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Polly Stewart

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Icons of Immortality: Forest Lawn and the American Way of Death

Elliott Oring

They function the way good imagery and poetic diction do in literature: to convey and dramatize more fully those abstract matters which cannot be well articulated and reexperienced in any other way.

—Barre Toelken

In 1916, Hubert Eaton became the manager of a fifty-five acre rural cemetery in Tropic, California, called Forest Lawn. It was on New Year's Day of the following year that Eaton received the vision that led him to transform this little, failing cemetery into one of America's most famous cemeteries, second perhaps only to Arlington National Cemetery.

Today over 250,000 "loved ones" are entombed, interred, and inurned within the sacred grounds of Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale. Twenty-five thousand weddings have been performed in its three churches, and more than half a million tourists visit it annually. Prior to the development of Disneyland, Forest Lawn was Southern California's most popular tourist attraction. However, Eaton's success with Forest Lawn was not without struggle, and in many quarters Forest Lawn's fame and reputation might be more properly described as notoriety.

A good deal of this notoriety was inspired by Evelyn Waugh's 1948 satire, *The Loved One*, and the even more excessive 1963 Hollywood film based upon the novel. Waugh viewed Forest Lawn as a product of the Southern California environment, heavily tainted by the artificiality, superficiality, and sentimentality of Hollywood. He saw Forest Lawn as banishing death and selling eternal life to those who could afford its cosmetic treatments for the deceased, its quilted caskets, and its earthquake-proof ventilated crypts. Stated Waugh, "The body does not decay; it lives on more chic in death than ever before, in its undestructible Class A steel and concrete shelf; the soul goes straight from the Slumber Room to Paradise, where it enjoys endless infancy" (Waugh 1947, 84).

Waugh's view has certainly conditioned subsequent responses to Forest Lawn, particularly in the national media. A writer in *Saturday Review* referred to Forest Lawn as "Ever-Ever Land," and *Time* sardonically dubbed it the "Disneyland of Death." (Sutton 1958, 24-26; "Disneyland of Death" 1959, 107). Even singer John Denver was not to miss out on the fun and recorded Tom Paxton's satirical song "Forest Lawn" on one of his early albums.

But there is something wrong in uncritically accepting a satirical portrait as the basis for understanding. And Waugh's portrait, though excellent and amusing as literature, leaves something to be desired as interpretation. It is appropriate, therefore, that a reconsideration of Forest Lawn begin, not with Waugh's interpretation, but with the set of questions he posed: "What will the professors of the future make of Forest Lawn? What do we make of it ourselves? Here is the thing, under our very noses, a first class anthropological puzzle of our own period and neighborhood. What does it mean?" (Waugh 1947, 77). Waugh's questions are substantial enough to merit a serious response, even if they are somewhat facetiously propounded. Although it will not be possible to render a complete and detailed portrait of Forest Lawn here, it should be possible to delineate the character of Forest Lawn sufficiently to offer some response to Waugh's query.

Inscribed on the twenty-five-by-twenty-eight-foot tablet known as "The Builder's Creed," which stands in the forecourt to the Memorial Terrace of the Great Mausoleum, is the substance of Hubert Eaton's vision for Forest Lawn.

I believe in a happy Eternal Life.

I believe those of us who are left behind should be glad in the certain belief that those gone before who believed in Him have entered into that happier Life.

I believe, most of all, in a Christ that smiles and loves you and me.

I therefore know the cemeteries of today are wrong because they depict an end, not a beginning.

I therefore prayerfully resolve . . . that I shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different, as unlike other cemeteries as sunshine is unlike darkness, as Eternal Life is unlike Death.

In fulfillment of these propositions, Eaton set out to create not only a safe repository and garden of memory for the dead, but also a place for the "sacred enjoyment of the living" (*Art Guide of Forest Lawn with Interpretations* 1941, 1). To this end he established a great park with green rolling lawns, unbroken by tombstones or other raised markers; with tens of thousands of shrubs, flowers, and trees (non-deciduous and forever green); replicas of Old World country churches; singing birds and splashing fountains; a great Mausoleum-Columbarium; and one of the largest

collections of marble statuary and stained glass ever assembled in America.

The presence of all this beauty was to “dissolve man’s fear of oblivion and bolster his faith in immortality” (*Art Guide*, 1). The “immortal” works of art in marble and glass, as well as the scientifically constructed mausoleums and columbaria, reinforce this belief. “We Build Forever,” reads the inscription in the Great Mausoleum. The proposition, though Ozymandian in its claim, nevertheless seems sincere.

The message of immortality is communicated at Forest Lawn at different levels. At the level of formal mythology, it is represented in the Sacred Trilogy—three works of art that depict the dramatic and theological foci in the life-story of Jesus: the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. *The Last Supper* is a recreation of Leonardo da Vinci’s famous fresco in a brilliant stained glass window set in the Memorial Court of Honor in the Great Mausoleum. *The Crucifixion* is a massive oil painting by the Polish artist Jan Styka. Its size (if stood on its side it is approximately the height of a twenty-story building) required the construction of a special hall to house and display it. Housed in the same hall is *The Resurrection*, a somewhat less massive painting that was commissioned by Forest Lawn to complete the trilogy. *The Crucifixion* itself is unusual, not merely for its size, but for its subject, which is not a crucified Christ but a Christ the moment before his crucifixion in a posture of serene faith and confidence in the eternal life that awaits him.

It may seem surprising, given the basic Christian orientation of Forest Lawn, as represented in the trilogy, that a negligible number of the hundreds of marble statues that grace the gardens, courts, terraces, and sanctuaries are explicitly Christian in theme. And very, very few of them depict the figure of Jesus. In fact there are only three: a reproduction of Michelangelo’s *La Pietà*, Bertel Thorvaldsen’s *The Christus* (there are several reproductions throughout Forest Lawn), and an original sculpture by Vincenzo Jerace, *For of Such Is the Kingdom of Heaven*. It was Hubert Eaton’s vision of the Christ that limited its appearance at Forest Lawn. The greatest number of extant statuary tends to depict Christ on the cross, a joyless suffering Christ. What Eaton wanted was a smiling Christ, a Christ that “loved you and me,” what Eaton called an “American Christ.” Despite contests and competitions that were held, Forest Lawn never found its American Christ; but it acquired Jerace’s *For of Such Is the Kingdom of Heaven*. Eaton was reputed to have said to Jerace, “It is not my smiling Christ, but it is a kindly Christ, a Christ to whom the little children came” (*Art Guide*, 81).

The centrality of the Sacred Trilogy substantially establishes the Christian context of Forest Lawn, despite the quantitative meagerness in the representation of explicit Christian themes in the remainder of Forest Lawn’s large inventory of sculpture. Explicit Christian themes are reiterated, however,

in the mosaics, stained glass, and inscriptions that appear throughout Forest Lawn's courts, churches, and mausoleums.

If Forest Lawn could not present the American Christ who smiled and loved you and me, it could present the love. The inscriptions proclaim it, the weddings celebrate it, and the statuary depicts or evokes it.

In the garden adjacent to the Court of David in the Triumphant Faith section of Forest Lawn stands Ernesto Gaggeri's *The Mystery of Life*, a large group of statues containing eighteen life-sized human figures. Through the center of the work flows the "mystic stream of life" (of real water), and each figure represents a person of different character, station, and circumstance in their moment of response to this great mystery. The work was created specifically for Forest Lawn, and Forest Lawn (with the approval of the royal superintendent of fine arts of Italy and Victor Herbert) offers its solution to the mystery: "Love is the end and all of living." The theology of Forest Lawn is a theology of love. "Love lives forever and is reborn," says Forest Lawn (*Pictorial Forest Lawn* 1953, 7). It is not only the basis of life in this world, but it is the key to life in the next. At Forest Lawn one depiction of love is romance. The Wee Kirk o' the Heather is a replica of Annie Laurie's church in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. The eight stained glass windows tell the story of Annie and Douglas of Fingland and their tragic love affair. The Ring of Aldyth, through which bridal couples clasp each other's hands and pledge their devotion, is reputedly based on some romantic Saxon legend with a happier climax. Over the chancel in the Church of the Recessional is inscribed, "Now abideth faith, hope love, these three: and the greatest of these is love."

The representations of love that are focal in the iconography of Forest Lawn, however, are those of domestic love. Death is not an end—it is a "going home," and Forest Lawn is virtually littered with images of idealized domesticity. The child—asleep, at play, mischievous, curious, content—is a primary image for sentimental reflection, as is the family group, invincible in its love and devotion, and the mother and child—the essence of love pure and uncomplicated. In this theology man is not depraved, nor is he judged. He is an innocent, as loving and as loved as the child—and it would seem that it is primarily within this structure of family sentiment that man is redeemed and reborn.

In a cemetery context it is difficult to ignore the overwhelming abundance of statuary that glorifies the human body. Scores of statues of young men, women, and children all emphasize the beauties of the flesh. It would seem to impute a physical referent to the immortality that Forest Lawn proclaims, not merely a spiritual one. Indeed, all contemporary embalming and cosmetic practices strive to present a physically pleasing last portrait of the deceased to family and friends. Scientifically designed crypts that promote "desiccation but not decay" (*Art Guide* 40) all contribute to a message that

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Forest Lawn Memorial Parks.

the life beyond involves not merely the immortality of the spirit but, in some unexplicated manner, the endurance of the flesh as well.

There is a brief and perceptive moment in the film *The Loved One* when the protagonist finds himself wandering about a hall filled with marble figures of nude and semi-nude women. Suddenly, when he is sure no one is watching, he plants a hasty kiss on the breast of one of the statues. Although Forest Lawn acknowledges the physical beauty of its statuary, it does not entertain the notion of its sensuality. Beautiful, yes; erotic, no. Consider the description of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth's statue *Joy of the Waters* in one of the editions of the *Art Guide of Forest Lawn Memorial-Park*:

With upflung hands and windblown hair, this gay young girl eagerly greets the onrushing waves. Well known for her lyrical figures, Miss Frishmuth has displayed here a sound knowledge of human anatomy and a sincere desire to attain the ideal of beauty in her work. The basic theme is spiritual. This girl, by her action and by the evident keen enjoyment on her face, expresses the happiness that comes to a receptive and believing heart which accepts and receives the blessings of God's all-embracing love. (*Art Guide* 54-55)

The description is typical; while recognizing the beauty of the female anatomy, the statue is unambiguously assigned a spiritual context. Physical beauty should not evoke a physical response but a spiritual one. Sensuality is subordinated. The possibility of the erotic is denied. The surreptitious kiss bestowed by the protagonist of the film was a denial of this denial.

Forest Lawn is dedicated to the stirring of national as well as domestic sentiments. Representations of relics, personages, and ideals that evoke the spirit of American freedom and democracy permeate the park. Statues of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as personifications such as *Pro Patria* and *The Republic*, can be found. In the Court of Freedom stands a re-creation of John Trumbull's painting *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* constructed of more than 700,000 mosaic tiles. At the base of the statue of Washington stretches a piece of the Liberty Chain that was used to bar the British access to the Hudson River during the Revolutionary War.

Besides love, beauty, and patriotism, there are other virtues to which Forest Lawn is clearly committed—those that constitute and contribute to what might be called “good character.” In the forecourt of the Church of the Recessional—a replica of the Parish Church of St. Margaret's in Rottingdean, England, where Rudyard Kipling worshiped for several years—are inscribed three of Kipling's famous poems: “The Recessional” (after which the church is named), “If,” and “When Earth's Last Picture Is Painted.” Tolerance, faith, humility, reverence, trust, truth, courage, vision, and determination—these are the virtues that are evoked in the poems and throughout Forest Lawn.

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Joy of the Waters by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth. Printed with permission
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Forest Lawn also evokes a sense of efficient organization and commercial success. It was one of the first cemeteries to utilize media advertising, stressing the economic and organizational benefits of Forest Lawn's services. Furthermore, the economic significance of the distinctions that are evident between the different plots, crypts, niches, caskets, urns, and memorials that are available at Forest Lawn serve as markers of individual material success. Anyone is entitled to the memorial they can afford. You may be buried simply or grandly. You may not be able to take it with you, but at Forest Lawn it is certainly possible to indicate that you once had it.

What then are we to make of Forest Lawn? What is the solution to the "first-class anthropological puzzle" that Waugh propounded? Is it some Hollywood fantasy, locally bred and born? I think not. In the first place we must recognize that in certain basic respects the concept of Forest Lawn is not new. In the early nineteenth century in reaction to the grim, gloomy, and neglected cemeteries of Puritan tradition as well as the offensive, overcrowded, and health-hazardous cemeteries of the city, the rural cemetery movement developed. The members of this movement advocated the acquisition of large, attractive acreage outside the city limits that would serve as sacred and inviolable resting places for the dead. The graves and memorials were to be set in beautiful foliage and landscaped surroundings. Fences that were constructed around family plots had to be made of durable metal or stone (not wood and not slate, the standard materials of the Puritan graveyard.) The memorials themselves were to be artistically controlled by the cemetery trustees to ensure their aesthetic effect. It was hoped that such cemeteries might become schools "of instruction in architecture, sculpture, landscape gardening, and arboriculture."¹ Furthermore, these cemeteries were regarded as schools of religion and philosophy where the memorials to the dead were to serve as inspirations to the living. The symbolism on the memorials was not grim, and Christian symbolism was only infrequently used. It was expected that the amalgam of the beauty of nature and art would teach that death is not an end and time not a destroyer. It was also hoped that the art would make the lessons of history tangible and thus give people a sense of historical continuity and instill feelings of patriotism and national pride.

Beginning with Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1831, the rural cemetery movement rapidly spread: Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia (1836), Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn (1838), Allegheny Cemetery, Pittsburgh (1844), Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati (1845). By the middle of the nineteenth century there were few major cities or towns that did not boast a rural cemetery.

These cemeteries were exceedingly popular. No visitor from abroad could visit the Boston area without being taken on a tour of Mt. Auburn. Laurel Hill Cemetery boasted 30,000 tourists a year. In the latter part of the

century the internal fencing that had delineated the boundaries between family plots began to be removed, an innovation that resulted in an aesthetically integrated park and which gave rise to the “lawn cemeteries” popular after the Civil War.

Thus—Hubert Eaton’s creed to the contrary—the Forest Lawn concept is not essentially new, but well within the tradition of the nineteenth-century rural cemetery. Like Forest Lawn, the rural cemeteries of the nineteenth century were not merely areas for the disposal of the dead, but also cultural institutions that served to instruct, inspire, and ennoble the living.

But if Forest Lawn is within the rural cemetery tradition, it still does not appear to be a typical nineteenth-century American cemetery. Perhaps to answer Waugh’s questions and to understand what Forest Lawn is, it might be best to view Forest Lawn not as a cemetery at all, but rather as a twentieth-century memorial to the tastes and values of the nineteenth century: a monument to the culture of Victorian America.

Victorian culture was essentially an Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture;² and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism is clearly reflected in Forest Lawn’s rural English and Scottish churches, Saxon legends, Tudor architecture, and in the overwhelming majority of its client population (until 1959, only members of the “Caucasian” race were permitted to be interred at Forest Lawn).

The artistic tastes manifested in the art and architecture of Forest Lawn are those commensurate with the popular tastes of Victorian America. The idealized subject matter, sentimentality, use of literary and classical associations, didacticism, and use of extraneous symbolism are all characteristic of the artistic expectations of Victorian culture. It is no accident that there is virtually no modern or abstract sculpture in Forest Lawn. The patriotic strains, the encouragement of the “inner-directed personality”—i.e., the building of good character—and the subordination of sensuality are well-known Victorian attributes. The focus upon the family, the child, and the mother-child relationship can be associated with the Victorian emphasis on the sanctity of the family unit, the importance of childhood, and the exaltation of motherhood.

What might appear to be the naive theology of Forest Lawn, which seems to stress a rather simplistic immortality of flesh and spirit, reuniting innocent loved ones in some kind of domestic Heaven, is entirely in keeping with conceptualizations of the afterlife that were propagated in the huge consolation literature of nineteenth-century America.³ If anything, Forest Lawn’s vision is considerably less extreme.

Love, Death, and Success are the three great themes that Carl Bode sees running through much of the American culture of the mid-nineteenth century—a “Trio for Columbia,” as he called it (Bode 1959, 269–276).⁴ And these indeed are the great themes of Forest Lawn as well. In viewing Forest Lawn, it is necessary to see Death simply as another of Forest Lawn’s

themes, like Love. What emerges from our perspective, therefore, is not a cemetery, nor even a Victorian cemetery, but a twentieth-century exhibition of and memorial to the culture of Victorian America.⁵

Since the 1970s, the clientele of Forest Lawn has changed dramatically. Hispanics, Armenians, Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese have become major consumers of Forest Lawn services and properties. The change in the population in part reflects the change in the population of southern California generally and the Glendale area specifically. But considering that Forest Lawn was restricted to Caucasians until 1959, the change is dramatic. Yet it would be wrong to say that the park has changed in its style or spirit. Chinese characters may appear on bronze grave markers, and neo-classic statues may bear Korean or Hispanic names on their pedestals, yet the park, the structures, the art, the thematic emphases have not changed. They remain as before. It seems that the Victorian values and tastes represented by Forest Lawn are precisely those that these populations respect. Despite the fact that Victorianism had declined before many had come to this country, they appreciate the beautiful landscapes, the representational art, the spiritual tone, the respect for family, nation, and character. Perhaps they are misreading the park, but I suspect not. It is rather that Victorianism never succumbed to modernism. If Victorian values were consciously repudiated by the cultural elite, they never lost their hold in the largest segments of American society. These values continue to be significant for those who have never identified with the cultural vanguard, and for immigrant and ethnic communities whose traditional values are close to those that Forest Lawn would conserve.

It, of course, becomes no less easy to satirize Forest Lawn. For those who do not share the artistic tastes, moral righteousness, and philosophical dispositions of the previous century, Forest Lawn will continue to seem curious, comical, or pathetic. But Forest Lawn is not the invention of some Hollywood studio, some whole-cloth fabrication for mass consumption. It is rather a genuine reflection of a well-established and powerful movement in the culture of Anglo-America.

Notes

1. The quotation is from John C. London's book, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (London, 1843), cited in Stanley French (1975, 69–91). See also Edmund V. Gillon, Jr., *Victorian Cemetery Art* (1972, v–xiii), and Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society* (1966, 200–208).
2. For overviews of Victorian American culture, see *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (1976b), particularly Daniel Walker Howe, "Victorian Culture in America," (1976a, 3–28), and Stanley Coben, "The Assault on Victorianism in the Twentieth Century," (1976, 160–81).

3. For an excellent description of nineteenth-century “consolation literature,” see Ann Douglas, “Heaven our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830–1880,” (1975, 49–68).
4. Bode’s “Aside to the Reader,” ix–xv, develops some other points concerning Victorian culture.
5. For the influence of the exhibition complex on Hubert Eaton, see Barbara Rubin, Robert Carlton, and Arnold Rubin, *Forest Lawn* (1979, 1–12).