

"I need bodies and I want them fresh"
**GRAVE-ROBBERS &
BODYSNATCHERS
IN DEVON**

Patricia Gray

Doctors all across Europe in the early 19th century were in great need of bodies for medical school examination and dissection. Most started out using bodies of executed criminals or unknown vagrants who'd died of natural causes. There was an excess of trainee surgeons, and only a small number of reasonably fresh bodies to study. Public executions provided one legitimate source of corpses, the other being transients who died of natural causes.

In the public eye, there remained a strong belief that in order to stand a chance of redemption, a corpse should be left intact. Most people believed dissection was equivalent to damnation. There were simply not enough bodies supplied by the hangman's gallows or deceased vagrants to meet demand and surgeons had to take more extreme measures: bodysnatching. Anatomists spawned a new profession: resurrection men. These body snatchers became the plague of the bereaved.

In many graveyards, watchtowers were built within so that people could keep an eye out for bodysnatchers. The affluent often buried their loved ones with great iron bands around the coffins, and some people were buried within 'mort-safes': fortress graves complete with walls and gates to keep the grave robbers out. Hordes of gang-like resurrection men competed for business as anatomists and doctors fought to find the best suppliers of fresh corpses.

Centred on the port of Plymouth, this book tells the story of Thomas Vaughan, body snatcher, who for 13 years supplied fresh corpses to some of the most eminent surgeons in the country. It also provides an intriguing historical background to the tidal wave of lawlessness that swept across Devon at the beginning of the nineteenth century – murder, theft and scandal fuelled by a society in crisis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

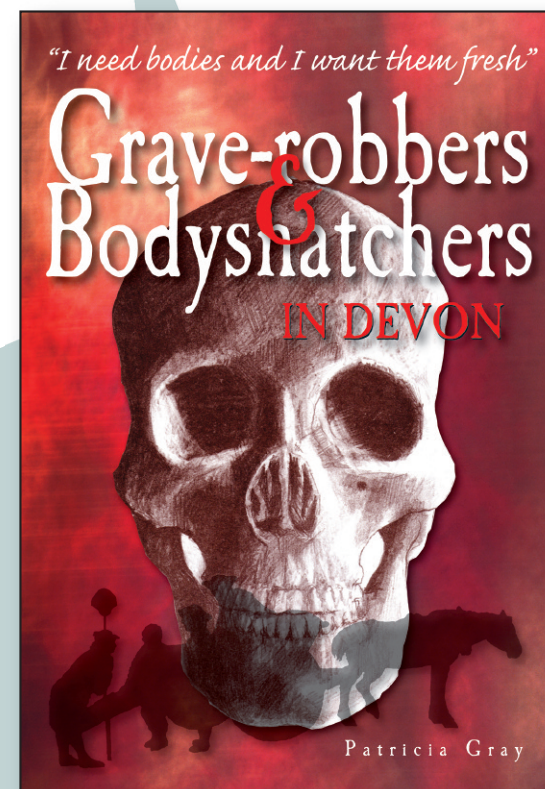
Patricia Gray lives in Plymouth. She is the author of a number of books on local history.

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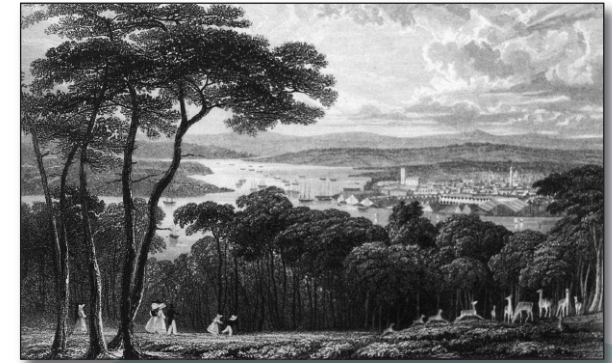
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Left: *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* is a 1632 oil painting by Rembrandt.

Above: Dr Knox.

Above right: *The view from Mt Edgcombe over the Hamoaze* c.1820, with Devonport visible on the far shore.

Bottom left: Gravestones in St Andrew's churchyard Stoke Damerel.



A typical double page spread.

CHAPTER ONE

Thomas Vaughan

Thomas Vaughan was born in Limerick, Ireland, but met his downfall in Devon. He had inflicted distress on a great many people before he broke his own long-held rules and came to grief in Devonport. Brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, he was undone in a Protestant burial ground.

Patrick Vaughan and his wife had four daughters before their son, Thomas, was born in 1790. At some time Thomas came to London where he became well-known to the officers at the Union Hall Magistrates' Court which dealt with petty criminals operating in a large part of South London. He may have learned of the fortune to be made supplying the newly-dead to the anatomy schools of London while he was working as a stonemason's labourer repairing church buildings or erecting headstones in graveyards. Grave-robbing was a very unpleasant business dealing in putrefying corpses but it paid well. For thirteen years Thomas Vaughan supplied the surgeons and anatomy schools with "subjects" or "things". He obtained them by all the practices used by bodysnatchers from robbing the graves of the newly-dead to using a female accomplice to acquire them from workhouses. He was audacious, and on one occasion he broke into the mortuary of a London hospital, stole two bodies and sold them to the mortuary of another London hospital. He was among the ten men named as the top bodysnatchers. He was the only one of them to end up in Van Diemen's Land.

Thomas Vaughan regularly supplied bodies to Sir Astley Cooper, the most eminent surgeon of his day. He was made a baronet in 1821 for

THOMAS VAUGHAN

Astley Cooper was born the son of a Norfolk clergyman. His uncle was William Cooper, appointed as a staff surgeon at St Thomas' and Guy's Hospital and it was there that he started his medical studies. He was also taught by John Hunter and in the winter of 1787 he also visited the anatomy department at the University of Edinburgh. In 1789 he was appointed demonstrator in anatomy at St Thomas' and in 1783 he gave lectures in anatomy for the Company of Surgeons. In 1800 he joined Guy's Hospital. He has been regarded by many as a leading surgeon of his day making numerous academic contributions to surgery and anatomy.

removing a cyst from the head of King George IV. Sir Astley's biographer, his nephew Bransby Cooper, described Thomas Vaughan as a man of "bad character, without common prudence and of dissolute and drunken habits". Sir Astley told a Parliamentary Select Committee that the men who supplied him were "the lowest dregs of degradation". He must nonetheless have had some trust in them for he also told the Select Committee that his men could obtain for him the body of anyone he wanted from anywhere in the kingdom. In 1820 a former patient of the surgeon died at Beccles in Suffolk.

"The Reward of Cruelty" is one of William Hogarth's most famous and clearly unforgettable engravings. Convicted and executed, Tom Nero's body has been delivered to the Royal College of Surgeons for an anatomy lesson.

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