

**The Story of William Burke and  
William Hare  
or  
The Anatomy or West Port  
Murders  
or  
Hare today and Burked  
tomorrow!**

An' it's doon the close an' up the stair  
A but-an'-ben wi' Burke and Hare  
Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief  
And Knox is the boy that buys the beef.

### **Background**

As Joe Friday in Dragnet would say, "Just the facts, ma'am" but Mark Twain said, "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story". In this presentation, I have tried to keep the facts straight as well as telling a good story. Unfortunately, I have had to distill it substantially to fit within the time allotted but I believe I have provided an accurate summary of the events.

The macabre story of these two entrepreneurs provides a fascinating insight into Scottish society, medical science and education and judicial process in the early 19th century; the Age of Enlightenment. It is a complex one that involves: politics, religion, racism, sex, social class, greed, treachery and even chivalry!

Burke and Hare were Irish immigrants who moved to Scotland independently sometime between 1818 and 1822 to find work on the Union Canal which was being constructed to connect the Clyde to the Forth mainly for the transportation of coal to Edinburgh. It is likely that they did not know each other until they met in Edinburgh sometime in 1827. William Burke was the older of the two and had some education. He left his wife and children in Ireland although he did write to her on several occasions but got no reply. He met, but never married, Helen M'Dougal while working as a navvy on the canal and subsequently worked as a labourer, weaver, baker and cobbler.

Less is known of William Hare. He, on the other hand, had very little education and could probably be best described as a "thug" and looked it. Hare left Ireland rather abruptly probably because he killed one of his master's horses and left to avoid prosecution. He met and married the widow of a man named Logue who ran a lodging-house in the West Port district of Edinburgh. The circumstances surrounding Logue's death are not clear. Margaret Hare continued to run the lodging-house while Hare worked on the canal.

After the completion of the canal Burke and M'Dougal moved to Tanner's Close in the West Port likely because his brother lived there. There they met and became "friends" with the Hares and, ultimately, moved in with them.

The University of Edinburgh Medical School was considered, at the time one of if not, the preeminent school in Europe. Medical education has evolved since the 19th century but this is a topic all on its own. However, the importance of the understanding of human anatomy has not changed. This is no more important than in the art and practice of surgery and, even today, it is achieved through

dissection of cadavers as well as pro-sections and, now, 3D virtual imaging. In most major cities, back then, this training was achieved, largely, through independent anatomy classrooms such as the one run by Professor Robert Knox. In the early 19th century, however, there were two major obstacles.

## 1. The supply of cadavers:

1.1. Before 1832 the only legal supply was the bodies of executed violent criminals (~50-60/year) and it did not satisfy the demand (>500/year). The Anatomy Act of 1832 changed this and increased the supply but a little more about this later.

### 1.2. Illegal supply:

1.2.1. Resurrectionists (Grave Robbers, Body Snatchers).

Bodies had to be obtained within a couple of weeks, for obvious reasons! Burke and Hare's solution which I will get to in a moment!

1.2.2. A "blind eye" was cast on these approaches because the legal supply could not satisfy the demand.

This practice was certainly going on while Robert Burns was in Edinburgh but it was never mentioned in his works (Tam O'Shanter would have been the logical one), and he may not have even been aware of it. However his cousin, John, was a graveyard guard.

## 2. Preservation

2.1. Lack of refrigeration or adequate embalming techniques (storage in whisky the method available at the time and as W. C. Fields would say...."death where is thy sting!"..... but that was more about drowning in a vat of whiskey!)

## **Burke and Hare's Solution!**

Burke and Hare were never resurrectionists, whether that method was too much work or too distasteful to them is not clear!

Sometime in late 1827 one of the Hare's lodgers (Donald) died of natural causes (Dropsy). He was an old army veteran and owed rent to them. Rather than bury him, they filled the coffin with wood and took the body to Edinburgh University (possibly to Alexander Monro) and were ultimately directed to Surgeon's Square where they were able to sell the cadaver to Prof. Knox for £7.10s or a value in today's currency of well over \$1000.00 (The Luck of the Irish?!). This was very good money so they developed a plan. Rather than dig up the product perhaps they could just help the destitute along to meet their maker! Most of their victims were vagrants or old people who would likely not have been missed and they were able to dispatch them easily with a method that became known as "Burking" in which, after being plied with whisky, the victim was smothered (nose pinched and mouth covered) by one while the other would compress the victim's chest. This left minimal signs of trauma and easy particularly if the subject was old, frail and inebriated! This was not always the case though. In all, they sold at least 17 bodies to Prof. Knox of which 16 were murdered, the first, of course, having died of natural causes! Had they continued with these "invisible" victims their killing spree might have lasted much longer! They were paid anywhere from £7 — £10 for their deliveries based on a number of factors, a lot of money in those days!

A major blunder was that one of their victims, Mary Paterson, was a healthy and attractive 19 year old prostitute and when she arrived at Knox's establishment she was still warm! Worse for the boys, she was recognized by at least one of the medical students (Knox's assistant)! Even worse still, another victim, "Daft Jamie" was very well known around the streets of "Old Town" and was young and strong and not a drinker. He, too, was recognized despite Knox's efforts to hide his identity.

Their final victim, Marjory Campbell Docherty, was lured to the house by Burke claiming that they were related. Her murder, ironically on Halloween, was delayed by the presence of other lodgers, James and Ann Gray, who later found the body. The Grays refused a bribe of £10 a week to keep quiet and the police were notified. Although the body was successfully moved to Knox's classroom, the police discovered it

there after an anonymous tip and the Burkes and Hares were arrested. Over a period of twelve months they had murdered 16 people and are among Great Britain's worst serial killers. Burke kept quite a detailed ledger of the "product" which they called "shots".

Keep in mind that they were part of the working poor in early 19th century Scotland and their victims were often even poorer!

## **The Investigation and Trial**

It is interesting to note that the evidence against the pair was largely circumstantial and realizing this the Lord Advocate, Sir William Rae, offered the Hares immunity if they would confess, turn King's evidence and testify against Burke. On December 8, 1828, William Burke and Helen M'Dougal were formerly charged with the murder of Mary Docherty only. The trial began on Christmas Eve and carried on through the night. On Christmas Day 1828 Burke was convicted but Helen was not. Her verdict (uniquely Scottish) was...Not Proven! Which means, we know you did it but haven't been able to prove it, so, go away and don't do it again. Unlike Hare's treachery, Burke never implicated the women! It is almost certain that Margaret Hare was an active participant but the evidence is less clear for Helen M'Dougal. She may not have participated but must have known something was not right as one of the victims was one of her relatives. It is reported that Margaret Hare even suggested that they kill Helen and turn her into merchandise as she was a "Scotch" woman and could not be trusted'.

## **The Epilogue**

Helen was released on December 26, 1828, and was attacked by an angry mob on her return to her home. It is rumoured that she went to Australia where she died in 1868. Margaret Hare also escaped lynching and is thought to have returned to Ireland.

On January 3, 1829, Burke made his official confession and on January 28 at 8:15 a.m. was hanged in front of 25,000 onlookers. As part of the sentence his cadaver was publicly dissected by Knox's rival from the University, Professor Alexander Monro tertius, and the next day he lay "in state" and was viewed by 30,000. His skeleton is in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh along with a pocket book made from his skin!

William Hare "got away with murder" but was hounded on his attempts to leave Scotland and it is purported that he died a blind beggar in London.

Professor Knox was never charged with any crime but his career was ruined, he lost his FRS (a major blow) and he moved from Edinburgh to Glasgow and then to London where he died in 1862.

The Anatomy Act was passed on July 19, 1832, and the activities of Burke and Hare were a large contributing factor. The practice of body snatching all but disappeared but it was the poor (workhouses, suicide victims, etc.) that were still affected by this law.

In 1877 Professor Sir William Ferguson, FRCS, FRS, HON. LL.D. (Edin), Sergeant-Surgeon to HM Queen Victoria died. Why is this important? (Professor Knox's assistant and purported lover of Mary Paterson)

This story spawned countless books, short stories (The Body Snatcher, Robert Louis Stevenson) and movies, including this one!

## References

Edwards, Owen Dudley. *Burke and Hare*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2010

Knight, Alanna. *Crime Archive Burke & Hare*. Kew, Richmond Surrey, 2007

MacGregor, George. *The History of Burke and Hare and of the resurrectionist times: a fragment from the criminal annals of Scotland*.  
Reproduction from the Harvard Law School Library, Glasgow, 1884

Rosner, Lisa. *The Anatomy Murders*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010

Roughead, William. *Burke and Hare*. William Hodge & Company Ltd., Edinburgh and London, 1921

Wikipedia

The Worlds of Burke and Hare. [www.burkeandhare.com](http://www.burkeandhare.com)