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Book Reviews



CURATING HUMAN REMAINS. CARING FOR THE DEAD IN THE UNITED KINGDOM. Edited by Myra Giesen. Pp. xii and 197, Illus 22. Boydell Press, 2013. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 184383 806 7.

This edited collection is of use and value for anyone interested in mortuary archaeology, museums and human remains. Stemming from a 2009 ‘Theoretical Archaeology Group’ conference session, the book assesses the impact and legacy of a range of new legislation, guidelines and practices affecting human remains over the last decade in the UK.

The book begins with Giesen’s efficient but cursory introduction. She then co-authors (with White) the first chapter which provides a very brief outline to the complex and varied international context. The book then really gets going with Swain’s personal, pragmatic and considered view of the ongoing human remains debate in the UK, and Woodhead’s essential review of the legal and ethical obligations on UK museums and other institutions holding human remains. White then surveys the impact of the *Human Tissue Act* and the 2005 DCMS *Guidelines*, identifying some, albeit limited, impact through the ability to de-accession for repatriation and the adoption of best practice. Giesen, McCarrison and Park also survey museums, arguing that vagaries of documentation mean that most of their human remains are ‘forgotten’, or at least difficult to access, within stores. Sharp and Hall assess the thus-far limited impact of the new human remains guidance and legislation on Scottish Museums, but, as with White’s survey, they concede it is perhaps too early to tell how rapidly policies and practices are changing.

Excellent and detailed case studies of policy and practice regarding the storage, display and use in research and outreach at individual museums are provided by Mark Hall (for Perth Museum and Art Gallery), Redfern and Bekvalac (for the Museum of London) and Scott (for the Great North Museum). Disappointingly, the book does not contain case studies from either Wales or Northern Ireland, and there is a lack of examples of what goes on in innumerable local museums storing and displaying human remains.

Four chapters then move beyond the museum context. Mays considers the use of St Peter’s Church, Barton-upon-Humber, as an accessible ‘church archive of human remains’, while Roberts outlines developments in best practice for the storage and handling of human remains teaching collections by universities. McKinley addresses the severe pressures on storage space for commercial units processing human remains. Finally, Parker Pearson, Pitts and Sayer outline their successful campaign to shift the interpretation of the 1857 *Burial Act* following the 2008 Ministry of Justice stipulation for reburial within two years, although they rightly state that the situation is not

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satisfactorily resolved. Clegg rounds off the book with an insightful conclusion and suggestions on ‘ways forward’.

This is a well-structured, well-presented, appropriately (but sparsely) illustrated, and useful book. The individual chapters each have their place and their merits, but I found myself frustrated by the frequent focus on description over debate, meaning that many discussions lack clarity. Given the clear focus on practitioners and their institutions, there is a near-absence of discussion regarding the cultural, religious and political contexts of these policies and practices, as well as an absence of critical self-reflection regarding changes in practice. For example, it would have been useful to learn more in the chapters by Hall and Scott regarding why decisions have been made to remove certain assemblages from museum displays, and to have a clearer criteria from McKinley (and others) regarding which sets of human remains could and should be reburied, rather than languish half-forgotten in stores. There are other gaps: some outline of ‘best practice’ when excavating human remains, including how ‘respect’ and ‘sensitivity’ is shown in the field, and how we best write, illustrate and photograph this material for publication, would have been welcome. A further frustration (not really a failing of this collection) is that the reader comes away without a clear sense of in what circumstances, and how, reburial takes place: is there still a clear-cut double-standard on grounds of religion and burial location?

This book comes out too early to incorporate discussion of the excavation of Richard III’s remains in Leicester, and the tawdry clamour regarding where his final resting place should be. Equally, the disputes over the display of human remains at the Stonehenge Visitor Centre cannot be addressed. Still, with its UK focus upon policy and practice, this book addresses many, but not all, of the key issues and usefully dovetails with the more internationally focused *Global Ancestors: Understanding the Shared Humanity of Our Ancestors* (edited by Margaret Clegg, Rebecca Redfern, Jelena Bekvalac and Heathersy Bonney, 2013). The treatment and curation of human remains in the UK is now a key area of ongoing debate and this book has a place in informing those involved and interested in recent developments.

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