



## Anatomy dissections and student experience at Irish universities, c.1900s–1960s

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### ABSTRACT

Utilising the unique source of articles, poems, stories and cartoons from student magazines from all of the Irish universities, in addition to the memoirs of Irish doctors, and the accounts of correspondents, this paper will discuss the Irish student's experience of anatomy in the early twentieth century. For many medical students, anatomy dissections were seen as a rite of passage, while one student at Queen's College Belfast claimed that 'the dissecting-room is to the student a club, a smoke room, common room research room—one in all.' However, the dissecting rooms of Irish medical schools were often rife with bawdy conversation, sexual undertones and black humour. Recognising this, following the admission of women to Irish medical schools from the 1880s, university authorities constructed separate dissecting rooms for the women students, and part of this paper will investigate why this separation occurred.

I will examine the Irish dissecting room as a centre of learning and integral part of student experience in the period. The paper will suggest that the black humour and pranks that were commonplace within the context of the dissecting room acted as a means for students to reconcile their fears and anxiety about dissecting.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to the history of anatomy education in Ireland

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the character of Buck Mulligan, a Dublin medical student, turns to Stephen Dedalus, who has just recounted a conversation which occurred between the pair the day after the death of his mother, and states:

'And what is death? You saw only your mother die. I see them pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond and cut up into tripes in the dissecting room. It's a beastly thing and nothing else'.<sup>1</sup>

Mulligan's observation gives us an insight into the grim reality of dissecting for medical students in Ireland in the early twentieth century and gives an indication of how students were desensitized to death as a result of their work in the dissecting room but also

highlights the horror involved with the experience. More recently, historians of medicine have begun to devote further attention to the topic of anatomy dissections.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the topic of student experience of anatomy dissections has been the focus of a recent scientific paper which examined the attitudes of medical and biomedical students at Irish universities to dissecting.<sup>3</sup> Respondents to a questionnaire most commonly reported feelings of interest and excitement triggered by the dissecting room, while a small proportion reported feelings of fear and nausea. Anatomy dissections were seen as a rite of passage within the education of the medical student. Most notably, John Harley Warner has demonstrated, through photographic evidence from American medical schools, how the act of dissection presented problems for medical students, and through the use of photographs taken which often display cadavers and students in darkly humorous poses, students attempted to reconcile the often disturbing process of anatomy dissections.<sup>4</sup> In the Irish context, J. J. Clarke, a medical student in Dublin in the late nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, (1922), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, Richardson (2000) and Sappol (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Cahill & Ettarh (2009, pp. 386–391).

<sup>4</sup> Warner & Edmondson (2009).

century, took a photograph of himself in a Dublin dissecting room with a skeleton on his lap, and another of his friend, who appears to be dancing with a skeleton wearing a top hat.<sup>5</sup>

There has been little research conducted on the experiences of medical students in Ireland, although there has been work done on the related history of bodysnatching.<sup>6</sup> Bodysnatching was a common practice in Ireland from the eighteenth century. One report in the *Dublin Gazette* in 1750 told the story of a group of 'young surgeons' who attempted to seize the corpse of a young boy who had just been buried. The father of the boy heard of their plans and the medical students were apprehended by a mob who 'severely chastised the young gentlemen for their pains'.<sup>7</sup> In 1752 the Murder Act was passed which stated that the bodies of murderers should be given up for dissection. One of the clauses of this act stipulated that a murderer should be executed within two days after his conviction and his body sent to a medical school. The Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, unlike other Irish medical schools, refused to accept the bodies of criminals during this period. However, from the 1820s, the College of Surgeons began to receive the bodies of murderers for whom dissection had been ordered by the judge in their trial.<sup>8</sup> This meant that dissection was used as an additional post-death punishment for Ireland's worst criminals. According to Charles Cameron, 'very often the corpse of a murderer was followed to the College gates by his weeping relatives or by a howling mob. A small portion of the anatomical theatre was set apart for persons who might desire to witness the dissections of malefactors' bodies.<sup>9</sup>

However, bodies of criminals only represented a small number of bodies. Considering the huge increase in numbers of medical students at institutions in the United Kingdom in the early nineteenth century, there became only one way of obtaining bodies for dissection, through stealing them from churchyards, and students themselves began to engage in this practice. In Dublin, there were unusually good opportunities for obtaining bodies. The graveyards at Kilgobbin, Killester, and more famously Bully's Acre, were located 'at convenient distances from the city which were either only partly enclosed or were protected by low walls, easily scaled'. Bully's Acre, in particular, was a graveyard for the lowest classes who were too poor to employ persons to watch the graves at night.<sup>10</sup> A tradition of grave-robbing developed among medical students in addition to the emergence of a new career, "the resurrection man". Medical students and resurrection men would steal corpses at night-time and deposit them at the Royal College of Surgeons and other Dublin schools of anatomy. Bodies were generally removed in a covered cart but on some occasions, students took bodies by foot to the dissecting room. They would put a suit of old clothes on the body and, with a student on each side supporting it, made the corpse stagger along like a drunken man.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, subjects were readily procurable in Dublin at a cost of one guinea each. However, they became more difficult to obtain and this, combined with the increased demand meant that much larger prices were soon de-

manded for them.<sup>12</sup> Bodies were exported from Ireland to Scotland and many bodies were also shipped to London.<sup>13</sup> Better prices for bodies could be obtained in Edinburgh than in Dublin. In January 1828, the detection of a body about to be exported caused a riot in the streets in Dublin and led to the murder of Luke Redmond, the porter of the College of Surgeons.<sup>14</sup> It was commented that, body-snatchers in Dublin had a more negative reputation than their counterparts in London: 'they were not content with taking the bodies, but, in addition, they broke the tomb-stones and played general havoc in the grave-yards'.<sup>15</sup>

According to one article in the *Morning Chronicle*, by 1826, the prices of bodies had doubled within the previous few years and bodies in London were now forty times the price they cost in Paris. At this point, bodies in Dublin were seven shillings.<sup>16</sup> Six years later, in 1832, prior to the introduction of the Anatomy Act, it was reported that three bodies were exported from Dublin to England for the price of £38.<sup>17</sup> With the increased demand, resurrection men became more adventurous, stealing graves of the rich and bribing grave-diggers and undertakers to give them information of impending funerals. Occasionally, resurrection-men acted as assistants to gravediggers with Cameron quoting the following poem:

'By day it was his trade to go  
Sending his black-coach to and fro;  
And sometimes at the gate of woe,  
With emblems suitable,  
He stood with brother-mutes to show  
That life is mutable.  
But long before they passed the ferry,  
The dead, that he had helped to bury,  
He sack'd (he had a sack to carry) the bodies of in;  
In fact, he let them have a very short fit of *coffin*.<sup>18</sup>

Concerns were raised that members of the public would begin to turn to murder for the provision of bodies to the medical schools because of the great profits that could be incurred from this practice.<sup>19</sup> The case of Burke and Hare in Edinburgh who between 1827–28 murdered seventeen people for the purpose of selling their bodies to Dr. Knox had also heightened these fears. In February, 1832, for example, a man in Wexford was discovered driving a cart, in which had been found the dead bodies of four children, supposed to have been murdered for the purpose of selling for dissection.<sup>20</sup>

Cameron also reported that it is a curious circumstance that during the 1820s, a company of purveyors of subjects used the school of the Royal College of Surgeons as 'a kind of warehouse for their ghastly goods'. None of the men involved were directly connected with the College; nevertheless, they were permitted to store their

<sup>5</sup> With thanks to Juliana Adelman. These photographs are available on the National Library of Ireland Photographic Database (<http://www.nli.ie/digital-photographs.aspx>).

<sup>6</sup> See: Fleetwood (1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Dublin Gazette*, September 5th, 1750, cited in: 'The sack 'em up men: Irish body-snatchers', *Irish Times*, November 16th, 1959, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Cameron (1916, pp. 178).

<sup>9</sup> Cameron, p. 178–9.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron, p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> Cameron, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Ball (1928, p. 48).

<sup>14</sup> Bailey (1896, p. 87).

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> 'Dead bodies', *Morning Chronicle*, November 13th, 1826, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> 'Imperial Parliament: House of Commons, Monday Feb 6th', *Freeman's Journal*, February 9th, 1832, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Cameron, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> 'Anatomy—prevention of "bishoping"', *Freeman's Journal*, January 26th, 1832, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Imperial Parliament: House of Commons, Monday Feb 6th, *Freeman's Journal*, February 9th, 1832, p. 4.

subjects in the school until they were disposed to the professors of anatomy at the college or to other Dublin institutions or even to anatomists in London or Edinburgh.<sup>21</sup> The men involved were named Collins and Daly and according to Cameron, they had little respect for the graves from which they stole; 'they smashed tombstones, and strewed the habiliments of the dead over the ground, and on one occasion exposed naked dead bodies on the public road'. In 1828, the Royal College of Surgeons prevented these men from using the school as a warehouse for subjects and put into place several rules in order to increase the supply of bodies and put an end to the abuses which had sprung up. In spite of this, prices for corpses continued to increase and in December, 1831, £38 was paid for three Irish bodies by a London anatomist.<sup>22</sup>

In August 1831, the council of the Royal College of Surgeons and the lecturers of other Dublin medical schools with the exception of the Richmond Hospital school, entered into an arrangement for the fair distribution of the subjects available for dissection with the medical officers in the majority of the teaching hospitals agreeing that the unclaimed bodies of persons who had died in these institutions should be conveyed to a depot in the College of Surgeons for the common use of all of the anatomical schools. Shortly after this, in 1832, the Anatomy Act was passed and the fair distribution of subjects was made permanent.<sup>23</sup> As in Britain, an anatomy inspector was to be appointed in Ireland with a salary not exceeding £100 per year. The anatomy inspector would inspect Irish anatomy schools and make periodical returns to the Chief Secretary as to the number of bodies dissected, and, if possible, the name and age of each person whose body was consigned for dissection.<sup>24</sup> Sir James Murray was the first anatomy inspector appointed in Ireland in 1834 and he held this post until a few months before his death in 1871.<sup>25</sup> The Anatomy Act thus regulated the supply of bodies to medical schools in the United Kingdom by giving medical schools legal access to unclaimed corpses from workhouses and prisons.

In spite of this, the introduction of the Anatomy Act in Ireland did not follow an altogether smooth path. In 1841, a group of rate-payers declared their objection to the board of Poor Law guardians at South Dublin Union workhouse giving away of paupers' bodies for dissection purposes.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in 1863, the Board of Guardians of Belfast Union Workhouse discussed whether they should continue supplying paupers' bodies to the medical school of Queen's College Belfast following fears concerning the desecration of corpses.<sup>27</sup> It was claimed by a member of the Board of Guardians, James O'Laverty, that medical students showed disrespect towards the bodies used in the dissecting room with O'Laverty stating that he knew of a 'beardless boy' who carried home with him a trunk of boiled and scraped bones from the dissecting room which he used to frighten 'less sophisticated relatives'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, O'Laverty claimed that medical students from Queen's used to preserve human brains in pickle and retain them.<sup>29</sup> On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, 1863, the Board of Guardians of the Belfast Union met to discuss the matter and came to the conclusion that they would continue to strictly observe the Anatomy Act but stipulated that a register

be kept with details of each corpse given to the anatomy school. If the Master of the Workhouse had any doubts about the contents of a coffin upon its return for burial, he was entitled to open it up for inspection.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in Galway in 1878, an incident occurred where two paupers died during one week at the workhouse. One of the corpses was claimed while the other was unclaimed and deemed suitable for dissection. The procurator mistakenly took the wrong corpse and the next day, the funeral of the claimed pauper took place and the relatives, realising that the coffin was light, removed the lid and discovered that it only contained the intestines of the deceased. A 'lamentable' scene ensued with the daughter of the deceased gathering up the contents of the coffin in her apron and throwing them at the gates of the workhouse, with the clergyman quickly dispersing the people in attendance.<sup>31</sup> This incident resulted in heated negotiations which involved the Board of Guardians of the workhouse, the Professor of the anatomy school at Queen's College Galway and senior representatives of the Catholic Church in Galway. These resulted in more stringent regulations regarding the supply of corpses from the workhouse to the medical school.<sup>32</sup>

Following the Anatomy Act, medical students were no longer involved in the supply of bodies to Irish medical schools. However, in the case of Queen's College Belfast, it is evident that the behaviour of medical students meant that the implementation of the Anatomy Act was problematic, while controversies in Dublin and Galway also resulted in public suspicion and more stringent regulations. In spite of this, the Act appears to have been successful and by the middle of the nineteenth century, the practice of body snatching in Ireland appears to have diminished completely, with the Act being well in place by the 1900s, the period when this article begins.

## 1.2. Sources

We know little about the experiences of students within the dissecting room. As has recently been pointed out, within the historiography of the history of medicine, medical students are 'largely absent or silent consumers'.<sup>33</sup> However, historians have begun to focus on the lives and experiences of medical students.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the social history of medicine in Ireland has begun to emerge as an area of historical inquiry. This paper aims to combine both of these topics and give an insight into the experiences of Irish medical students in the dissecting room in the twentieth century. But how is it possible to find out what it was like to be a student in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Letters and curricula have been previously utilised by historians studying student experience in the United Kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

In this paper, I will primarily focus on student magazines and doctors' memoirs as historical sources. Student magazines are valuable for gauging insight into student experiences. Written by students for students, they give us an engaging view of their day-to-day life and it is surprising that few historians of science or medicine have used this resource.<sup>36</sup> By the early twentieth cen-

<sup>21</sup> Cameron, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> Cameron, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> Cameron, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> Cameron, p. 210.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Sir James Murray', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>26</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1841, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1863, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1863, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1863, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1864, p.

<sup>31</sup> *The Irish Times*, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1878, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1878, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Waddington (2002, p. 45).

<sup>34</sup> See: Crowther & Dupree (2007).

<sup>35</sup> See: Brookes (2008) and Warwick (2003).

<sup>36</sup> Browne (1992, p. 167).

ture, a medical education could be attained at one of six institutions in Ireland: the three Queen's Colleges in Galway, Cork and Belfast (later University College Galway, University College Cork and University College Belfast), Trinity College Dublin, the Royal College of Surgeons, The Catholic University in Dublin (later University College Dublin) while medical licences could be attained at the Royal College of Physicians.

Most Irish university magazines appeared at the turn of the century, such as *Q.C.B.*, the magazine of Queen's College Belfast. As a result, the magazines give the most insight into the early twentieth century. Queen's College Galway and Queen's College Cork also had their own magazines; *Q.C.G.* and *Q.C.C.*<sup>37</sup> The Catholic University had its own magazine called *St. Stephen's*, which later became *The National Student*. *T.C.D.: A College Miscellany* was the magazine of Trinity College Dublin. It is difficult to determine what readership, apart from the students, these magazines had but there is evidence that some, such as *The National Student*, had a readership outside the student population.<sup>38</sup> And, although the editorial board was composed of students and most of the contributors were students, occasionally pieces by lecturers were published. Oftentimes, students contributed illustrations of professors and anatomy professors, in particular, were often depicted in a negative light. Medical students were often contributors to these magazines, giving comment on subjects relating to medical education more generally, university life, and amusing incidents that might have happened in a lecture one morning. Humour was an important element in the magazines, creating, as Browne puts it, 'a common matrix: the social cement, as it were, of the undergraduate world'.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the memoirs of Irish doctors, although a relatively rare source, are very useful because they are first-hand accounts of the experiences of medical students. However, because they are personal accounts, they do not always give us a deep insight into student experience more generally and they may also be biased or limited in terms of the information given about educational experiences. In this article, I will draw on the memoirs of Thomas Garry, Bethel Solomons, William M. Hunter, Sidney Croskery, Gearoid Crookes, Patrick Dignan, Ken O'Flaherty and John F. Fleetwood in order to give an insight into their experiences of dissection in the period.<sup>40</sup> In addition to these sources, I will also utilise the written accounts of Irish-trained doctors who contacted me with information about their experiences in the dissecting room in Irish medical schools in the 1950s and 1960s.

## 2. The nature of the dissecting room

Anatomy was an important part of the Irish medical curriculum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The subject was taught by professors while the dissections were overseen by demonstrators. These demonstrators were often former medical students, for example, Lily Baker, who graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1906, went on to work there as a demonstrator

to female medical students. At Queen's College Belfast around 1901, second-year students had 9 hours of anatomy in their first term and 13 hours in their second term each week, while third-year students had 12 hours of anatomy in their first term and 16 hours in their second term.<sup>41</sup> Students were expected to gain at least 10 hours of experience of Practical Anatomy in the dissecting room a week with 2–3 hours of lectures per week depending on their year of study and term.<sup>42</sup> The dissecting room was open from 9 a.m. until 4.30 p.m. each weekday and from 9 a.m. until 12 p.m. on Saturdays so students could undertake dissections.<sup>43</sup> The dissecting room had been extended in 1912 and was described as 'large and well-lighted'.<sup>44</sup> Students wishing to take the M.B. BCh B.A.O. examinations of the Royal University of Ireland (RUI), the examining board, were required to have taken a six months systematic course in Anatomy and a six month course in Practical Anatomy (Dissection) in either their first or second year. The aim of this was to 'enable the Student to acquire a good knowledge of the bones, joints, and muscles and such knowledge of the vessels and viscera and of the larger nerves as he may reasonably be supposed to have acquired at this period of his Medical Studies'.<sup>45</sup> Students at University College Galway (previously Queen's College Galway) were advised that 'dissections must be methodical and artistic, if vivid mental pictures are to be secured and detained'.<sup>46</sup> Considering the long hours spent in the dissecting room, it is perhaps unsurprising that an article published in *Q.C.B.* magazine in 1917 commented that 'the dissecting-room is to the student a club, a smoke room, common room research room—one in all'.<sup>47</sup> Not only did the dissecting room serve these purposes but Bethel Solomons commented that scouting parties of housemen and senior students would visit the dissecting rooms of Dublin universities in order to try and recruit good rugby players from the medical students.<sup>48</sup>

Gearoid P. Crookes, in his memoirs of his experiences as a medical student at University College Dublin in the 1930s, wrote that medical students were split into those who enjoyed dissecting and viewed it as sheer science, the type of men who would become surgeons or 'use their knowledge during a lifetime spent in its practical knowledge'. For most of the medical students, however, the study of anatomy lacked allure, although they came to accept it as the bedrock of their discipline.<sup>49</sup> Evidently, anatomy dissections required a strong stomach with one student writer commenting about the dissecting room were usually quite disgusting. One writer in *Q.C.B.* in 1900 stated that 'It may interest these gentlemen of refined taste to learn that it is a well established rule that a man's dissecting ability is generally inversely proportional to the elaborate nature of his toilet'.<sup>50</sup>

Crookes wrote of his first experiences of the dissecting room in his second year of medical study:

Only when our Second Year started in October 1935, could we rightfully frequent the dissecting room as of habit, a forceps our only tool, the acrid smell of formaldehyde constantly in

<sup>37</sup> These were succeeded by *U.C.G.: A College Annual* and *The Quarryman*.

<sup>38</sup> For instance, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, often used it for the propagation of his political ideas. See: Francis Sheehy Skeffington, 'The position of women', *St. Stephen's*, **1:12**, (June 1903), pp. 252–253.

<sup>39</sup> Browne, p. 193.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Garry began his medical training in the late 1880s, Bethel Solomons in the 1910s, William M. Hunter in the 1890s, Sidney Croskery from 1919–27, Gearoid Crookes in the mid-1930s, Patrick Dignan in the late 1938, Ken O'Flaherty in 1948, John F. Fleetwood in the 1960s.

<sup>41</sup> Minute Book of the Medical Faculty of Queen's College Belfast, 1891–1907, QUB/D/2/3/1.

<sup>42</sup> Queen's University Belfast calendar for 1945, p. 264 and p. 289.

<sup>43</sup> Queen's University Belfast calendars, 1915–16, 1930–31, 1945–46.

<sup>44</sup> Queen's University Belfast calendar for 1930, p. 75.

<sup>45</sup> The Royal University of Ireland Calendar for the Year 1900, (Dublin, 1900), p. 139.

<sup>46</sup> University College Galway calendar for 1915–16, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> *Q.C.B.*, **18:2**, (February 1917), p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Solomons (1956, p. 40).

<sup>49</sup> Crookes (2003, p. 139).

<sup>50</sup> *Q.C.B.*, **2:1**: (November 1900), p. 9.

our nostrils, and the wearing of greasy white coats a part of our state of existence. Along with these physical circumstances came the realisation that at last beginners' days were over and that now we were dealing with humanity, even though inanimate. The scene had changed significantly from theory to practice. We learnt to talk of our subjects as 'stiffs' and to grow an outer carapace making us seem indifferent to the handling of mortality, though indeed our skins were thinner than they seemed. As each new intimate dissection became necessary, behind the flippant speech we would grit our teeth, swallow hard, and get on with the newly presenting task.<sup>51</sup>

This quote gives a revealing insight into the nature of the dissecting room and the practice of dissecting itself. Along with the new surroundings characterised by the smell of formaldehyde, students also had to learn to deal with the issue of mortality through dissecting the corpses. One female correspondent, who trained at Trinity College Dublin in the late 1950s and early 1960s, stated that she felt nervous prior to her first time entering the dissecting room and played the piano to calm her nerves.<sup>52</sup> William M. Hunter who trained in the 1890s at Queen's College Belfast left the following vivid account of his first day in the dissecting room:

My first day in the Dissecting Room was pretty nerve racking. I will always remember the first time I saw so many dead bodies in different degrees of dissection. The first incision I made in the skin of a dead body was never forgotten. I was still very green when the Professor, pointing out some parts of the body, pointed out the armpit and asked me the name of it, I said, much to the amusement of the other students, that it was called the Oxter. They all laughed, but the Professor said I was quite right and that this was an Ulster term for armpit.<sup>53</sup>

By his second year, he felt that he was making 'some headway' with the afternoons in the dissecting room giving him 'something to think about'.<sup>54</sup> Another correspondent, who trained at University College Dublin in the same period, did not have qualms about the dissecting room, stating that the practice of dissecting itself was not 'unduly challenging' and that the 'prepared subject in some sense appeared completely depersonalised'.<sup>55</sup>

The language used by students in the dissecting room seems to denote an attempt at detachment from the grim reality of their subject. Similarly, an article in *Q.C.B.* magazine in 1900, which discussed the different types of students at the university, presented a grim depiction of the typical second-year medical student: 'his conversation makes one's blood run cold with its allusion to "taking off a leg" or "finishing an arm"'.<sup>56</sup> The use of such language perhaps indicates an attempt to come to terms with the disturbing nature of their new subject.

Sidney Croskery, a female student from Belfast who trained at the University of Edinburgh in the 1920s, mentioned the nature of the corpses which she and her fellow students dissected, that they were 'mummified by a red, chalky material being infused into the arteries, so that all the blood vessels were rendered visible,

in situ'. She also drew attention to the 'not unpleasant' pervading smell of formaldehyde in the dissecting room.<sup>57</sup> This is a common recollection of medical students of the dissecting room with correspondents making reference to the pervading smell of formaldehyde, used for preserving the corpses, which they had to learn to get used to. Ken O'Flaherty who began his medical training in 1948 commented that the first shock of his training was entering the anatomy department at Earlsfort Terrace and inhaling the 'pungent smell of formaldehyde'.<sup>58</sup> One correspondent who trained at University College Galway in the early 1960s commented that the "stiff", was wrapped in bandages and placed in a tank in the evenings and at the weekend, and, as the dissection progressed, the cadaver became more fragile and often ended up in pieces. He recounted one that one day at the dissecting room, some relatives came to reclaim their loved one's cadaver: he and one of the other students were sent to find it and they did not succeed.<sup>59</sup>

Articles on the topic of university dissecting rooms in Irish student magazines in the period also give an insight into the nature of the room itself. At Queen's College Galway, in 1905, it seems that the dissecting room was refurnished with 'half-a-dozen wicker chairs upholstered in maroon and white cushions are now to be seen around the fire of the dissecting room, in which the weary student can recline and digest his meal. One would almost imagine it was a lady's boudoir instead of one of the most up-to-date dissecting rooms in the four kingdoms'.<sup>60</sup> The article reported that even timorous engineering and arts students were seen to be casting longing glances at the 'forbidden portal' of the dissecting room as a result of the rumours of this luxury. Similarly, a report in 1909, stated that the author looked forward to the new changes which the College Council was planning to make to the dissecting room, which included new armchairs and sofas, in addition to a new reading room off the anatomy room, 'supplied with all the latest brands of tobacco, biners included'.<sup>61</sup> These articles seem to suggest that the College Council wished to make the dissecting room as comfortable as possible for students, perhaps because they realised the grim nature of anatomy dissections, but it also provides further evidence of the idea of the dissecting room as a 'club'. In spite of such comfortable surroundings, the dissecting room remained the scene of pranks and object of macabre stories, poems and cartoons in the student press.

### 3. Student experience

#### 3.1. Humour and pranks

In 1924, a story appeared in *Frav-lio—Queens*, the magazine of Queen's College Belfast, which told the tale of a second-year medical student who one night, while walking home through Queen's after visiting his friend's house, noticed that the lights were on in the second storey of the Medical Building, where the dissecting room was located.<sup>62</sup> Curious, he decided to investigate, and advanced to the dissecting room. Upon reaching it, he could hear sounds of laughter and applause and expected to see students having some sort-of party. Instead, he was greeted with a 'horrible sight'. In his words:

<sup>51</sup> Crookes, p. 139.

<sup>52</sup> Written communication from Correspondent B.

<sup>53</sup> William M. Hunter, 'Private Life of a Country Medical Practitioner', p. 7 (Private memoir courtesy of the Hunter Family).

<sup>54</sup> Hunter, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Written communication from Correspondent C.

<sup>56</sup> 'As others see us' the medical student (by a junior artisan), *QCB*, **1:3**, (February 1900), p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Croskery (1983, p. 15).

<sup>58</sup> O'Flaherty (2005, p. 113).

<sup>59</sup> Written correspondence from Correspondent A.

<sup>60</sup> 'Medicine', *Q.C.G.* **3:2**, (February 1905), p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> *UCG A College Annual* **1:1**, (February 1909), p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> 'A night in the dissecting room', *Frav-lio—Queens*, **3:2**, (February 1924), p. 10.

Not a student was in sight—instead, I saw to my amazement that the bodies were holding a meeting. Some of them were sitting up, but the majority, having lost both arms and legs, were forced to recline negligently on the tables. One tall fellow, on whom the dissectors had not yet commenced work, was in full possession of his limbs and was apparently acting as chairman. At the moment, however, he had vacated the stool and was engaged in handing to the others all the cloths he could find, in order to clothe them for this important meeting. I glanced around hurriedly to see if I could escape, but I was now afraid to move, and all I could do was crouch under the nearest table, trembling with fright.<sup>63</sup>

The topic under discussion was ‘Should smoking be permitted in the dissecting room?’ and the protagonist noticed that several of the female cadavers were strongly opposed to this, while there was a significant number of male cadavers who were ‘loud in their condemnations of its abolition’. This perhaps reflects the situation regarding smoking amongst the student body themselves. One cadaver commented that he had been very fortunate ‘as one of his young men [one of the students dissecting him] had been smoking a few days before, and had suddenly put out his cigarette, and having nowhere to conceal it, had put it in his (the cadaver’s) mouth. The cadaver stated “It’s a long time since I’d tasted a bit of bac-cy... but I’d sooner it had been a bit o’good twist. It didn’t give me much of a chow”’.<sup>64</sup>

The tobacco-loving cadaver was then interrupted by another corpse, apparently called Henry James, who grumbled that he would love to ‘get at’ ‘the fella that pinched my brains’ (who, it transpires, is our protagonist, the medical student cowering under the table who had removed the cadaver’s brain earlier that day). These grumbles were interrupted by a female cadaver who commented that she was sure that the medical students are ‘nice young fellas’ but that she wished they wouldn’t wash the corpses so much, stating, ‘I’m sure I’ll catch a cold with gettin’ so many baths’.<sup>65</sup> The corpses then decided to take a vote on the motion and there was an overwhelming majority in favour of smoking in the dissecting room. After this point, Henry James interrupted, once again grumbling, ‘I wisht I had the fella...’ and the medical student decides, in terror, that it is time to leave, and upsets the table he was crouching under as he makes for the door. Henry James yells ‘There’s the fella that pinched my brains!’ and as the protagonist reached the top of the stairs, he noticed a jar of preservative fluid hurtling towards him which knocked him out. When he recovered consciousness, he noticed that he was outside the Medical Buildings and that all was quiet in the dissecting room.<sup>66</sup>

This story gives us a revealing insight into the subconscious fears of the author and his counterparts but additionally the activities within the dissecting room and students qualms about these. Smoking appears to have been a common practice until the 1960s with William Hunter commenting that all students smoked a pipe while dissecting.<sup>67</sup> The practice of placing a cigarette in the mouth of a cadaver again seems to denote a certain lack of respect for them or perhaps an attempt normalise it, while the placing of cadavers in the tank, and the practice of dissection itself, is examined from the

cadavers’ perspective, demonstrating students’ moral dilemmas with dissection.

Testament to the idea of the dissecting room experiences as being the stuff of nightmares is a cartoon which appeared in *U.C.G.* in 1922–3. This image, entitled, ‘The nightmare of a medical student after his first visit to the anatomy department’, shows a terrified and sweating medical student in his pyjamas, gazing in fear at what appears to be an angry cadaver wielding a scalpel in each hand.<sup>68</sup> For medical students, the dissecting room was a place to be feared and these sentiments pervaded long into the twentieth century.

John Fleetwood, who trained in Dublin, wrote of his first experiences in the dissecting room in the late 1960s:

My first sight of the anatomy lab gave me shivers all over. A few of us stood nervously at the door. There were twelve dead bodies on benches. One had a lighted cigarette in his mouth. We never found out who put it there. The senior lecturer appeared through another door at the end of the lab. “Come in, come in, they won’t bite!” he called heartily and ushered us to our respective bodies. There was one body for each group of eight students, more than enough. We got a lecture on respecting the bodies and the generosity of the patients and their families in contributing their bodies to science. There was to be no messing with the bodies, our lecturer warned.<sup>69</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that there were occasionally pranks involving cadavers and the dissecting room. In the Catholic University guide for medical students, published in 1892, students were warned that the practice of conducting ‘funeral orations over the corpses’ was strongly discouraged.<sup>70</sup> John Fleetwood, in particular, wrote about a series of pranks involving cadavers in his memoirs. He recounted one occasion, when he hopped onto a bus after an afternoon spent in the dissecting room. When rummaging in his coat pocket for some change for his fare for the bus conductor, he found an eyeball, which had been presumably slipped into his pocket by a fellow student in the dissecting room. The bus conductor noticed and exclaimed ‘What the hell is that?’ as Fleetwood tried, unsuccessfully, to convince him that it was a marble. The bus conductor, looking pointedly at Fleetwood’s copy of *Grey’s Anatomy*, said “I wouldn’t know, would I? You wouldn’t be the first bloody medical student I’ve picked up at that stop”.<sup>71</sup>

Fleetwood wrote of another story he had been told of an event that had occurred a few years previous to his anatomy lecturer’s warning about ‘messing with the bodies’. Apparently, ‘a body had been ‘borrowed’ from one of the medical schools and ended up in a very posh Dublin hotel. It was only when the maitre d’ tried to extract the price of dinner for four that he noticed his diner was dead’.<sup>72</sup> On another occasion, a skeleton that two medical students had taken was wrapped up in clothes, hat and scarf and put on the back seat of their car. The students then picked up an American exchange student who was hitch-hiking. According to Fleetwood, ‘she left the car screaming hysterically when the skeleton’s head fell onto her lap’.<sup>73</sup> In spite of this apparent disrespect for the

<sup>63</sup> ‘A night in the dissecting room’, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> ‘A night in the dissecting room’, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> ‘A night in the dissecting room’, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> ‘A night in the dissecting room’, p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Hunter, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> *University College Galway Annual*, 2:9 (1922–3), no page number.

<sup>69</sup> Fleetwood (1994, p. 18).

<sup>70</sup> *Guide for Medical students, more especially those about to commence their medical studies, by the Registrar of the Catholic University School of Medicine*, (1892), p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> Fleetwood, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Fleetwood, pp. 18–19.

<sup>73</sup> Fleetwood, p. 19.

cadavers, at Queen's College Galway, and other Irish universities, a mass was said each year for the subjects, which all medical students attended, a practice which is still carried out today.<sup>74</sup>

The dark nature of the dissecting room was regularly the topic of articles, poems and cartoons in student magazines. A poem entitled 'For the dissecting room', published in *Q.C.B.* in 1906, is indicative of the black humour surrounding the dissecting room, in which the writer composes a list of irritating characters around the College, from the 'pestilential footballer' to 'the sorry cranks whose aim in life is running *Q.C.B.*' who he would like to use as dissecting room cadavers.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the anatomy lecturers were not exempt from the wrath of medical students' macabre humour. In a 1911 issue of *Q.C.B.*, a caricature of Professor Symington, affectionately known as 'Symie', the anatomy lecturer at Queen's College Belfast, displays the professor, apparently lecturing with a skull in his hand while a skull and bone fly in the air above him. A copy of 'Quain's Conjuring Tricks' lies to the bottom left of the drawing.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, an even harsher caricature of Professor Wheeler, the anatomy professor at Queen's College Galway, displays him with a sinister smirk, a bloody saw in one hand and a blood-dripping leg in the other.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, certain professors were said to have odd attitudes towards the corpses in the dissecting room. We have the example of John Fleetwood's anatomy professor who sarcastically remarked 'They won't bite' with regard to the cadavers in his charge, while Fleetwood's father, also a doctor, told him the story of his own anatomy lecturer who used to smoke a pipe in the dissecting room. What used to upset the students was the fact that the lecturer in question would use his pipe to move the organs around, before wiping the stem of the pipe on his coat and popping it back in his mouth.<sup>78</sup> Considering such uncouth behaviour, the action that university councils took to protect their female medical students from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is unsurprising.

### 3.2. Ladies in the dissecting room

From the 1880s, women began to undertake medical education at Irish universities. The editor of *Q.C.C.* commented that 'this feminine hankering after the disagreeable concomitants of anatomical work as carried out in the dissecting room' was one of the signs of the times.<sup>79</sup> William Hunter commented that 'The first lady student was received in silence in the Dissecting Room, we thought it was no place for women, but as she was good natured, we gradually accepted her as a chum and passed no remarks.'<sup>80</sup>

It is evident that the grim nature of the dissecting room presented problems for university authorities with regard to female students. With the admission of women students to Irish medical schools from the late 1880s, came the establishment of separate

dissecting rooms.<sup>81</sup> Irish universities could be said to have been following international trends with this procedure and these separate dissecting rooms remained in existence in most Irish medical schools until the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, women and men were educated together for all other subjects and undertook their clinical training in hospitals together. T. Percy Kirkpatrick, writing in 1912 commented that women and men were educated together for all lectures with the exception of anatomy and that 'in spite of the many prophecies to the contrary, the plan has worked well'.<sup>83</sup> In 1922, *The Irish Times* reported that at Trinity College Dublin and the Royal College of Surgeons, men and women were trained together without the slightest awkwardness.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Colonel Sir William Taylor, then President of the Royal College of Surgeons, commented that he found no difficulty in giving clinical classes to men and women together at the Meath Hospital in the 1920s.<sup>85</sup>

What was it about women's contact with corpses in an academic setting that universities appear to have taken issue with? The topic of anatomy had been problematic in the 1860s when women were forbidden from attending certain meetings of the Ethnological Society in London on the grounds that certain subjects were deemed unsuitable for women, such as, ironically, the 'indelicate' topic of childbirth.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, we may gain an insight into Victorian attitudes of feminine 'delicacy' through examining the case of English anatomy museums.<sup>87</sup> At some anatomy museums in England, such as Kahn's museum in the 1850s, women were permitted to attend the display on certain days, a practice that the *Lancet* objected to at the time because it was believed to undermine one of the most common arguments against women studying medicine: that they would find anatomy distressing.<sup>88</sup> However, considering that women and men were allowed to attend all lectures at Irish institutions together, including anatomy, and they were also allowed to walk the wards together with no restrictions on the living bodies they could see, it seems that it was not the subject of anatomy itself that was deemed unsuitable, but rather, the specific issue of dissecting dead corpses, and in particular, dissecting dead corpses in the company of men, which was problematic. At one university, it seems that it was the issue of women dissecting the male body that was problematic. Tellingly, at Trinity College, when the segregation of women and men for anatomy dissections came to an end in 1937, women medical students were then only allowed to 'poke around with the female anatomy'.<sup>89</sup>

Once the separation of women and men students for anatomy dissections came to an end, women found that they were not immune to the pranks conducted therein: one correspondent who trained at University College Galway reminisced of an occasion when one female medical student in his class went to Lydon's coffee shop on Shop Street after class one day, and found a scrotum in

<sup>74</sup> Written correspondence from Correspondent A.

<sup>75</sup> 'For the dissecting room', *Q.C.B.* 8:6, (April, 1906), p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Q.C.B.*, 12:7, (May 1911), p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> *Q.C.C.*, 6:1, (March 1908), no page number.

<sup>78</sup> Fleetwood, p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> Editorial, *Q.C.C.*, 4:1, (December, 1907), p. 15.

<sup>80</sup> Hunter, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> In the summer of 1897, for example, The Council of the Catholic University set up a special dissecting-room with waiting room attached for women students so that they could carry out their dissections away from the male students. The Council reported that 'the results have proved most satisfactory and encouraging, and the Faculty are satisfied that the step taken in this decision is one which will add considerably in the future, to the success and usefulness of the School'. (Annual Report of the Faculty: May 20th 1898', Catholic University School of Medicine: Governing Body Minute Book, Vol.1, 1892–1911 (UCD archives: CU/14)).

<sup>82</sup> See: Kelly (2010, pp. 495–516).

<sup>83</sup> Kirkpatrick (1912, p. 330).

<sup>84</sup> 'Women medicals', *Irish Times*, March 3rd, 1922, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> 'Women medical students: barred by London hospital: attitude of Irish schools', *Irish Times*, March 3rd, 1922, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> Richards (1989, p. 275).

<sup>87</sup> See: Bates (2008, pp. 1–22).

<sup>88</sup> Bates, p. 11.

<sup>89</sup> 'An Irishwoman's diary', *Irish Times*, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1992, p. 9.

her handbag.<sup>90</sup> This practice of removing specimens from the dissecting room appears to have been outlawed by the 1980s, with one doctor who trained at Trinity College Dublin in that period reporting that his class were warned that the unauthorised removal of specimens from the dissecting room would result in the end of their aspirations to become doctors.<sup>91</sup> This ultimatum, he said, was stated in order to combat a resurgence of the pranks of previous generations of medical students who had removed skulls, bones and semi-dissected arms, and left them on park benches and at bus shelters and from a distance, safely watched the horror of members of the public at discovering them.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Anatomy dissections are often seen as a rite of passage in the education of the medical student yet it is evident that the fear associated with this process is something that is common to generations of medical students passing through Irish universities. This article has briefly examined how students attempted to reconcile this fear and their feelings of horror at the act of dissecting. Through the writing of ghoulish stories and poems, medical students released their feelings of trepidation towards the dissecting room. While the pranks conducted by students, and indeed the language used by them in the dissecting room, seem to indicate a certain lack of respect for the cadavers with which they were dealing, it may also be viewed as an attempt on the part of the students (living) to establish their power over the cadavers (dead) and thus exercise control over their fears of mortality.

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<sup>90</sup> Written correspondence from Correspondent A.

<sup>91</sup> 'The body snatching habits of medical students', *Irish Times*, September 22nd, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> 'The body snatching habits of medical students', p. 6.