

# Murder and Medicine

## The story of the export of human bodies from Limerick

by John Curtin

The names of two Irishmen, William Burke and William Hare, will always be synonymous with the crime of murdering people with the intention of selling their bodies as cadavers for medical research. The two men disposed of the bodies of sixteen people, in Edinburgh, over the year up to November 1828.<sup>1</sup>

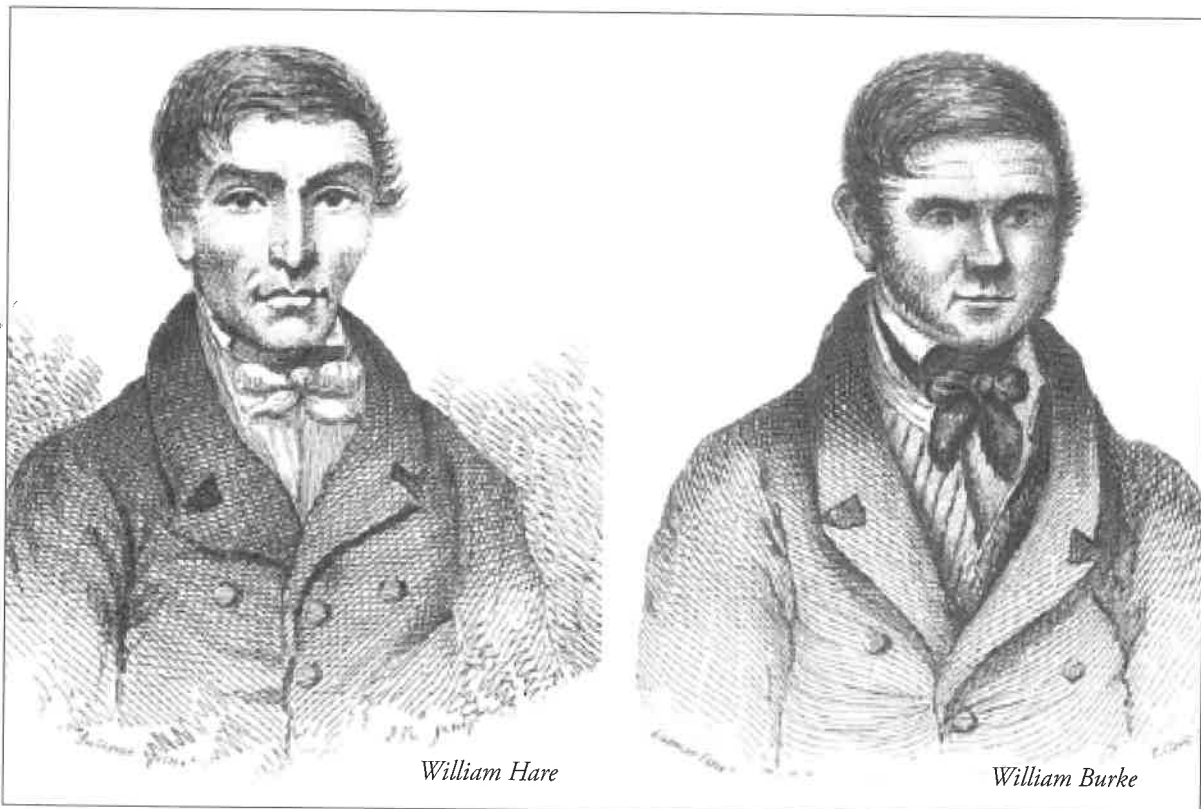
In the early 1800s Edinburgh was a leading European medical centre, specialising in anatomical study, in an era when demand for cadavers exceeded supply. The only legal source of corpses used for medical research came from suicide victims or from the deaths of prisoners, foundlings and orphans and executions.<sup>2</sup> A shortage of corpses led to an increase in grave robbing. However, the building of watch towers<sup>3</sup> and mortsafes in graveyards reduced the opportunities for grave robbers and exacerbated the shortage.

Burke and Hare saw an opportunity to look beyond grave robbing in November 1827. When a man lodging in Hare's house died, owing Hare money, the pair discovered that they could sell his body and recover the loss. The demand for cadavers was so great that anatomists asked few questions

when bodies were supplied, so the corpse was sold to Dr Robert Knox for dissection at his anatomy lectures. They were paid £7 10s. and this means of earning easy money was an inducement for the two men to consider murder.

Over two months later, Hare was concerned that a woman lodging in his house and suffering from fever would deter others from staying, so he and Burke murdered her and sold the body to Knox for £10. The method used in the murder displayed an awareness that un mutilated and pristine cadaver fetched a better price, so the men smothered their victims. Burke placed his full weight on the victim's chest to stifle movement while Hare either held the victim's nose or prevented breathing by smothering. In the absence of a body this type of crime was practically undetectable until the era of modern forensics.

The men continued their murderous spree, and it is believed that their wives either assisted or at least ignored their partner's activities. Burke and Hare became careless and their heinous plot was uncovered when other lodgers discovered their last victim, Margaret Docherty, and notified the police. Although



William Hare

William Burke

the police suspected Burke and Hare of this and the other murders, there was no evidence on which they could act.

Hare was offered immunity from prosecution if he turned King's evidence. He provided the necessary proof for the Docherty murder and confessed to all the other murders. Burke and his wife were charged with three murders and at the subsequent trial, held on Christmas Eve 1828, Burke was found guilty of one murder and sentenced to death. The case against Burke's wife was not proven. There was public disquiet that Hare and the two women went unpunished for their crimes and all three went into hiding afterwards. Others thought that Dr Knox should have been implicated, at least as an accomplice.<sup>4</sup>

William Burke was executed on 28 January 1829 in front of a crowd estimated to be as large as 25,000. Ironically his body was taken away and publicly dissected at the University of Edinburgh. During his trial Burke recalled that two of the victims were an old woman and her grandson, who was a dumb boy. The tea-chest, usually used to transport the bodies was found to be too small, so the bodies were forced into a herring barrel and delivered to Dr Knox.

Less than two months later a report in a Limerick newspaper<sup>5</sup> carried the dramatic heading '*Burking*' in Limerick.<sup>6</sup> The details conveyed bore many similarities to two of the murders in Scotland, especially the fact that a woman and young boy were the victims and the corpses were concealed in a herring barrel. Newspaper reporters in Scotland were only too eager to recount every sordid and squalid detail of the various murders committed by Burke and Hare, so it is not inconceivable that the Limerick murderers imitated their compatriot's modus operandi.

The report read:

The London papers furnish us with the following particulars of a nefarious and abominable traffic, that it appears has been carried on at this port. It will no doubt, be read with considerable interest by the Citizens of Limerick.

Saturday an inquisition was taken at the Vestry hall of St. John's Southwark, before Thomas Shelton coroner, touching the death of a fine young woman, apparently about 26 years of age, and a male child of three years, whose bodies were discovered in a pickle-cask on one of the wharfs, having been landed out of a vessel direct from Limerick. The Jury having viewed the bodies which were in an astonishing preservation, on account of being pickled prior to their shipment to this country, the evidence was then gone into. Thomas Thomas, Revenue Officer, deposed that between 11 and 12 o'clock last Thursday morning he was on duty at Liddiard's wharf, Horleydowd-stairs. He bored several casks to ascertain if any of them contained contraband Goods. One of those casks excited his suspicion; he caused the head to be taken out, and on removing some straw, discovered the bodies. The female was twisted nearly double, and the child lying between her thighs, by which means they were enabled to be packed up in the cask, which was rather a herring-barrel. He immediately

gave information to the parish officers, and the bodies were conveyed in a shell to the vaults of the Church. Juror – In what vessel was the cask containing the bodies found?

Witness – In a vessel called the *City of Limerick*.

Coroner – Was the cask addressed to any one in London?

Witness – Yes; the address was a Mr. Michael M. Newman, pork-butcher and butter-man, Michael Street, Brick-lane, London; but could find no such person there.

The Coroner observed that no doubt the address was fictitious, and that the bodies were intended for dissection. A Juror wished to know if any marks of violence were observed on the bodies; but the beadle said they had examined and that no marks could be detected. Richard Cooper, deposed that he was master of the City Limerick, that day fortnight the vessel was riding in the Shannon, when a man brought a cask down to the quay in a cart, to be shipped on board the vessel for London. The man said the cask contained pigs' trotters cured – the name of the shipper in the bill of Lading was Patrick Riely. The cask during the voyage lay on the deck, and was not in the slightest degree offensive, and on the vessel reaching the Thames, it was landed with several others.

Coroner – Had any person been to the wharf to claim the cask?

Witness – no.

There being no other evidence to throw any light on the transaction, the Jury returned a verdict "that the deceased persons were found dead, but how they came by their deaths and at what time, is to the Jury unknown".

One can only wonder if this export of human corpses was a singular occurrence or one of a series of similar and undetected cargoes of smuggled cadavers.



Dr Robert Knox

THIS IRON MORTSAFE WAS PLACED OVER THE GRAVE TO PREVENT GRAVE-ROBBERS FROM DIGGING UP THE BODY FOR SALE TO THE ANATOMY CLASSES IN THE MEDICAL SCHOOL. MANY OTHER MEASURES WERE TAKEN IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES TO PREVENT THIS REPULSIVE TRADE, WHICH CONTINUED UNTIL THE ANATOMY ACT WAS PASSED IN 1832.

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*Mortsafe in Greyfriar's graveyard, Edinburgh. (Courtesy of Tom Donovan).*



*Watchtower at Glasnevin Cemetery*

#### Sources:

<https://www.ranker.com/list/facts-about-burke-and-hare-bodysnatchers-murderers/setareh-janda>  
<https://blog.nms.ac.uk/2015/11/02/edinburghs-dark-history-burke-and-hare/>

#### References

1 The first death was on 29 November, 1827 and fifteen murders were committed in 2018, with the final murder occurring on 31 October, 1828.

2 The legislation dates from 1506, when Scottish surgeons first obtained the right to dissect the bodies of condemned criminals, once they were cut down from the gallows.

3 The occurrence of grave robbing in Limerick is evident from the name Watch House Cross, Kileely, where a watch house was erected to protect pauper's graves in the nearby graveyard. Watch houses were also erected and integrated as towers in the walls of Glasnevin Cemetery.

4 The authorities were aware that the sale of corpses, although immoral, was not illegal, so it was decided to make it less attractive to do so. In 1832, through the Royal Assent, Parliament approved the Anatomy Act, which allowed anatomists the ability to legally harvest the unclaimed cadavers of paupers from workhouses and other public housing establishments to continue their research in the subsequent improvement of life.

5 *Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel* 17 March, 1829.

6 This is one of the earliest known uses of the term 'Burking', which became a commonly used term in the early 1830s for the act of smothering people with the intention of selling their bodies.

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