

Hannah Priest, *Unburied: The True Story of Hannah Beswick the Manchester Mummy*. Manchester: Manchester U P, 2025. xii + 247 pp. ISBN 9781526175922

The Manchester mummy is an urban legend about a wealthy and eccentric woman from the late-eighteenth century who was so afraid of being buried alive she arranged for her doctor to embalm her and keep her body above ground. Years later her mummy became an exhibit in a museum and from there her legend grew and diversified. Hannah Priest related a version of the story on her weekly radio show for a Halloween special, then decided to uncover the truth about the woman behind the legend, Hannah Beswick.

In many ways, Priest is the ideal candidate for writing the history of the Manchester mummy. She is a native of the Manchester region, works in the heritage and local history sector, and is a scholar of medieval and early modern English literature. Moreover, under the name Hannah Kate, she is a writer of short stories “about the unsettlingly mundane and creepily municipal side of life” (Kate). All of this is reflected in *Unburied*, which not only examines the truth behind Beswick’s mummification and public display, but also places that story into the wider contexts of museum history, the municipal development of Manchester, the Victorian fascination with mummies and death, and the public display of women’s bodies – alive and dead.

That may sound like a lot to cram into one, relatively slim volume, and it is. By maintaining a narrow focus on Beswick and the organisations involved in her story, however, Priest manages to present a concise, coherent narrative that is both thought-provoking and enjoyable to read. Admittedly, there are times when it seems Beswick has disappeared and the point been lost, but Priest notes these moments in the text and always brings Beswick back to centre stage.

The many contextual layers Priest wraps the Manchester mummy up in do make it unclear precisely which area of scholarship *Unburied* falls into. Museum history, with a focus on the display of human remains, is the most likely. Beswick’s mummy first appeared in public in a natural history collection displayed by the Manchester Natural History Society when it opened a museum in 1835. There Beswick’s body, along with mummies from Egypt and Peru, remained until the society transferred some of its collection to Owens College, which grew into Manchester University, and sold the rest at auction in 1868. Beswick’s body was not transferred or sold. The administrator of the college decided, instead, to find out what he could about her and give her a belated burial. In relating these developments, Priest gives a detailed history of the Manchester Natural History Society and its museum, complete with an analysis of why the museum failed while the neighbouring one in Salford thrived.

The aspect of museums displaying human remains is also well covered. Priest relates contemporary accounts of people’s reactions to the Manchester mummy and the peculiarity of its place in a natural history collection and compares them with the responses to the other two mummies in the collection. Interestingly, while the Egyptian mummy remains in a museum’s collection, the Peruvian one disappeared without trace, not in a macabre mystery but through a total lack of interest. Priest also devotes a section of the book to consider examples of other nineteenth-century mummies and the fascination with embalming in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Saartje Baartman and Julia Pastrana were of particular note as the display of their embalmed bodies was a continuance of the last few years of their lives. Both had been brought to England to be shown as examples of exotic people and cultures.

Ultimately, Priest concludes that the problems of gender and race raised in these cases and the others she mentions do not relate to Beswick, who died in her later years and was kept in her conservative eighteenth-century dress. More pertinent to Beswick's story is the way assumptions of gender clouded her story and gave rise to some of its mystery. Beswick was a wealthy woman through inheritance and died even wealthier thanks to her acute business sense. Beswick also never married and had no children. Her nephews, then, could expect to inherit her wealth, but they were left next to nothing. Beswick left the greater part of her wealth to two women instead – one of whom she lived with for many years.

For all her exhaustive research, Priest does not know why Beswick had herself embalmed. That question may have been one of the catalysts for researching the book, but the lack of an answer beyond some reasoned speculations is not a disappointment. Indeed, the loss of that knowledge to time feeds into the book's more philosophical side. Beswick died, but her body continued on before finally being buried when the university decided it was inappropriate to put it on display. Her legend continues to live, however. In that time, Manchester went from rural town with surrounding villages, to metropolitan hub with suburban patches. Priest reflects on the changes to the city she witnessed even in the course of writing *Unburied*. While Beswick is remembered as an oddity, countless other lives and stories are forgotten and buried by municipal developments and urban growth.

Priest offers her reflection on this somewhat morbid fact of modern life as a conclusion to the book. There are no answers here, only the nature of our society and the immutability of our own mortality. Hannah Beswick is an anchor to that meditative look as she is to the academic considerations of museum development and Victorian attitudes towards and practices around mortality and the human body.

Unburied is a thoughtful and provocative book that combines good scholarship with engaging writing. Anyone interested in Victorian studies will enjoy it, and those with specific interests in its subject and related themes will find pertinent facts and informed scholarly analysis sure to be of value in building on our understanding of Victorian attitudes to mortality and women's bodies.

Work Cited

Kate, Hannah. "About." HannahKate.net, 2025, hannahkate.net/about/

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