

The Funeral of Anthony Burgess

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Complications started with Liana, his wife, who had given a slightly different date of death for Anthony to the press. Eventually, the two or three days of difference in the date were sorted out by one of the newspapers (it was Toni Howard of the obituary department of the London *Times*, in fact).

Then, she kept the ashes home for months – first in London, where the cremation had taken place, then in Monaco. I don't quite remember for how long. When she decided to get rid of them, she turned to me and the very competent Pierre Joannon, Irish consul on the Riviera. Burgess had always maintained that he was half-Irish, as his mother had been running an Irish pub in Manchester.

Having taken care of the administrative hassle, and choosing the location, I was faced with the problem of the inscription on the plaque. Liana was no help at all, with her randomized and highly unpredictable imagination...

I remember working for about two days on what the inscription on the plaque should be. And then, walking the streets of Monaco, I decided that we must take the title of one of his books. Once that decision had been taken, "mon penchant" pour over-conciseness and hard decoding almost led me directly to ABBA ABBA!

First, Liana was baffled, but after a bottle of wine together in her favourite Monaco bistro, she began to see the light – the light being Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

I will not bother the reader with the three, four, or five hidden readings – author initials; title of Burgess book; versification pattern; and, last but not least, the very strong Biblical implication, and even the name of a Swedish pop group. Indeed, this is how the letters came to stand on the stone (plus the full name, and the two dates, of course).

Then came the unexpected surprise: the village adjacent to Monaco is Beausoleil. And the street closest to the graveyard there was called – can you believe it? – **Abba** (it must have been the name of some minor local politician of Jewish origin). I also want to tell you that a few graves away from AB is the grave of Frank Launder, most famous British film director, who lived to be 97 years old.

Now, to the ceremony: there were only two persons who spoke. First came Pierre Joannon, representing the mighty authority of the Irish state, reflected in every single syllable of his address.

The second speaker was myself, representing both the family and the Principality. Madame Virginia Gallico, wife of the American writer Paul Gallico, and Lady-in-Waiting at the Palace of Monaco, represented Her Serene Highness Princess Caroline, who is in charge of Cultural Affairs in the Principality.

I had always been very much impressed by Robert Browning's *A Grammarian's Funeral*, so, what I did in my speech was describe and paraphrase it to suit the circumstances. (On the Riviera, practically all graveyards are located fairly high up on the mountain coast, with a maximally splendid view of the sea... All the dead on the Riviera see the sea day and night!) I closed my address with a reference to William Butler Yeats's first grave, and then current memorial, standing together with a multitude of Russian princes in the graveyard of Menton—a seafront village right on the Italian border.

The whole ceremony took an hour or so. All in all, I was not displeased with what I said, though both the illiterates and the anti-Burgess personalities (quite a number of them in the Monaco British Association) accused me that instead of the standard obituary, I had given what could have been called a straight lecture. I did not mind the objection, and anyhow, Liana was pleased.

The ceremony was short, but to the point, and deserves to be made known to the public at large.

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