

REVIEW

Deborah A. Symonds, *Notorious Murders, Black Lanterns, & Moveable Goods: The Transformation of Edinburgh's Underworld in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Akron: Akron University Press, 2006. ix + 180 pp. ISBN 1-93196827-6.

In 1828 William Burke and William Hare murdered 17 of the poor and dispossessed of Edinburgh's Old Town, and then sold their bodies to Dr. Robert Knox, an anatomist at the Edinburgh Medical School. The story of their crimes, for which Burke was hanged, have excited the imaginations of visitors to Edinburgh's Old Town for years. At the same time, the crimes of Burke and Hare have excited the imaginations of a great number of historians, and the actions and motives of the pair (and those of their wives, Helen McDougall and Lucky Log) have been more deeply and seriously considered. One of the most recent of these is *Notorious Murders, Black Lanterns, & Moveable Goods: The Transformation of Edinburgh's Underworld in the Early Nineteenth Century*, a new offering by Deborah A. Symonds. In *Notorious Murders*, Symonds uses the well-known murderous exploits of William Burke and William Hare in two ways, both as a backdrop to discuss and explore the seamy underworld of the city of Edinburgh, and as a way to chronicle the changes taking place in the types of, and reasons for, the crimes taking place in it during the early period of the nineteenth century.

While the case of Burke and Hare dominates the majority of the book (Chapter 1 is titled 'The Notorious Murders in the Westport in 1828', Chapter 3 'The Spectacular "Burke mania" Trial' and details of the crimes, the trial and its aftermath are dotted throughout the other three chapters) it would be a mistake to assume that this is just another book about the case of Burke and Hare. Rather Symonds has examined the court records of approximately 25 women and several men in addition to Burke and Hare, all of whom were indicted for theft, assault, murder,

and the sale of stolen goods in 1828 in Edinburgh's Old Town. As a result of this research, Symonds argues that that year offers many examples of entrepreneurial crime in Edinburgh's Old Town, particularly illustrating how this shadow economy both followed and sometimes led the capitalist transformation of the city. The prologue to *Notorious Murders*, for example, details the case of a trio of young thieves who ransacked a warehouse in a quest to find tea, but had to content themselves with the rather richer spoils of hams, double Gloucestershire cheeses, raisins, orange peel, figs, and candles one would expect to find in a world-class city instead. Later in the monograph, cases concerning women pretending to be prostitutes who lifted the watches of gentlemen waiting for coaches on the North Bridge, and cases concerning the theft of fine linens from washerwomen's houses are detailed, as is the selling of these items to shops and other middle men afterward.

Through the discussion of these crimes, Symonds reveals a shadow economy where the majority of all criminals and thieves practiced their trade not out of poverty and misery but because it was their trade. She also argues that the trade of thievery, far from being either static or a symptom of misery and sign of revolt, was a very lively economic sector, the freest market of all, and one that shifted and shadowed the larger legitimate economy. The most obvious example of this is Burke and Hare whose exploits Symonds weaves throughout the course of her monograph, interspersed with the stories of other less heinous criminals who nevertheless followed this shadow economy, demonstrating what was available to be stolen and the amounts of money the sale of these goods could bring. In the case of Burke and Hare, Symonds notes that Dr. Robert Knox, the Edinburgh Medical School anatomist to whom Burke and Hare sold their murdered lodgers and acquaintances, 'provided the "ready market" that lifted the four killers and their hired help above the usual run of petty thieves in the Old Town.' (p. 123) Knox typically provided a payment of eight or ten pounds per corpse, which was a better price than that which was usually received in exchange for the majority of the other stolen goods that were the staples of the shadow economy, such as shirts, watches, bed curtains and teaspoons. No wonder then, that Symonds cites evidence that Burke and Hare had plans to expand their 'business', culling the poor of Scotland and Ireland to feed the demand of the medical community for bodies.

The themes explored in *Notorious Murders* are a marked departure from Symonds' earlier work. An associate professor of history at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, Symonds' previous works have mostly dealt with the issue of women and crime in early modern Scotland, particularly her *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland*, published in 1997. What could have caused her to deviate so sharply from her previous interests? In the preface to *Notorious Murders*, Symonds remarks that 'This book began when I read William Roughead's *The Murders Companion*, because I wanted to read about nineteenth-century Edinburgh after working in earlier Scottish records for many years. [...] I finished Roughead in a few hours, and began making notes. I was not ready to leave the old alleys near the Grassmarket, nor the peddlers, street sweepers, or doctors at Surgeons' Hall.' (p. ix) The end result is an interesting, well-researched and entirely readable exploration of the seamy underworld of theft and crime operating in Edinburgh's Old Town in the early nineteenth century, which does well in pulling together a variety of secondary literature. Readers who find themselves intrigued by the questions Symonds raises about society's approach and reaction to crime will also appreciate the bibliography she has included at the end of her book. Given the combination of this bibliography, and Reynolds' treatment of the perennially interesting story of Burke and Hare, it is likely that after reading *Notorious Murders*, many of Symonds' readers will share her desire to linger a little longer in the nineteenth-century alleys Edinburgh's Grassmarket and Cowgate, albeit safely ensconced in a history book.

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