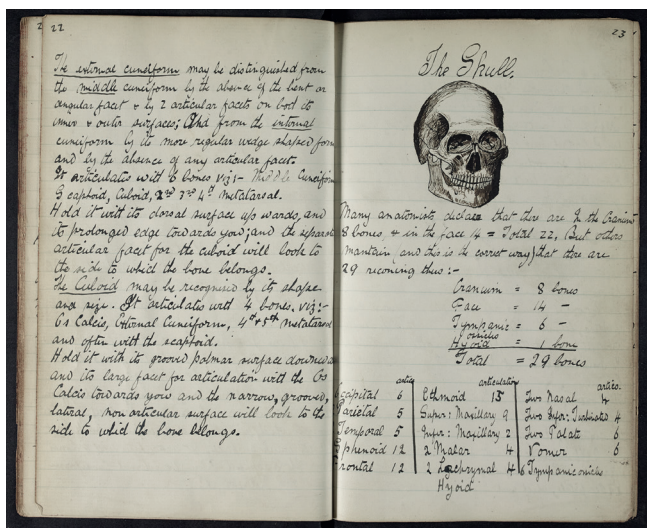


The curse of the college museum

BY PETER CACKETT



David Greig lecture notebook. Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

As sure as the inevitability of death and taxes, the hidden stories of past events will intermittently rise to the surface like oil on water and are frequently unearthed as an indirect consequence of progress. It also seems that the medieval cities such as Edinburgh, the place in which I reside, with their rich and at times macabre history, have more than their fair share of secrets waiting to be discovered. Some of the ghost stories that are revealed often serve as a continuation of the haunting, and almost as if there is a burning desire of an unknown force to breathe new life into their malevolence.

It was thus decided during a recent rather tedious departmental meeting at the Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion when my mind was distracted elsewhere, that the voluminous bound journals and textbooks gathering dust in the ophthalmic library should be placed into storage to make way for a new surgical simulator lab. A couple of weeks following this announcement, despite having plenty of other more important things to do with my time, a colleague gently arm twisted me into helping with the task of emptying the library during one of my morning administration sessions. It was whilst I was moving one of the empty dilapidated shelving units out into the corridor that I noticed an old leather-bound journal which had at some stage fallen behind it and had clearly lain unopened for several decades.

I had intended to return to my office to plough through the documents for my impending annual appraisal but needing any excuse to put off this torturous process, I sat down in a quiet corner to study this book which had piqued my curiosity. It was unlabelled but after studying it for several minutes it became clear that it was a diary account by one of the former eye surgeons working at the Moray Pavilion, the precursor to the current eye hospital in which I work. Over the course of the morning, I became more and more absorbed in the text. However, it was a little before lunch when I came across a disturbing series of diary entries, which I must confess have given me sleepless nights ever since. However, I feel compelled to share the words of this former doctor with you, which are reproduced below, word for word.

Friday 16th December 1906

Despite being slightly the worse for wear, it was with much vigour that I arose early this morning at my residence in Bruntsfield. Last night had seen the annual Moray Pavilion Christmas bean-feast at one of the fashionable new hostelrys that has opened on the Royal Mile. There had been a bit of a to do, as the retired surgeon Douglas Argyll Robertson was in attendance, and not only was he tediously dining out again on the pupil abnormality medical eponym which he had described, but he also proceeded to consume a couple of bottles of finest claret, thereby adding several shillings to everyone's chit much to our chagrin.

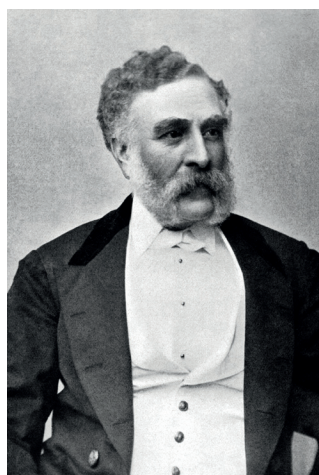
The reason for my exuberance today is that I believe that the research which I have been undertaking has at last started to bear some fruit, and my investigations are now bordering on obsessional.

Hailing a Hansom cab just as the sun was beginning to rise above Arthur's Seat in the distance, we made quick progress across town through the early morning traffic. As I alighted in front of the Pavilion I almost collided with Harold, one of my fellow surgical colleagues.

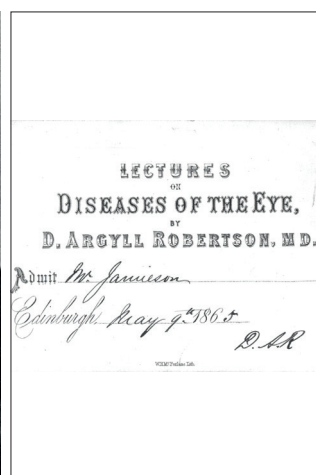
"Harold," I exclaimed, "I am glad I met you. I must apologise for having been unable to attend your lecture on the optimal management of retinal detachments with compression bandaging at the grand round yesterday. However, I was wondering if you may like to repeat it at my operating list this afternoon as my anaesthetist has succumbed to an attack of the dropsy and I thought that your soporific teachings may provide sufficient alternative sedation for the patients."

"Most amusing, but I should advise you that in your haste in descending from the carriage you have inadvertently stepped into some horse manure. I guess it may serve as a reminder of your surgical outcomes, which I must say have given us much amusement over a few yards of ale at the Deacon Brodie Tavern," he riposted.

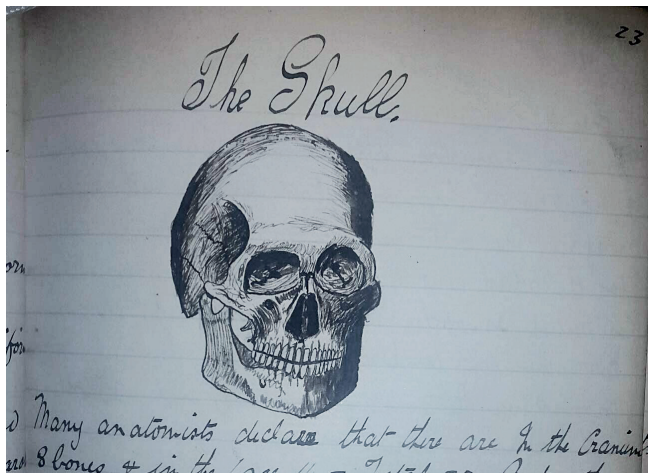
"Look," I say pointing up into the sky, "a Zeppelin." As Harry indeed obligingly looks up, I stride off to commence my ward round in the Pavilion.



Douglas Argyll Robertson. Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.



Eye Diseases, Robertson, 1865. Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.



Greig skull. Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

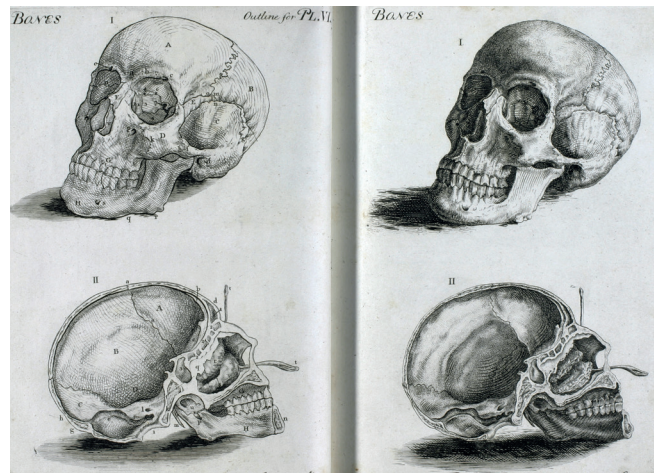
At around 10am, after leaving the last of my instructions for the matron in preparation for the afternoon's theatre list, in order to entail a hasty departure, I availed myself of the rear staircases to avoid being strongarmed by the formidable outpatient sister into assisting with the collection of casualties gathering in the atrium and headed the short distance to the Royal College of Surgeons to continue with my treasured research.

Not only does the College Museum possess an impressive collection of pathological specimens, but it also retains a large number of human skeletons, which have all been labelled with their name and sex, complete with dates of birth and death. I have always had a keen interest in anatomy. Furthermore, I believe that an advanced study of these skeletons may lead to an important discovery and possibly even the all-important eponym, which is highly sought after amongst my colleagues, including my adversary and surgical competitor Harold.

The skull is of primary importance for me, given that my field of practice pertains to ophthalmology. After several months of spending increasing amounts of my time documenting the anatomical landmarks of the orbit in the uncomfortable environment of a rather chilly attic room at the College, I have become convinced that I have unearthed a novel association. In some of the skulls that I have examined, there is a peculiar ridge within the bony cleft at the orbital apex known as the superior orbital fissure. What is even more interesting is that this feature only appears to be present in the male skulls. If indeed I can prove this to be the case, then it will make the identification of sex from archaeological and forensic specimens far easier for experts in the field. Not only that but if my assertions are proved to be correct, then there may be potential to claim this bony ridge as an eponym for my own and relative immortality assured. Or at the very least to be able to laud it over Harold for the rest of his career.

Now that winter has well and truly arrived in Edinburgh, with some snow flurries earlier today, the room in which I am carrying out my studies has become unbearably cold. I could not countenance the thought of returning there after my theatre session despite my overwhelming desire to continue my studies. I therefore ascertained that the optimal course of action was to take some of my work home with me.

I wish to create an illustration of a perfect example of this peculiar bony ridge and I chose the skull which I believed to be the best specimen. This particular skull is unusual in that it also has holes through both the floor of the right maxilla and the right frontal bone. However, the fissures are intact on both sides and the symmetrical ridges are really quite exquisite. I registered the temporary loan of the skeletal specimen in the ledger kept by the curator at the entrance to the College Museum, deposited the skull



John Bell (Anatomy of Bones, 1794). Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

in my leather holdall and made my back to the Pavilion for my afternoon theatre list.

Towards the end of the afternoon, since departing the Pavilion, I have started to feel light-headed, and I have put it down to a combination of the excesses of last night and the excessive cold whilst conducting my research at the College this morning. Despite the excitement of my discovery, I have left the continuation of my scientific work until tomorrow.

Saturday 17th December 1906

I slept fitfully last night. A ghastly pain from within my left ear, the like of which I have never experienced before, awoke me from my slumbers at around 5:30am. I have spent much of the day in a deep malaise and have been unable to even consider documenting the features of the skull on the watercolour paper which I recently purchased solely for this task. No manner of remedies, including even the Chlorodyne that I keep sequestered for the occasional ailments that I succumb to, have proved to be of any use to quell the pain. This evening I have resorted to several measures of whisky in the hope of some relief, and in a state of some exhaustion am retiring to bed at an early hour.

Sunday 18th December 1906

Once again, I achieved very little sleep last night, but whenever I did briefly lose consciousness I was tortured by the most terrible nightmares with disturbing visions of pathology specimens and bloodied surgeons. My left ear pain has continued unabated and is possibly worse than yesterday, although it may be that my tolerance is starting to wane now that fatigue is setting in. There does not appear to be any infectious element to my affliction though, since whilst the pain causes me to sweat quite profusely, there is no fever. With a fresh fall of snow overnight and a bright crisp morning, I thought that a brisk walk around Bruntsfield Links might aid my constitution but it was of no benefit and I returned home in a state of despair.

This afternoon I decided that I had to recourse to further action and paid a house visit to a close friend Edward MacPherson, an esteemed otologist. After a thorough otoscopy and a neurological evaluation, he proclaimed somewhat exasperated that he could find no abnormality to explain my affliction. Although this pacified me slightly as I do hold his opinion in high regard, I was still in unbearable pain and to this end he gave me a supply of morphine which he keeps sequestered for such emergencies. I have taken what I have estimated to be a maximal dose and am again retiring early to bed in the hope of some respite from this torment.

PETE'S BOGUS JOURNEY

Monday 19th December 1906

The night was once more a wholly unpleasant experience of broken sleep and disturbing dreams. I awoke early with my bedclothes drenched with sweat and feeling most wretched. The morphine had slightly alleviated the ear pain and I went to the living room to gather my senses. I immediately noticed that the Kentia palm located on the sideboard, which had survived perfectly adequately in that position for many years, had suddenly started to wither and the ends of the fronds were turning black. The skull was sitting right next to it, where I had deposited it on my return to the house on the Friday evening. I also became aware that the room was also still distinctly chilly despite my housemaid having created a good going fire in the hearth not half an hour previously. What was most unusual though was that our housecat Gladstone seemed reluctant to enter the room, for the chaise longue by the window is his most favourite place to reside.

I asked the housemaid to send a message via one of the street boys that I would not be able to attend my outpatient clinics today. Around lunchtime, with my pain slightly improved from a further dose of Edward's morphine and able to think with slightly more clarity, I began to consider the unthinkable. I am at the very heart a scientist, but I started to wonder if the change in my fortunes and the onset of my illness was a result of the loan of the skull from the College Museum. However, it seemed impossible and made no sense to me. I had a record of the details in my notebook of the man from whom this skull originated. It was a one John Hadley, Date of Birth 17th January 1852, Date of Death 14th May 1878.

I decided that despite my sickness I needed to find out more about this person. The best place for this, I deducted, would be *The Scotsman* newspaper, whose new offices had recently opened up in the Old Town at the top of Cockburn Street facing North Bridge. On arrival and bustling my way past a group of carol singers enthusiastically bellowing out a rendition of *Good King Wenceslas* outside, I dashed into the lobby. After explaining my request to the clerk on reception, I was directed to the newspaper archive in the basement which contains a copy of every issue since the newspaper's inception in the year 1816.

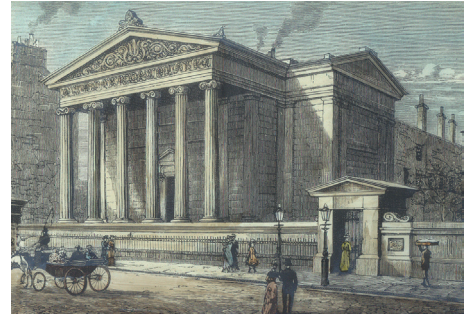
A rather morose elderly gentleman of few words in what was in effect quite a dingy storage room directed me to 1878, the year of the gentleman's death. If he had died on 14th May 1878, then I was hopeful that in one of the copies from the subsequent week there may be an obituary which may shed some light on him. It was with some surprise, as I am not prone to such fortunate outcomes, that my hunch was proved very quickly to be correct. However, it was not in the obituaries section as I had surmised, but actually tucked away in the corner on page five of the edition from 17th May 1878 I discovered a small article entitled 'Suicide in Leith'. I read with an overwhelming terror the following brief paragraph below:

"Mr John Richard Hadley, shopkeeper and resident of Great Junction Street, Leith committed suicide on 14th May 1878 by means of a pistol shot to the head. He had been driven to insanity as a result of several weeks of an intolerable earache for which no remedy had helped. He leaves behind a wife Mabel and daughter Martha."

So that explains the holes in the right maxilla and right frontal bones of his skull, I thought. The blood in my veins ran cold and I was overcome by nausea in the claustrophobic and stifling environment of the basement. The pain in my left ear throbbed even more fiercely than before. Even though I had not eaten anything since a light breakfast I retched several times. In that instant I knew what I had



*Playfair building, 1880s.
Courtesy of Dr
Jacqueline Cahif,
College Archivist, Royal
College of Surgeons of
Edinburgh.*



to do. There was no time to lose and I bounded up the stairs and staggered out onto the busy street again.

"Are you alright, sir?" the doorman enquired. "You look like you have seen a ghost!" he exclaimed.

"Actually, I have come over quite peculiar," I replied breathlessly. "Would you be so kind as to hail me a cab?" I continued, leaning against the building facade for support.

We made quick progress back to Bruntsfield, as the thoroughfares were fairly empty in the mid-afternoon. A wintry gale whipping off the Forth had also led most of the tradesmen and residents to beat a hasty retreat indoors. Once at my home, I requested that the driver wait outside. I then bounded up the steps, threw myself into the house and almost treading on the poor cat Gladstone, ran into the living room and grabbed the wretched skull, which now appeared to be gazing menacingly from the sideboard.

On re-lighting the cab, I shouted up to the driver, "To the College of Surgeons!"

My heart was racing and the pain in my ear excruciating. Once outside and thrusting a thrupenny bit into the hands of the driver, I bolted to the museum, grabbed a pencil lying on the desk, and inscribed a return date for the skull into the ledger. Making my way over to the skeleton storage section I deposited the skull along with the rest of the skeleton from whence it came and slid the lid back in place on the box sealing it tightly shut.

It is now 8pm as I sit here in the living room by the hearth. The room is warm once again, the housemaid has set some chestnuts roasting on the fire and Gladstone has reassuringly taken up his usual position on the chaise longue again. The pain in my ear started to ease the moment I left the College and I can say with some conviction that I feel that my normal constitution has almost returned.

Analysing the events of the past few days, I also believe with some certainty that the skull which I loaned from the museum was entirely responsible for my malaise. Even though I have no scientific basis for this, it is now quite evident to me that pathological specimens and skeletal remains may hold malevolent forces within their very being originating from the living humans from which they are derived. I have resolved from this very day to desist from any future research endeavours in the College Museum and will instead conduct my activities entirely within the study of the living. I no longer care a farthing for the eponym which could potentially bear my name.



School of Medicine, extra mural medical physics class at RCSEd, 1903. Courtesy of Dr Jacqueline Cahif, College Archivist, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

So, there you have the series of entries from the journal which I have found so disturbing. Following my discovery of this diary I spent a subsequent couple of weeks further studying the later entries. I came across a further one that was even more alarming than the previous ones dating from 1906, which reads as follows:

6th January 1909

It is with some sadness that we learnt this morning by telegram at the Moray Pavilion of the sudden death of Douglas Argyll Robertson three days ago whilst visiting his former pupil and friend Bhagvat Singh in Gondal, India. This took me by surprise as he had been a robust gentleman with never a day off through ill health in all the time that I had known him.

Although Argyll Robertson had retired to the warmer climes of St Aubin, Jersey in 1904, he had continued to be a regular visitor to Edinburgh and I often witnessed him in the corridors of the Moray Pavilion or the College grounds. The leisurely pursuits of retirement had clearly not lived up to his expectations as he had taken an interest in the College Museum and whenever he returned to the city, he spent considerable amounts of time there conducting further studies of his own. The last time that I had lain eyes on him, only six months ago at the start of July, he had been exiting the College grounds on to Hill Place carrying one of the large wooden museum skeleton boxes and he had been in good spirits and the picture of health.

To satisfy my curiosity, after completing the ministrations from my afternoon clinic, and with some trepidation I took a brisk walk over to the College. Although I had not crossed the threshold of the Museum since my terrible experiences just over two years ago, I had a compulsion to check the skeleton register for myself. I quickly turned to the page with the entries for Monday 13th July 1908 when I had last seen Argyll Robertson, and there it was written in black ink plain for all to see: 'Date – Monday 13th July 1908. Skeleton number – 1043. Name – John Hadley. College Fellow on loan to – Douglas Argyll Robertson.'

The skull which had previously caused me so much anguish had indeed been signed out by Douglas Argyll Robertson shortly before his departure to India and the column for the date of return lay empty.

I am now convinced that the cause of Argyll Robertson's untimely demise in India is the evil spirit of John Hadley that resides within his skeleton, the whereabouts of which now remains unknown. I believe that following death the tortured souls of those who have suffered anguish during life can possess their remains. These evil spirits are then able to exert sinister forces on the living that even scientists such as myself cannot begin to understand. I would therefore advise anyone to steer well clear of any contact with or involvement in the study of pathological or skeletal specimens derived from the dead. The occasional twinge of pain in my left ear

that I still experience to this day serves as a constant reminder to me to follow this counsel.

I have found the entries from the journal detailed above quite unsettling and my sleep has indeed become troubled since reading them. I will let you decide for yourself regarding the veracity of this doctor's accounts, but for my own part I am inclined to believe his claims and ultimately his conclusions. There is very little understanding of the soul in the afterlife, but these journal entries support the claim that the human spirit can live on in death and it is not always a force for the good.

Author's note

The story is based on some facts. In 1992 whilst studying forensic and archaeological osteology for a degree in anatomy, the author was involved in researching the contents of lead coffins discovered in post-war excavations of the crypt of St. Bride's church on Fleet Street, London.

Examination of one of the skulls found showed holes in both the maxilla and frontal bones. An investigation of the newspaper records from the time revealed that the skull had belonged to a young adult male who had been so plagued by an earache that he had ultimately committed suicide with a pistol shot through the roof of the mouth with the exit wound of the bullet through the frontal aspect of the head.

Douglas Argyll Robertson was indeed a celebrated ophthalmologist in Edinburgh and honorary surgeon-oculist to both Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, whose name has been preserved in an eponym for a pupil abnormality occurring as a result of neurosyphilis which he described. He did pass away in Gondal, India on 3rd January 1909 whilst visiting his former pupil and friend Bhagvat Singh and his body was cremated on the banks of the river Gondli. The cause of death was described as a result of catching a cold.

This story was shortlisted for the annual Crowvus Christmas Ghost Story Competition 2024 and was originally published in Crowvus' anthology of winners, *Christmas Through the Veil* (2023). The collection is available here: www.amazon.co.uk/Christmas-Through-Veil-Anthology-Anthologies/dp/1913182460

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