

## FOREWORD

*F*rankenstein and *Dracula* are twinned in the popular mind, rather like Oxford and Cambridge or Gilbert and Sullivan, largely because the famous black-and-white Hollywood versions appeared almost simultaneously in 1931, establishing a recognisable genre which flourishes to this day. For prospective readers, however, such linkage is misleading. *Frankenstein* was written by Mary Shelley in 1816 during a rainy stay in the Swiss Alps with Byron and Shelley. Byron suggested they should each write a 'ghost story'. The weather improved and neither of the men completed the task, but the idea took seed in Mrs Shelley's mind.

The result is a book which, for all its originality and indeed a kind of moral grandeur, is barely readable now except as an historical curiosity. *Dracula* is quite a different matter. Its narrative power and sinister gloss remain compelling and untarnished.

It was published in 1987 but had been gestating for several years. Bram Stoker was, by then, business manager, close companion and great admirer of Sir Henry Irving, the most celebrated actor of the time. Stoker was a genial raconteur with a broad Irish brogue. His first published work was a dissertation on the Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland, where he had been a civil servant but had moonlighted as a theatre critic; which is how he came to meet Irving during one of the actor's Irish tours.

Having been brought to London by Irving, he researched his future books in the British Museum Library and, on at least one occasion, in the public library at Whitby, where *Dracula's* coffin-laden ship would run ashore in the great storm. His working-title for this book was simply *The Undead*, and his first surviving notes for it, dated 8 March 1890, just say it would be about an 'old dead man made alive'.

## DRACULA

Vampires were by no means a new subject in Gothic novels. They went back before Mary Shelley's day, to the kind of fiction at which the young ladies in *Northanger Abbey* delighted to shudder. ('Are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?' one asks the other as they look through her reading list.) A characteristic example, *Varney the Vampyre: or the Feast of Blood* was published in the year of Stoker's birth, and he would certainly have read *Carmilla*, Sheridan Le Fanu's dreamy tale of Lesbian vampires.

Stoker worked on *Dracula* for six years, toying with the plot and geography. Its setting was originally to have been Austrian province of Styria, where the scene of *Carmilla* was laid, but, influenced perhaps by a book called *The Land Beyond the Forest* (that is, Transylvania), in which the author, the English wife of a Hungarian cavalry officer who had been stationed there, told of a country haunted by weird superstitions, Stoker moved the location of Dracula's castle to the Carpathian mountains, to the Borgo Pass, which connects Transylvania with Moldavia.

Meanwhile, in the backstage lumber rooms of the Lyceum Theatre, which Irving had rented, Stoker found, amid the piles of rotting dresses and crumbling stage props, a rusty grill which had belonged to a famous dining club, The Sublime Society of Beef Steaks. He decided to recreate the Beefsteak Room as it had been in its heyday, oak panelled, with an open kitchen range and the tutelary gridiron hauled to the ceiling. There he and Irving would preside at after-theatre dinner parties, glittering with thespian, literary and artistic celebrities. In that room, it has been suggested; Stoker first heard the story which was the template for *Dracula*.

This cannot be true since he had been working on the idea before the meeting which provoked the suggestion. It is true however that, on 30 April 1890, at the Beefsteak table, Stoker met Arminius Vambery, a folklore expert and specialist in obscure languages. Vambery is actually mentioned in *Dracula*,

where Van Helsing says he has consulted 'my friend Arminius of Buda-Pesth University' about the identity of Dracula and concluded that 'he must indeed have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turks'. ('Voivode' means 'Prince': 'Dracul' literally, 'the Devil', with suffix 'a' just meaning 'son of'.) The Draculas were, says Arminius, a great and noble race, though now and again were scions who were held by their coevals to have had dealings with the Evil one.

Arminius Vambery may well have discoursed at the Beefsteak on the legends of Carpathia, and the conversation would very likely have turned to the dreadful deeds of Vlad IV, the even more cruel son of a notoriously cruel previous Voivode. Vlad IV ruled and commanded armies from 1455 to 1462 and again in 1476. He was known in Walachia as Dracul, the Devil, and to the Turks for all too obvious reasons, as Vlad the Impaler. He was undoubtedly a monster, though no (as far as we know) a vampire. Stoker had learned from his researches in the British Museum Library something about the fifteenth-century conflict between the Turks and the Hungarians, and merged the stories of Vlad and other such dark warriors with the nightmare tale he was spinning. Dracula is not Vlad the Impaler but nor is he quite unrelated.

Stoker's novel was soon adapted for the stage, where he hoped that Irving might play the lead (but he never did). The Bela Lugosi film is rather unsatisfactory, at least in the second half, because it was made from the play, not the book, limiting and weakening the climax. Stoker himself went on to write several more novels with varying supernatural themes: some – notably the *Lair of the White Worm*, which was filmed by Ken Russell – are quite readable but undistinguished. A short story, called *Dracula's Guest*, is merely a chapter excised by the publishers from the novel on grounds of length; it was published posthumously by Stoker's widow and was used as a theatre programme souvenir.

DRACULA

Through innumerable spin-offs Dracula has become one of the great iconic figures of world fiction, like Sherlock Holmes or Tarzan of the Apes. But however familiar the story may seem, however well people may think they know it from all those films, endlessly repeated on television, it can still be said that the book has much more to offer. So hurry. The sun is almost down and a black coach will be waiting at the Borgo Pass...

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