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978-1-107-02677-3 - Classical Victorians: Scholars, Scoundrels and Generals in Pursuit of Antiquity

Edmund Richardson

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: the resurrection men*

Alcmaeon says that human beings perish for this reason: they cannot join the beginning to the end.

Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata*

Joshua Brookes was having trouble with the resurrection men. In the early years of the nineteenth century, he owned a medical school in London – and he required a constant supply of corpses. If that supply was not kept up, his anatomy classes would grind to a halt with nothing to dissect, and his students would walk out without paying.<sup>1</sup> He needed bodies. But as these could rarely be obtained by legal means, Brookes and his colleagues often bought them from gangs of grave-robbers, the resurrection men. This time, things had not gone to plan.

When the grave-robbers demanded five guineas on top of their usual rates, Brookes refused. Because of this, ‘two dead bodies, in a high state of decomposition, were dropped at night close to his school by the men he had thus offended. Two young ladies stumbled over one of these bodies, and at once raised such a commotion that, had it not been for the prompt assistance of Sir Robert Baker and the police, Brookes would have fared very badly at the hands of the mob which soon collected.’<sup>2</sup>

For those in the resurrection business, things rarely went to plan. ‘Friday,’ one grave-robber wrote in his diary, ‘Went to St Johns, the other party [a competing gang] had got the adult, coming back with the ladder, Bill got taken unto the Watchhouse [police-station] with the ladder, came home . . . Tuesday 10th. Intoxicated all day: at night went out and got 5 [bodies from] Bunhill Row. Jack all most buried.’<sup>3</sup> Corpses turned out to be still alive; resurrection men fell into graves instead of getting the bodies out;

<sup>1</sup> Bailey (1896): 44: ‘With the rise and competition of the Medical Schools in London, the difficulty of getting an adequate number of bodies increased. The absolute necessity of having a good supply for the use of students, so as to prevent them from going off to rival schools, caused the teachers to offer large prices.’

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 45–6.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 161.

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resurrection men got into fights and forgot about the bodies; angry mobs collected.

The use of the dead to the living<sup>4</sup> was one of the greatest fascinations of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Intoxicated by the possibilities, many were determined to put the dead to work – and set out to do just that, time and again. The grave-robbler's determination pales, here – for no corpses were seized upon so ruthlessly or so completely, in Victorian Britain, as were the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Hope and memory seemed, for many, to ignite in the classical world. And in a moment of hope, what might not be imagined – what might not be captured from the past? Power, empire, words and wonder – the world at its most glorious; rich and overspilling, was it there for the taking? Might not the enchantment of ancient Greece and Rome be recovered? Might it not be a support and a guide, here and now? Might it not live again? In Victorian Britain, many lost themselves in longing, believing that long-dead Greeks and Romans could still shape the world – and could still be put to work.

In recent years, scholars have mapped the richness and subtlety of this grand Victorian affair with antiquity. The groundbreaking studies of Jenkyns, Turner and Vance – and of Stray in the field of education – explore how some of the most fundamental cultural moments of the time stand in the shadows (or is that the light?) of the ancient world.<sup>6</sup> Antiquity

<sup>4</sup> Mackenzie (1827).

<sup>5</sup> It was also the businesslike title of one infamous pamphlet, *ibid.* William Mackenzie sought to defend the depredations of the anatomists in a document which made little concession to the scrupulous or the squeamish. His argument – bullishly articulated – was that, since 'the basis of all medical and surgical knowledge is anatomy' (*ibid.*: 4), doctors had to be able to claim for dissection as many corpses as possible: those from prisons and workhouses (cf. Marshall 1995: 181: the pamphlet 'recommended that all unclaimed bodies from workhouses and hospitals should automatically be given over to the surgeons'), and those 'unclaimed by immediate relatives, or whose relatives decline to defray the expenses of interment' (Mackenzie 1827: 36).

<sup>6</sup> In a rapidly expanding field, the work of these scholars remains indispensable. Jenkyns (1980), Turner (1981) and Vance (1997) provide valuable overviews of nineteenth-century Britain's engagements with the ancient world. Stray (1998) offers a remarkable narrative of the changing role of the ancient world within education. Recently, important work has been done in many focused areas of this field. In performance reception, the works of Hall and Macintosh have been deeply revealing – and Hall and Macintosh (2005) provides the best survey available of the performance of Greek drama in this period, while Macintosh (1997) provides a more concise account. Hall, Macintosh and Taplin (2000) and Hall (1999) look at specific productions in greater detail. The online database maintained by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford provides information on virtually every significant nineteenth-century performance of classical drama: [www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/database.htm](http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/database.htm) [accessed August 2011]. In the history of classical scholarship, Stray's work has been augmented by a number of portraits of academics – Henderson on Mayor (Henderson 1998) and Beard on Harrison (Beard 2002a) are among the most revealing. Wider surveys of nineteenth-century culture and society are offered by Goldhill (2002, 2011) – and the issues at stake in looking back to the ancient world are perhaps articulated most sharply of all in these works.

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was an inescapable force at the heart of British culture and society – shaping the ways in which thousands thought about themselves, and their parts in life. It stood behind a vast war, a quiet inner desire, a golden poem, a thwarted revolution, a Prime Minister's soaring speech, a lonely addiction; behind works of literature and art, moments across the breadth of nineteenth-century history.

The dreams of the resurrection men challenge us to stand before history with uncertainty and without scruples, determined to test the limits of our power over the past. Thus did the Victorians approach classical antiquity: with ambition which could be as hapless<sup>7</sup> as two resurrection men fighting over a rotten corpse, or as grand as Lord Palmerston in his pomp, standing up in Parliament and proclaiming 'Civis Romanus sum',<sup>8</sup> but ambition which was always ruthless. The notion that the classical past might be moulded into any form the present saw fit was truly one of the century's most enduring hopes.<sup>9</sup> Vivid and powerful, it runs through this book, and the lives of its protagonists. Victorian Britain set out to make the ancient world its own.

Such hopes were fit to sweep a culture off its feet. As Turner puts it, 'the list of poets, critics, philosophers, historians, and scholars concerned at one time or another with the Greeks reads like an index of the major contributors to the intellectual life of the age. The results . . . were impressive on every score.'<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that Victorian society often had the ancient world at its heart. (Turner has explored the gradual shift of emphasis from Rome to Greece, which gathered pace late in the eighteenth century and was sustained for much of the nineteenth.<sup>11</sup>) The sons of the aristocracy grew up surrounded by Greek and Latin schoolbooks – and the most prestigious schools in the country scarcely permitted any kind of education other than a classical one.<sup>12</sup> The dead seemed close enough to touch: 'If Plato could shake hands with Shakespeare, then perhaps Greek life and

<sup>7</sup> The resurrection men were notoriously – one might say infamously – incompetent: see Bailey (1896): 158, 'Wednesday 18th. Went to the Big gates to Look out, came home, at home all night which was a very bad thing for us as we wanted some money to pay our debts to several persons who were importunate.'

<sup>8</sup> See Chamberlain (1980): 125.

<sup>9</sup> Bann, indeed, has noted the 'resurrectionist' (Bann 1984: 53) tendency in this period's historiography. For an example from the mid-nineteenth century, see Rance (1975): 19, where an 1858 review of the fourth volume of Froude's *History of England* is quoted, which conceptualizes history as a 'pageant which we can resuscitate'. Cf. also Bann (1984): 50, for a discussion of 'Michelet's claim that history should be a "resurrection"'.  
<sup>10</sup> Turner (1981): 1.

<sup>11</sup> While Greece never came close to crowding out Rome, it was frequently closer to the foreground within discourse, as this narrative will reflect; see *ibid.*: 4, 189.

<sup>12</sup> See Stray (1998).

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thought were not, after all, completely alien from (formally) Christian Britain.<sup>13</sup> A narrative of antiquity in Victorian Britain could, indeed, easily become one of cultures triumphant: of a classically educated British elite,<sup>14</sup> commanding all corners of the world; of the classical past, valued and honoured across that world (even if sometimes ‘abused to suit the convenience of the moment’<sup>15</sup>). The strength of this picture – the triumph of the resurrection men, the triumph of the classical and of the elite – is intense; almost ‘too strong’ to shake off, as Goldhill has remarked.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this is a book about uncertainty – the uncertainty which defined British classicism. Victorian Britain stumbled through a doubtful, painful and insecure relationship with the ancient world. It was a relationship shaped by the present’s anxieties – and by the weight of hope which was loaded on to the past. That hope could be boundless: the classical was a space of infinite possibility. (One British general hoped to be remembered in the same breath as Agamemnon; one burlesque writer hoped to use his classical doggerel to start a revolution.<sup>17</sup>) If faith in the past could be infinite, however, it could also be Quixotic. Invoking antiquity frequently proved disastrous: its power within the contemporary world was quicksilver and unpredictable. (One James Shives, a schoolmaster, hoped to use his classical learning to win a lady’s heart. He found himself dismissed from his job, beaten by the lady’s father, and made to promise, in court, ‘that he would never speak to, or notice in any way, the young lady in future’.<sup>18</sup>) The past rarely satisfied the present’s whims – and triumphant Victorian classicism was never assured: its grandeur could disintegrate in a heartbeat; its disciples were lost in longing, not fulfilment.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Vance (2007): 93.

<sup>14</sup> The dialogue between classics and class has, of course, long been fraught. Hall (2007) and Schein (2007) are two recent studies of the relationship which give due measure to its nuances and contradictions. The unproblematic connections between British elites and knowledge of the ancient world have been convincingly complicated in these and other recent works (such as Stray’s (1998) discussion of non-traditional scholars) – and will be further explored in this book.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkyns (1980): 292. On this tendency, cf. also Wyke and Biddiss (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Goldhill (2002): 2. All scholars who have written about Victorian Britain’s relationship with the ancient world have had to engage with this picture, in one form or another. Stray, for instance, discusses the assertion that Victorian Classics was ‘the possession and the symbol of the educated gentleman’ (Stray 1998: 74), while Jenkyns also discusses the relationship between classical education and gentlemanly status (Jenkyns 1980: ix–x). Narratives, in this field, often take quite some staring down, as Beard remarks, when discussing those stories ‘lodged firmly’ in the ‘mythology’ of Jane Harrison (Beard 2002a: 8).

<sup>17</sup> See Vulliamy (1939): 160, Brough (1855). <sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 17 January 1850: 7, col.e.

<sup>19</sup> The triumph of the classical has always been subject to qualification in works on the reception of the ancient world in Victorian Britain. This volume extends and amplifies those qualifications, arguing that the classical was defined by uncertainty in this period – but Jenkyns, for instance, has recently

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Rather, Britain's fractious relationship with the ancient world encapsulates the elusiveness of antiquity: how easily it can become a mirage, how acutely difficult it is to make one's own – even in the period which seemingly marked its greatest cultural ascendancy. Those who built upon the classical, in Victorian Britain, built upon sand. Having dedicated themselves to it – and entrusted their ambitions to it – many felt deeply betrayed when it gave way beneath them; Victorian ideologies of classicism, however honoured, broke hearts and ruined lives. (Rev. John Selby Watson found himself penniless and scorned, after a lifetime's devotion to the ancient world. Swollen with bitterness and 'bad Latin,'<sup>20</sup> he would become one of the time's most horrible murderers.<sup>21</sup>) Such bitterness was widespread: however prominent a part it played across society, all the value of the classical past often added up to nothing, for striver after hopeful striver. This is the difficult work of hope – and (even for Rev. Watson) of love.

To grasp the failure of classical antiquity in Victorian Britain calls for an 'appreciation of the endless resourcefulness and inventiveness of human error',<sup>22</sup> an awareness that the dead do not come politely when called. Those who summoned the ancient world often, indeed, made bargains as unfortunate as that of Joshua Brookes, the anatomist, hoping to keep his classes well stocked:

A subject was brought to him [Brookes] one day in a sack, and paid for at once; soon after it was discovered that the occupant of the sack was alive. This was not a case of attempted murder; the 'subject' was a confederate of those from whom he had been purchased, and had, in all probability, been thus introduced to the premises for purposes of burglary. (Bailey (1896: 46–7))

So will the doctor seize control of the 'subject' and successfully dismember it, to note-taking and applause?<sup>23</sup> Or will the dead 'subject' seize control of

spoken of the fact that 'the analogy between Rome and Britain was equivocal' (Jenkins 2007: 277), while Vance has remarked on Benjamin Jowett's 'vulnerable and unstable' synthesis of ancient and contemporary worlds (Vance 2007: 93).

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 16 January 1872: 5, col.e.    <sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 11 January 1872: 9, cols.a–b.

<sup>22</sup> Grafton, Most and Settis (2010): vii.

<sup>23</sup> The physical abuse of the dead by the living was a frequent complaint against the anatomists – as well as one levelled, metaphorically this time, by later scholars against nineteenth-century historiography. This was due to 'the anatomist's notorious lack of respect for the dead' (Marshall 1995: 178). One pamphlet, on the 'Identity and General Resurrection of the Human Body', argued that a body should be seen as something forever transient, a vessel for our identity, rather than our identity itself, 'a mass of matter in a state of perpetual change' (Drew 1822: 173). In consequence, we should not worry unduly if a few pieces happen to be misplaced after our death: 'the identity of our future Bodies [after the Resurrection] cannot consist in all the numerical Particles, nor in the majority of them, which occasionally adhered to the Vital Mass, in any given Portion of the present Life' (ibid.: xxxi). 'The

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the doctor, and attract a mob to tear down his medical school, a police officer to put him in jail – or will it just get up and burgle the place? Authority over the dead is not to be relied upon – and Victorian relationships with the past were haunted by an awareness of their own fragility.

Heroes and heroines have been growing ever more elusive, ever less in control of their worlds, in recent accounts of Victorian classicism. The patchwork of characters has grown broader – and the excluded have found a place next to the assured. Burlesque writers have nudged into place next to elder statesmen, working-class readers next to the elite.<sup>24</sup> There is a growing belief that ‘the standard account of the development of the discipline of classics . . . with its drive towards political conservatism and its role as the educator of imperial gentlemen needs some serious qualification’.<sup>25</sup> Here there will be counterpoints, jostling together, complicating the ways in which Victorian antiquity can be narrated – filling narratives of it with wonder and bathos. Complication and the collision of perspectives are fundamental to this book’s picture of classicism: it was never placid, but rather a space where grandeur and failure – centre and margins, scholar and murderer, bankrupt and aristocrat – were always finding one another, always entwined.

As narratives of Victorian antiquity have grown broader, they have also grown more fragile.<sup>26</sup> The uncertainty with which the classical past was recalled was, Fiske argues, ‘precisely what constituted Greece’s appeal’<sup>27</sup> for

dissolution of our bodies is a necessary consequence of death,’ it argued, and should be seen as ‘morally necessary’ (ibid.: 225); the prospect of an expedited, surgical ‘dissolution’ ought not, in consequence, to cause us any qualms.

<sup>24</sup> This category of the ‘elite’ is, of course, a problematic one: elites, in this period, were rarely monolithic or entirely stable; positions of authority were fluid and open to being challenged. However, in many of the discourses mentioned in this book, there is a consistent – and marked – dialogue of power present, and, often, a marked difference in status between the discursive participants.

<sup>25</sup> Goldhill (2011): 6. McElduff’s recent work (2006) is an important theoretical articulation of the issues involved in narrating the reception of the ancient world amongst non-elite groups (on this, see also Hall 2007). Some very successful case-studies of this have been published: Hall and Macintosh (2005), for example, examine the breadth of British theatrical culture – from the grand to the threadbare – in their survey of the performance history of Greek drama; Hurst (2006) discusses the ways in which Victorian women made the classics their own. As Hardwick remarks, there is an increasing desire to challenge ‘the assumption that antiquity has invariably been appropriated in order to silence or demonize challenges to the cultural supremacy of politically dominant white males’ (Hardwick 2001: 369).

<sup>26</sup> See Beard (2002a: xi) on her ‘experiment in rejecting that tone of assured certainty’ in her biography of Jane Harrison.

<sup>27</sup> Fiske (2008): 19. Works which engage with this preoccupation with the fragmentary include Edwards (1999) on the fragmentary nature of the reception of Rome, and Goldhill (2011): 51, discussing how ancient texts are often read through an incomplete understanding and command of the ancient sources, and exploring the doubts and complexities which are elided by the term ‘educated viewer’.

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many.<sup>28</sup> Doubt and misdirection sit indeed at the heart of Britain's relationship with the past: they are – in a fundamental duality – stumbling-blocks but also beloved mediators. (When, for instance, Samuel Butler published *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, arguing that the *Odyssey* had been written not by Homer but by a young woman from Sicily, the scorn was wide and deep. 'The book is a freak,' one critic spat, 'and a freak not in the best taste.'<sup>29</sup> Butler knew that his theories were hard to defend and harder still to prove – yet he found hope in uncertainty, purpose in leading his readers astray. Such was the enchantment of the classical – there was no part of life which was just out of reach, no trick or longing, which did not become bound up with the pursuit of the ancient world.)

The picture of classicism which emerges here is troubled, then: brittle yet passionate, defined by its instability. Its two extremes were juxtaposed by Theodore Buckley – himself no stranger to life's highs or its lows, a brilliant scholar and a scorned opium addict, one of the closest things this book has to a hero – upon the occasion of a visit to the Crystal Palace. If, he remarked, the ghosts of Romans past were to look over their 'likenesses' there, they might be bemused by what they found:

It is our own private belief that everybody is to be met with at Sydenham [at the Crystal Palace]. Why should not Julius Caesar, 'arrayed in complete steel,' again revisit the place to see whether his likeness has been 'done justice to?' We ourselves believe that there is some 'sensus post fata quietis,' and that many a pale ghost flits past, and gibbers its delight. (Buckley (1854: 58))

Buckley staged an encounter (Figure 1.1) between the ghost of Julius Caesar – threadbare, thin and retiring – and Caesar's splendid Crystal Palace bust. The ghost huddles in a corner, keeping to the shadows, somewhat intimidated by its magnificent nineteenth-century 'regeneration'. The picture is never complete without both Caesars: proud ruler and awkward shadow, aristocrat and hanger-on, they eye one another throughout the nineteenth century – and both are richly products of their time. The space between them is the space of classical discourse, and the story of their relationship – of this period's numberless competing ghosts, gibbering at one another with outrage and delight – is that of this book.

<sup>28</sup> The American picture has been developed in similar ways: in Cook and Tatum's study of African-American engagements with the classics, the past is often deliberately hard to grasp, half-lost amidst many competing voices; see Cook and Tatum's discussion, for instance, of Melvin Tolson, 'the Pindar of Harlem', and his difficult, suggestive poetry. 'Tolson's whole aim is to lose the reader in a maze of allusions and references' (Cook and Tatum 2010: 246); these are texts which (make sure that they) cannot be confidently untangled.

<sup>29</sup> *The Academy*, 4 December 1897: 478.



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Figure 1.1 Julius Caesar's ghost at the Crystal Palace, from *Mr Sydenham Greenfinch* by Theodore Buckley (1854).

Many circles of friends and sides of society mingle here. There is Robert Brough the burlesque writer, attended by his worried brother William. Friend of Dickens and celebrated satirist, he was chased around Europe by his creditors and used the ancient world to campaign against the aristocracy. There is Duncan McPherson, irascible doctor in search of a grand role, who almost found it with Britain's army in the Crimea; he sought antiquity on the Black Sea coast, along with the aimless son of a neo-classical sculptor. There is Constantine Simonides, who wanders into picture after picture with a priceless Greek manuscript in his pocket – though the manuscript is never quite what it seems. Their voices are contentious, inclined to debunk and satirize; they sit uncomfortably within society, even when embraced by it. Few can be placed in the centre with certainty, and fewer still on the margins: Samuel Butler, for instance, was apt to complain of how the world



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ignored him, while being entertained in a particularly grand country house;<sup>30</sup> aristocrats competed to assist Theodore Buckley, only for him to reject them in venomous terms;<sup>31</sup> Rev. Watson, of course, truly desired a place at the heart of society – but his adventure ended in a prison on the Isle of Wight, and a fatal encounter with a chamber-pot.<sup>32</sup> Here, success is rarely certain, failure rarely simple.<sup>33</sup> These ill-fitting heroes<sup>34</sup> form what Güthenke has called a ‘decentred cultural history’,<sup>35</sup> a spiderweb stretching across the nineteenth century.

Following Bann, my gamble rests on the hope that selecting ‘a particular thread that traverses’<sup>36</sup> Victorian Britain and the time’s vast transformations – creating an extended but distilled narrative of cultural responses to the ancient world<sup>37</sup> – may pay deep dividends. It is not, however, a thread which may be easily followed. Victorian classicism is labyrinthine – giving space to the stories, rumours and hopes which swirl around it; to the characters and perspectives which collide across it. As soon as one version of the past comes into focus, another is sure to jostle in front of it and subvert it. Remembrance – the classical itself – is defined by interruption,

<sup>30</sup> See Keynes and Hill (1951): 28.    <sup>31</sup> See Buckley (1848).

<sup>32</sup> Watson died on 29 June 1884; see the report of the inquest into his death, in *The Times*, 8 July 1884: 11, col.c.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to diminish, of course, the ways in which many were systematically marginalized and excluded in Victorian society – in much more severe, near-absolute ways than were the protagonists of this book. The borderlands between confidence and its undoing, success and failure, are what preoccupy me here. Some important recent works which deal with different aspects of exclusion and nineteenth-century classicism – and the creative, productive uses to which seemingly ‘marginal’ positions are often put – include Cook and Tatum (2010), Hurst (2006), Dowling (1996) and Prins (1999).

<sup>34</sup> As Beard has remarked, selecting ‘a different group of friends’ to the norm leads to ‘a different kind of tale’ (Beard 2002a: 11).

<sup>35</sup> Güthenke (2009): 104, with reference to Goldhill’s work. (Goldhill’s approach, indeed, especially as articulated in Goldhill 2002, a groundbreaking cultural history of engagements with ancient Greece, has shaped this book in many significant ways.) Güthenke’s article is perhaps the best introduction to current debates and approaches within classical reception studies. In this, Martindale (1993) remains fundamental: an agenda-setting work which has lost none of its power to drive debate (as shown by many of the articles in Martindale and Thomas 2006). On theories of reception, Jauss (1982) and Budick and Iser (1996) are likewise invaluable.

<sup>36</sup> Bann (1995): 3.

<sup>37</sup> Sustaining that dialogue with classicism across the breadth of the nineteenth century is not to imply for a moment, of course, that this period was uniform or homogenous – though the wider narratives of Britain’s transformation over the course of the century are beyond the scope of this book. Classic overviews of British history during this period, which cast a wide net, include Williams (1958), Houghton (1968) and Hobsbawm (1968). More specialized starting-points include Hall, McClellan and Rendall (2000), Burton (1997) and Cannadine (2001) on ideas of nation and empire; McWilliam (1998), Finn (1993) and Joyce (1994) on class; Burrow (1996), Secord (2000) and Collini, Whatmore and Young (2000) on the breadth of intellectual history; and Rose (2001), Stray (1998) and Simon and Bradley (1975) on education.

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by moments of dissonance, moments when it is rejected as well as ones when it is honoured. ‘Classical antiquity’ and ‘the ancient world’, in this book, are always concepts being passionately argued over, not stable entities. There is – as Porter has pointed out – no fixed star to follow.<sup>38</sup>

This, then, is the story of those who forever seek the dead, yet rarely find peace. Victorians who stepped into the ancient world – a past as sure as quicksand – might bring back riches, or might lose themselves, grave-robbers in collapsing graves.

<sup>38</sup> Porter (2000).