33. How to steal a body

C. Turner

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Abstract

You are a medical student in 1820, training in anatomy has now become a prerequisite to graduation but there are limited cadavers available for dissection. Could you be a body snatcher? What about if you only took unclaimed bodies? What if you didn’t actually excavate, just helped drive the wagon? What would be your conditions before you would turn to a life of crime? Keep in mind that just by “borrowing” the occasional body you would provide yourself with ample opportunities to learn anatomy and also easily afford your tuition. If you do decide to go ahead and become a body snatcher you’re going to have to learn the classic modus operandi employed by the best in the business. First of all you want to do some daytime reconnaissance by attending the burial to see if any booby traps are being set for potential body snatchers. Next, you return at night with a wagon and drop two men off at the burial site. They then start digging a 3’X3’ hole until they hit the coffin. The body is carefully extracted and any identifying clothing or jewelry is removed and put back in the coffin before being reburied. Now you might be worried about retribution but you really don’t have much to fear. Townsfolk have been known to protest in front of medical schools but you’d have to deal with this even if you weren’t a body snatcher. If you end up going to court the worst that would happen is a fine that you could easily pay off by stealing another body or two. Hightet MJ. 2005. Body snatching and grave robbing: bodies for science. History and Anthropology 2005; 16(4):415-440. MacGillivray R. Body snatching in Ontario. CBMH/BCHM 1988; 5:51-60. Ross I, Ross CU. Body snatching in 19th Century Britain: from exhumation to murder. British Journal of Law and Society 1979; 6(1):108-118.

Downloads

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Body snatching is the secret removal of corpses from burial sites. A common purpose of body snatching, especially in the 19th century, was to sell the corpses for dissection or anatomy lectures in medical schools. They were often careful not to steal anything such as jewellery or clothes as this would cause them to be liable to a felony charge. Watchtower in Dalkeith town cemetery, Midlothian. The Lancet[7] reported another method.