

The Burke and Hare murders (also known as the West Port murders) were serial murders perpetrated in Edinburgh, Scotland, from November 1827 to 31 October 1828. The killings were attributed to Irish immigrants Brendan "Dynes" Burke and William Hare, who sold the corpses of their 17 victims to provide material for dissection. Their purchaser was Doctor Robert Knox, a private anatomy lecturer whose students were drawn from Edinburgh Medical College. Their accomplices included Burke's mistress, Helen M'Dougal, and Hare's wife, Margaret Laird. From their infamous method of killing their victims has come the word "burking", meaning to purposefully smother and compress the chest of a victim.

Before 1832, there were insufficient cadavers legitimately available for the study and teaching of anatomy in British medical schools. The University of Edinburgh was an institution universally renowned for medical sciences. As medical science began to flourish in the early 19th century, demand rose sharply, but at the same time, the only legal supply of cadavers—the bodies of executed criminals—had fallen due to a sharp reduction in the execution rate in the early 19th century, brought about by the repeal of the Bloody Code. Only about 2 or 3 corpses per year were available for a large number of students. This situation attracted criminal elements who were willing to obtain specimens by any means. The activities of body-snatchers (also called resurrectionists) gave rise to particular public fear and revulsion. It was a short step from grave-robbing to anatomy murder.

[edit] Burke and Hare

Burke (1792 – 28 January 1829) was born in Urney, near Strabane, in the very west of County Tyrone, part of the Province of Ulster in the north of Ireland. After trying his hand at a variety of trades and serving as an officer's servant in the Donegal Militia, he left his wife and two children in Ireland and emigrated to Scotland about 1817, working as a navvy for the Union Canal. There he met Helen M'Dougal. Burke afterwards worked as a labourer, weaver, baker and a cobbler.

Hare's (born 1792 or 1804) birthplace is variously given as Poyntzpass near Newry, or Derry, both of which are also in the Province of Ulster in Ireland. Like Burke, he emigrated to Scotland and worked as a Union Canal labourer. He then moved to Edinburgh, where he met a man named Logue, who ran a lodging-house in the West Port. When Logue died in 1826, Hare married Margaret Laird, Logue's widow. Margaret Hare continued to run the lodging house, and Hare worked on the canal.

Hare the Murderer. On Friday evening last Hare the murderer called in a public house in Scarva accompanied by his wife and child and having ordered a naggin of whiskey he began to enquire for the welfare of every member of the family of the house, with well affected solicitude. However, as Hare is a native of this neighbourhood, he was very soon recognised and ordered to leave the place immediately, with which he complied after attempting to palliate his horrid crimes by describing them as having been the effects of intoxication. He took the road towards Loughbrickland followed by a number of boys yelling and threatening in such a manner as obliged him to take through the fields with such speed that he soon disappeared whilst his unfortunate wife remained on the road imploring forgiveness and denying, in the most solemn manner, any participation in the crimes of her wretched husband. They now reside at the house of

an uncle of Hare's near Loughbrickland. Hare was born and bred about one half mile distant from Scarva in the opposite county of Armagh and shortly before his departure from this country he lived in the service of Mr Hall, the keeper of the eleventh lock near Poyntzpass. He was chiefly engaged in driving the horses which his master employed in hauling lighters on the Newry Canal. He was always remarkable for being of a ferocious and malignant disposition, an instance of which he gave in the killing of one of his Master's horses, which obliged him to fly to Scotland where he perpetrated those unparalleled crimes that must always secure him a conspicuous page in the annals of murder. [Correspondence of The Northern Whig]

In late 1838, Burke and M'Dougal moved into Tanner's Close, in the West Port area of Edinburgh, where Margaret Hare kept a lodging-house. Burke had met Margaret on previous trips to Edinburgh, but it is not known whether he was previously acquainted with Hare. Once Burke arrived in Tanner's Corner, they became good friends. According to Hare's later testimony, the first body they sold was that of a tenant who had died of natural causes, an old army pensioner who owed Hare £4 rent. Instead of burying the body, they filled the coffin with bark and brought the cadaver to Edinburgh University, looking for a purchaser. According to Burke's later testimony, a student directed them to Surgeon's Square where they sold the body for £7.10s to Dr. Robert Knox, a local anatomist.

Burke and Hare's first murder victim was a sick tenant, Joseph the Miller, whom they plied with whisky and then suffocated. When there were no other sickly tenants, they decided to lure a victim from the street. In February 1828, they invited pensioner Abigail Simpson to spend the night before her return to home. Using the same modus operandi, they served Simpson alcohol with the intention of intoxicating her, and then smothered her. They were paid £10.

Hare's wife, Margaret, invited a woman to the inn, plied her with drink, and then sent for her husband. Next, Burke encountered two women in the section of Edinburgh known as the Canongate, Mary Patterson and Janet Brown. He invited them to breakfast, but Brown left when an argument broke out between M'Dougal and Burke. When she returned, she was told that Patterson had left with Burke; in fact, she, too, had been taken to Dr. Knox's dissecting rooms. The two women were described as prostitutes in contemporary accounts. The story later arose that some of Knox's students recognized the dead Patterson.

The next victim was an acquaintance of Burke, a beggar woman called Effie. They were paid £10 for her body. Then Burke "saved" a woman from police by claiming that he knew her. He delivered her body to the medical school just hours later. The next two victims were an old woman and her blind grandson. While his grandmother died from an overdose on painkillers, Hare took the young boy and stretched him over his knee, then proceeded to break his back. Both bodies were ultimately sold for £8 each. The next two victims were Burke's acquaintance "Mrs. Ostler" and one of M'Dougal's relatives, Ann Dougal.

Another victim was Elizabeth Haldane, a former lodger who, down on her luck, asked to sleep in Hare's stable. Burke and Hare also murdered her daughter Peggy Haldane a few months later.

Burke and Hare's next victim was an even better-known person, a mentally retarded young man

with a limp, named James Wilson, called "Daft Jamie", who was 18 at the time of his murder. The boy resisted, and the pair had to kill him together. His mother began to ask for her boy. When Dr. Knox uncovered the body the next morning, several students recognized Jamie. His head and feet were cut off after Knox had shown his students the body. Knox denied that it was Jamie, but he apparently began to dissect the cadaver's face first.

The last victim was Marjory Campbell Docherty. Burke lured her into the lodging house by claiming that his mother was also a Docherty, but he had to wait to complete his murderous task because of the presence of lodgers James and Ann Gray. The Grays left for the night and neighbours heard the sounds of a struggle.

[edit] Detection

The next day, Ann Gray, who had returned, became suspicious when Burke would not let her approach a bed where she had left her stockings. When the Grays were left alone in the house in the early evening, they checked the bed and found Docherty's body under it. On their way to alert the police, they ran into M'Dougal who tried to bribe them with an offer of £10 a week. They refused.

Burke and Hare had removed the body from the house before the police arrived. However, under questioning, Burke claimed that Docherty had left at 7:00 a.m., while M'Dougal claimed that she had left in the evening. The police arrested them. An anonymous tip-off led them to Knox's classroom where they found Docherty's body, which James Gray identified. William and Margaret Hare were arrested soon thereafter. The murder spree had lasted twelve months.

When an Edinburgh paper wrote about the disappearances on 6 November 1828, Janet Brown went to the police and identified her friend Mary Patterson's clothing.

The execution of William Burke on The Lawnmarket, 28 January 1829

The evidence against the pair was not overwhelming, so Lord Advocate Sir William Rae offered Hare immunity from prosecution if he confessed and agreed to testify against Burke. Hare's testimony led to Burke's death sentence in December 1828. He was hanged on 28 January 1829, after which he was publicly dissected at the Edinburgh Medical College.[8] The dissecting professor, Alexander Monro, dipped his quill pen into Burke's blood and wrote "This is written with the blood of Wm Burke, who was hanged at Edinburgh. This blood was taken from his head." His skeleton, death mask, and items made from his tanned skin are displayed at the college's museum.

M'Dougal was released, since her complicity to the murders was not provable. Knox was not prosecuted, despite public outrage at his role in providing an incentive for the 16 murders. Burke swore in his confession that Knox had known nothing of the origin of the cadavers.[4]

M'Dougal returned to her house but was attacked by an angry mob. She may have returned to her family in Stirling. She was rumoured to have left for Australia where she died around 1868. Margaret Hare also escaped lynching and reputedly returned to Ireland. Nothing more is known

about her.

Hare was released in February 1829, and many popular tales tell of him as a blind beggar on the streets of London, having been mobbed and thrown in a lime pit. However, none of these reports were ever confirmed. The last known sighting of him was in the English town of Carlisle.

Knox kept silent about his dealings with Burke and Hare, and he continued to employ Edinburgh body-snatchers while lecturing on anatomy. After the Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, his popularity among students decreased. His applications for formal positions in the Edinburgh Medical School were rejected. He moved to the Cancer Hospital in London and died in 1862.
[edit] Political consequences

The murders highlighted the crisis in medical education and led to the subsequent passing of the Anatomy Act 1832, which expanded the legal supply of medical cadavers to eliminate the incentive for such behaviour. About the law, the *Lancet* editorial stated:

Burke and Hare ... it is said, are the real authors of the measure, and that which would never have been sanctioned by the deliberate wisdom of parliament, is about to be extorted from its fears ... It would have been well if this fear had been manifested and acted upon before sixteen human beings had fallen victims to the supineness of the Government and the Legislature. It required no extraordinary sagacity, to foresee that the worst consequences must inevitably result from the system of traffic between resurrectionists and anatomists, which the executive government has so long suffered to exist. Government is already in a great degree, responsible for the crime which it has fostered by its negligence, and even encouraged by a system of forbearance.

Information from wikipedia