then we have a man of science, formerly a Professor of Chemistry, a member of the late Government, still a leader of his party in the House of Commons, but always listened to with respect by both parties, whose latest work on "Subjects of Social Welfare," adds to the high reputation he has obtained and so well deserved - I need hardly name, Sir Lyon Playfair. Mr Robinson, whose beautiful work "God's Acre Beautiful," and his more recent work "Cremation and Urn Burial," has made his

name almost as well known as a Sanitarian as his works on Gardening have led to acknowledged eminence in all that relates to the beauty of our public parks and open spaces, and to the improvement of Horticulture and Floriculture in this Country. To prove that not only Law and Divinity, Medicine and the Army, Science and Literature, are well represented on our Council, we have Trade and Commerce represented by one of the most esteemed of our London Bankers, Martin Ridly Smith - and just before my own name is that of a religious teacher - formerly in the Church of England, but now a Nonconformist, Mr Voysey. Our Honorary Secretary, Mr Hanham, I am glad to see present this afternoon, and I am sure he will be as willing as he is able to answer any question about the Society which may be asked of him.

Am I not justified in asking whether a Society so constituted and so governed is likely to go very far wrong, or to lead its followers away from the path of true progress. It may be said that it has been at work for 15 years, and has so far accomplished but little. I ask, Is it indeed little to have overcome much prejudice, doubt and fear - to have defeated the opposition of two Governments - to have answered satisfactorily the objections of the clergy, the lawyers, and the chemists - to have so far conquered the force of old established custom

or fashion as to have already reduced to harmless ashes the bodies of 60 of our deceased countrymen? Not 20 years ago, the story of the cremation of an English lady in Germany, although in compliance with her own desire, was received here with a general feeling of surprise and horror. Last month the cremation of an English Marquis at Woking was heard without surprise, and the only question raised by the Bishop of the Diocesse, and the Rector of the Parish, was whether the funeral service of the Church should be read before or after the body had been reduced to ashes. In some cases the ashes have been taken from Woking to the Parish of the deceased and buried in the Churchyard with the usual solemnity. In other cases they have been buried at Woking. In some they are preserved by relatives. The Duke of Bedford has decided that, after his own death and cremation, the ashes shall be taken in an urn and coffin to the family burial place at Woburn Abbey. And you will observe that in whatever manner the ashes are disposed of, whether in town or country, in, or beneath, or around city churches, or in the graveyards around churches, or in suburban or country cemetries, or in the private grounds or gardens of landowners - they are absolutely harmless - they cannot possibly do any harm to anything or anybody - they cannot poison air, or water, and the purifying fire which has reduced the dead body to ashes, has destroyed the germs of any

It may have contained —

contagious or infective disease. Surely this system of cremation of the body and burial of the ashes must be far better from the sanitary standpoint, that even the best, simplest and most perfect system of burial of a mass of corruptible material in the earth. Very few people know, or can imagine, the shocking process which goes on year after year a few feet only beneath the surface of our graveyards and cemeteries. Sir Lyon Playfair says, "I have officially inspected many churchyards and made reports on their state, which even to re-read, make me shudder." He also says "Whether decay or fire destroy corpses matters not to the dead, but it matters exceedingly to the living" - and he goes on to show that even when burial is performed in a perishable coffin, in a dry and porous soil, and the graves are not too crowded "the dead are resolved into air and ashes as certainly in three years as they are in a furnace in the course of an hour;" but he adds, "How rarely are these conditions fulfilled in our mode of sepulture! We often find in cemeteries that 20 years are not sufficient to effect the change." And he sums up his reflections in these words -"The grave cannot be looked upon with the eye of knowledge except as an evil to the living and a dishonour to the dead."

Very few people seem to be aware that it is now very easy to ensure the cremation of a dead body provided satisfactory

proof can be given that death has been produced by some natural cause. I have here a form of declaration which has been prepared to enable those who prefer Cremation to Burial to record in precise terms their wishes and directions in relation thereto.

The Form should be signed, dated, and witnessed in duplicate. One copy should be deposited with the will, or with the signer's executor, or next of kin, and the other sent to the Honorary Secretary of the Cremation Society of England, 8 New Cavendish Street, London, W., by whom it will be preserved and regarded as confidential.

"I hereby express to my survivors my earnest desires that on my decease, my body shall be Cremated according to the system employed by the Cremation Society of England, and under the arrangements made by the Society for the purpose.

Signature _____

Address _____

Date _____

Witnessed by

_____ Signature

_____ Address.

_____ Date

In any case where no such document has been signed, but the cremation of a deceased person is desired, all the neces-

sary forms may be obtained at the Office of the Cremation Society, and the cost of the funeral conducted by any respectable undertaker, will be much less than that of ordinary burial where a grave must be purchased or opened, and a more or less expensive coffin or basket must be paid for. So long as bodies are conveyed to Woking, there will be unnecessary expense in transport, but as the revived practice spreads, and crematoria are erected in a number of districts or parishes, or in cemeteries where the choice of burial in the earth or of cremation may be left open, the expense of cremation will be very small and the economy of the process afford another example of the truth of the wise saying for which we are indebted to our President, Dr Richardson, ~~that~~ "National Health is National Wealth."

The time allotted to me has so nearly expired that I cannot now do more than refer all those who desire more information on this subject to the small book just published by Sir H. Thompson entitled "Modern Cremation, its History and Practice, with information relating to the recently improved arrangements made by the Cremation Society of England;" and to another very cheap book, very well illustrated, by Mr Robinson, now in the press, and about to be published by Cassell & Co., entitled "Cremation and Urn Burial, or the Cemeteries of

the Future." In these two books I believe the reader will find a great deal of information which is very important and thoroughly trustworthy. Both contain extracts from an address delivered ten years ago by Dr Fraser, the late Bishop of Manchester, at the opening of the Social Science Congress in that City. Coming from such a man and from a Bishop of the Church of England, it has had immense influence for good. I will read now a report of some of his remarks; and I trust they will again be widely spread by the Press as the thoughts of a wise and good man who 'though dead yet speaketh.' The Bishop said -

"I now draw attention to the provision made in our cities for the interment of the dead. On Friday last I consecrated a portion of a new cemetery, provided by the Corporation on the south side of Manchester, fully five miles from the centre of the city, containing 97 acres, at a cost, including the land, the fencing, the laying out, and the 'nevitable three or four chapels, of £100,000. It is very beautiful, but two thoughts occurred to me as I was consecrating the portion of it assigned to those who desire to be buried according to the rites of the Church of England. In the first place, this is a long distance for the poor to bring their dead; in the second place here is another hundred acres of land withdrawn

from the food producing ~~zones~~ area of the country for ever. I do not think we always observe or calculate how much this area is being gradually contracted By the infinite number of works and processes requiring space, but not producing food, which are encroaching upon it more and more every year; nor to what extent the power of the country to support its population is reduced thereby. 'Jam pauca aratro jugera regiae Moles relinquent.' In times of peace and plenty we can afford to be indifferent to this consideration, but I can easily conceive the existence of circumstances which would make this a very serious condition indeed. I feel convinced that before long we shall have to face this problem, 'How to bury our dead out of our sight' more practically and more seriously than we have hitherto done. In the same sense in which the 'Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,' I hold that the earth was made not for the dead, but for the living. No intelligent faith can suppose that any Christian doctrine is affected by the manner in which, or the time in which this mortal body of ours crumbles into dust and sees corruption. I admit that my instincts and sentiments - the result however, probably of associations more than ~~by~~ B anything else - are somewhat revolted by the idea of Cremation. But they are perhaps illogical, and unreasonable sentiments. - Sir Henry Thompson has stated the

case in a calm and thoughtful paper, which shows how little ground there is for the somewhat morbid sentiments that, indeed, prevail in relation to the whole subject to the interment of the dead -. All I call attention to is that it is a subject that will have to be seriously considered before long. Cemeteries are becoming not only a difficulty, an expense, and an inconvenience, but an actual danger."

You cannot need my assurance that if the Bishop was right ten years ago, his fear of the cemeteries becoming an actual danger to the public health is every year proving more and more manifest. The "Church of England Burial, Funeral, and Mourning Reform Association" has done a great public service by so repeatedly and powerfully impressing a sense of this danger upon the Government, that an official inquiry has at last been ordered into the condition of the London Cemeteries There are many of our large towns where inquiry is at least equally necessary. In some, as at Leicester, the necessity has been felt and acknowledged, and has led to steps towards the erection and maintenance of a Crematory.

But, while a Government Commission is investigating and reporting - while Cemetery Companies are being shamed by exposure into a tardy obedience to scientific denunciation and popular indignation - without waiting for Parliamentary

or municipal action - we may at least determine that, as members of a Health Congress, we will not be content with meeting a great evil by any feeble remedy, but will endeavour to avert impending danger by the timely adoption of a simple, economical, but efficient safeguard.
