

# The True and Horrid Story of Burke and Hare

“They would be glad to see them again when they had any other body to dispose of.”



As the practice of dissection became increasingly common in medical schools, anatomy professors demanded more and more dead bodies.

George Viner Ellis, *Illustrations of Dissections*, 2 vols. (New York: William Wood and Company, 1882)

## Lisa Rosner

On Monday, November 3, 1828, Edinburgh residents awoke to the horrifying news that the most atrocious murders of the decade -- of the century -- had been committed in the city's West Port district. William Burke and William Hare, together with Burke's mistress, Helen M'Dougal, and Hare's wife, Margaret, were accused of killing 16 people over the course of 12 months.

In the years before the arrests, the city's anatomists and their students had created a nearly inexhaustible demand for cadavers. One of the city's well-regarded anatomy lecturers, Dr. Robert Knox, purchased bodies without asking any awkward questions.

That demand, combined with the transient nature of the West Port, a busy immigrant district, had provided Burke and Hare with an opportunity to commit murder for

profit.

To kill their victims, Burke and Hare used a means of suffocation which subsequently and notoriously came to be known as "burking." Burke and Hare invited victims to join them for a glass of whisky and kept them drinking until they lay down and passed out. The two men then pressed down on the victim's chest to compress the lungs while covering the nose and mouth. After packing the cadavers into a chest, they delivered the bodies to Dr. Knox's dissecting rooms. Each cadaver brought Burke and Hare between £7 to £10, the equivalent of perhaps three months' work at their lawful occupations.

## The Dead Body Trade

Nearly sixty years before Jack the Ripper, Burke and Hare were the first serial killers to receive media attention. Newspapers printed

daily, sometimes twice-daily updates, as the story broke, and people everywhere asked the same question: How had such a dreadful system of murder for gain come into being?

When they first turned to murder, neither William Burke nor William Hare had any prior history of criminal behavior.

Burke, who was originally from Ireland, had come to Scotland about 1817 as a "navvy," or navigator, a laborer working on the Union Canal. He worked at a variety of trades, eventually settling on shoemaking. Able to read and write, he had a charming, outgoing manner. Although he was married, with two children in Ireland, his wife had refused to join him in Edinburgh.

Burke probably met Helen



**The world's first serial killers to attract media attention, Burke and Hare.**

**William Burke (left)**

**William Hare (right)**

**Images Courtesy of the Royal College of Physicians Library, Edinburgh,**

**<http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/library/>**



M'Dougal when working on the canal near Sterling. By 1828, the couple had lived together for about ten years, and their neighbors assumed they were respectably married.

William Hare had also come to Edinburgh as a laborer from Ireland; he worked in the canal basin, and sold fish in a cart. He had married Margaret Hare sometime around 1826. She was a widow: her husband had run a lodging house in the West Port, and she took it over on his death. She seems to have had one child by her first husband, and another with Hare. The second was an infant in December 1828, and so she must have been pregnant during the period of the murders.

To understand what led them to the killings, we have to look east, and uphill from the West Port, to Edinburgh University and the medical district, where Dr. Knox had his dissecting rooms. Robert Knox, MD, Fellow of the Royal College of

Surgeons of Edinburgh, has always been an enigma.

Born in Edinburgh, he had served in the army and studied in Paris before returning home to set up a private anatomical school. During 1827-1828, when he purchased cadavers from Burke and Hare, he was busy pursuing an ambitious research program in human and comparative anatomy. He also taught hundreds of students, lecturing twice a day and holding a separate dissection class. He was curator of the surgical museum, wrote articles for scientific societies, and was in the process of seeing several books on anatomy through publication.

His supporters claimed he knew nothing about the murders; his detractors argued that he simply turned his blind eye – for he had lost an eye to smallpox as a child. We will probably never discover just what Knox knew and when he knew it.

## The Victims

The first cadaver William Burke and William Hare sold is known only by his first name, Donald. He had died of natural causes in Hare's lodging house, owing Hare £4. Hare had the idea of recouping his loss by selling the body to “the doctors,” and asked his friend Burke for help.

The two men put the cadaver in a box and took it in a cart to the university. A student directed them to Knox's dissecting rooms. Knox approved the purchase of the cadaver, and one of his assistants uttered the fateful words, “they would be glad to see them again when they had any other body to dispose of.” According to Burke, that was when he and Hare first realized they could make money by murder.

Their first homicide was an



**Daft Jamie's family and friends grew suspicious when he suddenly disappeared.**

**Mary Paterson's renowned beauty led many to suspect her of prostitution.**

**Images Courtesy of The Royal College of Physicians Library, Edinburgh,  
<http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/library/>**

older man named Joseph, who was ill with a fever when staying at Hare's lodging house. Most of the subsequent victims were older women, poor, away from home, and given to drink. It was generally Burke's job to find potential victims, strike up a conversation and charm them into coming back to his or Hare's house for a friendly glass of whisky.

The three murders that caught the attention of the public were Mary Paterson, James Wilson (better known as Daft Jamie), and Madgy (Margaret, or Margery) Docherty (also known as Campbell).

Mary Paterson was killed in April, 1828. During the police investigation, rumors circulated about her extraordinary beauty, and she quickly acquired a posthumous reputation as a notorious prostitute.

Daft Jamie, murdered in October, 1828, was a well-known street figure, with a mother and sister living. Surprised at his sudden disappearance, his family and friends had no idea what had become of him; they only found out the truth six weeks later, when Burke and Hare were arrested.

On October 31, 1828 Madgy Docherty became their last victim. She was a transient en route to her home in Ireland, and her way led through the West Port, where she stopped at a whisky shop to beg for some drink. There she met William Burke. He greeted her as a fellow-countryman, and invited her to stay at his house, introducing her to Helen M'Dougal, and, later on, William and Margaret Hare. The five of them spent much of the night drinking.

In the morning, Madgy Docherty was nowhere to be seen. Two of Burke's lodgers, Ann and James Gray, grew suspicious, and looked under the bed. There they found Docherty's dead body and went for the police. Burke, M'Dougal, and William and Margaret Hare were arrested for murder.

### **The Investigation**

Edinburgh was one of the first cities in Great Britain to establish a police department, and the police surgeon who examined Docherty's body, and then the crime scene, followed strict procedures set



out for handling forensic evidence. Once he was finished, the body was turned over to two independent medical inspectors, who carried out CSI-style experiments to determine whether the bruises found on the body were caused by violence.

Because the forensic evidence was not enough to prove the prosecution's case, the prosecuting attorney offered William and Margaret Hare immunity in exchange for their testimony against Burke and M'Dougal.

William Burke and Helen M'Dougal were tried for murder on December 24, 1828. Defended by some of the finest lawyers in the city, M'Dougal was acquitted with the distinctively Scots verdict, Not Proven. Burke was convicted and sentenced to death. He was executed on January 28, 1829. His body was dissected and publicly exhibited.

Robert Knox refused to cooperate with the police investigation. Many in Edinburgh assumed him to be complicit in the murders, though his students and colleagues defended him. He was caricatured for dealing with Burke



*The second doorway in this picture shows the top of a passageway that led down to the main thoroughfare called the Cowgate. Rumors spread that Burke and Hare used this route, carrying their cadavers up the dark stairway to Knox's dissecting rooms. However, the truth is even stranger as Burke and Hare used a cart to transport the bodies along the street, like everyone else.*

*Today Edinburgh locals talk about tunnels going under Surgeon's Square that -- allegedly -- Burke and Hare used to transport their cadavers.*

James Drummond, *Old Edinburgh*, (Edinburgh: G. Waterston Sons and

and Hare, and likened to a butcher who preferred his meat "fresh." Though he taught in Edinburgh for many years after the scandal, his reputation never fully recovered.

The case focused national and international attention on the body-trade throughout Britain. When a copy-cat crime was committed in London two years later, Parliament was moved to action, passing the Anatomy Act in 1832.

By that time the Burke and Hare legend had entered the popular imagination, where it has remained ever since. Robert Louis Stevenson drew on the "true and horrid story of Burke and Hare" as an inspiration for a short story, *The Body Snatcher* and the story was later adapted as a

horror movie of the same name with Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff.

More recently, CSI's second season featured an episode called "Burked," based on a true story of a modern-day burking and in 2010, a John Landis film, *Burke and Hare* starring Simon Pegg and Andy Serkis, was released.

Wherever there are stories of organ trafficking and sales of body parts, someone is sure to mention Burke and Hare.

**Lisa Rosner is Professor of History at Stockton College. You can buy her book, *The Anatomy Murders: Being the True and Spectacular History of***

***Edinburgh's Notorious Burke and Hare and of the Man of Science Who Abetted Them in the Commission of Their Most Heinous Crimes here at Amazon.*** You can also visit her website, <http://burkeandhare.com>.