HISTORY OF THE EVENTS WHICH LED TO THE PASSING OF THE BRITISH ANATOMY ACT, A.D. 1832

By D. Fraser Harris, M.D., (Glasgow), D.Sc.

Professor of Physiology, Dalhousie University

THE series of dreadful murders by the miscreants Burke and Hare in the West Port of Edinburgh in 1828 created so much alarm in the public mind that the government was compelled to introduce legislation to enable teachers of anatomy to obtain supplies for their dissecting rooms by a method other than that of indebtedness to the body snatchers. By an old Act of George II, the only legal supply of subjects was that of the bodies of murderers who had been sentenced to be hanged and dissected. This source was of course far too limited. The real source was the activities of the body snatchers or riflers of graves, "resurrectionists" as they were called, ruffians of the type of "Jerry Cruncher" in the "Tale of Two Cities". The anatomists detested these men and their methods, and cried out for legislation, but the functional mental inertia of the government prevented anything being done. The discovery that no less than sixteen persons had been suffocated by two blackguards, William Burke and William Hare, during eleven months, and that the bodies had been sold to the Edinburgh anatomist, Dr. Robert Knox, who "asked no questions", influenced the public so unfavourably that something had to be done.

The trial of Burke and his mistress Macdougall on Christmas Eve, 1828, at the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh created an unprecedented sensation. Fifty-five witnesses were called, the evidence of the Hares who had "turned" on their accomplices was allowed; and the two famous lawyers, afterwards Lord Cockburn and Lord Jeffrey, were engaged on the case. By Cockburn's eloquence, the woman Macdougall was acquitted.

The execution of Burke at eight in the morning of January 28th, 1829, which took place outside the old Tolbooth Prison

Abstract of Lecture.

("Heart of Midlothian") was witnessed by about 20,000 people, including some blind men! The medico-legal aspects of the trial were interesting. The evidence given by Dr. (afterwards Sir Robert Christison, professor of therapeutics, on the post-mortem appearances after asphyxia were of considerable value. The sentence to "be hanged and dissected" was faithfully carried out; the corpse was dissected in the college by Monro tertius, who exposed the brain; phrenologists, sculptors and metaphysicians went to view it. Sir Walter Scott was reported by the newspapers to have been there, but he states in one of his letters that he was not, neither did he go to see Burke's house.

Burke's skeleton was prepared as an osteological specimen, and is still in the anatomical museum at Edinburgh University; portions of his skin having been tanned, were made into tobacco pouches.

Burke gave a new verb to our language. "Burking" and to "burke" were used as early as 1832 by Lord Macaulay during the debate on the Anatomy Bill in the House of Commons. Lord Macaulay, who was strongly in favour of the bill, pointed out that it protected the poor from being burked; a furious speaker having tried to prove that the bill would encourage crime.

The new act provided that the bodies of persons dying in public institutions might, if unclaimed by their relatives, be dissected by students under properly licensed teachers of anatomy. The bodies after dissection were to be buried. The passage of the act virtually made an end of body snatching. The Edinburgh murders have their place in literature, for they are mentioned by Sir Walter Scott, J. G. Lockhart, De Quincy, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Archbishop Tait, Robert Louis Stevenson, Professor Saintsbury, and Professor John Wilson.