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*Who Were the Body-Snatchers? A portrayal of those men that resorted to the
occupation of Stealing Human Cadavers in 19th Century America*

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Dr. Hicks

Research Seminar

On a cold autumn night in Baltimore, three men rush to the cemetery where they begin a grisly business under the cover of darkness. Each man is fearful of night patrolmen and any casual pedestrians, for their nightly escapade is both appalling and grim. These men have chosen the occupation of body snatching, a surprisingly popular job in the 19th century. One man is charged with transport; he drives a wagon to the cemetery then hides in an inconspicuous spot while the other two remain to dig up the body. With only a lantern, a tarp, a rope, and wooden shovels the two men continue their grim business. First, they lay out the tarp surrounding the grave and then begin to dig up the head portion of a coffin. They attempt to shield their lamplight from any one passing the cemetery and after an hour of digging, they finally break the coffin and pull the body out head-first using their rope. Just as their task is almost finished, an angry mob storms into the cemetery, so these two young men leave the site and run for their lives. The job of body-snatching was no easy task, in fact it came with quite a few risks and hassles. Yet it was an incredibly prevalent occupation in Westernized nations during the 19th century. Who were these men that risked angry mobs and bore the burden of snatching bodies for a living?

To understand what sort of people would choose the occupation of body-snatching, it is important to also understand the environment of America during this time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, America was a land of immense diversity and evolutionary change. From just 1750 to 1900 America evolved from a colony of dependence and insecurity to a land of patriotic identity and independence. There were so many ways in which America changed and developed within the 18th and 19th centuries but one that is most notable is that of the American Medical Practice. Modern readers may not realize that the reputation of Medical Schools, Doctors, and the Medical

practice in general has not always been given the upmost respect and esteem that it is accredited with today. In fact the general public used to condemn medicine as secondary or subordinate to the Christian faith.¹ Medicine was viewed by many as helpful, but ultimately the healing of the sick was attributed to God's will rather than the actual affects of medicine. However, as the medical practice grew, a need for cadavers grew as well. Doctors and medical students would need to find bodies to practice dissection on; and often paid "body-snatchers" to do this job for them. Particularly, dissection conflicted with the Christian belief of a "Ressurrection of the Flesh" that would occur at Christ's second coming. Protestants and Catholics believed that one might not rise to heaven if their body was not whole and in its' grave during the ascension.² Although this belief is not in accordance with actual Protestant beliefs, this was still a terrifying thought for both Protestants and Irish Catholics as well. Medical reputation remained commonly abhorred especially by the poor, and uneducated public throughout much of the 19th century.

However by the turn of the 20th century medicine was finally advancing. The practice in general gained respect and reputation mostly because the medical practice advanced both technologically and scientifically.³ One factor that influenced this growth was the furtherance of anatomy and anatomical knowledge of both the medical students and the common people. For although most citizens still regarded dissection as a horrendous act; 19th-century Americans were entranced by the knowledge of the components and working features of the human body. This fascination would eventually help the medical profession to gain support among the public.

Sappol states that Anatomy "worked... it provided a detailed and plausible narrative of bodily

¹ John Knott, "Popular Attitudes to Death and Dissection in Early Nineteenth Century Britain: The Anatomy Act and the Poor," *Labour History* 49 (1985): 13.

² Knott, "Popular Attitudes to Death and Dissection," 9.

³ Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodies Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 75.

processes to patients, physicians, surgeons, and the laity.”⁴ The opportunity to practice medical anatomy upon dissected cadavers enabled medical students with a much more efficient knowledge of the human body, and therefore furthered their ability to heal those they would encounter later in their career. It is a grisly and slightly disturbing fact that this growth would not have occurred if there had not been any body-snatchers to provide cadavers for these medical students and doctors. Although the medical profession and anatomical knowledge was certainly growing by the 1900s, it remains a fact that throughout the 19th century, the medical profession, body-snatching, and the dissection of cadavers remained detested by most of the population.

In this environment of superstition and disrespect for the medical profession, students and doctors were forced to procure cadavers illegally. This meant either the doctors and students themselves procured dead bodies from fresh graves, or they hired a specific type of men to do this job for them. These men were known by the more “uncouth” population as body-snatchers, but were regarded by the medical community as ‘resurrection men’.⁵

The resurrection men were typically a grisly set of characters; they would have to be given their occupation. So what type of men exhumed dead bodies for a living? Why did they choose to do so? For one thing, the resurrectionists usually did not *choose* this job; rather they were forced into it because there were not many other job opportunities available... this was the case for several of the resurrectionists. Although there are many characteristics that were shared between these men, this is certainly the most common.

The fact that so many men and some women in 19th century America turned to body-snatching just for quick cash gives great insight to the time period in which these individuals were living. First it tells us that America, although proclaimed as the ‘land of the free’, was still

⁴ Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 95.

⁵ Frederick C. Waite, “Grave Robbing in New England,” *Embryology and Histology* 21 (1983): 272.

a land that primarily benefited the higher social class.; those who came from money, owned great estates or vast amounts of land, and those who associated only with others of their class. These higher classes of people were still the ones that reigned in the political and economic world; they were able to go to college and find quality jobs easily. As a result many of the immigrants, paupers, and African Americans were left to do menial jobs and one of the most common of these in 19th century America was body snatching.

A second insight body snatching gave to the world of 1800s America was the immense expansion of the medical profession. This followed the progression of Medicine in Europe that began in the early 1700s. By the mid-19th century, there were numerous medical colleges throughout America; some of these being privately funded by doctors or benefactors. Doctors' professions were also beginning to gain greater respect which is obvious by the growth of their income; although they still were disrespected by the uneducated and superstitious public.

However, the medical profession did experience much growth throughout this century and one could argue that this would not have occurred were it not for the gruesome task of body-snatchers. For these cadavers exhumed by the resurrectionists provided great information for the medical students and doctors. These doctors and students would use the cadaver to study the anatomy within; sometimes each student would have one cadaver to study for himself, other times there would be one cadaver per class. They used these cadavers to further their knowledge of anatomy and would also study the disease which the body may have died from. So it can be understood the great benefit that these cadavers provided for the medical profession, even though body snatching and dissection was abhorred at the time. The body-snatchers were grim, obscure, and sometimes eccentric characters. Their personalities and characteristics were varied, although there were commonalities between them as well. Although these men, and sometimes women,

lived a strange and at times gruesome life, often they were forced into the profession as a result of the social and economic landscape of America at the time.

The men and women who resorted to body snatching for a living were a unique and sometimes bizarre people. For one thing, almost all of them enjoyed drinking alcohol. In fact, it was considered a hazard of the occupation.⁶ Many records cited in this paper speak of the dependence these workers had on alcohol. This is insightful to just how this occupation affected the body snatchers themselves, it can be reasoned that at least a few of these men may have turned to drinking simply to escape from the gruesome task they assumed each and every night.

Another commonality is that most did not come from famously wealthy backgrounds. Any of the men or women who exhumed bodies for a living typically resorted to doing so because they had few other job options; most presumed this occupation simply because they were in severe need of quick cash. For example, the notable William Burke and William Hare (two body-snatchers in Edinburgh, Scotland who killed 16 people for their use as cadavers) began their exploits by selling the body of a man who rented a room in their tenement.⁷ This man died while still owing them 16 pounds, so they sold his body to a Medical College to pay off the debt. Similar experiences occurred in the United States as well. One such event, notoriously called the “Baltimore Burking” is just one example; the men involved in the Baltimore Burking killed a family, sold them as cadavers, and then burned the familys’ home.⁸ One of the men was convicted in trial while his comrades were not tried at all; this man actually wrote a poem that encapsulated the life and environment for body-snatchers.

Kind friends, your attention
I’d ask a little while,

⁶ Suzanne M. Shultz, *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1992), 28.

⁷ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 69-70.

⁸ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 72-4.

And I'll tell you my misfortunes
 In my own illiterate style.
 Myself with two more fellows,
 Who lived in this same town,
 For fifteen paltry dollars
 Did murder Emily Brown.

I've no excuse to offer,
 My guilt I freely own,
 But does it look like justice
 I must suffer all alone?
 Is it fair, kind Christians,
 In this land of liberty
 That I alone must suffer,
 And the other two go free?⁹

These men did not have any resentment toward the family, their only motivation was that they were in desperate need of quick cash. Just as the poet says, America was supposed to be an ideal land of liberty yet this man apparently felt that his desperate need for cash was reason enough to kill three people for quick profit. The fact that he believed this depicts an America that was competitive, difficult, and grueling even in the mid- 19th century.

Resurrectionists were also often outcasts of proper society. A great mass of these men lived in major cities; Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St. Louis, New York to name a few, and yet there are no records that show a relevant connection between body-snatchers and high society. Again, this is evident of the fact that Resurrectionists were typically from a lower class which is why they had to resort to body snatching for an income. Most resurrectionists were enmeshed in a lower-class citizenry and by most accounts had no reason to associate with higher class citizens. Also, excluding the boastful rants of heavily intoxicated Resurrectionists, most would try to conceal their occupation. Letting anyone in regular society learn of a body-snatchers' exhumations or of the doctors' 'mutilation' of cadavers could prove extremely hazardous to both

⁹ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 73-4.

the body-snatchers and to the doctors. If local citizenry discovered that a former loved one was currently in a dissection room under the surgeon's knife, a riot would almost always result.

One such riot, the New York doctors' riot of 1788¹⁰, began when an insensitive medical student waved a cadavers' arm out the third-story window of their medical college to some children playing below. One of these children panicked because his mother had just died and he feared that it was his own mothers' arm. The children found a ladder, climbed to the third-story window, and discovered the medical students' dissection room in all of its' glory. Soon this same child's father formed a mob that ransacked the college for three days. The riot resulted in several physicians' being battered, and also some deaths among the mob.¹¹ This is just one extraordinary example of the riots that occurred so often near medical colleges.

Obviously anyone associated with body snatching was at risk of mass rage and physical harm. Because of this, resurrectionists went to many efforts to conceal their nightly occupations. They would often assemble a tent to shield their lamplight from anyone passing the cemetery at night¹², they used wooden shovels because these would not make as much noise while digging¹³, and they often hid their wagons during the digging process. Doctors also sought to disengage themselves from the superstitious reputation of dissection, anatomy, and body-snatching that was so affiliated with medical schools at the time. However, it is necessary to note that just because doctors sought to disengage their schools from this reputation does not mean that they did not indeed engage in these practices.

In fact, almost every doctor and notable medical school certainly did obtain cadavers through Resurrectionists and then they would practice anatomy upon these subjects. One

¹⁰ Julia Bess Frank, "Body Snatching: A Grave Medical Problem," *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 49 (1976): 407.

¹¹ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 78-9.

¹² Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 35.

¹³ Waite, "Grave Robbing," 279-281.

account from the Minneapolis tribune in 1885 describes a “Wild Adventure” for two medical students sent to procure a cadaver. The two students, one American and one Turk¹⁴, set out from the Minnesota College Hospital to procure a cadaver after the dean of the college, Dr. Dunsmoor, received a telegram notifying him of a boxed and ready cadaver in Chaska, Carver County, Minnesota.¹⁵ The students left the college in their wagon on a cold January night, the temperature was 35 below¹⁶. Once they finally got to Chaska, they transferred the coffin to their wagon and set out for Minneapolis, at least a four hour wagon ride. Shortly after leaving, they heard a shot and the sheriff of Carver County demanding their surrender.¹⁷ At this point the Turk fled into the surrounding woods, and his American friend chased after him, leaving the cadaver, wagon, and horses to be found by the sheriff and his men. According to the newspaper, they roamed the woods, in the freezing night, waiting for morning so they could find their way home.¹⁸ When the Midwinter chase was last mentioned in newspapers, it was said that one student was still in the hospital with frostbitten feet, and the other student was unavailable for the press or the authorities.¹⁹ Despite the embarrassment, stress, and trauma that the students had to endure after this escapade, they still had to undergo the conviction of grave-robbing. This serves as a severe example of the dangers and mishaps that resurrectionists often encountered during their exploits.

One other commonality between these doctors and the resurrection-men; they all seemed to share the ideal that the body was not so sacred after death. Doctors morally believed that dissection of dead bodies was instrumental to ensuring a successful medical practice and

¹⁴ Raymond A. Smith Jr, “Of Cadavers, Chases, and Colleges: Newspaper Coverage, 1885,” *Minnesota History*, 49 (1985): 333.

¹⁵ Smith, “Of Cadavers, Chases, and Colleges,” 334.

¹⁶ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 55.

¹⁷ Smith, “Of Cadavers, Chases, and Colleges,” 335.

¹⁸ Minneapolis Tribune, Jan. 1885.

¹⁹ Smith, “Of Cadavers, Chases, and Colleges,” 333.

therefore to ensure that living people benefited from the non-living. Resurrectionists too seem to have believed that the body was more useful (in both monetary terms, and for furtherance of medical knowledge) than it was sacred after death. In fact one resurrectionist sold his own sisters' body without second thoughts after her death.²⁰ Some will interpret this as a ruthless tactic of men who desperately needed money, and perhaps that was indeed the sole reason for these resurrectionists' actions, or perhaps some also believed that medical knowledge was lacking and therefore sought to make money while supplying the schools that would grow in medical knowledge. None can be too sure of each individual resurrectionists' motivations; but we can be sure that their occupation was notably gruesome which undoubtedly affected these people in one way or another.

It is also interesting to note the different personalities of these men as well; even though certain characteristics seem prevalent in all these characters, there were still of course differences in their personalities. Some were immensely witty, while others were unbearably dumb, some were brave, some were pawns of doctors, while others would have seemed normal to outward society. Despite all of their similar traits, these resurrection men were still notably different. Often doctors and their students would play the part of resurrectionist themselves; although they were not always as efficient as the actual resurrectionists. Sometimes these students would play pranks on their professors', this was something that body-snatchers did as well.²¹

Many of the body snatchers discussed formerly were of a more amateur sort; those that resorted to the business of resurrecting because they needed quick cash, or perhaps some were medical students or doctors that needed to provide their own cadavers... but amongst these amateurs were a much more professional group of resurrectionists. These men, for most renown

²⁰ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 47.

²¹ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 52.

resurrectionists were men, were often especially risky and bizarre. It is this group that provides an even more interesting and insightful account of the already fascinating history of body snatching.

One 'professional' body snatcher was named William Cunningham who lived in Cincinnati. Mr. Cunningham was an interesting character indeed. He was said to be notably fearless; even once returning to the same grave site in which he had been caught digging. When he was caught, his comrades fled the scene but Cunningham willingly went with his prosecutors, bought them a drink at a local tavern, promised to leave the grave alone and in so doing escaped his captors. After which he went directly back to the grave site to finish his previous work.²²

Cunningham went by quite a few nicknames that portray his character quite accurately; 'Old Cunny', 'The Ghoul', and 'Old Dead Man' to name a few. He was said to be competent of exhuming enough bodies to provide for an entire medical school. Cunningham was unsurprisingly a heavy drinker, Irish, and notably vindictive. He once gave human cadavers that had died of smallpox to some medical students simply because these same students had offended him.

Another attribute to Cunningham's fearlessness as well as his wit was the way he would transport his cadavers. If he had achieved his business on a night that he predicted would be busy, or if he expected to run into crowds of people, Cunningham had an incredibly risky way to transport his cadavers that would fool any man he might encounter during the transport. Cunningham would take the cadaver he had previously exhumed, dress it in fresh clothing, and would sit it next to him in the wagon.²³ If he encountered any passers-by, Cunningham would even talk to the cadaver to further normalize the situation. This is evidence of the great lengths

²² Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 60.

²³ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 59.

that body-snatchers often had to resort to because so many within society were on alert of any “sketchy business” near graveyards in the middle of the night.

Another incredible character was an individual named Dr. Joseph McDowell. Dr. Joseph McDowell was a native of Kentucky, he graduated from college in his home state, but later moved to St. Louis where he had high hopes of becoming head of the medical society there. Unfortunately, he was outcast for his eccentricities and seemingly immoral actions. However, to the extent to which he was eccentric, is the extent to which he was also incredibly talented. In fact he was one of the most renowned doctors residing in St. Louis, and taught a great many anatomical lectures to his medical students.

In addition to his medical abilities, McDowell was also a proponent of Texan independence, security of northern California, and security of the South, these were all common issues of the time period. Midway through his career McDowell obtained 1400 firearms, several cannons, and built his own medical fortress. He told those in society that he had obtained these resources to address the issues listed above, but in reality he probably only wanted to ensure his medical fortress was safe against mob riots. It is known that he did on at least one occasion plan to fire into an angry mob that had gathered outside his fortress... when the mob realized that the mad doctor was pointing a loaded cannon at them, they split, and a riot was diverted. His fortress was overtaken by the Yankees during the civil war and ironically, the dissecting room was converted to a dining room. This was while McDowell himself was serving the Confederate army as a surgeon.

Another, and perhaps the most astonishing fact that has been discovered of Dr. McDowell was his eccentric ‘connection’ with the famous author Mark Twain. Mark Twain, also Samuel Clemens, grew up in the city of Hannibal, Missouri outside of St. Louis where

McDowell resided. Anyone who has read Twain's book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* would remember the cave that Tom and Becky get lost in the end of the book. This cave was not a total product of Twain's imagination, in fact it was inspired by a cave known as McDowell's cave that Clemens himself ventured into as a child.²⁴ The cave was indeed owned by the same Dr. McDowell that resided in St. Louis at the time. McDowell had bought the cave in 1839, when he first moved to St. Louis, and he used it for a number of things, but not without first sealing the main entrances.

Why would he seal the main entrances? Well first because he hid his firearms there for a year before deciding he wanted them closer at hand in St. Louis, but he also hid a body in this cave. This was the body of his own fourteen year old daughter. He preserved the body in a glass coffin sealed by copper and the body itself was preserved in alcohol... this is accounted in Twain's own autobiography.²⁵

McDowell also engaged in numerous resurrection exploits with his students who loved him because he 'made the dry bones talk'²⁶ At one point in his career, McDowell set out to rob a grave and on his return a loud thunderstorm, one of his great fears, began. The storm worsened as the doctor carried his cadaver inside the wagon to the medical college. Shultz writes that: "After a particularly loud thunderslap, the doctor heard the sound of a shot and, turning around, looked upon the corpse. It was sitting up with a pistol in its shriveled hand... he deserted the wagon... Little did he realize that he was the victim of a hoax perpetrated by his students."²⁷ McDowell was eccentric in more ways than one, but he had vast medical knowledge, and made many contributions to his medical practice. He is another example of a professional

²⁴ K. Patrick Ober, "The Body in the Cave: Dr. Joseph McDowell's Influence on Mark Twain," *Mark Twain Journal* 41 (2003): 4.

²⁵ Ober, "The Body in the Cave," 10.

²⁶ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 50.

²⁷ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 50.

resurrectionist that also doubled as a mad doctor renown for his kindness, eccentricities, and medical ability.

Last but not least, there were professional ‘gangs’ of resurrectionists in 19th century America as well. These gangs were incredibly efficient at their ‘jobs’; this is because each member was able to have one main job. For example, one member might be the wagon driver or transportation for the cadavers, another might be a ‘mourner’ at a funeral (they actually went to the funeral to mark the gravesite), another two would be the actual grave-diggers. This process had many advantages: it allowed for an efficient body-snatching but lessened the chance of being caught. It also allowed for the process to run much smoother, and gave the snatchers a means for a back-up plan if something happened to go wrong. There were many of these gangs that confiscated quite a few bodies in 19th century America, one such gang was that of George Christian, Percy Brown, Maude Brown, Margaret Harrison, and “Workhouse” Kate. George Christian had a job as a government clerk in the Surgeon General’s Office, Washington D.C. but on the side he was the ringleader of a grave robbing and shipping business. George was the main leader, planner, and shipper of the crew. Percy and Maude would attend the funerals, with Maude effectively acting the part of “despairing mourner”, but in reality they would just mark the grave to ensure they dug the right one later on that night. The other two would work whatever job Christian assigned to them. The crew even had their own shack that served the purpose of hiding things they obtained from graveyards; they also could make a good deal of money from the cadavers... they could range from \$40 to \$100 depending on the demand at the time. When this gang was finally caught, not surprisingly a result of their alcohol intoxication, a diary, a revolver, and some letters were found among them. A portion of this diary is depicted below:

“January 3rd 1873—B. and C. went out and got two cadavers tonight.

April 4th—Dr. C. and I went to the Washington Asylum Cemetery tonight and confiscated two sets of extremities and one head.

Saturday 5th—There was quite a little excitement in this morning’s market about our little adventure last night, many believing another murder had been committed. No one suspected us.”²⁸

This portion was written by George Christian himself, who was arrested after this confiscation and sentenced to one year’s confinement. Christian does not seem to show any remorse or second thoughts at his job as a resurrectionist.²⁹ This is not to imply that his actions were immoral; that can be left to the opinions of the reader. However the fact that he does not show any remorse or decorum for his actions gives a great depiction of the typical resurrectionist. These men, and women, did not fall into the superstitious belief that bodies should be left in their graves for “sacred or religious” beliefs... no, they did not seem to see the body as sacred at all. However, they did see the advantages of a body; they recognized that cadavers furthered the medical profession, and many resurrectionists actually willed their own bodies to these medical institutions after death, but most importantly they realized that cadavers meant money. Money that these resurrectionists may have been hard fought to find elsewhere.

Resurrectionists lived exciting lives but they could also be scarring; undoubtedly, the effect of exhuming multiple dead bodies each night must have taken a toll on these men and women. Many of the resurrectionists were compelled to do this job because they needed a way to make money, and few other jobs were available. Some, such as medical students, doctors, and

²⁸ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 61-6.

²⁹ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 62.

even a few of the professional resurrectionists, believed that their nightly endeavors would advance the medical profession. Those who believed this were correct; for the ability of medical students and the reputation of medicine advanced as more and more medical students were able to practice anatomy on cadavers. One effect of this advancement was that doctors began to write narrative and textbooks concerning anatomy, they would also speak in anatomical lectures for both medical students and the general population. As a result, some in 19th century America became mesmerized by the subject of anatomy, for that population had never learned the details and intricacies of the human body. Anatomy became a fascinating and popularized subject for many, although the actual practice of dissection and body snatching was still certainly a controversial and horrendous act. 19th century Americans loved the idea of anatomy and learning about the human body, but they did not like the idea of loved ones being stolen out of their own graves and used to learn this same anatomy. Although the medical practice was advancing especially near the turn of the 19th century, it is important to remember that doctors, students, and resurrectionists were still opposed and disrespected by much of the population. Reasons for this include the belief that dissection of a body was opposed to religious beliefs, and also because the general population was superstitious about death. Often riots would ensue, and mobs would attempt to batter doctors, students or resurrectionists. As a result, only the most daring or most desperate of people would undertake the practice of body-snatching. This reveals the economic and social environment of 19th century America; there was still a massive lower class that was left only the most menial of jobs, if they could find any jobs at all. Although the profession of body-snatchers and doctors were disrespected at the time, these professions were necessary and arguably furthered much of the medical knowledge and respect of the medical community that is present in today's society.

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