

Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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Reviewer:

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In November of 2011, I listened to Dr Samuel Alberti present a paper on ‘Body parts in Bart’s’ – one of a series of seminars held in St Bartholomew’s pathological museum in West Smithfield. The museum is a cavernous room surrounded on all sides by glass specimen jars, making the visitor feel it is they who are as much under scrutiny as the specimens themselves. Indeed, the contents of the museum somewhat overshadowed the content of the talk itself: the low temperature necessary for the specimens’ survival led to a chilly hour-and-a-half, while my attention was constantly distracted by the glistening fragments of bone and flesh that lined the wall next to me. It was impossible to look at any of them without imagining my own story about each; I’d recently read about osteomalacia in the 19th century, so the rectangular case containing a rib and femur suggested a whole host of questions that the object itself was unable to answer satisfactorily. Was this a sample of diseased bone, or was it preserved as a ‘healthy’ benchmark? How did it come to be in the museum? Who did it belong to? Would *my* bones ever end up in a jar on a shelf?

I’m not alone in such morbid fascination. Historical interest in the dead body seems to have undergone significant growth in recent years with works on the dissected body (Edmondson and Warner’s *Dissection* (1)), post-mortem photography (most famously, Stanley Burns’ *Sleeping Beauty* (2)) and even the medical uses of the corpse. Richard Sugg’s *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires*, also published this year, examines the hitherto-neglected history of corpse medicine and once again places the dead body centre stage.(3) Like Sugg, Alberti forces us to closely evaluate our feelings about the corpse and its constituent elements, partly by eschewing any explicit appeal to sentiment in his analysis. While some readers might be disappointed by this lack of ethical rumination, the result in both cases is a highly readable and sober account of our

relationship with the dead body over time. Alberti is clear in defining his main focus in *Morbid Curiosities*: he is ‘concerned with the material and museological implications of the circulation of human remains in the nineteenth century’ in order to provide some ‘much-needed historical context to contemporary debates’.

Thus, Alberti begins by introducing us to the ‘Parliament of Monsters’ found at (appropriately) Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield, where the visitor could gaze upon ‘Albinos, painted Indians, Dwarfs’, ‘Wax-work[s]’, ‘modern Merlins, Wild Beasts [and] Puppet-shows’. Both Smithfield’s fair and its museum, he argues, were elements of a Victorian culture of display in which both the living and the dead body had the potential to be transformed into material culture. Drawing on the work of anthropologists as well as historians, Alberti examines the pathological specimen as ‘partible person’ or ‘dividual body’, with human remains in museums forming parts of a wider discourse on death, disease and corporeality. Travelling freak shows and anatomy displays charged the curious public a fee to glimpse nature’s anomalies, while the medical museum typically valued its specimens as teaching aids and producers of knowledge. Though it is always tempting to draw a neat dividing line between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures of display, Alberti rightly argues that such a clear-cut distinction is difficult to ascertain in this context. Joseph Woodhead, for example, advertised his Liverpool anatomical museum in a way that echoed the medical world’s justification of its teaching collections, albeit in a more raucous tone: his museum was ‘An Intellectual Study!! And a Public Advantage!!!’

This tension between education and sensation is evident throughout *Morbid Curiosities*, particularly in the chapter ‘Viewing pathology’ in which Alberti examines the experience of the museum visitor. As much as the wealthy individual doctor who collected pathological specimens, the visitor – whether medical student or the general public – was an ‘active [participant] in the construction of [the] meaning’ of exhibits. The story of the recent *Body Worlds* exhibition is in large part the story of the reactions it elicits – wonder, disgust, awe – and Alberti demonstrates that this is in many ways a repetition of old arguments. The public display of the dead body invariably causes an emotional response on some level, be that response enlightenment, horror or anger (or, as Alberti classifies reactions to exhibits, ‘good, bad or ugly’). Despite attempts to police visitors into behaviours appropriate to the sober environment of the museum, vandalism was a coincident risk as meddlesome students pierced the lids of jars causing the preservative alcohol to evaporate, or crowds smashed wax models to pieces in protest at the medical commodification of the body. Anyone excessively worried about the evil influence of our modern media on the vulnerable mind would do well to recall the case of a tailor who decapitated his wife after studying the anatomy of the throat at an anatomical exhibition, demonstrating that the medical museum’s influence could spread far beyond its walls.

It is refreshing to see that Alberti has avoided the common trap of producing a London-centric study of museums, also examining pathological collections in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dublin and Manchester. He emphasises that major medical museums in the 19th century were interconnected, the close network between them facilitated by the transfer of specimens through various hands. This focus on general hospital collections, however, does overshadow the role of smaller medical museums elsewhere, which is an unfortunate omission from the book. The chapter on ‘Preserving pathology’, for example, would have benefitted from some reference to the role of asylum pathologists in the development of techniques such as the use of the microtome for brain sectioning, with many larger asylums maintaining their own museums for teaching purposes.

There are a number of instances where the reader wishes that Alberti had expanded a point ever so slightly; his discussion of the presentation of sexual difference in the museum runs to just over two pages, yet makes some broad points that leave the reader wanting to read more – such as how the emerging field of gynaecology impacted upon museum displays. The language Alberti uses in this section also raises questions about our feelings towards certain body parts and the inevitable emotional involvement of the historian: he describes ‘man-midwives wrench[ing] the womb from the dead female body’, yet the removal of other body parts in the book is rarely described in such violent terms.

Yet if Alberti had chosen to elaborate on every element liable to catch the reader’s attention, the result would likely be a much less enjoyable read. I devoured *Morbid Curiosities* in the space of a day; it is one of the

most accessible scholarly works I have read in a long time and has relevance to readers across various subject areas. Beyond historians of science and medicine, the book also succeeds in speaking to economic historians (the body as ‘currency’, the role of auctions in procuring pathological specimens), historians of art and visual culture (the practical skills necessary for anatomical preparation), and those interested in the history of spaces (the museum as gendered, as alternately public and private, and as a social and a professional arena).

Towards the end of the book, the reader begins to wonder what has become of the objects at the heart of Alberti’s analysis, and his conclusion satisfies our curiosity. Many have disappeared as museum collections have become increasingly specialised in line with the development of the discipline of pathology itself, whilst other medical collections have been deemed unsuited to the modern museum where the need to engage with the public is paramount. Earlier in *Morbid Curiosities*, Alberti expresses his wish to complement rather than add to existing works that address ‘the psychological and ethical issues thrown up by the traffic in bodies’, yet by the end of the book there is no way of avoiding the role of emotion in the value placed on human remains, whatever the date of their preservation. The contents of the medical museum, Alberti concludes, proved to be ‘both its blessing and its curse’, as legislation such as the 2004 Human Tissue Act required museums to obtain licenses to keep body parts, and to prove the provenance of their specimens. Though the Act is just one of many pressures on the medical museum, it is a prime example of how our modern sensibilities might affect the very material available to future historians, and in this sense Alberti’s book has a relevance far beyond any of the specific subject areas covered here.

Notes

1. J. H. Warner and J. M. Edmondson, *Dissection. Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine: 1880–1930* (New York, NY, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (San Francisco, CA, 1990), and *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography, American & European Traditions* (New York, NY, 2002). See also A. Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London, 2011).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Sugg, *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires. The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* (London, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7848>