ForeWord Reviews

HISTORY

Cranioklepty: Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius
Colin Dickey
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In 1809, composer Franz Joseph Hayden's head was stolen from his grave. This was not an isolated incident. The skulls of artist Francisco Goya, composers Ludwig Van Beethoven and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, philosophers Rene Descartes, Sir Thomas Browne, Emanuel Swedenborg, and countless others were also plundered.

Cranioklepty: Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius examines the reasoning behind the bizarre practice of stealing skulls that persisted through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was the age of Enlightenment. Reason was of paramount importance and science began to rely on empirical evidence. For those who chose to study humanity, human specimens were needed. According to author Colin Dicky, "there was a widespread belief…that one's intact and naturally decomposed remains were vital for resurrection. Dissection or dismemberment repre-sented a fate far worse than death." Only executed criminals were given to scientists for study and such disciplines as phrenology, craniometry, anatomy, and anthropology required diversity in human remains to prove their theories. It there-fore became necessary to science to rob the graves of the most talented and brightest people of the age.

The book begins by detailing the development of phrenology. This dubious practice of identifying personality character-istics based on the bumps and ridges of the human skull became a popular science in the late 1700s, based on the theo-ries of Franz Joseph Gall. One of Gall's students, Johann Spurzheim, expanded on Gall's original ideas, taking phrenology out of hard science and placing it firmly in the field of popular culture. The field of anatomy was also growing. Dickey writes, "Anatomical study came to be recognized as increasingly important in the preservation of life." The acceptance of human dissection was still a long way off, but the need for human remains, and skulls in particular, was very high. Grave robbing became a lucrative business.

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, phrenology was largely discredited. Anatomy was still a relatively new science; Joseph Hyrtl published the first applied anatomy textbook, *Handbook of Topographic Anatomy*. In Vienna, where the reigning monarchs approved of

dissection, Carl von Rotinsky was given access to any body in the city. Grave diggers were informally employed by the government and sworn to secrecy. Craniometry was another emerging discipline which believed that the size of a skull could be used to determine intelligence. Originally applied to individuals on a case-by-case basis, it increasingly resorted to sweeping generalizations about skull size and intelligence. The end of scholarly grave-robbing meant a final resting place for many of the more famous stolen skulls, which the author discusses.

The morbid pursuit of the human skull proves to be a remarkable lens through which to view Western history. It touches not only on science and medicine, but also music, literature, politics, and religion; it illustrates the nature of popular thought. In the author's words, "the skull [became] the founding and central document of not just phrenology and craniometry, but psychology and anthropology and criminology and psychiatry. For that matter it was essential to the programs of slavery and segregation, colonialism and imperialism, patriarchy and misogyny. Next to perhaps the Bible itself, the hu-man skull was the inalienable proof of the unchallenged suitability of the white male for dominion over the entire world."

Colin Dickey, who has written a number of short stories and recently co-edited *Failure! Experiments in Aesthetics and Social Practices*, has served up a fascinating book. Well-researched, clear, and concise, *Cranioklepty* is full of interesting historical anecdotes. The compelling stories of the "after life" of several notorious skulls—most notably Hayden's, Brown's, and Beethoven's—keep the reader turning the pages. The lasting impression is that those scholars who perused this most macabre collectible did so with a sense of wonder and respect. It was not a fascination with death that led people to collect skulls, but rather a fascination with life.

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