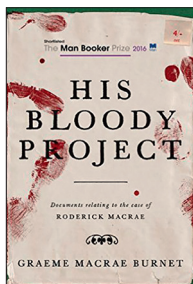


# Out of Hours Books

## His Bloody Project. Documents Relating to the Case of Roderick Macrae Graeme Macrae Burnet

Contraband, 2015, PB, 288pp, £8.99, 978-1910192146



### MAD OR BAD?

This well-imagined account of a very bloody project indeed, executed in a remote crofting community in Wester Ross in 1869, was a surprise shortlisted contender for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. It is published by Contraband, a new Scottish imprint for crime and thrillers, but *His Bloody Project* is more a novel about a crime than a crime novel. We know right away that Roddy Macrae committed three brutal murders in Culduie, a tiny village near Applecross, and are invited to share the perplexities, ambiguities, and prejudices that might have both precipitated and mitigated his crimes.

The year 1869 is, after all, only a quarter of a century after the formulation of the McNaughton rules — the test for criminal insanity — devised after the Scotsman Daniel McNaughton assassinated Edward Drummond, mistakenly believing him to

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have been the English prime minister, Robert Peel. These rules still form the basis of a legal defence against criminal charges on the grounds of insanity; they have been heavily criticised, but the law has not been changed.

The question of Roddy’s sanity is at the absolute centre of the book, but Macrae weaves in a number of other important strands. These include the perceptions of fatalism and predestination among the peasant community, unbending Victorian religious and societal prejudices, the Orwellian ascendancy of the land-owning classes, and its Kafka-esque consequences. When Roddy’s father asks to see the regulations under which their tenancies were governed, the Factor replies that, ‘a person wishing to consult the regulations could only wish to do so in order to test the limits of the misdemeanours he might commit’. Perhaps of the greatest importance, and a foil to the callous determinism of the odious criminal

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anthropologist, James Bruce Thompson (who really did exist), is Roddy’s sister’s connection to the Other World, which has momentous consequences.

After completing his novel Burnet discovered that a similarly brutal triple murder had taken place in 1857 in Benbecula, away to the west in the Outer Hebrides. The murderer, Angus Macphee, was, by extraordinary coincidence, imprisoned under the supervision of James Bruce Thompson.

Burnet has an excellent ear for dialogue, and the courtroom exchanges are perfectly pitched. His ability to sustain a sense of time and place is on a par with both Peter Ackroyd and Peter Carey. He carries off his unreliable history with considerable aplomb, avoiding any patronising exoticism that so often characterises descriptions of Gaelic communities.

He keeps you turning the pages and, while he doesn’t exactly leave you dangling (no spoiler there), he certainly keeps you thinking.

#### Roger Jones,

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