INVESTIGATIVE

Entombed Alive!

It is a horrifying concept: being buried—or walled-up—alive. Fears of such possibilities were once rife.

In earlier times even physicians could not always determine infallibly whether an individual was dead or instead in a comatose or cataleptic state. Actual cases of people seemingly returning to life may have inspired ancient folktales about persons being raised from the dead.

Moreover, in Europe, untimely inhumation helped spread fears of vampires—those who returned from the dead to prey on the living (Bunson 1993, 211). Edgar Allen Poe (1809–1849) expressed, with his usual genius, the grotesque horror of living interment with his tale, "The Premature Burial."

Then there were incidents—real or imagined—in which for some motive such as punishment or revenge a person was deliberately entombed alive, the theme of another Poe story, "The Cask of Amontillado."

One such alleged occurrence was in St. Augustine, Florida, at the Spanish-built fortress, Castillo de San Marcos. Purportedly, an eighteenth-century colonel discovered his wife was having an affair and chained her and her lover to a wall in the dungeon; he "mortared a new wall of coquina stone in front of them" (Hauck 1996, 125). In fact, however, investigation shows that the event is historically unrecorded, and the tale is traceable only to the rumors and outright concoctions of tour guides in the early twentieth century (Nickell 2005, 26).

In my travels, I have encountered other living-burial stories. Here are three that I have investigated, two being of the deliberate-entombment type, namely a walled-up nun in the Netherlands and a castle's mystery room in Switzerland, and the third belonging to the premature-burial genre, featuring a vault with a view in a Vermont graveyard.

Walled-up Nun

During a lecture and investigation trip to the Netherlands and Belgium in 2006 (Nickell 2007), I was escorted by Dutch skeptic Jan Willem Nienhuys to Singraven, an estate near the small town of Denekamp in northeastern Netherlands. Built on old foundations in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, the estate's manor house or "castle" is said to be haunted.

Its secluded location helped give it an air of mystery and, as is the case with many historic sites, the ambience helped spawn ghostlore. After one lord of the manor began a cemetery on the grounds, superstitious folk began to say he invited bad luck. When his beard caught fire from an oil lamp, burning him severely, and when his wife died in childbirth, people would say, "The ghost of Singraven has struck again" (Wynia et al. 2006).

A young Dutch "psychic," Robbert van den Broeke, has visited Singraven and claimed to perceive numerous ghostly presences. Robbert—who busies himself giving dubious readings, producing questionable otherworldly photos, conveniently discovering crop circles near his and his parents' home, and so on (Broeke 2005)—did not, however, perform at his psychic best. He incorrectly identified an oil portrait as that of the noble with the burned beard (probably because he had seen a television show that made the same misidentification). He also placed the incident in the wrong room (Wynia et al. 2006).

In the mansion's drawing room, Robbert "saw" various ghosts sitting in chairs or moving about. However, tour guides at Singraven pointed out that there had never been reports of ghosts in that particular chamber, which, in fact, had been added relatively recently (Wynia et al. 2006). At Singraven and elsewhere, Robbert has produced "ghost" photos, but these seem on a par with his "alien" ones (see Nanninga 2005, 28), which are indistinguishable from ridiculous fakes.

The main target of Robbert's psychic and photographic efforts at Singraven is the colorful, spooky legend of a walled-up nun. A cloister occupied the estate from 1505 to 1515. According to a popular tale, one night a young nun slipped away

Joe Nickell, PhD, studied literary investigation and folklore at the University of Kentucky and has written numerous books on literary, historical, forensic, and paranormal mysteries. His Web site is at www.joenickell.com.

for a clandestine liaison with her lover. Returning late, she attempted to sneak up the stairs, but they creaked and awakened the Mother Superior who decided to make an example of her. The unfortunate nun was sealed up in the wall near the foot of the stairway. As she slowly starved to death, her shouts of despair served as a warning to the other sisters (Wynia et al. 2006).

Now, this tale is implausible on the face of it—not only because it has an ostensibly devout prioress capriciously violating one of the Ten Commandments but because the cloister at Singraven was not for nuns at all but for Beguines (lay sisters). It is, in fact, a proliferating and often-debunked folktale. It has found its way into literature, for example in the epic poem *Marmion* by Sir Walter Scott (1808). Catholic scholar Herbert Thurston said of the legend (qtd. in Catholic 2006):

> To anyone who honestly looks into the matter, it will be clear that no statutes of any religious order have yet been brought forward which prescribe such punishment; that no contemporary records speak of its infliction; that no attempt is made to give details of persons or time; that the few traditions that speak of discovery of walled-up remains crumble away the moment they are examined; that the growth of the tradition itself can be abundantly accounted for; that the few historians or antiquaries of repute, whether Catholic or Protestant, either avowedly disbelieve the calumny, or studiously refrain from repeating it.

Thurston's skepticism is fully justified by the facts of our investigation at Singraven. The wall in which the nun was allegedly sealed—now graced with a mirror (see figure 1)—was actually opened up in the early 1990s. This was done by workmen who were replacing the manor's electric wiring. The workers discovered no bones inside the wall, thus discrediting the local legend and with it the ghost sightings of the nun at the alleged site of her horrible death (Wynia et al. 2006).

Such legends of nuns being walled-up for punishment may be derived from the fact that ascetics were sometimes voluntarily enclosed, hermit-like, for solitary meditation. We learned of a church in Utrecht with just such a history. Visiting there the day following our investigation at Singraven, Jan Willem Nienhuys and I found an incised stone tablet in the walkway at the side of the edifice. It reads (in translation): "Sister Bertken Lived Here as Hermit Walled in a Niche in the Wall in the Choir of the Buurkerk 1457–1514."

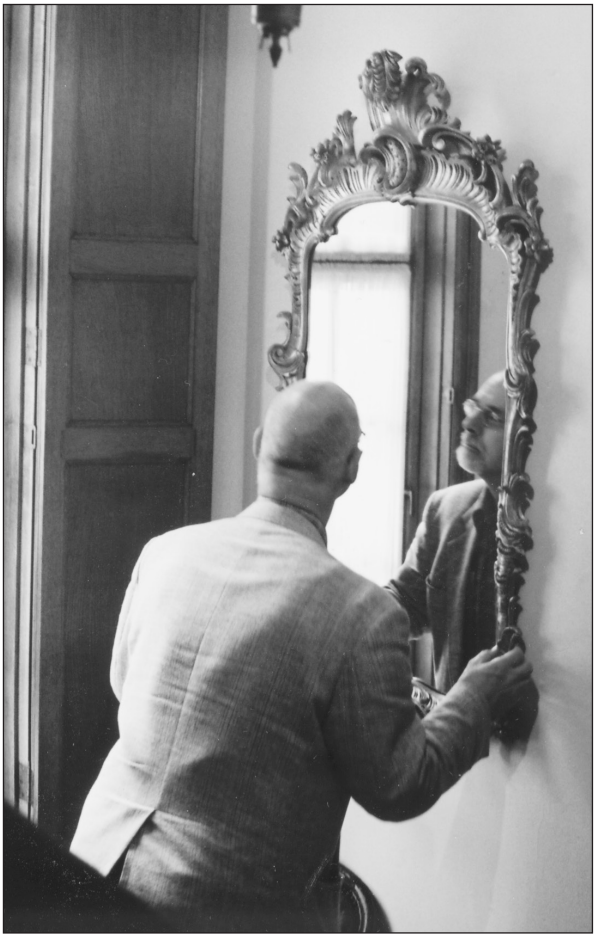

Figure 1. In a "haunted" manor house, Dutch paranormal investigator Jan Willem Nienhuys investigates the wall (behind the mirror) inside which an errant nun was reputedly sealed alive in the early sixteenth century. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

Called "anchoresses," the walled-up penitents were not nuns (they did not take vows, for example), and while they led very austere lives, their "cells" could be quite roomy and often had a door that led into the church. Such hermits even kept in touch with both common folk and nobles, dispensing spiritual counsel and practical advice. When, after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) the Roman Catholic Church became increasingly male-dominated, the urban anchoresses disappeared. (See Mulder-Bakker 2005.)

Mysterious Castle Room

Another entombed-alive legend is attributed to a curious little structure high atop a medieval castle in Switzerland. Overlooking the village of Oensingen, near Solothurn, Bechburg Castle could have been built as early as the mid-thirteenth century, although the earliest document relating to it dates from 1313 (Schloss 2007).

The enigmatic structure is at the highest part of the castle, except for an adjacent tower that continues upward (see figure 2). Roofed but doorless and windowless, the structure is the subject of a legend of uncertain vintage.

Reportedly entombed there was a certain Kuoni, a despicable robber-knight who terrorized the populace and shed much innocent blood. Finally, though, he received a kind of justice when he became afflicted with leprosy or some other contagious disease. According to the tale, he was walled inside the chamber, and servants fed him food and water through a small opening. When he died, this was closed with a stone. Supposedly, however, the chamber could not contain the restless soul of the evil man, which still haunts the castle on certain nights (Roth and Mauer 2006).

The fanciful tale of a leprous knight being walled-in sounds less like historical fact (especially since the spot seems an unlikely place for such confinement) than folkloric fiction inspired by accounts of walled-up ascetics.

Nevertheless, the name Kuoni—a diminutive of Konrad—has been common among the barons of the Bechburg, and there is an old document that could seem to support the legend. Dated 1408 and penned by Count Egon von Kyburg, it reports repair work occurred on the "alcove" (or "little chamber") in which "Kuoni reposes" (Roth and Maurer 2006). Ghost proponents assume that

this refers to the mysterious structure and so confirms that someone named Kuoni is entombed there. But might it not also refer to another place on the premises where, say, a child—little Konrad—slept?

In any case, there is no apparent evidence that the small roofed structure ever had a door or windows. Moreover, when I visited the castle with German skeptic Martin Mahner on May 25, 2007, we discovered something that none of our sources mentioned: its shape is peculiar. While one side meets the front at right angles, the other curves smoothly into it (again, see figure 2). This suggests that, architecturally, its purpose may have been partially or even totally stylistic.

As we learned from files at the city hall in Oensingen (Schloss 2007), a further possibility was suggested by a provincial historical-building supervisor. He had a worker use a jackhammer to drill into the mysterious structure from the top. While this was in progress, a severe lightning and hail storm arose and ended the exploration, but not before a depth of one meter had been reached. This led the supervisor to conclude that the little prominence has incredibly thick walls, indeed that it is probably not hollow at all but instead just a defensive bulwark.

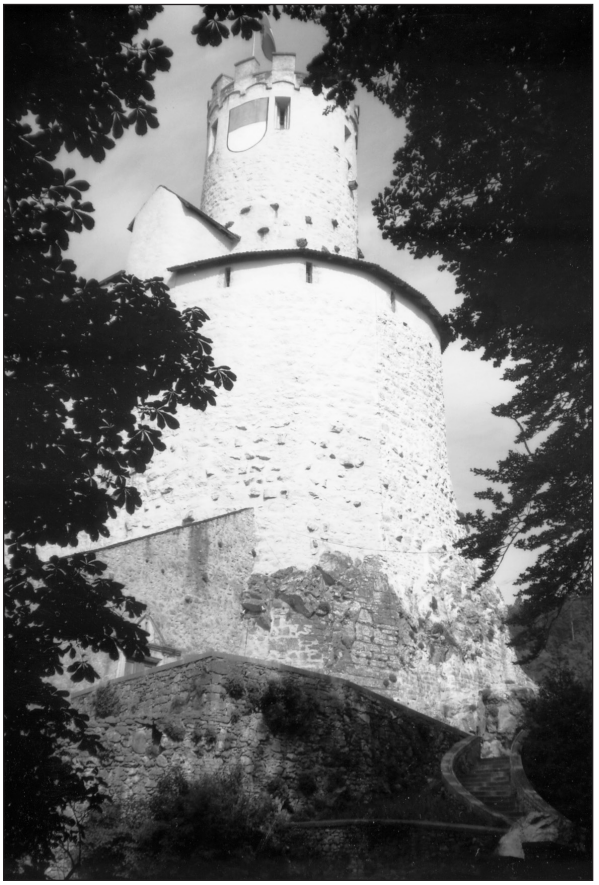

Figure 2. At the eastern end of Switzerland's Bechburg Castle is a roofed little room (upper left) in which an evil knight allegedly was sealed after contracting leprosy. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

Of course, even if the entire Kuoni folktale is untrue, that does not disprove the claims that the place is haunted. But what is the evidence that it is? Well, a tour guide who "usually" leaves the tower door open sometimes returns to find it closed again. Since it is latched from the inside, this cannot happen accidentally, and he dismisses suggestions that it could be a prank by visitors. He continually feels that he is not alone, and he sometimes hears voices along an empty hallway, but he is unsure whether they belong to ghosts or whether it is simply the wind carrying the voices of people who are walking nearby. Once, years ago, a volunteer worker during spring cleaning heard footsteps behind him as he descended the tower stairs. When he looked there was no one behind him, yet as he continued on so did the sounds. He insisted they were not the echoes of his own footsteps (Roth and Maurer 2006, 105–108).

Such anecdotal evidence, however spine-tingling it may be to some, has no weight in the scientific investigation of paranormal claims. If spooky happenings at Bechburg Castle are not due to the suggested causes already given—a prankster latching a door, the wind carrying voices, or the echo of one's own footsteps—clearly there are other possible explanations (cf. Nickell 1995, 39–77; 2001). We must ask: how, without a brain, can a disembodied spirit think, walk, or say boo? Science has never attributed a single occurrence to the alleged supernatural realm.

Vault with a View

A large, grassy mound seems strangely out of place near the front of Evergreen Cemetery in New Haven, Vermont. At the top of the mound is a small glass window encased in a square of cement that invites passersby to peer into the grave below (figure 3). The window was placed there at the behest of its tenant, and therein lies a spooky tale.

The deceased was Dr. Timothy Clark Smith (1821–1893). Between stints as a schoolteacher, merchant, and Treasury Department clerk, he studied medicine at New Haven (1834–1844) and the University of New York (1853–1855), obtaining his MD degree in 1855. He subsequently became a staff surgeon in the Russian army (1855–1856). Afterward, he served as U.S. Consul, first at Odessa, Russia (1861–1875), and then at Galatz (1878–1883) (Robinson 1950, 117). One source states that Smith's travels earned him the sobriquet "Odessa" Smith (Marquard 1982).

Smith died on February 25, 1893, at Middlebury, Vermont. I found his obituary in a later (March 3) *Middlebury Register*. It reported that he "died suddenly on Saturday morning at the Logan House [hotel] where he had been living. After breakfast, he walked out into the office and stood by the stove when stricken. . . ." A local-news article in the same issue noted that he was "formerly a resident of this town," adding that "Many will remember the old red store where Timothy Smith, Sr., traded, and afterwards his son." The article also noted that "The deceased leaves a wife and several children."

A modern newspaper feature story on the grave (Marquard 1982) says of Smith's era:

> It was the late 1800s—in times before embalming—and folks didn't have to travel far to hear tales of people who had been presumed dead, only to be buried alive.
>
> One legend has it that Smith particularly feared contracting sleeping sickness, and waking up on the cold side of a coffin cover.

Smith therefore devised a plan that

Figure 3. Atop this Vermont cemetery mound is a concrete-encased window to the grave below. The man interred reportedly feared "premature burial." The stone in the foreground seals the stairway to the arched vault. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

involved postponing his burial until he was assuredly dead and having his arched burial vault provided with stairs and a viewing window at the top of a glassed shaft.

One of Smith's children, Harrison T.C. Smith of Gilman, Iowa, reportedly traveled to New Haven "to supervise construction of the unusual crypt" (Marquard 1982). The vault has two rooms, cemetery sexton Betty Bell told me (2003), the second being for Smith's wife, Catherine (Prout) Smith.

According to the feature article, there are other legends about the tomb. One is that Smith had it outfitted with "tools for his escape." Although condensation and plant growth inside the shaft now block one's view, residents in years past claimed to see the tools along with Smith's bones. Said one, "You can see the face of the skeleton down there with a hammer and chisel crossed on the ground next to it" (Marquard 1982). Another source claims that when Smith was interred, "In the corpse's hand they placed a bell that he could ring should he wake up and find himself the victim of a premature burial" (Citro and Foulds, 2003, 292).

Curiously perhaps, ghost tales about the grave seem scarce. The authors of *Curious New England* (Citro and Foulds 2003, 292) attempt to provoke the credulous. Mentioning the bell allegedly placed in Smith's hand, they say, "So if you decide to visit the cemetery, keep very quiet . . . and listen." I did but, not surprisingly, heard nothing.

Area resident John Palmer (2003) told me that for fun he used to send impressionable children to the site to scare them. He still felt guilty about one such event. He had his two older boys take a couple of six-year-olds to the grave, telling them a person was alive down there. Then suddenly they exclaimed, "The ground is moving!" whereupon Palmer—who had hidden in the trees—jumped out screaming. The two youngsters were so scared that they ran into each other's arms and fell down.

Actually, Palmer told me, although as a child he had himself played there with other children, he never saw any ghosts or even heard any ghost tales. I guess Timothy Clark Smith is dead after all.

Acknowledgments

In addition to Jan Willem Nienhuys, Martin Mahner, and others mentioned in the text, I am grateful to Timothy Binga, Director of CFI Libraries, and Suzanne Douglas, librarian at the Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury, Vermont, for research assistance, as well as Paul Loynes for typing this manuscript.

References

Broeke, Robbert van den. 2005. Robbert—Van zorgenkind tot medium ("Robert—from problem child to medium"). Utrecht: Kosmos.

Bunson, Matthew. 1993. *The Vampire Encyclopedia*. New York: Gramercy Books.

Catholic Apologetics. 2006. Available at http://www.catholicapologetics.net/qb130; accessed October 26.

Citro, Joseph A., and Diane E. Foulds. 2003. *Curious New England: The Unconventional Traveler's Guide to Eccentric Destinations*. Hanover: University Press of England.

Hauck, Dennis William. 1996. *Haunted Places: The National Directory*. New York: Penguin Books.

Marquard, B.K. 1982. Beating the Grim Reaper. *Rutland Daily Herald* (Rutland, Vt.), May 27.

Meder, Theo. 2005. Het spook van het Singraven; posted October 18. Available online at http://www.meerten.sknaw.nl/volksverhalenbank/detail_volksverhalen.php?id=thm00267; accessed October 22, 2007.

Mulder-Bakker, Anneke. 2005. *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nanninga, Rob. 2005. Van zorgenkind tot wonderman: De avonturen van Robbert van den Broeke. *Skepter* (Netherlands), 18:4 (winter), 24–29.

Nickell, Joe. 1995. *Entities, Angels, Spirits, Demons, and Other Alien Beings*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

———. 2001. Phantoms, frauds, or fantasies? In James Houran and Rense Lange, eds. *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (London: McFarland and Company), 214–223.

———. 2005. Legends of castles and keeps. SKEPTICAL INQUIRER 29:6 (November/December), 24–26.

———. 2006. The Netherlands: Visions and revisions. SKEPTICAL INQUIRER 31:6 (November/December), 16–19.

Palmer, John. 2003. Interview by Joe Nickell, August 29.

Robinson, Duane L. 1950. *General Catalogue of Middlebury College*. Middlebury, Vermont: Publications Department of Middlebury College.

Roth, Hans Peter, and Niklaus Maurer. 2006. *Orte des Grauens in der Schweiz* ["Sites of Horror in Switzerland"]: *Von Spukhausern, Geister-plätzen und unheimlichen Begebenheiten* ["Of Haunted Houses, Ghost Sites, and Spooky Occurrences"]. Baden, Switzerland: AT Verlaq.

Scott, Sir Walter. 1808. *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*. Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co.

Schloss Neu-Bechburg. 2007. File of miscellaneous articles from city hall, Oensingen, Switzerland, copy obtained May 25.

Wynia, Sjouke, René Notenboom, Ans Zekhuis-Stroot, and Leen van Rooden (tour guides at Singraven). 2006. Interviews by Joe Nickell, October 26; supplemented by typescript history of Singraven (in English), n.d.