

Fleeting fame: The Memorial Brass to Thomas Cole MP

Jan Broadway

When in 1644 the brasses from the tombs in St Margaret's church, Westminster, were removed, only one survived.¹ The sole Elizabethan brass in the church today is appropriately that of an MP, Thomas Cole, elected to sit for Westminster in 1593 and 1597. The brass shows a husband and wife kneeling at a faldstool with an open book before each of them. A son kneels behind the man and two daughters behind his wife, while a coat of arms appears above their heads. It is a conventional evocation of the Protestant family at prayer. The brass was set up by Thomas Cole's wife, Margaret and below the image of the family is a long doggerel poem, expressing her feelings at the death of her husband.

<p style="text-align: center;">Sacrum Doloris²</p> <p>Shall teares the silent messengers of greife Dissolve their streames into a sea of moane Noe, noe; in vaine you sacrifice releife Over his tombe with eyes, with voice, with groane. For Cole, assigned by God the poor to pittie, The widowe's comfort, and eke th'orphanes sire, Who tun'd each string of hate to loves sweet ditty Is dead, aye me, will death the best desire: Remorsles death thy wrath in him is ended, Mauger thy darts his praises can not dye; Thou hast his bodye: but his soule ascended Into the place of joyes eternitye. And though his corps interd; lye dead in grave, Yet still his vertues, life and beinge have.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Anno Domi: 1597</p> <p>In parliament a burgess Cole was placed; In Westminster the like for many yeares; But now with saints above his soule is graced, And lives a burgess with heav'ns royall peares; O blessed change from Earth, where death is kinge, To be united there, where angels singe, Eiusdem. In eundem.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Terra tegit corpus, mens scandit ad aetheracaeli, Fama virens floret, caetera mors rapvit.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Thus in English</p> <p>The grave my bodye, heavne my soule doth keepe, The world my fame the rest in death do sleepe Margareta Cole Posuit</p>	<p>This monument unites two constant lovers. He that is dead, and her that lives in death: His body shee his spouse, in honor covers, Wishinge her daies were shortned, with his death. But shee must live; yet livinge shall be mated With him in death; while death her life hath dated. Full twenty yeares and odd their leauge was firme, Wittnes the world, their children and their love; Nothinge but death, by death could give ye tearme, Or farewell to their faith, by false remove. Of breach of concord, noe tounge can accuse them, Unless base envye, by her saints abuse them. O envye not the dead, but dye to synn, Expect the harvest of this dead mans bliss, Desire the crowne which envye cannot winn. Amend in you, in others whats amiss. So death shallbe your herrauld to procure, Rest to your soules, with Christ for to endure. Margett in noe distill thoes teares to comfort, And in thy childrens love addresse thy anguish, Three live with thee, then love their livinge consort, Noe longer in thy husbands sorrow languish. But immitate thy Cole in vertues lawes, That thou maist live, wher virtue pleads his cause</p>
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¹ M.E.C. Walcott, *Westminster Memorials*

² The inscription is entirely in capitals, with various letters combined to save space. The 'r' of 'corpus' was omitted and inserted above the line. In the transcription 'v' has been replaced by 'u' as appropriate and 'i' by 'j'.

If we consult the parish register for St Margaret's, we find that Thomas Cole married Margaret Cresfelde in December 1572. Their son John was born a year later in December 1573 and two daughters, Anne and Ellen, followed in April 1575 and February 1577 respectively. Thomas Cole served as churchwarden in 1592 and 1593. In November 1597 he died and was buried in the church. His widow paid 8s. 4d. for his grave and 6s. 8d. for the bells to be rung at his funeral. The funeral brass would have been commissioned and set up shortly thereafter. Margaret Cole was granted her expressed wish not to long outlive her husband. She died in September 1599. The correlation of the biographical information in the epitaph and the parish register confirms the identification of Thomas Cole the MP for Westminster with the husband of Margaret and father of John, Anne and Ellen. It also confirms that he was not the Thomas Cole of Barnard's Inn and Romford, Essex, who died earlier in the same year, with whom he has been confused.³ The confusion is an appropriate comment on the inherent weakness of funeral monuments to preserve the memory of individuals.

It is impossible to be sure why this brass alone survived of the many that were presumably to be found in St Margaret's in 1644. It is probable that it was preserved by one of Thomas Cole's descendants, who were still living in the parish. The iconoclastic despoliation of the monuments in cathedrals such as Lichfield and Ripon, when they were occupied by parliamentarian troops, is well-known. Lesser acts of vandalism were also recorded in many parish churches during the civil war.⁴ The extent to which brasses were removed and melted down as part of the war effort, however, is less often remarked upon. Yet this practice removed a large proportion of this type of memorial from the record. The inscribed brass plaque was inevitably the most vulnerable of memorial forms, as it was comparatively small, portable and the metal had an intrinsic monetary value. The damage caused by the greed of parish priests and others was frequently bemoaned by local antiquaries. In 1622 William Burton wrote of the 'covetousnesse or necessity of some poore Clerkes or Sextons, or the want or poverty of some needy Curates', which caused them to despoil monuments.⁵ The brass plaque was less expensive than the stone funeral monument and would therefore have predominantly commemorated less well-off, although still substantial, individuals. It was also easier to engrave than stone and allowed for freer expression of sentiment. A stone memorial

³ P.W. Hasler ed., *The Commons 1558-1603*, vol. 1, p. 629, conflates the two men. Thomas Cole of Barnard's Inn appears from the evidence of his will to have been a much younger man, possibly still a law student.

⁴ I am grateful to Nigel Llewellyn, however, for pointing out to me the extent to which damage to hands, noses etc. on monuments in country churches might be accidental damage, later interpreted as evidence for the presence of Cromwell's soldiers.

⁵ W. Burton, *The Description of Leicestershire* (1622), p. 97.

sufficiently large to incorporate Thomas Cole's epitaph would almost certainly have been beyond the means of his widow.

The disappearance of the majority of early post-Reformation funeral brasses has left a gap in the record of how the loss of spouses and children was expressed in this period. There is no reason to believe that Margaret Cole was a particularly unusual woman or that the sentiments that her memorial to her husband expressed would have been remarkable when they were engraved. It seems unlikely that the brass survived, because the churchwardens in 1644 thought that the doggerel poem was particularly worthy of preservation. This suggests that a more personal tone in funeral inscriptions began among the burgesses and others who commissioned funeral brasses and only later began to appear on the stone monuments of the gentry and aristocracy. It is likely that memorial brasses were generally commissioned in the immediate aftermath of an individual's death, when a surviving spouse was most intensely aware of feelings of loss. Those commemorated in stone had often commissioned the monuments before their demise or left strict instructions or designs for their executors.⁶

A sense of loss is the overwhelming sentiment expressed in Margaret Cole's epitaph to her husband. There is a conventional celebration of his virtues as a public servant and friend to the poor, widows and orphans, combined with the certainty that these virtues will win him a place in heaven. The heart of the poem is, however, Margaret's sense of loss after more than two decades of harmonious marriage. Despite his death, they remain 'two constant lovers' and she will remain 'mated with him in death'. Yet she must live on in virtue, so that she merits reunion with her husband in heaven, while the only comfort to be found is in their three children. No merry widow this, on the lookout for a second husband. Nor do the religious pieties of the inscription match the sense of loss and mourning. The language and sentiments of the inscription may be conventional and it was probably commissioned rather than composed by Margaret, but the incorporation of biographical material specific to this couple make it very personal to them.

⁶ C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (1984), pp. 200-01, quotes Lady Tanfield's poem to her husband at Burford of 1625. This significantly is the least visible of the four inscriptions on the monument and was apparently added at the last moment.