

By Edwin Handcock

# FINGAL



*Edwin S. Handcock*

## In Days when R.I.P. was No Guarantee

*Don't go to weep upon my grave,  
And think that there I be.  
They haven't left an atom there  
Of my anatomie.*

*Thomas Hood*



Anti Body-Snatching Grill in  
St. Joseph's Cemetery, Ballyphehane, Cork

The clandestine entering of graveyards on dark windy nights, guided by the flickering flame of a hand held lantern, casting shadows all about, is not for the faint hearted, when, as all policemen know, the powers of evil are exalted in the nighttimes. In late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, nocturnal entrepreneurs, who were both feared and despised by their fellow man, earned their living in these eerie surroundings, at a time when *Rest in Peace* was never guaranteed—enter Body-Snatchers and Grave Robbers, more colloquially known as –“ Sack-‘em –ups” and “Resurrectionists”.

Quantum leaps were being achieved in medical science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment

of now highly respected colleges in Edinburgh, London and Dublin. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland was founded in 1784 and built rather appropriately, on the site of an old Quaker graveyard overlooking St. Stephens Green in Dublin.

The Colleges and teaching hospitals required unlimited numbers of cadavers upon which to improve their knowledge and conduct their lecture sessions and each medical student was required to dissect a number of “fresh” bodies during their period of study. However up to the passing into law of the Anatomy Act 1832, the supply of corpses was legally restricted to those criminals sentenced to hanging and dissection. There simply were not enough bodies to satisfy requirements. This created a lucrative situation which was exploited to the full by Body Snatchers and Grave Robbers, in which bodies became a commodity, prices determined by market considerations of



Margorie McCall's gravestone



The Getaway

supply and demand. Children's bodies were sold by the imperial inch, six shillings for the first 12 inches and nine pennies per inch for the remainder. The primary requirement being that all bodies must of necessity be *fresh*.

Bodies featuring a medical curiosity such as a deformity or abnormal growth were in special demand, as illustrated by the case of Charles Byrne who became known as The Irish Giant. He was 7feet 6 inches (2.25m) tall and earned a comfortable living by touring around England with a travelling group of entertainers. A regular act in his repertoire was to light a cigarette from a street gas lamp while standing on the ground. He suffered from a liver complaint and in the opinion of the medical profession; he wouldn't live long enough to make old bones. While on his death bed, he became aware that a wealthy anatomist named John Hunter had designs on his body and had his dwelling under surveillance waiting for his demise. Byrne made arrangements with an undertaker to bury him far out to sea in a lead weighted coffin, beyond the reaches of Hunter. He died in London in June 1783. However Hunter bribed the undertaker's men with the unbelievable sum of £500, and he a Scotsman took possession of Byrne's body. Hunter's interest was in Byrne's skeleton, not his organs and lost no time in removing every piece

of flesh. The skeleton of Charles Byrne is still on display today in the Royal College of Surgeons in London.

The various Colleges of Surgeons ruled over by men in the higher echelons of society, paid good money for cadavers, cash on delivery, no questions asked and afforded no co-operation to the police. A classic example of this occurred in Dublin in 1831. At about 6 o'clock of a Friday evening, the body of an old lady by the name of Carroll was being waked in an upstairs room in Bow-Lane. A gang of daring bodysnatchers suddenly rushed up the stairs, seizing the body and made away with it. The police at College Street station were notified and informed that the body had been taken straight to the nearby Royal College of Surgeons. An officer and a party of constables went directly to the College only to be informed by the staff, that the body was not there and furthermore were refused permission to enter and search the premises.

Body snatching and dissection was greatly feared and abhorred by the public, who detested the anatomy students and their profession as much as they did the Resurrectionists. Students frequently had to run for their lives on account of a street urchin shouting "Sack-'em - ups". Because of the anatomist's preference for fresh bodies, they were being taken at a time when grief was most intense and inflicted extreme psychological suffering on those in mourning.

Grave robbing was a night time occupation, preceded by daytime reconnaissance. The tools required were simple for the soil was freshly dug, the "professional" would use wooden shovels for quiet digging, ropes fitted with hooks to lift the top end of the coffin lid, and a few sacks. The soil would be placed on sacking for easy return to the grave to allay suspicions. The body once lifted out would be placed in a sack, hence the dreaded term "Sack'em-ups" and removed in a waiting cart; the horse would be shod with leather covered shoes to provide an efficient "equine silencer" for a quiet getaway. Less discerning graverobbers would just open the grave; remove the body, carrying it through the streets leaving both grave and coffin exposed. Some enterprising Dublin grave robbers would dress the corpse in a change of clothes and make their way through the streets supporting their "drunken" friend between them.

Grave Robbers were also commonly known as "The Resurrectionists" for their ability to "raise the dead". The Irish Resurrectionists were so proficient that they established a thriving export business to London and Edinburgh, often dispatching the bodies in casks labelled as "Irish Cheese".

Various methods were employed to try and prevent grave



Watchtower in Glasnevin graveyard in Dublin



Plaque on watchtower in Glasnevin graveyard

robbing, e.g., mixing straw with the covering soil to make digging difficult, placing heavy stone slabs over the grave, installing cages, paying watchmen, or erecting watch towers. The situation became so bad in the Prospect Cemetery, better known as Glasnevin Cemetery or to the Dublin wit as "The Dead Centre of Dublin" that five watchtowers were erected strategically around the perimeter walls in 1842 and watchmen with bloodhounds were employed. Some families preferred to guard their own, on one famous occasion this led to what the newspapers referred to as the "Battle of Glasnevin Graveyard".

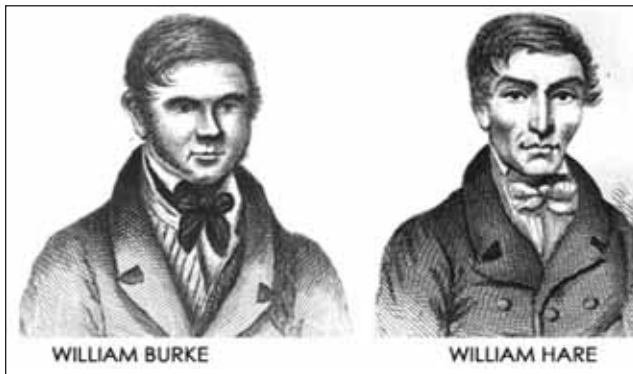
On Saturday night the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1830, while the family of Edward Barrett Esq. were guarding his grave, they observed a party of "Sack-'em-Up" men approaching but who departed upon being challenged. However they returned in force at 2.10 a.m. on the following Tuesday morning, four of them were observed standing on the graveyard wall while more were endeavouring to do so, the party guarding the grave warned them off, the "Sack-'em-Ups" replied with gunfire from behind the wall. The party at the graveside had come prepared and were also armed, they took up positions behind gravestones and returned fire, and the ensuing gun battle lasted for 15 minutes with over 60 shots being discharged. One of the grave robbers was seen to fall and was carried away by his companions; others were severely wounded as a large quantity of blood was observed on the wall and in the snow outside the wall. As the battle raged one of the watchmen on duty frantically rang the church bell, the sound of gunfire and the ringing of the bell brought the local inhabitants in their night attire and some constables to the scene. The "Sack-'em-Ups" made good their escape.



Skeleton of the "Irish Giant" on display in the Royal College of Surgeons, London. Photograph by Paul Dean



Dan Donnelly's mummified right arm displayed in the Hideout Bar



Dan Donnelly, the famous Irish boxer, born in Townsend Street, Dublin in 1788, fought and won his famous fight against George Cooper in what has since been known as “Donnelly’s Hollow” in the Curragh in Co. Kildare. He died on 18th February 1820 and was buried in the Hospital Fields, better known to generations of Dubliners as Bully’s Acre in Kilmainham. His body was dug up by medical students and sold to a Dublin Surgeon called Hall, this deed led to riots in the streets by the boxer’s admirers. Hall removed Donnelly’s famous right arm, from the shoulder, in the interest of “scientific advancement”, and then had the body re-interred. He brought the arm to Scotland, since then it has travelled extensively. It subsequently came into the possession of (1) a roving circus, (2) An Ulster bookmaker (3) a wine merchant (4) The Hideout Pub in Kilcullen. At the time of writing, Donnelly’s mummified right arm is on display at a “Fighting Irish Exhibition” in Boston having spent the previous year in New York. It will, eventually return to its “resting place” in the Hideout.

The names of William Burke and William Hare from Northern Ireland have become synonymous with body-snatching due to their activities in the slums of Edinburgh in 1827. It all began when a fellow lodger died and they sold his body to Dr Robert Knox the famous anatomist and lecturer. In less than a year they had supplied at least 16 cadavers to him, however they were not Resurrectionists, but murderers. They would entice victims into their abode with the offer of drink and hospitality, when the guest was suitably intoxicated, Burke would employ his own particular method of killing leaving no discernible marks on the body which would otherwise reduce their value. Hare would come from behind and suffocate the victim by placing his hands over the mouth and nose while Burke sat on his/her chest. This method of murder subsequently became known as “Burking”.



William Burkes skeleton

The accidental discovery of the body of murdered Donegal woman, Mary Docherty in straw on Burke’s bed on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1828, led to their arrest and trial. Hare turned King’s evidence and saved his neck. Burke was convicted and sentenced to be hanged, dissected in public and his skeleton displayed as a deterrent. He was executed on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1829. His dissection was witnessed by ticket holders only with 2000 students filling past, the following day his dissected remains were viewed by 40,000 members of the public. Today his skeleton is on display in Edinburgh University.

If any IPA readers would like a crash course in Body-Snatching, then I can heartily recommend that they take the Dublin Ghostbus Tour, you will be brought into the eerie surroundings of St Kevin’s Graveyard, a favourite haunt of the Resurrectionists, where your guide will produce all the required implements and give a most graphic demonstration on how to become a “Sack-’em-up”.