

Scotland's Murder Mysteries

8 x 60'

EPISODIC BREAKDOWN

1. Oscar Slater

Oscar Leschinzer fled Germany in the late 1890s. After drifting around Europe and America, he set up home in Glasgow with a Parisian woman. She and her maid worked as high-class prostitutes from the flat they shared with Slater. An exotic enough tale already – even before the added ingredients of a reclusive spinster, a hoard of priceless jewellery – and a brutal murder.

On the evening of 21st December 1908, Marion Gilchrist was left alone by her maid, who went to buy a newspaper. A few minutes later, a neighbour heard loud knocks on the ceiling. When he investigated, he met the maid on the stairwell. A man walked calmly past them, smiled, and exited the building. The two proceeded into the flat, to be confronted with the horrific sight of the old lady in the final throes of death. She had been severely beaten about the head.

A dealer in precious stones, Slater quickly fell under suspicion of Gilchrist's murder, despite the fact that he had several strong alibis. The documentary discusses the extent to which anti-Semitism at the time played a role in his fate, and reveals how no substantial forensic evidence was ever presented, and how Slater was effectively held up as being "guilty until proven guilty". But if Oscar Slater didn't kill Miss Gilchrist, who did?

2. Madeleine Smith

A crime of passion? Maybe. It certainly caused a scandal, and prompted David Lean to make the film "Madeleine." The question remains - did she do it, or didn't she?

In 1856, Glasgow debutante Madeleine Smith began a passionate affair with Emile L'Angelier, a drifter from the Channel Islands. The two met in secret, and wrote to each other frequently. When her parents tried to have her "married off", Madeleine abandoned her lover. He threatened to use their letters to expose the affair. Shortly afterwards, he was found dead from what was recorded as arsenic poisoning. When the passionate letters were found, Madeleine was charged with murder. In court, witnesses testified to seeing her sign for orders of arsenic. Although the circumstantial evidence pointed towards guilt, the jury freed Smith under the controversial not proven verdict.

This docu-drama revisits the colourful tale, and considers how L'Angelier - a shady character - might have perished.

3. Jessie McClachlan

The McClachlan story revolves around the brutal murder of a townhouse servant. Miss Jess McPherson worked at Sandyford Place, part of gentrified Victorian Glasgow. In the early hours of a weekend morning in 1862, her best friend Jessie found her badly beaten body in her basement bedroom. Arrested and accused of killing her, there was a public outcry when it became evident that McClachlan's wealthy employers, a family of accountants called Fleming, were being protected by the authorities.

Jessie McClachlan always resolutely denied the crime. She maintained that the elderly James Fleming had attacked the servant in a fit of drunken rage. McPherson had confided in McClachlan that she had long been resisting Fleming's sexual advances.

Despite much evidence against James Fleming, a jury found Jessie McClachlan guilty and she was sentenced to hang. Although there was widespread public sympathy in the wake of the deeply flawed case against her, she went on to serve fifteen years in prison after the sentence was commuted. To this day, the McClachlan case is considered one of Scotland's most shocking miscarriages of justice.

4. Dr Edward Pritchard

On 28th July 1865, nearly ten thousand people gathered in what was then known as "Jail Square" in Glasgow, to witness the last public execution in Britain. The convict was a murderer - and a doctor - found guilty of administering poison with deliberate intent to kill.

Physicians who kill are not uncommon. From the reviled Victorian Dr Crippen, to one of the most prolific serial killers in recorded history, Dr Harold Shipman. Knowledge of the human body, and being placed in intimate trust by patients, lend themselves to a specific brand of murderer. But Edward Pritchard's killings were literally much closer to home, as this programme reveals.

To this day, there's no way of knowing exactly what drove Dr Edward Pritchard to murder his doting wife, and mother-in-law. Not at all a 'spur of the moment' act of madness, Pritchard cruelly poisoned his wife to death, over a long period of time. Concerned about her daughter's persistent ill-health, Mrs Pritchard's mother moved into the household to help as best she could. But her stay there didn't last long... This documentary also investigates the possibility that Dr Pritchard could have been a triple killer.

5. Donald Merrit

Smuggling, theft, gun-running, forgery – and triple murder. For almost thirty years, Donald Merrett operated as a career criminal of remarkable daring. And most incredible of all, he got away with it.

On the morning of 17th March 1926, the Merretts were breakfasting together when the servant heard a gun-shot. In the dining room, she found 55-year-old Bertha lying bleeding from a head wound. Her son insisted she had shot herself. At a time when suicide was still illegal, Bertha Merrett was treated as a criminal as she lay dying in hospital. She never regained consciousness.

It gradually came to light that Merrett had been defrauding his mother, forging her cheques to pay for his extravagance. He was arrested in November 1926. The trial early the next year caused a sensation in Britain, with the exotic looking “Donnie” – in appearance far older than his years - charged with matricide. He was skilfully defended however, and the jury returned the controversial Scots verdict of ‘Not Proven’.

His criminal activities didn't stop there. Merrett led a sordid life of extraordinary illegal ventures, but in February 1954 he wrote a note to his mistress stating "after all that lies behind me, I have no chance." In a forest in Germany, he then shot himself.

6. Eugene Chantrelle

Poisoning, an explosive trial – an element of the unsolved - and the ultimate penalty. A shocking story of domestic abuse culminating in a murder that the accused denied to the end. The story of Eugene Chantrelle has been largely forgotten in the annals of Edinburgh crime.

Eugène Marie Chantrelle was born in the industrial city of Nantes in 1834. He studied medicine, and was active on the side of the Communists during the French Revolution of '48, but by 1866 Chantrelle was settled in Edinburgh.

On New Year's day 1878, she complained of illness. By the following morning, she was in great pain and distress. Chantrelle began to insist that a gas leak had occurred. Two doctors agreed that Elizabeth Chantrelle's symptoms in no way indicated coal gas poisoning. When she died, Chantrelle made a great display of grief. On the day of her funeral however, he was arrested on suspicion of murder.

Between verdict and execution, Chantrelle wrote often to the Home Secretary in increasingly confused detail about what had happened. There were public gatherings, demanding that the sentence be commuted to imprisonment. No such demand was ever satisfied.

The hanging of Eugene Chantrelle's was the first execution to take place within prison walls in Scotland. The hanged man's great grandson Paul Nelson now reflects on the devastating effect the incident had on Chantrelle's sons, and how this was carried down through the years to his own grandfather, and father.

7. Jessie King

On 18th February 1889 at the High Court in Edinburgh, a shocking trial opened. The defendant was a 27 year old woman, accused of the murders of three babies. She was not their mother, but had adopted them by a crude means known as 'baby farming.' But Jessie King had no intention of keeping the babies she had taken in, for money.

Vulnerable, uneducated and penniless, the young woman struggled to survive. She appeared willing to do whatever was asked of her, by anyone she saw as a figure of authority. Could it be that Jessie's lover took advantage of her easily manipulated nature? 30 years her senior, and an unemployed alcoholic, Thomas Pearson had to find ways and means to feed his addiction...

What exactly went on in the Pearson households between August 1887 and October 1888 will never really be known. Regardless, it is known that the pair 'adopted' at least three babies – three babies who did not live long.

Jessie King retains the tragic distinction of being the last female hanged in the city of Edinburgh. But what of Pearson? Although the Courts did not punish him, perhaps someone else caught up with him in the end ... Thomas Pearson's body was found in Glasgow, a year later.

8. Deacon Brodie

For the millions of tourists who flock to Edinburgh each year, The Royal Mile is a big draw ... packed with buskers, lined with souvenir shops and with its dark, intriguing little 'closes' either side. Lots of visitors will stop for a refreshment at Deacon Brodie's Tavern, a popular landmark. But how many know that the real life "Deacon" was hanged for his crimes?

By day, he was a mason and a locksmith. By night, he was a shady burglar who reaped rich rewards from acquaintances and clients. These extra-curricular activities shored up a louche lifestyle that involved two glamorous mistresses who did not know of each other, five children – and a serious gambling addiction.

Who was the man who inspired Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde? And why does he remain such a figure of affection, in the city of his birth? This is the story of William Brodie – the man who had everything to lose...

