

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Burke: Now and Then** *by Janet Philp*

Paperback, 216 pages  
Anatomy Fundamentals  
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It is refreshing to come across an account of an infamous atrocity in Scottish history told from a totally new perspective. Burke and Hare murdered sixteen victims whose bodies were sold to the anatomy school of Dr Robert Knox, but the story has become shrouded in mythology and supposition. Much of the mystique originated from Burke's confessions in his cell – first to the authorities and then to the press – that came to be sensationalised at the time and ever since.

Surprising then, at first sight, that Janet Philp has opted to tell the story in the first person – from the perspective of one of the protagonists. By writing "Burke's" account, the author imparts the narrative with a keen eye for detail and brings alive the various characters involved, not least the unfortunate victims who met their fate at the killer's hands. She convincingly describes, through Burke's eyes, the Edinburgh background where the events took place. Any factual gaps in the story are filled with very plausible conjecture, all penned with a light touch and interspersed with humour. The device of using Burke as narrator pays off handsomely to fashion a vivid description of the affair.

The story-telling is backed up by a wealth of end-notes and references, which are part of the strength of the book. Many of these use primary sources from a variety of archives. Together, they account for sixty pages, attesting to the extensive research which underpins the book and enhances its academic standing. The footnotes in themselves provide valuable analysis and detailed discussion about much of the evidence.

What is there to criticise? Burke would certainly not have written with the fluency attributed to him in this book, but that does not detract from the credibility of Philp's version of events. The lack of an index, however, is at times frustrating.

This very readable book will be appreciated by all those interested in the West Port murders and in the history of crime in the name of anatomical advancement.

**Iain Macintyre**  
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