

# Burke and Hare – The West Port Murders

**Format:** Historical Crime Tv Series (4 Episodes)

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In 19th-century Edinburgh, as medical science races ahead of morality, two impoverished Irish immigrants — the opportunistic William Hare and the more hesitant William Burke — discover a gruesome path to profit: supplying fresh corpses to the esteemed Dr. Knox, a brilliant anatomist desperate to stay ahead of his rivals. What begins as an act of convenience quickly spirals into premeditated murder, as Hare pushes deeper into darkness while Burke clings to a crumbling conscience. Meanwhile, Knox's ambition blinds him to the origins of the bodies that fuel his fame, and local journalist Alastair Johnson, haunted by his mother's stolen corpse, begins to investigate the disturbing rise in fresh cadavers.

As the body count grows and loyalties fracture, tensions ignite between partners, families, and institutions. Burke and Hare's deadly enterprise begins to unravel under the weight of guilt, suspicion, and public outrage. Helen, Burke's partner, emerges as the moral compass he can no longer follow, while Margaret Hare reveals a chilling pragmatism. When a victim's murder is witnessed by a child, the conspiracy begins to collapse that will lead to a trial that grips the city. With reputations shattered and lives lost, Burke and Hare delivers a chilling exploration of complicity, ambition, and the price of progress — a true-crime saga where survival breeds monsters, and silence is deadlier than the blade.

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# Logline

*When two impoverished men in 1820s Edinburgh discover they can profit from selling corpses to an ambitious surgeon, a string of murders follows—pitting loyalty against conscience, and plunging them into a city where science, greed, and guilt collide with deadly consequences.*

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# Tone, Genre and Style

**Genre:** Historical Crime Thriller / Gothic Period Drama

**Tone:** Bleak, morally corrosive, and unsettling — laced with dark irony and creeping dread

**Visual Style:** Gritty, tactile realism rooted in early-19th-century Edinburgh — gaslit streets, cramped interiors, soot-stained textures, and candlelit shadows. Violence is intimate and unglamorous, framed observationally rather than sensationally, with an emphasis on poverty, decay, and moral claustrophobia.

**Comparable Films:** From Hell, The Witch, Calibre, Gangs of New York

**Burke and Hare** is a historical crime drama grounded in brutal social realism, blending true-crime horror with intimate character study. The tone is bleak, claustrophobic, and morally corrosive — steadily stripping away any sense of safety as desperation hardens into routine violence. Visually, the style embraces grimy period authenticity: gaslit streets, cramped lodgings, flickering candlelight, and soot-stained interiors that press in on the characters, reflecting a world where poverty and opportunity coexist in the same shadow. Genre-wise, it draws from gothic crime and historical thriller traditions, but rather than centring mystery or spectacle, the tension arises from inevitability — where economic survival erodes conscience, murder becomes transactional, and ordinary men descend into monstrosity not through madness, but necessity.

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# Themes

**Poverty as Catalyst** – Economic desperation drives moral collapse and rationalises violence.

**Moral Erosion** – Small compromises accumulate until brutality becomes routine.

**Survival vs. Humanity** – Staying alive demands choices that strip away compassion.

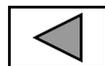
**Exploitation of the Vulnerable** – Society's forgotten become commodities in a corrupt system.

**Respectability and Hypocrisy** – Institutions profit from atrocity while maintaining moral distance.

**Science Without Ethics** – Progress advances through wilful blindness and tacit approval.

**Violence as Transaction** – Murder is reduced to labour, payment, and supply.

**Guilt and Denial** – Conscience is silenced through repetition, alcohol, and shared blame.



# The Characters

**William Hare** – Volatile, opportunistic, and amoral, Hare is the engine of escalation. Driven by desperation and resentment, he crosses moral lines with ease, viewing violence as a practical solution rather than a transgression. His lack of empathy makes him dangerous—and ultimately uncontrollable.

**William Burke** – More conflicted and emotionally dependent than Hare, Burke is a follower who mistakes loyalty for survival. He possesses flashes of conscience, but fear, love, and inertia keep him complicit as atrocity becomes routine.

**Helen McDougal** – Burke’s partner and the story’s moral pressure point, Helen is deeply uneasy with the violence but trapped by love and circumstance. Her inner conflict exposes the cost of complicity and the toll of living alongside evil without the power to stop it.

**Margaret Hare** – Pragmatic, hardened, and fiercely self-interested, Margaret is less shocked by crime than by poverty. She views murder as commerce and insists on her share, embodying survival stripped of sentimentality.

**Dr. Robert Knox** – A brilliant, arrogant anatomist whose ambition eclipses his ethics. Knox never kills, but his demand for bodies and deliberate ignorance make him a silent architect of horror—proof that respectability can coexist with profound moral failure.

**Archibald Johnson** – A determined journalist guided by personal loss and moral outrage. Johnson represents conscience and accountability, pursuing truth in a city numbed by corruption and fear, even as institutions resist exposure.

**Mary Paterson** – Young, trusting, and hopeful, Mary becomes a tragic symbol of innocence destroyed. Her vulnerability underscores the predatory nature of Burke and Hare’s crimes and marks a turning point in their descent.

**Janet Brown** – A working-class woman caught on the margins of the city, Janet’s fate reflects how easily the powerless are exploited. She embodies the anonymity of victims erased by poverty and indifference.

**Dapper** – A streetwise associate hovering at the edges of the underworld, Dapper survives by staying useful and silent. He reflects the ecosystem of small-time opportunists who enable larger crimes without direct participation.

**David Paterson** – Dr. Knox’s intermediary and facilitator, David bridges the criminal and academic worlds. Nervous but complicit, he illustrates how bureaucracy and distance soften moral responsibility.

**Mrs. Commarty** – A neighbour and quiet observer, Mrs. Commarty represents communal denial. Her selective blindness reflects a society that senses wrongdoing but chooses safety over intervention.

**Sergeant Fisher** – A formidable, no-nonsense lawman with the bearing of an ex-soldier, Fisher commands respect the moment he enters a room. Physically imposing and direct, he does not tolerate evasion or deference games, whether dealing with street criminals or esteemed figures like Dr Knox. He believes order is maintained through strength, discipline, and decisive action, and he is willing to use violence when necessary. Fisher represents blunt, old-world justice — effective on the streets, but operating within a system that is only just beginning to grasp the scale and subtlety of the crimes unfolding.

**Andrew Merrilees** – A ruthless and charismatic gang leader operating within Edinburgh’s criminal underbelly, Andrew Merrilees thrives on intimidation and control. Pragmatic rather than ideological, he views violence and exploitation as currency, using fear to maintain order among desperate men. His world mirrors Burke and Hare’s — survival-first, morality-last — but on a broader scale, illustrating how organised criminal power flourishes in the same social decay that enables their crimes.



# 3-Act Structure Summary

## Act I – Desperation and Opportunity

Burke and Hare are introduced as marginalised labourers in a city choking on poverty and prejudice. When a lodger dies and they discover the University's appetite for bodies, desperation mutates into opportunity — and the first moral line is crossed.

## Act II – Profit and Degradation

What begins as opportunism becomes routine murder as money flows and conscience erodes. The circle of complicity widens, violence escalates, and public respectability shields private atrocity, while suspicion quietly gathers around the lodgings.

## Act III – Exposure and Collapse

As victims mount and mistakes multiply, witnesses emerge and the protection of silence fractures. Authority closes in, alliances break under pressure, and the enterprise collapses — leaving survival to be decided by betrayal, testimony, and consequence.



# Mood Board



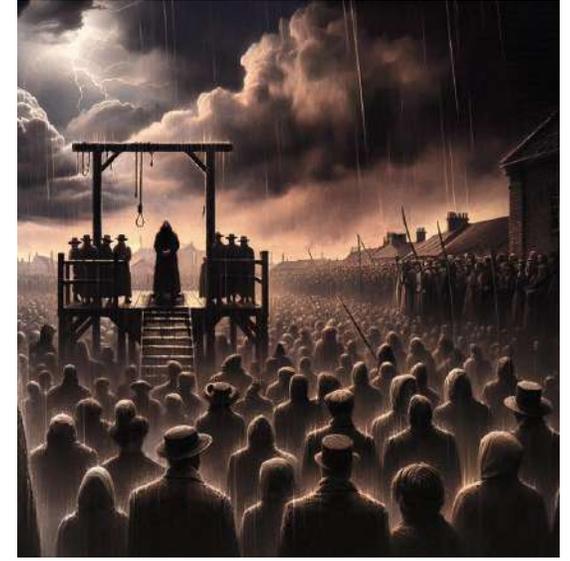
Sir Walter Scott meets the Knox sisters at a charity event



Daft Jamie is enticed with an apple by Margaret Hare



Sgt. Fisher confronts Hare



Burke is hanged in front of 30000 people



## Why This Film?

*Burke and Hare* confronts a true crime that feels disturbingly contemporary — a story of how economic desperation, institutional hypocrisy, and unchecked ambition allow violence to flourish in plain sight. Set against the stark realities of early-19th-century Edinburgh, the film exposes how progress in science and respectability was built on the exploitation of the powerless, protected by wilful blindness and social hierarchy. At a time when audiences are drawn to morally complex true stories and reckonings with systemic failure, *Burke and Hare* offers a visceral, character-driven exploration of how ordinary people become complicit in atrocity — and how justice, when it finally arrives, is shaped as much by power as by truth.

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# Burke and Hare – The West Port Murders

**Written By:** Stephen Hall

**Status:** Complete Feature Screenplay – Seeking Representation / Development

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*“We are drawn into the two different worlds of privilege and the other of the lower class and want to witness what happens as these two worlds begin to merge.”*

**Screen Craft**

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# The Writer

I started writing my first screenplay in December 2021 based on the true story: Burke and Hare – The West Port Murders then in September 2023, I began the first draft of Inside Reach, a story and genre very different from my first piece of work.

By August 2024 I was ready to return to this second screenplay and complete the first draft. These two projects and the awards culminated from the first, has encouraged me to continue with this extremely fulfilling interest in screenwriting and there are at least a further three stories lined up for the future.

At the time of writing, I have completed the first draft of my third script, another full-length feature called Greatrex.

*Stephen Hall*

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