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A Social History of Dying

Our experiences of dying have been shaped by ancient ideas about death and social responsibility at the end of life. From Stone Age ideas about dying as an otherworld journey to the contemporary Cosmopolitan Age of dying in nursing homes, Allan Kellehear takes the reader on a two million-year journey of discovery that covers the major challenges we will all face: anticipating, preparing and timing our eventual deaths.

This is a major review of the human and clinical sciences literature about human dying. The historical approach of this book places recent images of cancer dying and medical care in broader historical, medical and global context. Dying is traced from its origins as an otherworld journey to its later development as 'good death' or 'well-managed' dying in settlement societies. Professor Kellehear argues that most dying today is not well managed. Instead, we are witnessing a rise in shameful forms of dying. It is not cancer, heart disease or medical science that present modern dying with its greatest moral tests but rather poverty, ageing and social exclusion.

Allan Kellehear is Professor of Sociology at the University of Bath, UK.

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This lily – keep it till our next embrace

From one to another on her deathbed, 27 November 1907

– Anonymous (1908: 13)

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