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# THE WEST PORT MURDERS AND THE MINIATURE COFFINS FROM ARTHUR'S SEAT

SAMUEL PYEATT MENEFEE AND ALLEN D C SIMPSON

THIS PAPER OFFERS a new interpretation of the miniature wooden coffins found on Arthur's Seat in 1836, relating them to the West Port Murders committed by Burke and Hare in 1828. Surviving coffins from this group, and the figures contained in them, are preserved in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland, in Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup>

## PROVENANCE

At the end of June 1836, several boys, while rabbiting in Holyrood Park, Edinburgh, on the north-east range of Arthur's Seat, discovered seventeen small coffins placed in a recess in the rocks. Each was about three to four inches long, and contained a small carved wooden figure. Several of the coffins were allegedly destroyed by the boys, but an unspecified number survived intact and were preserved in a local antiquarian collection. The discovery caused some public interest and the first of several newspaper accounts was published in *The Scotsman* on 16 July 1836, in which they were described as 'Lilliputian coffins'.<sup>2</sup> On 20 August the *Edinburgh Evening Post* noted that the coffins were displayed in the private museum of Robert Frazer (fig. 1), an Edinburgh jeweller and seal engraver, at his shop at 17 South St Andrews Street.<sup>3</sup> His firm, Robert Frazer & Co., held a royal warrant as Jewellers to Queen Victoria. The business was wound up when Frazer retired in 1845. Having failed to find a buyer for his museum, Frazer had the collection auctioned over several days in late April and early May 1845.<sup>4</sup> The coffins, listed in the printed catalogue as 'The celebrated Lilliputian coffins found on Arthur's Seat, 1836, with description', were entered as lot 300, and sold for the then substantial sum of £4. 8. 0.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1. Robert Frazer as Curator of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; photograph by Thomas B. Johnston, exhibited at the Photographic Society of Scotland exhibition in 1856. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland [NMS].)

In 1901, eight of the coffins and their contents were donated to the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (now part of the National Museums of Scotland) by Mrs Christina Couper of Tynron Manse, near Thornhill, Dumfriesshire. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that these are the same coffins that were in Frazer's museum, and not a different group from the same source. In the description of the gift in the published *Proceedings* of

the Society, extended quotations were given from three of the 1836 newspaper accounts, and these were stated to 'contain all the information about this singular discovery which is now available'.<sup>6</sup> However, the quotations are not complete and have not been taken directly from the newspapers. Instead they follow the abbreviated text on a surviving single sheet, carefully reprinted at an early date from the contemporary newspapers and now preserved with the coffins in the National Museums of Scotland. The first extract on this sheet is from the original description in *The Scotsman*, but the second (abbreviated) extract and the third both highlight the presence of the coffins in Frazer's museum. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this sheet, which is backed with a nineteenth-century book board and pierced for a suspension string, forms the original display label from Frazer's museum and constituted the 'description' recorded in the sale catalogue.<sup>7</sup> The sheet is presumed to have come as part of Mrs Couper's gift in 1901.

The 1901 presentation to the Society of Antiquaries was not made in the name of the Rev. David Couper (1839–1913), who remained minister of Tynron until 1906, but in that of his wife, who was the daughter of the Edinburgh publisher Thomas Clark.<sup>8</sup> It is possible, therefore, that Clark bought the coffins, with their descriptive label, at the 1845 sale of Frazer's museum, and passed them on to his daughter.

Although the Society of Antiquaries did not deign to make purchases at the auction of Frazer's private museum, they did nonetheless accept the gift of a number of items from Frazer in December 1845 and June 1846.<sup>9</sup> There was also a remarkably close association between Frazer, the Society and their respective collections. In the 1845 sale catalogue Robert Frazer claimed Frazer & Co. had been 'Well-known Collectors for at least 30 Years', and he had in fact been elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1828.<sup>10</sup> By that date the Antiquaries had recently moved into rooms in the first floor of the

new Royal Institution building on the Mound (now the Royal Scottish Academy) where they and the Royal Society of Edinburgh were tenants.<sup>11</sup> The honorary Curator of the museums of both societies was James Skene and his Assistant Curator for the Antiquaries was Alexander Macdonald, who formally succeeded him as Curator in 1836. Frazer was probably closely involved with the Society of Antiquaries' museum from the time of his election, and he succeeded Macdonald as Assistant Curator in 1836, becoming sole curator within a few years. Frazer had completed a rearrangement of the Society's museum by 1841; he displayed the collection in late 1844 following the Society's removal to premises in George Street and he rearranged the collection again on the lines of a Danish classification system before the end of 1847.

It seems clear that Frazer's personal collection benefited from his privileged position at the Society's museum. In 1829 the Society secured the return to Edinburgh of the great artillery piece known as 'Mons Meg' from the Tower of London.<sup>12</sup> Frazer's collection contained a 'Piece of the original stock of Mons Meg'.<sup>13</sup> Three separate gifts of fragments from the wreck of the *Royal George*, sunk at Spithead in 1782, were considered unsuitable for the Society's museum, and three such fragments were included in Frazer's museum.<sup>14</sup> One group of specimens that was accepted by the Society was a collection of coining implements from the old Scottish Mint, presented by the Clerks of the Justiciary Court in 1841. At least some of these ended up with Frazer: lot 129 in the sale catalogue of Frazer's collection was described as 'Dies for knarling the coin, and piece of the block and dies from which the coin was struck in the Edinburgh mint'.<sup>15</sup> The impression that Frazer diverted into his personal museum material weeded from the Society's collection is reinforced by the large number of natural history specimens and 'curiosities' which appear in the 1845 catalogue, and



which may have become available in the exchanges made between the collections of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries beginning in 1828.<sup>16</sup>

There is no record of whether the miniature coffins from Arthur's Seat were first offered to the Society of Antiquaries for its museum. Perhaps they would have been rejected as mere curiosities, although it is clear that Frazer was proud to have secured them for his personal collection. His interest in such sensational material can be seen in the inclusion of two specimens connected with William Burke, executed for the West Port Murders in 1829 and subsequently dissected by Alexander Monro *Tertius*, the Professor of Anatomy in the University. These items were a piece of the rope which hanged Burke and a piece of tanned skin from Burke's right arm.<sup>17</sup>

It is not known what interpretation Frazer himself placed on the miniature coffins from Arthur's Seat, although a number of suggestions were made in the Edinburgh newspapers of the day. Since then, the coffins have been discussed twice in academic publications in addition to several popular mentions. In 1902, the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* described and illustrated the objects and quoted the newspaper extracts from the reprinted sheet described above; the writer generally concluded that the intention was to symbolise honorific burial.<sup>18</sup> In 1976 Dr Walter Hävernick, Director of the Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, published a further description of the items, offering his own theory as to their origin.<sup>19</sup>

In all, five separate explanations have been advanced to account for the construction and burial of the coffins: (a) that the coffins were used in witchcraft practices, representing individuals to be harmed through sympathetic magic; (b) that they were in imitation of the ancient German custom (from Saxony) of burying in effigy those who had died abroad; (c) that they related to a custom practiced by the

families of some Scottish sailors, who buried their menfolk in effigy if they were lost at sea; (d) that they were the result of a single individual's mental aberration; and finally, Hävernick's suggestion (e) that they were linked to the belief in the supernatural properties of a mandrake in a coffin and represented a hoard deposited by their maker (or a merchant) and intended for subsequent sale. This last proposal saw the Edinburgh coffins as a nineteenth-century nautical derivative of the mandrake tradition, in which the figures had become helpful spirits intended to bring good luck to the owner. Hävernick's interpretation was adopted by the Museum in 1989 when the coffins were displayed in the special exhibition 'The Wealth of a Nation', mounted to draw attention to the Scottish collections which will be exhibited in the new Museum of Scotland.<sup>20</sup>

It is the intention of this article to comment on the physical description of the artefacts in the light of new tests undertaken for the authors by staff at the National Museums of Scotland, and to review the available evidence concerning the coffins' original discovery. This will be followed by an evaluation of why none of the five theories about the purpose of the burial seems to be fully satisfactory. Finally, an alternative theory will be advanced, based on the new physical information available, and on the social context of the artefacts' discovery in 1836. This was originally propounded in an address given by Dr Menefee at the School of Scottish Studies in March 1992, and was advanced with additions by Dr Simpson in the most recent display of the coffins mounted in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, in October 1993.<sup>21</sup>

#### DESCRIPTION

Eight coffins of the original seventeen are now preserved in the National Museums of Scotland and no other examples are known to survive elsewhere. Each coffin contains an 'occupant' and has been hol-

lowed from a solid piece of wood. Each also has a lid which has been held in place by pins of various sizes, driven down through the sides and ends of the coffin base.<sup>22</sup> In many instances the pin shafts are still in place, although some are bent over: when the lids were prised off the coffins most of the hand-wound pin heads became detached, and indeed a number of pin heads are still embedded in the lids. In the early accounts these headless pins were described as 'sprigs', but it seems more likely that all the pins originally had hand-wound heads. The position of the pin holes indicates that the individual lids belong to the coffins with which they are now associated. Although the type of wood has not previously been commented on, it has now been identified as Scots pine.<sup>23</sup> Coffin dimensions vary: while the original description in *The Scotsman* on 16 July 1836 reported that they were 3 to 4 inches in length, those now accessible for study are 3.7 to 4.1 inches long (95–104 mm), 0.7 to 1.2 inches wide (18–30 mm), and 0.8 to 1.0 inches deep (20–26 mm) with their lids in place.

All the coffins have been cut from single blocks of wood, and judging by the longitudinal scoring on the base of the recess, a sharp knife – probably a hooked knife – has been used. The fact that the surfaces at the ends of the recess are so cleanly cut indicates that the knife has been very sharp; but the user has apparently not been a woodworker by trade because he has not had access to an edge tool such as a chisel to cut the base of the recess, and has had difficulty in controlling the depth of the cuts (which have even penetrated the base of coffin No. 5).

There are two distinct types of external shape. Five of the coffins (Nos 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8) have been carved with comparatively square-cut corners and edges, although most have slightly bowed sides so that the coffin has a taper at each end (fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> However, the remaining three (Nos 3, 5 and 7) have a pronounced rounding of the edges and ends of the coffin: this suggests a different manual approach to

forming the external shape and may indicate that the coffins could have been carved by two different individuals.

The most striking visual feature of the coffins is the use of applied pieces of tinned iron as decoration.<sup>25</sup> Lozenge-shaped pieces, with the two pointed ends turned down to form a staple, are attached to the sides of the coffin, at the corresponding position on the lid, and also at the ends of the coffin. It is possible that these might originally have been considered as partly functional, and that they may have been intended to locate tapes tied round the coffins to secure the lids; however, no evidence of such tapes is now seen. Hugh Cheape, the Curator responsible for these collections, has tentatively identified these metal pieces as the 'hatchlets' or 'latches' used on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century shoes, over which the buckles fitted to close the shoe.<sup>26</sup> Six of the coffins and their lids are embellished with small flat nails cut from the same material as the latches and similarly tinned: it is believed that these were also used in shoe-making or leather-working as a method, for example, of attaching leather to wooden components such as wooden soles. If this is the case, the combination of fittings used in the shoe trade with the type of very sharp hook knife used for leather cutting, might explain why the coffins were not made with the skill that would be expected of a joiner.

In one instance, a different type of metal attachment has been applied: coffin No. 3 has makeshift latches on its ends which have been cut from a pressed brass sheet. This was clearly some domestic fitting such as a mirror plate, and is consistent with an early nineteenth-century date.

Another feature which has not been mentioned in previous accounts and which distinguishes at least two of the coffins from the others is the remains of surface paint.<sup>27</sup> Pink or red pigment is visible on the exterior of coffins Nos 2 and 4, both of which are of





Fig. 2. Five of the miniature coffins, with their lids and figures, showing the external decoration and the different states of preservation of the clothing. These examples all have square-cut edges to the coffins. Left to right: above - Nos 1, 2, 4; below - Nos 6 and 8. (NMS.)

the square-cut variety, and in neither case does the paint extend over the lower surface. Coffin No. 2 is also the only one to have a paper lining – this is of a wove paper, almost certainly of rag fibre, and datable to post-1780.<sup>28</sup>

Little has been said about the figures inside the coffins – the initial account in *The Scotsman*, for example, noted only that ‘the faces in particular [are] pretty well executed’.<sup>29</sup> In fact the carving of these figures, which are in a close-grained white wood which may also be Scots pine, is excellent, and the quality of the detail is remarkably consistent over all the figures. Some of the figures are covered by cloth (which is described below) but the carved detail can be felt through the cloth and it can be determined that the vertical proportions of the figures are almost identical, even though some are slimmer than others (fig. 3). The heights of the complete figures vary only



Fig. 3. Two of the figures, Nos 3 (left) and 5 (right), shown for comparison in size and features. (NMS.)

between 3.2 and 3.4 inches (81–86 mm).

It is apparent that the figures have been carved by the same hand and that they form part of a set. The evidence of their features strongly suggests that they were originally made as model soldiers. The figures have a rigidly erect bearing with straight backs, and the contours of the lower half of their bodies are carefully formed to indicate tight knee breeches and hose, below which the feet are blackened to indicate ankle boots (fig. 4). In contrast, the upper trunk and the long arms are more rudimentary, and are probably designed to be covered by a military tunic. The arms of each figure comprise a single piece of light wood inserted in a hole drilled between the shoulders, bent down at each shoulder and brought to a point at the ‘hand’.<sup>30</sup> It is suggested that this would enable the arms to be swung backwards to fit in the sleeves of a tunic as well as providing support for a toy weapon.

The description of the figures in the Society’s *Proceedings* at the time of the accession in 1901 stated that there was ‘a perceptible difference in the size and make of the bodies as well as in the features, which seems suggestive of the idea that the different effigies are intended to represent individuals’.<sup>31</sup> However, these differences extend only to the girth or weight of the figures and, as has already been noted, the heights and vertical proportions of the figures are almost identical. Although the shapes of the heads of the figures differ, the writer of the description in the *Proceedings* did not appreciate that the working of the facial features shows remarkable similarities: all



Fig. 4. Side view of figure No. 5 showing the modelling of the head and legs. (NMS.)



the figures have the same characteristic wide-set eye shape with the pupil clearly shown, and they share the same short pointed nose, narrow straight mouth, broad jaw and projecting pointed chin. It seems unlikely that the figures were ever intended to represent particular individuals.

The open eyes of the figures suggests that they were not carved to represent corpses. Another indication leading to this conclusion is that the models were apparently intended to wear hats – hair has been indicated by blackening the back of the head, but not above a scribed 'hat-line' which runs round the head. It is suggested that in their original guise as toy soldiers, the figures were fitted with miniature headgear – possibly bicorn hats. Equally, corpses would not be expected to stand, and yet these figures have feet which are cut accurately flat, and they will stand if weighted slightly forward – perhaps originally they were supplied with miniature muskets or drums. Tentatively, these uniformed figures can be identified with the volunteer militias raised in the 1790s and familiar from the illustrations in John Kay's *Portraits* (fig. 5).<sup>32</sup> One can imagine that model soldiers would have been popular toys at this period and were probably sold by travelling chapmen.

Nine of the original seventeen coffins were destroyed, and of the eight that survive several have been badly affected by damp. The cloth wrappings of these figures has largely decayed, but in the best preserved examples it is clear that the 'occupants' of the coffins have been fitted with fabric grave clothes. Single-piece suits, made from fragments of cloth, have been moulded round the figures and sewn in place. With some figures there is evidence of adhesive under the cloth. The style of the dress does not relate to period grave clothes, and if it is intended to be representational at all then it is more in keeping with everyday wear.<sup>33</sup> However, the fact that the arms of figure No. 8 were already missing when the figure was clothed suggests that the fabric was merely



Fig. 5. Lt. Col. Patrick Crichton of the 1st Regiment of the Royal Edinburgh Volunteers, drilling the 'awkward squad' on Brunsfield Links: etching by John Kay in 1794. (NMS.)

intended to cover the figures decently and not to represent garments.

Fragments of different inexpensive fabrics have been used to make these clothes, but they are all of a basic plain weave in cotton.<sup>34</sup> In the case of the best-preserved suit, on figure No. 2, the cloth is entirely plain, whereas the cloth on figure No. 4 has a woven check pattern; three of the figures (Nos 3, 7 and 8) seem to have commercially-inked patterns applied to the cloth. The good condition of some of the fabric suggested to Naomi Tarrant, Curator of European Textiles at the National Museums of Scotland, that they were buried in the 1830s.<sup>35</sup> Some of the figures are also lying on fabric padding, and included in the



padding in coffin No. 8 was a small piece of satin-weave textile, possibly silk, which has been identified as the remnant of a hat lining.<sup>36</sup>

The cloth suits have been sewn together as well as being glued to the figures, and a variety of thread types have been found on the better preserved figures (fig. 6). For Nos 2 and 8, cotton thread has been used, in the first case 3-ply and in the second 2-ply; whereas for No. 4 a single-ply linen thread has been used, and for No. 6 a 2-ply linen thread.<sup>37</sup> Almost certainly such thread would have been manufactured in the thread mills of Paisley, where tradition has it that cotton thread was not made before 1812.<sup>38</sup> However, practical experience of handling contemporary garments has shown that cotton thread was tending to replace linen thread from about 1800, and it was already being manufactured in the late eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Philip Sykas of Manchester City Art Galleries,

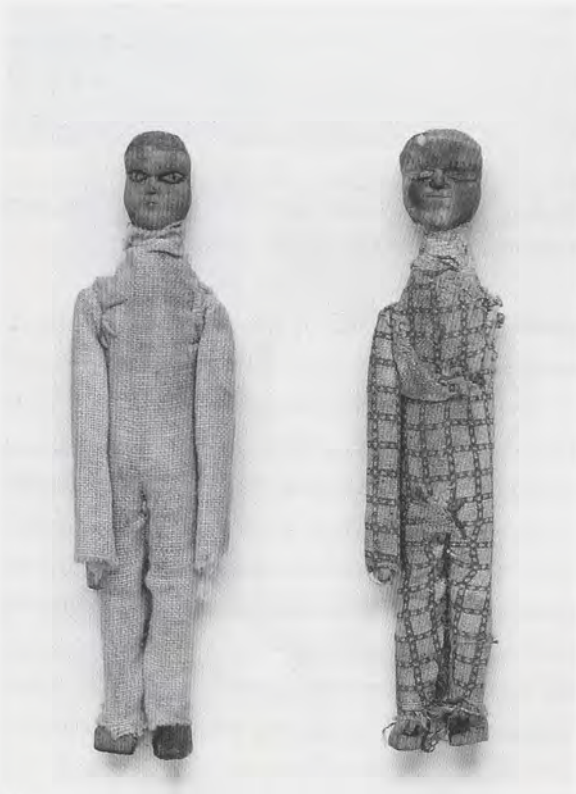


Fig. 6. The sewn clothing of figures Nos 2 (left) and 4 (right). (NMS.)

who has taken a particular interest in sewing thread, has observed that 3-ply cotton thread (as on figure No. 2) was used from about 1830, and he believes that the mixture of thread types found on the Arthur's Seat figures indicates a date in the 1830s.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, therefore, the evidence of the coffins themselves is that they were probably made by one or at the most two individuals. The variety of cloth and thread types equally indicates that the clothes were made by one or more persons or over a period of time. The coffins with the most refinement of detail, including paper lining and exterior paint, are also those in which the fabric is in best condition, suggesting they were the last to be prepared. However, the evidence of the figures is that a common source was used and the finished coffins were made up over a relatively short period, probably in the 1830s.

It has already been mentioned that Frazer's original descriptive label for the coffins seems to have been acquired along with the coffins in 1901. Another item obtained at the same time was one of the three slate stones which had been used to close the aperture in the rock in which the coffins had been hidden. The slates had been described in the original *Scotsman* account of 16 July 1836 as being 'rudely cut at the upper ends into a conical form'.<sup>41</sup> While the stone is not mentioned in Society of Antiquaries' donation ledger and can no longer be located, the so-called 'Continuation Catalogue' records the gift as including 'a small slab of dark-gray slate 3¾" x 1½" rudely shaped like the headstone of a grave'.<sup>42</sup> This colour suggests a Scottish slate from the West Highland slate belts, or possibly from the Ballachulish quarries.<sup>43</sup> Substantial quantities of slate were being shipped round the north of Scotland to Leith for the roofs of the rapidly expanding New Town: in 1795 the recorded annual output from the Easdale quarries was 5 million slates, and by 1837 the output from the Ballachulish quarries had reached 3 million slates per year.<sup>44</sup>

## DISCOVERY

The principal account of the original discovery appeared in *The Scotsman* newspaper of 16 July 1836.<sup>45</sup>

About three weeks ago, while a number of boys were amusing themselves in searching for rabbit burrows on the north-east range of Arthur's Seat, they noticed, in a very rugged and secluded spot, a small opening in one of the rocks, the peculiar appearance of which attracted their attention. The mouth of this little cave was closed by three thin pieces of slatestone, rudely cut at the upper ends into a conical form, and so placed as to protect the interior from the effects of the weather. The boys having removed these tiny slabs, discovered an aperture about twelve inches square, in which were lodged seventeen Lilliputian coffins, forming two tiers of eight each, and one on a third just begun!

Each of the coffins contained a miniature figure of the human form cut out in wood, the faces in particular being pretty well executed. They were dressed from head to foot in cotton clothes, and decently 'laid out' with mimic representation of all the funereal trappings which usually form the last habiliments of the dead. The coffins are about three or four inches in length, regularly shaped, and cut out from a single piece of wood, with the exception of the lids, which are nailed down with wire sprigs or common brass pins. The lid and sides of each are profusely studded with ornaments formed of small pieces of tin, and inserted in the wood with great care and regularity. Another remarkable circumstance is, that many years must have elapsed since the first interment took place in this mysterious sepulchre; and it is also evident that the depositions must have been made singly, and at considerable intervals – facts indicated by the rotten and decayed state of the first tier of coffins and their wooden mummies – the wrapping clothes being in some instances entirely mouldered away, while others show various degrees of decomposition; and the coffin last placed, with its shrouded tenant, are as clean and fresh as if only a few days had elapsed since their entombment.

As before stated, there were in all seventeen of these mystic coffins; but a number were destroyed by the boys pelting them at each other as unmeaning and contemptible trifles.

There are other accounts in contemporary newspapers over the next few months but they largely repeat the story from *The Scotsman*. No independent account of the unearthing of these artefacts has been found nor is there any other pertinent information in the files of the National Museums of Scotland. However, on 16 October 1956 an article by Robert Chapman in the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* offered

information not given in any of the several 1836 newspaper accounts.<sup>46</sup> The source and status of Chapman's information is unknown, but his account appears exact enough to warrant careful consideration. Chapman has added a number of details to the story: the discovery was made on Saturday 25 June as a result of the investigations of a dog brought on the rabbiting expedition, and the cave, which was 'about a foot in height and depth and about 18" wide' was opened up with trowels. While the boys were said to have tossed the coffins around, they did not open them and they replaced them in the recess before going off. The artefacts were later retrieved and opened by their schoolmaster.

Chapman stated that the coffins on the top tier were reported to have been 'rotting with age', but those lower down were 'well preserved'. This reverses the order given in the *Scotsman* account of 16 July 1836, which contrasted 'the rotten and decayed state of the first tier of coffins and their wooden mummies' with the fact that 'the coffin last placed [was] as clean and fresh as if only a few days had elapsed since ... entombment'. On the basis of this the *Scotsman's* writer assumed that 'many years must have elapsed since the first interment took place ... and it is also evident that the deposits must have been made singly, and at considerable intervals'. The contemporary account in the *Edinburgh Evening Post* of 20 August 1836 (which may, however, be based in part on the original description in *The Scotsman*) said that 'in the under row the shrouds were considerably decayed and the wood rotten, while the last bore evident marks of being a very recent deposit'. Chapman's account, if it is based on a separate source, implies the decay resulted from weathering action on a less protected upper tier; but this may simply represent a misinterpretation of the 1836 versions, which are consistent with damp penetration into the lower tier. In none of these versions does the condition of the coffins necessarily imply use of the



burial site over a very extended period: if the recess in the rock became wet enough the fabric in the lower tier of coffins could have decayed fairly quickly after a single deposition, or after a series of depositions over a comparatively short period such as a year.<sup>47</sup>

It would be particularly useful to know Chapman's source for his information about the boys' schoolteacher:<sup>48</sup>

Next day one of the boys told his schoolmaster, a Mr. Ferguson, what they had found. It happened that Ferguson was a member of the local archaeological society and after school asked the boy to show him the coffins. Mr. Ferguson took them home in a bag and that evening he settled down in his kitchen and began to prise up the lids with a knife. It appeared that they had been put in the cave at different times over a long period. The first ones may have been entombed many years earlier; the last within a few months, perhaps only weeks ... Mr. Ferguson took them to the next meeting of his society and his colleagues were equally amazed.

While it has not proved possible to identify the archaeological society involved, the teacher can provisionally be identified either as George Ferguson, the classics master at Edinburgh Academy, or as Findlay Ferguson, a teacher of English, writing and mathematics at Easter Duddingston.<sup>49</sup> Neither was a member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland or of the Bannatyne Club, the Edinburgh-based historical publishing society.

#### INTERPRETATION

As noted above, five theories have been coined to account for these objects. Several were offered in 1836 at the time of the coffins' discovery; others have arisen over the years. We will examine each of these theories in turn.

(a) *The items were used in witchcraft practices, representing individuals to be harmed through sympathetic magic.* As *The Scotsman* of 16 July 1836 noted: 'Our own opinion would be ... that there are still some of the weird sisters hovering about Mushat's Cairn or the Windy Gowl, who retain their ancient power to work the spells of death by entomb-

ing the likenesses of those they wish to harm or destroy'. While the existence of Scottish *corp creadh* (clay figures representing intended witchcraft victims) – one even dressed in linen – is well attested to, these images were specifically produced to be destroyed: they were either melted, pierced or placed in a stream in order to eliminate the enemy represented.<sup>50</sup> At least one spell, consisting of pins stuck in a piece of wood, is reported from Strathfillan, Perthshire.<sup>51</sup> But there is no evidence in any of these cases of coffins being used to contain the images, nor do X-rays reveal the presence of pins in any of the Arthur's Seat figures.<sup>52</sup> This is in accord with the *Proceedings'* statement<sup>53</sup> that

it is evident that the intention was different from that of the well-known maleficent superstitious practice of making effigies of individuals which were subjected to various kinds of ill-usage ... in the belief that the same effects would happen to the individual represented by the effigy. On the contrary, in this case, the intention seems to be to symbolise honorific burial.

(b) *The effigies imitate a Saxony custom of thus 'burying' those who have died abroad.* The *Edinburgh Evening Post* of 20 August 1836, and other papers, suggest that the figures were 'in imitation of an ancient custom which prevailed in Saxony, of burying in effigy departed friends who had died in a distant land'.<sup>54</sup> This theory fails to take into account how such a German belief passed to Scotland or what catastrophe could have destroyed seventeen individuals. As Hävernicks notes, 'the fact that the little coffins were so carefully placed in the rows of eight each indicates that this was not a case of individual symbolic burials, made one after another'.<sup>55</sup> If the belief did indeed travel, why then does the Edinburgh deposit appear to be unique in the British Isles?<sup>56</sup>

(c) A third theory holds that *the interments can be explained as a nautical custom.* Thus, according to the *Caledonian Mercury* of 25 August 1836, they were related to a 'superstition which exists among some sailors in [Scotland], that they enjoin their

wives on parting to give them a "Christian burial in effigy" if they happen' to be lost at sea.<sup>57</sup> Leaving aside why this custom, if it indeed existed, has resulted in only one such find, there are still problems with the multiple interments and their presence outside a burial ground.

(d) Others hold that *the coffins were the result of a single individual's mental aberration*. This explanation was initially suggested in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* in 1902.<sup>58</sup> It appeared to be reinforced in an article in the *Edinburgh Evening News* at the time of the centenary of the discovery, in 1936; according to 'M. H.', its anonymous author,<sup>59</sup> there was at that time a letter in the National Museum which described how

a woman who was living in Edinburgh in 1836 stated that a man who was not only deaf and dumb, but also 'daft' was in the habit of going to her father's office now and again. Some time after the discovery of the coffins on Arthur[s] Seat the man turned up at the office in a terrible state of excitement, clutching a sheet of paper on which was a sketch of three coffins bearing the dates 1837, 1839, and 1840. After this occasion the man never came back and was never heard of again. Curiously enough, it is stated that the woman's father died in 1837, and two other relatives died in 1839 and 1840. The theory advanced in this letter is to the effect that the tiny coffins and their 'corpses' were the handiwork of this man, who obviously was obsessed with the idea of coffins, and that possibly the loss of his carefully concealed little graveyard completely upset his usual balance.

While the mental aberration theory is, because of its very nature, hard to disprove, there is of course no proof of any connection between the wooden objects and the sheet of paper with its sketches. Furthermore, there is no explanation of the *rationale* behind the act of interment – why seventeen coffins should be buried together.

(e) Dr Hävernicks theory is that *the effigies are related to the belief in the supernatural properties of a mandrake in a coffin and represent a hoard deposited by the maker or merchant and intended for sale*. This solution was based on a perceived likeness between the Edinburgh burials and 'six little coffin-

shaped boxes, some of wood, some of thin iron plate' found in the debris of a house belonging to the Schooner Society in Lubeck.<sup>60</sup> These German examples date from the early eighteenth century (the dates 1710 and 1711 were chiseled on them) and each contained 'a lifelike figure made of cloth and with an animal skull'. Hävernicks suggested that the Edinburgh effigies were 'apparently a hoard, deposited by the maker or by the merchant and intended for sale to superstitious contemporaries ... presumably to be sought in seafaring circles'.<sup>61</sup> This association appears a bit optimistic, involving as it does geographically disparate occurrences of differently constructed objects being buried at dates almost a century apart. More to the point, why would any nautical merchant desire to stash his wares on Arthur's Seat?

#### REAPPRAISAL

Since none of these potential explanations for the Arthur's Seat coffins seems particularly satisfactory, a reappraisal of the available evidence appears desirable. The recent tests undertaken at the National Museums of Scotland play a large role in discounting some of the earlier theories, and in suggesting an alternative theory.

Hävernicks was told that the textile samples appeared to date from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and this opinion still holds true.<sup>62</sup> This dating is compatible with the presence of post-1780 wove paper in coffin No. 2, cotton thread on figures 2 and 8, and the stamped brass fitting on coffin 3. However, the evidence of the threads now points clearly to at least one of the coffins (No. 2) dating from about 1830. Without a knowledge of the conditions inside the recess in which the coffins were discovered it is impossible to say whether the decayed state of some of the coffins resulted only from their position or from their longer exposure to damp. However, the understanding that the wooden figures formed part of a set of toys, which was perhaps



already a generation old before being pressed into service again, strongly suggests that they were prepared over a comparatively short period and probably buried in a single act or on a very few occasions. In the light of this, the significant feature of the burial is that there were seventeen coffins.

It is arguable that the problem with the various theories is their concentration on *motivation*, rather than on the event or events which caused the interments. The former will always be open to argument, but if the burials were event-driven – by, say, the loss of a ship with seventeen fatalities during the period in question – the speculation would at least be built on demonstrable fact. Stated another way, what we seek is an Edinburgh-related event or events, involving seventeen deaths, which occurred close to 1830 and certainly before 1836. One obvious answer springs

out – the West Port Murders by William Burke and William Hare in the years 1827 and 1828.<sup>63</sup>

These killings were, of course, committed in Edinburgh by two Irish labourers who solved the problem of supplying corpses for dissection to the medical students of Edinburgh by the simple expedient of manufacturing corpses to meet demand. Burke and Hare were employed on the construction of the Union Canal and lodged in Portsburgh, the part of Edinburgh west of the Grassmarket, just outside the old city boundary at the West Port. The corpses of their victims were sold to the dissecting rooms of the prominent anatomy lecturer Rober Knox at Surgeon Square (fig. 7). Burke and Hare's first sale, in December 1827, was that of 'old Donald', a lodger who had died of natural causes; but the sixteen corpses which followed (see *Appendix*) were all mur-



Fig. 7. Robert Knox giving an anatomy demonstration to students: lithograph caricature by Daniel Macnee produced in 1829 at the time of the Burke and Hare case. The Latin tag alludes to night, in the form of Knox, inducing sleep of a more permanent type. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

dered by Burke, by Hare, or by the two working as a team. Unfortunately, there is no sexual differentiation of the surviving coffin figures which might serve as a check, nor is there any way to 'match' figures with the individuals known to have been victims. It is clear, however, that the sale of seventeen bodies was attempted between late 1827 and late 1828 (we have this from Burke's two surviving confessions, apparently corroborated by another from Hare).<sup>64</sup> Their trial in 1829, which resulted in Burke's execution after Hare turned King's evidence, caused a sensation; and information about their victims would have been available through pamphlets concerning this notorious case, newspaper accounts of the trial, or indeed from trial testimony.

Considering beliefs such as the alleged mimic burial given to Scottish sailors lost at sea, it would not be unreasonable for some person or persons, in the absence of the seventeen dissected bodies, to wish to propitiate these dead, the majority of whom were murdered in atrocious circumstances, by a form of burial to set their spirits at rest. While it is always possible that other disasters could have resulted in an identical casualty list, the West Port Murders would appear to be a logical motivating force. Several of Burke and Hare's victims had been selected in part because they did not have relatives who would miss them – or could mourn them. And although Robert Knox did have procedures for disposing of dissected corpses, it would have been known that these were hardly treated with Christian ceremony.<sup>65</sup>

Further, the presence of the coffins on Arthur's Seat could be explained in several possible ways. A churchyard would not have been the best place for such a mock burial because of the very fear of Resurrectionists heightened by the Burke and Hare

case. Perhaps the site of the find, falling within the bounds of the Sanctuary of Holyrood, might have provided certain religious associations freed from the strict supervision accorded a kirkyard.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, not only was this general locale the site of Muschet's Cairn, renowned as the site where that medical student murdered his wife in 1720,<sup>67</sup> but at least one alleged suicide, the murderer Mungo Campbell, had his body dumped (or buried) in the Cat Nick at Salisbury Craggs in about 1770.<sup>68</sup> A similar resting place might have been deemed appropriate for the coffins.

A mock burial of Burke and Hare's seventeen casualties might also have been deemed appropriate, amid the popular traditional responses to the West Port Murders. In addition to several children's rhymes,<sup>69</sup> the crimes and their discovery spawned the mock execution of Dr Knox, the anatomist responsible for dissecting the corpses,<sup>70</sup> and the attempted mobbing of Helen M'Dougall (Hare's common-law wife) and William Hare himself when he escaped justice by turning informer.<sup>71</sup> Many associated 'traditions', such as the subsequent blinding of Hare in a lime-pit,<sup>72</sup> or his eventual appearance in London as a beggar,<sup>73</sup> may be assigned with reasonable confidence to the realm of folk belief;<sup>74</sup> and there were, of course, tales and traditions of other 'Burker' killings.<sup>75</sup>

Set in this context of tradition and popular response, a mimic burial does not seem particularly out of place. It is not possible to state definitively the purpose of the Arthur's Seat coffins – only their gravedigger knew that. The re-evaluation of these ethnological artefacts, combined with an examination of the period's social context has, however, suggested a new potential connection – with the West Port Murders – which the years have not erased.



## APPENDIX

*Bodies sold by Burke and Hare (see note 64)*

| <b>Name and description</b>                                             | <b>Background and occupation</b>                                            | <b>Date of Death</b>             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Donald</b><br>old man                                                | army pensioner;<br>lodger                                                   | 29 Nov. 1827<br>(sold Dec. 1827) |
| <b>Joseph</b><br>man                                                    | miller; lodger                                                              | 1828                             |
| <b>Abigail Simpson</b><br>old woman                                     | beggar from Gilmartin;<br>sold salt and camstone;<br>lodger                 | 11/12 Feb. 1828                  |
| <b>Mary Pat[t]erson</b><br>young woman (c. 18)                          | prostitute                                                                  | 9 Apr. 1828                      |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>old woman                                           | lodger                                                                      | May 1828                         |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>man (c. 40);<br>tall, black hair,<br>brown whiskers | Englishman from<br>Cheshire; used to sell<br>spunks; lodger                 | 1828                             |
| <b>'Mrs' Mary Haldane</b><br>old woman; stout;<br>one tooth only        | prostitute; lodger;<br>mother of Margaret<br>Haldane below                  | 1828                             |
| <b>Effie (?)</b><br>woman                                               | cinderwoman; lodger                                                         | 1828                             |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>woman                                               | Irishwoman from Glasgow;<br>lodger; mother or grand-<br>mother of boy below | June 1828                        |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>young boy (c. 12)                                   | Irish boy from Glasgow;<br>simpleton; son or<br>grandson of above           | June 1828                        |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>woman                                               | lodger                                                                      | 1828                             |
| <b>(unknown)</b><br>woman                                               | —                                                                           | 1828                             |

|                                                           |                                                                       |                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Margaret or Peggy Haldane</b><br>woman                 | prostitute; lodger;<br>daughter of 'Mrs' Mary<br>Haldane above        | 1828                     |
| <b>Mrs Hostler or Ostler</b><br>woman                     | charwoman / washerwoman                                               | Sep. – Oct. 1828         |
| <b>Ann M'Dougal</b><br>young woman                        | Falkirk woman; distant<br>relative of Burke's<br>wife's first husband | 1828                     |
| <b>'Daft Jamie' Wilson</b><br>large boy (18)              | simpleton                                                             | 5–16 Oct. 1828           |
| <b>Mary Docherty or Mrs Campbell</b><br>middle-aged woman | Irish                                                                 | 31 Oct. – 1 Nov.<br>1828 |

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 1 National Museums of Scotland (NMS), History and Applied Art Department, Inv. NT.86.1–8.
- 2 *The Scotsman*, 16 July 1836 (reprinted almost *verbatim* in *The Times*, 20 July 1836, and in *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 July 1836); see also *The Scotsman*, 31 August 1836.
- 3 *Edinburgh Evening Post*, 20 August 1836 (p. 685). This article appears to be the source for a further entry in the *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 August 1836.
- 4 Frazer announced his intention to retire and his hope to sell the business as a going concern in *The Scotsman* on 4 December 1844. Having failed to find a successor he announced that the auction of his stock would begin on 10 March, followed at a later date by the 'Private Museum of Natural History and Antiquities': *ibid.*, 5 March 1845. A further advertisement on 22 March indicated a preference for

sale of the whole museum by private contract, and another on 16 April announced that the collection would be auctioned in stages from 29 April 1845: *ibid.*

- 5 *Catalogue of the Valuable Museum of Robert Frazer & Co., No. 17 South St Andrew Street, Well-known Collectors for at least 30 Years ... to be sold by Auction, on their Premises, on Tuesday 29th April 1845, and following Lawful Days ... by Mr David Walker* (Edinburgh 1845), p. 13. Certain entries (including this lot) are annotated in pencil with the selling price in the copy of this catalogue in the Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh City Libraries (YN 8650F). The scope of the collection described in the *Catalogue* was wide, and included natural history specimens and curiosities, antiquities, models, ethnographical material and coins. A separately published *Appendix to the Catalogue of the Museum of Messrs R. Frazer & Co.* (Edinburgh 1845) covered the mineral collection, books on heraldry and seal impressions. Frazer's collection is not recorded in the standard listing of natural history sales, J. M. Chalmers-Hunt's *Natural History Auctions 1700–1972* (London 1976).
- 6 The donation to the Society's museum was recorded at the meeting of 10 March 1902, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS)*, 36 (1901–02), pp. 460–463.
- 7 The second extract was abbreviated from the account in the *Edinburgh Evening Post* of 20 August 1836 and the third was from the *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 August 1836. In the original article in the *Edinburgh Evening Post* his name was spelt



- 'Fraser', but he has taken the opportunity in reprinting an extract from this article to correct it to 'Fraser'.
- 8 Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, New Edition (Edinburgh 1915–28), II, p. 328.
  - 9 The donations are recorded in *Archaeologia Scotica*, 5 (1890), *Appendix*, pp. 52–53, 54. These specimens included at least one item – an Egyptian mummy's hand – which had failed to sell at the auction. The hand is lot 379 in Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 16.
  - 10 Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 1. For Frazer's election see manuscript ledger, 'Minutes of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland' 1827–1840, meeting of 31 March 1828: NMS Library.
  - 11 The source for this paragraph is R. B. K. Stevenson, 'The Museum, its Beginnings and its Development. Part I: to 1858', in A. S. Bell (ed.), *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and its Museum, 1780–1980* (Edinburgh 1981), pp. 31–85, see especially pp. 66–79.
  - 12 R. B. K. Stevenson, 'The Return of Mons Meg from London, 1828–1829', in D. Caldwell (ed.), *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications* (Edinburgh 1981), pp. 419–436.
  - 13 Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 11. Instead of being part of the gun itself, the 'stock' may have been part of the wooden carriage for the gun, which collapsed in 1835 and was reconstructed at the Society's request: Stevenson, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 419–420.
  - 14 Stevenson, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 75; Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 6, 9, 14; lots 89, 180, 324. A fragment of the *Royal George* is included in the residual component of the private collection of Christopher Dawson, bequeathed in 1905 to the Royal Burgh of Linlithgow and now held on behalf of West Lothian District Council by Linlithgow Heritage Trust: ethnographic items in this collection can also be matched with entries in the catalogue of the Frazer sale. The collection is described in *Official Catalogue of the Dawson Collection and Burgh Museum in Council Chamber, Linlithgow* (n.p., n.d. [1906?]). See A. Creuze, 'Remarks on the Structure of the *Royal George* and on the Condition of the Timber ... recovered during ... 1839', *Proceedings of the Geological Society of London*, 3 (1842), pp. 289–290.
  - 15 Stevenson, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 75; Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 7.
  - 16 See Stevenson, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp. 69–70. Frazer's collection contained at least one natural history specimen figured in the literature – a misformed rabbit skull, described in *Edinburgh Journal of Natural History*, 1 (1835–39), p. 66; and see Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 5.
  - 17 Frazer, *Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 16, lots 370 and 371. One of these items was noted by Alexander Leighton, who described Frazer as 'the noted antiquarian and collector of curiosities': A. Leighton, *The Court of Cacus; or, The Story of Burke and Hare* (London 1861), p. 280 note. Leighton reported that a piece of the skin of William Burke's right arm was given to a friend of the dissecting room assistant, who had it tanned white and the portraits of Burke and his wife and of Hare printed thereon. This was given to Frazer 'and it was in one of his cases for many years – may be still, if he is alive': *ibid.*, pp. 279–280 note. However, it is assumed that this item was successfully sold at the 1845 auction and was not retained by Frazer. There are other Burke mementos of this type: another piece of Burke's skin covers a pocket book in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (Inv. HC.AB 10.4), and a phial of Burke's brain tissue is in the Wellcome Medical Museum in the Science Museum, London (Inv. A667469). Burke's skeleton is in the Department of Anatomy of the University of Edinburgh: R. G. W. Anderson and A. D. C. Simpson, *Edinburgh & Medicine* (Edinburgh 1976), p. 48, item 299.
  - 18 *PSAS*, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 460–463.
  - 19 Walter Havernick, 'The Ghost in the Coffin', in Caoimhín Ó. Danachair (ed.), *Folk and Farm: Essays in Honour of A. T. Lucas* (Dublin 1976), pp. 90–96.
  - 20 See *Sunday Post*, 18 June 1989, based on the exhibition label.
  - 21 *The Scotsman*, 5 October 1993. In September 1995 the coffins will be included in the exhibition *Of Monsters and Miracles* at Croydon Museum: Ian Simmons, 'Wonders of the Vaults', *Fortean Times*, No. 81 (1995), pp. 29–33. On Charles Fort's interest in the coffins see note 54, below.
  - 22 Pins of at least three types have been used, varying in length and diameter, and they are of brass or tinned brass. X-Ray fluorescence has been used to identify the plating material on a single pin, but results were inconclusive: Paul Wilthew, 'XRF Analysis and Radiography of Miniature Coffins and Figures found on Arthur's Seat', NMS Department of Conservation and Analytical Research (subsequently cited as C&AR), Analytical Research Laboratory Report 93/11 (C&AR 5420), April 1993. In coffin No. 5 the pins are so long that they extend through the base of the coffin. In coffin No. 6 a single cut nail has been used in addition to pins.
  - 23 Information from Ian Lawson, Craftsman Joiner, NMS C&AR, who suggests however that coffin No. 4 may be of pitch pine.
  - 24 Noted in *PSAS*, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 460.
  - 25 Analysed for the authors by Wilthew, *op. cit.* (note 22).
  - 26 Personal communication, June 1993.
  - 27 Analysed for the authors by Wilthew, *op. cit.* (note 22).
  - 28 Personal communication from Helen Creasy, Paper Conservator to the Scottish Museums Council and NMS C&AR, 'Examination of the Paper in the Miniature Coffins',

- December 1991.
- 29 *The Scotsman*, 16 July 1836.
- 30 Hävernick, who only saw photographs of the figures and did not examine them in person, incorrectly identified the arms as formed by a cord threaded through holes in each figure's shoulders: Hävernick, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 90.
- 31 *PSAS*, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 460.
- 32 See *A View of the Establishment of the Royal Edinburgh Volunteers* (Edinburgh 1795).
- 33 Personal communication from Naomi Tarrant, Curator of European Textiles, NMS, February 1992.
- 34 The cloth was examined and described in late 1991 by Naomi Tarrant and Caroline Muir (Textile Conservator at NMS C&AR): personal communication from Caroline Muir, February 1992.
- 35 Personal communication from Naomi Tarrant, February 1992.
- 36 The fragment has been described by Caroline Muir as decorated with a printed design of little stars and with the remains of the words 'guaranteed waterproof', and the identification was supplied by Naomi Tarrant.
- 37 Caroline Muir, 'Examination of Sewing Threads found on "Bodies" in Miniature Coffins from Arthur's Seat', NMS C&AR, Textile Conservation Report (C&AR 5420), July 1993.
- 38 The tradition is based on accounts of the Paisley firm established by James Clark (1747–1829) which was subsequently part of J. & P. Coats Ltd., found for example in Matthew Blair, *The Paisley Thread Industry* (Paisley 1907), pp. 36–37.
- 39 Personal communication from Philip Sykas, Head of Conservation, Manchester City Art Galleries, October 1993.
- 40 Personal communication, September 1993.
- 41 Robert Chapman, writing in 1956, described them as 'three triangular pieces of slate': R. Chapman, '17 Little Coffins: It is 120 years since five Edinburgh schoolboys found them on Arthur's Seat – but the mystery is still unsolved', *Evening Dispatch*, 16 October 1956.
- 42 Manuscript ledger of 'Accessions' to the Society's museum, 1892–1914, p. 170: NMS Library. The catalogue forms the continuation of the 1892 published *Catalogue*. The manuscript ledger 'Donations to the Museum', 1897–1913, merely records (entry for 16 May 1901) that 'three small slate stones' had closed the opening, without noting whether any of these formed part of the donation: NMS Library. We are grateful to Andrew Martin, Assistant Librarian, NMS, for his help on this matter.
- 43 J. E. Richey and J. G. C. Anderson, *Scottish Slates* (Geological Survey of Great Britain, Scotland: Wartime Pamphlet No. 40, London 1944). We are grateful to James Simpson for this reference.
- 44 John Macfarlane, 'Parishes of Killbrandon and Killchattan', in Sir John Sinclair (ed.), *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. 14 (Edinburgh 1795), p. 162; J. Carmichael, 'An Account of the Principal Marble, Slate, Sandstone and Greenstone Quarries in Scotland', *Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland*, 12 (1837), p. 402.
- 45 See also *Edinburgh Evening Post*, 20 August 1836, stating that the coffins were found 'in the fissure of a rock, of about a foot square, at the back of Arthur's Seat. These were covered by three pieces of flat stone.'
- 46 Chapman, *op. cit.* (note 41).
- 47 Chapman's statement that one of the *dogs* discovered the cache and that this occurred on 25 June, closely following Midsummer Eve, *might* suggest a visit to the spot by an individual apprised of its whereabouts immediately prior to the discovery. It is equally possible that such a visit might not have been to add to the interments or that something else attracted the dog's attention to the cache.
- 48 Chapman, *op. cit.* (note 41).
- 49 George Ferguson, previously assistant master at the Grammar School at Selkirk, was one of four Classics Masters at Edinburgh Academy when the school opened in 1824, and in 1847 he left to take the chair of humanity at King's College, Aberdeen: M. Magnusson, *The Clacken and the Slate* (London 1974), pp. 77, 142. He was listed in the Edinburgh street directories at the school and at his home, 11 Saxe Coburg Place. The *Post Office Directory* was expanded in scope and coverage in the early 1830s, apparently in response to competition from *Gray's Directory*, and Findlay Ferguson appeared for the first time in the *Post Office Directory* for 1833 (in the county directory under Portobello) as 'teacher, e[ast] Duddingston'. He was listed in *Gray's Directory* (always as Fergusson) in the classified section as a teacher of English, arithmetic, writing and mathematics in the first expanded edition of 1833, p. 216. He was still appearing in the *Post Office Directory* in 1845. A third (although unlikely) candidate is Thomas Ferguson, who was recorded in the *Post Office Directories* for 1835 and 1836 only, and entered in the classified directory under 'miscellaneous teachers', at 3 Fountainbridge.
- 50 See, generally, Christina Hole, 'Some Instances of Image-Magic in Great Britain', in Venetia Newell (ed.), *The Witch Figure* (London and Boston 1973), pp. 80–94; F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough. I. Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk-Belief* (Glasgow 1977), pp. 144–145; John Gregorson Campbell, *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland: Tales and Traditions collected entirely from Oral Sources* (East Ardsley, Wakefield 1974), pp. 46–48. The North Berwick witches wrapped a wax image in a linen cloth in 1590: McNeill, *supra*, p. 144. See also Montague



- Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (London 1927), pp. 10, 81–84, 104.
- 51 Campbell, *op. cit.* (note 50), pp. 47–48. Welsh figures pierced by pins are discussed in Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London 1987), pp. 154–155.
- 52 Wilthew, *op. cit.* (note 22).
- 53 *PSAS, op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 462–463.
- 54 See also *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 August 1836, and *The Scotsman*, 31 August 1836. Saxony is the area of North Germany between the Rhine and the Elbe, now known as Westphalia and Lower Saxony. For early Scottish maritime contact with Saxony see David Ditchburn, 'Trade with Northern Europe, 1297–1540', in M. Lynch, M. Spearman and G. Stell (eds), *The Scottish Medieval Town* (Edinburgh 1988), pp. 161–179. In 1919 Charles Fort, the assiduous American chronicler of unusual phenomena, found support in the concept of burial in effigy at Arthur's Seat for his belief in visits from tiny extra-terrestrials: *The Complete Books of Charles Fort* (reprinted, New York 1974), p. 169.
- 55 Hävernicks, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 91. Hävernicks, however, goes further, suggesting that symbolic burials of any sort can be ruled out because 'it seems reasonable to assume that in the case of a symbolic burial where the actual body was not present, the name or badge of the deceased person would have been included. Any such indication is, however, missing.' In the absence of further information on this practice, it would appear just as reasonable *not* to require identification of the individual so memorialised; presumably the gravedigger knew who was being buried.
- 56 'I know of no similar discoveries from Britain or Ireland and a general enquiry for information in the journal *Folklore* was in vain': *ibid.* See also [W. Hävernicks], Director of the Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, letter to the Editor, *Folklore*, 84 (Summer 1973), p. 166.
- 57 See also *The Scotsman*, 31 August 1836.
- 58 '... it may be attributed to an individual freak': *PSAS, op. cit.* (note 6), p. 462.
- 59 'M. H.', 'Tiny Graves: Unsolved Mystery of Arthur's Seat', in *Edinburgh Evening News*, 11 April 1936. The original letter is not known to survive, but it was clearly the source for an account published in *The Scotsman* on 16 May 1906. An early typescript transcription of part of this is in the NMS file, and it may only have been this that 'M. H.' saw. The museum of the Society of Antiquaries received government support from 1851, and it became the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMA) until 1986 when it was integrated into the new National Museums of Scotland.
- 60 Hävernicks, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 92.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 62 See correspondence of the former NMA in the NMS object file for NT86: Hävernicks to Mrs Anne Brocklehurst (Research Assistant at NMA), 15 January 1973 ('Regarding the good preservation of the coffins I should think [they are] not older than 18th or beginning of 19th century'); Brocklehurst to Hävernicks, 19 January 1973 ('we had not thought of them as earlier than the beginning of the 19th century, judging by the fragments of textiles still remaining, which agrees with the latest date you mention'). Also, [Hävernicks], *Folklore, op. cit.* (note 56) ('Mrs Brocklehurst and I agree that they date from the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century'); Hävernicks, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 90 ('the National Museum of Antiquities places them in "the beginning of the 19th century" on the basis of the cotton used on them').
- 63 See, generally, Robert Buchanan, publisher, *Trial of William Burke and Helen M'Dougal ... and Supplement* (Edinburgh 1829); Thomas Ireland, Jr., publisher, *West Port Murders ...* (Edinburgh 1829); William Roughead, *Burke and Hare* (Edinburgh 1921); Hugh Douglas, *Burke & Hare* (London 1973); Owen Dudley Edwards, *Burke & Hare* (Edinburgh 1980).
- 64 The *Appendix* lists the seventeen individuals involved, giving names (if known), a physical description, information on their occupation, and approximate date of death. This last, and indeed the order in which they were murdered, is open to question in several cases. Burke made two confessions in which these details differ, and Hare apparently made a confession with yet another order. All, however, agreed as to the number and description of their victims: see Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 136–139. Pictures exist of two of the individuals, namely Mary Paterson, and 'daft Jamie' Wilson, reproduced in Roughead, *op. cit.* (note 63), and Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63).
- 65 Knox's contemporary, Alexander Monro *Tertius*, professor of anatomy at Edinburgh University, had a 'burying ground' attached to the University anatomical theatre in which the dissected products of his teaching were disposed of or stored for subsequent burial. His reliance on the highly discreet supply and removal of his subjects was emphasised in 1824 when building work resumed at the University, disrupting the previous unobtrusive access. The record of burials at Greyfriars from 1835 to 1842 includes those of bodies from the classrooms of Monro, Knox and other anatomists, but this reflects the more controlled situation after the passing of the Anatomy Act of 1832. We are grateful to Professor David Simpson for providing a copy of his 1965 lecture 'Dr Monro's Pit' given to the Scottish Society for the History of Medicine. See also Andrew G. Fraser, *The Building of Old College: Adam, Playfair & the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1989), pp. 114–115, 235.
- 66 See also F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough. IV. The Local*

- Festivals of Scotland* (Glasgow 1968), pp. 82–84.
- 67 See Richard Whittington-Egan, *William Roughead's Chronicles of Crime* (Moffat 1991), pp. 287–289.
- 68 The mob took the body 'to the top of Salisbury Crags, from which they precipitated it down the *Cat Nick*': Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh and London, New Edition 1868), pp. 104–105. Mungo Campbell 'was privately taken from Prison and Buried at Salisbury Craigs' according to a manuscript annotation to *Tryal of Mungo Campbell: For the Murder of Alexander, Earl of Eglintoune* (London 1770: Lord Prestongrange's copy in the possession of one of the authors).
- 69 See Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 102, 156–157 (also noting that the murderers were used as a threat to unruly children). A sung version, collected by Peter Cooke in 1970, is published in *Tocher*, 5 (1972), pp. 140–141.
- 70 See Ireland, *op. cit.* (note 63), p. 361; Edwards, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 268, 277; Martin Fido, *Bodysnatchers: A History of the Resurrectionists 1742–1842* (London 1988), p. 130; Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), p. 138.
- 71 See Ireland, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 313–323, 357–358, 359; Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 96–97, 112–113, 127–128; Edwards, *op. cit.* (note 63), pp. 269–270, 275, 281; Fido, *op. cit.* (note 70), p. 129.
- 72 See Fido, *op. cit.* (note 70), p. 130; Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), p. 128. See also Edwards, *op. cit.* (note 63), p. 270 ('A rumour circulated that he had been recognised at Annan and stoned to death, but it was later contradicted'); p. 276 ('After Hare's disappearance, broadsides were on sale describing his hanging by a mob in Londonderry, and in more formal circumstances in New York').
- 73 See Fido, *op. cit.* (note 70), p. 130; Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 63), p. 128. This is similar to the chapbook ending of the adventurous life of Ambrose Gwinnet who, being 'enfeebled by hardships' and 'unable to work' and 'being without any manner of support', ended his days 'sweeping the crossing between the Mews-Gate and Spring Gardens, Charing Cross, London': Ambrose Gwinnet, *The Life and Unparalleled Voyages and Adventures of Ambrose Gwinnet* (Glasgow 1850), p. 24.
- 74 Another example is that a 'cancerous affection' on Burke's face 'arose from the saliva of Daft Jamie, communicated by a bite', a belief 'resolutely held to by the people': Leighton, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 260 note.
- 75 See Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language, Incorporating the F. J. Norton Collection: Part B, Folk Legends*, II (London 1971), pp. 11–20, noting that the West Port Murders 'made an immense impression on the popular imagination, and a whole series of tales about the 'Burkers' has been collected from the travelling people of Scotland ... A black coach driven by a gang of medical students in 'lum hats' features in many of them, and is a kind of successor of the death-coach': *ibid.*, p. 14. For later American black traditions concerning 'night doctors' see Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Knoxville, Tenn. 1977), pp. 170–211.