

Why Were Bishop Potter's Remains Cremated Secretly?



The Mystery of the Strange Midnight Journey of the Famous Churchman's Corpse to a New Jersey Crematory and of the Great Marble Sarcophagus Which Holds Only a Handful of Ashes



The Late Bishop Potter

THE Right Reverend Henry Codman Potter, bishop of the diocese of New York and one of the most distinguished leaders of the Protestant Episcopal Church, died in July, 1908. And now, eleven years after his death and burial, the fact leaks out that the remains of this famous churchman were removed from the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where they had been laid with great pomp and ceremony, carried under cover of night across the Hudson River to New Jersey and secretly cremated.

More surprising even than the cremation itself and the heavy veil of secrecy which was so carefully thrown around it, is the fact that it did not take place, as is usually the case, within a few days of the bishop's death, but after his body had lain in its tomb nearly eight years. It was, according to the surprising revelations made a few days ago, not until 1916 that the bishop's remains were stealthily removed from the cathedral tomb to a New Jersey crematory and reduced to ashes.

Why was Bishop Potter cremated when no other bishop of his church has ever been?

Why was his cremation delayed for nearly eight years after his death?

Why was it done with such great secrecy that until the other day no more than a score of persons knew of the strange midnight trip which his remains had made?

And why did it suddenly become necessary to divulge the secret that had been so jealously guarded for more than three years?

All these are questions which cannot yet be satisfactorily answered and which may always remain mysteries.

The news of Bishop Potter's secret cremation came as a distinct shock to everybody who knew him personally or by reputation. The many who had visited the chapel erected in his honor at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine were amazed to learn that its magnificent marble tomb held, instead of the bishop's mouldering form, only a handful of ashes—all that was left of the body after being subjected to the fiery heat of the crematory furnace.

The Protestant Episcopal Church has never taken a definite stand against cremation, but despite this fact Bishop Potter is the first bishop of this faith to be cremated.

To all members of the Roman Catholic faith, however, and doubtless to many of Bishop Potter's own church, cremation is little short of sacrilege—a practice not to be countenanced by any good Christian. According to their belief interment of the body as death left it is the only reverent way of disposing of the dead.

Bishop Potter died on July 21, 1908, at Cooperstown, N. Y., where he had long maintained an extensive country estate. His body was prepared for burial in the usual way and after simple services at Cooperstown was taken to New York and placed in the receiving vault of Trinity cemetery to await an imposing public funeral in the Fall.

As is now recalled there was, so far as the public knew, no suggestion of cremation made in connection with the elaborate preparations for his burial. This was considered strange at the time by leading advocates of cremation, for they had long believed that Bishop Potter favored the practice. Several years before he had been quoted as saying:

"I have long been in hearty sympathy with the effort to promote the practice of cremation, which the growth of population and the growth of cities of the dead in the neighborhood of large communities, makes in my judgment a sanitary precaution of great value; and I heartily agree with the Bishop of Manchester in his view of the utter irrelevancy of any so-called Christian objections to it."

In October, 1903, the Bishop's

body made what was, as it now turns out, only one of a series of journeys in and about New York. It was carried from Trinity Cemetery down to Grace Church, and after the public funeral there was carried to the crypt of the cathedral.

The beginning of this wonderful piece of architecture, which may not be fully completed for more than a century, was the proudest achievement of Bishop Potter's career. It was therefore thought eminently fitting that he should be laid to rest beneath the altar of the crypt, at that time the only part of the cathedral finished.

Accordingly, at great trouble and expense, a tomb of honor was chiseled out of the solid rock underneath the communion rail and directly below the splendid Tiffany mosaic altar. Into this the casket containing the bishop's body was laid.

The burial was private, only two or three of the cathedral clergy and members of the immediate family being present. This fact was recalled when the secret of the bishop's cremation was divulged the other day. Many thought that the bishop had doubtless been cremated within a few days after his death and that his burial was secret in order to conceal the fact that the massive casket contained only an urn of ashes.

Such, however, was not the case. It is definitely known that the body of the dead bishop did rest in the holy spot to which it was lowered with solemn religious ceremony from October, 1908, until April, 1916.

Soon after this first burial the bishop's family began plans for a memorial chapel, to be a part of the great cathedral structure. This was completed at a cost of \$200,000 and consecrated in October, 1914. Its central feature is a splendid marble tomb surmounted by a heroic bronze recumbent statue of the dead Bishop.

A Family Meeting in Heaven—From a Medieval Print.



The Death of the Pagan Potentate Sardanapalus. This Impressive Painting Shows the Great Pagan Ceremony of Cremation. In This Case King Sardanapalus Ordered His Living Wives, Concubines and Children Assembled and Burned Alive with Him.

What the Bible Teaches About Treatment of the Dead.

And he charged them: Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.—Genesis XLIX:29.

They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them.—Job XXI:26.

The worm shall feed sweetly on him; he shall be no more remembered; and wickedness shall be broken as a tree.—Job XXIV:20.

The dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.—Isaiah XXVI:19.

Jar of Human Ashes After Cremation and Ready for Shipment.



"The Morning of the Resurrection"

It Has Been Argued by Churchmen That This Great Scene Could Not Have Been Enacted if the Savior's Body Had Been Cremated.

No move was made to transfer the remains from the crypt to this new and more imposing resting place until 1916. Early in that year the bishop's children petitioned the proper authorities for permission to remove the body from the crypt and have it cremated. Every precaution was taken to keep all knowledge of this petition from the public.

The late Dean Grosvenor was the only one of the cathedral officials to be acquainted with the family's plans. He agreed to them and helped not only to carry them out, but to keep them a secret.

Shortly after midnight on the last day of April, 1916, an automobile hearse rolled into the cathedral grounds and drew up at the entrance to the crypt. The undertaker, with two assistants, who came with the hearse, were met at the crypt door by Dean Grosvenor and Mason H. Partridge, the sexton of Grace Church and a trusted friend of Bishop Potter and his family.

By the light of electric torches the men groped their way into the shadowy chapel. The heavy marble slab covering the tomb had been removed earlier in the day under pretext of making some trivial repairs in the interior. It was therefore an easy matter to remove the casket and place it in the hearse.

Through the deserted streets at an hour when the last of the theatre crowds had gone home and the first of the milkmen had not yet appeared the hearse was driven to the ferryboat which carried it to New Jersey. Soon after dawn the cremation was completed, but the ashes were held at the crematory until they could be returned to the cathedral under cover of darkness and with the same secrecy that was observed on the previous night.

On May 2, 1916, the Bishop's ashes were placed in the new tomb. But nobody outside of the Bishop's family, Dean Grosvenor, the sexton, the undertakers and the crematory superintendent had any idea that it was only cremated ashes which were transferred to this new resting place and not the remains originally buried in the crypt.

Both the size and shape of the sarcophagus indicate that it was

intended to hold the casket containing the body instead of the mere handful of ashes. It would seem from this that the decision to cremate the remains was not reached until after the completion of the tomb.

The interior of the tomb, according to an official of the cathedral, is filled up with marble, in which an elliptical groove about three feet long has been carved. The ashes of Bishop Potter lie in this depression.

But the truth about what was done with the dead bishop in the Spring of 1916, and about the character of the remains that now repose beneath his bronze effigy only deepens the mystery. The family and the few others who might clear it up steadfastly refuse to explain why cremation was delayed for eight years after the bishop died, and why it was finally carried out with such apparent effort to keep it a secret forever.

"As everybody knows," said Mrs. Charles Holland Russell, a daughter of the late bishop, "my father was always in favor of cremation, but he never expressed any wish about it for himself. The members of his family decided to have his remains cremated because we thought it right and proper. That is all there is to it."

The remarkable mystery surrounding this secret cremation of the distinguished bishop renews interest in the whole subject of what is the best disposition to make of the bodies of our dead. On sanitary and economic grounds the advocates of cremation have quite the best of the argument, but on the religious and sentimental side of the question they meet with the strongest kind of opposition.

Pope Leo XIII once instructed that every effort be made to inspire the faithful with the greatest horror for what he termed "the detestable abuse of burning dead bodies." The Archbishop of Montreal and other great dignitaries of the church have since joined with him in declaring cremation formally prohibited for all children of the church.

The church's view is that cremation is a revival of a pagan custom which is plainly out of keeping with the teachings of the Bible and with the time-honored rites of Christian burial.

Hindoo Cremation of the Dead of Calcutta, India.

