

## Alluring Gardens of Stone



By Graceann Macleod

*Bereavement in their death to feel  
Whom We have never seen —  
A Vital Kinsmanship import  
Our Soul and theirs — between —*

—Emily Dickinson

I believe I've written in the past about my love of final resting places. On many family vacations, my parents elicited cooperation and silence from me by saying “if you don't behave, we won't take you to see the dead people!” By sitting up straight, being seen and not heard, eating all my vegetables and generally being well-behaved, I was able to engage in an activity I valued highly – visiting the graves of Abraham Lincoln, Elvis Presley, and people I'd never heard of. Was I a ghoulish child? Maybe. A happy one? Definitely.

I'm honestly stumped when I try to think of a holiday I've taken that hasn't included a burial ground of some kind. I can't put my finger on what it is that draws me to cemeteries; the allure is varied and yet individual. A cemetery is one of the few absolutely peaceful places left in the world, where respect and contemplation are not only encouraged, but expected. And while my personal belief is that our bodies are simply the houses we live in while we're here, I can't help but be moved by getting to “meet” those I admire, albeit from six feet and many years away.



So, here for your delectation are some of the most beautiful places I've been and most heartfelt moments I've experienced in my journeys.

The most beautiful place I've visited so far has to be Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. Filled to the brim with Victorian statuary under gracious live oaks, and overlooking the marshes protecting the Georgia coast, this place is steeped in history and hush. The famous “Bird Girl” piece which graced the cover of John Berendt's “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil” once stood here, but sadly had to be removed due to her fame. She can now be found in the Telfair Academy Art Gallery. Still here are the final resting places of Johnny Mercer, Conrad Aiken and Gracie Watson, a little girl whose short life is the stuff of legend and whose beautiful sculpture welcomes all who visit. Bonaventure has had a bit of trouble because it is so beloved; so many tourists from all over the world flock to its gates that some measures have had to be taken in order to ensure proper respect.

A truly blessed and blissful destination for me is Christ Church Cemetery adjoining Christ Church Frederica on St. Simons Island, Georgia. I've been to this little patch of ground more than any other, and I never tire of it. I feel as if I know everyone here, and my first errand when I reach St. Simons is to take flowers to Eugenia Price's grave. I fell in love with her writing, and then with her beloved island; it seems only fitting to pay my respects to her and thank her in the only way I can. As long as I am there, I wander the stones marking historic local families; names that still fill the St. Simons phone book. The Goulds, Coupers, Wyllys and Kings are families whose histories I know almost as well as my own.

### Personal Pilgrimages

*Warm summer sun, shine kindly here.*

*Warm southern wind, blow softly here.*

*Green sod above, lie light, lie light.*

*Good night, dear Heart, Good night, good night.*

— Mark Twain

My love for the work of certain artists has led me to seek their final resting places as part of my travels, and I'm routinely surprised by my reaction. I don't know why I'm surprised; it's always the same. I go silent (a rarity for me), I cry, and I am filled with an overwhelming sense of peace. I remember a specific instance when I visited Buster Keaton's grave Forest Lawn-Hollywood Hills. As I stood there, I thought “this man, who died two years before my own birth, has changed my life in so many ways.” I started to cry, and though my companion was not entirely convinced, I assure you that they were happy tears. Then I recalled that his widow mentioned he had been buried with a deck of cards in one pocket and a rosary in the other, so that he'd be prepared no matter which direction he was headed, and I couldn't help but smile and dry my eyes. Buster wouldn't want anyone blubbering; he always sought laughter.

Hollywood Forever is the go-to place for anyone interested in silent and classic film. When I visited Hollywood in 2004, I was able to pay my respects to a long list of people I admired, but who were gone before I made my first squalling appearance at St. Michael Hospital. From the first movie star to be known by name, Florence Lawrence, to Fay Wray, to Valentino, to Fairbanks Sr. and Jr., they're all here, and you could easily spend days on end wandering the



grounds. One of my friends has a blog where he delves into the lives of those who are not as well known as they should be today, and every time I read another post it makes me want to return. I had heard that one of my favorite authors, Gene Stratton-Porter, was laid to rest here after she lost her life in a traffic accident in 1924. Imagine my surprise when I got to Hollywood Forever to discover that she had been moved back home to Indiana, much closer to my own place of residence! A year or two later, I went to the Gene Stratton-

Porter Historic Site and completed that circle. It did seem fitting to me that though Gene died in California, she was resting in the Indiana gardens she tended so lovingly.

I continue to wander, and as I ramble about the world I carry my list of the departed I intend to “visit” while I'm in the neighborhood. I often thank my parents in memory for indulging my wish to pay respects. I think that they were probably thanking their lucky stars when I was a teenager (though they certainly didn't admit it then). While my peers were campaigning to go to the loudest theme park, I was asking if we could go to Arlington on our next vacation, to see the Tombs of the Unknown Soldiers. Sure, I was an unusual child; but my tastes made vacations much less expensive to plan.



### **Suggested Reading:**

- Bonaventure Cemetery: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonaventure\\_Cemetery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonaventure_Cemetery)
- Little Gracie Watson: [http://gosoutheast.about.com/od/savannahgaattractions/ss/bonaventure\\_2.htm](http://gosoutheast.about.com/od/savannahgaattractions/ss/bonaventure_2.htm)
- Christ Church Frederica: <http://www.exploresouthernhistory.com/christchurch.html>
- Eugenia Price: <http://www.gacoast.com/hightide/ep.html>
- Hollywood Forever: <http://www.seeing-stars.com/buried2/HollywoodMemorial.shtml>
- Allan Ellenberger's Blog: <http://blog.allanellenberger.com/>
- Gene Stratton-Porter: <http://www.genestratton-porter.com/>