



## CHAPTER 7

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# Seeking the Physical Remains of the Criminal Corpse

We have traced the legal construction of the criminal corpse under the Murder Act, and its journey beyond the gallows and into the spaces and processes of post-mortem punishment. In the final section of this book, we turn our attention to the afterlives of these criminal corpses. We begin in this chapter by considering the material afterlives of bodies, partial bodies, and artefacts created from those punished under the Murder Act. Intentionally and accidentally, artefacts and objects from this period and from these bodies were preserved, and some remain with us into the present day. We ask: what kinds of physical remains endured and what are the ways that power inheres in them, then and now? In Chapter 8, we turn to the less material, though nonetheless potent and powerful, narrative remains of these punished corpses. In stories, songs, art, drama and literature, the criminal corpses created under the Murder Act linger with us and ‘haunt’ our everyday lives in the present. How is the power of the criminal corpse produced, and why does it still have the ability to disturb and entertain us today? Finally, in Chapter 9 we examine the philosophical and ethical legacies of the Murder Act and the treatment of corpses, criminal corpses, and criminalised corpses in Britain. For now, we turn our attention to the material remains and physical traces of the criminal corpses produced and manipulated under the Murder Act.

### RESTING IN PEACE OR RESTING IN PIECES?

The Murder Act specifically excluded the bodies of convicted and executed murderers from burial until the corpse had been anatomised and dissected or hung in chains. However, these punishments did not have a similarly formal or legislated moment at which a body might be considered to have been punished ‘enough’. There was no agreed point at which the punishment ended, and the body (or what remained of the body) could be laid to rest. If carried to their full extent, both dissection and hanging in chains disintegrated the body of the condemned, leaving very little, if anything, that would require burial or another form of disposal. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, those responsible for carrying out post-mortem punishments had some discretion in the accomplishment of their duties, and in some cases could choose how extensively a body should be cut or how long a body should be left hanging in chains. In practice, the extent to which these punishments destroyed the criminal corpse was variable, as was the type and amount of human material remaining at their conclusion.

There were no formal directions for the disposal or interment of the human remains of criminal corpses created under the Murder Act.<sup>1</sup> At the discretion of the medical men and those involved in the maintenance of gibbet sites, the (usually partial) bodies created under the Murder Act were disposed of in a variety of ways. To better understand how and why these bodies and body parts were put to various uses after post-mortem punishment, it is useful to consider broad patterns in their disposal over the life of the Act. We begin with burial, and compare the treatment of Murder Act bodies to those later dissected under the Anatomy Act of 1832. Then we will consider three other eventual fates of the human remains of those punished under the Murder Act: their use for magical and medical purposes, for educational ends, and for the creation of curiosities including macabre souvenirs.

Criminal corpses created under the Murder Act generally did not achieve the (relatively) happy end of ‘resting in peace’—that is, the burial of an intact body according to normative cultural or religious protocols. For those men convicted of murder and hung in chains, burial was extremely unlikely. But there were a few exceptions. James Cook of Leicester was the last man gibbeted in Britain. He was a 21-year-old bookbinder convicted on 8 August 1832 of the murder of Mr. John Paas, a manufacturer of brass instruments to whom Cook owed money.

The crime was discovered when neighbours saw light and smoke coming from Cook's house and found to their horror that he was attempting to burn Paas's dismembered body and destroy the evidence of his crime. Cook was hanged on 10 August 1832 outside Leicester gaol and gibbeted near the Aylestone tollgate. The execution crowd is said to have numbered about 40,000,<sup>2</sup> and unsurprisingly, huge crowds flocked to see Cook's gibbet. For three days there was no abatement in public fascination with the spectacle, which also provoked outcry at the barbarity of the punishment. Fearing disorder, and sensitive to the disruption to travel and trade that the gibbet was causing the city, Cook's body was brought down by an executive order from the Home Office, and was buried, still in its cage, at the place where the gibbet had stood.<sup>3</sup> In Cook's case we see a rare—and possibly unique—instance of a formal reprieve being granted for the post-mortem element of the punishment for murder, though arguably the three days exposure was enough to satisfy the hanging in chains requirement. As a result, Cook's intact body both required and was granted burial. The body of William Jobling, whom we met in the last chapter, was also buried (mostly) intact in 1832, but not because of a formal reprieve. A guard had been set around Jobling's gibbet because the authorities were aware of how unpopular his punishment was with the local miners, and that a rescue attempt was a strong possibility. As soon as the guard had been lifted, three weeks after the gibbet was erected, Jobling's body was removed under cover of night. An account of the 'rescue' notes that it took so long to cut the cage down that there was no time to bury the body before daybreak.<sup>4</sup> The corpse, still secure in its iron cage, was retrieved from the place it had been hidden the next night and buried in an as-yet-unknown location.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Jobling's opportunity to rest in peace came at the hands of his friends and peers who acted against the law but in accordance with their own moral code. Jobling's corpse became a highly contested object: through his execution and gibbeting his corpse was thrust into a specific role in the maintenance of the power of the state and of those who controlled (and benefited most from) local economies. The destruction of the gibbet and burial of the body imbued Jobling's corpse with a certain power as symbolically important to a broader context of working class resistance.

The burial of a relatively intact body that had been gibbeted was a rare occurrence. Much more frequently, within the secure hold of the iron gibbet cage, as flesh began to putrefy and shrink, parts of the body

would begin to drop to the ground. First the extremities—fingers, hands, feet—then parts of the legs and arms would fall and might be carried off by animals. Larger pieces became wedged in the cage such as the pelvis or ribcage and stuck there until more advanced decomposition caused connective tissues to wither. Then these, too, dropped to the ground. Usually the last part of the body left in the gibbet was the skull. Some of these pieces were taken away and put to other uses, as we will see below. There are also stories of family members of the gibbeted man visiting the site to collect the bones as they dropped. The mother of James Rook, executed in Sussex for robbing the mail in 1793, is said to have made repeated visits to his gibbet to gather her son's bones as they fell, and to take them (in secret) to a churchyard for burial.<sup>6</sup>

A small number of individuals sentenced under the Murder Act to anatomisation and dissection were not extensively cut or were spared this post-mortem punishment altogether. In these cases, intact and mostly intact bodies were disposed of by family and friends. The corpse of Earl Ferrers (the only member of the nobility convicted of murder during the life of the Act) was 'delivered to his friends for interment'<sup>7</sup> having been cut open and displayed to the public but not dissected any further. The corpse of 19-year-old Thomas Gordon was returned to his father. 'The surgeons', the newspapers reported, 'with great humanity gave up the body to the old man' and although Gordon had been sentenced to anatomisation and dissection, the body was buried intact.<sup>8</sup> At Surgeon's Hall, London, what remained after a corpse had been 'dissected to the extremities'—if anything remained—was buried in recycled coffin shells.<sup>9</sup> The remains of other corpses used for anatomical purposes were generally 'sewn together with a large surgical needle then wrapped in a woollen shroud used as a winding sheet and buried in a common grave [unmarked], normally no less than six deep'.<sup>10</sup> As Sarah Tarlow has found, there is archaeological evidence that attempts were made to give human remains from post-mortem investigations (i.e. autopsies) the semblance of a whole body before burial, as was the rule at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.<sup>11</sup> This was accomplished in a variety of ways, such as in the body found buried at St Peter's church, Barton-upon-Humber, in which the spine, organs, and ribs of an early nineteenth-century corpse had been removed, effectively leaving a 'skin bag'. Thanks to the insertion of a wooden stake in place of the spine, packing possibly with grass or moss, and sewing the remains together, a more human-looking 'body' was created for burial.<sup>12</sup> But many of the

remains of criminal corpses created and punished under the Act were not laid to rest in these ways. Even in the cases in which the remains of Murder Act corpses may have been buried, burial was perfunctory and did not include family or friends of the deceased and probably paid only minimal attention to religious rites. A much more common outcome for those subjected to dissection under the Murder Act was to have as much as a third of a body's material ending up washed down the drains of the anatomy laboratories.<sup>13</sup> Other parts came to rest 'in pieces' in other forms and spaces.

### PUT TO NEW USE: ANONYMOUS OBJECT OR UNIVERSAL REPRESENTATION?

The remains of those punished under the Murder Act were made to serve new, useful, and inventive purposes. These purposes sometimes relied on the remains having belonged to particularly notorious, infamous, or legendary people, but this was not always the case. Sometimes the bodily remains were preserved while the identity of the convicted was erased; often these criminal corpses did duty as representatives of a universal human body more generally. In such cases, the criminality of these bodies mattered only because it was this status, and more specifically the way the Murder Act left open the possibility for further uses that made them legally and ethically available for such ends. The fact that bodies produced under the Murder Act were meant to be the most heinous criminals, justifying the ongoing control of their bodies by the state (or medical men as agents of the state) meant not only that these bodies were infrequently buried, but also that they could be preserved without legal challenge or moral quandary. This was certainly the case in instances where Murder Act bodies were turned into educational objects that endured or were preserved far beyond the natural timeline of decay.

In the eighteenth century, anatomical dissection was a race against time as, in the absence of preservation technologies, bodies could decay past the point of utility in as little as three days. This urgency drove the tempo and determined the logistics of dissection for the penal surgeons who received bodies under the Murder Act, and decomposition often determined what parts of the body were used and over what time. The making of articulated skeletons for teaching and demonstrating purposes was a practical way to preserve and make use of the criminal corpse for a much longer period, long after the soft tissues had lost their utility.

As Anita Guerrini has argued, the spaces used by anatomists in early eighteenth-century London contained a minimum of one human skeleton.<sup>14</sup> These objects, and the scientific, religious, and symbolic meanings they carried, were an important part of creating an atmosphere of authority and authenticity for both practitioners and students of anatomy in this period. After anatomisation, public display, and any rapid dissection, bodies were reduced to bone by boiling, and then specialists connected and mounted the skeleton using wire. Unsurprisingly, given the key role the Murder Act played in supplying bodies for medical research, some articulated skeletons made from the bodies of people convicted and punished under the Murder Act were displayed in medical teaching spaces including Surgeon's Hall in London.<sup>15</sup> In addition to wired skeletons that could be used for instructional purposes, some surgeons preserved soft tissue samples from Murder Act corpses, using wax to maintain the shape and appearance of flesh or to highlight particular parts or processes. In these cases, it mattered little whose body part was preserved. As anatomical objects, criminal corpse parts were valuable for their ability to serve teaching and research purposes as representations of the human body, and the erasure of identity was a necessary part of the process that turned a convict into an educational object or artefact.

One criminal corpse created under the Murder Act was used for a curious project.<sup>16</sup> On 2 November 1801, Chelsea Pensioner James Legg was hanged at Newgate for the murder of fellow Chelsea Pensioner William Lamb.<sup>17</sup> In the month between the murder and the execution, three members of the Royal Academy of Arts, sculptor Thomas Banks and painters Benjamin West and Richard Cosway, made arrangements with the Chelsea Hospital surgeon Joseph Carpue—to whom the corpse was scheduled to be sent as Legg had been sentenced by the presiding judge to execution then anatomisation and dissection—to get possession of Legg's body when it was brought down from the gallows. But why did three artists want this criminal corpse so badly? The answer lies in longstanding debates over the physiological viability of Christ's crucifixion in the way it was typically portrayed by artists (Fig. 7.1). In question was whether or not the usual portrayal of the crucifixion involving nails being driven through the centre of the palms to attach the body to the arms of the cross was accurate. What Banks, West, and Cosway wanted to test was if it was possible for a body to be suspended in that way or if, as some argued, the weight of an adult male body would tear through the flesh. The alternative method for the crucifixion to have 'worked'



**Fig. 7.1** Anatomically accurate drawing of an écorché (flayed) figure, by Jacques Gamelin, 1779 (Wellcome Collection)

was for the nails to be driven through the heel of the hand or the wrist where not only skin but bones and tendons would have allowed for successful suspension. Further, representations of Christ on the cross often involved meticulous physical detail with each muscle and sinew depicted to express the strain and agony of the torture. But how did this strain actually impact on the body, and with what visible result? These may seem like tiny details, but the ability to faithfully create visual representations of one of the most important moments for the Christian faith was certainly no small matter either for art or for religion.<sup>18</sup>

Legg's body was taken still warm from the gallows and hung by Carpue and Banks on a cross. Once it had settled into position and cooled, Banks made a cast of the whole body. Then, it was removed to

Carpue's anatomy rooms where he flayed the corpse, removing all the skin and exposing the body's muscles and tendons with the corpse still in the crucifixion position. Banks made a second cast to preserve the illustrative power of the test as, in the absence of sophisticated preservation techniques of later periods, the rate of decay that would render the example useless and the body dangerous was rapid. The casts were used and exhibited in the century that followed in medical and artistic spaces. By 1917, one cast—that of the flayed body on the cross—had been returned to the Royal Academy and it still hangs there today in the life-drawing room. There, it joins a collection of other anatomical casts, articulated skeletons, and anatomical drawings, and is used by members and students to improve their understandings and accurate representations of human physiology. In 2012, Legg's *écorché* was put on highly public display at the Doctors, Dissection and Resurrection Men exhibition at the Museum of London, demonstrating the enduring power of this corpse-based object to fascinate and educate the British public.

There was another practical purpose to which the remains of Murder Act corpses were put that did not depend on the identity of the murderer, but drew power specifically from their status as pieces of an executed body. Owen Davies and Francesca Matteoni investigated the use of criminal corpses as part of a healing tradition in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. During this time, it was popularly believed that the touch or stroke of a hanged man's hand (always male) had the power to cure skin disorders.<sup>19</sup> While the corpse still hung on the gallows, its hand was stroked three, seven, or nine times over the affected area of the individual who stood or was held up, in the case of small children, so the action could be performed. The hanged man's hand was made powerful through a combination of factors. Performing a selfless act at the moment of death might function as a sort of atonement for the sinner, drawing puissance from the religious associations of redemptive action. Or, according to ideas of animal magnetism (which also drove experiments in galvanism, as discussed in Chapter 5), the touch of the hanged man's hand held energy that could influence the flow of blood in the sufferer and help heal their complaint.<sup>20</sup> This 'cure' made use of a specific part of the corpses of those executed for capital crimes in Britain, including murder, but as it was only deemed effective while the corpse still hung on the gallows, it did not involve the preservation of parts of the criminal corpse. Other parts of the bodies of those executed by the state were, however, used for other medical purposes such

as the use of the fat of executed criminals in Germany, Italy, France, and Spain for the treatment of injuries and wounds.<sup>21</sup> However, Davies and Matteoni have found no evidence that the fat from criminal corpses was collected in the dissection room in Britain, as had happened in France.<sup>22</sup>

The use of criminal corpses in folk medicine did not depend on the personal identity of the body. Their status as criminal corpses created under the Act made them available when other bodies were harder to get hold of during the eight decades that the Murder Act was in force. The notoriety of these individuals, and the details of their crimes and lives, however, did not create greater desirability of these objects or imbue them with greater value. But this was not the case for the parts to which we now turn.

### *Identity Matters/Identified Matter*

Although there is some overlap with parts preserved for the sake of scientific interest, most of the human remains of Murder Act corpses that still exist today take the form of curios or artefacts whose value derives from their close connection with notorious and specific criminals. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, some murderers achieved celebrity status, aided by the moral panic cultivated by print culture and periodicals. Sensational crime was the subject of extensive reporting and helped to sell both local and national newspapers. The *Ordinary of Newgate's Account*, a sister publication of the *Old Bailey Proceedings*, was published regularly from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, and contained the biographies and last dying speeches of criminals executed at Tyburn in London. It was eagerly consumed by readers across Britain, as were broadsides and cheap pamphlets that relayed the sensational stories of gruesome and grisly murders and the retribution or justice meted out against those who committed such heinous (but fascinating) crimes. Just as the execution crowd clamoured to participate in the spectacle of execution and later in post-mortem punishments at the foot of the gibbet or around the table on which lay the anatomised criminal body, so too did people seek to connect more directly with relics of the condemned.

Body parts of murderers who had been punished under the Murder Act were sought after and turned into objects of curiosity, desire and fascination. But it was not their proximity to celebrity alone that made criminal body parts desirable. They were also visceral and dangerous things made safeish because their production was predicated on the

death of the malefactor. Nevertheless, they still carried a sense of menace, and an allure based in part on revulsion but also an attraction to the extreme and unnatural nature of the individual capable of committing such heinous crimes. There was, at some level, a persistent belief that the ‘dead body of the criminal retained something of the living individual’s force and character’.<sup>23</sup> Thus possession of pieces of the criminal corpse allowed their owners to claim an exciting and titillating vicarious connection to the most dreaded of scoundrels.

Sarah Tarlow has traced the ‘curious afterlives’ of body parts of three individuals punished under the Murder Act.<sup>24</sup> Celebrity criminal Eugene Aram’s skull was removed from his gibbet and became an object of great interest particularly as a phrenological test case. The skin and other body parts of notorious murderer William Burke (who with his accomplice William Hare killed at least 16 people in Edinburgh to sell the corpses to medical men) were preserved and coveted (Fig. 7.2). Finally, pieces of the corpse of William Corder, the infamous Red Barn Murderer, were



**Fig. 7.2** Bust of William Burke, and pocketbook allegedly made from his tanned skin (Sarah Tarlow)

put on display in Scotland and England, and a book about the murder was bound in Corder's own skin. These body parts—or more properly these partial, selected, and preserved 'curios'—were the subject of attraction and financial exchange. The celebrity or notoriety of the individual from whom they were made conveyed a sort of glamour to those who possessed such items, or who saw or handled them.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the high value placed on them and their enduring appeal, artefacts and items created from Murder Act corpses are still on display in Britain, as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An encounter with one such object gave us the opportunity to reflect on historical processes of creation and preservation, and also the intensely personal experience of 'meeting' these human remains today. This object—the skull of John Bellingham—sits in a display case at eye level on the far right end of the main floor of Barts Pathology Museum, London. The skull is clearly special, and those with a knowledge of British political history will likely know why: on 11 May 1812 in the lobby of the House of Commons, Bellingham shot then Prime Minister Spencer Perceval in the chest. Having made no attempt at escape, Bellingham was immediately apprehended. Perceval died not long after. Bellingham was tried for murder on Friday 15 May 1812, convicted, and sentenced to death to be followed by anatomisation and dissection. This was, and remains, the only 'successful' assassination of a British Prime Minister. In accordance with the terms of the Murder Act, Bellingham was executed on Monday 18 May 1812 and his corpse sent to St Bartholomew's hospital where his post mortem punishment was accomplished.<sup>26</sup>

Today, this museum's extraordinary collection is housed in one immense room with three levels of shelves and walkways topped by a glass roof allowing light to all levels, and it is a key repository of anatomical artefacts. It serves both the curious public, to whom historical specimens and exhibits whose human material predates the restrictions of the Human Tissue Act (2004) are accessible on the ground floor, and medical professionals, who are able to access the two top floors where are kept items that can only be accessed by those currently engaging in medical education and research. Bellingham's skull sits in the area accessible to the public, presented alongside a reproduction of an image depicting the crime for which he was hanged, anatomised and dissected in 1812. The context is striking. The notorious nature of this artefact and the indelible link with criminality is on display for all to see. This skull is no anonymous didactic object of anatomical pedantry, valuable for its supposed

unity with mankind or its metonymic ability to stand in for any human body. It is important because of the person of which it was once an integral part and the criminal act that brought the skull as artefact into existence. And the skull is not the only such object.

Most writings on Bellingham's story end at the gallows, but Carla Valentine and Helen MacDonald have begun to trace something of the fate of Bellingham's criminal corpse.<sup>27</sup> The notes of surgeon William Clift during the dissection of Bellingham's corpse found:

- The stomach contained 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'
- The brain was found to be 'firm and sound throughout'.

Further, the surgeons were gratified to study the movement of the right auricle of Bellingham's heart for four hours following his execution, and then another hour when touched with a scalpel. A craniotomy was performed, hence the cut we still see today around the skull that allowed the top to be lifted off like a bowl. Indeed, Bellingham's skull (and not its contents) was the subject of some interest to phrenologists. This pseudoscience sought to identify physical signs of inherent criminality, and the drive to understand the workings of the individual who had committed such a violent and extraordinary crime was strong. Phrenologist George Combe wrote, 'The organ [of destructiveness] is large in the heads of cool and deliberate murderers. It is very large, and [the organ of] Benevolence small, in the skull of Bellingham, who murdered Mr. Percival. The temporal bones protrude at least half an inch in the situation of the organ of Destructiveness'.<sup>28</sup>

When the medical men of the Court had finished with Bellingham's body, the President, Sir William Blizard, gave it to a pupil of St Bartholomew's Hospital, a Mr. Stanley, and the body was broken up and distributed. MacDonald also notes that both the stomach and left testicle were sent to the College museum. Whether these specimens were preserved and if they still exist is unknown, but the skull—stamped with the number 159 and his surname at the front centre of the forehead—was. While phrenology is no longer considered a credible scientific field, it was far more accepted in the nineteenth century, and it was Bellingham's status as a notorious killer that brought his skull to the particular

attention of phrenologists—rather than this skull standing in for the ubiquitous human skull, it instead served as an example of the ‘organ of destructiveness’ assumed to reside inside the worst criminals. Two hundred years later, there is little sign of accidental damage, and the object continues to draw public interest.

The context of the display of this skull as well as the history of its preservation mark it out as unusual or exceptional. Had Bellingham not murdered the Prime Minister, his body parts would most likely not have attracted specific interest or merited investigation or preservation. The fact of his crime made the skull valuable and intriguing. Encountering it unexpectedly in the present day called up feelings of fascination and revulsion that went beyond what might be expected for a more mundane skull. Joining the thousands of people who have experienced the thrill of proximity to Bellingham’s skull over the past two centuries was a remarkable moment. It provided a visceral and material connection to a history we had read in accounts of the murder and its aftermath, and in that we are perhaps no different from the many others who have trodden the same path. While we stopped short of coveting the skull and desiring its ownership, the experience of spending time with this artefact gave us affective insight into why others might. At once grisly and harmless, alluring and revolting, the skull is inseparable from the authentic connection between the object and the commission of one of the most high-profile crimes of the early nineteenth century. Its possession might convey to the owner some of that fascination and power, and the satisfaction of mastery over the object, the individual, and their history.

Over the course of our research, the opportunity has not arisen to engage directly with a set of other, quite frankly, extremely disturbing objects created from the remains of Murder Act criminal corpses. As unnerving as it was to encounter Bellingham’s skull stripped of flesh, we would have been more rattled to have encountered that flesh, preserved separately from the bones more usually located beneath. The skin of murderers was considered important and fascinating, and was both valued as a souvenir or curiosity, and also as a resource. The book covered in the skin of the Red Barn Murderer, William Corder, was not actually unique. Mary Bateman, a con-artist from Leeds, was convicted of murder by poison and sentenced to execution and anatomisation. In addition to the tip of Bateman’s tongue being removed and added to the private collection of the governor of Ripon prison, two books were bound in her skin—both classic works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There was no clear relation between the books and Bateman, and it is unclear why these works were chosen, but Davies and Matteoni have surmised that Bateman's 'reputation as a cunning-woman was key to why her skin accrued such a reputation'.<sup>29</sup> Corder and Bateman's skins were not the only ones to eventually be made into coverings for books, and in most cases the specific connection between the book and the murder is more explicit. As experts at Harvard working on the phenomena of books bound in human skin have recently stated, during our period of interest, 'the confessions of criminals were occasionally bound in the skin of the convicted'.<sup>30</sup> As Lindsay Fitzharris has noted, these items became 'objects of curiosity for the morbidly inclined'.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, the skin of these executed convicts was seen to be important, and significant in a different way than simple access to flesh and bone for medical research and teaching. Skin is the part of the person most involved in social relationships: it is what we see, touch, and come to tightly associate with the people around us. The removal, preservation, and transformation of the skin of murderers like Corder and Bateman, among others, reads as an act of enduring torment and humiliation, consistent with acts of gibbeting and penal dissection. Unlike a skeleton, rendered anonymous by being stripped down and put to purposes independent of the specific actions and identity of the individual, books bound in the skin of convicts were—and are—notoriously and indelibly connected to the identity of the originator. Skin contains and identifies a body, as does the cover or binding of a book. Replacing a body's interior with text makes the book stand for the person—their body replaced by their story, but contained in the same skin. Covering a book in skin literally inscribes a story or narrative onto the body of the condemned, perhaps fixing in the minds of the public that no matter what friend, relatives or supporters might think, it is the story of murder and conviction before the courts that defined these individual lives in the grisly final calculus.

Mementoes such as these almost always came into circulation through the system of medical men. There are few, if any, known cases of people 'raiding gibbets for corpse pieces' or trying to make off with body parts of Murder Act criminal bodies during public anatomisation and dissection in Britain.<sup>32</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, it seems some friends and relatives patiently collected the bones of decayed corpses as they dropped out of gibbet cages, as Eugene Aram's wife allegedly did for the remains of her estranged husband's decaying body,<sup>33</sup> but we have

found little evidence of people attempting intentionally to remove such pieces from the gibbet for personal gain. The structure of gibbets certainly played a role here, as they were designed to prevent interference with the corpse. Intrusion was discouraged using practices such as covering the very tall gibbet pole with spikes and tar, and with laws against interfering with gibbeted corpses that carried harsh punishments. One of the only incidences of this that we uncovered may well be apocryphal, but bears repeating. It is said that some young men removed the finger bones from the corpse of Spence Broughton as it swung on the gibbet.<sup>34</sup> These bones, it is alleged, were then ground into powder and used to make pottery in a nearby factory. Here again, the association with Broughton (or the supposed association as it was impossible to prove that this event actually happened) made these products valuable, intriguing, or desirable.

#### ENDURING POWER AND UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

As Sarah Tarlow has noted, criminal bodies are powerful in a way that endures after death.<sup>35</sup> But not all criminal bodies are ‘created’ equal—the sentence of either gibbetting or dissection, for example, had a significant impact on how the public, collectors, and those searching for magical intervention were able to interact with the corpses. Bodies sent to the medical men were most often physically reduced until their utility for research and teaching were exhausted, and the remains disposed of with little of the ceremony or protocols usually afforded intact human bodies. For the parts that were preserved for purposes independent of identity, their power and utility inhered in their ubiquity. The persistence or survival of body parts of criminal corpses up to the present day, and the effort that has gone into their preservation, gives rise to opportunities to encounter direct physical remains of those punished under the Murder Act. Seeing first-hand or touching these objects, their physicality and authenticity (in contrast, perhaps, to the less tangible narrative remains that are the focus of Chapter 8) create a sense of making a direct and personal connection with these complex histories. Their continued existence also raises challenging ethical questions.

Ali Wells is curator of Natural Sciences and Human History for the Herbert Gallery in Coventry, situated in the West Midlands region of the United Kingdom. It is a city made famous in the twentieth century by the devastation wrought by targeted bombing in the Second World War,

and the construction of a new cathedral next to the bombed-out ruins of the old, intended to serve as a symbol of peace and human unity in the post-war era. It is also home to a unique object: the head of murderer Mary Ann Higgins. In 1970 the Herbert Gallery acquired the head. In 2009 it was put on display there for the first time since its acquisition as part of *The Hour of Death*, an exhibition curated by Wells that examined the histories of the last two women to be hanged in Coventry (of whom Higgins was the penultimate).

We follow Wells in referring to Higgins's head and not her skull, as skin and cartilage remain, as does a waxy substance that was injected into the veins around her scalp. The presence of soft tissue, and not just bone, is what in part humanises this object and provokes questions about how it should be treated and displayed. We know from newspapers and the *Newgate Calendar* that although Higgins confessed to poisoning her uncle with arsenic, she had been compelled to do so by apprentice Edward Clarke who had extorted money from her and assaulted her whenever she failed to produce what he wanted. This context does not change the fact that Higgins was tried, found guilty, hanged on 11 August 1831, and afterward her corpse sent for anatomisation and dissection.<sup>36</sup> But it has impacted considerations of how her head should be displayed and whether human remains can or should be retained and treated as museum objects.

In legal terms, there were no impediments to the Herbert Gallery putting Higgins's head on public display as part of an exhibition. There were, however, ethical concerns. These were directed towards Higgins herself, a woman who was a victim in addition to being the perpetrator of a terrible crime. We can assume her remains have been retained and put to other uses without her consent, and as we will see in Chapter 9, such actions can visit harm on a person even after death. Wells was also concerned with those who might see the head and *how* visitors would see it. The context of display would influence whether audiences encountered the head as a fetishised and macabre object, an artifact of scientific interest, or as providing a visceral connection to a local and human life from the past and the complex historical context to which it relates. Probably all three of these possibilities would have a bearing on any encounter with the artefact.

The approach developed at the Herbert to the display of Higgins's remains takes into account concerns for both the living and the dead. Any display of her head is set within wider discussions of nineteenth-century

crime and punishment (poisonings and crime detection in particular) and the history of medical access to human remains. Contextualised in this way, Higgens's head takes on a teaching role in addition to acting as an authentic and physical anchor for multifaceted histories that provoke reflection on the past but also the present. In *The Hour of Death*, visitors to the exhibition first encountered her story embedded in its historical context and were then able to choose whether or not to view her head, allowing individuals to decide how far they wanted to participate in the history and afterlife of these human remains. That the physical and narrative flow of the exhibition gave the option of seeing or not seeing the head created a moment for each visitor in which they had to make a decision, and therefore likely reflected—even if only briefly—about their relationship to Mary Ann Higgens's story, and the issues the existence of her preserved head raises in the present.

The criminal corpses produced and punished under the Murder Act possessed both utility and notoriety whether resting in peace or resting in pieces. As the curios and artefacts made from these criminal corpses that have been preserved up to the present and those that are still on display demonstrate, the criminal corpse remains with us, part of our entertainment or our education, as it has done for centuries. Whether object of curiosity, education, fetish, consumption or display, historical criminal corpses remain present and powerful. And as we will see in the next chapter, so too do their stories.

## NOTES

1. In the case of criminal corpses sent for dissection, this contrasts with post-1832 practices when the bodies of the poor and unclaimed were made available for medical research and teaching under the Anatomy Act. As Elizabeth Hurren has noted, there were burial practices for these human remains, though they were not always followed/adhered to. For more See, Hurren, E.T. (2012), *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834–1929* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
2. Beazley, B. (2012), *Leicester Murders* (Stroud: History Press).
3. *The Newgate Calendar*, James Cook, Executed 10 August 1832, for the Murder of Mr. Paas, whose Remains he attempted to destroy by Fire.
4. For details See, Pelham, C. (1841), *The Chronicles of Crime, or the New Newgate Calendar* (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg).

5. Unsuccessful attempts have been made to locate Jobling's resting place, in the 1970s using a mine detector, and later by Vincent Rea, local historian and former curator of the Bede gallery at Jarrow, as stated in Tarlow, S. (2014), 'Technology of the Gibbet', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, 668–699, 692.
6. It is believed that this story was the inspiration for Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'Rizpah' (1880). See for example, Simpson, J. (1973), *Folklore of Sussex* (B.T. Batsford, reprinted 2013).
7. *The Newgate Calendar*, LAURENCE, EARL FERRERS, Executed at Tyburn, 5 May 1760, for the Murder of his Steward, after a Trial before his Peers.
8. See, Gray, D. and King, P. (2013), 'The Killing of Constable Linnell: The Impact of Xenophobia and of Elite Connections in Eighteenth-Century Justice', *Family & Community History*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 3–31.
9. See, Hurren, E.T. (2016), *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-execution Punishment in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 139.
10. *Ibid.*, quote at p. 153.
11. Tarlow, S. (2011), *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 91–92.
12. Rodwell, W. and Rodwell, K. (1982), 'St. Peter's Church, Barton-upon-Humber: Excavation and Structural Study, 1978–1981', *Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. 62, Issue 2, 283–315, 306. Quoted in Tarlow, S. (2011), *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 92.
13. See, Hurren, E.T. (2016), *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-execution Punishment in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
14. See, Guerrini, A. (2004), 'Anatomists and Entrepreneurs in Early Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, Vol. 59, Issue 2, 121–154.
15. See, Hurren, E.T. (2016), *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-execution Punishment in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
16. An account of the case is described by the Royal Academy in an article about the cast taken from Legg's corpse, chosen as the 'object of the month', November 2012, available at <http://www.racollection.org.uk/ixbin/indexplus?record=ART13544> (Accessed 25 July 2017).
17. Old Bailey Online, JAMES LEGG, Killing>murder, 28 October 1801. Available at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18011028-39> (Accessed 25 July 2017).

18. The artistic reputation of West had been knocked by the ‘Venetian scandal’ whereby he led a group of Academicians to be defrauded into using techniques wrongly touted as being used by Titian (the Plovis’ formulae). His subsequent work was widely scathed by critics following his exhibition of two paintings displayed at the 1797 Academy Show, one of which he had used as inspiration for his St Georges Chapel ‘crucifixion’ stained glass window design. Two later drawings by West appear to demonstrate an ‘atonement’, in which he rejects the Plovis’ formulae and instead adjusts proportions to match Legg’s cast, with Jesus’ and the thieves’ shoulders abducted to 135°, and the digits flexed as they are in Legg’s cast. For more on West’s role in the experiment. See, Freshwater, M.F. (2015), ‘Joseph Carpue’s File Drawer Experiment—A Murder Mystery from 1801’, *JPRAS Open*, Vol. 6, 74–85.
19. Davies, O. and Matteoni, F. (2015), “‘A Virtue Beyond All Medicine’: The Hanged Man’s Hand, Gallows Tradition and Healing in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England’, *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 28, Issue 4, 686–705.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Davies, O. and Matteoni, F. (2017), *Executing Magic in the Modern Era: Criminal Bodies and the Gallows in Popular Medicine* (Palgrave Macmillan), p. 13.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
23. See, Tarlow, S. (2015), ‘Curious Afterlives: The Enduring Appeal of the Criminal Corpse’, *Mortality*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 210–228.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. See the essay by Carla Valentine, Curator at the Pathology Museum, Queen Mary University of London, ‘The Skull of John Bellingham’, available at <http://www.qmul.ac.uk/pathologymuseum/bellingham/index.html> (Accessed 25 July 2017).
27. See, MacDonald, H. (2005), *Human Remains: Dissection and Its Histories* (London: Yale University Press), pp. 17–19; Valentine, C. ‘The Skull of John Bellingham’, as above.
28. See, Combe, G. (1830), *A System of Phrenology* (London: Longman & Co.), pp. 176–177. In the same book, indeed on the same pages as the references to Bellingham, Combe mentions that the ‘Organ of Destructiveness’ is large in the skulls of several other murderers (who were convicted under the Murder Act), including Charles Hussey (executed 1818, Kent), James Nesbett/Nisbet (1820, Kent), George Lockey (1789, Yorkshire), Charles Rotherham (1817, Nottinghamshire), Robert Dean (1818, Surrey), and James Mitchell (1814, London).

29. Davies, O. and Matteoni, F. (2017), *Executing Magic in the Modern Era: Criminal Bodies and the Gallows in Popular Medicine* (Palgrave Macmillan), p. 9.
30. Quoted in Flood, A. (7 April 2014), 'Flesh-Crawling Page-Turners: The Books Bound in Human Skin', *The Guardian*.
31. Fitzharris, L. (31 January 2012), 'Books of Human Flesh: The History Behind Anthropodermic Bibliopegy', *The Chirurgeon's Apprentice*.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
33. Tarlow, S. (2017), *The Golden and Ghoulish Age of the Gibbet in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
34. Leader, R.E. (1901), *Sheffield in the Eighteenth Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Independent Press), pp. 54–57.
35. See, Tarlow, S. (2015), 'Curious Afterlives: The Enduring Appeal of the Criminal Corpse', *Mortality*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 210–228.
36. For details on Higgins's history, see Wells, A. (2016), 'A Hanged Woman and Her Journey to Becoming a Museum Object' [blogpost], *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse*, available at <http://www.criminalcorpses.com/blog/2016/11/9/rest-in-pieces-the-story-of-a-hanged-woman-and-her-journey-to-becoming-a-museum-object> (Accessed 25 July 2017).

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