Book Review


In 1989 a collection of human bones was unearthed in the basement of the Medical College of Georgia, then undergoing renovation. This book is the wide-ranging story of these bones, of medicine and sociology of 19th-century Georgia, and of American attitudes to the donation, sometimes forced, of human remains for study.

The building from which the bones were unearthed had been used as a hospital for confederate soldiers during the American Civil War, and throughout most of the 19th century was a dissection room—a risky business, dissection being illegal in Georgia until 1887—and the book chronicles the story of some transatlantic resurrectionists. There are lots of intriguing findings from the subsequent study of the remains. The architectural story of the building is fascinating, as are fleeting visions of pharmacy in 19th-century Georgia, as inferred from a study of bottles and other artefacts found alongside the bones. Many of the remains were simply prepared anatomical dissections, left to rot, and it is remarkable how well preserved some of them appear, particularly one showing the postvertebral muscles and the spinal cord.

The most interesting sections of the book deal with race, politics, sociology and moral issues. There is the hypocrisy of anatomists and doctors who demanded anatomical knowledge when dissection was illegal. There is the hypocrisy of the availability of medicine for whites as opposed to medicine for blacks (haves and have-nots—has anything much changed?); and that of the donation of remains from whites compared with the ‘donation’ from blacks (I still get a trickle of enquiries from those on the fringes of society, young and old, asking how much I will pay them if they sign donation forms). The last 2 chapters consider attitudes to dissection and the consideration in days of yore by some that the corpses were merely commodities—an attitude which contrasts with the growing practice in many medical schools of publicly acknowledging the generosity of donation by ceremonies, sometimes involving the relatives, and by generally treating the whole business with proper, but not exaggerated, decorum and gratitude.

The book is not a good read in the sense of being easy, or un-put-down-able, and it is certainly not cheap, but it is full of thought-provoking observations, evidence and opinions. At times like these, when dissection as part of medical education is being challenged, those of us who affirm its value will be well advised to have arguments to counter the often emotional reasons and prejudices of those who want it abandoned. Time spent reading this book, and reflecting upon its contents, will not be wasted.

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