EPITAPHS

✧ This slide show set provides some examples of the epitaphs we come across in our heritage cemeteries.

✧ Epitaphs are the words that are written on a tombstone. Interesting epitaphs are those that often provide a pity comment.

✧ Epitaphs provide important clues as to the attitudes prevalent at the time and what Victorians considered to be important.
Stop traveller, stop ere you go by,
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you must be:
Prepare yourself to follow me.

◊ Prior to 1800 ordinary people had little expectation that there was anything beyond death. Epitaphs from 1700s England conveyed the idea that once a person died that was believed to be more or less that.

◊ Changes in attitudes to death can be seen occurring in epitaphs over time. Victorian era epitaphs are unique in that they show that many ordinary people believed in the possibility that there was a life after death.

◊ Victorians were also proud of their achievements, held particular personal virtues in high regard, and often found life a toilsome an worrisome business.

On the tomb of the unknown warrior this pithy epithet…

To save your world you asked this man to die:
Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?
Mortality of Man

Many inscriptions are concerned with mortality, and its inevitability. The moral is expressed in different forms and is quite commonly found in our cemeteries.

Stop traveller, stop ere you go by,
As you are now so once was I:
As I am now so you must be:
Prepare yourself to follow me.

Northern Cemetery Dunedin

Mourn not for me my comrades dear
I am not dead but sleeping here
My end you know, my grave you see
Prepare yourself to follow me.

Northern Cemetery Dunedin
Unfairness of Fate

✧ George Rich an only son died aged 20 and is interred at Palmerston Cemetery.

✧ The grief of his parents is clearly expressed on this simple and otherwise unadorned capped stone.

✧ For many people life was hard work and endless toil and this is sometimes mentioned on headstones. With the death of young George Rich a pair of much loved and valued hands to share in the heavy workload has been taken away.

Day by day the voice saith come
Enter thine eternal home
Asking not if we can spare
This dear soul it summons there
GOOD & VIRTUOUS PEOPLE

Both inscriptions here are similar. They describe the piety of the deceased, his good works, the high esteem in which he is held in the community, and his willingness to meet death and his saviour.

In youth he gave himself to The Lord. In Manhood he commended the gospel by a good Christian Life. In death he rejoiced in his saviour. As a husband and a father, as an elder and a Sabbath school teacher, as a friend to the afflicted and widows, he lived beloved and died regretted.

(Palmerston Cemetery)

This headstone has been erected in affectionate remembrance of one who lived a pious and Christian Life, and beloved by all who knew him. He was also peaceful and resigned to meet his saviour.

(Old Cromwell Cemetery)
‘Safe in the Arms of Jesus’ epitaphs

✧ There was a strong belief in the resurrection and life after death.
✧ There are many examples of the short inscription “Asleep in Jesus” and “Safe with Jesus”.

I will lay me down in peace
And take my rest
For it is thou Lord only
That makest me dwell in safety

Asleep in Jesus.

Safe in the arms of Jesus
Safe on his gentle breast
There by his love o’er shadowed
Sweetly my soul shall rest
“Follow Me”

All St John’s Churchyard Cemetery Waikouiti.
‘The Resurrection Morn’ epitaphs

✧ There are many examples where the deceased is awaiting “the resurrection morn” or “waiting for the morning light”.

✧ Also quite common is the idea of earthly shadows, darkness, despair and despondency fleeing before the light of the resurrection dawn.

✧ These ideas are illustrated in the popular postcard of the time pictured here.
Death was a journey that may involve flight through darkness to the bliss or light of heaven. Angels may help with the journey.

Released from sorrow, sin, and pain
And freed from every care,
By angels' hands to heaven conveyed,
To rest for ever there.

Forgive blest shade, the tributary tear
That mourns thine end from a world like this
Forgive the wish that would have kept thee here
And stayed thy progress from a seat of bliss

No more confined to groveling scenes of night,
No more a tenant rent in mortal clay,
Now would we rather hail thy glorious flight
And trace thy journey to the realms of day
‘Meeting again’ Epitaphs

✧ There are many other examples where a time of reunion with parted friends and loved ones will occur in the future when everyone will be in a ‘State of Glory’ after the day of judgement and the resurrection.

✧ This very poignant epitaph can be found on the Mitchell family headstone. The family lost five children in less than two weeks in the 1877 Scarlet Fever epidemic in Dunedin.

A few short years of evil past,
We reach this happy shore,
Where death divided friends at last,
Shall meet to part no more.
Oh may we stand before the lamb,
When Earth and seas are fled,
And hear the judge pronounce our name
With blessings on our heads.

Mitchell Grave Northern Cemetery
DEATHS RESULTING FROM ILLNESS

Epitaphs that tell of an illness are not commonly found.

This inscription from the Palmerston Cemetery reads ....

One dawn had seen him healthy and fair
Smiling and blooming and strong
Blyth as the lark when he mounts in the air
and carols his morning song.

Another sun rose and sick he lay
And panting hard for breath
A third he was resting a clod of clay
In the icy embrace of death.

This inscription from Dunedin’s Anderson’s Bay Cemetery reads ....

In Loving Memory of Nurse Eva F.M. Cooper
Nursing staff Late of Gore
Died at Dunedin 18th Nov. 1918
During the time of the epidemic
Aged 28 Years
DEATH OF CHILDREN

✧ Epitaphs listing children are common because the death rate for children was high. “Suffer the little children to come unto me” was a popular passage drawn from the Bible. In this sense ‘suffer’ means ‘let.’ Who is me?

This inscription from the Waitati Cemetery reads ....

Sacred to the memory of Martha M. McEachern Who died March 28th 1876 Aged 8 months Also William Islay McEachern Who died October 1st 1877 Aged 7 years

Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.
Accidental Deaths

◊ Epitaphs that tell of an accidental death are very common and our heritage cemeteries are full of stories of death by shipwreck, falls from horses, trains & trams, explosions, crushings, drownings, and falls of earth.

◊ In the examples illustrated James Balfour drowned attempting to return to attend the funeral of his friend who had drowned 3 days before.

The inscription reads...
Thomas Paterson M.I.C.E.
Born Edinburgh 25th Dec 1830
Drowned When crossing
The Kakanui River
15th Dec 1869

The inscription simply reads...
In Memory of
James Melville Balfour
Colonial Marine Engineer
who was drowned off Timaru
On the 18th December 1869
Aged 38 years
Multiple drownings

Seven young men sailing in Otago Harbour on Christmas day were all drowned when a sudden squall turned the yacht over. Drownings in streams, lakes, rivers, and harbours were very common.

The inscription reads...

Also his beloved brothers
William & Peter Aged 24 years
John aged 22.
Drowned in Dunedin Harbour
On Christmas Day 1871
Together in life and in death
they were not divided.

The inscription tells the following story...

To the Memory of
John Bruce
Native of Leith Scotland
who was accidentally drowned
In Dunedin Harbour with six others
On Christmas day 1871
Aged 28 years and 9 months
Deeply regretted by all who knew him.
Shipwrecks, especially in the late 19th Century were very common. Before roads were well established, travelling by sea was a common way to get about.

There are many gravestones that feature loss of life due to shipwreck in our cemeteries and families were often devastated by the loss of several family members in a single accident. In the wreck of the S.S. Wairarapa in 1894 members from several Dunedin families lost their lives.

Father, touch the east
And light the light that shone when Hope was born.

This Epitaph on the Fyfe Memorial is a metaphor for the resurrection.

Loss at sea usually meant that the body was not found and family members were unable to secure a decent burial for family members something that is still very important today. All those who lost their life in the S.S. Wairarapa are commemorated only on the tombstones. We call these ‘cenotaphs’ or empty tombstones.
The wreck of the S.S. Wairarapa off Great Barrier Island in October 1894 claimed the lives of 121 people.

It was the third worst shipping disaster ever in New Zealand in terms of loss of life.

The inscription reads...

In memory of
Charlotte McDonald
Annie MacQuaid
and
Lizzie Crinrod
Stewardesses
Who were drowned in
the wreck of the
S.S. Wairarapa
Great Barrier Island
29th October 1894
Erected by the
Stewardesses of the
U.S.S. Company

In Loving Memory of
Alice Mary Fyfe
Aged 35 years
And wee Freddie
Aged 2 years
The wife and infant son of
Maxwell I. Fyfe Dunedin.
Who were drowned in the
wreck of the S.S. Wairarapa
at the Great Barrier Island
Near Auckland on Oct 28th 1894
Exposure to Bad Weather

The inscription for the headstone on the left reads...

Sacred to the memory of Edward John Garvey Late Sergeant in the Otago Mounted Constabulary who lost his life in a snow storm on the Kakanui ranges, Mt Ida Goldfield while in the execution of his duty on the 25th Day of September, AD 1863, deeply and sincerely regretted by all who knew him. Aged 30 years Requiescat in pace

The inscription for the headstone on the right reads...

In Loving Memory of William Beloved son of Hugh McKenzie of Walter Peak Station Who lost his life in a snow slip In sight of his home About noon on 8th August 1906 Aged 21 years and 3 months. (Queenstown Cemetery)
Cave-ins and Rock Falls

Accidental deaths due to a “fall of earth” are very common in the gold mining areas of Central Otago. Inadequately supported mine shafts were a frequent cause of cave-in. So too were rockslides in the notoriously unstable rocky Nevis and Bannockburn areas.

The inscription below reads …

Erected to the memory of Andrew Elliot
Who was killed by a fall of earth
On the 8 July 1881
Aged 48 years
(Kyeburn Diggings Cemetery)

The inscription below reads …

In memory of August Augustus
A native of Sweden
Who was killed by a fall of earth near Naseby April 18th 1877
Aged 35 years
Erected by the members of the Ark of Safety Lodge I.O.O.F.
(Naseby Cemetery)

The inscription reads …

Sacred
To the Memory of Joel Chapman
Who was accidentally killed by a fall of earth at Kawarau Gorge
Cromwell Nov 21st 1875
Aged 26 years
Native of Roche Cornwall.
(Old Cromwell Cemetery)
These epitaphs are for two explosions. One occurred during the Chain Hills Tunnel excavation and the second in the Kaitangata Coal mine near Balclutha. The second death records that of James Frew in 1879, who along with 34 other miners were trapped by a fatal explosion in one of the coal mine shafts.

The inscription reads ...

Also Harry Beloved son of Jane Smith
Accidentally killed by an explosion in the Chain Hills Tunnel
9 May 1913, Aged 31
A good son and a loving brother
(Southern Cemetery Dunedin)

The inscription reads ...

In loving memory of
Thomas Frew
Accidentally killed 21st Feb 1879
Aged 41 years
Also his son John
Died 11th Feb 1887 Aged 20 years
Also Edward
loved husband of Janet Gibb
Died 28th April 1938 Aged 73 years
Janet Gibb wife of above
Died Jan 19-7
(Northern Cemetery Dunedin)
**Railway Accidents**

✦ Fatal accidents involving any form of transportation have always been common. Once the railways were developed and train travel became popular there were a number of railway accidents recorded.

The inscription reads ...

**Erected**
By the staff and workmen
Employed on the North Island Main Trunk Railway
To the Memory of
George Millar Forsyth
Inspector of Works Who was accidentally killed in the execution of his duty at Waipuru
23rd May 1907
Aged 41 years

Loved most by those who knew him best

(Northern Cemetery Dunedin)

The inscription reads...

In memory of Andrew Wilson
Accidentally killed
Dunedin Railway
29th Oct 1903
Aged 49 years.
(Southern Cemetery)
Killed in Action Epitaphs

In Palmerston Cemetery this beautiful inscription written by a mother to commemorate her only son reads...

In loving memory of
Lieut. ALLAN RITCHIE DOUGLAS.
5th Mounted Rifles [Otago Hussars]
and 2nd Battalion N. Z. Infantry Expeditionary Force.
Dearly loved only son of
ANNIE ELLEN DOUGLAS
and second son of the late
JOHN DOUGLAS, Mount Royal
Killed in action. France 11th August 1917
Buried Prowse Point Military Cemetery
Aged 21 years and 10 months.

I cannot say, I will not say,
that he is dead. He is just away.
With a cheery smile and a wave of the hand
he wandered into an unknown land
and left us dreaming how very fair.
It needs must be since he lingers there.

Every small town and city in New Zealand has memorials to those who died in wartime. The variety of inscriptions amazes and some are presented here. There are many others. Pithy epigrams on headstones for soldiers killed in action include the following examples...

“Nobly fighting Nobly fell”
(Francis Davis, Messines)

“Translated from the War of the World to the Peace of God”
(Henry Pryce Naughton, Passcendeale)

“He fought to the end against odds uncounted. He fell with his face to the foe.”
(Lieut. Walter MacKenzie, Gallipoli, August 9 1915)
Killed in action epitaphs

The inscription reads ....

On a ridge in Gallipoli
a stone erected by his comrades
bears this inscription.

19th May 1915
Lieut. P. Logan [Age 22]
11th Squadron A.M.R.
N. Z. Forces
Mortally wounded and buried at sea
[From hospital ship Sudan]
When hit by a bullet on his head
while leading his troop during the
big assault on or stronghold
he immediately called for his
troop sergeant [Sgt. Allsopp]
Handed over the troop to him and
Then having completed his duties
fell back unconscious
and never spoke again.
He died respected by all, a brave
Soldier and gentleman.

Preston Logan Born 25th May 1892
Buried at Sea Lat 40° 15’ N Lon 26° 16’ W
Killed in action epitaphs

The inscription below and to the left reads...

Also
Corporal William Alexander
Second son of the above Who was killed in action on Passchendaele Ridge whilst helping his comrade.
Oct 12th 1917
Aged 24 years

The inscription above and to the right reads...

Also their eldest son
COLL BOYD MCDONALD
who lost his life whilst on Imperial Service as a Cadet on the training ship S.S. Aparima which was torpedoed by the enemy in the English Channel at 01 am on 19th Nov 1917.
Aged 24 years

Also their eldest son
COLL BOYD MCDONALD
who lost his life whilst on Imperial Service as a Cadet on the training ship S.S. Aparima which was torpedoed by the enemy in the English Channel at 01 am on 19th Nov 1917.
Aged 18 ½ years
Victims of Murder

This headstone is located at Dunedin’s Southern Cemetery. The inscription reads…

Erected by the United Otago District Ancient Order of Foresters
In memory of their late Bro
JAMES MURRAY DEWAR
Aged 30 years
His wife
ELIZABETH M. AITCHISON
Aged 23 years
Also his daughter
ELIZABETH LINDSAY
Aged 3 months
Who were brutally murdered in Cumberland Street Dunedin
March 14th 1880

✧ It is unusual for murder victims to have such a clearly marked epitaph as a reminder of such a tragedy as the Dewars’ endured.

✧ Most victims and their perpetrators lie in unmarked graves or in a simply marked grave that gives only names date of death and age. It was intended the passer by would pass the grave unnoticed and remain unknowing.

✧ The Dewar headstone, however, stops us in our tracks. It is worth finding out more about this unbelievable tragedy.
PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Most commemorations of a life’s work are for professional people such as lawyers, and engineers.

SACRED

to

THE MEMORY OF

Hon. Sir Thomas MacKenzie
C.C.M.G. L.L.D. M.L.C.
A Prime Minister and
High Commissioner of New Zealand
Born at Edinburgh 1853
Died at Dunedin 1930

Sacred
to the Memory of
Hon. Sir Thomas
MacKenzie
C.C.M.G. L.L.D. M.L.C.
A prime minister and
High Commissioner of New Zealand
Born at Edinburgh 1853
Died at Dunedin 1930

(Northern Cemetery)

The inscription reads...

Captain John Pietersen
Of the Union Company’s
S.S. Taiaroa
Who Died at Dunedin, July
18th 1880
Aged 49 years
Erected by officers and crew
of the steamer and a few of
his old friends in the service
(Northern Cemetery)

IN MEMORY OF

William Newsham Blair
M. Inst G.E.
Engineer-in-chief of N.Z.
Who Died at Wellington
On 4th May 1891
In his 50th Year
Erected by
Officers Past and Present
Of the Public Works Department
As a mark of the esteem in
Which he was held by them

In Memory of
William Newsham Blair
M. Inst G.E.
Engineer in chief of NZ
who died at Wellington
on 4th May 1891
In his 50th Year
Erected by officers past
and present of the public
works department
As a mark of the esteem in
which he was held by them.
(Northern Cemetery)
IN THE SERVICE OF OTHERS

Working for the good of others was often an attribute that friends or beneficiaries had inscribed on the headstone of an esteemed colleague.

The inscription reads...

James B. B. Bradshaw
Son of General Joseph B. Bradshaw
Born Barton Blount Lancaster
22nd Sept 1832
Died 1st Sept 1886
Aged 55
This stone is erected by factory operatives and others who have benefitted by his labours.
Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

The Rev John Williams
Late pastor of the Baptist Church Hanover Street, Dunedin...
An upright man, a genial friend and devoted Christian, a diligent pastor and earnest preacher.
Men loved him, and God used him to make bad men good and good men better.

Behold I come quickly: Hold fast that which thou hast that no man may take thy crown.

Both headstones at Dunedin’s Northern Cemetery.
Country of Origin

It is said that every New Zealanders’ ancestors travelled to this country at some time and this is very evident in our cemeteries. Many headstones offer information about the town, county and country of origin of the deceased.

- Panyu District, Ganzhou China
- Halle, Brunswick Germany
- Kilken, Flintshire North Wales, United Kingdom
- Edinburgh, Scotland United Kingdom
- Exeter England United Kingdom
Original Ships

Occasionally the earliest settlers to a district inscribed the ships in which they travelled to New Zealand on their tombstones.

In memory of Archibald MacDonald
Born 31st May 1809
Died 15th January 1880
Also his wife Janet MacGregor
Born 22nd March 1820
Died 5th December 1902
Arrived by Philip Laing 1848

Sacred to the memory of Maria Heenan
Wife of Denis Heenan
Born Kings County Ireland
Died at Dunedin 20th October 1904
Aged 76 years

Arrived Otago by Ship Mary 1849
Also Denis Heenan
Born Kings County Ireland
Aged 60 years
Died at Dunedin 30th December 1849

Southern Cemetery

Northern Cemetery
Try Writing your own Epitaph

Tombstone Generator

Given the opportunity to write a brief epitaph about yourself what would you write?

Try out the original tombstone generator at http://www.jjchandler.com/tombstone/download.php

INSTRUCTIONS: To download your custom tombstone, right-click on the image and choose the 'Save Picture As...' option from the drop-down menu.