

FORTHCOMING IN RAVON #61 (APRIL 2012)

Caroline McCracken-Flesher. *The Doctor Dissected: A Cultural Autopsy of the Burke & Hare Murders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-19-976682-6. Price: US\$65.00/£40.00.

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The task of this book, its author explains at the outset, is to wonder why the world continues to seek out the tale of William Burke, William Hare and Doctor Robert Knox, and why Scots cannot leave it behind (4). But her emphasis is clearly on the second part of this task: how the scandal of 1828—in which two Irishmen living in Edinburgh “burked” (or killed by smothering) sixteen people and sold their bodies to Knox for his classes in anatomy—became alternately, “the tale of Knox’s blame, of Burke and Hare’s underclass inevitability, a community’s guilt, a victim’s need, or a society’s self-critique,” but always functioned as “a story of Scotland” (10). Caroline McCracken-Flesher accordingly poses it as a peculiarly Scottish trauma—a story that must be told and re-told in an attempt to integrate an event that cannot be accommodated within previous schemes of meaning. She furthermore argues that Scotland’s peculiar trauma is ongoing, for out of it “comes a productive irony that resists the lure of coherent memory and manages to critique the very notion of remembering” (23). As in her previous book, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford University Press, 2005), McCracken-Flesher develops a complex, intensively documented view of multiple

narrations that produce multiple imagined communities. But here those repetitions of a single tale dissect any stable or coherent image of the nation into monstrous fragments.

The violence of Burke's execution and of the huge (estimated at 20,000) Edinburgh crowd's reaction to it, vividly described in the opening of the second chapter, certainly suggests that the crime was received as a shocking, traumatizing event. Hanged to "cries of 'Burke him, Burke him, give him no rope,' and 'Wash blood from the land!' and dissected in front of large audiences," Burke's skin was then tanned and converted into "portable property" by using pieces of it to make various souvenirs such as wallets, one of which can be seen today in the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh (28-29). The trial and conviction of Burke—Hare got off by testifying against Burke—was supposed to "tranquillize the public mind" (30), but it did nothing of the sort. The newspapers were full of the story, or what they could get of it. Hare was gone, having fled the country, his wife had been stoned out of town, and Burke's Scottish mistress was also "harried" from Edinburgh (32). McCracken-Flesher emphasizes the public's fervent need to know, and yet at the same time, to have the scandal shut down, for it was recognized as a "moment of national embarrassment" (40). But Knox could not be made to speak about his part in the scandal—he simply continued his career as a popular teacher of anatomy in Edinburgh for some years—and so rumor flourished. Walter Scott also declined to speak publically to the issue. Instead, in his 1826 "Malachi Malagrowther" letters, he made use of the Burke and Hare scandal to represent his country under English legislation with the "painfully ugly" metaphor of "a subject in a common dissecting-room, left to the scalpel of the junior students, with the degrading inscription,—*Fiat experimentum in corpore vili* [Experiment on this

vile body/body of little worth]” (47). This was the beginning, McCracken-Flesher observes, of “the compulsion of repetition that is both symptom and site of trauma” (39).

In succeeding chapters, McCracken-Flesher focuses on moments in which the story of Burke and Hare became particularly alive in Scotland in literature and culture in general, considering the cultural anxieties or critiques that could be articulated through the tale (25). She begins with the analysis of three novels published in the late 1850s and early 1860s, all of which she sees as attempts to “locate the horrors of 1828 within knowable systems—to assemble data, order it, analyze it, categorize events, and thus reduce the scandal into a manageable space” (58). Alexander Leighton’s *The Court of Cacus* (1861), which she approaches first, attempts to write the Burke and Hare tale as a “a great moral lesson” (6), as one advertisement put it. In this novel, Burke is seen as an agent sent by God to scourge and scathe the nation. David Pae’s two novels, *Lucy*, *The Factory Girl* (1858-59) and *Mary Paterson* (1864), likewise promote religious themes—Pae himself was a millennialist, believing that the End would come in 1866—but also cater to the market for sensation. Mary Paterson, a “girl of the town,” was not only burked but pickled for months to “demonstrate perfect musculature at the appropriate time” (75). But McCracken-Flesher concludes that neither of the two novelists is able to “resolve” the story (22). In a metaphor that rivals Scott’s for ugliness, she writes “efforts to control it begin to show as a repetition compulsion that keeps open Edinburgh’s psychic wounds by scratching at their scabs” (88).

In the title chapter for the book, McCracken-Flesher reads Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) as dissecting the doctor, *Mr. Jekyll*, *Dr. Hyde* and Robert Knox. The chapter begins appropriately with discussion of Stevenson’s story, “The

Body Snatcher,” written in 1881 at the time he was unsuccessfully applying for an appointment as Professor of History and Constitutional Law at the University of Edinburgh. Although the pundits at Edinburgh were not impressed with the story as evidence of Stevenson’s qualifications in history and constitutional law, it is unquestionably a repetition of the Burke and Hare story, one in which the doctor himself is burked. Somewhat less plausible is McCracken-Flesher’s contention that *Jekyll and Hyde* also repeats the tale. In her reading, Knox and Jekyll can both be classed as philosophical doctors, though the earlier one is in philosophical anatomy and the later in philosophical chemistry. Jekyll’s alter ego Hyde is described as a “medical preparation,” a “decaying, dissected, injected, and preternaturally vivid body in an anatomist’s laboratory” (112). This seems an ingenious reading, and one that McCracken-Flesher herself immediately questions: “But is *Jekyll and Hyde* convincingly a response to the long-dead doctor?” (112). She concludes that it is, commenting that “*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* went some way to explicate and so to assuage the anxieties Knox provoked” (118).

In the last three chapters, McCracken-Flesher moves into the twentieth century and beyond, turning to theatre, films and festival presentations, as well as fictions that recast the trauma of Burke and Hare. In the fifth chapter, she argues that James Bridie, pen name for the physician Osborne Henry Mavor, for the first time represents Burke, Hare and Doctor Knox as men whose guilt is shared by all, thus “anatomizing the audience” (118). His play, *The Anatomist*, first staged in Glasgow (1930) and then Edinburgh (1931), magnifies Knox into a “superman” who spectacularizes his guilt and yet will not make a confession (26). Every other character in the play similarly performs a guilt that is never openly acknowledged, thus transforming spectators into participants in a communal guilt. McCracken-Flesher classes the

film, *The Body Snatcher* (1945), starring Boris Karloff, as a descendent of Bridie's play, arguing that the film also demonstrates that "discourse surrounding Doctor Knox had shifted to the issue of the complicit community and folded in the gazing audience" (147).

Until the twentieth century, women writers are notably absent from McCracken-Flesher's discussion of the repetitions of the Burke and Hare tale, suggesting that perhaps the tale should have been considered as the site for constitution of a peculiarly Scottish *masculine* trauma, rather than a Scottish *national* psychic malaise. Gladys Hastings Walton's play, "The Wolves of Tanner's Close or, The Crimes of Burke and Hare," produced in 1930/1954, is dismissed for its similarity to past melodramas. But beginning in the 1970s, the victims of the crime—12 out of the 16 of whom happened to be women—become the subject for recastings of the tale. And in this feminist moment, as McCracken-Flesher notes, it is perhaps not surprising that women writers should begin to appropriate the women victims of Burke and Hare. Yet among the women writers discussed, only Isobel Rae is even part Scottish—most are American or English—so they do not promote the notion of Burke and Hare as a specifically Scottish trauma. And the novel about women as victims discussed at length here is again by a man, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer* (1992).

Noting the ongoing re-production of Burke and Hare in the twenty-first century, McCracken-Flesher comments that "Beside the grand narrative of nostalgia that culminates in a Scottish Parliament runs a counter tale of violence, blame, and guilt," and that Scots can never quite shut the door on this counter tale (217, 232). Although *The Doctor Dissected* is an impressively thorough analytic survey of representations of Burke and Hare and Doctor Knox—

one that is bolstered by numerous illustrations drawn from contemporary prints, cartoons, newspapers and broadsides—its argument that the tale constitutes a distinctive national trauma is not backed by a convincing presentation of trauma theory. Repeated assertions of Scotland’s anxiety fall short of an in-depth analysis of it as symptom. This “autopsy” should be read not for its contribution to trauma theory but to Scottish studies, where it will stand as a foundational document of a Scottish literary and cultural phenomenon.

Biographical Notice:

Mary Wilson Carpenter is Professor Emerita from the Department of English at Queen’s University. She is the author of *Health, Medicine and Society in Victorian England* (ABC-CLIO, Praeger Imprint, 2010), *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality and Religion in the Victorian Market* (Ohio University Press, 2003), and *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1986). She has published articles on Victorian literature and medicine, and is currently working on a study of Margaret Mathewson, a Shetland woman who wrote a narrative sketch of her experience as a patient of Joseph Lister in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in 1877.