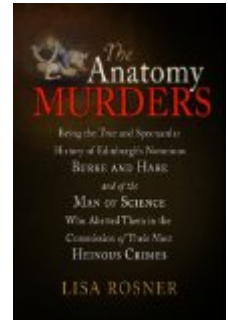


Lisa Rosner. *The Anatomy Murders: Being the True and Spectacular History of Edinburgh's Notorious Burke and Hare and of the Man of Science Who Abetted Them in the Commission of Their Most Heinous Crimes.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. vi + 328 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4191-4.



Reviewed by Melissa Bissonette

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

In 1818, Mary Shelley wrote of Victor Frankenstein, a man of pure reason, becoming a star pupil in the study of natural philosophy and physiology. She has her hero bluntly acknowledge that “to examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death,” which is found only in “vaults and charnel houses” and amid the “unhallowed damp of the grave” (pp. 79, 82). Though without “superstition” himself, Victor is fully aware of the popular prejudice against the use of corpses; he works at night and in secret. Thus Shelley articulated what was an awkward yoking of knowledge and fear, humanity’s advance and its criminal underbelly, throughout the Enlightenment.

Lisa Rosner’s *The Anatomy Murders* explores that yoking as exemplified by William Burke and William Hare, serial killers of 1828, whose string of murders were motivated by the constant demand, from the schools of anatomy and surgery in Edinburgh, for bodies to study. Rosner takes the crime spree as the focal point of a broader exploration of Edinburgh in 1828 and recreates the cul-

tural milieu that made the murders not only possible but also almost inevitable. Rosner’s fascinating history traces the paths taken by young men navigating academic requirements and politics to learn medicine, by Irish laborers forced to migrate from job to job across the North Channel, and by the working poor and sometime “criminal classes.”

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in Burke and Hare, largely in the popular market: Martin Conaghan and Will Pickering’s *Burke and Hare: The Graphic Novel* (2010); Alanna Knight’s *Crime Archive: Burke & Hare* (2009); and R. Michael Gordon’s *The Infamous Burke and Hare: Serial Killers and Resurrectionists of Nineteenth Century Edinburgh* (2009), which combines brief histories with enticing reproductions of images, ballads, and testimony associated with the case. Although the Burke and Hare story has always held a literary fascination (see Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1884 *The Body Snatchers*), there is no mystery nor were there any legal anomalies in their prosecution. Burke and Hare, denizens of

Edinburgh's West Port, a slum filled with the working poor, stumbled into their business when a lodger with no apparent friends or relatives helpfully died on his own in Burke's house. The 10 pounds they received for his corpse encouraged them to become more proactive, and in the end sixteen people--mostly poor people passing through Edinburgh with a predilection for strong drink and without personal ties--were suffocated ("Burked") and sold to Dr. Robert Knox for dissection.

The story of the murders themselves, as Rosner tells it, is disturbingly mundane. These crimes were committed neither from passion nor perversity, but rather as a freelance system to supplement a meager income. Despite her engagingly sensational title, Rosner eschews a kind of true crime recreation of the murders, aiming instead at thick description of types and spaces. Each chapter focuses on a different victim and illuminates aspects of Edinburgh in 1828 through each particular life story, while at the same time following the narrative along its creepy and bloodless way. Rosner relies almost entirely on archival records and contemporary publications, and her analysis of announcements and ads in newspapers as well as local legal codes produces a sociological portrait that is absorbing and utterly convincing.

Rosner's rich exploration enhances a careful reconstruction of what is known about these actual individuals with a wider picture of others in similar situations. She ranges fairly far from the Burke and Hare murders in places, including other cases (as in the chapters that discuss the history of forensic science and the use of "king's evidence" witnesses), individuals, or institutions in Edinburgh. For example, she explores the anonymity of "subjects" in medical research in a chapter focused on four individuals, only one of whose name is known (Effy). Her method has the paradoxical effect of personalizing the individuals, even where little is known about them.

Indeed, the anonymity of the subjects is central to the story Rosner tells, making her focus on victims itself a counter to the murders. Her intention throughout the book is to "recapture the voices of the historical actors in this drama" (p. 7). She traces the lives of the victims, revealing the lives of the barely working poor whose search for continually temporary employment took them away from home, from family, and from friends. These victims were the most vulnerable and least visible members of society: Irish immigrants, a magdalen, transients, petty thieves, a cinder gatherer, a child, and an "imbecile."

The breadth of her topics sometimes obscures Rosner's central concern, which is to redeem the importance of dissection to the progression of medical knowledge. It does not feel like there is an argument to this text or enough critical interpretation of the cultural patterns so richly laid out. Rosner's forays into early forensic science, the ideology of the magdalen houses, immigration patterns, gin consumption, and academic politics are well written and intriguing, yet the reader who wants more than these brief introductions will find very little in the notes or bibliography to continue with.

As in her previous scholarship, Rosner focuses more on the history of science than the history of crime, though she demonstrates the intriguing ways in which the two obviously overlap. Rather than focus on the inhumanity of the killers, Rosner continually questions the moral positions of the scientists and the limitations of the impersonal inquiry they claimed to practice. Knox, the anatomy professor who purchased the bodies, was never prosecuted for his role, and whether and how much he knew was a matter of heated speculation for the remainder of his life (and since). In keeping with her method, Rosner explores what we can know about that historical individual (through his letters, his subsequent career, and the narratives written by those around him) but is more interested--and interesting--in

addressing the culture that made blindness, willful or not, to a string of corpses possible.

Since the seventeenth century, anatomists had been allowed limited access to the corpses of executed criminals, and as the medical sciences and training advanced significantly in the eighteenth century, so did the demand for cadavers. After the 1752 Murder Act, anatomists across Britain could only legally dissect the bodies of the hanged; by the end of the eighteenth century, as Edinburgh had replaced London as the center of anatomical and surgical study, it had inherited the untenable reliance on resurrectionists, vendors of illegally unearthed corpses. When a corpse appeared before them, anatomists “deliberately separated the cadaver from its previous existence as a person,” even when they ought to have recognized those bodies as belonging to individuals they themselves had seen walking around perfectly healthy days before (p. 211).

Such was the situation with Daft Jamie, the victim around whom Rosner exposes the conflicting needs and procedures of anatomy and forensic pathology. Neither Knox nor his assistants asked the questions that Robert Christison, the groundbreaking medical jurist and inspector of the one existing corpse, ultimately did. Knox saw only a fully grown young male, a rare prize for the anatomists. Citing Christison’s 1839 pamphlet on “medico-legal examination of dead bodies,” Rosner explains how a medical examiner might have checked for evidence that the victim had been suffocated. The face “should appear flushed, as blood was forced into the face. The eyes should appear bloodshot, the tongue, lolling out of the mouth” (p. 201). Knox’s students began their dissection with Jamie’s back and buttock muscles, not seeing his face in this or any other condition until the victim had been dead for several days, by which time marks of suffocation would no longer have been visible.

Medical investigators sought evidence in the position of the dead body, contusions on the body,

and other “distinctive anatomical features that could unambiguously identify” the victim; “Jamie’s feet were known to be ‘peculiarly formed,’ with one foot ‘twisted or diseased by contraction’” but by the time he was reported missing, “there was no longer any physical evidence” that the “severed body parts” in Knox’s offices were his (pp. 191, 190). Ultimately, Rosner’s book, which pays very close attention to scientific realities, shows how these murders exposed a legal paradox; forensic science demanded a corpse to examine.

Following Knox’s notes and anatomical and surgical textbooks, Rosner brings the reader into the dissecting room. Subjects would be preserved in spirits to prevent decay, an operation that also distorted the faces on the bodies. Dissection then proceeded through the necessarily methodical examination and detachment of muscles, bones, blood vessels, nerves, joints, and viscera. The remains were simply discarded, as trash “in the forgotten corners of Edinburgh’s medical district” unless the student or instructor wanted the bones for a display skeleton (p. 167). Medical inspectors, like anatomists, relied on good fresh corpses. “Careful murderers could therefore escape conviction if they could hide their victim’s body long enough for telltale bruises or punctures to decay” (p. 206). Burke and Hare’s motivation also provided full cover for their crimes.

The Burke and Hare murders were prosecuted only when the body of Maggie Docherty was discovered hidden under a bed before they could deliver it to Knox, a circumstance Rosner successfully connects to the fuller social aspects of the case she spells out throughout the book, rather than making this some kind of fatal individual mistake. A bit more fortunate than many of the people they knew, Burke and Hare both lived in small rooms, with neighbors and family housed very close by. The trial of 1828 (of Burke only, as Hare had turned King’s evidence) served to expose the horrific system brought about by the

market in stolen corpses and led to the 1832 Anatomy Act. The most striking element of the act, which allowed for the purchase of bodies and of the disposal of the unclaimed poor--thereby eliminating the need for body snatchers--was "the end of the 'anonymous subject,' that staple of dissecting establishments of hundreds of years." The Anatomy Act further required full records kept for each cadaver, and "mandated that, once the dissection was completed, the lecturer to whom the cadaver had been assigned was required to provide a coffin and burial for the remains. Left-over bones and viscera could no longer be swept off the dissecting table and dumped in a corner of Surgeon's Square.... Though presumably poor, their remains were invested with the dignity of a name, an appropriate way to honor their service to the living" (p. 266). Rosner also honors the service of these remains. Her extensive and accomplished use of archival materials makes *The Anatomy Murders* a pleasure to read.

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