

Jeremy Bentham

Feb 15, 1748 (London, England) – June 6, 1832 (London, England)

AS YOU ARE READING this story, Jeremy Bentham is quietly seated and finely attired in 1830s outerwear.

On his head is either a leather wide-brim or tightly woven straw hat. His white shirt is buttoned at the neck, with the ruffled front partially covered by a vest. To guard against a cold draft, he wears a black frock coat. His hands, gloved, rest in his lap. The cuffs of his slacks are tucked into a pair of white stockings that end well above his ankles. His shoes are low-cut and dark.

He was likely right-handed as the handle of a walking cane rests just above his right hand should he decide to exit the cabinet, wherein he has sat in detached quietude for almost two centuries (1832 – to the present).

Alive, Jeremy Bentham was an odd sort of guy.

Dead? Well, he is still an odd sort of guy.

Quite lifelike in appearance, he currently resides at University College London, an institution he helped establish in 1826. He and the cabinet wherein he sits is at the end of the South Cloisters in the main building of the college.

If a trip to London is out of the question, there are numerous websites, all with the same photograph of him sitting attentively inside his cabinet. At least one site allows a person to rotate Bentham and his chair a full 360-degrees, should you be interested in viewing his rather ample backside.

His bony skeleton provides the framework for his likeness, his clothing stuffed with straw to make him appear lifelike. Per his will, written when he was twenty-one, he remains preserved almost as he wished and attired in the clothing he wore when alive.

The phrase, “almost as he wished,” is significant to the story because one element of his mummification didn’t turn out as he had envisioned.

Bentham directed that after his death, his entire body was to remain in a preserved state as a lifelike exhibit.

Here is an excerpt from Bentham’s will (edited):

My body I give to my dear friend Doctor Southwood Smith to be disposed of in a manner hereinafter mentioned.

The skeleton he will cause to be put together in such a manner as the whole figure may be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living, in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought in the course of time employed in writing. If it should so happen that my personal friends and other disciples should be disposed to meet together on some day or days of the year . . . my executor will from time to time cause to be conveyed to the room in which they meet, the said box or case with the contents therein to be stationed in such part of the room as to the assembled company shall meet.¹

When Dr. Southwood Smith undertook the preservation, let's just say that had Bentham still been alive, he would never have paid for the result.

Although the process produced a well-preserved head, the discoloration and drum-tight skin resulted in a face that looked nothing like Bentham, and today, Bentham's real head remains locked away in a cabinet drawer.

Instead, a remarkably life-like waxen head, made in the manner of Madame Tussaud's well-known museum figures, sits atop Bentham's shoulders.

The person who made the Tussaud-style head did use Mr. Bentham's real hair, a decision that might have consoled the subject were he still alive, or perhaps not.

Jeremy Bentham was not an easy man to please or predict.

He began life as a child prodigy. As a toddler, he enjoyed sitting at his father's desk with a volume of England's history close at hand, and by the age of three, tutors were assisting him in learning Latin.

His elementary education was at the Westminster School, where he learned Greek and Latin and reportedly wrote poetry in both languages.

At twelve, he was accepted at Queen's College (now: Oxford University), where he graduated at fifteen with a bachelor's degree.

In 1766, he began a study of law and passed the bar in 1769. Regarding his position on various social and political issues, he was ahead of his time.

He was an outspoken proponent of equal rights for women.

He supported the abolishment of slavery.

He was against the death penalty.

He despised the corporal punishment of children.

He was a strong advocate of animal rights, and

He believed that couples in untenable marriages should be allowed to separate or divorce.

At the age of twenty-eight, he wrote his first book and typical of the era, gave it a very long title: “A Fragment on Government: Being an Examination of What is Delivered, on the Subject of Government in General, in the Introduction to Sir William Blackstone’s Commentaries.” In the book, Bentham took on the British jurist and politician, Sir William Blackstone.

While the treatise did little to win friends and influence those who supported the British status quo, it established Bentham as an intellectual free thinker and gained him a sizeable following.

A list of Bentham’s accomplishments, along with a few personality quirks, is lengthy, but know he is still occasionally involved in matters of concern at University College London.

On the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the college, and again in 2013, he was taken from his cabinet and seated at a meeting of the College Council, where it was entered into the minutes that he was “present, but not voting.”

 1. Duhaime, Lloyd. “Duhaime Learn Law,” *Famous Last Wills: The Strange 1832 Last Will and Testament of Jeremy Bentham*.
<http://www.duhaime.org/LawFun/LawArticle-1279/The-Strange-1832-Last-Will-and-Testament-of-Jermy-Bentham.aspx>

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The cloning of humans is on most of the lists of things to worry about from science – along with the unrestrained growth of plastic flowers.

Lewis Thomas (1913–1993) etymologist, essayist