

## Moments of Cultural Transition: As Mediaeval and Superstitious Scotland Meets The More Modern World

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ABSTRACT: The beautiful city of Edinburgh has a squalid past, one not disguised by its Enlightenment image and the fine university. Shock, violence, body-snatching and the occult were significant aspects of the city from c. 1828 to 1832. There are here treated several scholarly ‘fictions’ that expose that past in lurid fashion.

### *The Scottish Setting and an Uneasy ‘Enlightenment’ at a Peculiarly Significant Time and Place*

To readers across the world, Brian Ruckley has hitherto been known as a prose writer with a taste for ‘spiritual fantasy’, a sort of Scottish equivalent of the style of the Londoner, the remarkable Charles Williams (1886-1945)—as in his *Many Dimensions* (1931) or his history, *Witchcraft* (1941)—he being an earlier British writer of ‘Anglo-Catholic thrillers’, where the highly spiritual could, and did, mix with the demonic and the shocking. Much of that set of ‘novels’ was set in a nearly contemporary London, where the occult could still be summoned up to walk the land, despite the presence of the Scotland Yard heirs to the Bow Street runners, and where some lingering occult experimentations were deemed to be practised in an earlier 20th century Hampstead and in other parts of the English capital.

### *‘This Book Makes Liberal Use of Real History to Tell its Tale’*

At the beginning of the present work, much gratitude is expressed by Brian Ruckley to the Staff at the National Library of Scotland and at the Edinburgh City Archives, as well as his gratitude for the use of a probing and reflective thesis on Edinburgh’s police force in the first quarter of the

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This work is a set of reflections occasioned by reading Brian Ruckley, *The Edinburgh Dead* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2011). Soft covers. Pp. xix, 369, plus 32 pages of related ‘extras’. ISBN 978-1-8419-865-2.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Acknowledgements’, p. vii.

nineteenth century. And, as is added,<sup>2</sup> that research work was found to be ‘utterly fascinating’.

The Modern English cultural parallel to the work of Charles Williams, is an apposite one, since, in the present fiction, the current narrator has created a terrifying tale set in the ancient Scottish capital in the year 1828, at a time when: there were a strange series of almost occult and very easy links/ affinities with: the largely experimental medicine ‘teaching’ of that time via the means of public dissection of the corpses of the recently hanged; with the scholarly and antiquarian Scottish Institute; and with some dubious and surely occult, if not demonic use of arcane archaeology and ‘souveniring’ in the Eastern Mediterranean region—the last a form of willed demonic possession practised by the decadent and wealthy.

Significantly all of this was also deemed to have occurred in the year when the Burke and Hare body-providing crimes (these to facilitate public dissection in the medical colleges) would come into full and shocked public view. Further, the sort of criminality now told of in Edinburgh must remind us of the like activities which Henry Fielding, both as a magistrate and as a novelist of the picaresque, would explore so memorably in his *Jonathan Wyld* (1743) and which would lurk almost in sight of the London Law Courts. Arguably too, like activities had long continued in Scotland. In the case of the Scottish capital, Edinburgh, this brazen criminality persisted till a much later date, and it had been both more involved in the public presentation of ‘science’, as well as in the lives of criminals. And the northern city had also had an even more shocking squalor lurking in its Old Town, in the life of its prostitutes, and in the quite vicious ‘science’ was, seemingly, practised by the wealthy and dilettante figures in the somewhat sinister ‘Institute’, where the occult-seeking members were still having to be excluded from the ‘Institute’s’ ever more scholarly and thoughtful meetings and also from a place in their company.

*And so to, The Climactic Moment, 1828-1829*

The overall focus of the present tale is on these two—and dubiously meeting—interfaces, the criminal and the medical, in the Edinburgh of 1828 and 1829, something well caught in its motto (p. xi), containing a memorable quotation from the contemporary writer, Thomas Ireland Junior’s *West Port Murders* (1829), and beginning thus:

We have heard a great deal of late concerning ‘the march of the intellect’ . . . but we feel that it must be characterised by some deeper

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

and fouler blots than have attached to any that preceded it . . . it has darker shades and more appalling obscurities . . . and become empowered with newer and more malignant aspirations.

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The dramatic first chapter of the present free recension of history describes a ghastly public dissection as conducted by Professor Andrew Ure—that of the body of a recently hanged murderer, Matthew Clydesdale, and conducted most publically in a large hall within the University of Glasgow. As is observed in our text, the deceased had been ‘executed this very day, in accordance with the sentence passed upon him by the court’. Further cutting up of the body is then done by Professor Jeffrey, while an enigmatic Edinburgh man, visiting, and who looks on, is said to be accompanied by ‘my man Blegg’.

In the second chapter we are out in the streets of Edinburgh of 1828, near the timeless and lowering Castle, and so are mainly concerned with the cramped Old Town, its closes and tortuous wynds (p. 9), and the Cowgate, and then soon we move on to meet the strong and quietly efficient policeman, Adam Quire, and the nicely styled ‘Shake’, his assistant; and we are also to be aware of the wretched Irish labourers, often unemployed and starving, and whose fate it is to all too often be detained in the watch house, for further punishments. Our protagonist and someone who interprets so much for us, as we slowly realise, is the strong and silent Sergeant Quire, now aged 37, a veteran of the bloody brutality of the Battle of Waterloo (1815)<sup>3</sup> and a policeman since then, serving under James Robinson, his Superintendent, the latter a lost soul with little confidence and no sense of his duties, both of them having vague responsibilities for good order in the vicinity of the somewhat ghastly Royal Infirmary. In these and other passages, we are treated to the shocking memories of Quire, with obscene details of the battles he had survived, and of the shocking and bestial shambles that was the reality of the famed victory at Waterloo.

We are also made aware of the personality and dignity and kindness of the present incumbent of the Edinburgh Chair of Medical Jurisprudence, Robert Christison.<sup>4</sup> While we obtain details of the private life of Sergeant Adam Quire, and his association with one feisty but warm-hearted prostitute in a seedy part of the city, the emphasis when dealing with most of the cast of twilight people is one ever distinguishing as between the poor and victimised, and the wealthy, cynical and

<sup>3</sup> Other references made it all too clear that Wellesley-to-become-Wellington had always been associated with barbaric warfare, callousness, and almost total indifference to the fate of his own men, let alone the wretched enemy and the civilians in his path.

<sup>4</sup> See the reference, at the end of this critical response, to this honourable Professor of Medicine/ Surgery.

unscrupulous, where the greater the social responsibility, the greater the depravity, cruelty and cynicism.

All these matters are thrown into high relief in Chapter XI, 'The Antiquaries', when the same Sergeant of Police has to talk to one Macdonald, the curator of the Institute—or is this a somewhat cynical picture of the then Society of Antiquarians? There they have such things as a lock of hair reputed to have been cut from the head of a witch before she burned (p. 125), a set of keys once owned by the dubious official, Deacon Brodie', etc., etc., mostly 'minor relics of the darkest corners of Edinburgh's past', and, as the current curator, Macdonald, says—'interesting to a local historian of macabre bent, but not central to our collections.' For Macdonald is at the cusp, where one knows well the predilections of the Fellows, however much they may seem wretched and malign souvenirs of earlier squalor of mind and body.

And an aristocratic, if somewhat mysterious, collector of the present period, one Ruthven, is referred to, and also said to be

distantly descended from a notable family of dabblers in the arcane [who] in less enlightened time than our own, were drawn into alchemy and much darker acts. Delusional mystics, would be the current judgement, fortunate to have avoided the stake, and the fires of witch-hunters. (p. 125).

And we soon discover that there was a namesake of his, a John Ruthven of the sixteenth century, who had habitually carried about his person a bag filled with magical wards inscribed upon plaques of wood in Latin and Hebrew.

To guard against evil spirits, or some such.' 'He was executed as a conspirator against the Crown, so you may judge for yourself the merit of such precautions. (p. 126)

All this mass of value judgements and a definite questioning of so many of his 'betters' we glean from the remarks of the present Secretary figure, whose mix of anecdote and wisdom are savoured by the other wise man, the plain and honest veteran of Napoleon's ghastly slaughter fields, Adam Quire. Clearly the old and magical is still to be found in Edinburgh, and still indeed pitted against 'the power of rational intellect' (p. 127); and this more recent longing for the arcane is still remembered in the Institute as a sad/ lingering blot on its fine respect for the rational, the measured, and the scholarly.

At this stage there is introduced mention of another person, socially somewhere near Ruthven, and seemingly a man of greater intellect, sensitivity, and vastly more knowledge—with that realm of mysterious lore seemingly drawn from the east, since the/ his link with Egypt makes it clear that the demonic from the further corners of the lands of the Old Testament is somehow 'coming through' by means of the conduit of

Institute work in Edinburgh, the city of the Enlightenment. He is found to be an educated man, one Durand, a Fellow of the Institute of Sciences in Paris, and so described—

and with—so it seemed to me—in every case—a quite profound knowledge of the antiquities of the Levant, and Egypt. [For] He was a member of that expedition which accompanied Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. (p. 129).

While it is not possible to unravel now too much of the dramatic pursuit plot for a demonic spirit variously present and then taking refuge in the body of the reprieved body-snatcher, William Hare, the later parts of this tale are concerned with the shocking tale of the two real life Irishmen, William Burke and William Hare. Their acts become enmeshed in the black science which seems to have found its conduit to contemporary Edinburgh in the person of Ruthven and so to the release of the dark forces that he has been able to conjure up or activate in wicked men and even in one of the noble born women.

#### *Bodies Dead and Bodies Possessed*

Before 1832 there had been insufficient dead bodies legitimately available for the study and teaching of anatomy<sup>5</sup> in British medical schools. Thus we turn to William Burke (1792–28 January 1829)<sup>6</sup> who was born in the very west of County Tyrone, in Ulster. After trying his hand at various trades and serving as an officer's servant, he had left his family in Ireland, and emigrated to Scotland, working first as a navy for the Union Canal, and duly working as a weaver, baker and cobbler. His friend William Hare has a similar background. Their murders to provide suitable corpses are told in brief compass.

Even more appalling is the arrogance and indifference to the corpses provided to him as is shown by Dr Robert Knox, the anatomist, who practised his somewhat maniacal craft in Surgeons Square, and to whom Burke and Hare would sell their first victim. The Canongate setting, too, is powerfully evoked, as is the story that some of Knox's students had identified one of his corpses before he began its dissection, but this had been ignored by the doctor. Similarly squalid and macabre is the habit of

<sup>5</sup> Ironically much Scottish learning of anatomy had been 'in action' in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, when the vast majority of the surgeons and their mates were drawn from Scotland, with their job learned in action, or in the great Royal Naval Hospital adjacent to Portsmouth, Haslar, where so many of the maimed would be buried in the grounds, so that Haslar was long said to be the densest burial ground in Great Britain.

<sup>6</sup> A surprising amount of the detail of the real lives of both Burke and Hare, of the wretched poor is fitted into the plot, as we see over the shoulders of the protagonists. Included too is much detail of the Irish canal workers of the time, and of the slums that were their haunts, and the source of so many of their victims – all this is somehow fitted into the book, as is the strange and sweaty and crude style of the tenements in the wynds, the free use of alcohol, and the sheer squalor of the time.

storing bodies under beds, as well as the stench from these garrets of the unwashed. Even more germane to the plot is the matter of the immunity from prosecution offered to Hare, if he would confess and testify against Burke, who deceived a death sentence in December of 1828, and was duly hanged on 28th January, 1829.<sup>7</sup>

*The Eastern Occult and its Demonic Possession of the Wretched Hare*

In real life, soon after the hanging of Burke, Hare was released, and there were many tales of him—as a blind beggar—for example, but it is here that Ruckley becomes markedly subjective, and blends with Hare the demonic possession that has, seemingly, come from Egypt or further east. The activities then detailed of Dr Knox are deemed to be authentic, but the ‘eastern possession’ that has to be exorcised from Hare/ his seeming body, is sensational, and also reminding the reader of Charles Williams-like inhabitation of the mortal body by demonic forces. This is not so plausible so much as a dramatic and loathsome indication of the ways in which personal guilt, war, social squalor, pathetic ignorance, and demonic possession are deemed to have rubbed shoulders in the latter part of the enlightenment.

And, perforce, they will and do destroy all the weaker figures in the tale. This is well borne out in the person of Andrew Merrilees /Merry Andrew, as Ruckley observes in his addendum:<sup>8</sup>

Andrew Merrilees (Merry Andrew) was a real body snatcher, as were his cronies Spune and Mowdiewarp. (They all sound to be like refugees from *Gormenghast*.) They provided the anatomists of Edinburgh with a great many fresh corpses. They’re examples of what you ‘d call ‘the professional corpse-thieves: a criminal class that emerged to service the needs of the professors. Bizarrely, at least as many corpses were dug up and stolen by the anatomists themselves—or more often their over-enthusiastic and infatuated students.

While the purposes, satiric, or artistic, of Ruckley’s gripping style must be guessed at, he does tell us in the sequential documents, that his texts were ‘plucked from the real and true history of the city’. And he continues:

Burke and Hare killed for financial gain, in the ‘service’ of famed and ambitious scientists, preying on the vulnerable. When their misdeeds became known, the public uproar was pretty much unprecedented, and prefigures the kind of media-driven hysteria we see nowadays, including exclusive newspaper interviews, exhaustive reporting of every gory detail, public disorder, and so on.

<sup>7</sup> Much of the detail given in the text is on display at The Police Information Centre in Edinburgh’s Royal Mile. See above for the references to the research material utilised in the writing of this grand fable of the rawnes and the culture of Edinburgh.

<sup>8</sup> *The Edinburgh Dead: Who’s Really Real*.

His comments on the historic Dr Knox, are both enlightening and, surely, indicting of the time's other professional 'anatomists', and of the latter-day lords of popular [British] journalism:

Robert Knox is entirely real, and his appearance and demeanour are—as best I could manage—historically accurate. Self-important, abrasive, with only one good wey, and a collection of gruesome anatomical specimens...a remarkable oddity of the time: there were plenty of such private teachers, operating outside the established University—or any other institution—busily dissecting cadavers for the edification of paying students.

*Not a conclusion to This Fine Impressionistic and Brilliantly Exploratory Folk Text*

It will be obvious to readers that the somewhat speculative and fascinated reviewers have already—in a few short weeks—found this sprawling book *sui generis*, intriguing, memorable, and a gargantuan fable of post-mediaeval and Christianity-believing man's curiosity; the dubiousness of famous 'civilising' warfare so much vaunted by the victors; the seaminess of industrial age/urban 'culture'; and, equally intriguingly, a form of expose of the 'Enlightenment', that cultural moment which was not particularly enlightened for most of the people of the same age.

It is probably also a seeringly honest appraisal of the best and the worst in the Scottish character, quite apart from the fact that it will long stand as one of the great texts on the real life of the people left in the Old Town, and so far behind the elegance of the New Town of Edinburgh. Further, it is supported by brilliant photos on the web, and historical travelogues by a son of the city who has been away and come back to re-interpret his heritage. Thus it is also a haunting cultural text on their nation for all those who have but a drop of Scottish blood and the present writers certainly have such a lineage. Similarly it should speak powerfully to those who are products of the famed Scottish-style Universities of the Empire, notably those of Sydney, founded in the 1850s, and of Otago, in New Zealand, it founded in 1868.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps typically, the writer of this text has also said that, for him, the so interesting hero of the whole is the other famous doctor of the time, Robert Christison. We can do no better than quote Ruckley's October 31, 2011, piece on him:<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Pleasingly we can each claim such a first University, in southern New Zealand and in Australia, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.brianruckley.com/category/edinburgh-dead-photo-trailer/>> this posted on 31 October, 2011. There are also a few other pieces from the next few weeks.

He was one of the great pioneers of what nowadays we would probably call forensic medicine, of toxicology, and he was a perfect example, in so many ways, of the fruits of the inquiring, imaginative ambition that took hold of Edinburgh's thinkers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; he went after the secrets that the emerging scientific understanding of the human body unlocked, and applied them in the real world.

These remarks are, surely, in the spirit of the way in which the present book was constructed, and in which it should be read. Indeed, it shows us that imagination and folklore and popular history can open doors that would otherwise have remained shut. And by virtue of the various web extensions of the printed text, as well as the author's own superb photographs, the readers are taken in to the soul of a nation in a way that only the most recent media would have made possible for the reader sitting quietly in his study.

*And the Interfaces That We Have Been Presented With ?*

We had started our reflections with some cautious recollections of various London examples of the interfaces between the law and the criminal class—of the daily round and the occult—and will conclude with the personal observation that this book, a seeming thriller, has sought to exposed the soul of a nation, at a time of temptation, and at a moment when 'The Old Order Changeth'. Indeed, there are so many grand paradigms in the text that we can say, in all truth, that this is a form of national folklore, a window on/ entry point to the climacteric moments for Scottish man or woman, their heritage and their deepest identity. It transcends individuals, denominations, and the 'normal' range of antiquarian studies. Despite the careful eschewal of anything like Middle-earth, Tolkien has to come to mind in some of the grander conceptions that lie behind the simple plot framework of the basic text.

By brilliant photography and multiple foci in the electronic supplements—if the reader should so desire to follow them—the whole is now epic-time and place- made visual—a sort of equivalent of a filmic *Kalevala*, an *Odyssey*, or a *Lusiad*. This is praise indeed, and we are delighted to have an opportunity from the 'New World' to comment on this set of our ancestral race's yesterdays, a subtle and yet motif-rich amalgam that far transcends the sorts of mortal creations and mnemonics that are normally deemed the heritage of a people, proudly carried with them across the seas, and pondered on so far from their original time, and normal place of enactment.

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*Map of central Edinburgh, 1830, and, in particular, the Burying Ground, at the far left (behind the Castle).*

*A Supplement to the Above Edinburgh Pieces*

Ian Andrew Henderson, *The Town Below the Ground: Edinburgh's Legendary Underground City* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 2008). Pp. 172, plus 2. £7.99. ISBN 9781840182316. [First published in 1999 by Mainstream Publishing Company (Edinburgh) Ltd.]

This text is a startling one, concerned with an underground and near mythical place that has generated eerie legends known the world over, telling how their context in fact came about in the earlier centuries of the modern city of seeming space and great beauty.

Yet Edinburgh is also built on a high ridge of soft sandstone which could be dug into to produce an 'underground city'. For long this had not occurred, since hardship, English invasions and the occasional outbursts of the plague had kept the population down to an acceptable level and the city was one of sections called 'tenements' or 'enclosures'—called 'closes'—and adequate grass was there for grazing. However, the city began to increase in size and importance, and to attract the attention of the English, the national armies clashing at the Battle of Sark, in 1450, when the Scottish won.

This victory meant more danger and hence the decision by James II to build a defensive wall around the city, one running from the foot of the Castle Rock and encompassed the upper part of the Royal Mile— all of which made the city easier to defend, but it had limited the area into which a steadily rising population could expand. From about 1500 the city began to be covered by tall buildings known as 'lands' (now more commonly known as 'tenements'), growing to ten or eleven storeys. Further, it was possible to dig into the soft sandstone, the foundations of the tenements soon resembling a warren with cellar caves cut into the hillside of the Castle Rock. Yet these caves were dark, wet and cold—and the start of the underground city.

Another defeat at the hands of the English resulted in the enclosing of the Cowpastures and the building of the Flodden Wall, twenty-three feet in height, with military defences. The consequence of this enclosure was that the city itself was confined, with minimal external building, for more than 250 years, with the expansions being upwards, where possible, and, for the ever more numerous wretched poor, downwards into the dark, a place dank, diseased and sordid.

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The rest of the book consists of circumstantial accounts of the city's psychic presences—ones that will be all too familiar to those of Scottish blood—of tours of the darker parks of the city that soon become

uncanny, and so the account moves on to the sensations of fear that are whipped up in those who venture underground. Many of these more recent reports are to be associated with foreign backpackers, living there in wretched accommodation, and, as they are often hungry and tired, with greater sensitivity to 'atmosphere'.

Thus we move on to the collection of legends like those of 'The Imp', of Whistle Binkies, and something that, in 1955, was christened 'The South Bridge Entity' (p. 135), and so the tale moves to 'the City of the Dead', ever to be associated with the Greyfriars Cemetery. This place is treated in much the same fashion as in the last text, with briefer details of the 'Resurrection Men' and the 'mortislocks' cage-like devices intended to protect fresh corpses there from the would-be grave robbers. The account ends with an Appendix, pp. 157,ff. listing the paranormal occurrences in the South Bridge vaults from 1994 to 1996, the flickering lights, and the experiences of a coven of white witches. The whole is a form of analogue of the eighteenth century London prison record, so much of it focussed for us by the life and legal career of Henry Fielding.

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Very clearly all of this record is a manifestation of things Celtic which are both notorious and peculiarly indicative of the atmosphere of the old city of Edinburgh, as well as of the heritage of superstition that has accreted to that capital city. Of course, it all links with the earlier discussed text that would explore the peculiar manner of that place in the later 1820s.

Yet the greatest significance of all this writing for the Australian of today is the focus on some of the invisible luggage that so many Lowland Scots may well have brought to Australia in the 19th century. Certainly such tales are recalled in a number of the more Celtic regions of the eastern states.

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