

Dead academics: what can we learn about academic work and life from obituaries?

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This article analyses the obituaries of 100 academics published in the British quality press in 2007 to see what they tell us about the changing nature of contemporary academic work, and how it is presented in this particular genre of writing. It concludes that the influence of Oxbridge and the American higher education system, and the dominance of men, remain strong in the senior levels of academic life that make it into the obituary pages. The obituaries also illustrate the impact of global events and trends, such as world war and the international mobility of highly skilled labour, on academe. At an individual level, they present a picture of almost mythic achievement, brought down to earth by accounts of caring and essential eccentricity.

Keywords: academics; disciplines; hierarchies; mobility; obituaries; status

Introduction

This article reflects my joint interests in the nature of academic work and life, and how this might be changing, and in the use of unobtrusive, secondary or 'found' data. Thus, previous related studies have explored aspects of this topic through, for example, the use of newspapers, year-books, novels, published articles and personal experience (Tight 2000, 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Here, my concern is with what published obituaries of academics have to tell us about academe.

I am not, of course, the first researcher to be drawn to such method/ological approaches, nor to the inclusion of auto/biographical elements (see, for example, Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000; Lee 2000). Arguably, though, these do remain a minority interest when set against the more conventional social research strategies of the interview and questionnaire. And neither am I the first researcher to be drawn to obituaries as a possible data source, though my focus on those relating to academics does seem to be relatively unusual.

In the next section, I will focus on recent academic studies of obituaries, before setting out the methodology of my own study. Its quantitative and qualitative results will then be discussed, before some conclusions are put forward.

Existing studies

Bytheway and Johnson (1996) analysed 86 obituaries published in *The Guardian* in June 1995 for the images they presented of the life course. The great majority, 70, were men, and six had worked in education. They concluded that those who regularly read the obituaries:

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will be routinely absorbing stories of careers full of success and incident, of premature deaths due to accident, drama and tragedy. Some will also include post-retirement life, covering both the familiar story of activity, bereavement, disability and ill-health, and more exotic accounts of rediscovery, belated recognition and second careers. (233)

Rodler, Kirchler, and Holzl (2001) carried out a content analysis of the obituaries of 894 organisational leaders, published in four Austrian, German or Swiss newspapers in five sample years between 1974 and 1998, to examine gender stereotyping.

Fowler (2005) examines obituaries as an element of collective memory. She argues that, in sociological terms:

the national newspaper obituary could be seen as a semi-ritualized nexus of ethical, political and professional worlds. Like the memorial service, it is a secularized *rite de passage*, to help the bereaved; yet it is also a verdict, derived from professional peers, about the worth of the dead person's contribution. Finally, despite conflicting interpretations vying for authority, it aims to provide the last judgement about their personalities ... Now that it is throwing off its earlier chrysalis of rigid aristocratic formulae, the obituary as a newspaper genre is becoming less coded, more subtle and more weighty. (61)

Tellingly, she goes on to point out:

The obituary's model is of purely individualistic success. Yet a systematic study shows that as many as 77 percent of the contemporary British obituary subjects within British newspapers have had an education at a fee-paying public school or academy ... a very high proportion (56 percent) ... had been to university. The persistence of privilege again is telling, with the presence of a particularly large minority (35 percent) who have been to Oxford or Cambridge. (62)

She notes as two further characteristics the emphasis in contemporary obituaries on what she calls 'cultural producers – artists, writers, musicians and actors, or academics and politicians', and 'the relatively large minority who have been migrant (40 percent)' (63, 64).

Fowler recognises four sub-genres of obituary alongside the '*traditional positive* obituary ... characterized as it is by an unambiguous celebration of its protagonist and a delineation of a continuous upwards ascent' (64). These are negative (e.g. for those who have abused power, been complicit in doing so, or been corrupt), tragic (e.g. for fallen heroes), ironic (common for politicians) and 'untraditional yet positive' (which differ from the 'positive' in not adhering to the 'continuous upwards ascent' model) obituaries.

Walter (2005) considers obituaries, alongside associated practices (e.g. autopsies, funeral celebrations, spiritualism), as a kind of mediator deathwork, 'where the professional gleans or constructs information about the dead, edits and polishes it, and publicly presents the edited version in a public rite' (383). He notes that:

though the autopsy report and inquest verdict on the one hand, and the funeral tribute and obituary on the other hand, present very different narratives of the deceased and his/her death, each must be recognisable as in some sense true by those present. (398)

Starck (2004) carried out an extensive comparative study of obituary practice, both historical and contemporary, in Australian, British and American newspapers. This included a content analysis of 1667 obituaries published in eight Australian newspapers in a six-month period during 2002–2003, more limited analyses of British (the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent* and *Guardian*) and American newspapers, and interviews with obituarists and others concerned with the practice. His later book (Starck 2006) summarises and popularises this work.

Starck notes, among other matters, the obituary's recent revival as a newspaper art form, its role as a celebration of life as much as a marking of death, its often somewhat coded nature, and its rather ambivalent attitude (currently) to detailing causes of death, gender imbalance and interest in the eccentric. He argues for its role as 'a valid instrument of historical record':

The obituary today is more comprehensive in content than either the death notice or the epitaph, less concerned with the factual recitation of mortality than the standard news story, and – by its newspaper manifestation – more urgent in demeanour than the biography. (2006, 46)

The only academic study which touches on academic obituaries in particular, of which I am aware, is by Bourdieu (1988). In a postscript to a study of the relations between social origins and academic success, he examines 34 obituaries of ‘old boys’ (only some of whom subsequently became academics) published in the yearbook of an elite French institution in the years 1962–1965. Arguing, along the lines of Starck, that ‘Obituary notices are first-rate documents for an analysis of university values’ (218), Bourdieu notes how ‘The system of adjectives used maps out the *world of professorial virtues*, which, like the university careers to which they grant access, are hierarchized’ (215).

His conclusions demonstrate a strongly class-based relationship:

Out of the fifteen ‘old boys’ of working- or middle-class origins, twelve became teachers in secondary education or professors in advanced secondary education and only three became professors in higher education, but in disciplines considered professionally inferior (modern languages, chemistry, physics) and/or in the provinces; on the contrary, out of the nineteen ‘old boys’ from the upper classes, only two became teachers in secondary education, whereas two became diplomats, two others became writers and thirteen became professors in higher education, mostly in Paris, and four of them at the College de France. (216)

Methodology

As, I suspect, with many studies based on ‘found’ data, my methodological approach to the collection and analysis of data was initially rather speculative or exploratory, but then became more rigorous.

To explain more clearly, I first became intrigued by the possibilities of obituaries as a data source when reading a ‘tribute’ to Roy Niblett published in the Summer 2005 issue of the *SRHE* (Society for Research into Higher Education) *News*. I cut out the tribute, opened a file and put it aside, feeling instinctively that there was something of interest here – other than Roy Niblett, of course – that warranted further study. Almost subconsciously, I then began to collect further examples of the genre, adopting in effect a convenience sampling approach. I cut out relevant obituaries published in the copy of *The Guardian* I had delivered (for the higher education vacancies) each Tuesday, and purloined further examples from national newspapers I happened to encounter on visits to the gym or dentist, during hotel stays, or from students whom I noticed reading newspapers before class began.

After a while, reviewing the obituaries of academics that I had gathered together, I was confirmed in my initial opinion that there was something worth analysing here. But the database I had collected wasn’t growing very fast. There were times, I confess, when I felt that academics weren’t dying in sufficient quantities and/or quickly enough. So I adopted a more targeted approach, aiming to collect 100 examples before I began serious analysis, and regularly examining the online versions of the quality dailies to build up this total more speedily. This led me to the opposing conclusion, namely that academics were dying like flies; indeed, at such a rate it was a wonder that our universities were managing to keep operating.

The 100 examples of academic obituaries which are analysed in this article were all published in the year 2007. They don’t amount to all of the academic obituaries published in that year, as I stopped collecting them (in September 2007) when I had got 100. This database does, however, include all of the academic obituaries published during this nine-month period in the four quality UK newspapers. The sample size, while not huge, is both manageable and reasonable, and represents the population of academics obituarised in the UK in the period concerned.

The obituaries collected are confined to ‘quality’ national newspapers (this is almost a truism, as the more popular, ‘redtop’, formerly tabloid, papers don’t tend to publish obituaries – and certainly not of academics – in any formal sense) published in the United Kingdom. I have also restricted myself to obituaries as distinct from contributions submitted by readers, which both *The Guardian* (‘other lives’) and *The Times* (‘lives in brief’) publish. Similarly, only those obituaries that were published in the printed copy of the newspaper (as opposed to online only) have been considered. Finally, only obituaries of subjects whose predominant career was as an academic are included. Thus, those with only brief academic careers (usually before going on to something else), or who pursued research careers predominantly in industry, have been excluded.

In total, I collected 38 obituaries from *The Guardian*, 36 from *The Times*, 35 from *The Daily Telegraph* and 25 from *The Independent*. As is indicated by those figures totalling to more than 100 (to 134), in some cases obituaries of the same academic were collected from more than one source. My interest here is not, however, in how different newspapers report on the same individuals, or in their differences in coverage (which, in my judgement, are relatively small: e.g. in terms of the ordering of the obituary, whether the cause of death is mentioned, and whether the author is anonymous or not). I am mostly concerned with the common features (which are considerable) of the sample as a whole.

Analysis

The analysis which follows has both quantitative and qualitative elements. Certain features of obituaries lend themselves to summary quantitative reportage, such as the age at death, discipline, main institution and country (as opposed to nationality, which is not consistently recorded) of those included. Others, however, most notably the kind of content and tone of the reportage, are best tackled qualitatively. Even with the qualitative components, however, there are considerable similarities of form.

Quantitative

One factor which this analysis bears out is, as suggested in Fowler’s (2005) analysis, the sheer number of academics who get obituarised in the quality press. The relative popularity of academic obituaries appears to be of long standing. Thus, a recent *Times* compendium of 123 obituaries dating from 1916 to 2005 (Brunskill 2005) includes nine relating to academics – Marie Curie, Sigmund Freud, John Maynard Keynes, Alan Turing, Alexander Fleming, Albert Einstein, Walter Gropius, Bertrand Russell and Francis Crick – or 10 if Jean-Paul Sartre, more of an intellectual than an academic, is included. This collection also seems to indicate that academics are relatively long-lived, even those who were born in the nineteenth century. If Alan Turing, who died at just 41, is excluded, the other nine lived to between 62 and 97 years, averaging 78 years at death.

In the sample of obituaries collected for this study, only 15 – note that, as the database has been restricted to 100 cases, all figures quoted are also percentages – related to women. This both confirms the general gender imbalance found in obituaries, and suggests that this may be more extreme for academics, a profession well known for gender discrimination (e.g. Howie and Tauchert 2002).

The age at death of the sample varied from 46 to 98, with a mean age of 79. However, there was a disparity here in terms of gender, with the two youngest to die women and the seven oldest men; and a mean age for women of only 69 compared to 80 for men. This might suggest a slightly sentimental approach, which should perhaps not be surprising.

This interpretation is possibly strengthened by the finding that the only academic in the database whom I found obituarised in all four newspapers was a woman who died relatively young.

The sample was spread across a wide variety of disciplines and subject areas, with roughly half from the arts, humanities and social sciences, and half from the sciences and medicine. Along with medicine (13 examples), established disciplines like biological sciences (10), history, physics (9 each), chemistry (6), philosophy and sociology (5 each) were well represented. Engineers were, however, conspicuous by their absence (only one example), which may be an artefact of the sample or indicative of further bias. As a higher education researcher myself, I was struck that three of the sample – Maurice Kogan, Graeme Moodie and Martin Trow – had been major contributors to my own, relatively small and specialised, field.

While the majority of the sample (60) had been born in the United Kingdom or Ireland, 15 were born in other parts of Europe, 14 in North America, and 3 each in Asia, Africa and Australasia (place of birth was not recorded for 2 cases). The distribution in terms of institutional affiliation was subtly different: recorded in terms of the institution at which they had worked for the longest period, 63 of the sample were primarily based in the UK, 26 in North America, 4 in other European countries, and 1 each in Asia and Australasia (not known for 5 cases).

The disparity between these two sets of figures reflects a number of tendencies. Given that the sample was confined to four UK newspapers, it is not surprising that the majority of those obituarised were born and mainly worked in the UK. Internationally known and regarded academics were also obituarised, with the greater proportion of these born or based in North America; reflective of the dominance of America in the knowledge industries, historical ‘brain drain’ from the UK to the US, and, doubtless, English language bias. Conversely, the figures for academic births and employment outside the UK and North America are reflective of a historical ‘brain drain’ to the UK from the former Empire (though some of those involved would, of course, have had British nationality), and of academic refugees coming from continental Europe before, during and after the Second World War.

The academics obituarised had worked in many different universities: 39 in the UK alone are mentioned, and 18 in the US. In terms of the main institution worked at, most, of course, only featured once, though Oxford features in 8 obituaries, Sussex in 5, Berkeley in 4 (if all branches of the University of California are added together, they featured 9 times), and Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leicester, Princeton, the School of Oriental and African Studies and University College London in 3. While this indicates a focus on academics who worked in elite universities, there were two examples of obituaries of academics who had spent most of their careers in ‘new’ UK universities. The dominance of Oxford and Cambridge universities over the period in which these academics lived (Halsey 1992) is, though, confirmed by 43 of them having studied at Oxbridge and 23 having worked there at some time.

The majority (at least 81: note here that this, and particularly some of the figures that follow, may be an under-estimate, as these characteristics were not necessarily recorded in all obituaries) had been professors. Six had been vice-chancellors, at least 7 deans, and at least 27 heads of department (while the latter may be an under-estimate, as this is the sort of detail that obituarists may have not felt it necessary to mention, it is possibly also suggestive of the ability of ‘top’ academics to avoid undue administrative responsibility).

Five of the sample had been Nobel prize winners; one might expect, of course, that such luminaries would be routinely obituarised. At least 36 were recorded as having won other prizes of note – often described as ‘equivalent’ to a Nobel prize – while 6 had been knighted. At least 25 had chaired academic societies, and at least 11 had been journal editors. Not surprisingly, given the period in which many of the sample had lived, at least 30 had served during the Second World War, in a wide variety of military and government capacities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the monastic associations of academe – which might also, of course, help to explain why the male academics lived relatively long lives – 13 of the sample appeared to have never married (or perhaps even have had a partner). For 62 one marriage/partner was recorded, for 18 two, while 5 had got through three (unrecorded for 2). About a quarter, 24, apparently left no children, while 9 left one, 19 two, 28 three, 12 four, 5 five and 1 seven (not recorded for 2).

Qualitative

Initial qualitative analysis of the 134 obituaries (of 100 academics) in the database indicated that two of Fowler’s (2005) five sub-genres were represented. Indeed, most of the obituaries could be characterised as ‘traditional positive’ (i.e. a celebration of ‘a continuous upwards ascent’), with a minority ‘untraditional yet positive’ (i.e. still a celebration, but not ‘a continuous upwards ascent’). No examples of negative, tragic or ironic – in the terms in which Fowler defines them – obituaries were present, which is perhaps not surprising given the focus on successful academics.

A content analysis of the database confirmed the presence of a series of common – though not necessarily to all cases – elements. These are summarised, in the rough order in which they were typically presented, in Table 1. For some of these, an ‘untraditional positive’ alternative element has been identified as well.

The typical, ‘traditional positive’, academic obituary, therefore, contains, in roughly chronological order, a summary account of its subject’s family background, education and career. Reflections on their qualities and achievements in the different aspects of academic work – as a researcher, teacher and administrator/manager – are normally included, alongside an

Table 1. Common elements in academic obituaries

Traditional Positive	Untraditional Positive Alternative
opening epigram	
family heritage	
migrant experience	
imperial background	
early promise	early struggle
excellent at school	
model undergraduate	troubles at university
beginning academic	
wartime/service experience	
transatlantic sojourn	
Oxbridge beckons	
established position	mixed judgement
respected academic manager	woman succeeding against the odds
professional servant	
renaissance man	
honoured by all	not an establishment man
prolific retirement	
the telling anecdote	
united in sorrow	
survived by	

extended consideration of what they added to the sum of knowledge in their particular field. Specific attention may also be given, where appropriate, to the subject's experience in the armed forces (something which is becoming less common, of course, now that it is over 60 years since the last major war involving British forces) or in overseas posts, and as a senior academic manager, society chair or journal editor. The major prizes they were awarded will be listed, and a quantitative summary of their published output is fairly common. The obituary typically closes with an anecdote designed to confirm their essential eccentricity (a feature which is common to non-academic obituaries as well, suggesting that eccentricity is either not confined to academics, or is a requirement for the obituarised), and a listing of surviving family.

The less common, 'untraditional positive', obituary is broadly similar in organisation and composition, differing in only a few elements. Thus, indications of an early struggle with family poverty may be included, as well as problems in getting into, and staying in, university. Judgements about the subject's overall academic performance may be more measured or mixed. Thus, while still normally lauding their intellectual achievement and teaching ability, some recognition that they did not entirely fit in may be included. While the numbers involved do not permit anything like definite conclusions to be drawn, it does seem significant that relatively more women than men feature in this obituary sub-genre. Indeed, the 'woman succeeding against the odds' element is well represented; indeed, almost expected for women.

Using the entire corpus of 134 obituaries in the database, two composite, illustrative or sample, obituaries have been constructed. One of these (Table 2), 'dead good', about Henry (a pseudonym) is representative of the 'traditional positive' obituary genre. The other (Table 3), 'dead flawed', about Matilda (another pseudonym, chosen to reflect the gender split), is representative of the 'untraditional positive' genre. Note that, though both are of about the average length for published obituaries, the 'great achievement' section – setting out the individual's contribution to knowledge, which tends to be very specific – has not been included in full.

Lest it be thought that I have deliberately chosen extreme examples from the database to include in these composite obituaries, I would emphasise that I was not short of equally impressive or striking alternatives. Indeed, some of the component parts – for example, about the childhood chemistry set setting the future scientific star on their way, or the committee chair allowing members to debate before getting them to agree to the 'compromise' course of action they had already pre-determined – were repeated virtually word for word in more than one obituary and about different academics.

Henry's obituary, 'dead good', contains many elements common to others of its 'traditional positive' genre. These include: an uncritical assertion of academic greatness; exemplification of early independence and brilliance; academic prizes won throughout life; gaining a chair early on; the wonderful intellectuality brought to meetings; evidence of achievement not only in their particular disciplinary specialism, but elsewhere within and beyond academe; continuing work in retirement (indeed, even to the point of death). While, as a composite production, it may seem rather 'jerky', even implying great achievement in a number of separate disciplines, both of these features are actually not that unusual in the individual obituaries from which this has been compiled.

Other elements included in Henry's obituary are not so common in the sample – including his family's refugee status, a wartime experience so substantial as to almost appear pleasurable (despite involving a long period of imprisonment), an obsession with singing – but still occur in a fair number of the obituaries, particularly of subjects of a certain age and background.

Table 2. Dead good: a composite 'traditional positive' academic obituary

Henry was one of the greatest mathematicians of the twentieth century.

Alarmed by the rise of Nazism, his maternal grandfather arranged for the family to escape to Switzerland in 1933 on the pretext of a skiing holiday.

A chemistry set received as a Christmas present set him on the road to academia. He found some classes boring, but was encouraged by one teacher who allowed him and some of his classmates to be excused lessons and to conduct experiments on their own. A poem he wrote about the delights of mountaineering won Henry the Enoch Powell Award for English verse at Trinity.

Having taken a First in Part I of the Classical Tripos, in February 1942, he was drafted into the 9th Royal Fusiliers, with whom he served in the Middle East and North Africa before being captured on landing in Italy and sent to Stalag Luft VIII B in Silesia, where he acquired fluent German, taught languages to other prisoners, perfected his remarkable skill on the clarinet, and developed as a Shakespearean actor.

Exceptionally, he was offered the Walker-Ames Professorship at Washington University twice within 20 years, the first time for zoology (1959), the second time for music (1979); but due to a perceived slight by a US Embassy official in London over his visa application, the trip was cancelled.

His rise through the academic ranks was rapid. By the age of 34 he held the chair of physics in the New University of Ulster at Coleraine. He had become a star performer presenting papers on his theories at conferences around the world; Eastern European students crowded around him to obtain autographs on copies of his papers, a very rare event in scientific circles.

He was admired for his gentle but firm touch, for his ability to persuade the right person to do the right job, for his selflessness and for his understanding of the foibles and frailties of academe. Sauntering into class, he would keep students alert, as one of them recalled, with 'one of his loud, stupor-crashing guffaws, complete with broad, yellow-teethed smile and bulging eyes which looked like they might drop out of their sockets and roll on to the cement floor'.

Henry was a consummate committee man. Even when he felt very strongly on a particular issue, he would always let the various protagonists argue for about 40 minutes before saying: 'Gentlemen, may I suggest a compromise?' In fact, it was what he had wanted from the start, but the exhausted combatants were always happy to agree.

He was an awe-inspiring scientist. A meeting with him was always an enriching and sometimes puzzling experience. Great attention to his explanations and patience with his mildly eccentric ways were required, but the reward was in proportion to his intellectual powers.

He and his wife had taken up ceramics when he was a junior doctor as they didn't see enough of each other and this would give them time together. This turned into a lifelong activity, and they sold their porcelain ware at local galleries. Henry also sailed a 43ft yacht, including a transatlantic crossing.

He remained modest about his achievement. When the Nobel Prize jury described him as the 'Isaac Newton of our time', he laughed off the description, putting it down to 'Nordic lyricism'.

Upon his retirement in 1976 Henry devoted himself almost exclusively to research and publication, maintaining a daily schedule of five hours of study in the early morning, followed by a hike on the steep trails of nearby Tilden Park, and then five more hours in the late afternoon and evening.

His particular passion was to get the College Classical society singing in Latin, the favourite being 'Waltzing Matilda', with its chorus starting 'ambiclitella! ambiclitella!'

Sources (slightly edited for consistency): *Daily Telegraph*, 28 March 2007, 29 March 2007, 17 April 2007, 4 May 2007, 24 May 2007, 19 September 2007; *Guardian*, 20 February 2007, 31 August 2007; *Independent*, 29 January 2007, 5 March 2007, 25 August 2007, 16 September 2007; *Times*, 24 March 2007, 3 July 2007, 18 September 2007.

Matilda's obituary, 'dead flawed', contains many elements similar to those of Henry's, also asserting the intellectual greatness of its subject and her sustained achievement. Alongside these, however, this 'untraditional positive' composite includes less positive elements. Childhood deprivation is evident, along with bullying at school, troubles during undergraduate study and – since more of these obituaries are about women and/or academics from lower social class backgrounds – discrimination in later working life. A more mixed judgement is presented of what Matilda was like to work with, suggesting reservations about her behaviour and management style. And, while Henry's varied intellectual, artistic and sporting achievements are presented as if he was an out-and-out renaissance man, in Matilda's case her varied interests are seen as eclectic, with the sum of the parts perhaps very much less than the whole.

Table 3. Dead flawed: a composite 'untraditional positive' academic obituary

Matilda elucidated, as perhaps the leading British anthropologist of the second half of the twentieth century, the cult of the pangolin, the abominations of Leviticus and the explosive tendencies behind al-Qa'eda. She grew up in a tent by the Purangi creek after her father became a fisherman at Mercury Bay. Matilda's clothes were home made and she was frequently bullied by other girls, and, though she took on a paper round, she had no shoes until she moved to Brixton Road primary in 1935. She was the first female student not to be expelled from Oxford for becoming pregnant. The college authorities did, however, as a public expression of their disapproval, strip her of her scholarship.

Aspirations to comprehensive understanding came naturally to her. In a less intellectually scrupulous person, this might have led to pretentiousness and hand-waving, but her breadth of ambition was allied to definiteness and scholarly discipline.

Matilda found herself something of a scientific celebrity: people sent her fan mail while religious fundamentalists prayed for her soul. While some would judge her science as too eclectic to place her among Britain's elite, others would see her oeuvre as the product of an intellect flexible enough to confront the most pressing issues.

Matilda never felt she was discriminated against as a woman, although she was aware of the problem. She said: 'When I was young I never thought of myself as a woman scientist, just as a scientist, and as a woman. There was no statutory maternity leave, we just had children and got on with things as best we could'.

What was special about Matilda was her kindness and capacity for caring and understanding. Meeting her changed my life. When my then supervisor threatened to flog me in public for my failing work, I asked Matilda to supervise me and she, turning a blind eye to my deficiencies, took charge of my life. She and her then husband Jeremy became the nearest I had to a family in York. I owe them my happiness, and partly thanks to their advice, my husband.

She and Jeremy built their own house together at Coton, a village two miles outside Cambridge, working on site in the mornings and returning to their respective theses in the afternoons and evenings.

Never a disciple of the medical establishment, Matilda's maverick tendencies appear to have prohibited her from receiving the public honours which might otherwise have been hers. Her total dedication to scientific research and enormous productivity conflicted with the limited ambition of some of her colleagues. Not surprisingly there were disagreements and not everyone approved of her management style. Matilda's standards were extremely high and she was no lover of compromise.

Only a few days before she died Matilda said with some difficulty over the telephone to one of her friends that she was taking the opportunity to write a phenomenology of dying.

She published more than 100 articles and chapters, and 15 books, but would probably prefer to be remembered for the plays, including a parody of Hamlet, that she wrote for performance at international psychology conferences. She is survived by her encyclopaedia, her husband and her sister.

Sources (slightly edited for consistency): *Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 2007, 4 May 2007, 21 May 2007, 22 May 2007, 30 August 2007, 18 September 2007; *Guardian*, 26 June 2007, 7 July 2007, 15 August 2007, 16 August 2007; *Independent*, 16 August 2007, 17 August 2007, 25 August 2007; *Times*, 6 September 2007.

Intriguingly, though probably simply a function of the greater number of women included in the 'untraditional positive' genre, the kindness of, and care exercised by, the obituarised to their students appears to shine more brightly in these obituaries even than in the 'traditional positive' ones.

Discussion and conclusion

So what can this analysis tell us about academic work and life, primarily in the United Kingdom, during the post-war period?

First, though perhaps surprisingly to some, it suggests that academics – or, at least, the most senior and successful academics – are held in relatively high regard, at least amongst the professional and managerial groups who read the quality daily press (cf. Fowler 2005). Otherwise, there would be no reason to include so many academic obituaries in these newspapers. This should be at least somewhat reassuring to most academics, even if they are unlikely to be obituarised.

This conclusion does, however, run somewhat counter to the other ways in which academics are sometimes portrayed in the media. Thus, we may also find our research held up to ridicule, particularly in the more popular press, and our teaching under-valued, and be somewhat humorously labelled as ‘boffins’ or ‘dons’. Yet, a multi-faceted portrayal is surely to be expected, and the positive and respectful impression presented in obituaries – reinforced as it is by the many references to, and uses of, academics as ‘experts’ in the media – is arguably dominant. The academic’s standing in society may not now be as strong as it was, for example, in the early 1960s, but it is still fairly assured.

Second, and perhaps less satisfactorily, the analysis confirms the continuing dominance of long-established hierarchies, with their class and gender components, in the way academic achievement is demonstrated and celebrated (cf. Bourdieu 1988). While this is in part a reflection of genuine intellectual quality, as many of the ‘best’ are attracted to work in the ‘best’ institutions, it is far from being wholly so.

But not all professors, and not even all ‘first class’ professors, get obituarised in the national quality press. And, at the same time, some surprising candidates, who may never have been professors, and whose achievements may appear relatively modest by comparison, are. So, while inclusion in *Who’s Who*, and similar directories, may lead fairly directly to obituarisation, it seems that personal and social networks, and other sorts of connections with the media, also have a part to play in determining who gets in and who doesn’t. Thus, a close connection between obituarised and obituariser – usually, with the latter having been a student of the former – was evident in a few cases in the database, though this does appear to have been relatively unusual.

Third, even leaving aside the somewhat mannered style in which obituaries are composed, and their reluctance – at least in traditional positive mode – to admit to any inadequacies on the part of their subjects, one is left awe-struck regarding the glittering achievements and charmed lives of many of those who make it in to print. This feeling is compounded by the mythic quality (which is not, of course, to say that they are untrue) of many of the statements and anecdotes included.

This is to be expected, of course, as, by and large, obituaries in the quality press are reserved for those who have achieved great things in their lives. But this does have a downside. Thus, most of us, even professors, in academic life, may feel truly not worthy by comparison (so perhaps a follow-up investigation of academics appearing in the ‘other lives’ or ‘lives in brief’ sections of the obituary columns of the *Guardian* and *Times* is called for).

Fundamentally, though, the story which these obituaries impart to me about post-war academic work and life is one of lots of individuals striving hard and putting in long hours, caring for their students, colleagues and research topics, and achieving a great deal in often trying circumstances. This is not a story which commonly reaches us through the more conventional forms of academic output – the research paper, conference presentation, quality audit report or news story – so is to be genuinely celebrated.

Postscript

Perhaps regrettably, neither the composite traditional positive obituary presented earlier, nor its untraditional positive alternative, nor any of the individual academic obituaries contained in the sample analysed in this article, are a patch on that of Count Gottfried Alexander Leopold Graf von Bismarck-Schönhausen (who also appears to have had more names than anyone else – *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 2007), which begins with the gripping sentence:

Count Gottfried von Bismarck, who was found dead on Monday aged 44, was a louche German aristocrat with a multi-faceted history as a pleasure-seeking heroin addict, hell-raising alcoholic, flamboyant waster and a reckless and extravagant host of homosexual orgies.

While he was not an academic, he was a student at Oxford, where ‘Perhaps unsurprisingly he managed only a Third in Politics, Philosophy and Economics’, leaving in disgrace after the daughter of a cabinet minister was found dead on his bed.

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