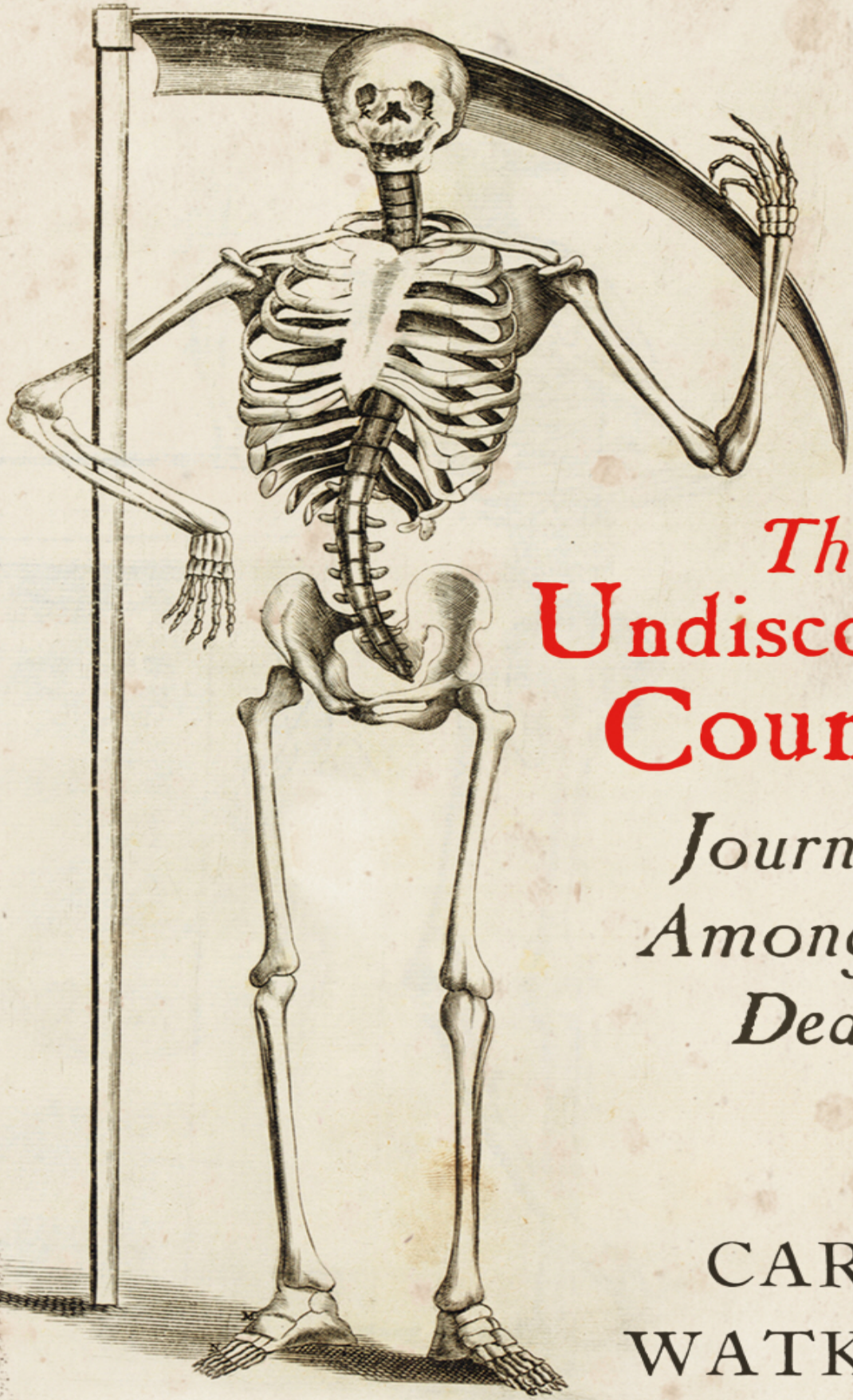

The Undiscovered Country

Journeys Among the Dead

CARL WATKINS

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About the Book

We know what happens to the body when we die, but what happens to our souls? The answer may remain a great unknown, but the question has shaped centuries of tradition, folklore and religious belief.

In this vivid history of the macabre, Carl Watkins goes in search of the ancient customs, local characters and compelling tales that illuminate how people over the years have come to terms with our ultimate fate. He discovers what a small Norfolk church has to tell us about the apocalypse; why the greatest minds of the seventeenth century were embroiled in debate over the phantom Drummer of Tedworth; and how a nineteenth-century Welsh Druid completely changed the national view of cremation.

The result is an enthralling journey into Britain’s past, from medieval hauntings on the Yorkshire moors and eccentric memorials on the Cornish coast to séances in Victorian kitchens and gallows tales from a Bristol gaol. Impeccably researched and elegantly told, *The Undiscovered Country* ventures beyond the veil to bring the dead back to life.

About the Author

Born and bred in Warwickshire, Carl Watkins read history at Cambridge, where he is now lecturer in medieval history and a fellow of Magdalene College. He writes about belief and has published on the history of ghosts, the afterlife, saints and folklore. His first book, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, was published by CUP in 2007, and he has contributed to a forthcoming Cambridge history of medieval England. He has also appeared on Radio 3's *Night Waves*, in a number of programmes for Radio 4's series *The Long View* and on a number of television documentaries. He lives in Cambridge.


NORTH &
MIDLANDS
North Sea
COUNTY DURHAM
Danby
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Cold Kirby
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TOWER HAMLETS
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Thames
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Tate Britain
Brookwood Cemetery
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SOUTH-WEST
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Sampford Peverell
HAMPSHIRE
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INSET MAP: BRISTOL
Clifton
University of Bristol
Infirmary
BRISTOL
Hanham
New Gaol (Cumberland Road)
Temple Meads Railway Station
St Augustine's Church

The Undiscovered Country

Journeys Among the Dead

CARL WATKINS

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

PROLOGUE

A large painting draws in viewers at an exhibition in Tate Britain. Most stand before it curious, some transfixed, others a little uncomprehending. The painting is of a landscape but not a landscape as that genre is conventionally understood. It is on a massive scale, measuring some thirteen feet by nine, but the subject is more striking than the size, for this is no pastoral idyll or romantic fantasy. It is a painting of destruction on a cosmic scale. An earthquake shakes mountains out of their places. Lightning rives boulders from the tops and sends them down into the valley. A city totters, fragments and falls inwards. Reds, oranges and blacks dominate; everything is darkness and fiery light. Getting closer, the painting folds the viewer in and, as it does so, pulls the gaze towards tiny human beings in the shadows, some in rich clothes, others naked, some crying out, others trying to hide in rocks and caves, all fragile and grabbing at the disintegrating earth. The key to the painting is a scriptural verse: 'For the great day of his wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?'[1] It comes from the last and easily the strangest book of the Bible, Revelation, a vision cast in poetic, almost hallucinatory, language of how the world would end. This painting, *The Great Day of His Wrath*, was no ordinary piece of art. It was a prophecy in paint.[2]

The idea of the painting was, then, an ancient one but the painting itself is not ancient. It is the work of a relatively modern man, John Martin, who painted it in the early 1850s – an age of railways, wireless telegraphy, steamships, heavy industry. Martin had been born at East Landends near

Haydon Bridge in 1789 as the industrial transformation of Britain was under way. He walked the hills as a boy, fearing the mine workings with their reputations for ghosts and hobgoblins and filing away in his memory impressions of sublime nature. Rather later, as he strayed further afield, he encountered blast furnaces, illuminated by night with liquid fire; they inspired his palette of colours when he created his vision of the last things. Martin's mother bequeathed her religion to him. She counted among her ancestors Nicholas Ridley, Protestant, bishop and a martyr who had been burned to death slowly at Oxford in 1555 when his pyre did not catch light properly.[3] She was a descendant worthy of him in her zeal, and her piety was fierce: she believed in the devil's angels and a fiery hell, a place, she told her son, where the blasphemer and the swearer would ultimately be consigned. John's three brothers, older than him, were brought up in the fervour and turned into eccentrics. William, the eldest, was a frustrated inventor. Richard was practical, a soldier who fought in Wellington's army against Napoleon. Then there was Jonathan, a preacher, visionary and madman – he was condemned to Bedlam after he almost succeeded in burning down York Minster. Only the timely arrival of a powerful pumping engine from Leeds saved the great church from the flames. The older Martin brothers were full of millenarian speculation. They wondered about the end of the world, anxious that it might come in their own day, and John listened and absorbed it all.

When he put brush to canvas half a century later, *The Great Day of His Wrath* was one image in a sequence of three. Revelation, the book at the heart of apocalyptic talk, laid out in detail how the end would come and John Martin tried to put the essence of the story into two further paintings. They also hang in Tate Britain. The second is less arresting than the first. It shows the judgement of the

living and the dead. Christ is enthroned in the upper middle of the painting surrounded by white-robed elders and angels. In that portion of the painting stillness prevails. Below there is turbulence. The drama is explained in a pamphlet, a fragile thing only six inches by four inches, which forms a ‘Descriptive Key’ to the ‘Grand and Solemn Pictures’. Mass-produced for the original exhibition using cheap paper, very few copies have survived.[4] It explains that peoples from the four corners of the earth have been summoned and now ‘nation meets nation in an unusual brotherhood’. As the living gather together, the dead, too, have been raised from their graves; all are separated: sheep from goats, good from wicked, blessed from cursed. On the right-hand side, an angel holding the trumpet that has announced the judgement looks down, observing the scenes that play out in the landscape of the Bible but which are also full of features of Victorian England. For not only different peoples but also different times would meet in this moment of cosmic unity. In the distance the armies of the Antichrist are vanquished as they try to lay siege to the people of God on Mount Zion. In the foreground, the damned gather in the valley of Jehosaphat, bathed in what remains of the sun’s light. The land around them crumbles away and they lose their footings; hills disintegrate, cities collapse and a steam train, trailing smoke and carriages, falls into the chasm. Among the lost souls are the rich and the powerful: a crowned king, a bishop in full pontificals, a Catholic, sprawled in the foreground. All wicked things, explains the pamphlet, pass away in the end times – avarice and pride, pomp and hypocrisy, pretended faith and false sanctity, fake humility and the ‘hideous engines and vain trophies of war’.

On the left-hand side of the painting are the saved, men and women of all estates: painters, philosophers, divines, holy martyrs, virtuous queens, innocent children, ordinary

people, ‘all who have benefited mankind and served the cause of Christianity’ united now ‘in brotherly love’. Some are knowable – John Milton and William Shakespeare; there are Protestant heroes too, counterpoints of the damned bishop, the medieval heretic John Wyclif and the stirrer of the Reformation, the German monk Martin Luther. Faintly visible in the distance ‘in illimitable space’ is a celestial city which waits for the blessed, a place lighted not by sun or moon but by the glory of God. To the far left is a grassy path, winding through trees, a way out of the dying world onto the *Plains of Heaven*. This is the final painting. Built around the Bible text ‘I saw a new heaven and a new earth’, mountains rise far away in a haze while in the foreground the inhabitants of heaven gather among flowers. The painting brings life to the scriptural promise that ‘God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying … for the former things are passed away’. And ‘he that sat upon the throne said “behold, I make all things new”’.[5] All this, too, made sense to John Martin, his family and Victorian men and women who came to see the paintings in the 1850s. The pamphlet guide explained the judgement scene quite fully but, for the other paintings, it was deemed sufficient to list illustrative quotations; the Bible was familiar enough for at least a basic understanding to be taken as read.

The essence of the Christian prophecy John Martin painted had been brought to England by St Augustine and his missionaries in 597. Endlessly elaborated and reconceived, read, preached and for some of the time figured in art, it had become fixed in the imaginations of Christian men and women down the generations. It formed an essential element in a body of knowledge about not only how the world itself would die, but how each man and woman within it would die. It held out the prospect of judgement

for all, of the eternal fires of hell to the unregenerate and new life to those who embraced Christ, souls that would rise to inherit a new world. This story, central to the Church's message, modified, refined, sometimes quarrelled over, was shared by the people of Christian Britain for 1,300 years. And it was still alive – very much alive – in the mid Victorian England that John Martin set out to please with these, his last and greatest works. And please Martin did. The paintings were almost instantly famous. The railways, which by the 1850s criss-crossed much of England, carried them to most major towns, beginning with those of the northeast and then London in 1855. Crowds queued to see them. Viewed by gas lamps in darkened rooms, they became more phantasmagoria than art, cinematography before cinema, seeming almost to move in the shimmering light. Mass-produced engravings spread the images even further afield. They appeared in homes, church halls, school rooms. The *Descriptive Key* gave advance notice of the impressions to be made 'in the most costly manner' and of a quality 'commensurate with the importance of these grand subjects' so that the public could order their own copies. Nourished on the Bible, pulpit preaching and Sunday school teaching about heaven and hell and judgement, and still exposed to wonder tales about the invisible world, the paintings made sense to most who saw them; many still interpreted them not as poetic images licensed by art but as painted prophecies, approximations of things that would surely come to pass.

Long after Martin's death, the paintings were, for a time, forever on the road or rails, touring almost every major city of the British Isles; their fame spread overseas during the 1860s and 1870s and they were packed off by steamship to the United States and Australia. Their appeal seemed as durable as the prophecy they captured. But then, quite suddenly, the spell seemed to break, and not only because the terrible glamour of the paintings began to wear off. The

painting of heaven was still admired beyond the 1870s – and it continued to be put on display – but the others were shuffled into storage. Eventually the allure of the *Plains of Heaven* began to fade as well. It too was hidden away. A later owner of the paintings wondered about showing them again to the public, confessing 'some feeling that the religious element that in my youth was so strong in our midst, has, in a measure, passed away'.[6] By the 1930s the triptych was almost forgotten; the paintings sold for a pittance, one even being cut into pieces to cover a screen.

It was not simply that artistic fashions had shifted in the late Victorian decades, beginning the paintings' slide into obscurity, although that was one part of the story. It was also that the cultural chemistry that powered the early enthusiasm was altering. John Martin had been born into a European world in transformation; the Bastille was stormed within days of his birth and the French Revolution set in motion, but as he ended his life, a second, very different, revolution was under way, a revolution not of politics but of the imagination. For in the century or so after his death in 1854, the beliefs that had underpinned the popularity of his art faded. The idea of the resurrection of the body, that all would one day stand before Christ, that many would be cast into a fiery hell for eternity, even that there was a tangible place called heaven, all began to slip away. The fate of the paintings is more than a metaphor for this change; it is intimately related to the crumbling of a vision of the other world that had held sway for generations. And when the paintings were retrieved and set again on a gallery's walls in the 1970s, they were resurrected as art and not prophecy.[7] Startling, overwhelming, garish and more than a little kitsch, the restored triptych had become an artefact testifying to ways of thinking about this world and the next that had fallen away. Clues to a vanished world – now the alienness of the vision, not its familiarity –

drew the viewers in. Today this is still how most people engage with them. Rapt but uncertain, they are sent back to the modern key and catalogue to make some sense of what they see.

That altered relationship between viewer and painting highlights the scale of the imaginative revolution wrought since the paintings were first put on show. It is as if the men and women of the modern age are separated from their Victorian forebears by chasms as deep as those John Martin envisaged in the last days. Emptying pews, closure of churches, diminishing numbers of baptisms and marriages in church are commonplaces in a modern narrative of dechristianisation, elements in a story of cultural change that has seen the hold of Christianity over imaginations weaken in Britain during the twentieth century, and more surely so since the 1960s.[8] Modern Britain is a place of many faiths and none, a place where religious narratives about how to live and how to die have lost much of their power, where many pick and mix spiritualities from an array of ideas far more cosmopolitan in its make-up than in John Martin's day.

Looking back at the past from this vantage point, what stands out is a grand continuity, a past, stretching from the advent of Christianity until perhaps the late Victorian era, in which the people living in the British Isles, in the very broadest of terms, shared a vision of their own end and that of the world. Making sense of those people and their beliefs from that same vantage point can be no easy task. Thomas Browne, a seventeenth-century scholar, an archaeologist before archaeology, surveyed funerary urns and ashes deposited in ancient Britain and meditated on the faith of those who practised the rites. As he struggled to make sense of it, he saw that 'the religion of one seems madness unto another'. Many of us now are a little like Thomas Browne as he gazed at his mysterious pots; we look back on

Britain's past – the comparatively recent past – and can make little sense of the beliefs that we see at work there.

In trying to enter that world, there are still points of contact. Few might now accept the narrative of the last things that John Martin's paintings offered, a narrative of judgement, hellfire and heaven, but two-thirds of the population of Britain still believe in the soul. As many as four in ten believe in the of ghosts and around half hold that there is some kind of life after death, a figure seemingly quite stable since the Second World War.[9] Residues of older visions are still there in the way people speak and structure their thoughts about the dead, too. Most are still cremated or buried according to Christian rites. Words about peace and rest, promises of a better place are expressed on cards attached to funeral flowers or printed in newspaper memorial notices. Some people talk to the dead. Some hold that dead loved ones watch over them. Votive lights set in candle racks in many churches and cathedrals suggest the dead are still in mind and notes pinned to prayer boards seek prayers for them, sometimes ask for help from them. Memorial announcements in newspapers sometimes address the dead as if they might be able to read the page; memorials on the internet sometimes speak to the dead as if they were there, somewhere, still within reach. In the modern world it is almost as if death is an obstacle to communication a little like distance, just as susceptible to being shrunk by an electronic miracle. 'Hellfire and harps' have all but vanished from these interpretations.[10] But there is still an idea that at the end of life there might be a place of bliss and radiance, stillness and freedom from pain; a place where children gone before their time become angels and there is hope of meeting again. The Russians capture something of this fuzzy hopefulness of modern heaven with their own expression. They call it 'Another Light'.[11]

This book begins with people and paintings at an exhibition in a country that seems to be in the business of dispensing with organised religion. But it works with the grain of beliefs and emotions around the dead that are often enduring. It is a modest bid to raise the dead, or some of the dead, and to make them come back to life briefly in stories made out of their lives. The critics, for the most part, did not much care for John Martin's paintings even if the public did. This was, they sneered, art to please the 'ignorant eye', ignorant, that is, of what made art great. It is fitting then that this is not, for the most part, a book about establishment figures, about elites and their beliefs or even about churchmen and abstract theologies. It is a book about how ordinary people in the past – people a little like those who queued to see John Martin's paintings in 1855 and those who view them still today – imagined the dead. It travels through this world to uncover the next, unravelling the stories behind places and artefacts and people that appear along the way. It travels through time, from the Middle Ages, when ordinary men and women can first be coaxed to speak to us directly from reticent sources, to the edge of the modern world, the immediate aftermath of the Great War, when ordinary men and women come more sharply into focus in letters and memoirs and photographs. It tells no single story for there is no single story to be told. This is, then, a book of many stories, pictures in words, set before the reader for contemplation.

1

THE STRANGE ISLES

In the south aisle of St Mary's Church in the East Anglian market town of Bury St Edmunds an effigy lies flat on its back on a tomb chest, resting there as it has done since the mid fifteenth century. The figure is not, as is more conventionally the case with tombs, a representation of a living person. It is a carved corpse, half clothed, skin stretched tight as a drum over bones that almost protrude, face set hard in a rictus, the nose crumbled away, the work of decomposition already begun. The effigy is not only an image of a dead human being, it is a reflection of the onlooker's future too. It confronts the viewer in the starkest fashion with his or her own eventual fate. Inscriptions laced round the figure make this plain. One scroll reads, 'From earth I came and onto earth I am brought, This is my nature, for of earth I was wrought.' Another: 'He that will sadly behold one with his eye, May see his own mirror and learn for to die.' A card near to the tomb announces that it is of a man called John Baret, a prosperous Bury merchant who lived through the first two-thirds of the fifteenth century and died in 1467. He worshipped at St Mary's and years before his death he commissioned his cadaverous tomb, gazing on it from his pew and meditating on his own end. Then, when his end came, his stone corpse continued to look down on its dead self thanks to many little mirrors set in the roof above the tomb. They are still there, dulled by time but occasionally catching a glint of light.[1]

Today John Baret's effigy cuts an incongruous figure in the church bustling with worshippers, visitors, guides and helpers. It exerts a grim fascination over tourists, bespeaking a kind of medieval comfortableness with the things of death, a readiness to gaze on death, which is remote, alien to modern sensibilities. And yet they know that his tomb's message is for them, too. People are as fragile in their flesh and blood now as John Baret and his generation, and the tomb's messages have not lost all of their power. They turn away from it, sometimes with a shudder. These facts of life and sensations in the face of death bridge the half-millennium that separates us from them. Yet in most ways, the life John Baret lived and the way in which he conceived its ending are almost impossibly hard to envisage at such a great distance.

When the historian Thomas Carlyle came to Bury in the nineteenth century he wondered if he could ever make sense of the town's medieval inhabitants.[2] The ancient ruins of the great monastery of St Edmund that once dominated the town stuck out like 'a broken, blackened shin-bone of the dead ages', its stones uncommunicative about the lives once lived inside them. Written records scarcely helped him because they said little of inner things; to him the people of that part of the past, the great age of faith, seemed utterly remote. So very rarely, mused Carlyle, 'some real human figure is seen moving' and then they were only half seen, as if in a wintry twilight. Standing by John Baret's tomb, the problems that beset Carlyle have not gone away. There are no diaries, memoirs or boxes of letters to reveal how the people of John Baret's Bury lived, how they died or what they thought about death and the dead. Most of them are destined to be figures forever imprisoned in Carlyle's wintry twilight. But John Baret emerges with a little more clarity and sharpness of definition than most. He can be summoned to life not only

through the traces on his tomb but, paradoxically, because of the very precision with which he prepared for death. His unusually voluminous will allows the man carved in stone to live again, flickeringly, in the imagination.

A Figure Half Seen

John Baret's Bury was no backwater. Some four or five thousand souls filled its late medieval streets.[3] It was among the wealthiest towns in Suffolk and Suffolk was one of the wealthiest counties of England, its prosperity founded partly on cloth manufacture.[4] This was a place full of fine houses and in the 1460s many were being rebuilt in the latest style, jettied upper floors stretching out over the streets, new chimney stacks freeing them of fug, more and smaller chambers arranged within, refinements that were all conducive to comfortable living. But this was a place of poverty too. The poor lived in the shadow of fine houses belonging to the rich. The fifteenth century was a hard economic time and many were sinking on Fortune's Wheel even as some men rose. So this was a place of anxiety as well as pleasure; anxiety for the impoverished who wondered how they would live and anxiety for the rich who feared for their souls when they died. At the heart of the town, the abbey of St Edmund sailed through it all. The abbey had given the town life. The plan of the central streets – still a neat grid today – had been the handiwork of an early abbot and the abbots still ruled their creation in the 1460s, though riots and rebellions had seen the monastery's grip on the town's affairs weaken. The abbey's life sprang from its saint: the bones of Edmund, the martyr-king killed by the Vikings in the ninth century, lay in a reliquary there. They still pulled in pilgrim crowds eager

that their souls be relieved of sins or broken bodies mended by his miraculous intercession.

Even King Henry VI had made the journey to the shrine. On the day of his visit in 1434, aldermen in scarlet, burgesses and ordinary townsfolk assembled to greet the king on Newmarket Heath, there to be touched by what limited glamour this most unprepossessing king could muster. John Baret would have been in his thirties or early forties by then, for he was born some time between 1392 and 1400. He was the son of Geoffrey and Joan Baret; Geoffrey, a man of some small property in the town had ties to the abbey, serving Abbot Cratfield who had appointed him keeper of his fishponds at Babwell in 1391. The family was already rich enough for the young John to have made a good marriage to a woman called Elizabeth Drury. This was not likely to have been a love match. She was the daughter of a knight, Sir Roger Drury of Rougham. The Drurys brought age-old aristocratic sparkle to the union and to the Barets, a family on the rise, while John Baret brought hard cash. He also brought a nose for business to their partnership, especially cloth business, and it was from this branch of manufacture that he made his money. The comfortable life this bought John and Elizabeth shines out from his will. Lists of possessions seem endless. There were tables, testers, cupboards, coffers, cushions, coverlets, curtains, featherbeds, pillows, pewter pots, pans, sheets, blankets, brasses, basins, tubs and other ‘ostilmentys’ too many to itemise.[5] Things mattered to Baret. They were parcelled out as mementoes to friends or bequeathed to family with care. Many were described with loving precision. He had a ‘covered, chased silver salt-cellar’. There were candlesticks of laton ‘whereon is written “Grace me Govern”‘, his motto. The ‘best spoons’ were singled out and so too were cloths painted with images, most likely religious ones, that had been hanging in the

hall. In a world where most had little, possessions filled John Baret's life. His house was a mansion with many rooms in which to put them. It stands today – now 3 Chequer Square where it hides inside a Georgian rebuilding – but the will reveals in passing that it once had a hall, study, 'white chamber', a chapel, parlours and sundry other chambers, kitchens, outhouses and storerooms. This was, emphatically, a rich man's house. And, in local terms, a powerful man too. For his will and tomb reveal that he had risen in the world to wear the abbot of Bury's livery and the collar of the Lancastrian kings.[6]

The Barets worshipped a short walk from Chequer Square at St Mary's where John's tomb stood, waiting. It was one of the town's two parish churches. Still imposing, its grandeur testified to the wealth, piety and self-confidence of the townsfolk who built and beautified it. A great medieval hammerbeam roof floats above the nave, borne aloft by angels that would once have been brightly painted. Grave slabs, some medieval, lie underfoot, and pockmarks in the stone suggest where brasses were once inset, calling to mind the dead of the parish. Windows were set with stained glass, walls plastered with pictures of Bible stories. Niches and alcoves were filled with statues of saints painted so as to stand out in a church lit by rushlights and candles. Latin liturgies under way at the several altars filled the space with sound. The air was heavy with incense and there may have been a sicklier tang, too, from bodies buried in the church precincts but not always well sealed in their long homes. All around the church was a steady to and fro of parishioners at their own devotions. On Sundays and feast days the parishioners converged on the church for mass. Gathered in the nave, they watched as the priest consecrated wafer and wine, transformed them into the flesh and blood of Christ and in

so doing renewed the sacrifice Christ had made for sinful beings on the cross. Mass reminded all how Christ had suffered and died for them, conquered death itself through his resurrection and ransomed all who were alive to his message out of hell. This was the central, saving rite of the medieval Church.

On these and other occasions, John Baret would have received discomforting messages too, messages that called into question the riches he had spent a lifetime accumulating. For it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Preachers drove that message home – the camel, one felt constrained to remind, was 'a terrible and great beast' – and it was captured in stained glass and painted mural, in plays of Bible stories; it could not be escaped.[7] In hell there was only stink and darkness, the 'horrible sight of devils, dragons, worms and serpents', sorrowing, weeping, wailing, gnashing of teeth, 'hunger and thirst irremediable'.[8] If all the leaves of the trees of the earth were turned into tongues they would not be able to tell of its pains.[9] The danger of landing there was great for a merchant like Baret. Not only riches but also the way they were acquired might block the way to heaven. Tales from the pulpit reminded congregations about this. Some hit close to home. In one, a dead merchant haunted the dreams of his former business partner. The ghost said that he was damned 'because we grew rich at the expense of many' who they had deceived 'in the sale of wool'. When the sleeper woke he was traumatised. Communion wafers choked him. The sight of a crucifix terrified him and he shielded his eyes. There was no place in the Church, no place in heaven, for a man made wealthy by sharp practice.[10] Living the faith, attending mass, confessing sins at least annually to the priest, taking communion from his hands at Easter, paying his tithes and giving generously to

the Church could all help John Baret on the way to salvation. But as he grew old, earlier wheeling and dealing clearly preyed on his mind and he looked to his will as the last chance to make amends. One man in particular, Edmund Tabor, was to be recompensed for the wrongs John Baret had done to him. In this, Baret was far from unusual. The will was the place to set things right with God and man, to pay debts and especially to discharge debts to the Church that might otherwise put the soul in peril.

But the business of death in the Middle Ages entailed much more than setting wrongs right. In his mind's eye – very much a merchant's eye, watchful, accounting – John Baret saw with precision what must happen when he was dead and laid it all out in unusual detail. His funeral was to be *spectaculum* and *speculum*; a spectacle in which John Baret would be remembered and a mirror in which those who came to see him off could discern their futures. The two were connected. For as people remembered Baret and saw themselves in his bones, they might be moved to think and pray for him as they hoped others, in time, would pray for them. So he planned intricately for the funeral. He laid out money for black gowns, which friends and kin were to wear. There were payments for children dressed in surplices and for chanters skilled in the singing of pricked song, for subdeacons, deacons and priests, the last each to receive fourpence in a purse.[11] He wanted attendants – men in black and women in white – to hold torches and provided for numerous candles, signifiers of salvation and practical aids; for lights kept evil spirits from the body. The scale of it all was designed to proclaim that a man of substance was dead. Even the officiating priest would double as an advertising hoarding: his vestment, 'ready made against the time' in white cloth and fine gold thread, was worked with John Baret's coat of arms and a 'remembrance' of his motto, '*Grace me gouerne*'. Many

outside the church's walls who could not come to the funeral were co-opted as John Baret's mourners too. Every bedridden man and woman would have tuppence, the prisoners in the gaol their 'bread, meat and drink' and each 'lazar' in the leper house pennies and a loaf of bread. At the centre of all this funereal commotion would be the still figure of John Baret. Encoffined, encircled by candles, bells tolling, his charitable giving would work like gravity. It would draw everyone in the town, on this his funeral day, into orbit around his corpse.

And even when the funeral was over and the people had gone, John Baret still planned to have an abiding presence in Bury. In the year after his demise, every week, on the day of the week on which he had died, there was to be a 'mind'. The St Mary priest would put on his white-and-gold vestment again and say 'a mass of our lady', 'rehearse' John Baret's name, saying *De profundis* for him, his father and mother and all Christian souls, and then offer up a requiem mass for them all. On the 'yearday' – the anniversary of Baret's death – he envisaged an even grander ceremony: the whole panoply of the funeral was to be reprised, with chimes, lights, money and bread, the only difference this time being the necessary absence of his corpse, for this would now be closed up in its tomb.

Spectacle, yes; but all this was a sound investment too, an investment in John Baret's post-mortem future. The canny merchant was calculating even as he prepared for death, for, when he was gone, money could buy him one thing that he still needed: prayer. The special masses chanted for him by the priests, the intercessions of all the town's poor folk, the prayers of his friends and neighbours and fellow burgesses would all help him on his journey through the other world. With solemn ritual and hard cash working on feelings of friendship and fellowship among the townsfolk, John Baret insinuated himself into collective memory. He would etch his name on the fabric of the

church and town too. The tomb itself cried out for prayers. It was loaded not only with pleas to God to be merciful, to blot out his many iniquities, to find a place for him in heaven, but also appeals to friends, family, neighbours and well-wishers. Looking on the sack of skin and bones carved on the lid, the living should pity and help him. Above all, they should pray for him – 'Wherefore ye people in way of charity, With your good prayers I pray you help me.' One day everyone would be as Baret is today – 'for like I am right so shall ye all be' – and they too would need help.

As they squared up to death, medieval men and women drew on that fellow feeling: the helpless dead needed the living as they travelled into the next world and medieval men and women could, and should, lighten the darkness of the dead by their prayers. An indulgence enshrined another, perhaps more mercenary, contract between living and dead. Indulgences were commonplace in late medieval England and promised remission of some of the punishment due for one's own sins, so long as one had confessed them, and were issued by the Church in return for a good deed. But Baret's was a rather special kind of document. He wanted it to be pinned up so 'it may be read and … exhort the people to pray for me' since it affirmed that those who did so would find their own suffering reduced in the next world in recompense.[12] Even as they travelled out of Bury, the townsfolk would not escape the memory of John Baret. He planned to rebuild its Risbygate. There he would add a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary to watch over the gate and an inscription bearing his own name.[13] Not only in their devotions in church but in their daily comings and goings, the townsfolk were encouraged to remember him. Baret's ambition was of a piece with the piety of his time, for prayers were not things only of church-time. Devotions bled into everyday life, at home, at work, on the move. And even as people got on with their lives, they were exhorted

to remember the dead. This was piety with a practical edge. Gates, roads, bridges were all the sorts of things that merchants liked to provide. Keeping them in good repair was a fitting gesture by those eager to grease the wheels of trade. In death, money left for the same purposes earned gratitude from their peers and acquired a numinous dimension too. For what better call to mind could there be of a soul on the threshold of a new frontier, travelling in the next world, than a memorial at a bridge, roadside or town gate?

To the Strange Isles

When death finally came for John Baret he would likely have been prepared. The signs of death were well known; commonplace diagnostics even rendered them into verse so that people could remember them and make ready. When eyes were misting, lips turning black, mouth gaping, heart trembling, spittle running, hands shaking, those at a bedside knew that it was time to fetch the priest.[14] Baret was steeped too in teaching about the last things. He had probably meditated on his little tract, *Disce Mori*, Learn to Die; the rhythms of the deathbed were familiar things, for people in the fifteenth century seldom died alone or sequestered from company but fortified by friends and neighbours gathered in prayer.[15] John Baret would have watched others die. Now the candles burned for him. One was placed in his fingers while he had enough strength to hold it, a symbol of Christ 'light of the world' who gave 'clear light unto the soul by the dark way and unknown by the which he shall walk'.[16] Family, friends and neighbours gathered and prayed at the deathbed. This solidarity mattered because this final crisis of John Baret's life was a cosmic drama too. Worlds, visible and invisible, collided in

these moments. Demons made a last great effort to win the soul, tormenting and testing, they drifted through his dreams and waking delirium. They crowded about the bed, ‘disfigured, foul and loathsome’, gazing with terrible eyes ‘as they had been two basins, glowing and burning as fire’ or ‘with sparks of fire spitting out of his mouth’, all of them ‘so foul that no tongue can tell nor heart think [of] the abominable and disfigured shape of them’.[17] They drove Baret to doubt Christ’s mercy, to despair at the Church’s works in a last desperate attempt to snatch him to hell. Prayers and blessed candles, invocations of saints and angels, banished them.[18] A priest held a crucifix before Baret’s eyes and he held Christ in his mind, thinking on the cross and the wounds Christ suffered for humankind. He thought of Mary and her pity at the foot of the cross and he reached out for her help in this final crisis of his life.[19] Even as the priest offered consolation, he had last questions too. Did John reject heresy? Did he wish to die in the true faith of holy Church? Did he truly repent of his sins? Was he ‘in charity’ with his neighbours, and if not would he settle his debts and compose his quarrels with them? Only when these questions were satisfactorily answered did the priest absolve his sins and anoint his body, touching eyes, ears, nose and mouth with oil. With this all that could be done had been done. John Baret, it was to be hoped, would now be able to die a ‘good death’. He waited between worlds.

A few miles south of Bury St Edmunds, across undulating Suffolk countryside, is the village of Long Melford. This place makes a little more sense of the man who lay dying in Bury St Edmunds in 1467. Long by name and long by nature, the village is strung out up the High Street, which rises gradually, flanked by houses, shops and inns, many in Georgian brick, others of Tudor and medieval timberwork,

until it ends at an eminence on which the church sits. ‘Church’ does not do justice to a building that resembles a modest cathedral. Inside, flooded with pure light, are the bones of the Cloptons, friends and relatives of John Baret who made something of a mausoleum of the church. They, and their neighbours, also rebuilt the nave, tower and chancel in splendour and had appeals for prayer cut into the stone of its outside walls and inscribed near the window arches for which they had paid. Remembered in his will, the Cloptons were to have keepsakes of Baret. There was, among other things, a spoon in beryl, silver and gilt for Mistress Clopton and a ring for Sir William, the son of Sir John Clopton who had paid for much of the work in the church. This ring was more than a memento since John Baret hoped that Sir William would ensure that the will’s provisions were enacted, for this powerful local figure was one of his executors.

But these kin ties are not the main reason for travelling to Long Melford. The Barets and Cloptons were tied together by something more than blood, business and that silver ring. John Baret and Sir William’s father both had connections to a famous man too. His name was John Lydgate. Born a few miles away in another Suffolk village, Lidgate, in about 1370, this second John became a monk of Bury. His star rose in the world thanks to his verse; favoured by the future Henry V and high society around him, he put into poetry not only epic history but everyday sentiment and ordinary experience.[20] He wrote of life and love and faith and he reflected on mortality too. ‘Feblysshed’ in old age, suffering ‘unwieldy joints’ and ‘cloudy sight’, he remembered his youth as a springtime among honeysuckle and primroses when he ran without a bridle, stealing apples, neglecting prayers, missing mass, hating school and fearing only the rod. Standing at the other end of his life’s span, having long since turned to