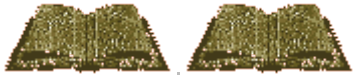
ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 5, NO. 2
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_005_no_002/reviews/pb/page004.html

Book Reviews: Popular Books Section





WELL-RESEARCHED

Burke and Hare, The Year of the Ghouls by Brian Bailey. Softcover, 6" x 9".
Mainstream Publishing, 7 Albany Street, Edinburgh EH1 3UG, , ; E-mail: enquiries@mainstreampublishing.com. Publication Date 2002. 224 pages, ISBN 1 84018 575 9. Price £9.99

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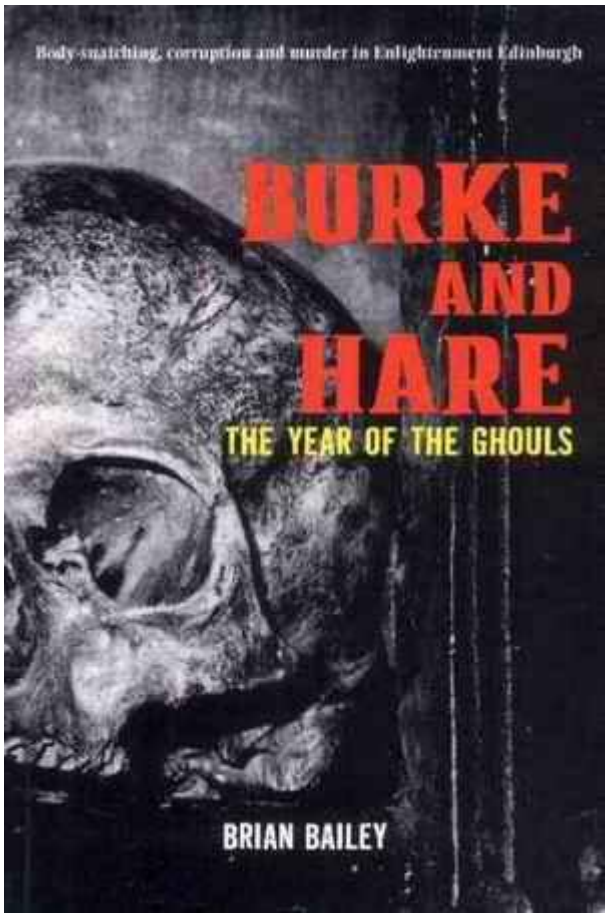

Brian Bailey, the author of this book, finds it 'surprising that the infamous Burke and Hare affair has not generated anything like the degree of interest and investigation that has been shown in recent years in Jack the Ripper'. Maybe it's because, unlike Jack the Ripper, the murderers were identified and justice meted out. Several books have also been published about this infamous duo before. So what is new and special about Bailey's Burke and Hare?

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Bailey promises the reader that his purpose 'is to present a comprehensive review of both the case itself and previous commentaries on it - to examine new evidence and correct the self-perpetuating errors.'. There is no doubt that there have been many myths and inaccuracies about this case. For example, most people believe that Burke and Hare were grave robbers. This strictly, is not correct.

In his introduction Bailey takes a pot shot at the medical profession when he refers to Harold Shipman and makes a sweeping statement 'whose crimes perpetuated the chillingly long and close links between murder and the medical profession.' Ouch!

...well-written, readable and a gripping account of the infamous Edinburgh duo...

In the opening chapter itself the author points his finger at the medical profession, particularly the Edinburgh establishment. Is this going to be the tone of the rest of the book?

Fortunately it is not.

Edinburgh and the Cowgate/Grassmarket

In the first two chapters Bailey lays down the socio-political background of Britain and Europe at that time. We get to see what Edinburgh was like in late Georgian Britain and in particular what the Cowgate/Grassmarket was like. We get to know about the Irish immigrant workers who worked on the canal constructions and made their home in the Cowgate. (Bailey compares the living conditions to that depicted in William Hogarth's "Gin Lane").

Then the sordid tale unfolds!

In the next few chapters the author not only gives us a blow-by-blow account of the activities of Messrs. B&H but also attempts to piece together the chronological sequence of the murders. The narrative is rather racy and gripping.

...Baily's descriptions of the Scottish Legal System, legal niceties, legal arguments and the trial evidence are, in particular, well written...

The 'Climax' is when the indifferent arm of the law is persuaded to descend on B&H. There then follows a detailed account of the trial and Burke's execution.

This is where most accounts of this infamous case ends but not Bailey's account. There are a few more chapters to go!

For a start we get to know that Burke was suffering from a rather nasty condition (I will not spoil the story for the reader by offering my own views!). We also want to know what happened to the women involved and of course what did Hare do with himself afterwards? What happened to Dr. Knox? Did the medical profession rally around him or did vultures descend on him? Were their copycat murders elsewhere in the country?

This is well-researched book complete with appendices consisting of transcripts of historical documents. Some of the 'self-perpetuating myths' have been knocked on the head. Throughout the book, at intervals, Bailey brings on Sir Walter Scott as a commentator.

Bailey's descriptions of the Scottish Legal System, legal niceties, legal arguments and the trial evidence are, in particular, well written, as are the descriptions of the state of the bodies. The forensic aspects are accurate as well. There are at least two references to cadavaric spasm and there is reference to the difficulties involved in extracting a body out of a tea chest after rigor mortis sets in! One also gets a glimpse of the cut-throatism that prevailed and prevails in the medical profession.

Unfortunately the book carries no illustrations. However it is a well written, readable and a gripping account of the infamous Edinburgh duo and at £9.99 is reasonably priced as well.



-Gyan Fernando
Dr. Gyan Fernando is a Forensic Pathologist in the West Country of England. He was formerly the Senior Lecturer in Forensic Medicine at the University of Edinburgh and knows the Cowgate, Bannerman's public house and its environs well!

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