Past progressive

Bodysnatching in Canada

The nefarious practice of body-snatching is probably as old as the study of anatomy, but on this continent it was roughly coeval with the founding in 1756 of the first American medical school, in Philadelphia. Canada's first medical school was established in Montreal considerably later, in 1822, but the days of "the resurrection men" were far from over. By 1850 there were 42 medical schools in the United States and Canada, and with them had arisen a need for anatomical specimens. But the lack of legally available cadavers drove professors and students to obtain their raw material by clandestine means.[1]

The robbers were usually medical students, who stole bodies for their own study or sold them to anatomy instructors. In doing so, they continued a longstanding tradition of their European counterparts; for example, in early 18th-century Edinburgh, students at the Royal College of Surgeons were required to sign an agreement not to engage in grave robbing.[1] In Canada, bodysnatching was practised by both English- and French-speaking medical students, although with slightly different motivations. Francophone students tended to be poorer than their anglophone counterparts and needed the money to pay for their education.[2,3] By contrast, English-speaking students tended to join bodysnatching expeditions more out of a spirit of daredevilry. They were frequently intoxicated and hence frequently caught.[3]

To evade detection by the authorities, school staff developed ways to spirit away their corpses at a moment's notice. In some places a pulley was used to hoist the cadaver up the chimney. Alternatively, a block and tackle might be rigged to raise the corpse through a trap door into a domed ceiling: "At the first sign of

William Austin, **1721–1820**, *The Anatomist Overtaken by the Watch ... Carrying off Miss W— in a Hamper.* Etching, 27 cm × 40 cm , London (UK), 1773

trouble, up went the corpse … . The students then shut the trapdoor and removed the ladder … a rapid scrub down — and the searchers would find absolutely nothing."[4] To further confuse the authorities and make identification of the corpse difficult, the corpse's head would be skinned and scars excised.

To avert public outrage the robbers were selective. McGill graduate Dr. Griffith Evans reminisced in 1862 that "plenty of negroes were obtained cheap, packed in casks, and passed over the border as provisions, or flour."[4] Robbers would also prowl potter's fields, churchyards, hospitals and poorhouses.[4]

Although penalties for bodysnatching were increased, such desecrations were rarely prosecuted, for the authorities sympathized with the plight of the medical schools.[4] Consequently, the emphasis shifted from punitive legislation to the creation of laws that would make corpses available. An Act to Regulate and Facilitate the Study of Anatomy was passed in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada in 1843 and later amended in 1883. As a result, the *Canadian Medical and Surgical Journal* was able to report in 1884 that the robbing of graves in Canada had ceased.[2]

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