

# The Dinosaur Hunters

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Even as a young man, Owen made a striking impression. He was very tall and, according to Thomas Carlyle the philosopher and essayist, possessed 'great glittering eyes'. An oil painting of Owen at the time suggests that his eyes were indeed a noticeable feature: large and dark, with a penetrating intensity. His straight hair is neatly swept across a broad expanse of forehead, framing his face in the fashionable sideboards of the day. A pressed, upturned white collar partially conceals a prominent chin, and the sombre colours of his suit form a marked contrast to his pale complexion.

Richard Owen's enthusiasm for study was not a feature of his childhood. He came from the northern town of Lancaster, where his family owned a five-storey house on the edge of Dalton Square. His father had capitalised on the new development of woollen mills and canals at the turn of the nineteenth century to expand his draper's business. He had amassed a considerable fortune in trade with the West Indies, although he had later lost some of it when Napoleon reneged on all France's debts to the British. The prosperous Owens had been keen to obtain a good education for their two sons. Undeterred by the fact that Richard saw no point in his lessons, his ambitious mother, Catherine, enrolled him at the Lancaster Grammar School at the tender age of six.

The family archives show that the ebullient young Owen's most enduring memories of his schooldays were of the 'Black Mondays'. This was the day when the misdemeanours of the previous week were publicly announced and suitably hideous punishments, designed to form character, were duly inflicted. Richard was not beyond getting embroiled in fights with the brightest boy in the school, William Whewell, and occasionally coming home with a black eye. Whewell was later to become a celebrated Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. By contrast, the tutor held out no hope for Richard Owen: he was 'lazy and impudent' and would 'come to a bad end'.

In 1820, after ten years at school, the sixteen-year-old Owen was unwilling to settle to any particular trade. That same year he signed up as an apprentice to a local surgeon, Mr Leonard Dickson, whose medical practice extended to the prisoners in the county gaol sick-rooms. Armed with little more than a few leeches, the doctor and his younger apprentices did daily battle with consumption, cholera, smallpox and many other killer diseases. Overcrowding in the prison was normal, and the dark, lice-scabbed walls encased such misery that it was hard to see how anyone could survive. It was in this gruesome setting that Owen received his introduction to the science of anatomy, through post-mortem work on unfortunate inmates who had died.

The first autopsy that Owen attended was such a shock that he almost gave up his apprenticeship there and then. Merely entering the gaol was frightening enough: the forbidding fortress was a towering edifice on a hill, built with turrets and ramparts. Owen and his master entered through a great

portcullised gateway, guarded by a turnkey. Obediently, he followed the surgeon across the yard and up an endless spiral of stone-flagged steps to a room in the old tower, which was used as the prison washroom. With a sense of disbelief, he saw the contours of human bodies lying on stone slabs under white sheets.

As one sheet was flung back, Owen was alarmed to see 'the pale, cold collapsed features of the deceased, the half opened eyes . . . the glassy staring eyeballs'. It was the body of a young man whom he had tried to save only a few days previously. He felt 'over-awed by the power of the human corpse', and revolted and distressed by the surgeon's clinical dissection, which seemed a terrible 'desecration of the sanctity of the dead'. The youthful and naïve Owen, who had no doubt that even muttering the Lord's prayer backwards as a spell could 'raise the Devil' and who held due reverence for a score of similar schoolboy myths, found his enthusiasm for science 'damped considerably'.

By chance, at nine o'clock that same November evening, Owen was summoned to the gaol again to deal with a few cases of fever. As he made his way across town, a storm was rising. It was dark by the time he reached the portcullis and raised the heavy iron knocker. Once more, lantern in hand, he crossed the cobbled yard to the turret that led to the tower. As he turned the heavy key, he was knocked aside by a great gust of wind. The lantern swung open and his light was extinguished. Trapped on the spiral stairway as the door to the tower closed behind him, he was plunged into pitch-black.

'The loneliness of my position first then struck coldly upon me', he recalled. Each step brought him closer to the cold chamber where the dissected corpses lay stretched out on the stone slabs under their white sheets. As he passed the chamber, a sound made him raise his head. 'My alarm grew into a creeping, freezing horror, as I, staring intently upwards, made out by degrees the pale, collapsed features and those half opened glassy eyes that had haunted me through the day and now looked coldly down and met my own.' The thin figure now clasped the central pillar of the staircase. The young Owen rushed to make a descent, but 'I had hardly made one turn down past the closed door of the dead-chamber when a second figure in white appeared below me as if to intercept my passage . . . and surely it bore the features of the other corpse! I grasped the pillar for support and gazed upon the spectre in speechless terror'.

While anyone else might have fled from the dark gaol as fast as he could, Owen showed a presence of mind that tells us something about him. As he began to make his escape, he suddenly became aware that his feet were dragging some strange object. At the first thin shaft of light, he could see he had a white sheet entangled around his feet. This simple 'evidence of materiality' seemed to

pull him to his senses. Summoning all his courage, he went back up the stairs and saw in the moonlight falling through the arrow-slit window that a nail in the wall had been used to hang the prison sheets to dry. In his terror, he had somehow mistaken the hanging sheet for a ghost. He put the sheet back and continued up the stairs to investigate carefully the source of the first ghost. This mystery, too, he could explain by the way the light fell through the higher window.

Having solved the problem he made his exit, nodding politely to the turnkey and summoning an air of authority and dignity as best he could. However, once out of sight, he collapsed with the shock. When he recovered, he found himself vowing all the way home, 'never, never, again to desecrate the Christian corpse and to quit a profession that could only be learned by such practices so repugnant to the best feelings of one's nature'.

However, within six weeks Owen's fascination with anatomy had become so compelling that all his other fears and scruples were brushed to one side. Encouraged by fellow pupils and excited by some articles he had read, he had begun to form a small anatomical collection, including the skulls of dogs and cats and the skeletons of mice. But this tame collection of domestic animals was soon insufficient to satisfy his appetite for knowledge.

By chance, a black patient had died in the gaol hospital and Owen assisted at the post mortem. Inspired by an article he had read on 'The Varieties of the Human Race', he slipped some silver to the old turnkey. 'I told him I should have to call again that evening to look a little further into the matter before the coffin was finally screwed down.' It was snowing that night, when he returned to the gaol. He made his way up the same spiral stairway that had so terrified him just a few weeks previously, entered the corpse room and took the head of the dead man. Carefully concealing the head in a brown paper bag under his cloak, he went back down, past the turnkey. His thoughts, he said later, were only on craniological speculations of 'facial angles', 'prognathic jaws' and the 'peculiar whiteness of osseous tissue'.

But his thoughts were not on such lofty matters for long. As he hurried down the hill, he slipped on the ice and lost his balance. The black head was catapulted out of the bag and went bounding off down the slippery hill, pursued by Owen in his great, flapping dark cloak and leaving splashes of red on the white pavement slabs. It bounced against the door of a cottage, which flew open, and he heard unearthly shrieks from inside. Owen rushed inside, 'saw the whisk of a garment of a female' vanishing through the door, 'and the ghastly head at my feet with its white protruding eyeballs'. He grabbed it and ran home.

The next day the whole town was talking of the phantom, which was widely rumoured to be the ghost of a Captain Tasker and his Negro slave, perhaps even the devil himself. For any doubters, a drop of blood now dry and dark by the door to the cottage, provided proof of their nocturnal visit. Only Richard Owen knew the truth about the terrifying apparition that haunted the town, and for years he did not 'disburden' himself of what had happened.

In a matter of weeks, it seems, the sixteen-year-old Owen, spurred on merely by some articles in a cyclopedia, was transformed from an apprentice ruled by schoolboy

superstitions into a young man who would stop at practically nothing to improve his skill in dissection and make headway in his career. Thefts of body parts, bribery of officials, even ghostly fears, were no longer an obstacle. The fledgling subject of anatomy held the young Owen in thrall.

In 1824, shortly after the Reverends Buckland and Conybeare had announced the existence of the *Megalosaurus* and *Plesiosaurus* to the Geological Society, money was found to send Richard Owen to Edinburgh University to study medicine. Scotland's capital had become during the second half of the eighteenth century one of Europe's most cosmopolitan and fashionable centres. As Owen's carriage turned into Princes Street, he could glimpse down the side-roads the elegant, recently built squares of the New Town and the classical homes of the prosperous merchants. Across the great ravine that divided the town, beyond the steep alley-ways and precipitous steps leading up to the stately High Street, stood the castle, perched on a massive rock that rose high above the New Town, the law courts with their bewigged judges hurrying down Canongate, and a cluster of schools and Gothic buildings around the university seething with student life. It was here that Owen settled into lodgings in Nicholson Street and began to register for courses.

Since the Scottish Enlightenment when the ideas of philosophers such as David Hume, William Robertson and Adam Smith had influenced intellectuals across Europe, Edinburgh had become renowned as a centre of learning. Although the 'golden age' of Edinburgh had ended by 1800, because of strong links with European universities the medical training at Edinburgh was still broader than any in England. In the 1820s, Edinburgh offered more courses and greater awareness of continental thinking than anywhere else in Britain. Many medical students visited Paris – not least because of the availability of cheap cadavers at French hospitals – and came back with news of all the most radical European ideas.

Despite his deep interest in anatomy, Owen spurned the lectures of the resident professor of anatomy, Alexander Monro the third, who seemed a curious throwback to the eighteenth century. Monro had inherited both his eminent chair and his lecture notes from his father and grandfather. By all accounts, he cut a shabby, dirty figure; it was not uncommon for him to enter the lecture hall spattered in blood from dissections. His teaching was woefully out of date and there were times when his sessions turned into student protests. It was Monro's lectures that were to stir such a powerful aversion to human anatomy in the young Charles Darwin the following year.

Richard Owen was much more excited by the extramural anatomy lectures of Dr John Barclay, who had been teaching anatomy in Surgeon's Square in Edinburgh for nearly thirty years. Barclay's lectures were recognised by the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and described as 'of a very superior order to that of the third Monro'. Enveloped in the pungent smell of preservative in the claustrophobic rooms of Barclay's anatomy school, Richard Owen soon realised that anatomy was not just the practical tool of the surgeon for understanding the workings of the body and the causes of death. It was a powerful agent for tackling fundamental issues in science: the origin and extinction of species, the process of Creation itself.

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