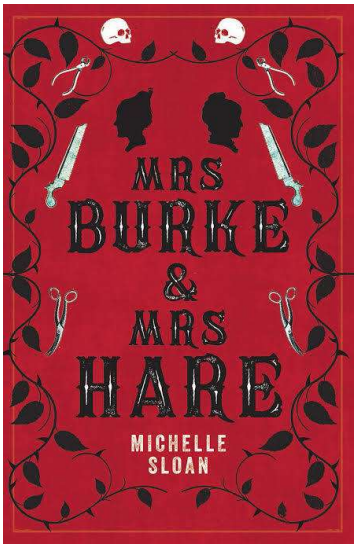
‘Mrs Burke and Mrs Hare’, by Michelle Sloan

Review by Martyn Colebrook



There is a growing contemporary trend for novels of critical acclaim and historic incidents of notoriety to be retold or rewritten through the lens of the associated women in the narrative: *Call Me Ishmaelle* is a gender-swap Moby Dick, *Wifedom* tells the unsung work of George Orwell’s wife and now Michelle Sloan has taken up the baton with her account of Lucky Burke and Nelly Hare, the wives of the Edinburgh grave robbers.

The structure of the novel is two parts. In the first, the reader is introduced to Helen Macdougal and Lucky Hare, setting the scene for the machinations and power dynamics which underpin the activities of the better-known men. In the second part, erstwhile cub reporter Duncan Fletcher, based at the *Caledonian Mercury*, leaves his home and travels to London in search of the ‘women of Burke and Hare’.

The prologue sees a young boy commemorating the deaths of those who met their demise at the hands of the body snatchers. For the reader who is unaware of the historic context of the novel, these opening lines highlight the sanctity and remembrance which is afforded to seventeen victims: ‘The boy carefully packs seventeen tiny coffins into the basket, making sure to handle them with the

reverence they deserve' (8). For the violations practiced against their bodies after burial or, indeed, the prevention of a burial the young boy offers a way of ensuring the victims are not forgotten.

Sloan is a native of the city and her eye for the cityscape and atmosphere shows through on many an occasion. One compelling instance in the prologue sets the tone for the remainder of this dark and dreich plot: 'There's a murky filth about the streets of Edinburgh's Old Town today. The rain is pelting down; everything is dark and greasy.' (8) Redolent with death and decay, the symbols of of Victoriana and Gothic hang over the inhabitants and the predatory individuals among them seeking to turn bodies into capital.

Part 1 begins with Margaret 'Lucky' Laird, a woman working among navvies on the Union Canal. She is volatile, punitive and possesses the strength to inflict serious injury on her fellow workers should they commit the slightest perceived infraction of her reputation. The two men who are tasked with escorting Margaret into Edinburgh after she is sacked for nearly killing another navvy are offered a drink by her as thanks for preventing her from 'swinging' – as they enter the tavern at her instruction Margaret quips: 'Burke and Hare. […[A fine pair of gents, so you are' (16).

We are then introduced to Helen McDougal, girlfriend of William Burke, who peddles her wares around Cowgate and Candlemaker Row. A 'thin, birdlike' lady, she is baffled to see him leaving the White Hart Inn with a woman she does not know. Over the course of the interaction between the group, it becomes apparent that upon discovering Helen has sold her wares for the day, Burke seizes the opportunity to put her earnings into consuming more drink back at the lodging house where Laird lives. The dynamic between the domineering Burke and friends and the meeker McDougal is a recurrent theme in this narrative with Helen repeatedly needing to defend the quality of their lodgings at 'The Beggars Hotel' and their general lifestyle in the face of scathing comments from others. By contrast the spendthrift Burke is the less cautious and more impulsive of the two – lacking commercial sense or any desire for security.

The first death unintentionally provides the motivation for the acts that are perpetuated in the remainder of the novel. Lucky's alcoholic and abusive husband, John Logue, who attacks her and who Lucky then burns on the neck with a 'scalding pipe bowl' (26). His demise, principally from the festering wound,

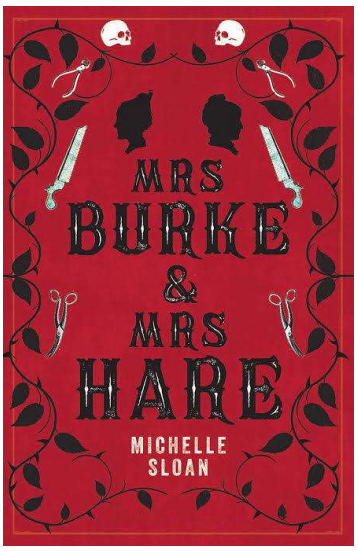
leads her to a discussion with a gravedigger who explains that the bodies snatched from the graveyard can be sold for eight pounds – more than her monthly wage. Lucky's societal perspective informs her decision making and her analysis of the growing disparities in socio-economic opportunity is telling: 'She had rarely considered her own death or indeed what lies beyond. If in life there was such a divide between the rich and the poor, then who was to say it wouldn't be the same in death.' (28) If the same gaps between wealth and poverty exist in death as in life, she ought to make the most of the chances which are presented to make money and secure a more comfortable life, even if that involves contributing to others' deaths. As Duncan Fletcher's mother later remarks '[t]hey were ruthless sorts who would do whatever they had to do to better their lives' (171) and those activities are seemingly without boundaries.

From this point onwards, Part I sees Lucky become the driving force behind procuring and murdering the vulnerable or socially downtrodden in order for Burke and Hare to deliver the fresh cadavers to Robert Knox at the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. She overwhelms the meek McDonald, becoming the proverbial *femme fatale* and mocks Burke's reluctance to involve himself in 'low work' (38) and accuses him of being afraid of 'ghosties and ghouls' (38).

Part II transports the reader to Edinburgh, 1850, where Duncan Fletcher is suffering nightmares caused by his encounter with 'Burke's bones' (167) at the Edinburgh School of Medicine. Each time he sees Burke's 'fixed smile like a skull' (167) and 'two faceless women' who encourage the body snatcher (167). Fletcher's father, also a newspaperman, intimates his conviction that the women who walked free had 'guilt […] buried deep in that story' (170) and this prompts Duncan to start to explore and interview the women associated with Burke and Hare. What emerges is a trail that leads to the darkest denizens of Victorian Whitechapel.

his is a memorable novel for the all the right reasons and is deserving of the plaudits it garners from critics. Sloan is clearly a talented writer and blends strong attention to detail with an aptitude for combining history with reimagination. There are many tales to tell of the women behind the notorious men and I suspect this will not be the last we see from her.

Mrs Burke and Mrs Hare is published by Polygon.



There is a growing contemporary trend for novels of critical acclaim and historic incidents of notoriety to be retold or rewritten through the lens of the associated women in the narrative: *Call Me Ishmaelle* is a gender-swap Moby Dick, *Wifedom* tells the unsung work of George Orwell's wife and now Michelle Sloan has taken up the baton with her account of Lucky Burke and Nelly Hare, the wives of the Edinburgh grave robbers.

The structure of the novel is two parts. In the first, the reader is introduced to Helen Macdougal and Lucky Hare, setting the scene for the machinations and power dynamics which underpin the activities of the better-known men. In the second part, erstwhile cub reporter Duncan Fletcher, based at the *Caledonian Mercury*, leaves his home and travels to London in search of the 'women of Burke and Hare'.

The prologue sees a young boy commemorating the deaths of those who met their demise at the hands of the body snatchers. For the reader who is unaware of the historic context of the novel, these opening lines highlight the sanctity and remembrance which is afforded to seventeen victims: 'The boy carefully packs seventeen tiny coffins into the basket, making sure to handle them with the reverence they deserve' (8). For the violations practiced against their bodies after burial or, indeed, the prevention of a burial the young boy offers a way of ensuring the victims are not forgotten.

Sloan is a native of the city and her eye for the cityscape and atmosphere shows through on many an occasion. One compelling instance in the prologue sets the tone for the remainder of this dark and dreich plot: 'There's a murky filth about the streets of Edinburgh's Old Town today. The rain is pelting down; everything is

dark and greasy.' (8) Redolent with death and decay, the symbols of of Victoriana and Gothic hang over the inhabitants and the predatory individuals among them seeking to turn bodies into capital.

Part 1 begins with Margaret 'Lucky' Laird, a woman working among navvies on the Union Canal. She is volatile, punitive and possesses the strength to inflict serious injury on her fellow workers should they commit the slightest perceived infraction of her reputation. The two men who are tasked with escorting Margaret into Edinburgh after she is sacked for nearly killing another navvy are offered a drink by her as thanks for preventing her from 'swinging' – as they enter the tavern at her instruction Margaret quips: 'Burke and Hare. […[A fine pair of gents, so you are' (16).

We are then introduced to Helen McDougal, girlfriend of William Burke, who peddles her wares around Cowgate and Candlemaker Row. A 'thin, birdlike' lady, she is baffled to see him leaving the White Hart Inn with a woman she does not know. Over the course of the interaction between the group, it becomes apparent that upon discovering Helen has sold her wares for the day, Burke seizes the opportunity to put her earnings into consuming more drink back at the lodging house where Laird lives. The dynamic between the domineering Burke and friends and the meeker McDougal is a recurrent theme in this narrative with Helen repeatedly needing to defend the quality of their lodgings at 'The Beggars Hotel' and their general lifestyle in the face of scathing comments from others. By contrast the spendthrift Burke is the less cautious and more impulsive of the two – lacking commercial sense or any desire for security.

The first death unintentionally provides the motivation for the acts that are perpetuated in the remainder of the novel. Lucky's alcoholic and abusive husband, John Logue, who attacks her and who Lucky then burns on the neck with a 'scalding pipe bowl' (26). His demise, principally from the festering wound, leads her to a discussion with a gravedigger who explains that the bodies snatched from the graveyard can be sold for eight pounds – more than her monthly wage. Lucky's societal perspective informs her decision making and her analysis of the growing disparities in socio-economic opportunity is telling: 'She had rarely considered her own death or indeed what lies beyond. If in life there was such a divide between the rich and the poor, then who was to say it wouldn't be the same in death.' (28) If the same gaps between wealth and poverty exist in death as in life, she ought to make the most of the chances which are presented to

make money and secure a more comfortable life, even if that involves contributing to others' deaths. As Duncan Fletcher's mother later remarks '[t]hey were ruthless sorts who would do whatever they had to do to better their lives' (171) and those activities are seemingly without boundaries.

From this point onwards, Part I sees Lucky become the driving force behind procuring and murdering the vulnerable or socially downtrodden in order for Burke and Hare to deliver the fresh cadavers to Robert Knox at the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. She overwhelms the meek McDonald, becoming the proverbial *femme fatale* and mocks Burke's reluctance to involve himself in 'low work' (38) and accuses him of being afraid of 'ghosties and ghouls' (38).

Part II transports the reader to Edinburgh, 1850, where Duncan Fletcher is suffering nightmares caused by his encounter with 'Burke's bones' (167) at the Edinburgh School of Medicine. Each time he sees Burke's 'fixed smile like a skull' (167) and 'two faceless women' who encourage the body snatcher (167). Fletcher's father, also a newspaperman, intimates his conviction that the women who walked free had 'guilt […] buried deep in that story' (170) and this prompts Duncan to start to explore and interview the women associated with Burke and Hare. What emerges is a trail that leads to the darkest denizens of Victorian Whitechapel.

his is a memorable novel for the all the right reasons and is deserving of the plaudits it garners from critics. Sloan is clearly a talented writer and blends strong attention to detail with an aptitude for combining history with reimagination. There are many tales to tell of the women behind the notorious men and I suspect this will not be the last we see from her.

Mrs Burke and Mrs Hare is published by Polygon.

(c) The Bottle Imp