BURKE AND HARE: Research Packet

Who were BURKE AND HARE?

William Burke and William Hare were grave robbers turned serial murderers in the late 1820s in Edinburgh, Scotland. The two were Irish immigrants who were aided by Burke’s mistress Helen McDougal and Hare’s wife Margaret Laird.

Burke was born in 1792 in Urney, which is part of the Province of Ulster in Northern Ireland. He attempted many different trades and eventually left his wife and two children in Ireland in order to move to Scotland in 1817 to work as a navigator for the Union Canal. This is where he met his mistress Helen McDougal, and afterwards he also worked as a laborer, weaver, baker and cobbler.

Hare too was born in the Province of Ulster in Ireland, but his birth year is not certain. He immigrated to Scotland and, like Burke, worked on the Union Canal as a laborer. When he moved to Edinburgh, he met a man named Logue who ran a lodging house. Logue died in 1826 and Hare subsequently married his widow, Margaret Laird.

It is believed that Burke and Hare met either while working on the Union Canal or at the lodging house that Hare had taken over from Logue. Hare later testified that their spree began when they sold the body of a deceased resident of the lodge to Dr. Robert Knox in order to regain money owed to the deceased.

Why did they begin killing?

Burke and Hare were originally grave robbers (often called “Resurrectionists”) who eventually stole bodies to use as cadavers in medical schools. Many of the medical schools in Great Britain lacked sufficient amounts of cadavers necessary for studying and teaching human anatomy. At this time, only the bodies of executed criminals were legally allowed to be used as cadavers. However, the number of executed criminals had fallen due to the repeal of the Bloody Code, which sharply reduced the execution rate in the early nineteenth century. Due to this, less than five corpses were available per year for the entire Edinburgh Medical College.

At first they robbed the graves of recently deceased people, but soon the people of the town grew suspicious and would watch over the graves of their relatives 24 hours a day until the body had decomposed to a state that would render it useless to the body snatchers. Sometimes high walls and watchtowers were constructed around Edinburgh’s graveyards in an effort to stop this from happening.

The close surveillance of graveyards spurred Burke and Hare to prey upon ordinary citizens. Instead of waiting for their victims to die of natural causes, they began preying on tenants of the lodging house, prostitutes, and strangers on the streets of Edinburgh.
Their first murder was a sickly tenant at the lodge named Joseph the Miller. They fed him copious amounts of whiskey and then suffocated him. Following this, they turned to luring victims into the lodge from the street, as there were no more sick tenants. Their next victim was Abigail Simpson who was also served alcohol and then smothered. For each body Dr. Robert Knox paid between £8-10. Hare’s wife Margaret often did the work of luring people into the lodge.

Other victims include Mary Patterson and Janet Brown; a larger woman Effie; an old woman and her blind grandson; Burke’s acquaintance “Mrs. Ostler;” one of McDougal’s relatives Ann Dougall; a former lodger named Elizabeth Haldane who asked to sleep in Hare’s stable; Haldane’s daughter Peggy; “Daft Jamie,” mentally retarded man with a limp; and Marjory Campbell Docherty.

**How did they kill their victims?**

Burke and Hare had a trademark method of suffocation. This method is now often referred to as “burking,” meaning to purposefully smother and compress the chest of a victim; to quietly suppress.

**How were they caught?**

A previous tenant at the lodging house, Ann Gray, returned to the house in order to look for her stockings, which she had left near her bed. Burke would not let her approach the bed and she grew suspicious. When she and her husband James were left alone in the house later, they found Docherty’s body underneath the bed. They immediately left to alert the police. On their way, they ran into McDougal who offered a bribe of £10 per week in exchange for their silence. They refused.

By the time the police arrived, Burke and Hare had removed the body from the house. Police questioning revealed that Burke and McDougal had conflicting stories about when Docherty left the lodging house, leading the police to arrest them. The police also received a tip-off about the body that led them to Knox’s classroom.

Because the evidence against them was not overwhelming, Lord Advocate Sir William Rae offered Hare immunity if he prosecuted against Burke. Hare took the immunity and testified against Burke, which led to his death sentence in 1928. He was hanged on January 28, 1829, and was subsequently publicly dissected at the Edinburgh Medical College. The dissecting professor, Alexander Monro, dipped his quill pen into blood from Burke’s head 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 and death mask are displayed at the University of Edinburgh’s Anatomical Museum. Items made from his skin, including a book, are displayed at Surgeon’s Hall. A calling card case made out of his skin is on display at The Police Information Centre in Edinburgh’s Royal Mile.
What happened to the others that were involved?

McDougal was released from jail, as there was no proven evidence of her involvement. She returned to her home but was attacked by an angry mob. There are various stories about her whereabouts, including ones that say she returned to her family in Stirling and others that say she fled to Australia.

Dr. Knox was not prosecuted — Burke swore in his confession that Knox did not know where the cadavers had originated. He denied his dealings with Burke and Hare and continued using cadavers that were obtained by Edinburgh body snatchers. However, after the Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, he moved to the Cancer Hospital in London and died in 1862.

Hare fled to England, and the last reported sighting of him was years later in the town of Carlisle. There are popular tales of him as a blind beggar on the streets of London, having been mobbed and thrown in a lime pit (chemical pit). These tales are not confirmed.

Where did the killings occur?

The killings took place in the town of Edinburgh, Scotland. At first, their body snatching was confined to graveyards such as St. Cuthbert’s, but most of the murders took place in the lodging house that Hare and his wife Margaret ran.

Many murders were committed in the West Port district of the Old Town, which led to the nickname “The West Port Murders.”

A map of Edinburgh can be seen here: http://burkeandhare.com/1830map.htm

Were there any medical discoveries made that can be attributed to these bodies?

There were no major medical discoveries that came directly from these cadavers. The bodies were mainly used as a way to study and learn human anatomy in a time when cadavers were not readily available for medical purposes.

However, other products were created in order to stop body snatching including the Kingskettle Collar (an iron hoop around the neck and bolted to the coffin) and the mort safe (a heavy metal cover that dropped over the coffin, which would be kept there for about six weeks, after which the body was of no use for dissection in anatomy classes).

Who investigated the murders?

The Police Surgeon, Alexander Black, followed codes on handling the forensic evidence. The public prosecutor was the Lord Advocate Sir William Rae who was also Scotland’s chief legal official. A Scottish custom allowed the accused party to obtain a defense counsel free of charge. Burke and McDougal were defended by two of the finest Edinburgh lawyers: James Moncrieff and Henry Cockburn.
**Film Adaptations**


The Anatomist. 1939; BBC. Based on the play The Anatomist by James Bridie.


Burke and Hare. DVD. Directed by Vernon Sewell. 1972; Sinister Cinema, 2008.


I Sell The Dead, a 2008 comedy horror film, has pub patrons claiming career grave-robbers Willie and Arthur are successful rivals for Burke and Hare's notoriety.

The 1971 film Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde transported Burke and Hare into the late Victorian era and portrayed them as being employed by Dr. Jekyll. Burke was played by Ivor Dean and Hare by Tony Calvin.

**Other Media Portrayals and in Popular Culture (from Wikipedia)**

Folk tales about "Burkers" attacking travelers, especially children, to sell their cadavers are still common in Scotland.

The Burke and Hare murders are referenced in Robert Louis Stevenson's short story, "The Body Snatcher", which portrays two doctors in Robert Knox's employ responsible for buying the corpses from the killers.
The 2004 Doctor Who audio drama Medicinal Purposes placed the Sixth Doctor (Colin Baker) amidst the events of the murders; the play featured Leslie Phillips as Dr. Knox and David Tennant (who would later become the Tenth Doctor) as Daft Jamie.

In April 2012, Channel 4 TV featured on its Four Rooms show the card case made out of skin taken from William Burke's hand.

In the 1965 TV show The Munsters, season 1, Herman Munster (Fred Gwynne) is showing home movies in which we see two grave robbers. Herman claims that he knew them (Burke and Hare) back in the day.

The New Exhibit, a 1963 episode of The Twilight Zone, features Burke and Hare along with several other historical murderers as exhibits in a wax museum tended by curator Martin Balsam.

The 23 November 1964 episode of The Alfred Hitchcock Hour, "The McGregor Affair" featured Burke and Hare as characters. Andrew Duggan starred as McGregor, a man who hauls items for Burke and Hare. Burke was played by Arthur Malet and Hare by Michael Pate.

In the 1989 children's show Tugs, two scrap dealers are known as Burke and Blair, a parody of the two corpse dealers.

In 1999 a novel inspired by Burke and Hare, Grave Robbers, was written by Robin Mitchell and published by Luath Press, Edinburgh.