



Trinity College Dublin

The University of Dublin

BRAM STOKER (1847-1912)

Jarlath Killeen

In May 1897, the well-known theatre manager and part-time writer Bram Stoker released *Dracula*, a Gothic adventure novel about the exploits of a Transylvanian vampire in England and the attempts by a crew of respectable professional men (and one woman) to destroy the ancient evil. *Dracula* was one of a number of novels of the so-called 'Gothic revival' of the late nineteenth century, joining Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1888), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Robert Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897)—which significantly outsold *Dracula* in the year they were both published. Stoker's vampire novel was greeted by relatively positive but by no means universally approving reviews in the press. The *Manchester Guardian*, for example, declared that it was a novel 'more grotesque than terrifying', explaining that while 'it says no little for the author's powers that in spite of its absurdities the reader can follow the story with interest to the end', it was still 'a mistake to fill a whole volume with horrors'. Others were more enthusiastic, the *Bookman* warning: 'Keep *Dracula* out of the way of nervous children', and the *Pall Mall Gazette* insisted that:

Mr. Bram Stoker should have labelled his book "For Strong Men Only," or words to that effect. Left lying carelessly around, it might get into the hands of your maiden aunt who believes devoutly in the man under the bed, or of the new parlourmaid with unsuspected hysterical tendencies. "*Dracula*" to such would be manslaughter. It is for the man with a sound conscience and digestion, who can turn out the gas and go to bed without having to look over his shoulder more than half a dozen times as he goes upstairs, or more than mildly wishing that he had a crucifix and some garlic handy to keep the vampires from getting at him' (all reviews found in Browning, ed., 2011).

Despite such praise, when Stoker died in 1912 the obituaries hardly mentioned *Dracula*, and merely listed it as one of his many novels, concentrating instead on his long management of Henry Irving, one of the greatest actors on the late-Victorian stage. Irving is now all but forgotten except by theatrical historians, but Count Dracula has eclipsed even his author, and Stoker himself is remembered for little else. Indeed, while Stoker may have created in *Dracula* one of the most easily recognizable characters in world literature, instantly identifiable almost everywhere on the planet, the author remains virtually unknown even in Ireland, where he spent half his life.

Bram Stoker was born on 8 November 1847 in Clontarf, then still a small village about three miles from Dublin's city centre, although it was fast becoming a suburb by the time of Stoker's appearance. His family was solidly middle class, though upwardly mobile, and possessed a healthy sense of ambition, his father Abraham Stoker senior, a respected, hard-working civil servant, his mother, Charlotte Thornley reform-minded and industrious—and possibly 'superstitious', full of horror stories about the effects of the cholera epidemic in 1830's Sligo where she grew up.

Stoker had six brothers and sisters—William Thornley, Matilda, Thomas, Richard, Margaret and George.

Information about the first years of his life is vague and much remains unclear. In his tribute to his boss, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906), Stoker tells the reader something of his own childhood, and mentions that for much of it he had been extremely weak and ill, so ill indeed that he spent a large amount of time laid up in bed: 'till I was about seven years old I never knew what it was to stand upright' (Stoker 1906, I: 31). If he is to be believed, this period of his life – the first seven years in which he was effectively bedridden, (possibly) near to death – must have had an extraordinary impact on Stoker's personal psychology, since it implies that he never went through the normal childhood experiences of learning to walk through crawling and toddling and was instead carried everywhere by others, living on sofas and beds (Belford 1996, 17-20). His early years, then, were those of an invalid, although exactly what was wrong with him remains something of a mystery. By the time he began his writing career, however, he had miraculously overcome his frail past to become an immensely successful athlete, indeed the 'Athletic Champion of Dublin' while an undergraduate at Trinity College, and an all round proponent of male physical power. His early life in bed may have made him shy, but he later wrote that his physical prowess and imposing stature helped to overcome any social ineptitude he felt and he became a favourite in the undergraduate community. His status as what we would now call a 'jock' was certainly helpful in terms of popularity and social interaction (Murray 2004, 39-43). He entered Trinity in 1864, and there hardly seems to have been a sport in which he did not participate, and he excelled in rugby, walking races, gymnasium, sling shot, high jump, trapeze, and rowing. He was on the rugby team, and in 1867 won prizes for weight lifting and for the five- and seven-mile walks. Stoker recalled that he 'won numerous silver cups for races of various kinds' and 'was physically immensely strong': 'In fact I feel justified in saying that I represented in my own

person something of that aim of university education *mens sana in corpore sano*' (Stoker 1906, I: 31-2).

While he was academically average, Stoker was clearly more interested in the athletic than the academic scene and distracted by his sporting activities. He was a notable figure in this college's history in that he was the only person to be both Auditor of the Historical Society and President of the Philosophical Society, and was very active in both positions, delivering his inaugural address as Auditor of the College Historical Society 'The Necessity for Political Honesty'—in November 1872 (Stoker 1872). In this address, as well as arguing for the importance of reform in political life, Stoker also reflected on what he saw as the increasing weakness of the Anglo-Saxon race and the growing strength of America due to the influx of Irish immigrants. The individual and national vigour focused on in this address would become important subjects in Stoker's fiction. His athletic and social achievements in college are even more remarkable given that he was only a full time student for two years and from 1866 also worked a six and a half day week in the civil service. However, Stoker clearly was a young man of extraordinary energy. He is not listed in either the examination or student records from 1866, which is understandable given his demanding career in Dublin Castle, though he did graduate with a BA in 1870, and purchased his MA in 1875. Why he claimed to have graduated with 'Honours in Pure Mathematics' is something of a mystery, though it is unlikely that he simply misremembered his college years, and this misleading claim puts the general accuracy of his own account of his younger life in question.

Stoker worked diligently in the civil service and was made Inspector of Courts of Petty Sessions (a new post) in 1876, a position which required him to travel around the country to ensure the efficiency of the courts in petty sessions districts which, while it certainly opened up opportunities for someone as interested in dialect as Stoker, was possibly also mind-numbing in administrative and bureaucratic terms,

dealing with the minutiae of dog licences and minor legal affairs. After three years of this he was well-qualified for the writing of his first proper book, the 'dry as dust' *The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland* (1879) (see Murray 2004, 47-8). During his civil service days he also made time to work as an unpaid drama critic for the *Dublin Evening Mail*, reforming the reviewing system so that for the first time a review would appear the day after the performance, rather than two days as had been traditional. This indicates that in all areas of his life, Stoker was full of ideas and focused on efficiency and effectiveness. During these years he also briefly edited a daily magazine *The Irish Echo*, and had his first fictional publications. His multi-episode novella 'The Primrose Path' appeared in the *Shamrock* in 1875, and involves the disastrous emigration of an Irish theatrical carpenter to London where he is brought low by alcoholism and murders his wife. Stoker also started on a novel, *The Snake's Pass* (published in 1890, after he had left Dublin), the last major work by him located in Ireland. Set in the West of Ireland, the novel concerns the intervention of an Englishman, Arthur Severn, in the exploitative relationship between Catholic gombeen man 'Black' Murdock, a late-nineteenth century reincarnation of the 'King of the Snakes' driven into hiding by St. Patrick, and his Protestant tenants, the Joyce family. This early fiction establishes many of the subjects to which Stoker would return in his mature work, including the metaphysical struggle between agents of darkness and light, the importance of virtuous manliness and chaste but intelligent femininity, and the necessity of modernization and progress. In the meantime, Stoker also managed to meet and court his future wife, Florence Balcombe (then engaged to Oscar Wilde). It was while busy with his unpaid reviewing that Stoker met the famous Henry Irving, who came to Dublin on a number of occasions to give readings, and the two became friendly, although on Stoker's side the friendship bordered on adulation. Irving was apparently impressed with Stoker—or at least flattered by Stoker's admiration—and asked that the young man become his business manager. Perhaps bored with his civil service job, and dazzled by the chance to work with a luminary like Irving,

especially since Stoker had always been fascinated by the theatre, and just stopping off in time to get married in St. Ann's Church on Dawson Street on 4 December, 1878, Stoker left Dublin for London without any apparent qualms, and would manage Irving for the next twenty seven years.

His years with the civil service stood him in good stead in his theatre work, and he was certainly an assiduous manager for Irving, and the Lyceum Theatre too. He took over all of Irving's affairs, including his correspondence which involved writing about half a million letters in all. Stoker also arranged Irving's tours, including eight of the United States, and organised the theatre staff, sometimes micromanaging advertising campaigns and booking arrangements. Indeed, Stoker was so much involved in Irving's life, and the life of the theatre, that he appears to have spent very little time at home with his wife and their only child, a son, Noel, born in 1879, and the available evidence suggests that even when on holiday with his family he actually spent much of the time alone (Frayling 2013), so perhaps he was simply not a man all that interested in cultivating a thriving domestic life. Despite rumours to the contrary, and frequent psycho-biographical speculation (Weldon 1992, viii; Schaffer 1994), it may be safest to say that his marriage to Florence worked, and there is no extant evidence of any marital discord. His work with Irving gave him access to the cultural and political elite of Victorian London. Certainly, Stoker appears to have known anyone of any consequence in the period, including Gladstone, Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, W. B. Yeats, George Moore, Sir Richard Burton, David Livingstone, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. When he wasn't managing Irving, who was a demanding boss by all accounts, Stoker was busy writing. He somehow found time to work at length in many different genres. *Under the Sunset* (1882) was a collection of fairy stories, evidence of Stoker's eye for the market as he sought to capitalise on the growing appetite for children's literature in the wake of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). *A Glimpse of America* (1886) was a travelogue which drew on Stoker's trips to America with Irving,

during which he met two presidents, William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as his literary hero Walt Whitman. *The Watter's Mou'* (1895), and *The Shoulder of Shasta* (1895) are both minor works, but highlight Stoker's interest in dialect and locality—very prominent in *Dracula*—the former being set in Scotland, the latter in California. Both also pay close attention to male bonding and the confluence of physical and moral power. Luckily, his literary reputation does not rest on any of these slight pieces, and they are best seen as 'prentice work for Stoker's masterpiece. He spent at least seven (and perhaps up to ten) years researching and writing *Dracula*—whose title character was originally given the rather less striking appellation Count Wampyr (see Stoker 2008, 33)—released in 1897, and now considered one of the major novels of the 1890s. As well as possessing a tightly constructed plot and a mysterious and mesmeric central character, *Dracula* has rightly been read as an exploration of many of the 'anxieties' and concerns of the *fin de siècle*, and has been subject to an extraordinary number of different interpretations. The title character alone has been decoded as everything from an absentee landlord to a New Woman, and the novel has spawned an enormous number of adaptations in different media. As well as *Dracula*, Stoker's literary reputation rests on his many very fine Gothic short stories which balance intense violence and very black humour with a strong focus on incident—especially 'The Dualitists' (1887), 'The Judge's House' (1891), 'The Squaw' (1893), and 'Dracula's Guest' (1914).

Stoker continued his work with Irving until 1904 when, due to serious financial difficulties which some (unfairly) blamed on Stoker, the Lyceum was put into receivership. The death of Irving the following year devastated Stoker, and propelled him to toil on what was then considered his most important work, a two volume *Personal Reminiscences*, now generally considered a kind of hagiography. Stoker was in serious need of money at this stage, and became a writer full-time, managing to write many more novels after *Dracula*, of uneven quality, though some

of them deserving much more recognition than they receive now. Many of them are basically romances, including *Miss Betty* (1898), *The Man* (1905), and *Lady Athlyne* (1908), and lean heavily on Stoker's intense belief in sexual and gender complementarity and 'soul marriage', for which ideas he draws heavily on Victorian and Edwardian sexology. *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902), *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903), and *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), are much better, in part because they return Stoker to the Gothic mode in which he was at his best. His last novel, *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), is widely accepted as being one of the barmiest books ever written. Based on the legend of the Lambton Worm, the plot involves a series of attacks by an ancient White Worm on the Derbyshire coast, but involves a confusing number of subplots and characters, including a Mesmer-trained kite-flying locality-hypnotising aristocrat Edward Caswall; Oolanga, a crazed African servant; a series of meandering and distracting archeological and comparative mythological digressions; a mongoose infestation; and the economic opportunities opened up by mining. In many ways *White Worm* is a synthesis of the themes and issues of Stoker's entire writing career, dramatized in its central conflict between an athletic and virtuous male and feminine serpentine evil. The novel doesn't make much sense, but has remained in print, in abridged forms, since publication which suggests it possesses a power greater than an outline of its ridiculous plot would indicate .

By the end of his life Stoker was quite hard up financially and he tried his best to make money, even becoming business manager for a short time to a West-End musical, though his literary outpourings (including *Famous Impostures* (1910), and *Snowbound* (1908)) testify to his determination to remain a literary figure. He suffered much ill health in his final years, had a stroke after Irving's death, and Bright's Disease, a kidney disorder, practically made him into an invalid again. He died in London on 20 April, 1912, probably from the effects of syphilis, though this is the subject of considerable dispute (see Murray 2013).

Works Cited

- Browning, John Edgar. *Bram Stoker's Dracula: The Critical Feast, An Annotated Reference of Early Reviews and Reactions, 1897-1913*. Afterword by J. Gordon Melton. Berkley, CA: The Apocryphile Press
- Belford, Barbara. *Bram Stoker and the Man Who Was Dracula*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1996.
- Frayling, Christopher. 'Mr Stoker's Holiday'. In *Bram Stoker: Centenary Essays*, ed. Jarlath Killeen. Dublin: Four Courts, 2013. 179-200.
- Murray, Paul. *From the Shadow of Dracula: A Life of Bram Stoker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004.
- '. 'Bram Stoker: The Facts and the Fictions'. In *Bram Stoker: Centenary Essays*, ed. Jarlath Killeen. Dublin: Four Courts, 2013. 56-72.
- Stoker, Bram, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, 2 vols. London: Heinemann, 1906.
- '. *Bram Stoker's Notes for Dracula: a facsimile Edition*. Annotated and transcribed by Robert Eighteen-Bisang and Elizabeth Miller. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co..
- '. 'The Necessity for Political Honesty'. In *A Glimpse of America, and other Lectures, Interviews and Essays*, ed., Richard Dalby. 1872. Essex: Desert Island Books, 2002. 31-47.
- Weldon, Fay. 'Introduction'. *Bram Stoker's Dracula Omnibus*. London: Orion, 1992.
- Schaffer, Talia. "'A Wilde Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*." *English Literary History* 61 (1994): 381-425.

Cite as: 'Bram Stoker', by Jarlath Killeen at <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitywriters>. First published January 2016.