

Graveyard survey in West Ulster

Harold Mytum

In only a few regions of Britain and Ireland do headstones survive in large numbers prior to the later 18th century. West Ulster is one such region, and its graveyard memorials have already been briefly noted and illustrated in print (Hickey 1976). Moreover, three papers have examined some aspects of such memorials, namely one particular style of highly decorated headstone, some memorials with tradesmen's symbols, and the origins of mortality symbols (McCormick 1976; 1979; 1983). The majority of the headstones, however, have not been archaeologically recorded and analysed, and so the opportunities for studying variability and change over time, space and cultural group have not been realised.

A research project has been initiated to examine the range of West Ulster memorials in use during the 18th century, and explore changes in commemorative practice through to the end of the 19th century. Fieldwork was carried out during 2000 and 2001 as part of an archaeological field school on selected graveyards in Co Monaghan and Co Fermanagh, and will continue for at least one more season. To date, all or parts of Aghalurcher, Devenish and Galloon in Co Fermanagh, and Clones and Killeevan in Co Monaghan, have been recorded following a standard

procedure (Mytum 2000). Over 500 memorials have thus far been entered into the database. Further survey will complete the recording of all relevant monuments at these sites and add others from the region as necessary in order to compile a suitably large database of memorial forms and decorative elements.

Results from the survey have highlighted the high survival of 18th-century headstones at a number of graveyards no longer in use, where two main types can be identified. Preliminary analysis already demonstrates some significant patterns, and these are discussed below.

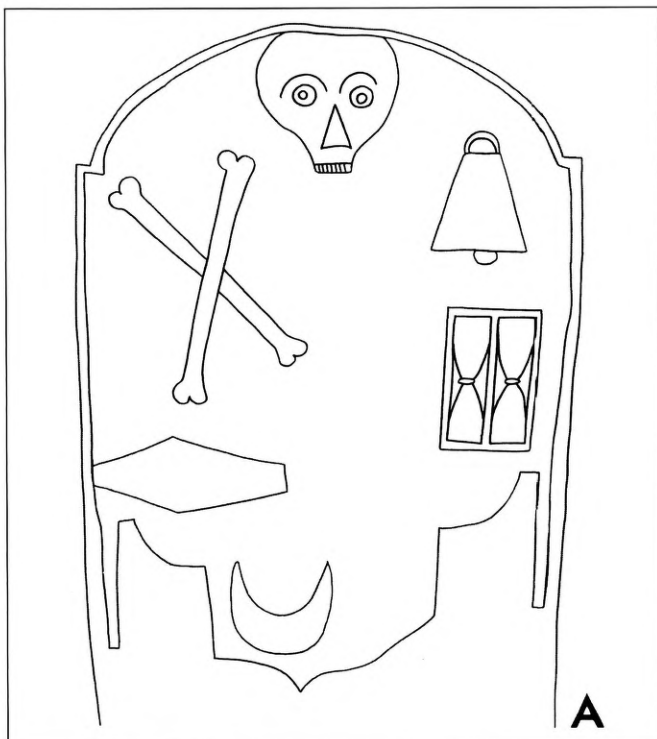
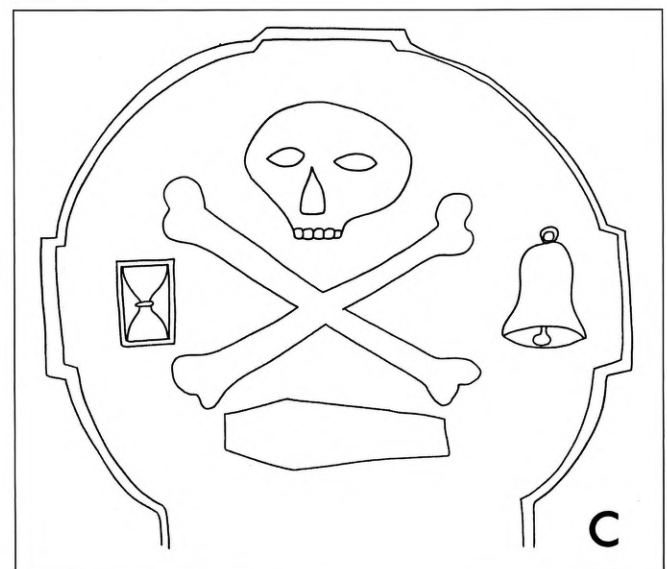
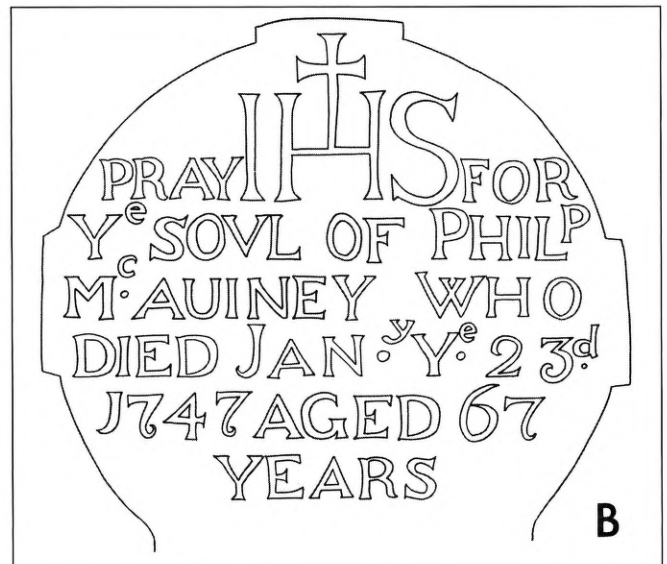


Fig 1A Back of slab headstone, Killeevan 1743



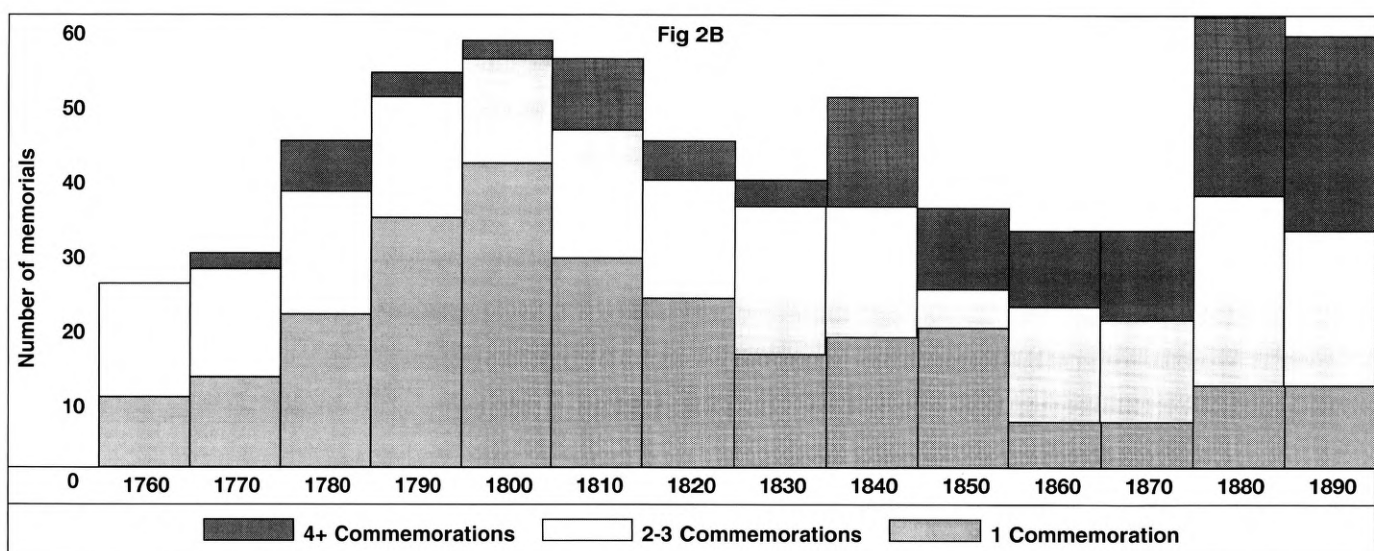
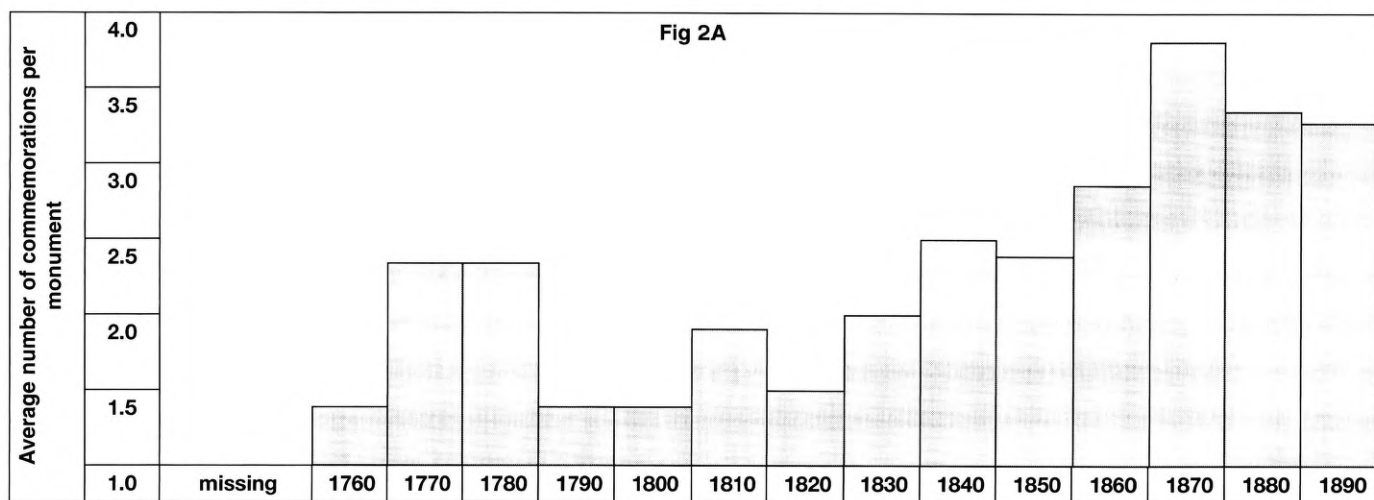
Figs 1B & 1C Front and back of wheeled cross headstone, Galloon, 1747

The first headstone type comprises upright slabs with a range of simply shaped tops, similar to those seen widely elsewhere in Britain and Ireland (Fig 1A). They tended to be produced at a smaller size than later headstones, but varied considerably in dimensions at any one time. Over the decades, headstones gradually became taller, though the proportions of height to width tended to remain similar. The memorial inscription was always placed on the front, where there could be some decoration above the text. Almost all headstones of this type had their commemorative texts incised, and some had motifs placed on the back of the stones; this was rarely deeply carved, and a wide range of designs have been noted. The upright slab headstones rose in popularity through much of the century, and the decline in the sample during last two decades may be partly due to a shift of interment to new burial grounds at that time (Fig 2, top). This will be investigated further in the next phase of fieldwork.

The second headstone type was a regional style, of a wheeled cross form. Whilst most of the commemorative

texts were incised (Fig 1B), a significant minority had the lettering carved in false relief. On most examples of the wheeled cross type, deeply carved designs were placed on the back; they were most frequently mortality symbols (Fig 1C), though other motifs were also chosen. The wheeled cross type was mainly popular from the 1720s to the 1750s, peaking in the 1740s (Fig 2, bottom). The wheeled cross design also occurred carved onto the face of upright slab headstones, and some other types such as cross forms have been found, but the role of these types may only become clearer with larger samples.

The mortality symbols used on the headstones were those frequently also found in Scotland (Willsher and Hunter 1978), notably the skull, cross bones, coffin, hourglass and bell. Initial examination of the records by Joy Giguere has identified great variability in the depiction of these symbols, with minimum numbers of forms totalling 17 for the bell, 24 for the hour glass, and 26 for the skull. Most of the wheeled cross headstone type with mortality symbols had all the motifs present, though their arrangement on the stones



Figs 2A, B Top, Bar chart of upright slab headstones, by decade; Bottom, Bar chart of ringed cross headstones, by decade.

varied. A minority omitted at least one motif. It is highly likely that the varied treatment of the symbols reflected the work of different masons. Further research will attempt to define at least the most productive workshops and assess their spatial and temporal operation.

West Ulster was a region heavily settled by the Scotch Irish, and this provides a context for the spread of mortality symbolism in funerary art from Scotland to this part of Ireland (McCormick 1983). It is notable, however, that the majority of the 18th-century headstones were erected by native Irish families, whilst the Scotch Irish often used ledger slabs on which heraldry and mortality symbols could be carved. Many of the Irish indicated their Catholic faith through the placing of the IHS motif, with a cross extending from the horizontal bar of the H, above the memorial inscription on the stones, and sometimes also by the use of the phrase 'Pray for ye soul of' (Fig 1B). These headstones also incorporated the mortality symbols on the reverse; the method of transmission of these symbols across the cultural and religious divide, and the meanings that they were given by the two communities, deserve further attention.

Note

The West Ulster fieldwork is part of a larger research programme on graveyard memorials. The author would be grateful for information on graveyards with unpublished early headstones (as opposed to ledgers or tombs) from the 17th century and early 18th century in Ireland, Wales or England. Please write to him at the Department of Archaeology, University of York, King's Manor, York YO1 7EP, or email to hcm1@york.ac.uk.

Acknowledgements

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