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Citation: Elliott, Ian (2021) City sextons: tales from municipal leaders. *Local Government Studies*, 47 (4). pp. 681-683. ISSN 0300-3930

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1946291>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1946291>>

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Book Review: *City Sextons: Tales from Municipal Leaders*, by Staci M. Zavattaro, Routledge, 2021, £13.59 (eBook); £35.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780367250836

“I did an interview for this book while sitting on a toilet” might well be the greatest opening to a public administration book that I have ever seen. In this ground-breaking (excuse the pun) book Prof Zavattaro sheds light on the role of the city sexton in an incredibly personable and thoroughly entertaining way. The opening vignette provides an insight into the challenges of conducting qualitative research as well as highlighting the commitment of the author to giving a voice to those who work in this otherwise often overlooked aspect of public service.

This book provides an exploration of death and of “public sector death-care management” (p1). The author consciously uses the term sexton, a term we might more commonly associate with those who maintain graveyards within church grounds. Ultimately these individuals are charged with maintaining public burial grounds. A quick browse of a popular job search website brings up a wide range of contemporary job titles associated with this role including cemetery manager and even memorial consultant. In this context, I’m inclined to fully support the reclaiming of the more historical title.

Professor Staci M. Zavattaro is Professor of Public Administration in the School of Public Administration, University of Central Florida, and editor-in-chief of *Administrative Theory & Praxis*. In this book Prof Zavattaro provides an exemplary insight into the work of these underappreciated public servants. The research consists of in-depth interviews with 35 sextons across the USA. The qualitative approach adopted enables the complexities of the role to be fully illuminated and shows the value of qualitative studies particularly for under-researched topics. The author discusses many of the challenges in conducting the fieldwork and these reflections, along with the use of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach to coding and qualitative data analysis, make this a valuable resource for students interested in learning more about qualitative methods. The book is structured around thematic codes that emerged from the interview data.

The introductory chapter (Ch1) provides a brief overview of how the research came about, initially through a project that was exploring a city’s response to a mass shooting event. Looking in more depth at the role of city sextons was further stimulated by Prof Zavattaro’s own interest in cemeteries. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the role that cemeteries play in our everyday lives and specifically the role of cemeteries as a local government function. Chapter 3 explores the nature of records management and how digital technologies, including GIS, are becoming increasingly key to the role of sexton. Chapter 4 focuses on the softer skills required of sextons as relate to cultural competence. This chapter sheds a light on the many inequities associated with death that typically reflect inequities in life. It covers the nature of slave burials, the segregation of Black and White cemeteries through time and the inequitable financial burden of funeral costs associated with burial and cremation. Chapter 5 explores the commodification of cemeteries as sites for dark tourism. The allure of cemeteries as tourist sites can stem from a range of reasons

but, in any case, the impact of managing large numbers of visitors places an additional burden on those who are charged with their maintenance. It also brings into question the nature of cemeteries as quiet places of reflection and tranquillity versus their potential as mass visitor attractions. Chapter 6 comes returns to other soft skills, specifically as relate to empathy and the emotional labour involved in being a sexton. This chapter highlights the emotional burden of working in this area and dealing with death, especially the deaths of children and young people, over many years. The final substantive chapter (Ch7) includes those areas of the study that were not seen to fit neatly into the other chapters based on data coding. These include historic preservation, networking, Death is a Reality – So Why is it a Secret?, cemetery boards and finally 'cemetery potpourri'. In the concluding remarks (Ch8) the author highlights how the role of sexton holds so many of the features of other public service roles, but with the added emotional burden that comes with dealing with death and grief.

It's a touching book that is clearly written by someone with a deep affection for cemeteries and huge respect for those who manage them. The stories that are provided are personal and often moving. One particularly moving case study centred on the Pulse Nightclub shooting tragedy of 2016, which highlights many of the challenges faced by the city sexton. Pulse was an LGBTQ+ nightclub and the night of the shooting was Latin night. Many of those who were killed were in their teens or early 20's. Some had not come out to their families. Some had to be repatriated to Puerto Rico. The city sexton in this case, Don Price, had the task of ensuring everyone was treated fairly whilst also ensuring that funeral homes weren't 'jacking up prices' in order to profit from the massacre. It's a stark reminder of the emotional labour required in conducting this public service. The burden this puts on these public servants is something that is returned to throughout the book.

Death along with taxes is, as per the idiom, one of the certainties of life and provision of burial grounds is, at least in Scotland, a statutory requirement of local government. Yet cemetery management only ever receives fleeting mention in local government scholarship. Do we take this public service for granted? The case of the National Cremation Investigation in Scotland (2013-2016) surely is one tragic example of why we shouldn't. This independent investigation followed the baby ashes scandal that first emerged at Mortonhall Crematorium in Edinburgh where it was discovered that the remains of more than 250 children had been routinely disposed of without the knowledge or consent of the families (it later emerged that this practice was in place from 1967 through to 2011). The report that followed the investigation brought about a number of recommendations which were integrated into Scots Law in the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016.

So, this is an important book and one that should be widely read. I do hope that it stimulates further research and discussion on the nature and role of the sexton. I also hope that we will see further editions of this book as it is ripe for further development. In particular, I would like to see greater exploration of international graveyards and cemeteries such as the Commonwealth War Graves or different cultural traditions associated with burial grounds such as Día de los Muertos. It

would be interesting to explore to what extent national approaches to public administration influence the management of these different sites and customs.

References:

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