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When memories live in things: remembering the dead through objects

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The case of the Lupton Family of Leeds

Laura King, University of Leeds

Across different cultures, in different places and different times, objects of various types have been used to help us remember those who have died. In some cases, this means the creation of specific things to keep that person's memory with us – such as brooches featuring a photo of the person, perhaps with a lock of their hair embroidered around it. This was a very popular trend in Victorian England. Recently, we've seen a rise, in Britain and beyond, of families and friends creating objects using the ashes of a cremated body. You can pay for a china plate, a vinyl record or even a tattoo embedded with the ashes of someone you loved.

Often, though, it's other things that become significant after someone's died. A person's clothing, personal items, books, plants, letters – anything really, can come to symbolise them after they're gone.

During the twentieth century in Britain, the stuff people owned changed over time. Generally, most families have more stuff than they used to – furniture, crockery, other household objects, clothes and so on are on the whole now more affordable for most families. The gap between rich and poor is bigger and more entrenched than ever – but in general our houses are fuller than they used to be. And the meaning of possessions has changed over time too. As the historian Deborah Cohen has described in her book, [Household Gods](#), since the late nineteenth century what we own has become more closely connected with how we want to represent ourselves to the rest of the world. From china cups to the latest smart phone, the things we own are part of who we are, as our possessions have become closely tied to our identities.

Wealthier families were (and are) much more likely to pass on valuable things through their wills. Unlike the possessions of poorer families, objects of monetary value, such as jewellery and furniture, were likely to stay in families for multiple generations. For these families, a whole range of goods could be used to help remember someone who had gone.

The Luptons were a notable and wealthy Leeds family; involved in commerce and public service, the family did well in the growth of industry in Leeds in the nineteenth century. They published a number of accounts of their own history. In a collective family history written in 2001, a number of the family wrote about their older relatives who had died. One chapter is dedicated to Kitty Lupton, born in 1903. When she died in 1984, her niece, Eve, described inheriting a particularly important collection of items:

I inherited her box of 'treasures'. There was little of monetary value inside, but it contained (and still contains, for I have kept the contents intact) what she probably considered her most precious possessions, consisting of many photographs, medals awarded to her father and brother, a few letters, newspaper articles and various papers. They all have one thing in common, which is that they all concern her family.

This included objects relating to her parents and siblings, and most tragically, Roger, a brother who was killed in the First World War. Eve describes:

There is one person whose entire short life can be documented by piecing together items in the box and that is her brother, Roger, killed while flying over France in May 1918. There are photographs of him as a baby, as a boy and as a young officer. There is a play he wrote at Rugby and the music for his school football song. Above all, there is every detail Kitty was able to learn about the circumstances surrounding Roger's death, even including correspondence she had received in 1972 from a fellow officer. I do not think she ever really recovered from the loss of her beloved brother.

Here we see the different ways in which objects can have value. Objects which are valuable in economic terms are often passed on at the time of death due to specific instructions in a will, but as Kitty and Eve's story shows, it can be objects that are worth very little in monetary terms that are of the most sentimental value. And it's something about keeping these items together, as a collection, that makes them particularly valuable to Eve. It's the connection between the items and the story they tell as much as their individual worth that mattered in this case. Value can be measured in all sorts of different ways. And historically, it's women particularly – like Kitty and Eve – who have preserved and passed on these less economically valuable items, as the historian Jane Hamlett has described in her book [*Material Relations*](#).

In 1984, when her aunt died, Eve received a box of all sorts of different items relating to Kitty, and notes she has kept it since, intact. But this box of treasures goes back more than one generation, as she describes. As well as becoming important to Eve because it symbolises her aunt's life, the objects were about other relatives too. As Eve highlights,

To me, the most significant thing about the box of treasures is that it contains almost nothing about Kitty herself. Apart from her appearance in a few photographs, the only personal item is her degree certificate from Leeds University. I think this tells us a great deal about her personality.

The box was 'what she probably considered her most precious possessions'. The photos and documents in that box symbolised the short life of Kitty's brother, as well as the stories, lives and achievements of other relatives who had passed away – such as her father's OBE. Across three generations, this little box of little value beyond the family took on significant emotional value, particularly in the wake of family members' deaths.

As such, it's often not economically valuable items that are the most significant when we remember those we've lost, though these items are the most likely to be formally passed on in wills. For those left behind, it's these very personal items that are most significant emotionally. It might be scraps of handwritten notes, old photos or the most mundane and 'normal' objects. But thinking about individuals' and families' status and wealth is crucial to understanding how objects are used in remembrance. For women like Kitty and Eve, this

box of treasures would have sat within a context of a multitude of other, expensive objects. Indeed, Eve writes that the little box is valuable *despite* being of little economic worth.

Symbolising relationship and networks of emotional meanings across different generations, our stuff is incredibly important. And death is probably the most important moment at which family objects take on a much greater value.

As part of this project, we are putting on an exhibition on *Remembrance* at Abbey House Museum in 2018. Let us know what kind of objects you'd put in our display, if you were putting it together.

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