

Laying a Legend

Dr. F. R. Walsh

“Up the close and down the stair
But and been wi’ Burke and Hare
Burke’s the butcher, Hare’s the thief
Knox the boy who buys the beef.”

THE trio remembered in this rhyme made history early in the last century. Burke and Hare were the culprits involved in a famous Edinburgh murder trial in 1828. They supplied corpses for dissection to the Anatomy School owned by Dr. Robert Knox, then the leading teacher of anatomy in the United Kingdom.

A record number of 500 students flocked to his classes, many of them from Ireland. He was an outstanding teacher, loved by his pupils who nicknamed him “Old Cyclops”; an attack of smallpox in his youth had left him blind in one eye. He required a regular supply of eighteen bodies for his eighteen dissecting tables. The bodies of executed criminals were the only legally available sources.

Demand exceeded supply. It was the era of the resurrectionists and body snatchers. Newly interred bodies required watchers to prevent their removal to the medical schools.

In a previous contribution more than two decades ago I referred to this Burke who had introduced a new word to the language. I repeated a local legend to the effect that he was a native of Callan. The house in which he was born was pointed out to me. It is still to the good but the legend is entirely bogus.

Burke was in fact born in Co. Tyrone. He served in the Donegal Militia, married a Ballina girl and lived there for a few years before deserting her and their two children to go to Scotland. There he teamed up with a fellow Northerner name Hare. They ran a slum basement lodging house in Edinburgh. An old army pensioner, suffering from dropsy, died in their doss house. As there was no claimant for the body Burke and Hare delivered it to Dr. Knox’s Anatomy School. They were welcomed, rewarded with £7.50 and a come again invitation.

Such easy money set them off on their career of crime. Selected victims were enticed by drink to their lodging den where they were made helplessly drunk. Burke found that by placing his hand firmly on the nose and mouth

of his torpid victims he could asphyxiate them without leaving any obvious sign of violence. He varied this by compressing a pillow firmly over the victims face combined with pressure on the chest. Hare was equally proficient at this "burking" operation.

The bodies were taken to Dr. Knox's dissecting room. Payment was prompt, up to £15 "for a big one." Business was brisk. Within nine months sixteen bodies were delivered. All went well until November, 1828. A harmless popular Edinburgh youth, James Wilson, well known as "Dart Jamie" went missing. His body was recognised in Knox's dissecting room by medical students. Within days the body of another missing person, an elderly Donegal woman named Mary Docherty was traced to the same place.

Burke and Hare and a woman companion were arrested. Because of insufficient evidence the authorities decided to offer Hare a free pardon on condition that he turned King's evidence. He agreed readily. His pardon related specifically to the murder of Mary Docherty only. The trial of Burke was a classic "famous trial" and created tremendous interest.

The jury retired on Christmas Eve, 1828, and brought in their verdict of guilty on Christmas Day. The public execution on 28-1-1829 was witnessed by some 25,000 people. Sir Walter Scott was amongst the many celebrities present. Burke's body was sent to the Anatomy School of Edinburgh University for public dissection by Professor Monro. The populace demanded the arrest and trial of Hare. His pardon related only to the murder of Mary Docherty. There were at least fifteen other murders in which he had participated. Strong legal pressure failed to get him put on trial. With the aid of police protection he escaped to London where he ended up as a blind beggar.

Knox too was in trouble. "Hang Knox" was the cry. Ignored by his medical colleagues who never liked him, he was forced to leave Edinburgh and he too ended up in poverty in London.

The repercussions of this famous trial helped to create the local legend that Burke was born in Callan. In his Diary, Humphrey O'Sullivan let fly with unwonted exaggeration. His entry reads :

"4. 2. 1832. A man named Burke was hanged in Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland last year for having murdered thirty persons by stopping their breath, in order to sell their bodies to the "Surgeons" for ten guineas a body. It has been discovered that thousands of persons have been smothered in Edinburgh and in London to sell their bodies also.

It is said the same diabolical practice is being carried out in Ireland now. It is even said that there is a group of these "Burkers" at present in Callan, but I do not believe it. The way in which they perform "Burkering" on a person is by drawing down over his mouth and nose a mask or visor in which there is pitch and thus smother him with the pitch mask; but both in London and Edinburgh it is usual to make the victim drunk before smothering him or put "opium" in his drink and then to smother him."

This record is in marked contrast to his usual sober entries, particularly so as he had first hand advice available. Surprisingly he is two years wrong in his date.

Dr. Patrick Keatinge is mentioned frequently in the Diaries. The two were often together. He graduated M.D. (Univ. Edin.) in 1824 after which he returned to practice in Callan, his home town, until he retired in 1878. His successor, my father, completed the century in 1924 when I took over. Dr. Keatinge was familiar as a student with the Edinburgh scene and he knew every family in his local community. He would assuredly not confirm the alarming picture painted by the diarist.

In a small community, rumours, gossip, and fear combined to create the fable about Burke's origin — a fiction that should be scotched. Equally untrue is any suggestion that Knox had local connection. He was a Scot, still remembered in the opening doggerel.



OLD KILKENNY REVIEW

Articles and notes of Kilkenny interest are always welcome for the Review. All such material should be submitted by the end of September, type written if possible.

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