

# Body-Snatching in Ontario

ROYCE MACGILLIVRAY

In a well known scene in *Tom Sawyer*, Tom and Huck watch while Injun Joe and two associates, one of them a doctor, open a grave in the cemetery at midnight to steal a recently buried body. The purpose of the theft was to use the body for anatomical teaching. This scene was based on life. Throughout the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century, grave-robbers stole newly buried corpses to provide subjects for medical students. A surprisingly extensive literature has developed on this practice as it existed in Britain and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In Canada, the subject has also been well treated for the Province of Quebec. E. D. Worthington's *Reminiscences [sic] of Student Life and Practice* (1897) described his personal involvement in body-snatching up to the year 1840. F. J. Shepherd's privately printed and much cited *Reminiscences of Student Days and Dissecting Room* (1919) told the story for the 1870s and 1880s. C. R. Rouleau has described in a fictionalized autobiography, *Laurentian Heritage* (1948), what grave-robbing meant to the people of a French Canadian parish particularly exposed to the depredations of the medical students. The subject has been thoroughly researched for Quebec in D. G. Lawrence's William Osler Medal Essay, "'Resurrection' and Legislation: Or Body-Snatching in Relation to the Anatomy Act in the Province of Quebec."<sup>2</sup> Sylvio Leblond has written of "Anatomistes et résurrectionnistes au Canada et plus particulièrement dans la Province de Québec,"<sup>3</sup> which, despite its title, deals exclusively with the province of Quebec. I shall return later in this article to the conclusions reached by the medical memoirist, Shepherd, and by the researchers, Lawrence and Leblond.

By contrast, there is little on body-snatching in Ontario. The matter is occasionally mentioned in local histories.<sup>4</sup> The only article seems to be my own, published in 1985 in a University of Waterloo alumni

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Royce MacGillivray, Department of History, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1

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magazine.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as the following pages will show, body-snatching did indeed have its part in the history of this province.

It is difficult to explain its relative neglect by historians, except that it faded out earliest in the most extensively studied part of the province, namely Toronto and Southwestern Ontario. If it is argued that the subject is intrinsically trifling, it can be pointed out that it has been found significant enough for serious consideration in Britain and other countries. If it is argued that it was less common in Ontario than elsewhere, the answer has to be that it was never particularly common anywhere and that we have no evidence that it was less common in Ontario than in Quebec or Massachusetts.

#### ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DEAD

A part of the fascination of the subject is what it tells us about the contemporary attitudes to death, to the human body, and to family ties. On 19 January 1876, the *Montreal Daily Witness* reported that a farmer living near Cornwall, Ontario, complained to the Montreal chief of police,

that the remains of his wife had been stolen about a week previous from the churchyard in which they had been interred. The Chief placed the case in the hands of Detective Lafon, and that officer in company with the farmer, searched several medical colleges, and at length found the body on a dissecting table, cut up by the students' knives. The farmer claimed the remains, and they were given up by the Dean of the Faculty, who was not, however, in the best of humor, complaining that the Government was neglecting its duty in not providing subjects for the use of the College. The students of the College in question are subjected to great loss from these seizures, as they state that they pay from \$20 to \$30 for each subject.

It is unsafe to draw conclusions from a short newspaper article, but this article coincides with other nineteenth-century Canadian material on body-snatching in the attitudes it suggests. Both the Dean and the journalist who wrote the article are acting here with a coarseness inappropriate, according to our view, to the plight of a husband dealing with bereavement and desecration. These are Victorians who are not acting like textbook Victorians.

Criminal statistics tell us little about body-snatching because even when detected, the crime virtually never was prosecuted. The belief seems to have been widespread, among medical students and others, that the chances of conviction were much lessened provided the thieves took only the body and not its clothing, jewellery, or the like. These were seen as "property," even if the dead body was not. Whatever the exact reasons for the scarcity of convictions, it was clear that what was taken when a corpse was stolen was something that society

had hidden away with the strong desire of not examining again. Body-snatching was likely to be detected only if the culprits were found at their work in the cemetery, or if they left behind them an unfilled grave, or other clear evidence that the grave had been reopened. The more professionally minded body-snatchers appear to have prided themselves on the skill with which they restored the grave to its original condition. For these reasons, most cases of body-snatching probably passed undetected.

The present article takes these difficulties into account but tries, on the basis of the admittedly unsatisfactory evidence at hand, to establish some temporal and geographical limits for body-snatching in Ontario. This evidence divides most conveniently into three portions, corresponding to three areas of the province, these being Ontario west of Kingston, the Kingston area, and Ontario east of Kingston.

In the area west of Kingston the focal point was, of course, the medical schools at Toronto. There, instruction of would-be doctors had begun as early as the 1830s. The *Globe* reported in 1849 that soldiers had made a successful assault on three intended grave-robbers, at least two of whom were thought to be medical students. "We are informed," the *Globe* explained, "that it was lately discovered that the bodies of the soldiers of the Canadian Rifle Corps, who have died since the arrival of that regiment in this place, had all been raised from the graves, and conveyed away."<sup>6</sup> A student wrote in 1855 from Trinity College, Toronto, that "Some of the students are medical, and as the bodies they require for dissection are sometimes stolen, we are all called 'Kidnappers.'"<sup>7</sup> In 1858 the *Globe* reported the robbing of a grave at St. Thomas, Elgin County. The deceased, Mrs. Patten, was discovered in a room used by an Orange lodge, and the Master was suspected. The body was being used for anatomical purposes.<sup>8</sup> In 1858, the body of an 18-year-old youth was stolen at Milnesville, York County. The deceased had been buried on his father's farm. "Last Monday night the grave was opened, and the body removed; an old axe, a cane, and a bottle containing some brandy, were found within a short distance of the spot." The violated grave was left open.<sup>9</sup> In 1859, a railing erected around the grave of Mrs. B. Manser, of King Township, York County, was found thrown to the ground. Further inquiry "resulted in the discovery of sleigh marks leading from the road to the place of interment." When the grave was opened, the body was missing.<sup>10</sup>

A gruesome and particularly unusual case (I have found no parallel to it in the province) comes from Waterloo in 1859. A Dr. Frederick Christ was convicted of having stolen the body of a child of the Eby family from the grave to make a skeleton. Dr. Christ had apparently performed the same operation on a number of bodies and, it appears from the evidence at the trial, freely admitted to enquiring friends and visitors at his house what he was doing. One witness testified that he

saw the doctor boiling what the doctor affirmed to be human bones in a kettle, another that he saw human bones in a tub in the doctor's barn. Presumably the accused was in the business of selling mounted skeletons to doctors and medical students. He and an accomplice were each sentenced to three months in the common jail.<sup>11</sup>

From about this time the practice of body-snatching seems to have declined in Southwestern Ontario. The legal machinery for providing a legitimately obtained supply of bodies to the medical students seems, after some delays and malfunctions, finally to have taken effect. The original Anatomy Act of the Province had been passed by the Legislature of the United Canadas, in 1843, to the accompaniment of anecdotes by "Tiger" Dunlop about his involvement in body-snatching in his native Scotland.<sup>12</sup> It evidently did not result in an adequate supply of corpses to the medical schools. Other acts followed in 1859 and 1864, while the modest growth in urbanization and the multiplication of institutions for those unfortunates who needed to be supported by the public for reasons of infirmity, insanity, or other misfortunes provided a greater potential supply of corpses. A medical journal of 1876 conceded that body-snatching had once been pursued in Toronto but boasted that "thanks to our admirable Anatomy Act, the Medical Schools of this city have for many years been so abundantly supplied by law, that our young men have no occasion to risk life and liberty to procure material for dissection." The writer noted that Dr. John Rolph (1793-1870) had imported material from New York rather than allow his students to desecrate graves. The cynical practice of many municipalities in shipping their poor and vagrants to Toronto had, the writer reflected, at least one benefit: when they died in the metropolis, their bodies swelled the number available to medical students for dissection.<sup>13</sup>

#### SHORTAGE OF CORPSES

Despite these rosy views, there is evidence from 1885 that Toronto medical students were desperately short of corpses. There was considerable pressure at this time from medical men to get an alteration of the Anatomy Act to improve the supply of the bodies of deceased indigents to the medical schools.<sup>14</sup> A Toronto anatomist was also reported to have been sharply rebuffed by members of the Buffalo medical community when he attempted to establish a traffic in cadavers from Buffalo to Toronto.<sup>15</sup> Despite this anxiety on the question of availability of corpses, there does not seem to have been any reappearance of grave-robbing in Toronto or Southwestern Ontario at this time. Body-snatching does not seem to have occurred in connection with the medical school founded in 1882 at what is now the University of Western Ontario.<sup>16</sup>

At Kingston, where the Queen's University medical school opened in the mid-1850s, body-snatching probably continued longer than in Southwestern Ontario. Referring to a period about the 1870s, Hilda Neatby remarks that Queen's medical students had their "den" on Princess Street and "boasted of their own particular mores, especially of their prowess in 'body-snatching.'" <sup>17</sup> However, in 1876 Nathan Dupuis of Queen's denied a newspaper report of body-snatching in the Kingston area, alleging that the students habitually had as many legitimately obtained cadavers as they needed. <sup>18</sup> Some body-snatching seems to have occurred after this in the Kingston area and public opinion there seems to have blamed the Queen's students for it. The *Toronto Globe* reported in 1882 that Kingston medical students had promptly opened the grave and stolen the corpse of a young man who had died in the Kingston General Hospital. <sup>19</sup> The *Globe* thought that the problem of cadaver-supply could be solved in part by a redirection of surplus corpses from large cities to the more isolated medical schools. Five weeks later, presumably referring to yet another case, the *Globe* reported that the friends of the late Charles Tackaberry, of Elgin, Leeds County, were in Kingston "looking for the remains which had been stolen from the cemetery in the township of Bastard" (Leeds County). The writer, surprisingly well informed, thought that this time the Queen's students were wrongly suspected. "The body has gone in another direction." <sup>20</sup> In 1884, two bodies were stolen from a vault in the Wilton Cemetery near Kingston. <sup>21</sup>

A thorough search of the Kingston area newspapers <sup>22</sup> and other local printed sources and a canvassing of orally transmitted traditions, might usefully reveal the dimensions of late body-snatching in the Kingston area. At any rate, Kingston does seem to have been some sort of "transitional" area between the Toronto-Southwestern Ontario area, where body-snatching ended fairly early, and the Montreal-dominated Southeastern Ontario area, where it was locally believed to have lingered on close to and perhaps even into the twentieth century.

Anxiety seems to have established itself early in Southeastern Ontario over the danger of body-snatching. The following may indeed be taken as evidence more of the anxiety than the fact of body-snatching, though of the reality there can, presumably, be little doubt. In 1832, the Rev. William Bell noted that in the Perth area there were fears (he thought them baseless) about grave-robbing. <sup>23</sup> When George Cross of Longueuil Township, Prescott County, was killed in an accident in 1867 his friends put large stones in his grave to deter robbers. <sup>24</sup> In 1876 occurred the case already mentioned of the wife of the Cornwall area farmer. Two years later, the inhabitants of Lancaster were shocked to find that two strangers had transported the corpses of a man and a youth in a barrel and box from that Glengarry County village to Montreal. The stolen corpses were not, as it turned out, from Lancas-

ter, as was at first supposed. They were en route from a cemetery at St. Anicet, P.Q., across the river from Lancaster.<sup>25</sup> In 1883 a Cornwall newspaper reported the death of a resident of Glengarry County, stating that "The remains were interred near the house until the Spring, for fear of body stealers, it [sic] will then be removed to Kirkhill."<sup>26</sup> A Glengarry County diarist reported the following year that watchers were set on his father's grave for two and a half weeks after the burial.<sup>27</sup> This seems to have been a standard practice at the time. It was assumed that when the body was partly decomposed it would be useless or at least distasteful to medical students.

When the ex-M.P. for Glengarry County, Patrick Purcell, was buried in 1891, his body was stolen by two young scoundrels of the neighbourhood and sunk in the St. Lawrence, from which it was not recovered till three years later. The exact motives for this crime, or prank, are not known. Presumably the perpetrators had no intention of disposing of it to medical students. Purcell's grave had in fact been watched in the traditional manner for the first night after the burial—in fact, it had been watched by the two young men who later stole the body! Their dismissal from their graveside employment by a member of the Purcell family the morning after seems to have been the insult that precipitated the theft. The Purcell episode received widespread notice through the press and provoked a debate in the Canadian Senate, as a senator of medical background, Dr. Donald McMillan, attempted to get a bill passed against body-snatching. Another medical senator, Dr. Michael Sullivan of Queen's University medical school, cautiously but firmly defended the ancient rights of the medical students to make whatever provision they must for themselves in case of necessity. It was only within the last few days, he complained, that the Mayor of Kingston had interfered with the legitimate processes of supplying cadavers by claiming "no less than three bodies for which no relative had presented any claim."<sup>28</sup>

The last report I have found of body-snatching in Canada is from the year 1906 but only its consequences touch on Ontario. Three bodies were stolen from the vault at Rigaud, P.Q., and two of them were later found abandoned near Alexandria, Ontario.<sup>29</sup> Stories about body-snatching long continued to be a prominent part of the flourishing folklore of Glengarry County, in Southeastern Ontario. Some families of the area had the unattractive reputation among their neighbours of having made money by grave-robbing. It has even been alleged that one well-known cemetery of the area has today for this reason virtually no human remains! The Glengarry County connection here reminds one that it has sometimes been claimed, perhaps on the basis of recollections of the Burke and Hare era in Edinburgh, that body-snatching was a particularly Scottish phenomenon.

## BODY-SNATCHING IN QUEBEC

Continued concern about body-snatching in Southeastern Ontario reflected the long survival of the practice in the province of Quebec. As early as 1829, John Mactaggart, in his *Three Years in Canada*, complained of the practice in Lower Canada of stealing the dead from the churches where they were stored awaiting burial after the ground thawed in the spring.<sup>30</sup> Francis J. Shepherd remembered that when he was studying medicine at McGill in 1869-73, "nearly every subject for dissection was obtained illegally, by the old method of 'body-snatching.'" When he became an instructor in anatomy at McGill in 1875, he found that he too had to rely on body-snatchers for cadavers. A cadaver was worth \$30 to \$50, which Shepherd would pay in cash to the suppliers. This was a sizeable sum for the time, thus it is not surprising that individuals were attracted to grave-robbing. The body-snatchers were usually medical students who used this trade to obtain money to pay their fees. Sometimes the students tobogganed with their corpses down Côte des Neiges hill. If relatives found the bodies were missing, a search of the medical schools might be made. Sometimes Shepherd was prosecuted for the "offence against decency" involved in possessing a stolen body. A compliant judge would fine him \$50 "and nothing more was said."<sup>31</sup>

The *Montreal Daily Witness* noted in 1878 that "The three medical schools of Montreal are in full blast, and two bodies are wanted per week in each for purposes of dissection, consequently 'prices are firm with an upward tendency,' as a commercial reporter would remark. . . ."<sup>32</sup> Lawrence, in his study of body-snatching in Quebec, notes that in a single Montreal newspaper, between 12 December 1882 and 25 January 1883, 7 grave-robbing incidents were noted, with the total bodies stolen amounting to 18. Between 26 January and 1 March, a further 18 bodies were reported stolen.<sup>33</sup> Some of these may have been carried far afield. During this period *The Canada Presbyterian* reported the belief that a gang of American body-snatchers was "at work in the country villages surrounding Montreal stealing bodies for the medical colleges in Vermont and other places in the eastern States. Singular as it may appear, six subjects were shipped away openly from Montreal one day last week in boxes addressed to various medical colleges across the line, and without any attempt on the part of two city detectives, who were looking on at the depot, to interfere." The police explained that the body-snatchers were known but that they must remain unarrested because the poor people whose relatives were stolen could not bear the costs of a prosecution. Thus, *The Canada Presbyterian* observed, "people's feelings can be lacerated because they are poor."<sup>34</sup> Occasionally, it appears, surplus bodies were sold back to relatives.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than being abashed, the medical students seem to have relished the public notice their body-snatching activities drew upon

them. In 1875, when a Montreal student was fined for attempting to steal a body from the Côte des Neiges Cemetery, his fine "was at once paid by the culprit's sympathizing fellow-students, who carried him out of the Court on their shoulders and paraded the streets brandishing the body-snatching implements, and shouting forth songs of triumph."<sup>36</sup> As in the case of Shepherd, this prosecution may have been a collusive action between the magistrate and the culprit for the purpose of placating an understandably aroused public.

The reason for these abuses was that the existing Anatomy Act failed to force public institutions to hand over the bodies of the destitute dead to the medical schools. But in 1883, with backing from the ecclesiastical authorities, Quebec finally passed an act that forced the institutions to comply with the needs of the medical schools. With this, body-snatching in Quebec seems to have come to an end.<sup>37</sup> Leblond does, however, add the qualifying words that if anyone after 1883 "fréquentait encore les cimetières . . . , c'était plus pour se trouver des ossements ou se monter 'un squelette': Les salles de dissection étaient bien garnies."

While body-snatching was in force the danger was spotted that the existence of a trade in bodies could lead to criminals committing murder to get saleable bodies, as Burke and Hare had done in Scotland in the 1820s. It was also evident that the trade in bodies to medical schools provided a way for murderers to get rid of their victims' corpses or for abortionists to get rid of the corpses of women who had died under their treatment.<sup>38</sup> These were anxieties for the professional worriers of society, speculations on misfortunes that might follow if all the steps indicated by due prudence were scorned. There was seldom, in Ontario or Quebec, a body-snatching incident of a kind that suggested the practice was being conducted in association with other, less morally equivocal crimes. In connection with the question of public tolerance, however, one wonders how far the skeleton-maker of Waterloo was seen as having gone beyond the moral standards of the body-snatchers.

Ontarians of the first half of the twentieth century, recalling the grave-robbing days, unashamedly delighted in their horrors, just as people delight in Gothic novels and vampire movies. This attitude was not anachronistic. The reader finds in the contemporary Ontario and Quebec newspaper accounts of body-snatching an attempt to cultivate a sense of horror in the reader, an appeal to the reader's moral indignation, yet a sense that the incidents do indeed represent, without serious injury to the community, a bit of "fun."

Body-snatching was always useful to the newspapers. Articles on the subject could hardly fail to seize the attention of the reader. It does not appear from the nineteenth-century newspapers, however, or from any other contemporary source, that body-snatching was seen as

going beyond the pleasingly shocking to be deeply reprehensible. It was recognized as a nuisance, perhaps on the same level of importance as people allowing their dogs to bark or their cattle to trespass. The medical students had even less objection to it. There may have been unwillingness to make the anatomy acts effective as early as the physicians would have wished, but there was also evident unwillingness to establish systems for prosecuting and punishing grave-robbers effective enough to deter them. It can hardly be doubted that a crime so little prosecuted, much less punished, was winked at by many. Nineteenth-century Canadians were seldom slow to strike out at crimes they considered really serious. Perhaps all this can safely be taken as evidence for both the coarseness and the commonsense practicality of nineteenth-century Canadians, including the people of the Province of Ontario. Although in the later stages Ontario may have been simply caught up in the Montreal practice of body-snatching, its people remained answerable for their own reactions.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Hubert Cole, *Things for the Surgeon* (London: Heinemann, 1964); Norman Adams, *Dead and Buried?* (New York: Bell, 1972); and T. Gallagher, "The Body Snatchers," *American Heritage*, 18 (1967): 64-73.
- 2 Published in both *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 32 (1958): 408-24, and in *McGill Medical Journal*, 28 (1959): 3-21. A shorter article based on Lawrence is E. H. Bensley, "Sculduddery [sic] in the Dead House," in *Calgary Associate Clinic Historical Bulletin*, 22 (1958): 245-48. The subject has been treated briefly in histories of Canadian medicine, e.g., Donald Jack, *Rogues, Rebels, and Geniuses: The Story of Canadian Medicine* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1981), p. 245-46. I treat the subject fictionally in my *The House of Ontario* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History, 1983), p. 70-75.
- 3 *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 95 (1966): 1193-97, 1247-51.
- 4 So, e.g., Dorothy Dumbrille, *Up and Down the Glens* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954), p. 129; Dorothy Dumbrille, *Braggart in My Step* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956), p. 75-76; and, at greater length, Royce MacGillivray and Ewan Ross, *A History of Glengarry* (Belleville: Mika, 1979), p. 589-92.
- 5 "What Did You Do with the Body?" *University of Waterloo Courier* (December 1985), 8-12.
- 6 *Globe*, 3 February 1849; also 27 January 1849.
- 7 George W. Spragge, "The Trinity Medical College," *Ontario History*, 58 (1966): 72n.
- 8 *Globe*, 23 and 28 January 1858.
- 9 *Globe*, 10 May 1858.
- 10 *Times* (Hamilton), 15 January 1859.
- 11 *Berlin Telegraph*, 2 and 16 September 1859.
- 12 Elizabeth Nish, ed., *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of United Canada 1841-1867*, Vol. 3: 1843 (Montreal: Presses de l'école des hautes études commerciales, 1972), p. 464-67. The act was 7 Victoria c.5.
- 13 *Canadian Journal of Medical Science*, 1 (1876): 31-32.
- 14 *Ottawa Daily Citizen*, 7 February 1885. *The Toronto Mail*, 7 February 1885. *Canada Lancet*, 17 (1885): 251, and *Canadian Practitioner*, 10 (1885): 91, comment on the need for the 1885 act, which passed as 48 Victoria c.31.
- 15 *The Toronto Mail*, 10 February 1885.

- 16 Murray L. Barr, *A Century of Medicine at Western* (London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario, 1977), p. 168.
- 17 Hilda Neatby, *Queen's University*, Vol. 1: 1841-1917 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), p. 212.
- 18 *Canadian Journal of Medical Science*, 1 (1876): 62, 31.
- 19 *Globe*, 19 October 1882. For another Kingston area incident, see *The Toronto Daily Mail*, 6 January 1881.
- 20 *Globe*, 24 November 1882.
- 21 *Globe*, 19 February 1884.
- 22 The indexing of the early Kingston newspapers, which at the time of writing has reached the year 1848, has as yet apparently turned up no references to body-snatching. I am grateful to Mr. Michael Dicketts of Kingston for this information.
- 23 Glenn J. Lockwood, *Montague: A Social History of an Irish Ontario Township* (Smiths Falls: Corporation of the Township of Montague, 1980), p. 132.
- 24 Toronto, Ontario Archives, I-D-4 MU 840, Diary of Thomas Dick, 4 January 1867.
- 25 *Montreal Daily Witness*, 29 January 1878; *Montreal Herald*, 30 January-1 February 1878.
- 26 *The Freeholder* (Cornwall, Ontario), 16 February 1883.
- 27 Ottawa, Public Archives of Canada, MG25 G150, Diary of Angus MacMillan, called the Deacon, continued by his sons, 18 August and 11 September 1884.
- 28 *The Montreal Daily Star*, May 1891 *passim*. *Senate Debates*, 26 June and 3 and 10 August 1891.
- 29 *Glengarry News* (Alexandria, Ontario), 14 May and 15 June 1906.
- 30 Vol. 1, p. 207.
- 31 Francis J. Shepherd, *Reminiscences of Student Days and Dissecting Room* (Montreal: Privately Printed, 1919), p. 24-25. Also, W. B. Howell, F. J. Shepherd—*Surgeon: His Life and Times* (Toronto: Dent, 1934), p. 74-77.
- 32 *Montreal Daily Witness*, 29 January 1878.
- 33 D. G. Lawrence, "'Resurrection' and Legislation or Body-Snatching in Relation to the Anatomy Act in the Province of Quebec," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 32 (1958): 419-20.
- 34 *The Canada Presbyterian*, 21 February 1883.
- 35 Lawrence, "'Resurrection' and Legislation," p. 420.
- 36 *Montreal Daily Witness*, 12 November 1875.
- 37 Lawrence, "'Resurrection' and Legislation," p. 421-22; Shepherd, *Reminiscences*, p. 27-28; Sylvio Leblond, "Anatomistes et résurrectionnistes au Canada et plus particulièrement dans la Province de Québec," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 95 (1966): 1251.
- 38 *Montreal Daily Witness*, 15 and 16 October 1875, 12 November 1875.