



‘And writing [...] will preserve his memory’: Laman Blanchard’s Afterlife in Letters and Ledgers

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical fragments of cemetery records and monumental masonry for the poet and journalist Laman Blanchard, who was interred in West Norwood Cemetery, London, in 1845, and whose monument was cleared a century later by Lambeth Council. It focuses on Blanchard’s role in the Dickens literary circle and his relation to mid-Victorian writers, situating his untimely death in light of changing legislation on suicide. His lost grave marker is recovered by scrutinising his burial record, obituary, epitaph, and periodicals to ferret out connections amongst the archival sources of his death. The nebulous association, between what is written-by a person in life and what is written-about that person after death, is contemplated throughout.

Keywords: death studies, cemeteries in London, monumental masonry, nineteenth-century English literature

The binary of life and death is relationally complex, for this pair of opposites is at once both different, and similar, in meaning: designating something as living entails that it is not (yet) dead, and if something is dead, it necessarily once lived. Life writing, the genre ascribed to capture some aspect of life, does not seem entirely adequate to accommodate the conceptually congruent, but distinct, writing that seeks to qualify life that is no more. Perhaps the texts that take death as their subject warrant a

unique repository—death writing. It is the tension between life writing and death writing which reveals the epistemic distance between authorship and readership that is conceivably less remarkable in the former, but wholly significant in the latter. Reading a corpus which places death at a nexus suggests the possibility of commemoration through contemplation of this genre's literature, a responsibility which lies with the reader. With a life that has ended, vitality—one's very essence—is lost, and it is death writing that resurrects a textual presence which addresses the absence of animate existence.

The cultural significance of death in the nineteenth century was a result of what architectural historian James Stevens Curl terms the 'Victorian Celebration of Death',¹ exemplified by the new commercial cemeteries which appeared in industrial cities—though they were also a response to the age's introduction of urbanisation and its attendant overcrowding in metropolitan Britain. Established in 1836, in what was then Lower Norwood by the South Metropolitan Cemetery Company, and consecrated in December 1837 by the Bishop of Winchester, West Norwood Cemetery was the second of the garden cemeteries inaugurated in London in the early years of the century. Designer Sir William Tite (1798–1873) created an informal layout with 'curving roadways and deciduous trees, following English landscaping tradition'.² These landscaped cemeteries of the 1830s, which sought to preserve memory in perpetuity, faced substantial financial hardship only a century later, falling into disrepair and requiring consistent maintenance. When Lambeth Council assumed ownership of the grounds, it controversially cleared a large portion of West Norwood's monuments in the 1960s, obliterating the dead's identities alongside much of the tract's architectural and chronological heritage. Plots were re-sold for further interments to sustain the cemetery's solvency. This exploitation of the grounds and its established graves, annihilating significant portions of history and genealogy, explicitly contradicted a foundational tenet of the cemetery movement, in that it denied the Victorians an express legacy within a tangible record.

In tracing the afterlife of the interred in West Norwood Cemetery, fragments of bureaucratic manuscripts are all that remain for some because destroyed markers fail in their purpose as a referent for the corpse lying *in situ*. The grave of the poet and journalist Laman Blanchard (1803–1845) was subject to the council's lawn conversion project, such that his monument no longer marks his remains, nor those of his wife and two sons also buried in the plot. However, his textual contributions in life seem often echoed *in absentia* in death, and in locating Blanchard's lost tomb, fragments of record books and personal epistles remain his only legacy. In this way, the lost manuscript of Blanchard's epitaph can, instead, be

pieced together and offered a permanence it was deprived and preserved as his contemporaries would have wished.

Samuel ‘Laman’ Blanchard was born 15th May 1803 at Great Yarmouth. He enjoyed success as a journalist, critic, and essayist, and was affiliated with a number of publications throughout his career.³ As early as 1822, Blanchard began a steadfast friendship with Douglas Jerrold (1803–1857) that would survive the transition from this life to the next when Jerrold’s son selected a plot for his father in West Norwood Cemetery that was separated from Blanchard’s by only a small path.⁴ Blanchard was a member of Charles Dickens’s coterie, along with Jerrold and William Harrison Ainsworth.⁵ In 1844, Blanchard reviewed *A Christmas Carol* for *Ainsworth’s Magazine*, rightly predicting the story would ‘be as surely heard and remembered a hundred Christmases to come. And may the wise and merry author of it live to see that we are no false prophets!’⁶ This approbation, seemingly crafted with the expectation that Dickens would personally read it, was well received by the author, who expressed his sincere gratitude in a missive to Blanchard:

I cannot thank you enough for the beautiful manner, and the true spirit of friendship, in which you have noticed my Carol. But I *must* thank you, because you have filled my heart up to the brim, and it is running over.

You meant to give me great pleasure, my dear fellow, and you have done it. The tone of your elegant and fervent praise has touched me in the tenderest place. I cannot write about it; and as to talking of it, I could no more do that, than a dumb man. I have derived inexpressible gratification from what I know and feel was a labour of love on your part. And I can never forget it.

When I think it likely that I may meet you (perhaps at Ainsworth’s on Friday?) I shall slip a Carol into my pocket, and ask you to put it among your books for my sake. You will never like it the less for having made it the means of so much happiness to me.⁷

Noticeably touched by Blanchard’s review, Dickens’s letter is unrestrained in its requital for the *Carol*’s appraisal; this, along with other correspondence of the period, confirms Dickens’s professional and personal relationship with Blanchard, Ainsworth, and their extended social circle.

Shortly after the *Carol* exchange, in February 1844, Blanchard’s wife, Ann, fell ill with paralysis, ailing for nearly a year before she died. This plunged Blanchard into a deep depression, ‘during which symptoms of his wife’s paralysis were repeated in him’. The grief caused by Ann’s death destroyed him: Blanchard committed suicide at his home—Union Place, Lambeth—by slitting his throat with a razor on 15th February 1845.⁸ His death was recorded in several publications across the country,

which reported from the 17th February coroner's inquest at the Spread Eagle public house in Lambeth, that Blanchard's 'great anxiety during the period of [his wife's] long and harassing illness so injured his own health, that convulsive fits ensued'. He had been attended by Mrs Jane Spinnell, a nurse who was present that evening, and his son Edmund.⁹ The inquest re-traced the tragic events, noting that Blanchard 'had been observed to labour under a great depression of spirits, and that to such an extent that he was afraid to be left alone of a night, so that when the nurse departed, the youngest child, a lad about eleven years of age slept with him'. After nightly rituals which included reciting the Lord's Prayer, Blanchard committed suicide while Edmund was in the room, with the son springing 'towards him, and catching hold of his hand, [exclaiming] "Oh! father!"'¹⁰ The jury, gathered at the request of Mr William Carter, Coroner for East Surrey, returned a verdict of 'Temporary Insanity'.¹¹

It was the 1823 legislation on the interment of suicides that relaxed the law for any person found *felo de se*, or 'felon of himself', as previous law demanded that a person found guilty of suicide necessitated burial in a public highway with a stake driven through the body—an example of punishment through post-mortem humiliation. Mark Robson suggests that this shift might be attributed to the suicide of politician Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh (1769–1822), as an inquest determined mental delusion as his cause of death, thereby avoiding the more serious charge of *felo de se*, and permitting an honourable burial in Westminster Abbey. This new statute would align legislation with practice, as actual cases of staking and highway burial were reportedly rare.¹² It was not uncommon for an inquest to find a verdict of 'Temporary Insanity' to avoid the serious social and financial consequences of *felo de se*. The 1823 legislation allowed the 'Remains of Persons against whom a finding of *Felo de se* is had to be privately buried in the Parish Churchyard', with the interment made during the hours of nine and twelve at night without the Rites of Christian Burial.¹³ Further to this gradual shift in attitude towards *felo de se*, in *The Anatomy of Suicide* (1840) Forbes Winslow examines the act of suicide in 'reference to its pathological and physiological character',¹⁴ a method of investigation which had previously been unexplored in medical jurisprudence, as many held the belief that 'suicide was a crime against God and man',¹⁵ and an offence punishable in death. However, it was not until 1961 that the crime of suicide was finally abrogated.¹⁶

Blanchard purchased grave 1,051,98 for Ann in West Norwood Cemetery on 18th December 1844, and he was listed as that plot's owner in the South Metropolitan Cemetery Company Sexton's Books—a textual artefact bearing his ownership, which would be subsequently re-iterated for further interments. Ann was buried in consecrated ground at West



Figure 1 Record of Ann Blanchard’s interment in West Norwood Cemetery, Lambeth Archives, IV/100/1.¹⁷

Norwood on 21st December and two months later, on 22nd February, Blanchard’s own sepulture was recorded in the Sexton’s Books, noting both his ownership of the grave and last mortal residence in Lambeth. The Gravediggers’ Memorandum Book registered Blanchard’s burial depth as one foot shallower than that of his wife, who was inhumed first in the plot. Two of Blanchard’s children would also be interred—Edmund Forster in 1870 and Sidney Laman in 1883—with their father listed in the cemetery records, again as the plot’s title holder. This reductionist accounting is suggestive of an archive, both imaginative and literal, which hearkens to the vitality and relationship of the previous interment in the plot and marks Blanchard as both the ultimate holder of the title and antepenultimate (third from last) deposition: an identity which he partially assumed in life when he purchased the grave for Ann. This ephemera, devoid of any affect, also embodies a hard inheritance between the grave’s owner and its occupiers. The Blanchard family entries in the cemetery records catalogue a tragedy of relation in the distilled style of

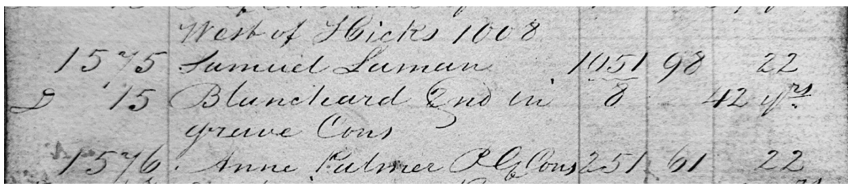


Figure 2 Gravediggers’ record of Laman Blanchard’s interment in West Norwood Cemetery, Lambeth Archives, IV/100/AD3/8.¹⁸

bookkeeping, and document their separation numerically according to corpse depth and grave square. The cemetery's ledger, a form of death writing, narrates the movement of the dead and their attendant place of rest.

After Blanchard's death, his obituary and epitaph were published in Ainsworth's eponymous periodical. Ainsworth memorialised his friend as a poet, journalist, and essayist, describing how Blanchard, while a youth, intended to devote his career to poetry, but was hindered by the need for an income that his poetic endeavours likely could not provide. Ainsworth paid fond tribute to Blanchard's talent and temperament:

VIR Probus et justus, jacet hic; qui vixit honesté;
In Medio vitæ, sors inopina fuit.
Suprá alios homines, scribendi doctus in arte;
Quod scripsit, pulchrum est; utile, et inocuum.

AMICUS.¹⁹

An excellent and just man lies here; he lived honourably;
In the midst of life, his fate was unexpected.
Above other men, he was skilled in the art of writing;
What he wrote was beautiful; useful and unoffending.

A FRIEND. [author's translation]

The afterlife of Blanchard's memory, according to Ainsworth, will not centre on his literary contributions, but on the skilful journalism from which he earned his livelihood, including a collection that was to be printed shortly after his death in *The New Monthly Magazine*. It was fitting that, in life, Blanchard's writing regularly appeared in *Ainsworth's Magazine*, the very place where his friend, the editor, obituarised him:

Month after month did he continue to pour forth themes sparkling with wit, profound with wisdom and truth; a shrewd observer of human nature, but ever noting the follies and frailties of mankind with a lenient eye, he spared while he corrected, and excited a kindly admiration while he censured. Good humour and benevolence, no less than integrity of purpose, distinguished all he wrote; and though earnest and impassioned in the reprehension of vice or meanness, he never satirized with bitterness.²⁰

The Northern Star similarly described his 'unaffected sensibility' as 'absolutely beautiful': 'it was inherent, spontaneous, and embraced the whole sphere in which he moved'.²¹

Dickens was dismayed by Blanchard's sudden death, and lamented the loss in a letter to their mutual friend John Forster: '[n]o philosophy will bear these dreadful things, or make a moment's head against them, but

the practical one of doing all the good we can, in thought and deed'.²² It was Dickens who pledged financial assistance to provide for Blanchard's four children after their parents' deaths, also securing contributions from Forster, Ainsworth, and Jerrold, as well as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Thomas Noon Talfourd, Leigh Hunt, B. W. Procter, Robert Browning, George Cruikshank, W. M. Thackeray, and W. C. Macready.²³ The literary and theatrical world was eager to come to the aid of the Blanchard children, with an actor and author anonymously writing to the *Morning Chronicle* to suggest a theatre benefit for the benefaction of the family.²⁴ However, the Blanchards' grave would go unmarked for over a decade, until 1857, when a monument was placed in West Norwood Cemetery, as chronicled in the *Illustrated London News*:

This tasteful tribute to the genius and private worth of Laman Blanchard has just been placed in Norwood Cemetery, where his remains rest. The pedestal bears the following elegantly-written inscription: —

Sacred to
SAMUEL LAMAN BLANCHARD
Born 15th May, 1803;
Died the 15th February, 1845.
His life was devoted to the
Honourable industry of a man of letters.
He injured none.
He instructed and assisted many.
He pleased all.
His abilities were various,
As his toils were incessant;
And writings
Which have assisted social progress
And disseminated cheerfulness
Will preserve his memory.
His heart was gentle,
His manners winning and social
His integrity unassailable
The latter days of a career
Brief and laborious
Were embittered by the loss of his wife,
ANNE BLANCHARD,
Who died December 16th, 1844,
For 22 years his beloved partner and consoler.
They are here,
After two months' separate,
Reunited in the dust,
In the sure hope
Of an eternal union in the spirit.

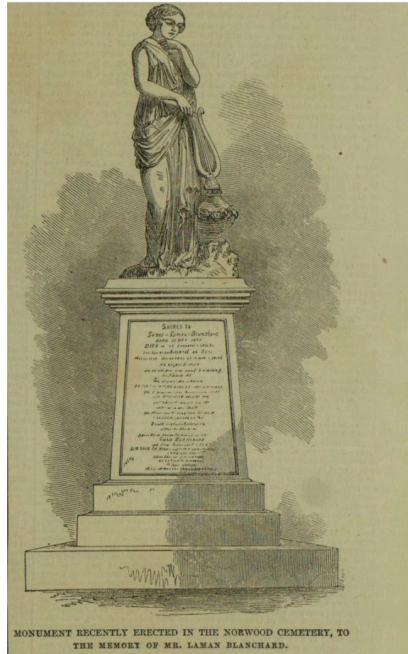


Figure 3 Monument to Laman Blanchard in West Norwood Cemetery, 'Monument to Laman Blanchard,' *Illustrated London News* (3 January 1857) (675).

An echo of Ainsworth's Latin epitaph of 1845, similarly emphasising Blanchard's poetic voice, amiable nature, honour, integrity and writings, appears in the monumental masonry memorialising the resting place of the writer, which was grievously razed a century later. The marker's destruction entails a deprivation that is twofold: the location of the corpses is obscured, and the associated remembrance, which might otherwise continue in perpetuity, is often lost as well. Although it is certainly not always the case, often the visual representation of the deceased is inherently tied to a physical exemplar which relies upon a readership through which to confront and interface with the present. Whilst alive, Blanchard had quite a substantial literary footprint; after death, his renown dwindled, as was the case with most all who perish, and the clearance of Blanchard's tablet eliminated his being the happy recipient of unexpected encounters with passersby who pondered his grave.

The Blanchard monument also poses a problem centring on authenticity, for his epitaph praises his virtues, directing the reader to admire his sensibilities as a man who 'injured none'. The distance between the reality of this statement and the trauma sustained by his own hand complicates the truthfulness we can ascribe to the inscription, for Blanchard is remembered by his supporters as a man of kind sensibility. However, neither his epitaph nor his entry in the cemetery records suggest a life terminated through violent self-injury. The inquest following his death uncovered a disturbing departure which contrasts with the compassionate accounts of friends. In truth, he slaughtered himself in the presence of his young son and likely bequeathed a psychological wound on the child. The place that we might seek as offering the most definitive commemoration for his life would be the resting place of his corpse, which was fitted with a distinctive memorial to celebrate his legacy and esteem. As text conveys such sentiments, it is at this juncture that life writing and death writing merge, as Blanchard's tomb proclaims, to 'disseminate [some] cheerfulness [which] will preserve his memory', reliant on contemplation at his place of burial.

The enduring power of death writing is most elegantly crystallised in monumental masonry, which provides a textual and symbolic afterlife to a decaying corpse. It seems a deprivation for future generations that the opportunity has been lost to commune with the place in West Norwood—the place in eternity—of a writer who was an important figure of his day in the quotidian literary life of London. In tracing Blanchard's lost monument, the fragments of record books and personal missives remain the only preserved legacy of the 'man of letters'.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Scott studied English at the University of Regina and Victorian Literature at the University of Glasgow, where her dissertation considered the confluence of the Glasgow Necropolis and the poetry of Tennyson and Hardy. At University College London, her PhD thesis probed the rise of the Victorian garden cemetery in London, which was born as a solution to improve sanitation while providing ample burial space that would rectify insecure interment and create a venue for leisure in the metropolis. Her research interests centre on manuscripts, ephemera, monumental masonry, letters, and literature, and their broader implications in cemetery studies. E-mail: h.scott.11@ucl.ac.uk.

NOTES

- 1 See Curl, James Stevens. *The Victorian Celebration of Death*. Stroud: Sutton, 2001.
- 2 Friends of West Norwood Cemetery. *The South Metropolitan Cemetery, West Norwood: An Introductory Guide*. London: Local History Publications, 2015 (3).
- 3 Blanchard was associated with a number of newspapers and journals throughout his career: *Monthly Magazine*, *Belle Assemblée*, *True Sun*, *The Constitutional*, *Court Journal*, *The Mirror*, *The Courier*, *The Examiner*, *Ainsworth's Magazine*, and *George Cruikshank's Omnibus*. Other publications include *Lyric Offerings*, *The Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.*, and *Sketches from Life*.
- 4 Jerrold, Blanchard. *The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold*. London: W. Kent & Co., 1859 (346).
- 5 William Harrison Ainsworth (1805–1882) is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery at grave 3443/154/PS.
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- 23 Sanders, Andrew, 2004 (2).
- 24 'The Late Laman Blanchard.' *Morning Chronicle* (4 March 1845) (4).