

An immigrant Irish contingent in the crowd at the execution of William Burke in 1829

Ken Donaldson, Jacqueline Cahif and Chris Henry

Surgeons Hall Museums, Nicholson St, Edinburgh

The deadly work of the serial killers William Burke and William Hare, immigrant Ulstermen who came to Scotland in 1818, is well known. When they were finally caught, having murdered 16 people and sold their bodies for dissection, Hare turned King's evidence and after a dramatic trial Burke was hung in January 1829. The notoriety of the case resulted in a crowd for Burke's public execution that is generally regarded as the largest that ever assembled in Edinburgh for a hanging, being estimated at between 25,000 and 35,000 people. A contemporary journal kept by a medical student named Thomas Hume recently came in to the hands of the Surgeons Museums in Edinburgh. It contains new information regarding a contingent of about 100 immigrant Irishmen who were present in front of the gallows in the lead-up to the execution, who then tried to prevent any non-Irish from approaching the area immediately in front of the gallows, a futile aim given the huge, rapidly accumulating mob. On being questioned by Hume on their motives they said it was bad enough for Burke, 'the poor devil', to be hanged but they feared he would be mocked and denigrated by the crowd and so they were there to keep the crowd away from him as much as they could. The Irish in Scotland at that time were a marginalised and ghettoised group who saw Burke as one of their own. Therefore they most likely saw it as their duty to at least try and protect him during his final and most harsh mistreatment by a society that had habitually mistreated him and them.

Background

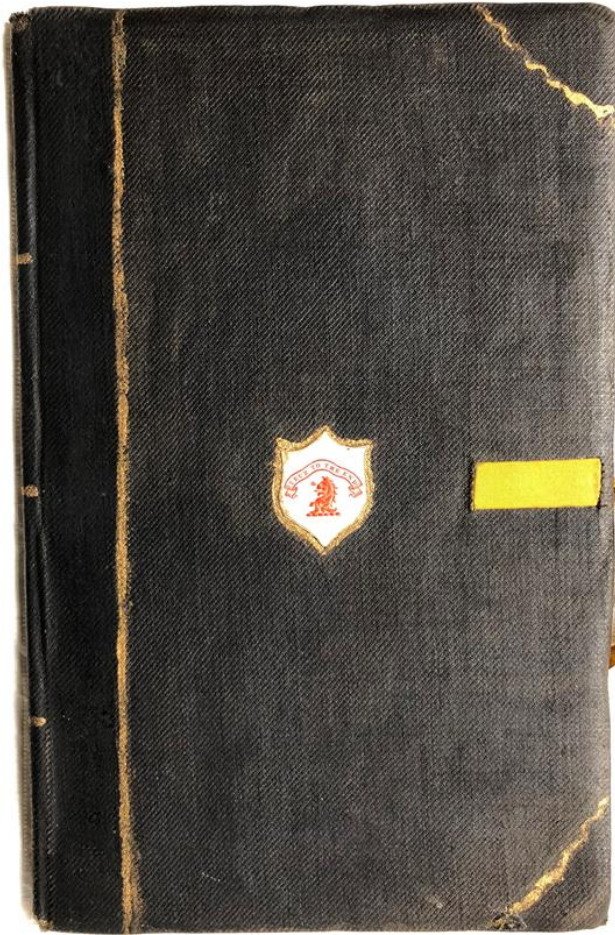
The trial and conviction of William Burke for the ‘West Port murders’ was a seminal moment in the history of anatomy in the UK, laying open to public scrutiny the vexing fact that there was a thriving trade in stolen bodies for anatomical dissection in the UK and leading to the enactment of the Anatomy Act. From Hare’s boarding house in Edinburgh’s West Port Burke and Hare killed 16 innocent people in Edinburgh in 1829 (1) and sold the bodies of their victims to Dr Robert Knox, the anatomist, for dissection in his private anatomy school in Surgeons Square, Edinburgh. Knox alone needed about 400 bodies each year to service his thriving anatomy school and there were several such anatomy schools operating in Edinburgh around the University’s own Medical School at this time. They usually received their bodies from grave robbers, but Burke and Hare found murder to be an alternative way to obtain fresh corpses.

The Irish origins of Burke and Hare

Burke and Hare were immigrant Ulstermen who came to Scotland in 1818, to work as navvies on the Union Canal that ran from Edinburgh to Falkirk. Due to a range of factors including an increasing Irish population, coupled with changes in the laws pertaining to subsistence farmers, rural Irish began to migrate seasonally to the UK in increasing numbers towards the end of the 18th century, to earn money. (2) About 100,000 Irish plied back and forth to the UK Mainland where urban growth and population expansion had required the agricultural industry to supply more produce, which in turn required more seasonal labour. Of the total seasonal migrants from Ireland to the Mainland at that time, about 8% or 8,000 came annually to Scotland and they were absent from Ireland for an average of 5 months of the year.

Not all of the Irish immigrants were temporary agricultural workers. From 1768 when the Bridgewater Canal was begun, well into the 20th century, Irishmen worked as navvies throughout the UK on public works like canals, roads and railways [16]. Living apart in their own temporary settlements close to their worksite the Irish Navvies were especially isolated so were aliens from their own country and aliens within their adopted one; as Sullivan puts it ‘The Irish were cast out even by the outcast navy: they were the minority within the minority,’ (3). It was this marginalised and close-knit minority, the Irish navvies, that Burke and Hare joined in 1828 when they both began work on the building of the Union Canal. It is not the purpose of this paper to repeat the facts of the Burke and Hare case, which are well-known, concerning the murders, Hare’s turning of Kings Evidence and walking free, Burke being tried for the murder of Mary Docherty and being found guilty and then being hanged on 28th January 1829. Rather, this paper concerns a journal covering this period, recently acquired by The Museums of the Royal College of Surgeons which contains new information regarding a contingent of immigrant Irishmen in the crowd at Burke’s hanging. As such it casts light on the nature of the immigrant Irish experience in Edinburgh at that time and how they viewed Burke. The journal (4) was hand-written by a medical student named Thomas Hume and is nominally titled ‘College Reminiscences: In which notice will be taken of Dr Knox, Sir Wm Ferguson, Dr Jeffrey, “Burke & Hare”, “Daft Jamie” & others:-¹’. The diary was gifted to the Museums of the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh in 2018.

¹ William Ferguson (later Sir William Ferguson) refers to one of Knox’s doorkeepers who dealt with the reception of corpses. Although corpses were normally supplied by grave robbers, Ferguson and two others were implicated if only by default, in knowingly receiving the freshly –murdered victims of Burke and Hare for dissection. Mr Jeffrey was a family friend of Hume’s and ‘Daft Jamie’ was James Wilson a physically and mentally abnormal individual who was a victim of Burke and Hare.



College-Reminiscences,
being a Chapter,
in the
Autobiography
of
Thomas Sturges,
paterfamilias

Entered at the Registration Office No.
109 Warrender Park Road, Edinburgh, for
"Home Consumption", this 22^d May
1888.

Figure 1 The journal of Thomas Hume

The execution of William Burke

A most interesting and as far as we know, unique observation within ‘College reminiscences’, concerns the makeup of the crowd attending the execution of William Burke and in particular the presence of Irishmen.

Burke was brought from the Calton Jail, Edinburgh’s main prison, to a temporary ‘lockup’ in Libberton Wynd on Tuesday 27th January 1829 and spent his last night there, with the hanging set for 08.00 on Wednesday 28th. Libberton Wynd, now a lost street, rose steeply from the Cowgate to meet the Lawnmarket at the present junction of George IV Bridge and the High Street, running in a line approximating the east side of George IV Bridge. A plaque on the wall of the French Institute, on its High Street wall, now marks the spot at the top of Libberton Wynd where the gallows was customarily assembled for executions at that time (5).

The crowd for Burke’s hanging represented the largest that had ever assembled in Edinburgh for a hanging, being reported by the Spectator as ‘Never before was such an assemblage seen’ (6). The number has been estimated at between 25,000 and 35,000 people (6;7). The general mood was buoyant with much cheering and a popular broadside sold for one penny described the crowd as ‘..coming from all places in the surrounding country..’ and that during the period when Burke was actually suspended and dying ‘..Every countenance wore the lively appearance of a gala day..’. (8).

All the windows in the Lawnmarket and High St. that afforded a good view of the gallows were crowded with people, the going rate for a good seat being 5-20 shillings, a considerable amount- £20 to £80 in modern money. The crowd was not homogeneous, particularly around the gallows themselves where 'police and 'patrols' made a space around the gallows free from spectators (7). Additionally due to the crush, few women were present near the gallows but farther back they were more equal in proportion to the male spectators. (9) .



William Burke cotemporary print

Hume's experience in the crowd at Burke's hanging

Hume relates in his journal (4) how he left his rooms in College St, a couple of blocks from the gallows, at 4.00 AM on the morning of the 28th for the hanging at 8.00 AM. On arriving he found few people there:-

'..Sure enough I arrived, in good time, to select a position anywhere I liked, there being hardly half a dozen people forward, & the workmen still busy finishing the erection of the Gallows with Candlelight the morning being pitch dark..'

Next he describes the entrance of Irishmen onto the scene

'The next arrival was a posse of Irishmen & their number was increased by successive detachments following hard on one another'

This 'phalanx' of Irishmen which Hume estimated to be around 100 did not have far to come since they almost certainly emanated from Edinburgh's immigrant Irish ghetto, 'Little Ireland' where Burke and Hare also lived. Since the heart of Little Ireland, the Cowgate, lay at the foot of Libberton Wynd, they had only to take the same route as Burke to quickly find themselves in the Lawnmarket, in front of the gallows. From this position, around the base of the gallows, they commenced to prevent any non-Irish from approaching the gallows.

'By the time Irishmen were pretty numerous & formed a dense cordon round the scaffold for whenever any townsmen or rather Scotsman came within a certain line, or boundary of the "sacred precincts" he was quietly but forcibly elbowed off again to a safe distance from the Gallows.'

Hume describes how he ingratiated himself with the Irishmen so that he could remain close to the front and he was accepted by them, one of them in particular, and indeed they protected him from the crush that was developing. Being thus in their trust, he asked one of them what they were trying to accomplish by their presence:-

'after a severe tussle & jostling back & fore in which a number of Scotsmen were again forced out to a respectable distance, Inquired what all this hubbub meant; on which, said he..'

In providing the Irishman's reply to his question, Hume writes in the voice of the Irishman, even to the extent of parodying his accent with the use of 'Ye' for you, 'Sur' for sir and 'daicint' for decent.

'Ye see sur we got notice that they meant to collect round the Scaffold, and by hooting & execrations give "him" (evading any mention of the name) as bad a time of it as they could; So as we thought it was bad enough for the poor Devil, as it was, we were determined to keep them at a 'daicint' distance.'

Clearly the Irishmen felt some sympathy for Burke whom they describe as ‘the poor Devil’, sufficient to wish to protect him from ‘they’, i.e. the locals who intended to collect around the scaffold to mock and barrack the condemned man. Hume says no more about the motives of the Irishmen, but describes how he attempted to ingratiate or ‘*moul in*’ with the Irishmen so he could remain close to the gallows while they ejected other Scotsmen from the proximity. He succeeded in this since, as the hour of the hanging approached and the crush intensified he became faint and exhausted and fearing for his life he :-

‘struggled up on to their (the Irishmen) shoulders, & here I rode as on the crest of some angry wave lashed into fury, for what appeared to me, a terribly long time, some half an hour or so, when at 8 o’clock previously, the Actors in the last scene of the horrible tragedy “mounted the stage”, after which all movement of the vast crowd was instantly staged’*

*My insertion

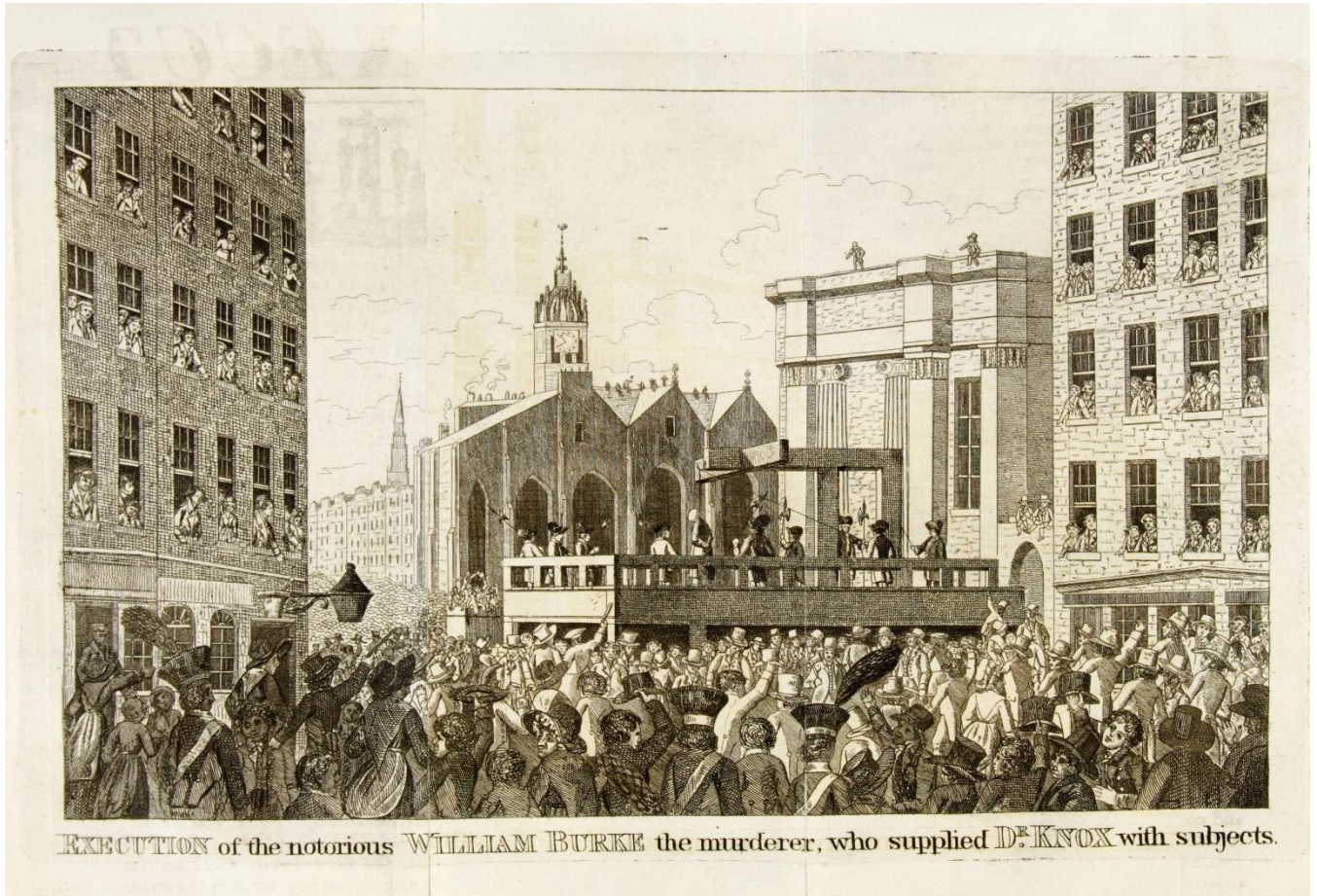
His gratitude to the Irishmen for saving him from being crushed was considerable and he attributed his rescue to the Irishman to whom he had spoken:-

‘I should mention that I ascribed the wonderful kindness of the Irishmen in allowing me to ride on their shoulders so long, to the influence received on my behalf by the young man, alluded to formerly, altho’ in the melleé I had lost sight of him, nor have I ever since seen him to render my thanks.’

The efforts of the Irishmen to protect Burke from the crowd were doomed to failure given the sheer size of the crowd that accumulated, intent on displaying their antipathy towards the condemned man, and which the Irishmen had no doubt underestimated. One hundred Irishmen were no match for upwards of 25,000 locals furiously intent on making their feelings known. All accounts of the hanging describe how ‘deafening’ (7) catcalls and jeering continued from the moment Burke appeared on the gallows until his demise. These generally took the form of shouts of ‘murderer! Burke him²! choke him!’ (6), ‘Hang Hare

² This refers to the colloquial expression of ‘Burkeing’ that was used to describe the method that Burke and Hare used to suffocate their victims.

too' 'Hang Knox' 'Burke the _____ do not waste rope on him.' (7) . Cruel humour was also evident in that '*Puns and jokes on the occasion were freely bandied about and produced bursts of laughter and merriment*' (7).



Contemporary print of the hanging of William Burke 1829

Notwithstanding the failure of their undertaking to keep the crowd at a distance and lessen Burke's torment at their hands, the Irishmen can have had no means of escape from the sheer weight of the crowd. They must have had to remain and witness close-up, the final humiliation then death of their compatriot.

Immigrant Irish in Scotland in the early 19th century

William Burke and William Hare were immigrant Ulster Catholics, a category that made up the majority of Irish immigrants who came to the UK mainland from Ireland in the first

decades of the nineteenth century [16]. Burke was born in County Tyrone and Hare most likely in County Armagh and they arrived independently in 1818 (1). Their arrival predated the great permanent exodus of Irish to the UK and worldwide which followed the great potato famine of 1845-1847 and which peaked around 1861, when the total number emigrating into the UK was 806,000 (10). Unlike the 8,000 or so Irish 'commuting' between Ireland and Scotland for seasonal agricultural work, Burke and Hare became permanent residents, working as 'navvies' on the Union Canal, where they met (1). The 31.5 miles of the Union Canal was constructed between Edinburgh and Falkirk between 1818 and 1822 to link Edinburgh with the Forth and Clyde canal (11). It employed navvies, many of whom were Irish. Conditions were hard for the Irish navvies, who built makeshift dwellings along the banks as the building of the canal extended westwards across West Lothian. These were described, in thinly- veiled racist language, as having dimensions which 'would not suffice for a pig-sty', were 'a picture of poverty' and 'composed 'entirely of rotten straw'. However, the reporter noted that 'the children appear frolicksome' and the adult residents 'contented and happy'. (12)

In choosing to remain in Scotland to work permanently, Burke and Hare joined a population of Irish immigrants who were neither integrated nor welcome in Edinburgh Society, nor society anywhere else in Britain. In Edinburgh, The Grassmarket, Kings Stables Road, Cowgate and the West Port, where Hare had his lodging house and where most of the murders were committed, comprised an Irish ghetto known as 'Little Ireland'. It had a population of 4,000 Irish in 1820 when Burke and Hare resided there rising to 14,000 by 1848 (13). The following rather harrowing description of other Irish Ghettos in the UK in the nineteenth century very likely also applied to Edinburgh's Little Ireland:-

'..The 'little Ireland' ghetto in Manchester, the London courts and rookeries, the Glasgow tenements, the Liverpool cellars and similar quarters in Cardiff, Bradford and other centres of British industry, displayed the full spectrum of social evils-

appalling over-crowding, little or no sanitation, open sewers and cesspools, unhealthy diet, inadequate clothing, vagrancy, disease, alcoholism and general squalor; a high quota of unemployed paupers, or of underemployed casual labourers; and a high incidence of casual violence very often provoked by drink..’ (10).

The immigrant Irish lived in ghettos because a number of factors placed them outside the society of the indigenous population causing them generally to be considered ‘undesirable’.

The Ulstermen were catholic in a society that was predominantly Scottish-protestant. In fact overt anti-Catholic feeling had been commonplace in Scotland reaching back to the reformation, and had ignited in the late 18th century in anti-catholic riots focused against Bishop Hay in Glasgow. This anti-Catholicism was fully institutionalised and even as late as 1923, the Church of Scotland published a pamphlet entitled ‘The Menace of the Irish race to our Scottish Nationality’. The Church of Scotland apologised for this in 2002. (14)

The immigrant Irish were poor and even worse they were considered ‘non-righteous poor’, being thought idle, uncivilised, drunken and generally undermining of the moral fibre of Scottish society (10;15). The stereotypical, if not downright racist nature of these attitudes is also evident in the content of a Glasgow newspapers at the time, which bemoaned:-

‘..the cheapness with which this Class of persons get over from Ireland to Scotland in the steam boats threaten[ing] to overwhelm the west of Scotland with the miserable beings in the lowest state of wretchedness and want..’ (16).

Against the charge of racism it need to be said that there is some evidence that the immigrant Irish were indeed more lawless ,as the statistics for England and Wales 1861-1901 show

‘the Irish –born were five times as likely to be committed to prison than the English’

(17)

Rate-payers in turn resented the heavy burden, as they saw it, of Irish paupers on their poor-rates, or as put by Neal with regard to the immigrant Irish in England, there was:-

'.. an outcry in the national and provincial press that English ratepayers were sinking under the burden of Irish pauperism..' (18) .

Prejudice against the Irish was overt and In 1852, a text on physiognomy, a discredited 'science' that sought to determine a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially the face, contained the following blatantly racist discussion of Irish physiognomy in comparison to that of dogs:-

.' Compare the Irish and the dog, in respect to barking, snarling, howling, begging, fawning, flattering, backbiting, quarrelling ...and whatever other traits you may discover in either, and you will be convinced that there is a wonderful resemblance..' (19) .

It was also rumoured that the Irish navvies, in a bid to secure employment, accepted lower wages than the other UK navvies (3) (19). This would have the effect of driving down wages in general and, true or false, earned the opprobrium of their fellow mainland navvies.

Balancing the host society's reluctance to accept the Irish, Tuathaig (10) has described *'the Irish reluctance to integrate'*. This derived from their belief that, while acknowledging that Britain was providing them with the means to live, the sense of gratitude for these benefits was largely nullified by their belief that it was Britain's misrule of Ireland which had caused them to be uprooted in the first instance.

The solidarity with Burke that the Irishmen who turned up at the hanging felt is perhaps understandable in the context of the general exclusion of the immigrant Irish from Scottish society, their demonization and ghettoization. Despite his undoubted crimes, his compatriots still regarded Burke as one of their own. Therefore they saw it as their duty to at least try and protect him during his final and most harsh mistreatment by a society that had habitually mistreated him and them. They did not appear to have an issue with Burke's death sentence and their aim was not to highlight a miscarriage of justice or anything of that nature.

However, their reference to him as 'poor Devil', a term most people would have reserved for the victims of Burke and Hare, reveals that they saw him as a victim. Few people other than

Irish immigrants themselves, would have held much sympathy for this point of view. However, as a marginalised, ghettoised group, they were inward looking and possessed the solidarity that such a situation inevitably produces amongst its members, struggling together against a common discriminatory majority. In the end they saw Burke simply as a 'poor Devil' and one of their own, undergoing an experience that was essentially dehumanising and terrifying and so sought to restore some common human 'daicincy' to his final minutes. It is not recorded if Burke was aware of their efforts on his behalf before he dropped the handkerchief, the pre-arranged signal to the hangman that his last prayer was complete and the trapdoor was released.

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