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Clinical Detachment, Dead Houses, and Cadavers

The Great American Doctor and Anatomical Knowledge – Part 3

Michael L. Hawley

Part one of this article examined the first two years of young Francis Tumblety's quack doctor business beginning in May 1856; selecting as his territory Canada West, officially the Province of Upper Canada. He became independently wealthy by scamming patients out of their money, first startling them with life-altering diagnoses, such as cancer or consumption (tuberculosis), then prescribe miraculous, cure-all herbal medicines at exorbitant prices. By December 1856 Tumblety made his way to Toronto, advertising that he was going to "make Toronto, C.W., his home for the future." And why not? It made him rich beyond imagine. An article in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 5, 1865, stated that in 1859 the Proprietors of Buffalo's Merchant Exchange contacted the Bank of Toronto, who revealed Tumblety had \$60,000 in his account, which is equivalent to 1.6 million dollars of today's value. Members of Upper Canada's medical licensing board soon realized that this American quack doctor, who was flooding the newspapers with ads, was not just selling patents medicines, but was acting as a physician by diagnosing ailments then prescribing medicine. Tumblety was practicing medicine without the required license, so in April/May 1857 they took him to court and won. Tumblety was fined and barred from practicing in Upper Canada. Further, he was threatened with a six-month prison sentence if he was caught practicing medicine. To the ire of the medical establishment who wanted this quack doctor out of Canada West, the courts allowed Tumblety to maintain his Toronto office but only as a druggist selling his patent medicine. Tumblety could no longer use his diagnosing/prescribing scheme and he soon left, but he kept the Toronto office open. Part two of this article discussed his experiences when he ran his business in Montreal, Canada East, beginning in August 1857. He also needed a medical license in Canada East, or Lower Canada, but he merely had to prove to the Lower Canada Licensing Board that he was a man of good character. It is likely not a coincidence that Tumblety found himself in court for charges challenging his character, such as assisting a young lady in an abortion. Tumblety stated at the outset in his Montreal and Quebec City advertisements that he was headquartered in Toronto, Canada West, and would be returning, and in the summer of 1858, he did just that.

In the November 2, 1858, of the *Toronto Globe* Tumblety announced in an advertisement that he has "returned to Toronto after an absence of 16 months." This time around he had a new business plan, knowing full well that running a mere drugstore had minimal earning potential. He now called his office spaces a Medical Institute, as in a place of educating and training medical doctors but still caring for and treating patients. In the *Toronto Globe*, June 24, 1858, Tumblety states:

"...by calling without delay to see the well-known and justly celebrated Herb Doctor, F. TUMBLETY, Principal of the "Medical Institute," ...Below we give a few of the many thousands of cases of Chronic Diseases, cured at the MEDICAL INSTITUTE, No. 111 King street east, Toronto, under the management of its successful principal, Dr. F. Tumblety..."

Notice how Tumblety is attempting to avoid potential six months imprisonment for operating as a physician without a license but still cashing in on the lucrative diagnosing/prescribing scheme. He, himself, is the principal, or manager, of the Medical Institute, and not the practicing physician diagnosing patients. Note the phrase, "under the management of." Just a few years later in 1864 when Tumblety operated out of St. Louis, Missouri, he did indeed partner up with another so-called doctor with the last name Blackburn; listing his establishment in the 1864 St. Louis city directory as, "J. Blackburn & Co."

There is evidence that his Toronto Medical Institute was indeed a place of learning and training for medical doctors. Records of a Dr. Charles Jones make it clear that he not only was a student of Tumblety's but was a student of his in Toronto in the mid- to late- 1860s at a "Medical Institute." In the Biographical Sketches section of the History of Wyndot County, Ohio (Chicago: Leggett, Conaway & Co., 1884, p. 709),

*"[Charles P. Jones] was educated in the public schools of Cleveland, abandoning his studies at eighteen. He subsequently engaged in a mercantile establishment as a salesman, attending school at intervals, and began the study of medicine at Toronto, Canada, in 1856, under the instruction of Dr. F. Tumblety, remaining with him nearly four years. In 1857, he entered the **Toronto Medical Institute**, graduating in 1859. In 1860, he began the practice of his profession at Chicago, Ill., where he remained one year, when, on account of failing health, he was compelled to suspend his practice for about one year. He subsequently resumed his practice of his profession, and in 1865 located at Nevada, where he had since engaged. He has a good practice, and has accumulated considerable property as a result of his labors...Dr. Jones is a member of the Northwestern Medical Association; Medical Examiner of the Knights of Honor, of which order he is also a member; member of the Lutheran Church, and a Republican in politics."*¹ [Author emphasis added]

Jones had a very respectable career, as evidenced by the local community adding him to the biographical sketches. He even acted as a coroner. The phrase, "under the instruction of Dr. F. Tumblety," corroborates Tumblety claiming to have been the principal.

For to practicing in Chicago just months after graduating from the Medical Institute is highly suggestive that he did indeed receive education and practical training in Toronto. The four major subjects taught in 19th century medical schools were physic, or medicine (either herbal, homeopathic, or allopathic medicine), human anatomy, surgery, and midwifery. Further, for Tumblety to profess to the watchful eyes of Upper Canada's medical establishment that his medical institute was credible, his students must have been trained in these subject areas. It was mandatory in Canada to perform actual dissections on cadavers in medical schools. Note what Canadian physician and surgery professor Dr. E.D. Worthington stated while he was complaining about working on illegally acquired cadavers, "By 'law' [the student] was bound to dissect, by 'law' he could be punished for dissecting. Strange inconsistency!"²

Tumblety would have had anatomical representations for teaching and we know he did. Part two discussed in the June 19, 1857, edition of the *Toronto Mirror*:

"Dr. Tumblety has recently purchased a splendid set of physiological engravings and representations, which can be seen at his rooms, opposite the St. Lawrence Hall. They consist of no less than ten set of fine plates, superbly mounted o rollers, and exhibiting the nerves, muscles, bones, and aorta, so clearly and beautifully as to convince the beholder, in truth and in very deed, that "we are fearfully and wonderfully made." They have been imported at considerable expense from Rochester, in which city the Doctor practiced his peculiar department of medicine with success for several years."

Practical training in anatomy and surgery meant nothing less than training with human organs and cadavers. Tumblety being the manager/owner, it would have been his responsibility to the medical equipment, anatomical organs, and cadavers necessary for anatomy and surgery classes. There is evidence that Tumblety owned a large collection of anatomical organs around this very time. Just after Tumblety was arrested in London on suspicion of the Whitechapel murders in November 1888, an investigative *New York World* reporter was seeking out stories about Tumblety and his run-ins with the law and found an attorney named Charles Dunham at his home in New Jersey. Dunham recalled meeting Tumblety in Washington DC in the summer of 1861 just after the First Battle of Bull Run. He was a colonel and attended Tumblety's medical lecture given to his military officer guests, which was illustrated with an extensive collection of human organs. Dunham was quoted:

"Then he invited us into his office where he illustrated his lecture, so to speak. One side of this room was entirely occupied with cases, outwardly resembling wardrobes. When the doors were opened quite a

¹ Biographical Sketches section of the History of Wyndot County, Ohio, Chicago: Leggett, Conaway & Co., 1884, p. 709

² Belyea, S., *A Century of Snatching – Grave Robbing in Kingston, Ontario*, Ontario Historical Society, Volume 108, Number 1, Spring 2006, <<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/onhistory/2016-v108-n1-onhistory03908/1050610ar.pdf>>.

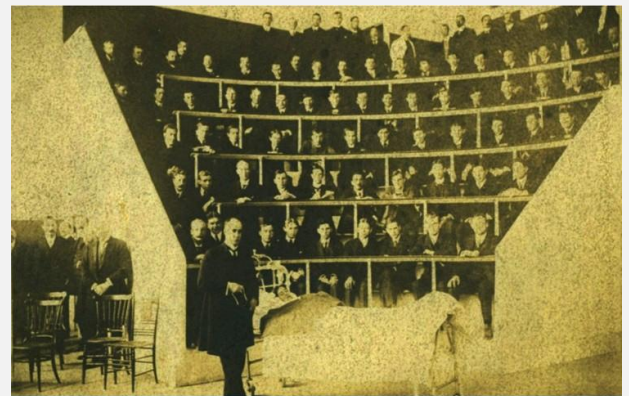
museum was revealed--tiers of shelves with glass jars and cases, some round and others square, filled with all sorts of anatomical specimens. The 'doctor' placed on a table a dozen or more jars containing, as he said, the matrices of every class of women. Nearly a half of one of these cases was occupied exclusively with these specimens."³

One reason for scepticism amongst Ripperologists about Charles Dunham's account was not necessarily that Tumblety possessed a few human organs for illustrating a medical lecture -a common practice amongst lecturing surgeons- but that the collection was reported to be so large. It now makes sense as to why Tumblety would have had such an extensive collection in 1861. He likely had to fill his Medical Institute he founded in 1858 with a wide variety of specimens. It should not be a surprise that there is evidence that Tumblety was both attempting to acquire organs around this time. It was reported that Tumblety attempted to steal the organs of a previous patient of his who died:

*"During the inquest [In a New Brunswick city in 1860], and before the Doctor [Francis Tumblety] fled, those present at the hearing were horrified at the nearly successful attempt to abstract the heart and liver of the dead man from the receptacle in which they lay."*⁴ [Author emphasis added]

Collecting human organs means having access to cadavers, and Tumblety was in the right place at the right time. Medical schools in both Canada East and Canada West in the mid-19th century had a constant concern about having a ready supply of cadavers for dissection in the next semester's anatomy and surgery courses. Cadavers were critical to ensure their medical students were highly skilled physicians immediately upon graduation.

There were legal methods of acquiring cadavers for dissection; put into law in 1843 as the Canadian Anatomy Act through the Legislative Assembly of the Province of



Anatomy clinic run by Dr. William Osler at the Royal Victoria Hospital
Courtesy of McGill University Archives



McGill medical students, 1884
Courtesy of McGill University Archives

Canada. Championed by the Medical Board of Lower Canada in Montreal, they made it legal to use unclaimed remains for anatomy. The problem was demand from the ever-increasing student enrollment in medical schools and new priorities involving surgery dramatically outpaced supply.⁵

This put anatomy and surgery professors at universities and medical schools in an untenable situation. In the minds of the medical community, it was far more important for society to have highly skilled surgeons than to not, so the reliable practice of grave robbing was secretly endorsed. Most affected by not

having enough cadavers to practice on were the students, so they took it upon themselves to indulge in the nightly practice of bodysnatching at local cemeteries.

Case in point; an article in *The Kingston Whig-Standard*, February 4, 1858, titled "Grave Robbery at St. Thomas," reported on the remains of recently deceased St. Thomas, Canada West resident, Mrs. Patten, having been discovered missing on January 15, 1858. "Her mangled remains were discovered by her afflicted relatives in a room, the Master of which is a shoemaker, named Sparling." The jury at the coroner's inquest concluded:



Bodysnatchers
Courtesy of hauntedmontreal.com

³ *New York World*. December 1, 1888.

⁴ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 5, 1889.

⁵ Belyea, S., *op. cit.*

"...the grave had been robbed by Sparling or others, for surgical purposes, but it did not show so far, that Dr. Caughel was cognizant, when he received the remains, how they had been obtained... We learn that the remains of the lady had been used for the purpose of anatomical demonstration by Dr. Caughel and his pupils, though the Doctor professes entire ignorance of the crime by which the body was provided for dissection."



Bodysnatchers
Courtesy of hauntedmontreal.com

The article goes on to report upon a similar outrage ten miles to the north in the English Cemetery in London, Canada West; the same city of Tumblety's very first office in Canada West in May 1856.

According to the *Weekly Chicago Times*, January 14, 1858, the niece of a "sheriff of Upper Canada" committed suicide in London, Canada West, and was soon buried:

"...[A] day or two later, her corpse was found lying on the surface of the soil in the church yard. Some body-snatchers had probably attempted their nefarious designs, but had fled through fear of interruption..."

The article continues about yet another grave robbery from St. Thomas Cemetery "for medical purposes" that was discovered a few days before the theft of Mrs. Patten's interred remains. The grave of Mrs. Mary Paddon was found empty. Reprinted in the *Semi-Weekly Spectator*, March 14, 1858, was a *The London Free Press* article titled *Violation of the Graves*. It began:

"We learned that a gang of body catchers, or "resurrectionists," have for some time past been carrying on their disgusting operations at the Potter's Field, wherein the deceased poor of this city are interred. A considerable number of graves have of late been despoiled by the miscreants, who carry on their infernal trade with the utmost boldness..."

The above cases of grave robbing in Canada West in the late 1850s make it clear that there was a lucrative black market financed by either their professors or the medical school even though there were legal avenues for medical schools to acquire cadavers. In Canada East, anatomy professors even sweetened the pot by offering large sums of money for cadavers, and then never ask questions about where the body came from.

By the 1880's McGill University professors were offering \$30 to \$50 dollars.⁶ Many medical students, especially the poorer French-Canadian students, paid for their education by bodysnatching. Griffith Evans was a young medical student at McGill University graduating in 1864 and commented upon the prevalence of students robbing graves and the wealthier English students robbing graves just for the excitement:



Dead house of the Montreal General Hospital
Courtesy of hauntedmontreal.com

"Our English students do it not for economy but for mischievous fun, dare-devilry, they make themselves intoxicated with alcoholics to excite the daring before going to the grave, then they do the work carelessly and in haste and consequently a large proportion of them have been traced."

The best season to steal cadavers from cemeteries was in the winter, since bodies were temporarily stored in dead houses until the ground was warm enough to dig.

They would pay the night watchman under that table, discard the clothes and jewelry (in order to not be charged with theft if caught), then snatch the bodies away in the night. Once they arrived at the medical building at McGill University



Dead house at Aurora, Ontario
Courtesy of Canada's Historic Places

⁶ Dysert, A. *Resurrecting the History of Body-Snatching at McGill, De re medica – News from the Osler Library of the History of Medicine*, <<https://blogs.library.mcgill.ca/osler-library/history-of-bodysnatching/>>.



Janitor James "King" Cook
Courtesy of McGill University Archives

According to historian Matthew Rankin, author of *Anatomically Incorrect: Bodysnatching in the 19th Century*:

*"They [medical students] were taught to intellectually divorce the body from all of its religious, cultural, and even personal meanings, and see the body as simply the anonymous object of their work. This objectivity, or "clinical detachment," as it was termed, was essential for the practice of surgery."*⁸

Francis J. Shepherd, an 1873 McGill University graduate recalled students grave robbing at the cemeteries of Mount Royal and would



Dead house at St. Michael's Cemetery, Toronto
Courtesy of spadeandthegrave.com

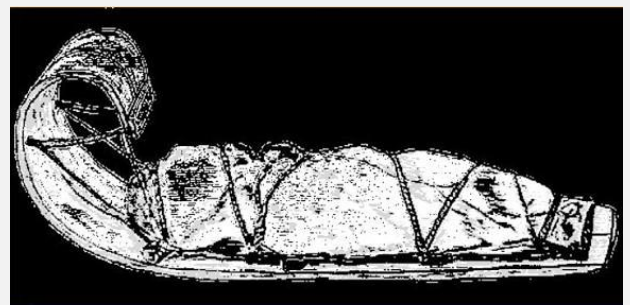
wrap the cadavers in blankets and *"toboggan them down the slopes of Côte des Neiges Road."*⁹ They certainly emotionally disengaged themselves from the act of stealing the corpses of human beings.



Graduating Class in Medicine, c.1905. McGill Archives.
Courtesy of McGill University Archives

If Jack the Ripper had a medical background and practiced the "objectivity of clinical detachment" in his past, this is an intriguing possibility. A number of the suspects had some level of medical training, such as Thomas Neill Cream, Michael Ostrog, Francis Thompson, George Chapman, and even Francis Tumblety, thus, may have emotionally disengaged as they dissected and even collected organs. Curiously, Thomas Neill Cream attended McGill University for medical training having been taught clinical detachment by the faculty. If Jack the

Ripper did indeed practice emotionally disengaging, he may not have merely had a blood lust to literally bath in organs and tissue while eviscerating his victims. He may just have been practicing what he believed was the art of surgery on a cadaver as he collected organs.



Medical students would snatch bodies from Mount Royal Cemetery and toboggan them down Co'te des Neiges Road.
Courtesy of hauntedmontreal.com

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Rankin, M., *Anatomically Incorrect: Bodysnatching in the 19th Century*, *Canada's History*, <<https://www.canadahistory.ca/explore/science-technology/anatomically-incorrect-bodysnatching-in-the-19th-c>>.

⁹ Dysert, A., *op. cit.*