

Remembering the Dead: Shifting Forms of Commemoration and Immanent Understandings of Death in Obituaries

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Chris Miller¹ , Hannah McKillop¹ , and Sohini Ganguly¹

Abstract

Obituaries serve important social functions; they announce death, but more importantly, allow the living to shape how the dead are remembered. Originally reserved for the elite, a democratization of the format has led to obituaries becoming more common and more detailed over the past century. Changes in this genre interact with the rise of nonreligion. As declining affiliation complicates the relationship between death and religious structures, obituaries reveal a shift from transcendent to immanent life stances, reflected in patterns of death commemorations. Based on analysis of obituaries across six Canadian newspapers over the past 120 years, this paper explores the relationships, activities, and values people express through obituaries. We argue that the growing appearance of family members left behind, favourite hobbies, and community associations indicate changes in how death is understood. Death is increasingly commemorated by reflecting on the relationships that people form in life.

Keywords

death, obituaries, religion/spirituality, nonreligion, narrative, commemoration

¹Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Toronto, ON, USA

Corresponding Author:

Chris Miller, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, 84 Neilson Drive, Toronto, ON K1N 6N5, USA.

Email: cmiller5@uottawa.ca

In addition to funeral services and burial rites, obituaries are one way that societies honour people who die. Although they were once exclusive to the famous, powerful, and rich (Starck, 2006), the last century has seen what Bridget Fowler (2007) calls a democratization of the obituary. Obituaries now extend across lines of gender, race, religion, and status, encapsulating the range of identities in a given society.

Reasons for writing obituaries are manifold. They serve pragmatic purposes, from announcing that someone died to inviting people to an upcoming funeral. Obituaries may also facilitate grieving, as the process of writing and reading these notices can help the bereaved process their loss. Another important function of obituaries is legacy-making. These texts allow families to craft and share the life narrative of their loved ones. What were their accomplishments? Who did they leave behind? What did they enjoy doing? Through these details, obituaries construct an image of the deceased, including the values they possessed and communities to which they belonged.

Scholars have analyzed obituaries from a range of perspectives. Starck provides a historical account of this genre's development (2006) while Fowler's Bourdieusian analysis explains how obituaries contribute to/construct collective memory (2007). Building on Fowler, many scholars study how social inequality is enacted through obituaries. Examples range from the language used to describe men versus women, or the kinds of photographs that are selected.¹ Others analyze what obituaries reveal about the surrounding society that produced them, such as marriage patterns or locations where people die (Matcha, 1995; Matcha & Hutchinson, 1997). Since obituaries are one way in which people confront death, scholars also explore how these texts reveal outlooks on death (Bytheway & Johnson, 1996), including popular death metaphors (Crespo Fernández, 2006) or how sports fans preserve their devotion even in death (Campbell et al., 2021).

Despite these varied approaches, research on obituaries largely ignores religion. Some exceptions include a study of Iranian death notices and an analysis of Turkish papers (Aliakbari & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016; Ergin, 2010). Focusing on non-Western countries, these studies highlight the centrality of Muslim identities, practices, and beliefs in these texts. These studies reinforce that religion has an important impact on the way that obituaries are composed. However, as exceptions in the wider literature, these studies underline that the influence of religion on obituaries in the West is generally taken for granted. Based on data from Canadian obituaries from 1900-2021, this study explores the impact of declining religion on the ways that people commemorate death. How have obituaries transformed over a period in which religion has steadily declined? What does this reveal about new ways in which people respond to or make sense of death? Against the backdrop of a major rise of nonreligion, our data suggests that people's lifestances are reflected in obituaries through focusing on relationships and values, rather than drawing attention to religious beliefs and identities.

The data that we examine stands in contrast to the very lengthy obituaries written by professional editors (often about famous/notable figures). We focus instead on obituaries about the average citizen. Generally speaking, these texts are written by people who knew the deceased, including spouses, children, or parents. While scholars tend to

distinguish obituaries from death notices, the line separating these two types of texts is often blurry (Anderson & Han, 2009) and Ergin challenges whether these distinctions are universal across cultures (2010, p. 177). Indeed, among the six publications in our sample, some newspapers use the heading ‘Obituary’ while others use the heading ‘Death Notices’ or simply ‘Deaths.’ In some cases, identical texts about a deceased person appear in several newspapers, classified under different headings. The texts that we analyze (and describe as ‘obituaries’ throughout) appear in a dedicated section of newspapers and reference individuals who died in the preceding days/weeks.

We also offer a note of caution concerning the role of authorship. Davis and Breede (2018) compare the ‘finished product’ of published obituaries against interviews with the families who composed them, and argue that obituaries reflect the values of the bereaved, just as much as the deceased. Any information shared about the deceased (such as their favourite hobby) may accurately encapsulate their life experience. However, this information is also reflective of what the bereaved considered to be the deceased’s favourite hobby, and more broadly, what information to share as a fitting way to memorialize them. In other words, these texts are as much about the living as they are about the deceased.

Declining Religion

Religious affiliation and participation has steadily declined in North America. Based on data from North America and several more Western countries, Kasselstrand et al. offer convincing evidence that fewer people “*believe* in supernatural claims,...engage in religious *behaviors*,...[and] *belong* to or identify with a religion” (2023, p. 12). In Canada, Clarke and Macdonald (2017) trace the beginning of this decline to around the 1960s. Since the 2000s, the pace of decline has accelerated. In 2001, roughly 16.5% of people in Canada reported having no religious affiliation (Statistics Canada, 2022). This grew to nearly 23.9% in 2011. As of 2021, roughly 12.6 million people – 34.6% of the population – identify as “having no religious affiliation or having a secular perspective” (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Scholars have suggested various factors that might possibly explain this decline. Some people leave religion due to dissatisfaction with religious ideas and communities (Blankholm, 2022; Kolysh, 2017) or weak intergenerational transmission of religious identities (Strhan & Shillitoe, 2019). Scholars also point to stronger *irreligious* socialization as a contributing factor (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017, 2020).² Finally, some point to more popular alternative activities that divert attention or energy from religious commitments (Cragun et al., 2019). The precise reasons behind decline are outside the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on the social impacts of the rise of nonreligion.

As an important life event, death has traditionally been understood through the lens of religion (Cann, 2023, p. 9; Moreman, 2018). Questions such as what happens to people after they die or what rituals should the bereaved conduct were often informed by religious officials and institutions. However, as people are less likely to be shaped by

any religious influences, this leaves space to develop new mortuary practices. Building on Callum Brown's suggestion to reflect on "what people are adopting *in lieu* of religion" (2017, p. 9), we look for changes in how people mark the death of loved ones.

Lived religion describes an approach to studying religion that eschews formal institutions to focus on "individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression" (McGuire, 2008, p. 4).³ In relation to death, a lived religion approach captures, for instance, that someone who does not identify as Christian nor attend church may still believe that when they die, they will go to heaven. Lived (non-)religion is an approach that explores the outlooks and practices of people from various nonreligious backgrounds, including atheists, agnostics, humanists, and some who identify as simply spiritual (Beaman & Strumos, 2024). Scholars have applied a lived (non-)religion approach to various activities, including what people wear, what they eat, or their activist expressions (Beaman, 2017; Richter, 2023; Salonen, 2018). What things does a person value? How are these values expressed in everyday life?

This paper applies a lived (non-)religion approach to obituaries, exploring how they reflect the lifestances of their authors and their subjects. This approach is useful because it focuses on the (at times mundane) activities that the deceased did throughout their life. Although obituaries often reference formal rituals, like funerals and burials, they also describe the deceased's everyday passions and pastimes. Recalling the dual-nature of obituaries (documents about both those living and dead), this paper explores both changing life patterns (what people did while they were alive) and also the changing ways in which people commemorate death (how they compose obituaries). Against the backdrop of declining religion, our data indicates that rather than drawing attention to religious beliefs and identities, obituaries increasingly focus on (nonreligious) relationships and values.

Methodology

This paper is based on content and textual analysis of 3300 obituaries published in newspapers between 1900 and 2021 (see Table 1). Our sample consists of six newspapers from across Canada: The Globe and Mail, Vancouver Sun, Calgary Herald, Toronto Star, Montreal Gazette, and Chronicle Herald (from Halifax). These publications represent the highest-circulated English-language papers in several major Canadian cities.⁴ In addition to one national newspaper, this sample also offers a cross-section of Canada, including its two largest cities, cities on both coasts, and in the prairies. Overall, this sample provides a view of how Canadians memorialize the dead while also affording some insights on regional variation between texts.

The authors, with the support of research assistants, collected obituaries by accessing microfiche and microfilm collections at a range of libraries, as well as utilizing online repositories (e.g., [Newspapers.com](https://www.newspapers.com)). Following collection of obituaries, a team of researchers developed a coding framework through a process of open inductive coding. We then proceeded to code the first five obituaries appearing in each paper

Table 1. Demographic Details of Obituaries (*n* = 3300).

Category	Sub category	<i>N</i>	%
Gender of deceased	Man	1834	55.58
	Woman	1454	44.06
	Unclear/Unknown	12	0.36
Age of deceased	0-17	70	2.12
	18-35	121	3.67
	36-50	183	5.55
	51-64	355	10.76
	65-80	726	22.00
	81-95	638	19.33
	95+	60	1.82

every year.⁵ By analyzing five entries from each newspaper every year (or thirty obituaries each year) over a long time frame, our study hopes to replicate both the long historical view (Anderson & Han, 2009; Kearl, 1987; Phillips, 2007) and large dataset (Campbell et al., 2021; Kastenbaum et al., 1977) of previous studies.

This paper emerges from a larger study conducted under the Nonreligion in a Complex Future project, which explores the social impacts of the rise of nonreligion. Resembling the framework of Barth et al. (2014), our coding framework accounted for visual elements, length of text, as well as the content of each obituary. Coding attended to the many elements which are included in obituaries, including what life details people mention, where a funeral is being held, or whether images are included. Researchers developed and refined a coding framework that corresponded to the wide range of details included in obituaries, and each obituary was assessed for whether and how certain elements were described.

Concerning the coding process, evaluating each obituary involved two separate approaches, which were carried out simultaneously while reading each entry. First, researchers read each obituary and determined whether certain elements were included/mentioned (e.g., children, photographs, end-of-life rituals). Additionally, researchers transcribed certain parts of an obituary to be used for further analysis (for instance, the text used to describe the deceased’s children). A high degree of inter-coder reliability was established through initial training on the coding framework, discussion among coders, and regular check-ins from the first author.

Once coding was completed, we applied both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Quantitative analysis was performed in R v4.3.1, and revealed such insights as the mean length of obituaries (as well as how this varies over time and by publication), or the number/proportion of obituaries that include specific details (e.g., occupation, education, donation requests). Qualitative content analysis focused on patterns and

changes in language people use, asking for instance, the difference between describing a ‘father’ versus a ‘loving’ or ‘cherished’ father. Qualitative analysis also involved reflecting on the significance of the details about the deceased included in obituaries, and what priorities these decisions reveal.

Reflecting the breadth of information contained in obituaries, our larger study explores many transformations in these texts. This paper focuses on three specific elements that emerged in our analysis; namely, how family, hobbies, and community involvement are described. These three elements emerged in analysis as relevant to understanding the changing shape of obituaries against the backdrop of rising non-religion.⁶ We argue that the increased focus on these details reveal an effort to commemorate the dead by crafting life narratives, and reflect an immanent outlook towards death.

Findings

The backdrop that shapes all of our findings is that obituaries have consistently grown longer since 1900 (see [Figure 1](#)). We determined length of obituary by counting the number of lines in each entry. Between 1900-1919, the mean obituary length was 8.89 lines (see [Table 2](#)). This steadily increased throughout the twentieth century, towards a mean length of 32.03 between 2000-2021. Some local variation exists, such as obituaries in Halifax being longer, on average. Overall however, popular convention seemingly dictates that people write longer obituaries with each passing year. As obituaries become longer, this space is generally filled with increasingly more details about the deceased’s life.

The growing amount of personal disclosure in obituaries may reflect a larger change in public intimacy ([Kaplan, 2021](#)). While social media has impacted this shift, this trend may actually predate this technology, as Marzol’s analysis of obituaries from the early 2000s indicates that people share more information over time ([Marzol, 2006](#)). Further, while the internet affords the possibility to publish longer obituaries at minimal or zero cost ([Hume & Bressers, 2010](#); [McGlashan, 2021](#); [Murrell et al., 2021](#)), this study is based entirely on print newspapers. In this realm, the cost of publishing an obituary has actually grown over the years (even accounting for inflation). Regardless, the length of text continues to grow. This points to a general shift in how people tell a life story.

Family

Families are a fundamental part of obituaries. It is often bereaved family members who write and submit these notices to newspapers. More substantially, the deceased’s life story is often told through the family members they left behind. Obituaries typically have a dedicated section that summarizes by whom a person was predeceased or survived ([Marzol, 2006](#)). One of the biggest transformations over the last 120 years is a rise in the number of obituaries that mention partners, children, grandchildren, and other family (see [Figure 2](#)). To make sense of the multiple strands of kinship that

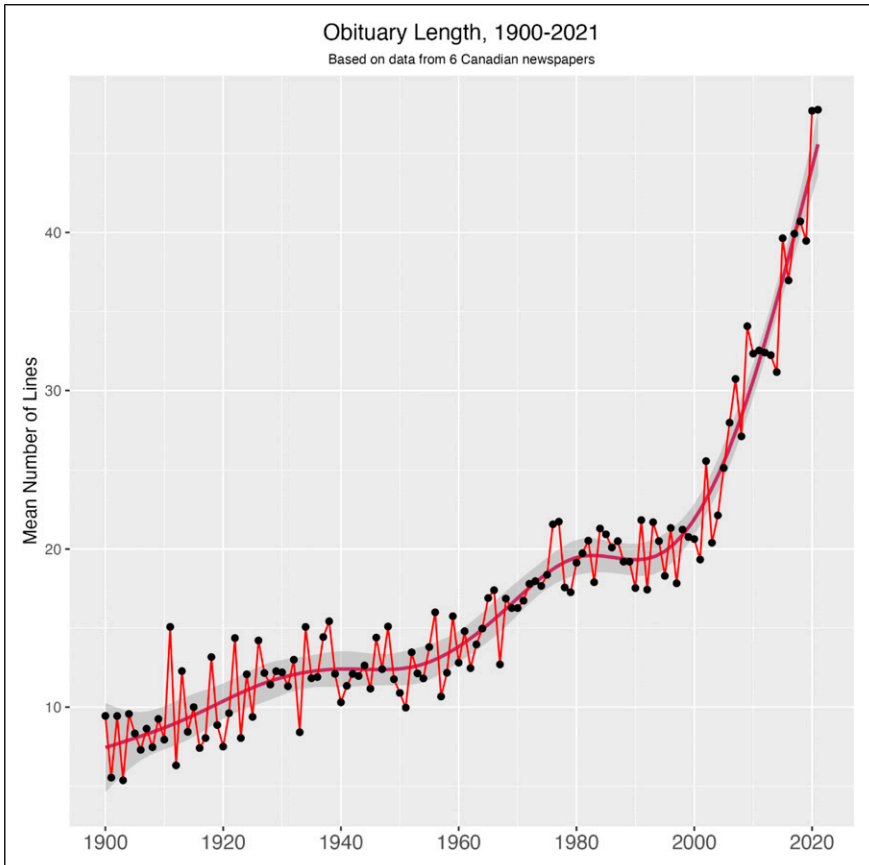


Figure 1. Mean length of obituaries (measured by number of lines) between 1900-2021.

obituaries reference, our coding separated family into four categories (see [Table 3](#)). Partners refers to spouses or domestic relationships of any kind (e.g., surviving, ex-, or deceased spouses). Children and grandchildren are fairly self-explanatory, save that our grandchildren category also included references to great-grandchildren (and in rare cases, great-great-grandchildren).⁷ The final category was termed ‘other family,’ and included parents and siblings as well as nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins.⁸

Partners have always been included with some frequency, but over the first quarter of the twentieth century, their inclusion grew from roughly 30% to over 60% (see [Table 4](#)). More dramatic spikes are seen in the case of children and grandchildren. From 1920-1939, only 31.66% of obituaries mention children ($n = 170$). Since the 1980s, at least 70% of obituaries reference children. Prior to 1940, only eighteen obituaries referenced grandchildren. However, from 1960-1979, 38.58% of obituaries mentioned

Table 2. Mean Obituary Length (*number of lines*).

Category	Sub-category	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Overall Publication	Overall	17.99	14.33	1	134	3300
	Vancouver Sun	16.99	10.59	3	100	507
	Calgary Herald	16.81	13.23	1	101	516
	Toronto Star	14.55	10.91	2	134	598
	Montreal Gazette	15.84	12.16	4	102	574
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	25.91	15.65	2	103	527
	Globe & Mail	18.37	18.71	2	134	578
Gender of deceased	Man	18.46	15.82	1	134	1834
	Woman	17.48	12.19	2	101	1454
Year	1900-1919	8.89	7.45	1	61	332
	1920-1939	11.87	8.94	3	102	537
	1940-1959	12.48	7.39	4	59	585
	1960-1979	16.65	8.29	4	75	591
	1980-1999	19.85	8.97	4	64	600
	2000-2021	32.03	21.35	3	134	655

grandchildren ($n = 228$). Revealing expanding ideas concerning which family members merit inclusion in obituaries this rate continued to rise over subsequent decades.⁹

The category that we designate ‘other family members’ includes parents and siblings, as well as nieces and nephews. Prior to 1960, 39.06% of obituaries listed family members in this category ($n = 568$). The rate of inclusion grew to 63.62% between 1960-1979 ($n = 462$), and then 80.46% between 2000-2021 ($n = 527$). Overall, this data suggests that the mid-twentieth century marked a shift in how people composed these texts. People increasingly tell the deceased’s life story by outlining their networks of relationality, with specific reference to family.

Beyond a sheer increase in how often certain generations are listed, there has been a qualitative shift in how family is described. In the early 1900s, most descriptions of family are quite brief, stating only their name and relationship to the deceased. A typical entry indicates that Winston Sanderson “is survived by a widow,” who ultimately goes unnamed (Halifax, 1927).¹⁰ Similarly, readers learn that Wilbur Fitzpatrick “Passed away on Sept. 22nd,” and that “He leaves to mourn his loss three sons and three daughters,” who again are not named (Vancouver, 1927).¹¹ The oldest obituaries plainly state facts concerning an immediate nuclear family.

As the obituary genre developed, so did subtle shifts in language when referring to loved ones. In the mid-twentieth century, we see a rise in adjectives describing the types

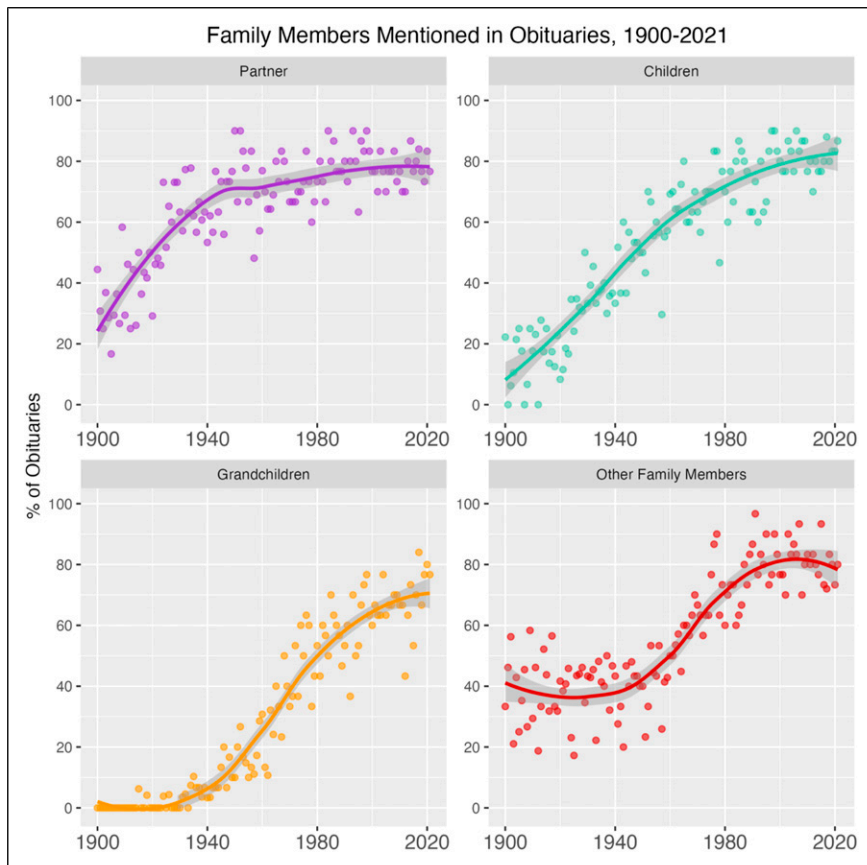


Figure 2. Family members mentioned in obituaries between 1900-2021 (sorted by generation).

of relationships the deceased had with their family. A mother leaves behind their “beloved daughter,” and will be missed by “their loving family.”

Over time, descriptions also become more rich, offering glimpses into the life that the deceased and their family created together. Gerald Kodish was not just a dad, but “an intensely proud and loving father” who was “on cloud nine” when his son was born (Globe, 2021). Readers learn that Christopher Bennett “is survived by the love of his life,” and that this couple was “devoted to one another and absolutely inseparable” (Montreal, 2020). An entry from the *Globe & Mail* offers even more detail, describing how Liam Collins and his wife met as teenagers at a dance “and continued dancing through their 75-year love story” (Globe, 2020). The writers of this obituary (presumably his children) add that they were “truly blessed to grow up in a home knowing we were always loved, valued, and protected” (Globe, 2020).

Table 3. Family Members Mentioned in Obituaries ($n = 3300$).

Category	Mentioned?	N	%
Partners	Yes	2262	68.55
	No	1038	31.45
Children	Yes	1905	57.73
	No	1395	42.27
Grandchildren	Yes	1113	33.73
	No	2187	66.27
Other family	Yes	1933	58.58
	No	1367	41.42

Finally, since the 2010s and onwards, conceptions of the ‘family’ have expanded greatly to include cousins, nieces, and nephews, but also friends and even pets. An obituary from Halifax states that Bonnie Coulter will be missed by not only her “treasured grandchildren” but also her “cherished pets” (Halifax, 2011). Beyond her immediate family, Nora Sullivan “also had another family for over 59 years,” in the form of “all of her sisters at her sorority Beta Sigma Phi” (Calgary, 2020). Obituaries reveal changes in the people (and non-human animals) that we consider to be part of our families. Over time, people take a more expansive view in how they imagine their family circles, and also describe these relationships in a more loving and detailed manner.

Hobbies, or any activities we enjoy in leisure time, seem to not only matter in life, but in death as well. Obituaries highlight these activities as a way to further capture who the deceased was. Reflecting the growing length of obituaries, hobbies are mentioned more frequently over time (see [Figure 3](#)).

Overall, 13.30% of obituaries mention one or more hobbies ($n = 439$). However, this feature has become especially common in recent years (see [Table 5](#)). Rather than simply listing activities, many obituaries now offer in-depth accounts.¹² For example, Theo’s obituary describes in great detail his involvement in numerous organizations. Adding that “Theo was a man who took his responsibilities seriously and focused much of his energy on improving community services” (Calgary, 1996), his hobbies reflect his character and values.

The hobbies that people list are varied, from playing music to spending time with family or enjoying nature (see [Figure 4](#)). Most popular was involvement in social clubs (mentioned in 170 obituaries), sports ($n = 133$), volunteering ($n = 103$), being involved in a church ($n = 86$), and travel ($n = 68$). However, rather than just list the activities mentioned most often, it is instructive to observe the shifts in recent years (see

Table 4. Generations of Family Members Included in Obituaries (n = 3300).

Category	Year	Total	Mentioned	
			N	%
Partners	1900-1919	332	121	36.45
	1920-1939	537	326	60.71
	1940-1959	585	410	70.09
	1960-1979	591	423	71.57
	1980-1999	600	477	79.50
	2000-2021	655	505	77.10
Children	1900-1919	332	52	15.66
	1920-1939	537	170	31.66
	1940-1959	585	300	51.28
	1960-1979	591	402	68.02
	1980-1999	600	449	74.83
	2000-2021	655	532	81.22
Grandchildren	1900-1919	332	2	0.60
	1920-1939	537	16	2.98
	1940-1959	585	76	12.99
	1960-1979	591	228	38.58
	1980-1999	600	349	58.17
	2000-2021	655	442	67.48
Other family members	1900-1919	332	127	38.25
	1920-1939	537	211	39.29
	1940-1959	585	230	39.32
	1960-1979	591	376	63.62
	1980-1999	600	462	77.00
	2000-2021	655	527	80.46

Figure 5). Mentioning involvement in churches or social clubs has remained fairly steady over the last century. In contrast, a host of other hobbies began appearing with much greater frequency since the year 2000. Activities which have risen in popularity include sports, travel, volunteering, and spending time with family.

Accompanying a growing diversity of activities are adjective-rich narratives. Where older obituaries simply indicated that someone belonged to a given club, recent obituaries remember an “avid outdoorsman” (Vancouver, 2014), a “gifted gardener” (Halifax, 2020), or an “accomplished athlete” (Montreal, 2020). This reflects the

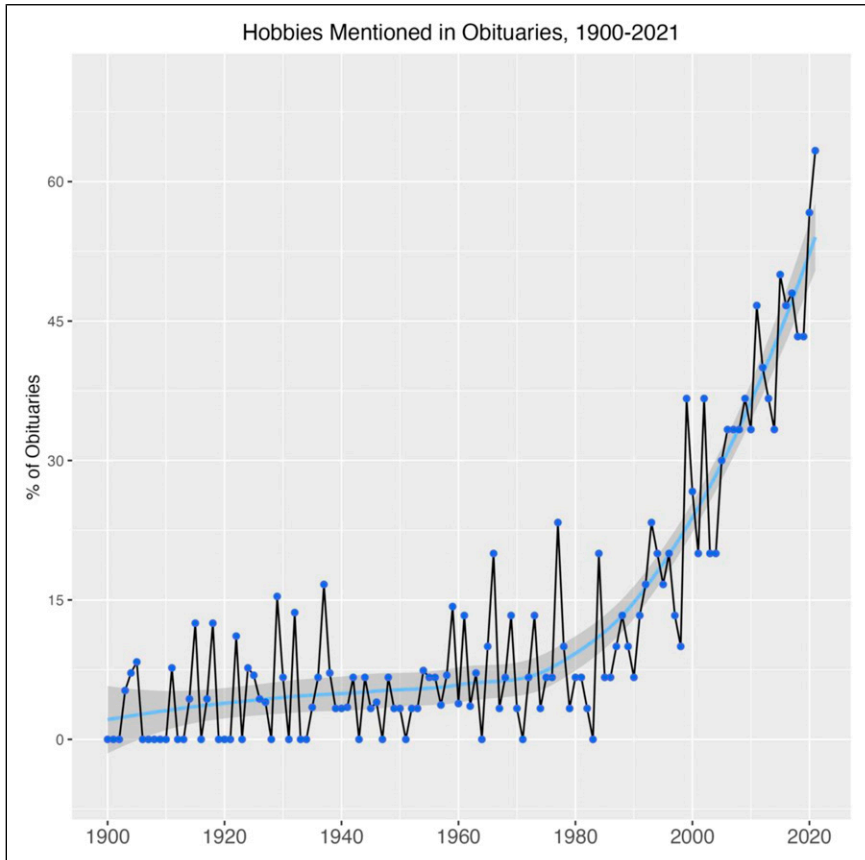


Figure 3. Percentage of obituaries that mention hobbies of the deceased.

overall growth of detailed obituaries, and the desire to more accurately capture the deceased's passions and personality.

Reflecting the growing presence of social bonds in memorialization, obituaries increasingly also describe the people with whom the deceased enjoyed an activity. Lance's obituary speaks to a connection with his father through shared activities: "Lance enjoyed working with his dad at home, fishing, woodworking, gardening and outdoor activities." (Halifax, 2005). Social bonds were also important to Tessa, "a prodigious writer" who "continued to correspond with family and friends all over the world" (Vancouver, 2021). As noted, the bonds people treasure even extend to animals (McConnell et al., 2019), who become co-participants in the activities people enjoyed. Dorian Creston, for instance, enjoyed hunting, "especially with his English setters" (Calgary, 2009).

Table 5. Hobbies Mentioned in Obituaries, 1900-2021.

Category	Sub category	Total	Hobbies mentioned	
			N	%
Overall			439	13.30
Year				
	1900-1919	332	11	3.31
	1920-1939	537	29	5.40
	1940-1959	585	27	4.62
	1960-1979	591	47	7.95
	1980-1999	600	78	13.00
	2000-2021	655	247	37.71
Publication				
	Vancouver Sun	507	75	14.79
	Calgary Herald	516	85	16.47
	Toronto Star	598	57	9.53
	Montreal Gazette	574	38	6.62
	Chronicle Herald (Halifax)	527	113	21.44
	Globe & Mail	578	71	12.28

In the early twentieth century, most hobbies mentioned were tied to specific clubs or communities. One of the most common types of organizations referenced were churches. While some obituaries describe the importance of someone's faith, most highlight the wider array of activities that take place within churches. Wilson Norton, for instance, "organized and headed a successful fund-raising campaign to rebuild the church after it was destroyed by fire" (Montreal, 1966). Sharing that "one of Millicent's greatest pleasures was music," her obituary describes her involvement with the church choir, including "the infamous choir tour of England in 1974" (Calgary, 1998). Besides churches, other common organizations include Masonic Lodges, Shriners, I.O.D.E, Royal Canadian Legion, or the Legion Women's Auxiliary (a branch of the Canadian Legion). These clubs are highlighted as a source of friendship, while also emphasizing one's role in charity and outreach.

By the late twentieth century, churches and fraternal organizations are increasingly replaced by yacht and country clubs, and also clubs related to curling, skating, or skiing. Reflecting the growing popularity of sports over this period (Howell, 2004), this also reveals that athletics are increasingly seen as a fitting part of memorialization (Campbell et al., 2021). Some descriptions focus on specific accomplishments. Dan, for instance, competed in the "1972 Olympic Games as a member of the Canadian Olympic Sailing Team" (Globe, 2000). At other times, obituaries describe one's enthusiasm for an activity, such as Davis's "passion for golf" and his work as country club President (Vancouver, 2011). These clubs also often reflect valued relationships, such as

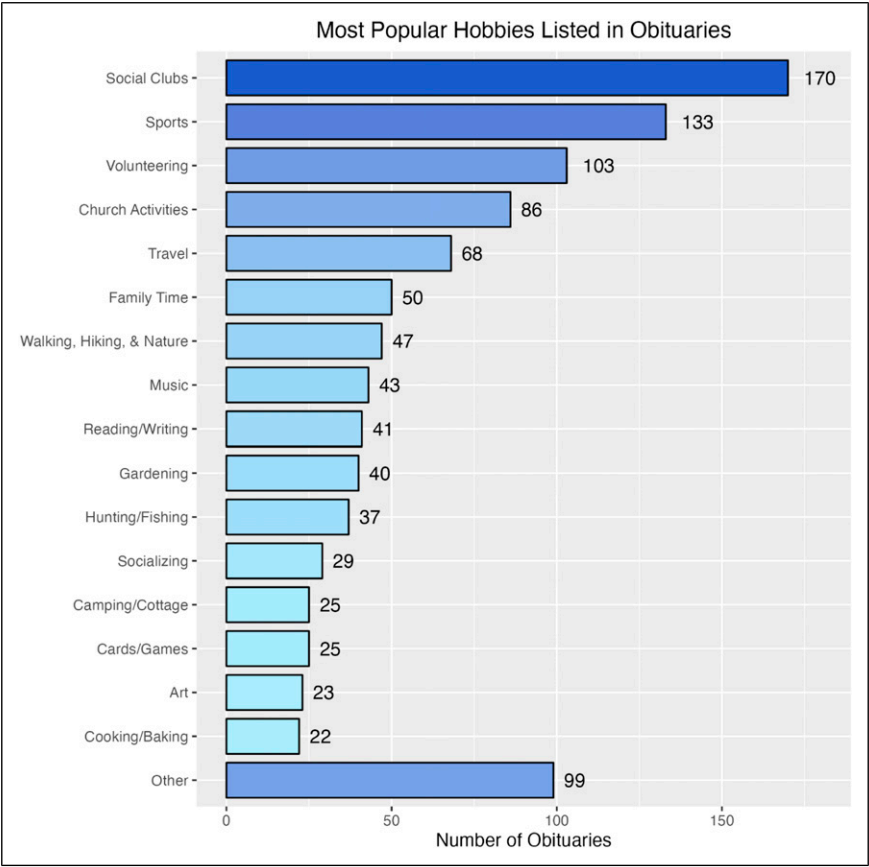


Figure 4. Most popular activities mentioned in obituaries between 1900-2021.

Dominic, who is “sadly missed by ... his friends at Cosburn Lawn Bowling Club” (Toronto, 1999).

Concerning the social bonds reflected in hobbies, one final trend bears mentioning. For many people, family has become the de facto ‘community’ to which they belong. Simply spending time with family is often described as a hobby or pastime. Richard, for example, was “always happiest with his family,” whether in their home, their cottage, or on the golf course (Globe, 2013). Many obituaries similarly describe family spending summers at the cottage, or couples who travelled the world together. Others enjoy quiet activities alone, like walking in nature, reading, or tending their garden. This shift in hobbies reflects a broader trend, in which people are less likely to belong to formal organizations and more likely to be loosely associated with a range of liquid communities (Bauman, 2000; Putnam, 2000). While the shift away from formal belonging can be linked to a crisis of loneliness (Thompson, 2024), the rich narratives shared in

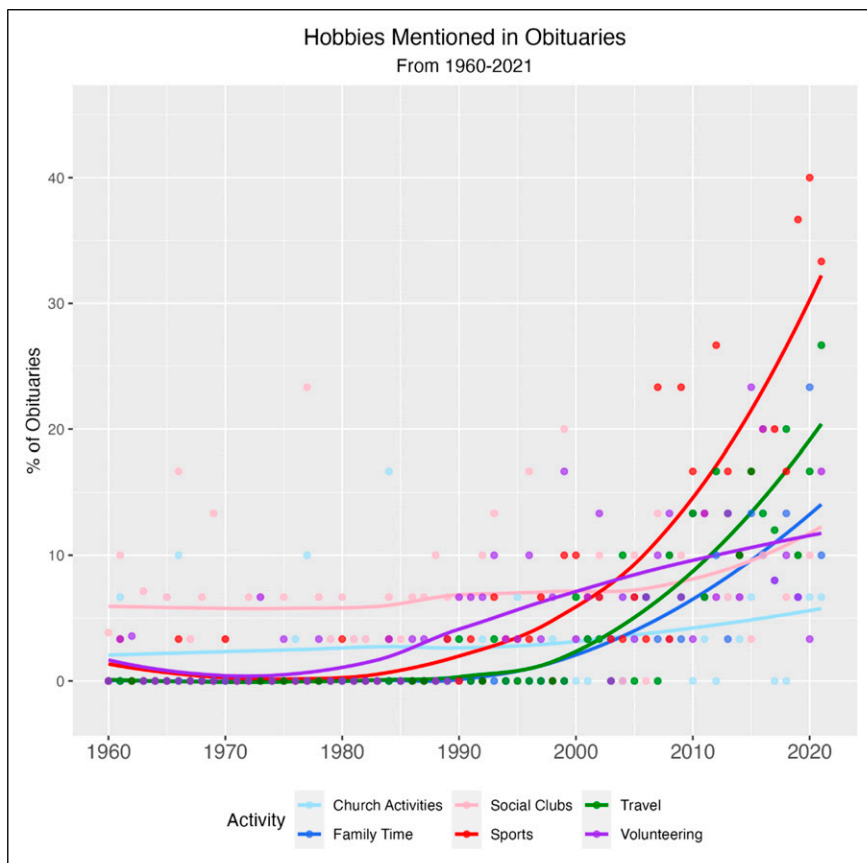


Figure 5. Types of activities mentioned in obituaries, by percentage, between 1960-2021.

obituaries reveal that people still form social connection and pursue activities that bring value and enjoyment. Connection and fulfillment shifts from the large group to more intimate relationships and more personalized activities.

Discussion

Our results reveal significant transformations that have shaped obituaries over the years. The most obvious and perhaps significant of these is an overall increase in length. There have also been changes in how certain elements are included and described in obituaries. While our broader study explores several different elements, this paper focuses specifically on how family, community, and hobbies are described.

Concerning the presence of families in obituaries, we discovered two important quantitative increases. These were the overall frequency of how often family members

get mentioned and a growing number of family members being referenced in obituaries. More significantly, we observed a qualitative transformation in how family is described. From brief, matter-of-fact statements in the early 1900s, over the twentieth-century, obituaries increasingly describe the relationships between the deceased and their family in greater detail.

Emblematic of this transformation, a shift towards personalized language is especially apparent in the deceased's role as grandparent. In the 21st century, we notice a diverse array of terms, including Poppa, Zaidie, Baba, Oma, or Dziadzia (Calgary, 2017; Montreal, 2002; Toronto, 2000; Toronto, 2021; Toronto, 2001). These titles first reflect the growing diversity of Canadian society (Crawford & Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 141). More importantly, these terms indicate a shift away from formality, towards language that is specific and meaningful to the bereaved.

Davis and Breede suggest that the presence of families in obituaries makes these texts "a family tree" or "family Bible" (2018, p. 99). Obituaries represent an important record of the deceased and all of the family members to which they were connected.¹³ Mentioning family publicly situates the dead within a web of their most intimate social relations (McGlashan, 2021, p. 14). While simply listing family members functions to mark one's place within a broader community, the concomitant growth of adjectives to describe these relationships is also significant. Declaring that someone was a devoted husband or beloved mother goes beyond situating social ties, and instead expresses how someone lived their life (for instance, as a warm, loving person). These descriptions provide a glimpse into how much someone meant to their family or community (McNeill, 2005, p. 192). Cemented in newspapers, these relationships become that person's lasting legacy.

As obituaries grow longer and more detailed, the function of legacy-making becomes more pronounced. Carmon calls obituaries "cultural artifacts allowing for the public documentation of personal legacies" (2023, p. 1324). A biographical approach has long been standard in obituaries written about elite and notable figures (Starck, 2006). However, it is also becoming more common in the (generally shorter) notices about average citizens. Many obituaries now traverse the life course, from childhood through adulthood and old age. For instance, Kevin Buxley's obituary offers a lengthy account of a prolific football season at university in 1963, before describing his passions later in life (Halifax, 2007). Readers learn that Dashiell Branson's "zeal for fishing began as a young boy at the family cabin on Lake of the Woods, Ontario, and carried through to adulthood on the waterways of Alberta, where he instilled a love for the sport in his nephews" (Calgary, 2014). As life progresses through different phases, so do one's interests (or abilities). This is reinforced through Remy, who was "a long-standing member of the Toronto Cricket Skating and Curling Club" and then "pursued his love of the sport through judging after his own skating days were over" (Toronto, 1999). Life changes can also be tragic, as we are reminded with Dean Aubrey, who loved hunting, fishing, and golf until "Alzheimer's took away those interests" (Halifax, 2017). Overall, obituaries share events from across the life course to encapsulate one's identity.

Alfano et al. (2018) observe that obituaries often communicate a person's values by way of their activities and affiliations. Concerning the types of hobbies which commonly appear, a historical connection to religion cannot be completely overlooked. Recall that activities within a church were one of the most frequent types of hobbies to appear. Additionally, both sports and charity or volunteer outreach have histories that can be told through religion (Griffith, 2004; Hackett, 2014; Liagre, 2014; Parsell & Stambe, 2023; Putney, 2001). However, religion does not have an exclusive claim to volunteering or other prosocial behaviors (Galen, 2012; Speed & Edgell, 2023; Wielenberg, 2013). Chelsea, for example "was active in Peace organizations," and in lieu of flowers, her family requests donations to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Vancouver, 1995). Likewise, Carrie "gave unstintingly of her time to Scarborough General Hospital for many years as a volunteer" (Globe, 2004). Similarly, Maureen was "happiest when volunteering in the East York community," where she "touched many lives" (Toronto, 2001). Obituaries thereby reinforce that values need not be connected to religion.

Increasing descriptions of hobbies and community affiliations, coupled with the overall decline of religion, supports that people increasingly craft their identities, values, and practices outside of traditional religion. Declaring that someone was an avid Toronto Maple Leafs fan or a world traveler have become more popular ways to communicate who that person was and how they should be remembered. In their paper which calls for scholars to focus on the substantive content of nonreligion, Cragun and McCaffree describe a hypothetical person with the primary social identity of mountaineer (2021, p. 18). Despite not having a stated religious identity, the authors detail how mountaineering can shape a person's ontology, epistemology, axiology, praxeology, and cosmology. In like manner, sharing the hobbies that a person enjoyed in their obituary may speak to that person's values and even how they understood the world.

The findings of this paper and changes in memorialization must be understood against a backdrop of religious transformation. In Canada, as in many other Western societies, religious affiliation and participation has been declining since the mid-twentieth century (Clarke & Macdonald, 2017; Kasselstrand et al., 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022). To be sure, we do not suggest a direct relationship between the religious decline documented by censuses, and religious references disappearing from obituaries. However, given the massive demographic shift that has taken place over the time span analyzed in this study, one must recognize the impact of this shift on various aspects of social life, including death.¹⁴ While religion traditionally offered a cultural script for how to experience death – including what rituals to perform or how to grieve – this script is no longer relevant for the many people who identify as non-religious. Even people who do identify as religious now imagine this relationship differently, and may re-tool (or ignore) the cultural scripts of their religion in favour of more personally meaningful practices.

As Canada and other Western societies experience a massive demographic shift towards nonreligion, a transformation in the death rituals people conduct is expected. It is important to recognize that many traditional rituals, such as burials and funerals, have

significant religious roots and link to particular theological understandings of death (Davies, 2017; Heinz, 1999). However, many traditional rituals are being re-imagined, whether by humanist or atheist communities who actively reject religious traditions (Engelke, 2015; MacMurray & Fazzino, 2017), or simply by people who no longer identify strongly with religion (Garces-Foley, 2003; Long & Buehring, 2014). Overall, funerals have seen a move away from tradition towards practices that are personally meaningful (Lawrence, 2022; Long & Buehring, 2014; Lowe et al., 2021; Rumbold et al., 2021; Velsey, 2022). Obituaries appear to have undergone a similar transformation. Understood against the backdrop of rising nonreligion, a transformation towards personalized, more detailed texts highlights emergent ways of processing and commemorating death.

We argue that the dominant forms of commemoration in Canadian obituaries – drawing attention to nonreligious relationships, communities, and hobbies – reflect an immanent lifestance. William Connolly describes immanence as “a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power” (2011, p. 43). In contrast to transcendent outlooks, obituaries do not often reference deities, but rather focus on the here-and-now. While references to God or ascending to heaven are occasionally present in our sample, the activities that a person enjoyed while they were alive, or the people with whom they forged relationships are central. Describing, for example, someone’s favourite team and the people they loved watching the game with reflects an immanent focus on the natural, material world.

Building on Connolly, Lori Beaman describes a focus on the immanent as belief that “something must be done here and now, by us, urgently” (2020 p. 245). Though Beaman is describing the more urgent situation of climate activism, this parallels the changing forms of commemoration. The ‘something’ that ‘must be done’ includes the act of writing an obituary itself. The most recently-published obituaries are highly personal, candid, and original, standing in contrast to rather formulaic notices from the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Longer obituaries may reflect a feeling among the bereaved that *we* need to tell the story of our deceased father, not leave it to someone giving a eulogy. Perhaps coincidentally, in recent years, more obituaries state that no funeral or end-of-life service will be held. This may reflect that fewer people belong to a religious community (which traditionally provide end-of-life services) or simply reveal a change in how people wish to mark death. Regardless of the cause, this suggests that for some people, an obituary is the only sort of formal commemoration the deceased receives. By foregrounding the active voice of those who knew the deceased best, obituaries reflect the immanent belief that *we* must do something ourselves to memorialize the dead.

As religious affiliation declines, and by extension, belief in traditional concepts of the afterlife fades, renewed emphasis is placed on achieving continuity through social bonds (Haimila & Muraja, 2021) or by creating some sort of legacy (Manning, 2023). Changes in obituaries reflect this outlook. Rather than emphasize precisely how a person died or describe where their body, soul, or spirit is now, obituaries in recent years strive to construct a life narrative. Through focusing on who the deceased is survived by, this communicates that a legacy lives on through family and other loved ones.

Focusing on hobbies and other activities, obituaries highlight ways in which that person may have impacted the world.

The developments we observe also shed light on the changing ways in which grief is understood. Tony Walter defines grief as “the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives,” adding that this process is achieved through “conversation with others” (1996, p. 7). By listing the people that someone is ‘survived by’ in these public texts, families situate themselves in the deceased’s personal legacy. By narrating this legacy through the activities that the deceased enjoyed, the authors of obituaries pave the way to construct continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass & Steffen, 2018). In their study of online memorials, Hume and Bressers find many messages from the bereaved about activities they enjoyed doing with the deceased (2010, p. 262). Exploring the complex process of how families compose obituaries, Davis and Breede note that hobbies or interests often reflect what the bereaved remember fondly, rather than what the deceased really enjoyed (Davis & Breede, 2018). The activities that wind up in obituaries therefore reflect what things the bereaved want to cherish, and suggest that these memories might be ways they will continue to connect with the deceased. Reflecting an immanent understanding of death, the deceased is memorialized in ways that help to create continuing bonds.

It is finally worth noting that religion is still visible in obituaries. The most common areas where religion appears concerns end-of-life rituals. Following funeral homes and public cemeteries, churches or church graveyards are the third most common site for end-of-life rituals, and are mentioned in 27.03% of obituaries ($n = 892$). Granted, the popularity of these sites may simply reflect that in Western settings, churches are a default setting where such rituals occur (Garces-Foley, 2003).¹⁵ Religious language also sometimes appears. For example, the obituary of Beth Cullen reads: “Surrounded by angels of kindness singing Amazing grace and the Lord is My Shepherd, our beloved mother, sister, and Nanny looked into our eyes and accepted God’s kind offer of mercy and eternal salvation” (Globe, 2001). Nevertheless, such examples are relatively infrequent, appearing in less than 1% of all obituaries. Finally, the pastimes listed occasionally reflect one’s religious affiliation. Being a member of a parish or simply having a ‘strong faith’ are just some of the ways that obituaries reference someone’s religious identity.

We raise these examples to clarify that religion has not wholly disappeared from obituaries, and we do not seek to claim that it has. Although religious participation and affiliation is declining, religion still shapes some people’s lives. By extension, religion will still shape how some people are commemorated in death. Rather than providing evidence of religious decline, this paper hopes to highlight transformations in how people perform memorialization. While religious references are present, they are dwarfed by the number of obituaries that focus on nonreligious identities, relationships, and values.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

We acknowledge a number of limitations in this study. First, as [Davis and Breede \(2018\)](#) note, obituaries are only partial records of the lives the deceased lived. Our analysis is shaped by the brief information shared, and there is no way to discern how accurately an obituary reflects the deceased.

Another limitation concerns the obituaries selected for analysis. Selecting the first five obituaries appearing on a given date each year offers a random sampling. However, different sampling strategies would incorporate different obituaries, potentially revealing slightly different findings. Likewise, our selection of newspapers (all from major Canadian cities) shape what people get included. Finally, our sample size (from year range to number of texts) shapes the data. A larger sample, or one skewed to certain years, may have also yielded different results.

With these limitations in mind, our paper also points to avenues for further research. Though our larger study aims to analyze all components of obituaries, this paper focuses on the transformations of particular elements, understood within the context of rising nonreligion. Analyzing the end-of-life rituals described in obituaries, or even the language used to describe how someone died can also reveal the social impact of religious transformation. In terms of the broader content included in obituaries, further research can also explore changes in how occupations are described, and the inclusion of new elements, such as donation requests or messages thanking healthcare staff.

As noted, our focus on hobbies and family paid specific attention to the context of religious transformation. Further studies of these elements could also offer insights on the impact of social class, gender, and region. For instance, despite a general democratization of obituaries, the most popular hobbies mentioned may reveal the role of status or privilege in composing obituaries. Similarly, while men and women are now included at fairly similar rates, the sections dedicated to hobbies or family may expose gendered perceptions of appropriate social and professional roles. Finally, while our study points to regional variation in terms of length or elements included, in-depth analysis in Canada or elsewhere could explore how memorialization styles vary by region.

Conclusion

Obituaries are a mortuary ritual which help people process grief and memorialize the dead. Obituaries also offer a way to explore “cultural attitudes” in societies ([Ogletree et al., 2005](#), p. 341). The cultural attitude that this paper most keenly explores is the social impact of declining religion. Fowler and Bielsa argue that obituaries reveal the identities and values that societies consider worthy of remembering (2007). Alfano et al. similarly argue that obituaries “reveal what counts as a value, virtue, or constituent of wellbeing for a particular type of person in a particular community” (2018, p. 60). Revealing transforming understandings of how to memorialize death, obituaries reveal changing life priorities. Over the past 120 years, there has been a considerable increase

in obituaries mentioning family, hobbies, and other community ties. Not only are these elements mentioned more frequently over time, they are also described in considerably greater detail.

Overall, people commemorate their loved ones through a focus on the immanent: the people they connected with, activities they enjoyed, and causes they supported. Obituaries are not only about the deceased, but also about how the bereaved wish to remember them. By tracing the ever-growing list of people to whom the deceased was connected, families cement their social bonds to the dead, thereby honouring and preserving those relationships. By recalling favourite memories and moments of enjoyment, the bereaved narrate what they want that person's legacy to be.

Appendix

The list below includes all newspapers that were quoted directly within this article. Each entry is separated by publication, and sorted chronologically

Calgary Herald

Announcements: Deaths. (1996, September 28). *Calgary Herald*, p. D15.
 Announcements: Deaths. (1998, September 26). *Calgary Herald*, p. D19.
 Remembering: Deaths. (2009, September 26). *Calgary Herald*, p. B6.
 Remembering: Obituaries (2014, September 27). *Calgary Herald*, p. D8.
 Classified: Obits. (2017, September 30). *Calgary Herald*, p. E6.
 Remembering: Obituaries (2020, September 22). *Calgary Herald*. p. NP12.

Chronicle Herald (Halifax)

Obituary: W. L. Saunders. (1927, September 24). *The Halifax Chronicle*, para. 8.
 Announcements: Obituaries. (2005, September 24). *The Chronicle Herald*, p. B6.
 Announcements: Obituaries. (2007, September 29). *The Chronicle Herald*, p. B8
 Announcements: Obituaries. (2011, September 24). *The Chronicle Herald*, p. D9.
 Herald Obituaries: Deaths. (2017, September 30). *The Chronicle Herald*, p. A15.
 Obituaries: Deaths. (2020, September 26). *The Chronicle Herald*, p. A14

Globe and Mail

Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2000, September 30). *The Globe and Mail*, p. C9.
 Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2001, September 29). *The Globe and Mail*, para. 4.
 Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2004, September 25). *The Globe and Mail*, p. S6.
 Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2013, September 28). *The Globe and Mail*, p. S7.
 Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2020, September 26). *The Globe and Mail*, p. B18.
 Birth and Death Notices: Deaths. (2021, September 25). *The Globe and Mail*, p. B22.

Montreal Gazette

Births-Marriages-Deaths: Obituary Record. (1910, September 24). *The Gazette*, p. 4.
 Births & Deaths: Deaths. (1996, September 28). *The Gazette*, p. D10.
 Obituaries & Memorials 987-2324: Deaths. (2002, September 28). *The Gazette*, p. C14.
 Classifieds: Remembering. (2020, October 3). *Montreal Gazette*, p. C11.

Toronto Star

Deaths, Memorials, Births: Deaths. (1999, September 25). *The Toronto Star*, p. B6.
 Deaths, Memorials, Births: Deaths. (2000, September 30). *The Toronto Star*, p. A28.
 Deaths, Memorials, Births: Deaths. (2001, September 29). *The Toronto Star*, p. B6.
 Deaths, Memorials: Death Notices. (2021, September 25). *Toronto Star*, p. B11.

Vancouver Sun

Sun "Classified" Seymour 40: Deaths. (1927, September 24). *The Vancouver Sun*, p. 18.
 Classified: Deaths. (1995, September 30). *The Vancouver Sun*, p. F1.
 Remembering: Obituaries. (2011, September 24). *The Vancouver Sun*, p. C8
 Remembering: Obituaries. (2014, September 27). *The Vancouver Sun*, p. D12
 Classifieds: Obituaries. (2021, September 25). *The Vancouver Sun*, p. C13.

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ORCID iDs

Chris Miller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6816-0973>

Hannah McKillop  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4690-1771>

Notes

1. Regarding gender differences in language, see for example: Kastenbaum et al. (1977); Spilka et al. (1980); Ogletree et al. (2005); Ferraro (2019). Concerning ageism and gender bias in obituary photos, see Anderson & Han (2009).

2. Irreligious socialization refers to the fact that rather than people consciously leaving or disaffiliating from religion, many are raised without a religious background and are therefore less likely to adopt one in adulthood.
3. For more in-depth descriptions of this theory/approach, see [Ammerman \(2016\)](#); [Knibbe & Kupari \(2020\)](#).
4. The smallest local paper (Montreal Gazette) has a daily average circulation of around 80,000, while the largest (Toronto Star) has a daily average circulation of over 300,000 ([Newspapers Canada, 2016](#)).
5. To offer consistency across years, we selected obituaries published on the last Saturday of September each year. In cases where data from that date was unavailable, we included obituaries from earlier in September or the beginning of October.
6. To be sure, these three elements are not the only aspects of obituaries relevant to understanding the impact of religious change. For instance, our team also analyzes the changing locations of end-of-life rituals, and how forms of bodily disposition reveal changing outlooks on mortuary rituals. However, due to space and other considerations, this paper focuses specifically on the three elements listed above.
7. Nearly all instances of obituaries that reference great-grandchildren also mention grandchildren, justifying the decision to create this combined category.
8. We made the decision to combine this array of family members after initial reading of many obituaries. Since these texts are generally written about older individuals, the ‘family’ referenced are typically one’s immediate family which they have created (i.e. spouses and children) rather than the family with which they grew up (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins). The persons within this ‘other’ category therefore reflect additional strands of kin not always included in the average obituary. Additionally, obituaries that mention one person within this ‘other’ category (e.g., siblings) are more likely to mention others (e.g., nephews/nieces/cousins), explaining our decision to create this collapsed category.
9. Granted, this growth may partly reflect increased life expectancy over time ([Statistics Canada, nd](#)), which increases the number of people who live long enough to meet their grandchildren.
10. For simplicity, any material quoted from an obituary will be cited according to the city and year of publication, or in the case of the Globe and Mail (a national newspaper), simply “Globe.” The names of all persons mentioned in obituaries have been replaced by pseudonyms. A full list of all newspapers cited can be found in a dedicated [Appendix](#), following the References section.
11. Rare instances where a longer passage is included may focus on the deceased’s relationship to notable members of society. Hadley McPherson’s obituary, for example, states that she was a cousin of Sir John A. MacDonald and also “a schoolfellow of the Premier in their younger days” (Montreal, 1910). Here, the deceased takes a backseat in their own obituary, in favor of the more eye-catching figure.
12. For context, from 1960-1979, the mean number of characters to describe someone’s hobbies was 124.34 (sd = 95.94). Between 2000-2021, the mean grew to 279.68 (sd = 276.73).

13. The sense in which obituaries represent a genealogical chronicle is made even more apparent through the rise in amateur genealogy sleuths who use programs such as [Ancestry.com](#) (Barnwell, 2013; Blitz, 2023; de Groot, 2020; Lowenthal, 1985; Taithe, 2015). This broader trend reinforces the importance that people invest in tracing and treasuring their family connections.
14. To reiterate the demographic shift and rise of nonreligion in Canada, Clarke and Macdonald note that as late as 1961, over 90% of the Canadian population was [Clarke and Macdonald \(2017, p. 4\)](#). As of 2021, 34.6% of the population – roughly 12.6 million people – identify as nonreligious ([Statistics Canada, 2022](#)).
15. Notably, recent years even reveal a slight decline in their use, now surpassed by funeral homes, cemeteries, and other locations.

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Author Biographies

Chris Miller is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Nonreligious Future Project at the University of Ottawa. He completed his PhD at the University of Waterloo, and his MA at Saint Mary's University. His current research explores the impact of nonreligion on death and dying. In other projects, he explores New Religious Movements and religion and popular culture.

Hannah McKillop is a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. She completed her BA (Hons) in Religious Studies at McGill University, and her MA in Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. Her research explores the intersections between religion, nonreligion, and popular culture in North America.

Sohini Ganguly is a PhD candidate in Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa. She completed her Masters and Bachelors in International Relations from Jadavpur University, India. Her current research explores the intersection of gender, religion and nationalism in Southeast Asian context. She is also an illustrator.