FORETASTE OF A WORLD REMADE: FIVE ORDERS FOR AN AGAPE, Douglas Galbraith, Wild Goose Publications, 2022, downloaded from www.ionabooks.com, £3-80.

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Even at first glance, and in the form in which I received the material, this work presented as an engaging and attractive publication whose appearance just now is timely for a variety of reasons. The very nature of public worship has been undergoing considerable change, a change undoubtedly accelerated by the presence of Covid for the last three years. House groups and study groups of all varieties have also been affected, as have many of the traditional methods of training and personal development used in church circles of all denominations. Physical attendance and participation in all kinds of group work, and of course at worship in all its forms even in a sanctuary, have altered dramatically with the emergence of more relaxed and informal ways of meeting such as *café church, messy church, pilgrimage groups,* and *worship in the woods* (to mention but a few). In addition to this, is the undeniable fact that many are now expressing themselves in worship, and indeed in belief itself, in wholly different words, styles, and actions from those they have used in the past. In such a context, the 'rediscovery' of Agape seems both timely and significant. On a personal level, this reviewer has almost no experience of the presence or use of Agape in spite of over half a century of participation in house and study groups of many kinds, and also considerable amounts of involvement in worship and church life. I think I recall personal involvement in its use only once in all that time. It may be that through this publication more people can be introduced to the concept.

The introduction to the collection provides a very helpful account of its recent use by congregational and Iona Community groups, and leads into a very useful and succinct section on the origins and place of the Sacrament of Holy Communion/Eucharist in the Church. I hope it is not unfair to say that many of today's communicant members across the denominations know what it is that they do at communion, but not necessarily how and why this point was reached. In this publication, Douglas Galbraith provides an opportune moment for the Agape to come into its own again. The relative shortage of ordained clergy has also resulted in a greater degree of lay leadership across

the whole life of the Christian Church. This is on the whole, very successful though one hopes that there are adequate training and development opportunities taking place. I believe this material will certainly be welcomed by lay and ordained alike.

There are five agape 'liturgies' or orders which focus on the sense of community and togetherness which are marks of 'being Church' in the broadest sense. There are five named themes of the senses - bread, water, wine, and the marks of the church. Each one is provided with a considerable number of scripture readings from which selections can be made and used. These are well chosen, some of them being very specifically related to a particular Biblical narrative. But the selection is wide ranging, many speaking powerfully and directly both to groups, and to individuals within such groups. The way they are chosen and arranged means (one feels) that each order can be used over and over again and still retain its freshness. The suggestions included for how each theme may be experienced are indicative of possibilities of flexible and imaginative use.

For all sections of society, these are challenging times, and no less so for Christian communities - perhaps even more so when communities may not be very 'structured'. One would hope that this rediscovery of an ancient and venerable tradition of the Church may prove to be a useful tool and opportunity for sharing and that once tasted, will have wide appeal.

Rachel J W Dobie

is an educationist and minister who retired in 2008 from the parishes of Broughton, Glenholm and Kilbucho with Skirling with Stobo and Drumelzier with Tweedsmuir. While there, she built up a team of leaders of worship to ensure that worship continued in each locality. She is a former Secretary of the Church Service Society and a past President.

THE COFFIN ROADS: JOURNEYS TO THE WEST,

Ian Bradley (Birlinn, 2022); ISBN 978 1 78027 779 0.

On holiday on the Applecross peninsula this year, we found that our accommodation (an imaginatively converted church) practically straddled one of the old 'coffin roads', which climbed and dipped its nine miles from nearby Kenmore over the mountains to the coast on the Inner Sound looking across to Raasay. We would have been quite unaware of this had it not been for Ian Bradley's new book on the coffin roads of the West, proving him right that 'walkers and cyclists exploring the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are very likely to find that coffin roads feature on their itineraries'.

These paths were worn into the ground by coffin bearers, working in relays, carrying the bodies of the dead often over many miles to one of those remote graveyards that can be found in isolated locations on the west coast and on the western isles of Scotland. Such journeys could last for days and sometimes involve large numbers of mourners on their way to the deceased's 'home' in the west. These routes could cross water, with *Port nam marbh* (port of the dead) a place name often found. The sombre nature of the ritual is captured by Peter May in his atmospheric whodunnit set in the Outer Hebrides, where the protagonist, suffering from memory loss, finds himself in possession of an old map of a coffin road (the book's title) which he now must travel to find his identity.

'The Coffin Roads' is one of a planned trilogy of books on aspects of death and the afterlife. Already published is '*The Quiet Haven: An* A*nthology of Readings on Death and Heaven*' (DLT), and to follow will be '*Breathers of an Ampler Air: Heaven and the Victorians*'. In this, his second volume, Bradley, a member of the Church Service Society and a prolific author whose themes include Celtic Spirituality, explores a practice most frequently recorded in the nineteenth century but which could well have been older. His purpose, however, is not simply to bring history to life but to allow it to comment on the attitudes and practices in our time, when death tends to be 'swept under the carpet'.

As well as first-hand experience of these routes, the author calls on several writers whose works have lain silent for many years and who deserve to be heard afresh. Typical is nineteenth century minister and Moderator, Norman MacLeod – 'MacLeod of the Barony', one of those parish ministers who took a keen, compassionate, and perceptive interest in the lives of the people of his parishes, recording his observations for posterity. MacLeod notes the

strength of desire for people to be buried with 'kindred dust' – namely, among ancestors in the place from which they came. He cites the man who, already living in poverty, even sold his whole potato crop in order to meet the expense of burying his wife in a distant churchyard among her own folk.

Such journeys and rituals, Bradley notes, took place 'without benefit of clergy'. This was not so much because 'drink was taken' as from credal conviction. The absence of a formal liturgy at funerals derived from a Reformed unease with anything which sailed so near to being prayers for the dead. The '*First Book of Discipline*' (1560) had proscribed any singing or reading at burials on the grounds that it would encourage the superstition that such activities by the living 'may profit the dead'.

The author examines eight such roads, relating custom, topography and destination, but not omitting the occasional anecdote: how after a taxing day's journey the bearers and mourners rewarded themselves with generous measures of whisky, so much so that a mile or two into the next day's journey it was found that the coffin had been left behind. There was also the wake at which the dancing became so vigorous that the reverberations of the floor caused the corpse, which had been placed sitting upright, to 'leap' out of his coffin, causing terror among the fleeing mourners.

In reflecting in the '*Epilogue*' on the customs about which he has written, Bradley comments on the way death is integrated into landscape and culture, which makes it 'something that is open and involves the whole community, rather than shut away and private'. Another of the author's witnesses, Lord Teignmouth, who left a written account of his travels through the Highlands and Islands in the late 1820s, gave as an example that one of the first duties of a bride after marriage was to prepare the winding-sheet for her interment.

It is the book's contention that in this day and age the taboo surrounding death may be weakening and we are getting closer to a point where we can receive help from the rituals and practices of which the coffin roads were the emblem. The author instances: the rise in eco-friendly funerals; the shift to more secular and informal ceremonies; the growing ease in speaking about death in public, as in the bill brought to the Scottish Parliament in 2021 in favour of assisted dying for terminally ill adults; the evidence that the wake has become more important than the funeral service. In particular, he cites statistics which show the likelihood that more people will die at home in future.

I was particularly struck by another aspect named among these conclusions and predictions, namely the Victorian rebirth of the ancient Celtic role of *anamchara*, the 'soul friend' who would accompany a monk in his life and his dying, a role explored at greater length in Bradley's '*Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*' (2000). This rebirth was evinced in the persons of the mourning women, often doubling as midwives, who were brought into the houses of the dying 'to sing the death croon over them and so assist their souls on their journey into the next life'. Noting today's awareness of the power of music in palliative care, the author wonders if, when deaths take place at home, there is a case for 'reviving and encouraging the practice of keening and expressing grief through lament and song' to help friends, family, and the dying through the journey. And could the enabling of this, as Alexander Carmichael of '*Carmina Gadelica*' suggested in the nineteenth century, be a new form of lay ministry in our own time?

Ian Bradley and his witnesses have restored for us a forgotten aspect of our common life. 'Tradition' is so often seen as deadening and limiting, frozen in time, whereas it is flow rather than sediment. '*The Coffin Roads*' reminds us that in liturgy as in life our traditions carry the seeds of renewal and that we need continually to revisit our history and our story, the better to navigate the roads and the ways of contemporary life.

Douglas Galbraith
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