

JOHN DALTON: AN ACCOUNT OF HIS FUNERAL

John Dalton was a lifelong Friend and a scientist of world renown. The conflict between society's perceptions of these two roles led to his having a funeral remarkable not only for its scale, but also for the behaviour of the mourners.

Born in Eaglesfield in Cumbria on 5 September 1766, he came from a Quaker farming family and his father had limited means with which to educate his children. Dalton went to a school kept locally by another Quaker, John Fletcher, at the Friends' Meeting House, Pardshaw. There he was educated until the age of twelve, at which time Fletcher retired. Dalton himself took over the teaching, at intervals assisting his father on the farm.

In 1781, at the age of fifteen, he moved to Kendal to teach in a Friends' School. Twelve years later, he procured the position of the Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at the Manchester Academy. After the publication of the first part of his *New System of Chemical Philosophy*, in which he put forward his views relative to the Atomic Theory, or doctrine of Definite Proportions, or Chemical Equivalents, Dalton's scientific reputation had become established. In the following years he toured many of the large towns of England giving lectures.

In 1837 he had a 'severe attack of paralysis' (probably a stroke) which affected his speech and left him with only partial use of his left side. A few months later he had a second attack. From these he recovered well enough to be able to continue many of his everyday commitments. Then, three months before his death, he suffered a third attack which reduced his strength still further.

On the evening of 27 July 1844 he retired to bed after his usual supper of oatmeal porridge. The following morning his servant, who slept near him, spoke to him at about six o'clock, then left the room. Half an hour later he returned to find Dalton in a state of insensibility in which he remained until his death later that day.

Despite his commitment to Friends, his funeral was a very ceremonious affair. The first stage occurred on the Friday evening. Shortly after nine o'clock the coffin, which was constructed of highly polished, curled Spanish mahogany, with frosted brass handles and a brass plate, was placed in a hearse. (The outer coffin contained an inner coffin made of lead, upon which was soldered a copper plate which bore

a lengthy inscription praising his many achievements). It was drawn by four horses, preceded by two mutes and followed by a mourning coach. Dalton's remains had been removed from his lodgings to a large room in the Town Hall which had been converted to a funeral apartment for the occasion. The room was darkened, allowing in no daylight; instead the coffin was lit by two gas chandeliers and eight candles. The public were admitted to pay their respects between the hours of eleven and six on the Saturday. It was calculated that no fewer than 40,000 people passed through the room. It was described as

...what in other cases would be termed the "lying in state"
...The term, however, would here be a little out of place; for every appearance of state was, with excellent taste, suppressed. Some immense funeral plumes were withdrawn; and the only objects that could for a moment withdraw the eye from the plain though beautiful mahogany coffin were the breast-plate which ... was placed on a pedestal at the foot of the platform, and a copy of the vote of thanks from the (Manchester) Literary and Philosophical Society.¹

On the Friday the Mayor issued a placard ordering that the streets along which the funeral procession would parade should be freed from obstruction. He also intimated that as a mark of respect warehouses and shops should be closed from eleven to one o'clock on the Monday.

On the Monday morning, 12 August 1844, the procession started forming at ten o'clock. So many people took part that its head formed some three quarters of a mile from the Town Hall. At about 10.20 the hearse arrived at the Town Hall to collect the coffin. It was one of the funeral carriages peculiar to Manchester, sculptured in "applicable" allegorical subjects. It was drawn by six black horses with black velvet quarter cloths, led by two grooms in mourning attire.

The procession began to move at 11.5 a.m., with representatives from many local bodies and societies leading the hearse. Nearly 400 of the borough's police were on duty, lining the streets and keeping them free from obstruction. There was no attempt on the part of the dense crowds to force their way and they maintained quiet, orderly behaviour, and silent and respectful demeanour along the whole distance. So large a multitude had never been seen manifesting its presence and numbers with so few audible signs. The procession took 1¼ hours to travel 1½ miles to the cemetery gates. Along the way the bells of nearly every church it passed were tolling. The recommendation of the mayor was observed and warehouses, shops and other places of business along the route were closed, their windows being filled with women in mourning. The roofs of the houses, too, were occupied by observers; never before

had so general a wearing of mourning been seen in the community. The coffin was taken to the vault with four mutes and eight pall-bearers, as the registrar of the cemetery recited passages from the Bible. Then the coffin was lowered into the vault and the usual burial service was read, followed by a prayer pre-composed by the registrar himself. The funeral service was concluded with the usual benediction and most of the parties forming the procession then left after seeing the coffin in the vault. During the afternoon the public was freely admitted and throngs of people came to view the vault and coffin. At six o'clock in the evening a large stone was placed over the vault and the crowds quietly retired from the cemetery.

Apparently,

...various members of the Society of Friends ... expressed an interest to attend the funeral, and a place was assigned to them.²

Certainly they appear on the programme of the procession, as fixed by the committee of arrangement and in fact the 'active executor' was a member of the Society of Friends. Yet, for the actual procession, they are not reported as having been present.

...On reaching the cemetery, we found there nearly a hundred members of the Society of Friends, of both sexes, who, having a conscientious objection to forming a part of the procession, had gone direct to the cemetery from their respective residences.³

Directly following the report of his funeral in the *Manchester Guardian*, is a letter to the editor from a few members of the Religious Society of Friends, explaining their abstention from the procession, and expressing their disapproval. It was the first time a Friend had ever been "honoured" by a public funeral. Many Quakers felt it to be a day of real mourning for the occurrence of the sort of event which they were well known to have always had a testimony against.

...In thus recording our unqualified disapproval of the entire proceedings, we would not be misunderstood. We impute not motives: but as regards the "lying in state", we certainly cannot admire the judgement, neither do we envy the feelings, of those who could originate such an exhibition; and we have no sympathy with the taste of the forty thousand who afterwards joined in it. Doubtless many, very many, of those who attended the funeral, did design to give expression to their sincere regard for the estimable and disinterested character of the deceased. We are certain that they did; but we think that the mode of manifesting it was most inappropriately chosen. And we more than think, that such proceedings are entirely prohibited both by the letter and by the spirit of Christianity.⁴

Elsewhere it was questioned how it could happen that a Member of their Society should be thus interred. They felt that the fact that the mortal remains of a man who had been a member of the Society of Friends all his life could be consigned to the grave in such ostentatious pageantry was wrong. Whereas a general feeling against such a funeral was believed present amongst others than Friends, it would appear that once plans had been made people were unwilling to draw back. Friends of Manchester Meeting did make their views and wishes clear to the committee for arrangements, however these were forgotten or ignored.

And yet, from the removal of the funeral plumes from the lying in state, and the general quietness of manner of the procession, it is obvious that those not connected with the Society of Friends felt that the pageantry that could otherwise have been expected had been greatly restrained.

Thus one of the great men of English Science, a very shy, humble man, was given a funeral the like of which had never before been seen in Manchester. It is ironical that the man whose remains lay at the centre of so much attention, would have been so very upset and embarrassed by such ceremony.

Anne Banks

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ *The Manchester Guardian* Wednesday, August 14th 1844.

² *The Manchester Guardian* Saturday, August 10th 1844.

³ *The Manchester Guardian* Wednesday, August 14th 1844.

⁴ *The British Friend* 31 August 1844.

Also used in the writing of this report was:

John Dalton: A Bibliography, by A. L. Smyth, (Manchester U.P., 1966).