

*CASHING IN ON CADAVERS
OR
THE REAL LIFE GHOULS OF REGENCY ENGLAND*

by Carol Goss



Ghouls? In the Regency? I know, I know, sounds fantastic, right? But it's true. One of the dictionary definitions of "ghoul" is "one who robs graves or corpses", and that leads to what the Regency and later the Victorians called Resurrection Men.

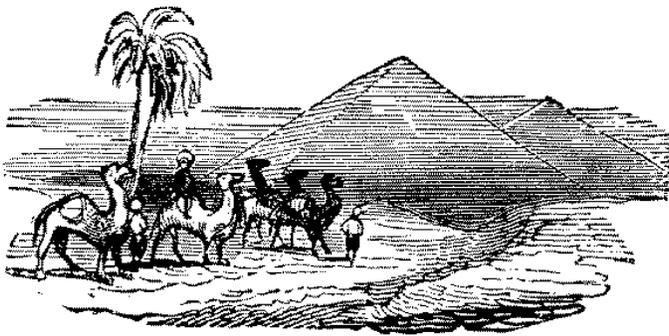
Why had these practices become a terrifying nightmare for the families of the Regency and the early Victorians? The answer lies in the rise of medicine and medical studies since the Renaissance with its emphasis on science.

To learn about the human body, inside and out, required bodies for medical professors and students to dissect and still does.



Yet since ancient times it was considered a crime

and even a sin to cut into a dead body. Think of the men who



robbed the Great Pyramid tombs of pharaohs in ancient Egypt. If caught, they'd be thrown to the Nile crocodiles to be eaten so that, with no bodies left, they could never reach the next world. When

Christianity entered history, the body was also believed to be necessary for the eventual resurrection of the dead person at the Last Judgment. Add to that the belief that a mutilated body was forced to wander the earth, and even on Judgment Day, its chances of resurrection were slim to none. Those beliefs greatly increased both the religious horror of dissection as well as the criminal condemnation.

You can see evidence of this idea in the epitaph of 1615 on Shakespeare's tomb in Stratford-upon-Avon which reads:



*Good friend, for Iesus' (Jesus') sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare.
Blest be ye man (that) spares these stones,
And curst be he (that) moves my bones.*

It's not that dissections never occurred.

Leonardo left drawings of dissections in famous notebooks, Rembrandt painted "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" in



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1615. But that dissection was a public event and the body that of an executed person.

Because dissection was the only means to learn the human body, bodies were necessary at schools and hospitals that trained doctors. Yet the Murder Act of 1752 in England stated that only the bodies of executed felons could be used for dissection. This law was still in effect during the Regency and a good part of the Victorian era as well. A person could not donate his body nor could his family donate his remains to a medical school. How then did these institutions get the bodies they needed?

The problem in the Regency was that medical studies were on the rise, but the number of executions was way, way down due to the repeal in 1815 of what the people called the Bloody Code which had mandated execution for a myriad of crimes ranging from murder and treason to cutting down young trees, pick pocketing or even, believe it or not, in a child of 7-14 years of age, showing "strong evidence of malice."



So, how does a medical school teach anatomy without bodies to dissect? The answer is it doesn't. Sometimes the medical students stole bodies from graveyards; in fact, medical students both in Europe and America were notorious for doing this. For instance, stealing bodies is said to have been done at the University of Michigan Medical School when it was, it was, in its early days, located next to a graveyard. It was done to the point where it was rumored the graveyard had more empty graves than full ones.

Sometimes students or their professors paid for bodies brought to the medical school late at night, questions asked. Sir Astley Cooper, important Regency surgeon and anatomist said in 1828 that, if he wished, he could get the body of anyone "whoever they were and of whatever station in life." The only requirement, he said, was "ready money".

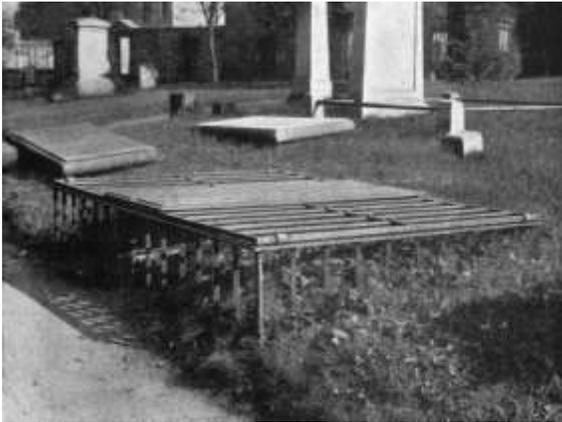


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So Resurrection Men and even murderers rose to both the challenge and the profit to be made by stealing bodies or, in some cases, murdering someone to profit by that death. Those who sold bodies they'd stolen or murdered to get were called Resurrection Men, a bad joke as the bodies they brought to sell had all "risen" from their graves.

Did Resurrection Men also steal the clothes or jewelry that might have been buried with the person? Good Lord, No! Body snatching was just a misdemeanor, though a serious one. If the Resurrection Man was caught, he'd just be fined and imprisoned. However, if items such as clothes or jewelry were stolen from the dead person or that person's coffin, that was a felony, and he was in danger of being executed or transported to the horrible prison camps the British had established in Australia.

The fear of a loved one's body being stolen was acute all during the Regency and into the Victorian period. People tried various methods to stop the desecration of their loved ones, but it was an almost impossible task. They kept vigil at the gravesite, not only before death and burial but for a long time afterward so the body would be too decomposed for the Resurrection Men to sell. Yet some people such as undertakers and others hired to prepare the dead for burial hid the corpse and placed weight such as sandbags in the coffins so they could sell the bodies for a profit. Families put iron cages called mortsafes over the



graves. You can still see such cages in Greyfriars Kirkyard (churchyard) in Edinburgh, Scotland. Some buried their dead in iron coffins which were then welded shut or lead coffins which were very heavy and could also be sealed shut. There are even

stories of exploding devices or spring guns placed in the ground around the grave to kill or injure any bodysnatchers. Some even used coffins inside larger coffins like Russian wooden dolls.

Another solution, but only for the most wealthy, was to build a stone or brick crypt, re-enforced by being dug into a hill and having locked iron doors and grills.

The Anatomy Act of 1832 in England tried to ease the shortage of bodies for medical use by allowing the next of kin of the deceased to donate the body in exchange for burial at the



expense of the person or group who dissected the body. This didn't always work as it should because the act also allowed dissection of persons who died in a workhouse who weren't immediately claimed for burial by relatives.

However, Resurrection Men then hired women to either claim the bodies of the workhouse dead posing as grieving relatives or, if the Resurrectionists couldn't get a body that way, the women were to attend funerals as grieving mourners to find out problems the body snatchers might encounter when digging up the body such as the precautions mentioned earlier. As workhouses for the poor were phased out during the Victorian period, the mentally ill without families, who died in insane asylums, were sent for dissection. As an ironic side note, though the law was not fully enforced in the twentieth century, the Anatomy Act of 1832 was not repealed in Britain until 1984, so it was on the books for 152 years.

The case that finally brought about real changes in the law was the notorious case of serial killers, William Burke and William Hare who, understanding that digging up bodies was not only hard work but that you were apt to be caught doing it, decided that murder was an easier route to go. It also brought in more money as a "fresh body" brought a better price. They started on their 16 murders in 1827.

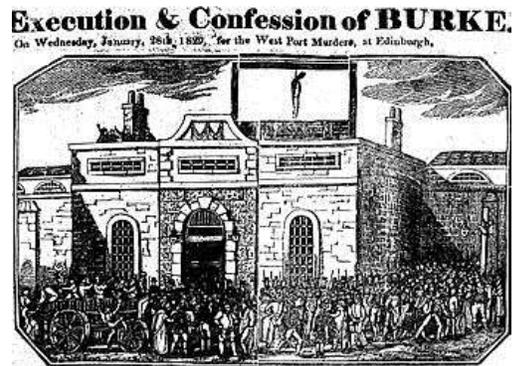


The first body Burke and Hare sold was that of a tenant at the rooming house where they lived in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Though the man died of natural causes, he did so owing Hare 4 pounds. Therefore, instead of burying the body, the two men took the corpse to Edinburgh University, the premier medical school in Britain and even in all of Europe at the time. A student sent them to Surgeon's Square to the famous anatomist, Dr. Robert Knox who paid them 7 pounds, 10 shillings, a tidy profit. Their next victim was a tenant of the rooming house who was sick. They got him drunk, smothered him, and sold his body to Dr. Knox. They also lured victims into the rooming house: an old lady, two prostitutes, a beggar woman and even Daft Jamie, a simple-minded beggar boy beloved in the neighborhood. Their profit was up to 10 to 14 pounds because the bodies were in such "fresh" condition. Was it profitable? Just consider that a governess would be lucky to make fifteen pounds for a year's work. Eight more victims followed, all smothered so there would be no sign of violence on the bodies.

When the police, finally alerted by an anonymous tip in 1828, investigated the disappearances, they found the last body on Dr. Knox's dissection table in his university classroom. William Burke, William Hare and his wife Margaret were arrested for this series of murders that lasted just over a year. Offered

immunity if he confessed and testified against Burke, William Hare did just that. Burke was convicted and then hanged in January, 1829. Hare had to leave Scotland as did his wife. It's believed that Hare went to England under an assumed name while she fled to Ireland.



Since Burke was an executed felon, poetic justice was served when his body was publicly dissected by Dr. Munro at Edinburgh Medical College before a crowd estimated at 30,000 people where the doctor lectured for two hours as he dissected the body. Burke's skeleton was displayed in the Museum of Comparative Anatomy along with his death mask and items made from his skin which was removed, tanned and made into such useful items as wallets and notebooks. Strips of Burke's tanned skin were also sold as souvenirs.

Many people, including Sir Walter Scott, the famous author, believed Dr. Knox, who bought all those amazingly "fresh" bodies from Burke and Hare, should have been charged as an accessory to their crimes. He never was. He was, however, burned in effigy by the citizens of Edinburgh, caricatured in the press, and ostracized by the medical community. He eventually left the city.

There have been "ghouls" like Burke and Hare in America as well. In 1762, Dr. William Shippen Junior of the University of Pennsylvania advertised lectures on anatomy. His house was burned in 1765 by a mob that believed he'd stolen bodies from a churchyard. He claimed he only used the bodies of suicides which, of course, were not then allowed to be buried in holy ground, of executed felons, and one from a local Potter's Field where only unclaimed bodies were buried.

Another case tied to American history is that of the body of John Scott Harrison, son of the U.S. President, William Henry Harrison and father of U.S. President Benjamin Harrison. His body was stolen and later found

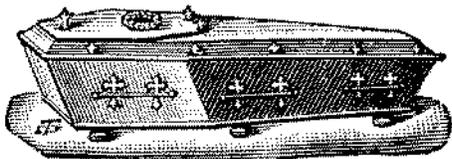


by members of his family at the Ohio Medical College in Cincinnati.

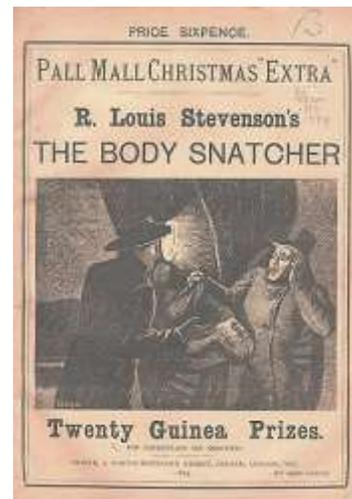


The latest famous case is that of the body of Alistair Cooke, the well-known broadcaster and writer. His bones appear to have been stolen from his body before he was cremated for use in transplants but without his family's permission.

Knox, Burke and Hare left many marks of their crimes that still exist today. If you look in a dictionary you'll find the word, **burke** defined as murder, as by suffocating or smothering as to leave no or few marks of violence to kill with the object of selling the body for the purpose of dissection." Charles Dickens, remembering the Burke Hart case, put a character in THE TALE TWO CITIES called Jerry Cruncher who works as a "resurrection man" at night,



Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a short story titled "The Body Snatcher" inspired by the case. Movies also have been made based on these men and their crimes. In 1945, Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff starred in THE BODY SNATCHER based on the Burke-Hare murders as did Peter Cushing, Donald Pleasance and George Raft in THE FLESH AND THE FIENDS in 1960. In 1985 Timothy Dalton starred in a film as Dr. Knox (called Thomas Rock in the movie) in THE DOCTOR AND THE DEVILS based on a play by Dylan Thomas, the famous Welsh poet.



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Finally, friends tell me that even today, especially in Scotland, when children are jumping rope, you still hear them jumping to the verse written and used in the time of the crimes of Burke and Hare. It was even printed in broadsides posted everywhere in Edinburgh during Burke's trial. That spooky rhyme goes like this:

***"Up the close and doon the stair,
In the hoose with Burke and Hare,
Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief,
Knox, the boy who buys the beef"***



SOURCES:

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