‘Death has no dominion when it is so common’

Roadside memorials at the Isle of Man TT Races

Ray Moore

The Isle of Man Tourist Trophy, or TT Races, is one of the world’s oldest and most prestigious motorcycle racing events. Its association with the Isle of Man arose due to the island’s unique constitutional situation as a British Crown dependency with a responsibility for internal legislation. When the British government refused to amend laws that restricted speed and prohibited motor racing on English roads, Manx authorities were approached about the possibility of running an event in the Isle of Man. The necessary legislation, the Highways (Light Locomotive) Act 1904, was passed by the Manx government at the request of Lieutenant Governor Lord Raglan and the first motor racing, initially for cars, took place later the same year. Motorcycle racing followed in 1907, with racing over the current ‘Mountain Course’ first taking place in 1911. The races continued as a niche event until the outbreak of World War I, grew in popularity through the 1920s and 1930s, and in 1947 became one of the premier events in the fledgling FIM World Championship. As part of the World Championship it attracted the world’s greatest riders, but increasing concerns over safety, due particularly to the death of rider Gilberto Parlotti in 1972, led to increased criticism. The event’s World Championship status was removed in 1976 after growing numbers of riders refused to race at the event. While the TT Races could have easily failed at this juncture, the support of the Auto Cycle Union and the Isle of Man Government along with its historic prestige, enabled the event to continue to attract competitors and spectators alike.

Although famed as one of the world’s fastest and most exhilarating motorcycle races, the TT Races also remains one of sports’ most controversial. The races take place over a 37¾ mile (60.73 km) circuit of public roads where competitors pass within inches of street furniture, stone walls and houses at speeds in excess of 200mph (322kph) [see Figure 1]. Such is the power of the resultant spectacle that fans have identified the Isle of Man as the “Road Racing Capital of the World” (Duckworth 2007: 3) and a “Mecca of Motorcycling” (Hoskin 2006). Yet the very same elements that attract riders and spectators to the TT Races have courted
controversy in equal measure as a consequence of the dangers involved. The death of Japanese rider Yoshinari Matsushita during practice for the 2013 TT Races, marked the 136th fatality in the event’s 106 year history, the 21st this century and the 240th in all racing events on the course. This ‘darker side’ has attracted more attention than any other aspect of the racing or its results, with as many column inches devoted to condemnation of the brutality of the event, its safety record and repeated calls for the event to banned. Indeed, concerns over speed and safety have been a consistent feature from the outset. In 1908 The Times (UK) newspaper reported,

There is no excuse of any kind for using public roads for a display of this sort, in which men, intoxicated by the excitement of rapid motion, and stimulated by the most undisguised commercial motives, tear along at murderous speeds, in clouds of dust which make even modern driving highly dangerous(The Times 1908: 9).

Local counter responses were equally vociferous, with a letter in the Isle of Man Weekly Times calling upon the Manx legislature and population to “stop following Englishmen and have your motor races and any others you like!” inciting them to “vindicate home rule!” (Dweller 1908 as cited in Vaukins 2007). This same debate has been rehearsed annually ever since.

The release of the critically acclaimed film TT3D: Closer to the Edge (2011) with its unrestrained exposé of the dangers from the perspective of its competitors, their friends and families has contributed to a much fuller understanding of the event. The film highlights the fact that for many participants the inherent danger of racing at the TT is part of the attraction. Regular TT competitor and TV presenter Guy Martin pragmatically remarked: “Get it wrong round here and nine times out of ten you’re dead. And that’s a buzz” (Isle of Man TT: A Dangerous Addiction 2012). The humanity, camaraderie and sense of community portrayed within TT3D demonstrated that participants were not simply mindless dupes in a sort of Greek tragedy carried out for the entertainment of spectators and the benefit of the local economy, or driven by the misguided pursuit of fame and fortune. They were, instead, well aware of the inherent risks and were motivated by the sheer thrill and challenge of competing in much the same way as participants in other dangerous sports. This perspective countered the established view of the races as a dangerous anachronism, and led to a softening of the negative attitudes, particularly within the national press. The Independent (UK) newspaper, for example, recently reported,

Death has no dominion when it is so common, but these men deserve our respect. They [the competitors] are important because they provide a bulwark against the sanitisation of sport, the mediocrity of conformity, (Calvin, 2013).

Such a view would have been unthinkable until relatively recently. Despite this new understanding of the TT Races, death remains the so-called ‘elephant in the room’ and is rarely openly discussed. This is largely motivated by a sense of respect for the deceased and the feelings of the bereaved; understandable within the small and relatively close knit racing community. The memorials and monuments erected by the bereaved in the aftermath of death, therefore, represent one of the few expressions of mourning and attitudes towards death at the event. This paper developed from an initial survey carried out between 2010 and 2011 of memorials and subsequent observations made on the creation, development and maintenance of these monuments during episodic visits to the Isle of Man (Moore and Corkill 2012).
Remembering the dead

"...to succeed on the island you have to be totally at ease with yourself, know what you are doing and accept that you might be going home in a box."
John McGuiness (Gillan 2005).

The inherent danger of racing at the Isle of Man TT Races means that “death is an ever-present reality that is written onto the Manx landscape: place names, ‘spontaneous shrines’, plaques and monuments all attest to its pervasiveness,” (Corkill and Moore 2012: 259). The use of commemorative place names has decreased in recent years, often concealed by an official ‘cleansing’ of names and relative narratives associated with death from the TT landscape, as the event struggled with the negative publicity associated with the its safety record (ibid.). In contrast, the establishment of roadside memorials has become increasingly popular, a tradition which is both ingrained in the event’s history and influenced by the wider prevalence of such monuments more generally. Awareness of this, and concern over the power and negative implications of these monuments, has led racing authorities to try to wrestle control over the methods and narratives of remembrance from the bereaved through the creation of a centralised monument: the Rider’s Garden. Despite their ubiquity, these roadside racing memorials remain poorly understood. Useful comparative material comes from the more extensively studied memorials that have become a common feature at roadsides in North America, Australia and the UK. Yet, the memorials from the Isle of Man TT Races appear to represent a distinct subset, motivated by similar feelings of loss and bereavement, but implicated in the negotiation of complex narratives of remembering and forgetting.

Roadside memorials have become a fairly common feature of contemporary society, but there remains some discussion over the origin of the tradition. At first sight, these memorials may be regarded as a relatively recent phenomenon developing out of contemporary attitudes to death and bereavement (Grider, 2001), but there is evidence that they were widespread during the nineteenth century and perhaps even earlier (Monger, 1997). Whatever the origin, “the practice has proliferated in the last 15 odd years and drawn the attention of scholars and journalists who argue they represent a new social trend” (Clark and Franzmann, 2006: 580). Discussions often associate their development with modern attitudes towards death that are increasingly institutionalised, professionalised and estranged from the realm of the living. As Gibson contends, “death will be largely absent and invisible in most everyday environments” (2011: 146). Improvements in medical care have seen the demographic of death change also; death has become an affliction of the old, consequently the experience of unexpected or sudden death is more keenly felt amongst the bereaved and society generally. The roadside where many of these sudden deaths occur has become a location where people feel a close connection with the deceased and where, free from the rules and regulations of the churchyard, the bereaved can overtly express their loss. As Clark and Franzmann contend, these memorials are personal expressions of loss and grief that transform secular spaces into sacred places; the civil ‘freedom’ of the roadside allows individuals to construct monuments without religious conventions or the rules of the municipal cemetery (2006).

Commemorating the deceased at the TT Races

At the Isle of Man TT Races the development of roadside memorials is an organic process that begins almost immediately after a death is announced and the circuit has reopened to the public. Those passing the place of fatality...
will slow as a mark of respect for the deceased, offer a ‘prayer’, wave a hand, sound a horn, or as observed in one instance pull a wheelie, as a mark of respect to the deceased. Others will be moved to stop and pay personal respects and begin the process of creating a memorial. The nature of these high-speed accidents means that the roadside is often littered with the debris from the accident. Most of this wreckage will have been tidied away by race officials and marshals, but small fragments of machinery and motorcycle fairing often remain. Visitors often collect these fragments together and place them in a pile close to the scene of death. This wreckage will have a particular symbolic importance for the bereaved, providing a physical connection between themselves and the deceased. In the absence of the body it is through this process that mourners attempt to re-form the remains of the life of the deceased. It also allows them to reconstruct their own lives by restoring order to the scene of death. This is a common process observed elsewhere (e.g. Kuassens et al. 2013). In some instances, mourners are motivated to leave tributes to the deceased. Initially these are somewhat ad hoc, comprising objects close at hand. Within hours of the death of experienced sidecar crew Bill Currie and Kevin Morgan at Ballacr, in 2011, visitors to the scene had left tributes to the pair that included a glass of beer, cigarettes, a glove and an event programme. Soon more ‘formal’ floral tributes begin to appear at the scene, typically brought by family and friends of the deceased. These are a common feature of roadside memorials at the TT Races where their fragility and transience serves as a powerful metaphor for the brevity of human existence. In succeeding days the bereaved visit and revisit the place of death bringing other tributes to the scene such as cards, photographs, teddy bears and other personal objects. These tributes transform the place of death into a more considered and personal memorial to the deceased.

There are some noticeable differences between memorials at the TT Races and other roadside memorials. Cuddly toys, for example, are a common tribute at ordinary roadside memorials when the person being commemorated is young, but are much less common when the deceased is older, particularly if the person being remembered is male. In contrast, at the TT Races cuddly toys seems to be a common feature at the place of death. Accounting for this difference is difficult, but it might be that amongst the bereaved the toy signifies the family left behind, particularly if that family involves children. More general discussions of roadside memorials have often highlighted their role in the “hegemonic construction of masculinity” (Hartig and Dunn 1998: 13). Within a hyper-masculinized environment like the TT Races, where this hegemonic construction of masculinity would be expected, the machismo of motorcycle racing is critiqued and deconstructed at the roadside at the time of death. Similarly, food and drink are also used to commemorate the deceased, arguably undermining notions of the masculine through reference to the domestic. Within days of the accident that claimed the life of Yoshinari Matsushita in 2013, a mourner placed imported sushi and a carton of soft drink as a tribute to the rider. Food plays an important role in traditional mourning practices in Japanese culture (Radin 1946). Similar tributes that reaffirm the place of the deceased amongst the living are found at other racing memorials in the Isle of Man.

**Visiting and revisiting**

At both the TT Races, and more generally, as time progresses visiting and revisiting the place of death will allow the bereaved to come to terms with the passing of the deceased and begin the process of grieving. For some, the construction of a more formal monument will allow relatives, friends and
well-wishers to embody the deceased at the place of death charging it with memories of the departed. As the place where the deceased was last alive, the bereaved will often feel a special connection to the location; a connection which can last an indefinite period of time. Following the funeral, the focus of mourning will traditionally move from the roadside to the grave, the place where the cremated remains were scattered, the home or perhaps another meaningful location important to the bereaved (Grider 2001). At the TT Races, however, where competitors are drawn from diverse geographical locations, the place of death continues to be important amongst the bereaved long after the formal disposal of the corporeal remains. In many circumstances these physical remains are repatriated to another location away from the circuit which may not be immediately accessible to friends and fans from within the racing community. Lacking a particular focus for the expression of grief and commemoration, the place of death takes on greater significance amongst sections of the bereaved without direct access to the place where physical remains are placed. The dispersed nature of this racing community means that the place of death may be the only location where the ability to mourn and commemorate the deceased is possible; a notion reinforced by the fact that the circuit will be visited episodically often on the anniversary of death. The annual attendance at the TT Races will invariably involve ‘visiting’ friends and family who are dead, as well as those who are alive. Even where permanent memorials are absent, the bereaved will often leave floral tributes or mementos on the anniversary of the death.

Construction and form

While a large number of deaths are marked by short-lived, transient tributes, others develop into more formal, permanent memorials. Reflecting the desires of the bereaved these monuments can take a variety of forms from simple plaques, such as that found at Glen Helen to David Nixon, to large ‘monumental’ structures, like the concrete and stone cairn dedicated to Jimmy Guthrie [Figures 2a & 2b]. At the same time, while many memorials are created as a singular and organised event, others develop more organically over a protracted period. The complex collection of tributes to the memory of Wayne Hamilton at the 13th Milestone includes metal plaques, photographs, floral tributes, cards, other hand-written messages...
and a ‘Guinness’ glass [Figure 3a]. The bereaved evidently feel a close connection with the place of death, as the site has clearly been visited over a prolonged period, with clear evidence of the degradation of original tributes and the addition of new ones. While belief is often regarded as a strong motivating factor in the creation of ordinary memorials, at the TT Races only a handful of examples show any evidence of religious symbolism. This would therefore seem to support the idea that faith is not always an important motivating factor in the creation of roadside memorials (Clark and Cheshire 2004). There are notable exceptions, for example, the cross erected for Gilberto Parlotti on the Verandah, which represents one of the earliest examples of a roadside memorial for a man with a Catholic background at the event [Figure 3b].

The variety in the forms of these monuments suggests that while an important factor for the bereaved which reflects the individualism of the deceased, greater value is often given to the location of the monument. The placing of monuments shows similar variation. Some monuments are intended to be seen by those passing by, for example the bronze statue of Joey Dunlop who was the event’s most successful competitor with over 26 wins is placed in a location where it is a highly visible landmark on the mountain section of the TT Course [Figure 4a]. Similarly, the concentration of memorials are placed in locations where they can be clearly viewed at the TT Grandstand, the organisational hub of the event and a popular vantage point for spectators. In contrast, other monuments have been purposefully placed in secluded locations.

Figure 3a: Memorial for Wayne Hamilton (1991-2011) at the 13th Milestone © Ray Moore 2013

Figure 3b: Cross placed at the Verandah to the memory of Gilberto Parlotti (1940-1972).

Figure 4a: Bronze statue to the memory of Joey Dunlop (1950-2000) at the Bungalow.

Figure 4b: ‘Garden’ and associated memorials at Black Dub for Rob Vine (1955-1985) and Mark Farmer (1964-1994).
locations or even hidden away from public view. The monument complex erected to the memory of Rob Vine and Mark Farmer, for example, has been placed in a hidden informal garden at the side of the circuit [4b]. A high wall on the roadside hides the memorials from general view, while the plaques to Farmer have been purposefully positioned on the back of the wall so they can only be viewed from within the garden. The monument to Steve Harding, a few hundred metres away, is placed on a steep rock face where it is almost invisible to those passing. Elsewhere, discussions of roadside memorials have often highlight visibility as an important facet in the creation of monuments, bringing the deceased into the mind of the living. Such discussions have also highlighted a secondary function for these memorials in warning road users of the inherent dangers associated with that location and urging them to be cautious (Monger 1997; Grider 2001). At the TT Races, this understanding contradicts the competitive nature of an event where the negotiation of the line between speed and danger is the key to success. Furthermore, many of the memorial plaques are barely discernible at normal road speeds and during racing periods may even be hidden by temporary race furniture, straw bales or padding positioned to afford some protection to competitors. While authors have often claimed that roadside monuments are intended to signpost danger and prompt caution, the nature of many of these memorials means that they are situated in hazardous locations. The death of two race fans as they attempted to visit the memorial to Steve Henshaw at Quarry Bends (Copparelli and Mylchreest 2013), clearly illustrates that far from preventing accidents, such memorials can also cause them.

The significance of place
Interestingly, while the place of death may have great significance for the bereaved the choice of location for the memorial is sometimes different. For some, the choice of location is specific to the deceased or the bereaved. The inscription on the memorial at Westwood serves to illustrate, “In memory of Simon (Boy) Beck at his favourite corner... Died 1st June 1999 at the 33rd [milestone]”. At the same time, memorials can commemorate riders killed racing elsewhere. Jimmy Guthrie, for example, was killed whilst competing at the Großer Preis von Deutschland in Hohenstein-Ernstthal but a memorial was constructed at the place where he retired during his final TT Race [Figure 2]. In other instances the division may not simply be geographic. Memorials are also created to commemorate competitors or officials who were keen supporters of the event and died of natural causes. The memorial to Richard Swallow at Bungalow Bridge, for example, celebrates the life of a popular competitor who raced in the Isle of Man for nearly 20 years. Although he died of natural causes, the memorial plaque allows his friends and fans to remember him in a place where some of his greatest successes came.

Figure 5: The Riders’ Garden, Douglas Borough Cemetery.
[Figure 5]. The development of the monument was stimulated by the death of two spectators who were attempting to view the memorial of Steve Henshaw in 1994 (Copparelli and Mylchreest 2013). The memorial consists of over eighty individual plaques arranged around a central marble plaque, with a stone bench dedicated to local riders Tommy Clucas and Gavin Feighery. The Rider’s Garden stands as a monument to the collective trauma felt amongst both the racing and local communities. Much like a war memorial which re-orientates “the memory of war away from violence and physical damage towards peace and community cohesion” (Carden-Coyne 2009: 319), the Riders’ Garden attempts to reconstruct the community in the face of bereavement. The memorial uses a series of visual cues to reinforce this message of collective identity and communal bereavement. The use of discrete plaques highlights the individual, while their uniform colour, style and spacing serves to subsume the individual into an integrated collective identity. Located in the Douglas Borough Cemetery, this position highlights a desire to include the deceased and by association the bereaved, into the historical and emotional traditions of the local community, creating a united community of loss. At the same time, Douglas Borough Cemetery’s location opposite the TT Grandstand enables the memorial to retain a connection with the event’s hub. Indeed, it is has been purposefully situated as close as possible to the start/finish line (within 30m), placing the deceased symbolically and metaphorically at the very heart of the event.

Unfortunately, its intention for the Rider’s Garden to be a replacement for the many roadside memorials scattered around the TT Course represents a fundamental misapprehension of the meaning of these monuments. For many, it is not remembrance per se that is important, rather it is the place where the monument has been raised, typically the place of death. Elsewhere it has been suggested that roadside monuments may develop from dissatisfaction with traditional practice and ‘rules’ within the graveyard and modern municipal cemetery. This freedom is keenly expressed at the TT Races where the variety in form and the nature of roadside memorials attests to its significance. In contrast, the rules at Douglas Borough Cemetery are reinforced by regulations on the form of plaques erected at the Rider’s Garden. It is perhaps for this reason that in some instances individuals commemorated in the Rider’s Garden are also memorialised at the roadside.

**Discussion**

As manifestations of mourning and the grieving process, roadside memorials have attracted considerable scholarly attention. While many of these discussions have struggled to account for the growth and development of the phenomena, the memorials at the TT Races provide some thought provoking insights into the creation and manipulation of these monuments. Certainly the sheer variety in form, complexity and development highlight the inherent freedom of the roadside in allowing the bereaved a freedom of expression that contrasts with the more traditional formality of contemporary mourning and mourning practices. At the same time, the roadside allows the bereaved more hands-on involvement in the commemorative process; something largely absent from modern death rituals as they are increasingly placed in the hands of ‘the professionals’. It is this freedom which has allowed the bereaved to challenge the hegemony of race officials over who is, and who is not, remembered. The construction of the Riders’ Garden, well-meaning though its intentions may be, can easily be misconstrued as an attempt by race officials to wrestle control of the dead from the bereaved; to regulate who and how they are commemorated (Corkill and Moore 2012). The continued proliferation of
roadside memorials certainly suggests that this strategy is flawed and something that other policy makers might wish to consider when placing restrictions on roadside memorials found in other geographic locales.

The memorials at the TT Races also illustrate the significance of place in the commemoration of the deceased. Indeed, it may even be proposed that the place of death is more important to the bereaved than the form of the monument itself (Corkill and Moore 2012). Here the memorial serves to highlight the significance of the place, where the bereaved feel a close connection with the deceased and where they seek to 'reconstruct' and re-present the individual through the construction of a monument in the aftermath of death. Arguably, the continued importance of the place of death may in part be forced by the nature of a geographically disparate racing community. With limited access to the graveside and the place of formal commemoration the roadside may represent the most appropriate location for remembering the deceased.

Conclusion
The TT Races, therefore, certainly provide some food for thought for those interested in roadside memorials, providing some useful insights into the phenomena. As Vaukins contends “[t]he Manx people cannot forget that the Isle of Man is the venue for the TT. Residents are reminded of this every day. The TT is written into the landscape” (2007). The series of roadside monuments scattered around the course contribute to this experience, implicating the deceased in the TT landscape and bringing their narratives to the fore.

REFERENCES

---

i A second event, the Manx Grand Prix, is also held on the same course in August and September each year.

ii As a self-governing British Crown dependency, the Isle of Man has its own elected government who are responsible for creating its own laws, tax rates and even currency, although the British Government are responsible for defence and international relations. It is this statutory independence that allowed the Manx Government to pass legislation which allowed the races to be held in 1907, at a time when racing was still illegal in England (Duckworth, 2007).

iii In the United States Klaassens, Groote and Vanclay have reported that cuddly toys are a common feature at collective shrines or spontaneous monuments involving children or young adults; they are much less frequent when the deceased is older, and particularly if the person commemorated is male (2013). Elsewhere the use of cuddly toys has been attributed to the fact that the roadside memorial is more recent expression of grief commonly expressed amongst younger demographics leaving tributes regarded as significant amongst young mourners (Collins and Rhine 2003).

iv This brief discussion does not do justice to the variety of monuments found at the Isle of Man TT, consequently readers are encourage to visit the online catalogue where information of the individual memorials is available (Moore and Corkill, 2012, see also Copparelli and Mylchreest, 2013).

v A visit to the location in September 2013 showed that this cross has now been removed.

vi A visit to the location is from Calvin 2013.


