Legal Bodies: Dissecting Murderers
at the Royal College of Surgeons, London, 1800-1832

Helen MacDonald

Abstract
With the rise of empirical methods in medical science, during the first decades of the nineteenth century there was a high demand for ‘subjects for dissection’. However such subjects could be very difficult to obtain. The Crown did, however, make some people’s bodies legally available for dissection, in the form of those who were executed for murder. They were dissected before an audience in the Royal College of Surgeons’ anatomy theatre, not far from the scaffold. These were the last public dissections in London until a controversial performance in November 2002, which has worried many commentators by the way it slips between science and art. This article explores London’s early nineteenth-century public dissections, offering a window into the culture of British medicine at an earlier time when surgeons also worked to establish their science in artful ways.

[Page 10] In 1829, London surgeon John Abernethy (1764-1831) delivered a lecture to his students at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, informing them that ‘[t]here is but one way to obtain knowledge … we must be companions with the dead’.¹ Many believed that only through hands-on dissecting could ‘views become essentially our own’, and ‘we dare give them the name of knowledge’.² Direct observation of the dead human body provided alert men with valuable opportunities to trace the effects of disease, and this
complemented their clinical practice. Astley Cooper (1768-1841), one of London’s best surgeons at this time, articulated it in the following way:

by examining Dead bodies, we become acquainted with the changes produced by Disease, with its nature whether curable, or incurable; if it be of the former description we are enabled to form an opinion respecting its best mode of treatment, and if of the latter, we avoid giving unnecessary torture to future Patients with the same disease.

Valuing empirical knowledge in this way had practical effects. As one student noted, learning medicine now meant that ‘every medical man is compelled to … go to work as if the science existed in its original state of chaos and confusion, in order to fix for himself with exactness and certainty its elementary facts and principles…’. Each needed to find for himself a way ‘out of this darkness.’

By the mid-eighteenth century, experience in dissecting was ‘conventional practice’ for London’s surgeons. However in Britain, in contrast to France (where revolutionary edicts made a plentiful supply of bodies available to medical men), creative ways of obtaining bodies upon which to find a way out of the darkness needed to be found. What medical men did with the dead contravened deeply held social beliefs about how human beings should properly be dealt with, post mortem. It mattered that bodies were treated with respect and buried whole for all kinds of reasons, including an expectation that the dead would rise in bodily form on God’s final judgement day. In England the only legal supply of bodies came from the scaffold. Under An Act for better preventing the horrid Crime of Murder (25 Geo. 2, c. 37, 1752) either dissecting or gibbeting became an additional punishment meted out to murderers alone, due to the heinous nature of their crime. From this time the College of Surgeons had the right to the bodies of all such people executed in London. However the fact that there were very few in any given year meant that medical men and their students inevitably needed to obtain most of their supplies elsewhere. They went to
work on corpses that had been stolen from graves soon after their burial, or bodies that lay unclaimed in hospital dead houses. Much more rarely, they purchased (probably unwittingly) the bodies of people who had been murdered to turn them into objects for sale.7

In this paper, I will focus on those few bodies that were made legally available in London for dissection. Who were these people, and to what uses were their bodies put? Exploring these matters reveals that they were not used for conventional practice at the College, but were turned into experimental subject-matter, material gifts that bound men working in London’s charitable hospitals to the College, and even became the subjects of a kind of post-mortem portraiture that destabilised established versions of some of these people’s crimes.

The College of Surgeons had been receiving all murderers’ bodies to dissect since 1752.8 These public dissections were social events;9 and they were artfully performed. Astley Cooper, who carried them out between 1793 and 1796, later recalled that the College’s theatre was ‘constantly crowded, and the applause excessive’.10 Executions were public spectacles that attracted huge and rowdy crowds.11 [Figure 1]. They were performed at 8 o’clock on Monday mornings, following which the body was left dangling at the end of the rope for an hour before being carted to the theatre. The body was accompanied on that journey by both the executioner and London’s Sheriff, and was received by the College Master, dressed in his official regalia.

Between 1800 and 1832, William Clift (1775-1849), the Conservator of the College’s Hunterian Museum, performed these dissections. Though not a surgeon, Clift was exceedingly skilled in dissecting, having been apprenticed to England’s premier comparative anatomist, John Hunter (1728-93), whose collection formed the basis of the Museum.12 In dissecting murderers, Clift worked under the direction of the College Master. Of the 45 dissections performed during these years, 12 were brief affairs comprising
only a ‘proper’ examination, which meant nothing more than making an incision over the sternum.\textsuperscript{13} This was a theatrical cut to mark the College’s treasured monopoly over these subjects. After that, the bodies were quickly passed on to well-connected surgeons or pupils in London’s hospitals and, more rarely, in the city’s private schools of anatomy. However most of the College’s dissections were much lengthier affairs.

\textbf{‘Oddities let Loose’: Galvanising George Foster, 1803}

The early nineteenth century was a time of fascination in Europe about the source of animation. Anxieties about the precise boundary between life and death were expressed in novels and poems, and circulated in dark tales about people who had been buried alive.\textsuperscript{15} Some people who had been executed had even later revived on the College’s own dissecting table.\textsuperscript{16}

Murderers’ bodies were subjected to experiments in an effort to determine precisely the point beyond which a person was certainly dead. Some were so violently crude that William Clift clearly found the job distressing. In an uncharacteristically stumbling hand, he crossed out words and rephrased his sentence as he recorded what he was instructed to do to the body of Martin Hogan as it lay on the dissecting table in 1814:

\begin{quote}
[a] needle was introduced immediately through the coats of each eye & each? With the view of stimulating the Iris – but no visible effect was produced.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Other investigations were undertaken in a more systematic way as College men sought to understand whether an absence of obvious animation was a sign that the ‘life force’ had merely been ‘suspended’ or was irretrievably extinguished. And—although this was never stated in the context of the College’s work on murderers—they were also wondering whether it was in the power of medical men to return people to life.

In 1803 the College invited Professor Giovanni Aldini (1762-1834) to perform galvanic experiments on the body of George Foster, who had been found guilty of murdering his wife and child by drowning them in the
Paddington Canal. Aldini required access to the bodies of people who had
died very recently, in the belief that these still held their ‘vital powers’. In
contrast, those who had died of disease might have ‘humors’ which would
resist his experiments. In later writing up his London work, Aldini spoke
admiringly of England’s ‘enlightened’ laws, which provided murderers with
an opportunity to atone for their crimes by such uses of their bodies after
death. He argued that galvanic experiments were especially in the interests
of a British public, for Britain was a commercial and maritime nation, filled
with rivers and canals. When British people drowned, he said, galvanism
might provide the necessary ‘means of excitement’ to return them to life.
Dealing with the dead in controversial ways always requires some form of
rationalisation. It is part of the process through which access to bodies is
socially negotiated.

Reading the records of this scientist’s work at the College in 1803, it
is not difficult to see why others believed such men liked to play at being
God. Always conscious of his audience, Aldini made the dead perform
tricks. He boasted that in Europe he had once placed the heads of two
decapitated criminals on separate tables, connecting them with an arc of
electricity that made them grimace to such an extent ‘that the Spectators …
were actually frightened’. [Figure 2]. He had also made the hand of a
headless man clutch a coin and throw it across a room.

The College provided Aldini with an opportunity to make some
‘new’ experiments on George Foster, whose body had been left hanging for
an hour in temperatures ‘two degrees below the freezing point of
Fahrenheit’s thermometer’. When it was delivered to the theatre, Master
Keate ceded his authority to direct what followed to Aldini, who applied
arcs to various parts of the body over the following hours to make George
Foster perform. His jaw quivered, his left eye opened, and his face
convulsed. When conductors were applied to his ear and rectum, the
resulting muscular contractions ‘almost [gave] an appearance of re-
animation’. One hand clenched and the right auricle of the heart
contracted. The audience was amazed by such signs of animation.
These experiments continued for more than seven hours after the execution.27 While Aldini denied intending to re-animate the corpses upon which he went to work,28 everyone in that room would have considered it a triumph he had managed it. The Times, whose reporter probably witnessed the day’s work, noted that a principle had been discovered ‘by which motion can be restored to Dead Bodies’.29 Such possibilities had not been in the minds of England’s legislators when they worded the Murder Act. Dissection was meant to result in the mutilation of the dead, not their resurrection. Bringing executed murderers back to life might have been a matter of congratulation for the man who achieved it, but it would have been a complicated problem for the law. Aldini himself spoke ambiguously about his intentions. He said the object of his experiments ‘was not to produce re-animation, but merely to obtain a practical knowledge how far Galvanism may be employed … to revive persons under similar circumstances’.30

Regulating Dissection: John Bellingham, 1812
That surgeons, like executioners, went to work on behalf of the law in punishing murderers, was a matter of discomfort to many of them. They thought the association between themselves and the hangman was a ‘degrading coalition’.31 Surgeons preferred a self-image that tied the act of dissecting closely to the promotion of medical science, rather than to inflicting indignities on human bodies on behalf of the Crown.

With this in mind, the College’s dissections were meant to follow a certain dignified path. The fact that they often did not is revealed by the need, from 1812, to attempt to officially regulate what went on in the Theatre. As Giovanna Ferrari has noted in her work on Bologna’s anatomy theatre, the very existence of such regulations is revealing of the kind of undesirable behaviour that was taking place.32 The College’s rules were written on 8 July 1812, at the first meeting of the Museum’s Board of Curators following the dissection of Britain’s only assassin, John Bellingham. He had murdered Spencer Perceval, Prime Minister of an unpopular government, in the lobby of the House of Commons a week earlier.33 [Figure 3]. The act was initially perceived as the beginning of a
political revolt. It caused mayhem in London’s streets. When Bellingham ascended the steps to the scaffold a week later he was greeted with cheers, and the government had taken the precaution of stationing 5,000 troops nearby.

The College’s theatre was crowded with spectators for Bellingham’s dissection. We can catch a glimpse of the kind of behaviour that prevailed that day in the regulations that were enacted soon afterwards. From this time on, they instructed, ‘Disorder, and Interuption [sic] during the Dissection’ were to be prevented by admitting only people who were accompanied by a Member of the Court of Assistants, and in addition, from now on only the Master or one of the two College Governors could give a ‘specific Direction … respecting the Dissection’.

William Clift opened each cavity of Bellingham’s body and certain matters were recorded. The stomach was found to contain a small quantity of fluid (‘which seemed to be Wine’); the bladder was empty and contracted; the penis ‘seemed to be in a state of semi-erection’; and the brain was found to be ‘firm and sound throughout’. Some audience members may have been surprised by this, expecting to find material signs of madness in the brain of a man who had murdered a Prime Minister. In Bellingham’s stomach and left testicle, something of particular interest was found and these body parts were sent to the College Museum.

The Master also directed that some experiments be undertaken on this body. College men wished to explore how long a heart could be made to move after the moment of death. This was the beginning of such experiments at these public dissections, and they continued until Mary Wittenbach was anatomised in 1827. Sometimes those in the theatre were content to observe the heart pulsating of its own accord. At others, they artificially stimulated it. Some hearts were cut out of bodies, placed in a saucer and watched. When they finally lay still, they were nudged with a scalpel to see if they would move again. The motion of Bellingham’s right auricle was observed with care. Its movement was assessed as being ‘not strictly a contractile action, diminishing in any Sensible degree the cavity of the Auricle’, but ‘undulating and weak, sometimes beginning at the right
extremity of the Auricle & moving to the left: at other times commencing & proceeding in the contrary direction’. The surgeons experienced one of their greatest triumphs with this man’s heart, for the right auricle continued to move ‘without the application of any Stimulus, during the period of nearly four Hours from the Time of Execution; and for about an Hour Longer, upon being touched with a Scalpel’.

When these men were done with Bellingham’s body, the College President, Sir William Blizard (1745-1835), turned it into a gift which he sent to Mr Stanley, a pupil at nearby St Bartholomew’s Hospital. Murderers’ bodies were often given, in this way, to men working or learning in London’s charitable hospitals. These gifts were one way through which the College maintained its close relationships with London’s most powerful surgeons. Bellingham’s body seems to have been something of a prize for a pupil, given the fame of this subject for dissection and the controversy that surrounded his speedy trial and execution, both of which attracted large audiences. Perhaps whatever else had gone on in the College’s dissecting room—the kind of behaviour that had precipitated those new regulations—had resulted in there being so little left of the body that few other medical men would have wanted to receive it.

Seven years later, it had become apparent that the 1812 regulations needed to be strengthened. The new rules stated firmly that all men concerned with the dissecting of murderers were to act in a way that was ‘as conducive as possible to general Benefit by promoting the Designs of the College, with reference to the Museum and Theatre, and, otherwise, facilitating the cultivation of anatomical and chirurgical knowledge’. From now on, three College Members ‘at least’ were to decide to whom murderers’ bodies were to be given, and none was to be ‘taken or removed from the appointed Place of dissection until the Dissection thereof shall have been duly performed’. But despite the clarity of this Standing Order, in practice, individual College men continued to pass the bodies of murderers to favoured individuals elsewhere.
Dissecting Women: Catherine Welch, 1828

It was rare for a woman to hang for murder in England at this time, so of the bodies received at the College between 1800 and 1832, only seven were female. Five of these left the College in relatively pristine condition after only the ‘proper’ dissection. All but one made valuable gifts, for these women were young and healthy at the time of their deaths and there was much to learn on such subjects for dissection. It was a time when women were viewed, anatomically speaking, as being defined by their organs of generation. So the fact that four of these five women were in their reproductive years counted for something.

At this time, medical men could only learn about the internal anatomy of the female reproductive system in the bodies of dead women. Yet surgeon-anatomist Charles Bell (1774-1842) informed his students that women’s bodies were difficult subjects to investigate on the dissecting table.

To give a full and comprehensive view of the diseases incident to the female pelvis would lead to a very long dissection … [they] are difficult [Page 18] to be understood; and the explanation of them requires a complete knowledge of a very delicate and minute piece of anatomy, together with much practical dexterity. It is indeed a subject so extensive, that it cannot be fully treated of on the present occasion.

This, in a two volume work that claimed to explain the anatomy of the human body.

There were social, as well as scientific reasons for medical uncertainties about the female body. In lectures and dissecting manuals, physicians and surgeons impressed upon their students the need for ‘decorum’ when working on the bodies of well-to-do female patients. Decorum dictated that, at least where the genitalia and accessible generative organs of private patients were concerned, a man must carry out his work blind. Astley Cooper instructed that inserting a catheter into a woman’s urethra to draw off urine ‘ought always to be done under the bed cloathes
[sic]. Students therefore needed to learn the comparative location of urethra and vagina by heart, orientating themselves from the position of the clitoris, lest acts performed blind should go horribly wrong. John Hghton informed his pupils that there were two ways to examine a pregnant woman. One was more certain than the other, though ‘the rules of decorum do not always permit you to practice [sic] it’. The ‘certain mode’ involved the use of a speculum, an instrument developed by the French which might, he said, ‘be thought ingenious, did we not observe that the idea was borrowed from some shoemaker’. The less certain mode was by ‘feeling’, ‘without seeing the part’. 

No such concerns with decorum were necessary when investigating the body of a dead woman. On 14 April, 1828, a young woman named Catherine Welch was carted from the scaffold to the College’s anatomy theatre. She had been executed for murdering her six week old son in tragic circumstances. According to the reporter for the Evening Mail, who had attended the execution, Welch was ‘a fine young woman of stout and particularly healthy appearance’. He noted that she had struggled greatly at the end of the rope ‘for some minutes’, though there were no signs on her face of this slow death by asphyxiation. The College performed only a proprietorial cut on Welch’s body, which was then given to Charles Bell, who ran a private school of anatomy in Windmill Street. Thanks to the sketches William Clift made of those who came to lie on the College’s dissecting table, no matter how briefly, we can catch a glimpse of what Bell’s students saw as they crowded around the table on that day. [Figure 4]. [Page 19]

Welch became a subject for dissection within a few weeks of giving birth to and suckling her child for the last time, so a number of interesting things could be demonstrated on her body. Contemporary dissecting manuals taught students the process. Bell would begin with the breasts. The manuals instruct that the mamma, a ‘gland peculiar to the female’, is of ‘a rounded form’ and adheres loosely to the surface of the large pectoral muscle. They advise students to draw the nipple out to make the excretory ducts visible to the eye. Observers should also notice the way the ‘areola …
varies in colour at different times of life, and during pregnancy is of a darker colour than at other times.\textsuperscript{53} In his own dissecting manual, Bell asks students to attend particularly to the mamma in women ‘giving suck’, under which circumstances these glands ‘become enlarged, and very evident’.\textsuperscript{54} Catherine Welch fell into this category, so her breasts would have been ‘a larger size than common’, ‘hard and troublesome to the touch’, the nipples thick and strong.\textsuperscript{55} The students may even have tried to replicate a test performed by the surgeon, Mr Holmes, who gave evidence against Welch at her trial.\textsuperscript{56} She had denied having a child to suckle or murder, but Holmes proved otherwise by extracting milk from her breasts. Bell’s students could attempt to do the same, ‘by pressure, or by suction’.\textsuperscript{57} Then the anatomist cut off the breasts and sent them to be injected for display in the College’s Museum.\textsuperscript{58} [Page 20]

Now Bell’s students could move on, past further signs of Welch’s recent delivery—a relatively rough and flaccid abdomen—to the external parts of the organs of generation.\textsuperscript{59} Separating the labia, they could explore the Clitoris, the Nymphae, the Vestibulum, the Meatus urinarius, and the orifice of the vagina.\textsuperscript{60} The clitoris would be compared to the male penis and could be sliced in two for a more thorough examination.\textsuperscript{61} To inspect the perineum, the students would fix the body ‘in the same position as that for the operation of stone’.\textsuperscript{62} This meant either lying Welch on her back, parting her legs and placing them over her head or, as she was dead, sawing them off.

Bell’s dissecting manual explains how he would then have gone about opening the body. He advised students to ‘hold the knife easily in the hand, not rigidly … lay the edge fairly to the part … cut with a steady and uniform stroke … but the best rule in this, and all such operations, is to avoid all affectation of manner’.\textsuperscript{63} He would teach his students how to recognise further signs that Welch had recently given birth. The vagina would be distended, and there might still be signs of the presence of a substance ‘that differs from the common menstrual flux’. In examining the orifice of the uterus, the students would notice that it was still soft and open, and ‘not [yet] … properly collapsed and … its natural shape’.\textsuperscript{64} The extent
to which the uterus was exposed during a dissection depended upon whether or not the subject’s bladder was full. In the body of a woman who had been hanged, it would probably have been empty. So the advice of surgeon John Flint South (1797-1882) would have been followed: distend the bladder and stuff the rectum to make viewing what lay within the pelvis easier.

Knowledge about the ovaries was still, at this time, a source of interested speculation rather than established fact. They were said to answer ‘to the testicle in [the body] of the male’. Some believed they carried ‘the rudiments of the foetus’; others that miniature human beings lay in a man’s sperm, rather than a woman’s ovaries. Working on the ovaries was something that could only be done on the bodies of dead women, and what men learned there could not, before the invention of anaesthetics, assist in dealing with ovarian disease in the living—despite the ovaria ‘of all the parts of the female pelvis … [being] the most frequently diseased’. For Charles Bell, this made deep knowledge about the ovaries ‘unimportant’, a kind of useless acquisition.

Slowly, beneath these enquiring minds and hands, Catherine Welch disappeared. The College expected, in return for the gift of her body, to receive a report that would contribute to anatomical and surgical knowledge. Bell sent none, which was a source of ongoing ill-feeling. Two years later, the College Secretary was still writing to request an official report of this particular dissection.

**Elizabeth Ross, 1832: Dissecting the ‘female burker’**

In 1828, it was discovered that two Irishmen living in Edinburgh, William Burke and William Hare, had murdered 16 people to sell their bodies to the private anatomy school of Dr Robert Knox (1791-1862). Burke and Hare had developed a system of murder (or ‘burking’) that left few marks on their victims’ bodies, and it is unlikely that Knox suspected he was dissecting victims of murder. Nevertheless, the public furore that followed the discovery spelled the effective end of his career.

William Clift was deeply interested in the phenomenon of burking. This is not surprising given the publicity these crimes attracted and the
additional fact that some similar English cases were discovered in London in 1831. The London burkers, John Head and John Bishop, came to lie on the College’s dissecting table after their execution, as did Elizabeth Ross a year later. She was the only female ‘Convicted Burkeite’.\textsuperscript{74} As was his habit, Clift sketched all three before the dissections began. If he was tempted to make these people’s portraits illustrate some kind of physical propensity for their crime, as others did at the time, he resisted it. Clift’s sketches contrast, for example, with some made of Burke and Hare. One artist influenced by phrenology and theories of physiognomy gave Burke’s skull the shape of a man in thrall to the animal passions and turned Hare into a cunning fox.\textsuperscript{75} [Figure 5]. Clift’s images of the English burkers are different. He portrays them in a much more open-ended way, which also contrasts with the contemporary word assessments made of them in newspaper accounts, which turned Head, Bishop and Ross into monsters whose crimes were incomprehensible.

Clift’s sketches of London’s murderers, made quickly before he was instructed to take up the tools of dissection, often problematised contemporary accounts of the crimes that brought them to the dissecting table. Elizabeth Ross’s conviction was based on very shaky evidence, most of it provided by her 12 year old son to save his father, Edward Cook, from execution. The son insisted his mother had acted alone in smothering the family’s elderly lodger, then hawking the body to anatomists at London Hospital. Ross denied the crime. She said her son had been coached in what to say at the trial, and that she had left the [Page 22] lodger alive in the company of both him and her husband.\textsuperscript{76} Her refusal to confess to the crime before she was executed left loose ends that the press tried to tie together. They sought the opinions of her neighbours, who remembered noticing that when Ross moved into their neighbourhood, cats began to disappear.\textsuperscript{77} They also said Ross was a gin-drinker and a thief. In the absence of the victim’s body, which had presumably already been dissected at London Hospital, newspaper reports tried to establish this woman’s guilt by relating her crime to the Head and Bishop murders a year before. Despite the ‘most rigid inquiries’, one newspaper reported that the only motive ‘that could be
guessed at’ was that Ross wished to profit from selling a body, since everyone knew from the earlier trial that money ‘made by such a murder’ was relatively easy.  

This newspaper gave Ross both a nationality (Irish, like Burke and Hare) and a physical appearance to match this understanding of the crime. She was said to be a ‘large, raw-boned, and coarse featur’d Irishwoman’ of ‘masculine proportions and strength’. This picture in [Page 23] words made it believable that Ross had single handedly murdered her victim (though it had taken both Burke and Hare to hold down and smother theirs, some of whom struggled mightily), then carried the dead weight of the body through the streets to London Hospital to negotiate a sale.  

Clift’s pencil sketch of this woman tells a different story to that which appeared in newspaper accounts. [Figure 6]. There is no sign here of masculine strength. Unusually, Clift has included in this portrait his subject’s upper arm and shoulder. No outline of muscles appears, and the words that accompany the sketch tell us that Ross was only five feet ‘high’ (though she was measured on the dissecting table, and ‘long’ was a more accurate word). She does not seem to have been a substantial woman. Although her head is thrust forward by the block of wood beneath it, there is hardly a sign of a double chin. Ross was only 34 years of age when this sketch was made, but the sparse hair makes her appear much older, and the rope from which she hung has left a mark around a wrinkled neck. This woman’s life had given her the look of an old woman. Taken together, the physical facts in Clift’s portrait suggest that Ross was no murderer of masculine strength. So does that hole in her earlobe, which indicates she cared [Page 24] sufficiently about the way she appeared in the world, as a woman, to decorate her face with earrings.  

Ross’s breasts are covered by a cloth, which is unusual in Clift’s portraits of women. I think it indicates he made this sketch after, rather than before carrying out the ‘proper’ dissection on this body, for in this case alone, where a woman was concerned, such a proper dissection comprised ‘an incision from Sternum to pubis, thro’ the integuments’. This was the way a man would be cut, if a full dissection was about to follow. A woman
was normally opened differently, to leave a triangular flap of skin folded over the pubis to better expose the internal organs of generation. I can see Clift following the President’s instructions: one slashing mark of contempt for a woman whose crime reminded the public that surgeons stood in ill-repute where gaining access to the dead was concerned. Or perhaps Elizabeth Ross, though only 34, was assessed in the College’s theatre as being too old to make her body suitable for illustrating the reproductive organs.

Soon after this dissection the British Parliament acted to provide medical men with increased legal supplies of subjects. It passed an Anatomy Act in 1832, and simultaneously repealed the Murder Act. From now on there would be no public dissecting of murderers. Instead, surgeons would be given access to the bodies of those who died in charitable institutions and were not claimed for burial. Thus dissecting became a more private affair.

Until 20 November, 2002, that is. On that day maverick anatomist and showman Gunther von Hagens, dressed in a blue surgical gown and wearing a perky fedora on his head, performed an illegal public dissection in an old boiler room next to an art gallery in London’s east end. In rationalising this piece of what he called ‘event anatomy’, von Hagens used the early nineteenth-century dissections as an historical reference point for his own work. He claimed to be democratising anatomical science in a culture now deprived of the public spectacle of anatomical theatres. Neither celebrity nor money, it seems, enter into this man’s multifarious transactions with the dead.

This public dissection attracted a large audience. Hundreds of people paid to attend in person, and more than a million others watched televised excerpts. Such an avid desire to observe a human dissection may reflect, as von Hagens suggests it does, the fact that such opportunities are rare now anatomy has become the province of experts. However in the twenty-first century, we have opportunities to witness anatomy in different
ways. We can explore it on the internet or a CD-Rom, watch operations performed on reality TV, read crime novels filled with forensic detail, and visit galleries that display body parts as art. It seems such opportunities are not enough. We want to experience the real thing: to watch an anatomist disaggregate a person’s body into its constituent parts before our eyes.

Some fear this is an unseemly desire. It reminds us of how close we are to those crowds competing for the best view of a public execution. Britain’s medical institutions are also troubled by von Hagens’ performance, which was illegal under the terms of the Anatomy Act. They know how difficult it has historically been to persuade the public that it is in everyone’s interests for anatomists and surgeons to be companions with the dead. They are also sensitive to the public reception of news about recent unethical medical uses of human body parts.86

Much of the continuing debate surrounding von Hagens’ form of ‘edutainment’ reveals discomfort with the way such public performances on bodies slip between science and art. However this exploration of those earlier dissections reveals that during the early nineteenth century, too, efforts to clearly differentiate between these forms of cultural endeavour were never entirely successful. Dissecting murderers on behalf of the law was also a theatrical performance in which the subjects for dissection served more than a scientific purpose.

Perhaps all we can say about public dissecting in the end, is that in both the present and the past, these performances are never just in the interests of promoting medical science.

END NOTES


3 Joshua Waddington, Lectures on Anatomy; and the Principle Operations of Surgery. Delivered at the Theatre, St Thomas’s Hospital; between 1 January and the 1 June, 1816 by Astley Cooper Esq., 3 volumes, Vol. 3, 2, Guy’s Hospital Archives.

4 American students in Paris, Lyle (1841) and Jackson (1833) respectively, cited in Warner, 236.


8 Prior to the Murder Act, the College had received six bodies per year. These were also those of criminals who had been executed, though not necessarily for murder (Richardson, 36).


For a nuanced discussion of the spectacle of public executions and the participation of the crowd, see Gatrell.


I have arrived at this figure by examining every relevant record held by the Royal College of Surgeons, London [hereafter RCS]: the Record of the Bodies of Murderers, notes contained in William Clift’s box of sketches, College Letterbooks, and William Clift’s diaries. The definition of a 'proper' examination is contained in Fiona Haslam, From Hogarth to Rowlandson: Medicine in Art in Eighteenth-century Britain, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1996, 261.

The quotation is from the first canto of Lord Byron’s Don Juan, Stanza 128.


‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, 24 January 1814, Box 67.b.13, RCS.

The Times, 15 January 1803.

John Aldini, An Account of the Late Improvements in Galvanism, with a series of various and interesting experiments performed before the Commissioners of the French National Institute, and repeated lately in the Anatomical Theatres in London (to which is added an Appendix, containing the author’s experiments on the body of a malefactor executed at Newgate &c., &c.), Cathell & Martin, London, 1803, 67-8.

Aldini, 189-90.

Aldini, 191.

Galvanic experiments informed the writing of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, in which Dr Frankenstein usurped the role of God by creating a man (Tim Marshall, Murdering to Dissect: Grave-robbing. Frankenstein and the Anatomy Literature, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1995, 5).

Aldini, 71.

24 Aldini, 78.
25 Aldini, 190; The Times, 15 January 1803; Aldini 191.
26 Aldini, 192.
27 Aldini, 192-5.
28 Aldini, 201.
29 The Times, 24 January 1803.
30 Aldini, 91.
33 Bellingham was a merchant who felt the British government had been unsupportive of him when he was arrested in Russia (The Times, Wednesday 13 May 1812).
34 Charles Bell to George Bell, 13 May 1812, in Letters of Sir Charles Bell, Selected from his Correspondence with his Brother, George Joseph Bell, John Murray, London, 1870, 199.
36 Gillen, 134.
37 Minutes, Court of Assistants 1811 to 1820, Volume III, 86-7, RCS. [Page 28]
38 ‘Record of Bodies’, entry dated 18 May 1812, RCS.
39 ‘Record of Bodies; entry dated 18 May 1812, RCS.
40 ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, note dated 18 May 1812, RCS.
41 ‘Record of Bodies’, 18 May 1812, RCS. When the reporter from the Morning Chronicle, who was present at the dissection, recorded the length of time Bellingham’s heart continued to move, he thought it ‘proof of the
steady, undismayed character which [Bellingham] preserved to the last
gasp’ (Gillen, 1972, 134).

42 For other links between the College and London’s surgeons, see Susan
Lawrence, Charitable Knowledge: Hospital Pupils and Practitioners in

43 Minutes, Court of Assistants, 1811 to 1820, Vol. III, 375-6, RCS.

44 See Ann Dally, Women Under the Knife: A History of Surgery,

45 Charles Bell, A System of Dissections Explaining the Anatomy of the
Human Body, the Manner of Displaying the Parts, and their Varieties in
Disease, Volumes 1 and 2, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1799),
101.

46 Waddington, ‘Lectures on Anatomy’, Vol. II: 253, Guy’s Hospital
Archives.

47 Joshua Waddington, ‘Lectures on Midwifery And Diseases of Woman,
and Children: Delivered at the Theatre, Guys Hospital between the 1st of
November 1816 and the 1st of March 1817 by John Haighton, M.D’, Guy’s
Hospital Archives, 42.


49 Deserted by the man who had impregnated her, Catherine Welch married
another, but when he found she was pregnant he refused to support her
while ‘the child existed to publish his disgrace’ (Evening Mail, Monday 14
to Wednesday 16 April 1828).

50 Evening Mail, 14 April to 16 April 1828.

51 Clift’s biographer, Jessie Dobson, nominates Clift’s son, William Home
Clift (1803-1832), Assistant Conservator of the College’s Hunterian
Museum from 1823, as the artist. However as W.H. Clift was aged 4 when
the first of these sketches was made in 1807, and the last was made after his
early death, the sketches must have been produced by both father and son.

52 Joseph Henry Green, The Dissector’s Manual, Printed for the Author,
London, 1820, 113. [Page 29]

53 Green, 114.

54 Bell, System of Dissections, 36-7.
55 Samuel Farr, MD, Elements of Medical Jurisprudence; or a succinct and compendious Designation of such Tokens in the human body as are requisite to determine the Judgment of a Coroner, and Courts of Law, in cases of Divorce, Rape, Murder, &c. to which are added Directions for preserving the Public Health, Third Edition, printed for Callow, Medical Bookseller, London, 1815, 54.
56 The Times, Saturday 12 April 1828.
57 Farr, 54.
58 There was a recipe for the preservative: ‘Bees wax, six ounces; resin, eight ounces; turpentine varnish, six ounces’ (Bell, vii). When the specimens failed to arrive, Clift noted the injections ‘had probably failed’ (Clift Diary, entry 14 April 1828, RCS).
59 Farr, 54.
61 Green, 176. Ludmilla Jordanova is critical of an image in William Hunter’s Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus, which shows a clitoris sliced in two. She sees the cutting as a sign of sexist violence since it has ‘no relevance to the plate or, indeed, to the book as a whole’ (Ludmilla Jordanova, ‘Gender, Generation and Science: William Hunter’s obstetrical atlas’, in W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds) William Hunter and the Eighteenth-century Medical World, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, 385-412, 390). I am not so sure. All dissecting was a matter of cutting, slicing and sawing and every internal part was explored in such ways.
62 Green, 177.
63 Bell, xi-xii.
64 Farr, 53-4.
65 In the slang of the time, a man who hanged was said to wear ‘a pissen pair of breeches’(Linebaugh, 66).
66 South, 269.
67 Farr, 4.
68 South, 284.


70 Bell, 101. Although the first operation to remove an ovarian cyst was performed in Kentucky in 1809, it was not written up until years later and was dismissed by the medical establishment in England until the 1830s (Dally, 15).

71 See Endnote 43.

72 Edward Balfour to Charles Bell 20 January 1830, Typescript Copies of Two Letterbooks 1800-1850, 125, RCS.

73 Most of the newspaper clippings Clift kept relate to these crimes.

74 Unsourced newspaper clipping, ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, RCS.

75 Hare was cunning. Though equally involved in the murders, he gave evidence against Burke and escaped any punishment for the crimes.

76 Reverend Cotton, ‘Original Diary or Visiting Book of the Reverend H.S. Cotton, Chaplain of Newgate, from 1823 to 1836, detailing day by day his Visits to the Prison, Conversations with Prisoners, their Crimes, Last Hours of the Condemned, their Executions, Confessions, & etc’., Entries 6 and 8 January 1832, MS 14, National Library of Australia.

77 They believed she skinned them, including the favourite cat of her landlord at the Sampson and Lion Public House, whose carcass she flung at him (‘Full Account of the Execution’, unsourced newspaper clipping, ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, RCS).

78 Unsourced newspaper clipping, ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, RCS.

79 Unsourced newspaper clipping, ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, RCS.

80 Undated note on card, ‘Clift’s Heads of Murderers’, RCS.

81 Bell, 14-15.

84 Von Hagens also exhibits preserved, anatomised human bodies in his travelling exhibition, ‘Body Worlds’, which at the time of this public dissection was housed in the art gallery next door.
86 One example is the notorious Alder Hey affair, in which a pathologist removed thousands of organs from the bodies of children who had died, without their relatives’ consent.
Author/s: MACDONALD, HP

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