

Bodysnatching in Dublin (3'08")

Snippet from trailer: “Back in the days when willing patients were scarce and surgery was mostly guesswork, there was a great demand for bodies to practice on. Some people weren’t too fussy where the bodies came from. Bodysnatching was a thriving business but the competition was fierce.” (trailer’s music stops)

Male presenter: And that was [the trailer for the 1972 film](#) “Burke and Hare.” It’s based on the *true* story of two Irish criminals who made a profit by killing people and selling their bodies to medical schools in 19th-century Edinburgh. Theirs is – hopefully, anyway! – a unique case in that they actually committed murder to maintain a steady supply of corpses.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the practice of bodysnatching, the secret stealing of dead bodies from the graves was very very common indeed. At the time Dublin was the bodysnatching capital of Europe as corpses were in constant demand by anatomy and surgical schools where they were essential for medical research and training, and also there was a thriving export trade. We’ll talk about all that in a minute. And joining me to talk about this macabre... occupation is medical historian Joe Harbison. Joe, you're very welcome indeed!



*Myles Dungan, presenter of [RTE's The History Show](#)**

And I think, as far as Dublin is concerned, the story starts with or is very much involved with your own institution, where you lecture medical students, Trinity College?

Joe Harbison: Well, yes, I mean I think the story and what brought alive (?) the programme was last year, we had a ceremony in Trinity where we reinterred the remains of over 200 individuals that were found in the foundations of the Berkeley library when it was being built, and we had a very simple ceremony to allow them to be reinterred in Glasnevin [[Dublin's cemetery](#)]... er, but that was just the beginning. Anatomy started in Trinity in 1711, but even before then, to become a doctor, a qualified doctor, you still needed to have seen three dissections, so there’s probably even dissections going on in private institutions before that.

What happened later on, in the 19th century, is there was a boom in medical schools, a boom in... and as a result you needed more and more bodies, and those couldn't be provided by conventional means – that is with hanged murderers.

Male presenter: Do you reckon that there might be more bodies in various parts of Trinity College if they kept digging?

Joe Harbison: Err, I think, well... according to some people, there were a couple dug up last year that will be reinterred again, if you're thinking around Dublin, though, there were at various stages about 20 schools of anatomy and medicine in the early 19th century**, so there are bodies probably buried in lots of different places. I heard last year that they’d er... when they were building the site for the new [Mater hospital](#), they found a couple of remains under that, er... and there *was* an anatomy school on Eccles Street at that stage – and Robert Adams, a very famous surgeon, had an anatomy school on Eccles Street, so we have to suspect that’s where the remains came from.

* For RTE Radio (Irish radio - [Raidió Teilifís Éireann](#)), see [here](#).

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