

BOOK REVIEW

Eugenia Pacitti, *The Body Collected in Australia: A History of Human Specimens and the Circulation of Biomedical Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), pp. xii + 214, AUD\$170.00, hardback, ISBN 9781350373723.

For the best part of two centuries, anatomy museums served as sources and repositories of knowledge about the structure, function, and derangements of the human body. In many Western medical schools, dissection of cadavers and the display of disarticulated remains were foundational to clinical praxis and heuristics. In the process, notes Eugenia Pacitti, trainee doctors also learned to control their affective responses when incising flesh. Concurrently, their relationships with corpses and disembodied tissues contributed both to individual ethics and to collective standards across the medical profession.

As *The Body Collected in Australia* details, these norms were never neutral: obtaining cadavers and exemplars of pathology reflected prevailing social and moral hierarchies. Focused on the University of Melbourne in the Colony (later State) of Victoria, this monograph addresses the period 1860–1925. It follows Ross Jones and Helen MacDonald in highlighting how anatomists sourced their subjects from socially disadvantaged and racially maligned communities. However, as Pacitti points out, specimens were also secured by a dispersed network of clinicians – sometimes in consultation with patients, but at other times against their express wishes.

As the chapter on foetal specimens elaborates, mothers might permit the study of their miscarriages in the hope of promoting healthier future pregnancies. Indeed, the scrutiny of unborn remains gradually shifted medical interest away from maternal tissue, to focus on whether or not miscarriages comprised a potentially viable neonate. Women's voices also mattered. 'Looking outside the museum to depictions of pregnancy, miscarriage and childbirth ... in medical journals places the specimens into a new historical narrative', Pacitti asserts. These accounts foreground 'not only the work of doctors, but also, importantly, the experiences of the women from whom they took specimens' (p. 94).


Pacitti's particular contribution is to emphasise how remains could become worthless – or even burdensome – when divorced from individuals and their stories. On the one hand, she notes, objects in anatomy museums 'assumed a shelf position and catalogue number that effectively effaced their former personhood and gave them a new identity and meaning' (p. 61). On the other hand, lack of identifying information proved increasingly problematic for specimens donated by Australian medical officers serving in the Great War, and especially for the collected remains of Aboriginal people. From the 1980s, attempts to repatriate these ancestors to their cultural homeland – their Country – were repeatedly stymied by a lack of reliable documentation. In some instances, the process has been further confounded by recalcitrance, obfuscation, or ignorance. Wounds cannot heal, and the dead remain restless.

This book happily lacks the sense of curated outrage that sometimes characterises works of this nature. Rather, Pacitti acknowledges the diverse motivations and moral precepts of those who gathered pathological specimens. She borrows from Warwick Anderson to propose that morbid tissues formed an exchange commodity amongst the medical fraternity, both for altruistic and for careerist ends. However, by the late nineteenth century, the era of the curious specimen and clinical anecdote as the primary medium for advancing medical knowledge was drawing to a close. As Michael Bliss demonstrates in his 2007 biography of Canadian physician William Osler, an abundance of clinical observations matched with their pathological sequelae became the new path to medical expertise. This is not to belittle the systematising and descriptive work undertaken by Professor Harry Brookes Allen at the University of Melbourne but to suggest that, in the twentieth century, series rather than singular examples predominated as the basis for anatomical epistemology. Yet Allen's successor as Professor of Anatomy, Richard Berry, has in recent years been pilloried for his voracious collecting of Aboriginal people's remains.

As a curator, I would have welcomed more information on the taxonomy, arrangement, and display of anatomical specimens. These fundamental concerns animate the vast literature on natural history collections, which have long been understood to reflect prevailing racial, social, and political schemas. Was teratology associated with venereology, for instance, or with the socioeconomic status of the mother – or father? Were neoplasia organised according to body system, gender, occupation, treating surgeon, or patient outcome? Museums are, after all, three-dimensional spaces that structure the visitor's interpretive experience. Such practical and pedagogical considerations are, only occasionally explored in *The Body Collected in Australia*.

The book dwells thoughtfully on the poetry of medical students, published in their often irreverent journal, *The Speculum*. However, it was a shame that the author did not mine the University of Melbourne's residential college newsletters, which provide an alternative window into the interiority of medical tyros. Many fine historiographic contributions in the collected proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Society of the History of Medicine have also been overlooked. Nevertheless, Pacitti's bibliography boasts a wide selection of primary and secondary sources well-tailored to the book's focus.

This monograph is crisply written, thoroughly edited, and produced to an admirably high standard. It offers fresh insights and themes, if not a novel interpretive armature. It would be an ideal primer for teaching, both for students of medical history and for today's medical students, whose formative knowledge is increasingly remote from the fleshy realities of human remains.

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