

Human Remains



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Until 1832, when an Act of Parliament began to regulate the use of bodies for anatomy in Britain, public dissection was regularly carried out on the bodies of murderers, and a shortage of cadavers gave rise to the well-known practices of Burke and Hare. This book tells the scandalous story of how medical men obtained the corpses upon which they worked before the use of human remains was regulated. Helen MacDonald looks particularly at the activities of British surgeons in nineteenth-century Van Diemen's Land, a penal colony in which a ready supply of bodies was available. Not only convicted murderers, but also Aborigines and the unfortunate poor who died in hospital were routinely turned over to the surgeons. This sensitive but searing account shows how abuses happen even within the conventions adopted by civilised societies. It reveals how, from Burke and Hare to today's public performances by Dr Gunther von Hagens, some people's bodies become other people's entertainment.

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