

# Death, Decency and the Dead-House

## The City Morgue in Colonial Melbourne

Dr Andrew Brown-May and Dr Simon Cooke

---

'Death, Decency and the Dead-House: The City Morgue in Colonial Melbourne', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 3, 2004. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Andrew Brown-May and Simon Cooke.

This article has been peer reviewed.

Dr Andrew Brown-May is a senior lecturer in the History Department at the University of Melbourne. He is director of the Encyclopedia of Melbourne project and his books include *Melbourne street life* (1998) and *Espresso! Melbourne coffee stories* (2001).

Dr Simon Cooke completed his 1998 doctoral thesis 'Secret sorrows: a social history of suicide in Victoria, 1841-1921' in the History Department at the University of Melbourne. He is the author of *A meeting of minds: the Australian Psychological Society and Australian psychologists 1944-1994* (2000).

### Abstract

**The idea of a central morgue where dead bodies would be kept for identification and inquest was a new one in the urban culture of the British Empire of the mid-nineteenth century. Inquests up to that point took place in public houses, and bodies awaiting inquest were stored in outbuildings. A central morgue in Melbourne was first utilised in the 1850s and by the 1890s had become the main site of coronial inquests. The call for a morgue was partly a response to the desire of the government to identify its deceased members and label their deaths, and partly a requirement of the climate. Traditional practices, rooted in localism, were inefficient in a growing colonial society with hot summers. The surveillance of the dead was common in French and English societies, but was given particular emphasis in a town experiencing a gold-rush population boom. Changing ideas about what was acceptable in polite society also played a part. Identification, decency and health, therefore, provided varying motivation for this radical departure from local English practice. However, the morgue occupied an ambiguous place within the bureaucracy of the day. And like its Paris counterpart, it was sequestered, for a period at the end of the nineteenth century at least, as a lurid but nonetheless acceptable place of spectacle and macabre titillation.**

On 5 March 1898, Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper ran a short item on a strange event that had taken place the previous day:

Casual pedestrians along the North bank of the Yarra [River] yesterday afternoon could scarcely believe their ears when they heard the pop of champagne corks and the chorus 'For he's a Jolly Good Fellow' at the Morgue.

The paper explained that 'this somewhat incongruous hilarity' was occasioned by a gathering to present Coroners Candler and Morrison with portraits of themselves. The pictures were to be hung behind the Coroner's chair, on either side of a photograph of Richard Youl, City Coroner from 1853 till his death in 1897. Attending the event were city and district pathology staff as well as some prominent medical gentlemen. Presiding over the festivities was James Edward Neild, lecturer in forensic medicine at Melbourne University, and a regular at the morgue dissecting table. Speeches were made, and toasts drunk, we are told, with 'musical honours'. Clearly, the morgue was an institution that had a sense of its own past and identity. Medical men dominated the proceedings, but there were also a number of lawyers and police present.

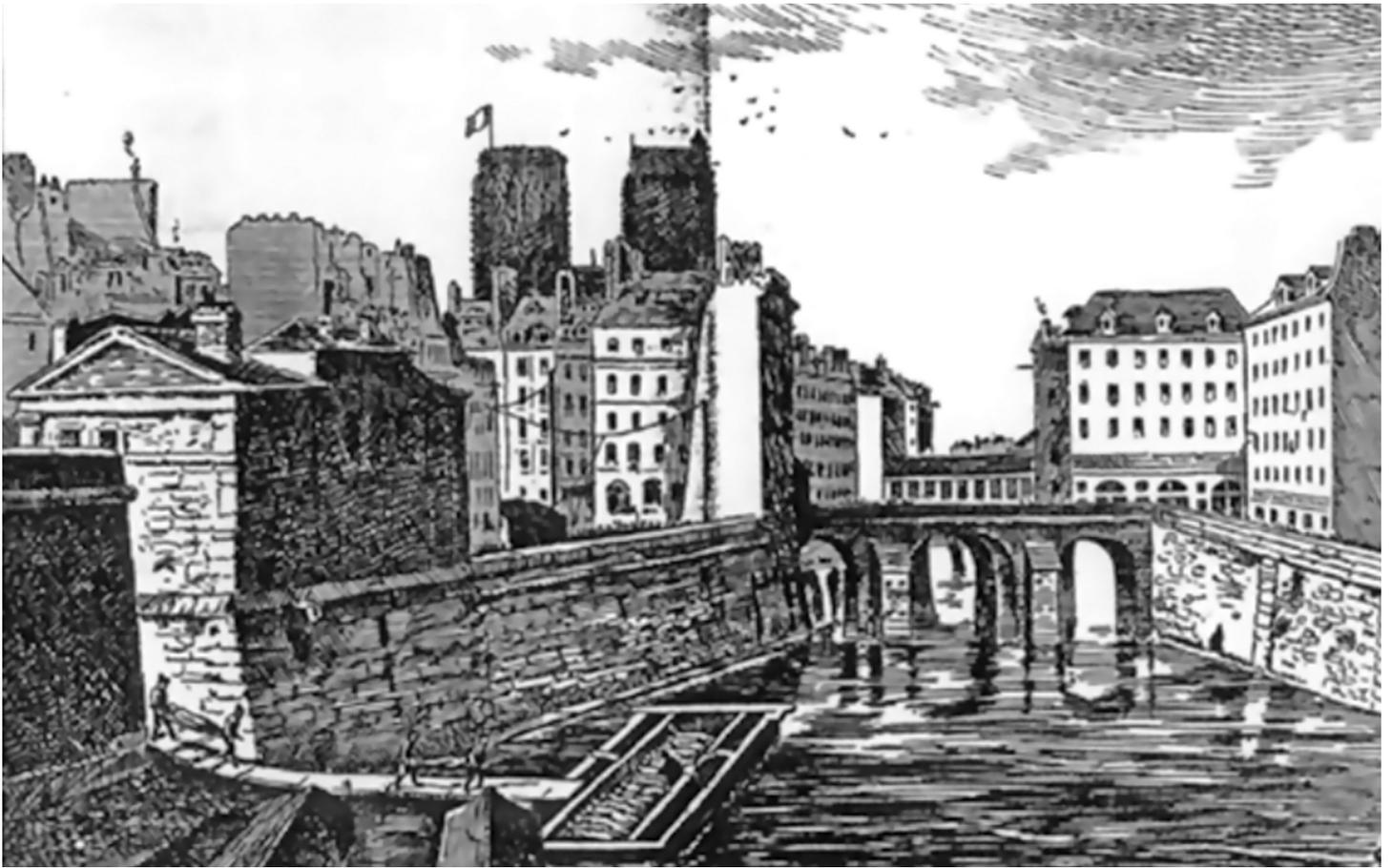


Illustration 1: La Morgue (Journée de Juillet, 1830) in Firmin Maillard, *Recherches historiques et critiques sur La Morgue*, Paris, 1860.

Compare this gathering with the incident described in a letter dated 16 February 1855 – some 43 years earlier – from ‘A Jury man’ to the Colonial Secretary complaining about the conduct of an inquest in which he had taken part:

an inquest was held on the body of a murdered woman, within seven yards of the Olive Branch public house, Latrobe Street East, and strange to say that the Jury had to sit in a narrow confined apartment where the awful spectacle [of the] deceased lay half naked at the feet of the Jury[] the position occupied by the Jury became intolerable and disgusting from the long investigation and heat of the day ... why was not the usual mood adopted namely to allow the Jury to sit in a room in the adjoining Public House and then view the body as usual, hoping you will prevent in future a repetition of such an insulting method being recurred to, if the Coroner be void of christian or humane feelings he should respect those of his sworn Jury. [sic][2]

The contrast with the celebrations at the morgue is striking. First, there is no dedicated building for holding inquests: indeed, the ‘Jury man’ complains that even the ‘usual mode’ of holding inquests in hotels was not followed. Second, the inquest involves ordinary men (but not women) as jurors, who play an essential role in the decision-making process. Inquests had yet to become a predominantly medical event. Third, our ‘Jury man’ objects to having to look at the body because of ‘christian or humane feelings’. We get a hint here of growing revulsion toward the corpse, and, although he does not mention it, his sense of unease was most likely

heightened by the knowledge that the house where the inquest was held was, in fact, a brothel.[3]

Why then does the morgue appear during the nineteenth century and become the main site of coronial inquests within 50 years? How did Melbourne’s morgue come to be positioned at the corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets – at Melbourne’s prime southern gateway – if only for a short time? *La morgue* was of course a French institution *par excellence*: its origins can be traced back to the fourteenth century, where in the Châtelet prisons (called *basse-geôle*) the morgue was a place from where gaolers viewed prisoners. By the early eighteenth century the term had come to describe the place where bodies were dumped for identification. In 1804 the Paris morgue moved to its own building at the Quai du Marché on the Ile-de-la-Cité, and after the Haussmanisation of Paris a new morgue was built in 1864 on the Quai de l’Archevêché behind Nôtre Dame. The morgue’s central location attracted as many passers-by as possible for the identification of bodies, and the institution was conveniently located near the police headquarters, judicial chambers, the medical faculty of the Sorbonne, and the river from which many bodies were dragged.[4]

.....

A dedicated morgue building – albeit temporary and dilapidated – was located in Melbourne’s wharf area and used from the late 1850s as a site for storing bodies as well as for inquests. It pre-dated both the rejuvenated Paris building (1864) as well as other comparable institutions such as New York City’s first morgue, opened in 1866 on the grounds of Bellevue Hospital near the East River.[5]

Nineteenth-century arguments about the morgue are a sensitive indicator of new understandings of death and its place in urban culture.[6] Unlike cemeteries, morgues did not require large tracts of unused land, and could be placed anywhere in the city. Nor did morgues have any connection with religious practices, or have to accommodate the needs of the various denominations for their own sacred spaces. However, the morgue was a new institution, unlike the cemetery, and finding a place for it in an already allocated and overcrowded city presented a novel problem. Deciding where to put the recently deceased, and hence by what route the bodies would be taken through the city to get to the morgue, were issues created by the centralised accommodation of the dead. Like Allan Mitchell, who has written on the Paris morgue as a social institution in the nineteenth century,[7] we argue that an understanding of the institutional history of death is necessary to ground the study of attitudes to death more generally. The construction of morgues in the nineteenth century can therefore be understood as part of new ways of dealing with death throughout the West, and as indicative of new sensitivities about public displays of bodily functions. We further argue that the construction of the Melbourne morgue makes more sense when placed in the specific context of the colonial city.[8]

In the first section we examine the calls for a morgue and the novelty of such an institution in British urban culture. Once the decision was made that there should be a house for the dead, there ensued a long drawn-out discussion about where it should be. The process was complex, and did not ultimately produce a site. We deal with this at some length in Section 2 because the very indecision underlines our main point: that the morgue was a new problem, not yet well established in the minds of administrators. Section 3 examines the temporary location that was found for the morgue in the late 1850s and 1860s following the rejection of a favoured location in what now appears to us to be a very peculiar place – the intersection of two of the city’s main streets. The difficulty of understanding why a morgue was proposed for such a site is compounded by the fact that it was finally located at this spot between 1871 and 1883, as detailed in Section 4. We then discuss in Section 5 the move away from this site, first to another

temporary site, then to the place that would serve as a morgue from 1888 to 1951. In the final section we point to a transitional moment at the end of the nineteenth century when the demands of science and social sensibility over sensationalism and populism began to draw the curtains around the more lurid aspects of the morgue as public spectacle.

I

When Melbourne was planned *ab novo* in 1837, no particular provision was made for a morgue. By the 1850s, however, the city was undergoing a transformation. The discovery of gold in 1851 led to a huge influx of immigrants. Melbourne’s population of around 23,000 in 1851 tripled in just three years – and the number of deaths also increased dramatically. The earliest references to the problem of accommodating the dead appear in the minutes of the Melbourne City Council (MCC) in June 1852. The Council drew attention to the need for a morgue owing to the growing problem of large numbers of unidentified corpses about the town, and was critical of ‘the present odious system of depositing dead corpses ... in houses of public accommodation, while awaiting a Coroner’s Inquest’.[9] Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe, who was effectively in control of the city, responded favourably to their request, and promised to place a sum on the estimates for the erection of a morgue. It is perhaps not insignificant that publicans had some influence in the City Council – Melbourne’s first mayor had indeed been a member of the fraternity.[10]

From these earliest calls for a morgue, the debate was couched in terms of how death should be organised in an urban space. It is worth noting in this regard that the cause was first taken up by the city corporation. The offended sensibilities of the councillors were soon championed by Melbourne Coroner, William Byam Wilmot:

In the present crowded state of the City, the danger attending the introduction of bodies perhaps in an advanced stage of decomposition into public houses for the purpose of an inquest must be obvious, and the disgraceful scene which took place on Sunday evening last when a corpse was hawked about the streets before any publican would admit it upon his premises, induces me to urge this matter upon His Excellency. There is great allowance to be made for some publicans in this matter, who have had premises licensed without the compliment of stabling and out offices prescribed by the law.[11]

It is not surprising that Wilmot, an MD from Edinburgh and a Member of the Royal College of Physicians, pointed to the risks of the present system for spreading disease, but he did so in the context of an attempt to ensure decency. Wilmot had been Coroner for Melbourne since 1841, and his inquest load had more than doubled in the rapidly growing city: from 97 in 1850 to 262 in 1853. In 1853 he clearly considered that a morgue had become necessary, though medical arguments were to have a remarkably small place in the debate over where to put the institution.

Calls for a morgue were not the only response to the city's crisis of accommodation for the dead. The 'hawking' of the body to which Wilmot referred also drew the attention of the *Argus*. Unlike Wilmot, the *Argus* thought the solution was to withhold licenses from, or at least fine, publicans who refused to take a body, to ensure that this situation did not occur in future. The *Argus* was certain that this power existed in England, but was unsure of the colonial situation. [12] The legal position in the colony remained unclear until 1864 when publicans were specifically required to house dead bodies for post-mortems, for which they received one pound. [13] Whatever the letter of the law in 1853, however, the practice of holding inquests in hotels was common, and accepted as the proper practice, as the protest from the *Argus* suggests. Approval of this practice is also clear in the letter from 'A Jury man' quoted above. Crawford Mollison, Melbourne's premier pathologist at the end of the nineteenth century, recalled that before the erection of the 1888 morgue, 'post-mortems were made in stables and barns, and inquests were held in hotels'. [14] Mollison slightly overstates the practice to the extent that inquest records from the 1850s list bodies being stored in a range of mortuaries; for example, gaols were used for inquests on prisoners who died in custody as well as those who were executed, and inquests were held in lunatic asylums, the Immigrants Home and the Melbourne Hospital on those who died in these institutions. [15] The common practice of keeping bodies in hotels was, however, an accepted cultural norm of the British city in the mid-nineteenth century.

The novelty of the morgue in British culture can be measured against the primacy of the Paris morgue as a *sine qua non* of civil surveillance. The keystone of the French morgue was public display to maximise the likelihood of identifying the dead, and the central location of the Paris morgue was designed to attract many passers-by. But more than that, the Paris morgue was 'La Musée de la Mort', a morbid attraction listed in guide books to the city as a must-see alongside the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the waxworks and the theatre.

[16] It has been estimated that a million visitors a year passed through the morgue by the end of the century. While as a place of banal curiosity the Paris morgue may have been the 'Luxembourg de la Cité', French commentators noted ironically that its clientele comprised mostly English tourists. Not content with the offerings of the Salle d'exposition, they would, if they could, go over the place with a fine-tooth comb. [17] In 1833 F de Courcy commented that now that well-known people were no longer executed on the Place de la Grève, it could only be hoped that onlookers would not be deprived of the stocks, as the morgue would then be the only place of comparable recreation left. [18] Changing ideas of decency through the nineteenth century eventually put an end to this display of death. Bodies were no longer displayed naked at the Paris morgue from 1877, and public exhibition of bodies was ended in 1907. [19]

The French example was certainly not lost on those in Melbourne. In 1868, Chief Commissioner of Police Standish noted that 'the Morgue in Paris is now the most complete structure of the kind, and should the Officers entrusted with the erection of the new Morgue in Melbourne require details of that building I shall be happy to procure them from the Parisian authorities'. [20] Not everyone was so happy about following the French example. The *Age* newspaper regarded the French morgue as 'one of the dismal sights of Paris' and claimed it was 'a gloomy emanation from the morbid sentimentality of the French mind'. [21] While the *Age* identified some crucial differences between British and French culture and judicial systems, it somewhat overstated the case. A body could only be identified at inquest when someone could testify to the identity. Some of the early calls for a morgue addressed this very problem by insisting that identification was a key function that the morgue would play. Coroner Youl, who took over from Wilmot temporarily in 1854 and permanently in 1857, emphasised the importance of having a central place where people might look for 'persons, who in a state of Delirium wander from their homes and are found by the Police'. Public houses failed to provide this central point for identification. Similarly, the Mayor called for 'a morgue or dead-house for the reception of dead bodies awaiting Coroners Inquests or recognition by their friends'. [22]

.....

The extent to which colonists took ‘advantage’ of the number of unidentified corpses to view the dead as spectacle, as was the case in Paris, is unclear for the 1860s and 1870s, although as discussed below there were moments later in the century when this certainly occurred. It is clear however that the call for a morgue was partly a response to the desire of the government to be able to identify the deceased in a society of immigrant strangers, and partly a requirement of the climate. Traditional practices, rooted in localism, were inefficient in a growing colonial society with hot summers.[23] The surveillance of the dead was common in French and English societies, but was given particular emphasis in a town experiencing a gold-rush population boom.[24] Identification, decency and health, therefore, provided varying motivation for this radical departure from local English practice.

## II

Once the idea of a morgue was accepted, the problem became where to put it. A morgue ensured that bodies were not stored in public houses. But at the same time it also meant creating a location where bodies would *always* be present, and to where bodies would have to be carried, concentrating the visibility of death in the streets. Choosing a site meant carefully considering each of these possibilities.

The large proportion of bodies for inquest retrieved from the Yarra led to various officials suggesting sites near the river. Public propriety, which had begun the debate, was also influencing the location of the morgue. Wilmot considered a site in the immediate vicinity of Prince’s Bridge to be the most appropriate, close to the river. He pointed out that it had a number of other advantages as well, being nearer the Swanston Street police station and the wharf, ‘more especially when we consider how great a desideratum it is that the Streets of the City should be harassed as little as possible by the dead bodies found in such various stages of decomposition.’ [25] Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe, who had the ultimate authority over where public buildings were to go, reacted with cautious approval to this proposal, so long as the morgue was not ‘made a prominent object in any position’. To this end, he suggested embedding the morgue in the embankment of Prince’s Bridge. Colonial Architect Henry Ginn was not so sure about La Trobe’s idea, both on account of its expense and on the grounds that ‘many females would be much shocked at having to pass over a place where dead bodies are kept.’[26] The emergent ideology of public space as a reformed, sanitised and generally accessible and democratic domain, open in theory to all the city’s denizens, was

compromised in practice by complex manipulations of behaviour and locations that demanded conformity to particular notions of convenience and propriety.[27]

Plans for a morgue were first drawn up in early 1853, but apparently came to nothing. The bureaucratic indecision soon frustrated the city corporation, which again resolved in Council to urge the Lieutenant-Governor to speed up the process, citing ‘the extreme hardship requiring licensed victuallers, in the present crowded condition of their houses, to receive dead bodies awaiting Coroner’s Inquests.’[28] A further site was selected near Prince’s Bridge by August 1853, and appeared to have been approved by La Trobe. The morgue was to ‘be situated in the bank of the bridge approach, and thus form a kind of catacomb, which will be masked with shrubs, &c.’[29] However, La Trobe soon noticed that the morgue was being built on the east side rather than in the embankment on the west side; plans which were supposed to have been submitted to him in October the previous year had never in fact been formally approved. La Trobe regarded the final position on the eastern side as ‘horrible’ and ‘needlessly offensive to the feelings of the citizens.’[30] Work was suspended.

The problem now was that construction was already well in hand. The partially built morgue made the spectre of death in the city much more real, even before any bodies had been placed there. What had once been pure imagination, guided perhaps by the example of the Paris morgue, now had a physical reality. The *Argus* addressed the ‘very sorrowful and disagreeable subject’ of the new dead-house, and like La Trobe viewed with disfavour the ‘indelicate’ location at Prince’s Bridge, impinging as it did onto the ‘busy street-life of a bustling city’:

As our rich cits drive across the bridge then, exhausted by the labors of the day; and, with empty stomachs, begin to turn their thoughts to the fragrant hashes and savory cutlets which will greet them on their arrival at St. Kilda or South Yarra, they must not feel surprised if they find themselves suddenly assailed with a whiff of something not particularly appetising. They must console themselves with the reflection, that it is nothing worse than the smell from the decaying bodies of a few of their fellow creatures.[31]

All of Wilmot’s assurances about the decency of the site came to little. The problem of locating the dead proved too difficult, and the *ad hoc* use of public houses continued.

.....

The Prince's Bridge complex, though at least partially completed, was being used as the City Coroner and Registrar's office, but not as a morgue. In August 1854, Acting Coroner Youl re-ignited the demand for a centrally located morgue, now to deal with the high mortality of recently arrived Chinese gold-rush immigrants encamped on the south bank of the river. At the end of 1854, dead bodies were still being conveyed to public houses, a practice which served to keep the issue of the morgue alive. The body of Alexander McQueen, a boy who had drowned, was 'deposited in a fowl-house, exposed to the heat of the atmosphere' while awaiting inquest, to the distress of his friends and the *Argus*.<sup>[32]</sup> The hot summer season in January 1855 saw the Acting City Coroner making arrangements with an undertaker, Mr Crofts, to store corpses.<sup>[33]</sup> At the end of that month Youl reported to a special committee on government office accommodation on 'the absolute necessity which exists for the erection of a morgue, in connection with the office of the coroner, whether the present site be retained or not'.<sup>[34]</sup>

### III

Despite the failure to complete the proposed Melbourne morgue in 1853-4, small-scale use of a dedicated morgue began in the late 1850s, in a temporary structure at the western end of town nearer the wharves. In 1858 Constable Mooney noted at an inquest that he had found a body in the Yarra on 17 September and 'conveyed it to the morgue', and the inquest was said to have taken place in Flinders Street. In the following year a number of inquests were held at 'the Morgue' on bodies taken from the Yarra near the wharves, and the jurors said to be good and lawful men of Flinders Street. Certainly the morgue was far removed from the central position of the proposed Prince's Bridge site.

Nevertheless, having a central morgue did raise the problem of bodies being conveyed thence. In 1858 Youl suggested that a truck used for removing corpses to the morgue might be stationed at his Prince's Bridge office, for use 'when the distance is long', and that a painted canvas stretcher could be kept at the morgue for shorter distances, which would keep the bodies completely hidden to avoid offence to the public.<sup>[35]</sup> However, many inquests were still being held in the city and the body was *not* being taken to the morgue. Wilmot's vision of the dead being brought from the suburbs to the central morgue was certainly a long way from realisation and was bringing with it its own set of problems.

If, as we surmise, the Australian Wharf past the western end of Flinders Street was the location of a temporary morgue, there were moves to develop it (or a site nearby)

into a permanent building in 1864. On 13 September of that year, the Inspector General of Public Works ordered that timber lumber be removed from 'the piece of ground allotted for the intended Morgue & that the ground may be reserved & gazetted'.<sup>[36]</sup> The disgraceful state of the establishment in 1867 again highlighted the need for a new morgue. Coroner Youl put a suggestion to the Minister of Justice:

The present Morgue is a disgrace to the City – it being no Department's Business to look after – it is dirty and offensive the building is so insecure – that the dead in it have been robbed of their clothes in wet weather it is almost impossible to approach it – the Verandah is the resort of Cattle and Goats ... I think therefore a new Morgue built of stone in a proper site most desirable ... I think the City Corporation should have the charge of it ...  
<sup>[37]</sup>

but his plea fell on deaf ears. In May 1868 the morgue was again reported to be in a ruinous condition.

In 1875 Youl still did 'not know in which Department the Morgues are placed'. As he had suggested, throughout this period the failure of the authorities to erect and maintain a proper morgue was the failure of any department to take responsibility for it. Despite its role in the surveillance of citizens, the nineteenth-century morgue occupied an ambiguous place within the bureaucracy of the day. The question of who bore responsibility for the morgue was one that continued from decade to decade without resolution. The Police, the Public Works Department, the Crown Law Office and the Corporation of the City all denied responsibility for building and maintaining a morgue at various points. The dispute is indicative not only of the tight-fisted attitude of government departments, but also of uncertainty about the role the morgue was meant to play. Was it part of municipal responsibilities, like garbage collection? In England, coroners were still a responsibility of local governments, but in the colonies a more centralised state had taken over the appointment and payment of coroners.<sup>[38]</sup> Or did the morgue fall under police auspices, as it was invariably the police who took bodies to the morgue? Police took part at most inquests, and, if a verdict of murder was returned, it was the first step in the prosecution. The introduction of the 'new police', with their multifarious public welfare duties, added a new dimension to the ancient office of coroner.<sup>[39]</sup> Then again, was the morgue part of the responsibilities of coroners (and, hence, the Law Department), who presided at inquests? This, in turn, raised questions about the role coroners were expected to play as they became professionals in their own right – salaried government officials rather than local gentlemen holding the occasional inquest for a fee. Eventually the Chief Secretary decided that morgues should be under the control of the police.

#### IV

The temporary morgues had not met the demand for a city morgue, and the Prince's Bridge site rejected in 1854 again became the focus of attention. In September 1869 the Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands suggested a new site on the south bank of the Yarra west of Prince's Bridge, and by 1870 there was a clear indication that moves were again afoot to build a new morgue. Significantly, however, the *Age* viewed the delay with a certain amount of pleasure, and it is clear that there was still some opposition to the very institution of the morgue itself.

Finding a suitable location was again a difficult task. Many of the issues in 1871 were the same as those in the 1850s. Despite this, the outcome was the opposite of that of 20 years earlier: the Melbourne morgue ended up at Prince's Bridge, at the city's southern entrance. This site was favoured by the *Argus* over other locations that were deemed to be even more noticeable.[40] The building was completed in 1871, and from JE Neild's sketch-plan in 1878 it appears that the Prince's Bridge morgue was attached to the original 1854 office.

Centralisation was slow to take effect. Even after the central morgue was established in the city, bodies were still being taken to local hotels for inquest. In 1876 attention was drawn in Parliament to an incident where a suicide's body was taken to a hotel in North Melbourne, the state of decomposition driving customers away from the premises.[41] This case drew attention to the problems of grafting new sensibilities onto existing legal structures. The Coroner was still an office based on local participation. There was also new concern about the propriety of having the morgue in such a prominent position. The dilapidated state of the morgue by 1878 induced Coroner Candler to suggest that 'that the place should be made far more presentable than it is – more creditable to the City of Melbourne – and more fitted for its purpose'.[42]

In a sense this signals a new era of civic consciousness in relation to the public image of the city. Plans in the late 1870s for a new Prince's Bridge culminated in 1888 with the opening of the new structure. By 1900 the site was firmly identified as the city's gateway from St Kilda Road,[43] and improvements after 1901 were motivated by the opening of Federal Parliament in Melbourne, a Royal Visit, and the visit of the American Fleet in 1908. By this time, the MCC and the Government had invested hundreds of thousands of pounds on the new railway station and on statues, lawns and flower beds at the city's southern entrance in an effort, as the *Age* would have it, 'to make this spot – the city's front door – a credit to Melbourne'.[44]

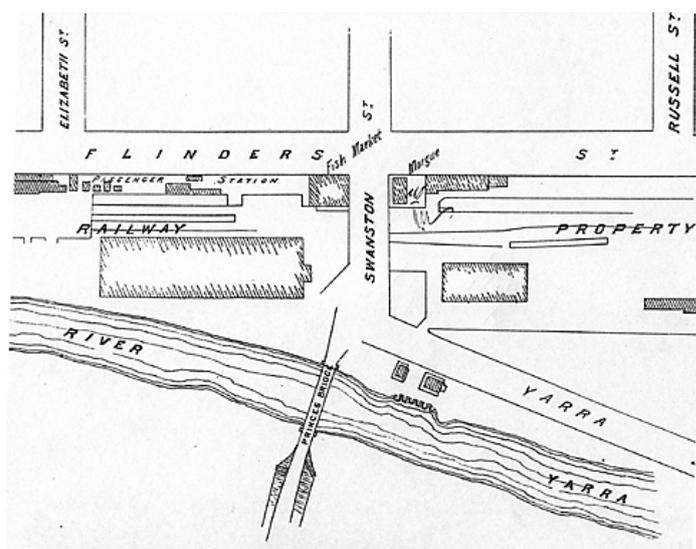


Illustration 1: Location of Melbourne Morgue, 1883.

#### V

The Prince's Bridge morgue was abandoned by the Coroners in 1883 when the Railway Department required the old building.[45] A temporary morgue was located in a yard at Cole's wharf, but within twelve months Youl condemned the building as hopeless: 'The dead house is so infected with rats that the bodies have to be protected from them with iron covers. The jury room is cold dark and very uncomfortable so much so that jurors refuse to sit in it and the Court has to be removed to [a] Hotel'.[46] The Secretary of the Crown Law Office was more direct: 'The present disgusting place is enough to kill people [who have to] go there and perform duties in the place'.[47]

While the temporary site was miserably inadequate, no agreement could be reached on a permanent location. The Railway Department and the Secretary for Public Works suggested sites near the wharves, Youl objecting to such proposals on the grounds that this precinct was too far away from the centre of population, that juries would need to be transported in cabs and paid for their time and trouble, and that bodies would have to be carried through the town.

.....

The morgue had finally become an important and often-used building, highlighting the problems of centralising the storage of the dead. In 1885, Solicitor-General Alfred Deakin told Parliament that a central and convenient location could not yet be fixed upon, four proposed sites having been objected to.[48] The MCC and others rejected any site that would be objectionable to the citizens of Melbourne: 'surely the views of the living must be regarded as well as the sentimental view put forward by Dr. Youl or any one else'.[49] Deakin observed that the City Council objected to many sites 'which they considered would be disfigured by the erection of a morgue; they were opposed to a building of the kind, from its associations, no matter how architecturally perfect it might be, occupying a public position'.[50] Having championed the removal of the dead from city hotels in the 1850s, the Council now objected to death in the city *per se*. Nevertheless, this debate seems to have inspired some action, and on 2 September 1886 Youl approved a site just outside the city proper, on the banks of the Yarra at Batman Avenue. The new morgue was opened in 1888, and served as the City Morgue until 1951 when the institution was moved first to the Flinders Street extension, and finally in 1988 to premises in Kavanagh Street, Southbank.

## VI

Public viewing of bodies was at least as important in colonial Melbourne as it was in Paris. Victoria was an immigrant society, attempting to recreate the social bonds of 'home'. But while for some of its nineteenth-century history the Melbourne morgue was a centrally located and public institution (despite the reservations shown by various officials about its prominent position), there is little evidence that the general public flocked to the Melbourne morgue as they did in Paris, as a source of titillation and amusement. Certainly by the early twentieth century such a practice was seen to degrade the spectacle of death and to provoke vice and immorality. Charlady Mrs Prendegast, for example, was aghast in 1875 to find the door of the Morgue left ajar, and a corpse 'on the slab in the centre of the Morgue ... so that any person having occasion to enter the yard would have a full view'.[51] Her reaction suggests just how important it had become to keep bodies out of view. Constable Hoey promised to remedy the situation with a sign on the morgue reminding police to close the door. This attitude was consistent with the abolition of Public Execution in 1856, after which only people approved by a Justice of the Peace were allowed to view the bodies of executed felons. Of course, some members of the public must have come to the morgue to aid identification of

bodies, and journalists attended the morgue to write up inquests for their newspapers. In 1878 Dr Neild reported for the information of the City and District Coroner requirements at Melbourne Morgue for the enforcement of regulations 'whereby the public should not be admitted to the dead-house while a body is being examined'. This again indicates that there was some degree of public display.

There is however some evidence to show a peak in public interest in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In 1886 it was reported in the Victorian Parliament that 'a number of the public frequently visited the place for the purpose of identifying bodies which might be conveyed thither; and it was a stigma on the present enlightened age for it to be possible that those bodies should be liable to be mutilated by vermin'.[52] The Hon. LL Smith, medical practitioner, also suggested that the proposed morgue

should contain suitable accommodation for post mortem examinations, and for the holding of inquests, and that it should be arranged after the mode adopted in continental cities, whereby the public were enabled to view the cadavres, decently laid out, through glass plates – a proceeding which often assisted in the discovery of crime.[53]

In 1892 a story in the *Bulletin* entitled 'They met at the Morgue' had two friends making for the morgue after taking their lunch, to flatten their noses against the screen of glass and take in the most recent load of 'wrecked humanity'.[54]

In the case of at least one notorious crime, there is also clear evidence that Melburnians did indeed flock to the morgue like their Parisian counterparts. The 'Yarra Boot Trunk Tragedy' was one of the names given to the discovery of the naked corpse of an unidentified young woman in a yellow box floating in the Yarra at South Richmond on 17 December 1898. Initially, people wishing to view the body claimed to be looking for missing friends; later, police gave in to public curiosity in the hope (correct, as it turned out) that someone would be able to identify the body. Crowds continued to gather after police removed and preserved her head, allowing her decomposing body to be buried, and the public entertainment was celebrated in verse as 'The Ballad of the Melbourne Morgue':

Do come an' see the 'Ead  
Of the donah [woman] who is dead;  
It lies upon a marble slab  
In a buildin'; you're aware,  
By the Yarra over there –  
Suppose we take a four-wheel cab;  
For the cab can carry eight,  
And will land us at the gate  
Of the villa where the gal's on view;  
Thought we can't say who she is  
From the photos. of her phiz.,  
Thank Gawd! she wasn't me or you![55]

.....

Newspapers reported that over 8,000 members of the public had called in on the morgue in the period prior to identification on 11 January 1899, when police were informed that the body was that of Mabel Ambrose, 17 years of age, who had died in the course of an illegal abortion.[56]

The Paris public may have frequented its 'Musée de la mort' to gawk at drowned bodies 'comme ailleurs on va pour voir la modes nouvelles, les orangers en fleurs, les maronniers'. [57] For a period at the end of the nineteenth century at least, its Melbourne counterpart, too, may have operated as a lurid but nonetheless acceptable venue for macabre titillation. [58] At the same time, however, despite the 'sensation-hunters' (the crowds in Melbourne, as in Paris, noted as being disproportionately working-class and female), [59] public protocols were changing. While these transformations might be more broadly concomitant with general shifts in social sensibilities and the moulding of instinctual urges that saw a withdrawing of bodily functions from the public gaze, [60] restricted access to inquests was also a particular part of a changing equilibrium between science and populism, and the inquest's re-definition as an essentially scientific event. [61]

## Conclusion

Around a quarter of a century ago now, Phillipe Ariès opened up the question of how attitudes to death have changed historically. He also championed the argument that there was a massive 'denial' of death in the nineteenth century, the most immediate link with our own modern discomfort with death and the strategies used to hide it from view. [62] Complaints about Ariès' use of evidence are well-rehearsed, and the theoretical underpinning of 'denial' has also been attacked. [63] For the reasons outlined in our introduction, we suggest that the morgue is a good test of this argument. The evidence from the attempts to find a suitable location for Melbourne's nineteenth-century morgue points to the occurrence of fundamental shifts in attitudes to death.

Nevertheless, the critics are right: 'denial' does not adequately express it. The attempt to 'hide' death in the morgue served only to draw attention to it. Instead of bodies in private houses, or even in public houses, an institution had been created where bodies could *always* be seen, and to which they had to be transported in the first place. As our discussion of the morgue as a place for the identification of bodies – if not for public entertainment – has shown, one of the primary functions of the morgue was to put corpses on display. This ambiguity ran right through arguments

over the location of the morgue, and was perhaps partly responsible for the inability of officials to agree on any location for long. Other factors must assume an important role. Melbourne's gold-rush population boom (creating a youthful society which may have felt the revulsion of death more keenly) and hot summer climate also go some way towards explaining the early need for a morgue; after all, as the Age had noted: 'Who ever heard of a morgue in London, or any of the large towns of the United Kingdom?' [64]

Concerns about health played a surprisingly insignificant role, especially in contrast to the fears of miasmas from the dead in cemeteries. Medical and bureaucratic authority over the dead was important, and the City Coroners in the period (Wilmot, Youl and Candler) were prominent medical men. A constant theme of the debate was 'decency', and the sensitivities of Melbourne's ladies, merchants and 'rich cits' were of great concern to the bureaucrats and press we have surveyed here. This was as much about *appearance* as about death itself; a similar heightened sensitivity is revealed, for example, in the introduction of by-laws against bodily functions such as spitting and public urination, prior to their being retrospectively supported by new epidemiological doctrines. [65]

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, inquests were increasingly held at the Melbourne morgue; the morgue was a place where the inquest was transformed. The *ad hoc* inquest process, carried out in hotels by men who had little experience, was succeeded by a well-organised profession in a custom-built institution. [66] English forensic medicine has traditionally been seen as the black sheep of the European forensic family. Recently historians have shown that this reputation may be unjustified; that, while the English were slow to publish formal treatises on anatomy, they were *practising* forensic medicine all along. In the morgue we see both aspects: the practice of asking medical men to make dissections, and a theoretical interest in the new science.

.....

The need for a place to conduct *post mortem* examinations was not mentioned in any of Wilmot's proposals for a morgue, although he had suggested that an Assistant Surgeon be appointed to his staff, observing that 'Medical jurisprudence is now regarded as a distinct branch of science, and well worth the attention and fostering of enlightened legislature'.<sup>[67]</sup> Youl included the cost of 'a post mortem examination room &c' in his estimates of the cost of the morgue in 1854. From being just one of the functions of the morgue, the importance of the *post mortem* grew over time. In a sample of inquests we have examined from the morgue in 1859, 42% included a *post mortem* examination. In 1896-7 that figure had risen to 82%, and a medical examination of the body – without opening it – was held in a further 5% of cases.<sup>[68]</sup>

By the time the jury was practically abolished in 1903, the importance of professional knowledge of the body had overtaken the value given to the observations of the lay jurors. By creating a regular supply of bodies, especially for practitioners like Neild and Crawford Mollison, the morgue fostered the development of forensic medicine in Victoria as much as it was the product of this developing field.

The establishment of a central, custom-built morgue in Melbourne in the mid-1850s appears to have taken place earlier than in London or New York; Melbourne was in a sense the laboratory of Empire. The needs of family, friends and state to identify the dead in an immigrant society, and the heat of the Australian summer, provided the impetus. To these endogenous colonial factors can be added a falling tolerance found throughout the West in the nineteenth century to unpleasant sights, smells, and the mere presence of the dead. Ultimately, the anxiety created by these feelings was enough to ensure that Melbourne's morgue did not stay in a prominent position for long. With occasional exceptions of public spectacle, the morgue became the institutional home of the Coroner, and a site for forensic expertise. It began to develop its own institutional culture, largely sequestered from the city around it.

## Endnotes

- [1] The authors thank the following for feedback on their research: respondents to a query posted on H-URBAN; participants in the Melbourne Urban History Discussion Group; delegates at a paper delivered at the 5th International Conference on The Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal, Goldsmith's College, University of London, September 2000. Thanks also to Sam Furphy, Helen Harris, Christina Twomey, Dean Wilson and Juliet Flesch for references and research assistance.
- [2] 'A Jury man' to Colonial Secretary, 16 February 1855, Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 1189, Unit 135, Item L55/2462.
- [3] Age, 16 February 1855.
- [4] *Times*, 9 January 1854; 14 January 1864; 28 April 1864; 8 July 1864; *New York Times*, 28 April 1864.
- [5] The American morgue, championed initially by the Commissioner of Charities and Corrections and constructed 'upon the plan of the famous Morgue at Paris', had by 1882 itself become a repulsive, decaying structure 'unworthy of our civilization', and was relocated a decade later. J DeLuca, 'Morgues' in KT Jackson (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., & New York Historical Society, 1995, pp. 770-1; *New York Times*, 1 July 1865; 8 February 1866; 20 June 1866; 23 February 1882; 15 May 1892.
- [6] Pat Jalland's *Australian ways of death: a social and cultural history 1840-1918*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2002, is the most comprehensive history of death and loss in Australia.
- [7] Allan Mitchell, 'The Paris morgue as a social institution in the nineteenth century', *Francia*, vol. 4, 1976, pp. 581-96; id., 'Philippe Ariès and the French way of death', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 10, 1978, pp. 691-4.
- [8] Unless otherwise indicated, this paper draws on correspondence files located in PROV: VPRS 24, Units 56, 62, 65, 69; VPRS 44, Unit 687; VPRS 69, Units 3, 14; VPRS 242, Unit 17; VPRS 266, Units 3A, 284, 413; VPRS 1189, Unit 146; VPRS 1198, Units 128, 133, 185, 191.
- [9] Melbourne City Council Minutes, vol. 6, pp. 1893-4 (7 June 1852) and p. 1895 (21 June 1852).
- [10] loc. cit.; D Dunstan, *Governing the metropolis: politics, technology and social change in a Victorian city: Melbourne 1850-1891*, Melbourne University Press, 1984, p. 149.
- [11] Coroner Wilmot to Colonial Secretary, 13 January 1853, VPRS 1198, Unit 128, Item 53/446.

[12] *Argus*, 11 January 11 1853. Unfortunately, there is still no social history of the coroner in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but there is a growing body of work on related issues: TR Forbes, 'Crown's quest', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 68, 1978, pp. 1-52; JDJ Havard, *The detection of secret homicide: a study of the medico-legal system of investigation of sudden and unexplained deaths*, Macmillan, London, 1960; RF Hunnisett, 'The importance of eighteenth-century coroners' bills', in EW Ives and AH Manchester (eds), *Law, Litigants and the Legal Profession: Papers presented to the Fourth British Legal History Conference at the University of Birmingham, 10-13 July 1979*, Royal Historical Society, London, & Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1983, pp. 126-39; E Cawthon, 'Thomas Wakely and the medical coronership: occupational death and the judicial process', *Medical History*, vol. 30, 1986, pp. 191-202, and 'New life for the deodand: coroners' inquests and occupational deaths in England, 1830-46', *American Journal of Legal History*, vol. 33, 1989, pp. 137-47; J Sim & T Ward, 'The magistrate of the poor? Coroners and deaths in custody in nineteenth-century England', in M Clark & C Crawford (eds), *Legal Medicine in History*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 245-67; O Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, chap. 1; R Richardson, *Death, dissection and the destitute*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987; M MacDonald and TR Murphy, *Sleepless souls: suicide in Early Modern England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, chap. 4; IA Burney, 'Viewing bodies: medicine, public order, and English inquest practice', *Configurations*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, pp. 33-46; RW England, Jr, 'Investigating homicides in Northern England, 1800-1824', *Criminal Justice History*, vol. 6, 1985, pp. 105-23; D Zuck, 'Mr Troutbeck as the surgeon's friend: the coroner and the doctors – an Edwardian comedy', *Medical History*, vol. 39, 1995, pp. 259-87; GHH Glasgow, 'The election of county coroners in England and Wales circa 1800-1888', *Journal of Legal History*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1999, pp. 75-108; IA Burney, *Bodies of evidence: medicine and the politics of the English inquest, 1830-1926*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1999; MB Emmerichs, 'Getting away with murder? Homicide and the coroners in nineteenth-century London', *Social Science History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2001, pp. 93-100.

[13] *An Act to consolidate and amend the Laws relating to the licensing of Public Houses and the Sale of Fermented and Spiritous Liquors*, 27 Vic. No. 227 (1864) s. 55.

[14] CH Mollison commenting on GA Paton, 'The development of forensic medicine', *Proceedings of the Medico-Legal Society of Victoria*, vol. 4, 1939-41, p. 261. Mollison's textbook draws on his experience in Melbourne's morgue: *Lectures on forensic medicine* (1921). See also 'Some medico-legal reminiscences', *Proceedings of the Medico-Legal Society of Victoria*, vol. 2, 1933-6, pp. 63-83.

[15] From sampling of VPRS 24, Coroners' Inquest Papers.

[16] A Higonnet, M Higonnet & P Higonnet, 'Façades: Walter Benjamin's Paris', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 10, 1984, pp. 391-419; VR Schwartz, 'The morgue and the Musée Grévin: understanding the public taste for reality in fin-de-siècle Paris', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 7, 1994, pp. 151-73; Mitchell, 'The Paris morgue'; B Bertherat, 'Les visiteurs de la morgue', *L'Histoire*, vol. 180, 1994, pp. 16-21.

[17] F Maillard, *Recherches historiques et critique sur la morgue*, Paris, 1860, pp. 92-3.

[18] Quoted in Maillard, p. 94.

[19] Mitchell, 'The Paris morgue', pp. 581-2; Bertherat, pp. 16-21.

[20] VPRS 266, Crown Law Office Inwards Correspondence, Unit 284, Item 75/4301.

[21] *Age*, 13 January 1871.

[22] In 1869 the Board of Health included identification as a function of the morgue. The *Argus* agreed with Youl and the Mayor: *Argus*, 30 December 1854.

[23] Melbourne's average maximum temperatures in the summer months are approximately 40C higher than those of London or Paris. While New York City experiences higher average summer maximums, Melbourne's overall average yearly temperature and highest maximum temperatures exceed those of the other three cities.

[24] M Perrot (ed.), *A history of private life*, vol. IV: *From the fires of revolution to the Great War*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, pp. 468-75; L Prior's 'Policing the dead: a sociology of the mortuary', *Sociology*, vol. 21, 1987, pp. 355-76 develops this theme, but not in an historical framework; IA Burney's 'Viewing bodies' discusses the limits of the medical gaze, which was enforced by the popularity of the coroners' jury. It is interesting to note that the Victorian coroners' jury was, for all practical purposes, abolished in 1903 (*Coroners Act 1903*, 3 Edw. VII, No. 1828).

[25] Wilmot to Colonial Secretary, 1 March 1853, VPRS 1198, Unit 128, stack marked 'Coroner', Item A53/2204.

[26] loc. cit.

[27] The regulation of nineteenth-century public space generally, and women's value as the focus of male competitive exchange that involved the stereotype of female 'delicacy' being invoked in the mitigation of a variety of perceived urban nuisances in particular, have been explored in relation to nineteenth-century Melbourne in A Brown-May, *Melbourne street life*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1998.

[28] MCC Minutes, 9 August 1853.

[29] *Argus*, 22 April 1854; 15 May 1854.

[30] Colonial Engineer to Colonial Secretary, 26 May 1854, VPRS 1198, Unit 128, stack marked 'Coroner', Item E54/5695.

[31] *Argus*, 10 June 1854.

- [32] *Argus*, 1 December 1854; see also *Argus*, 30 December 1854.
- [33] *Argus*, 3 January 1855.
- [34] *Argus*, 27 January 1855.
- [35] VPRS 937, Unit 284.
- [36] Inspector General of Public Works to Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands, 13 September 1864, VPRS 44, Unit 687, J64/8348.
- [37] Minute for the Chief Commissioner of Police by the Inspector General of Public Works, 8 May 1867, VPRS 266, Unit 284, Item 75/4301.
- [38] Anderson, chap. 1; Havard, chap. 4.
- [39] M Finnane, *Police and government: histories of policing in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, chap. 1; R Haldane, *The people's force: a history of the Victoria Police*, Melbourne University Press, 1986.
- [40] *Argus*, 13 February 1871.
- [41] *Victorian Parliamentary Debates (VPD)*, vol. 25, 13 December 1876, p. 1734.
- [42] Candler to the Minister of Justice, 17 August 1878, VPRS 266, Unit 317.
- [43] *Argus*, 17 January 1900.
- [44] *Age*, 20 April 1908.
- [45] *VPD*, vol. 45, 9 July 1884, p. 494.
- [46] Youl, 9 July 1884, VPRS 266, Unit 413, Item 87/3721.
- [47] Secretary Harriman, Crown Law Office, Memo, 8 July 1887, VPRS 266, Unit 413, Item 87/3721.
- [48] *VPD*, vol. 48, 28 July 1885, p. 460.
- [49] *VPD*, vol. 52, 24 August 1886, p. 1178.
- [50] loc. cit.
- [51] VPRS 266, Unit 284, Item 75/4301.
- [52] loc. cit.
- [53] *VPD*, Session 1886, vol. 53, 8 December 1886, p. 2699.
- [54] *Bulletin*, 9 July 1892, p. 21.
- [55] *Bulletin*, 21 January 1898.
- [56] loc. cit.
- [57] Gozlan quoted in Maillard, p. 93. See also K Baedeker's *Paris and its environs*, Leipsic, 1900, p. 227.
- [58] On the Paris morgue as spectacle see V Schwartz, *Spectacular realities: early mass culture in fin-de-siècle Paris*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, pp. 45-88.
- [59] *Argus*, 20 December 1898; Maillard, p. 87.
- [60] See for example N Elias, *The civilising process*, trans. E Jephcott, Urizen Books, New York, 1978; A Corbin, *The foul and the fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986.
- [61] Burney, 'Viewing bodies', p. 33.
- [62] P Ariès, *Western attitudes toward death: from the Middle Ages to the present*, trans. PM Ranum, Marion Boyars, London, 1976; and *The hour of our death*, trans. H Weaver, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983 (1977). See also G Gorer, 'The pornography of death', *Encounter*, vol. 5, 1955, pp. 49-52; and *Death, grief, and mourning in contemporary Britain*, Cresset Press, London, 1965.
- [63] A Kellehear, 'Are we a "death-denying" society? A sociological review', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 18, 1984, pp. 713-23; T Walter, 'Modern death: taboo or not taboo?', *Sociology*, vol. 25, 1991, pp. 293-310. Historians have also criticised this aspect of Ariès's achievement: R Houlbrooke, 'Introduction' to his (ed.), *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 4; D Cannadine, 'War and death, grief and mourning in modern Britain', in J Whaley (ed.), *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Europa, London, 1981, pp. 187-242; PC Jupp & C Gittings (eds), *Death in England: an illustrated history*, Manchester University Press, 1999, p. 2.
- [64] *Age*, 13 January 1870.
- [65] On changing attitudes to public urination and expectoration in the nineteenth-century city, see Brown-May, pp. 64-88.
- [66] S Cooke, 'A "dirty little secret"? The State, the press, and popular knowledge of suicide in Victoria, 1840s-1920s', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 115, 2000, pp. 304-24.
- [67] WB Wilmot, 9 July 1853, VPRS 1189, Unit 146, Item C53/6852.
- [68] From a sample of 100 consecutive inquests held in Melbourne (57 of which were at the morgue) between 2 September 1896 and 18 January 1897 (VPRS 1205/P1).