

Book Reviews

these records. Other outcomes should be the improved understanding and higher standards of cataloguing of such archives. There is no ISBN for this publication and one fears that without good marketing it may not have the readership it deserves. A pity, since this is indeed a model of its kind, illuminating the research value of these archive resources to a waiting audience.

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Jan Bondeson, *Buried alive: the terrifying history of our most primal fear*, New York and London, W W Norton, 2001, pp. 320, illus., £18.95 (hardback 0-393-04906-X).

A recent straw poll among nine-year-olds revealed that they were just as aware of the Victorian fear of being buried alive as they were of Alfred and the cakes or the Battle of Hastings. They knew all about bells attached to the surface of the grave and interred corpses trying to escape. This suggests that the “most primal fear” is still with us. So, if people dare to read it, this book should be a great success. It is comprehensive, well-researched, and illustrated with dozens of fascinating pictures. For example, an eighteenth-century “apparently dead lady wakes from her trance when a thief attempts to steal a valuable ring on her finger” and “a brave German doctor administers an enema of tobacco smoke to a corpse”.

The author is a professor of medicine and discusses at some length the history of beliefs regarding the signs of death, a topic that changes and is still disputed, sometimes complicated these days by the desire to “harvest” the organs for re-use. Fifty years ago we listened for a heartbeat, held a mirror in front of the mouth and sometimes got a shock when the patient started to breathe again, preferably *before* one had informed the relatives that he or she had died. Even today, it is not always certain.

From the late eighteenth-century, many countries produced “security coffins”, with windows, air tubes, ropes and bells. In Germany, they built “Waiting Mortuaries” (known as *Leichenhäuser* or “Hospitals for the Dead”) to guard against *Scheintod*, or the *appearance* of death. These were smelly, unpleasant places, though often architecturally magnificent, where corpses were supposed to stay until corruption made it obvious that they really were dead. Unsurprisingly, people refused to bring their dead to them and there were rumours that they were used for secret medical experimentation. Nevertheless, in the state of Württemberg, between 1828 and 1849, it was said that more than a million corpses had passed through and not one had awakened in the mortuaries. Even so, in 1871, the city of Lemburg erected a new *Leichenhaus* with an electric warning system for the corpses’ beds. In Frankfurt each corpse bed had strings leading to a powerful alarm bell and every eight corpses had a watchman. Yet even these “hospitals” were often not trusted. Only a hundred corpses a year were admitted to the Frankfurt *Leichenhaus* before the cholera epidemic of 1869, when the authorities made it obligatory for every corpse to be taken there before burial. The novelist Wilkie Collins used the place as the setting for his 1880 novel, *Jezebel’s daughter*. Like many other Englishmen, he distrusted Continental doctors and, when staying in a hotel abroad, he always put a note on the bedroom mirror saying that in the case of his (presumed) death, he should not be buried until a competent English doctor had been consulted.

We may find all this amusing or bizarre but living people are still being diagnosed as dead. The book is full of such of information. It will amuse, disgust and instruct its readers.

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