

Dracula was Irish

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which, do what I would, I could not conceal. The Count, evidently noticing it, drew back; and with a grim sort of a smile, which showed more than he had yet done his protruberant teeth, sat himself down again on his own side of the fireplace. We were both silent for a while; and as I looked towards the window I saw the first dim streak of the coming dawn. There seemed a strange stillness over everything; but as I listened I heard, as if from down below in the valley, the howling of many wolves. The Count's eyes gleamed, and he said:- "listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!" Seeing, I suppose, some expression in my face strange to him, he added:- "Ah, sir, you dwellers in the city cannot enter into the feelings of the hunter."

[From Bram Stoker's novel Dracula]



Dracula is one of the most successful novels of all time, translated to almost every language in the world, and over 1,000 movie and TV story lines inspired by it, lives on more than 100 years after it was written. What makes it so great? It hits on a kind of universal chord, it's classic terror fiction. Dracula's author, Bram Stoker was born in Clontarf, Co. Dublin in 1847 at the height of the Great Famine. He lived in Ireland for the first 32 years of his life. He had somewhat of a strange childhood in that he didn't walk until he was 7 years old and it appears, he enjoyed spending most of his time in his room in the dark. His mother had a great influence on him, and her stories would shape him into the person he was to become. She would tell many stories, like the one about the Cholera epidemic in Co. Sligo. *The habit was when there was a new batch to arrive to whom there was no beds. To take*

those who were stupefied from opium and nearest death and remove them to make room for the new arrivals. Many were said to be buried alive. One man brought his wife to the hospital on his back and she being in great agony tied a red handkerchief tightly around her waist to try and relieve the pain. When he came again to the hospital in the evening, he heard she was dead and lying in the dead house. He retrieved her body to give her a more decent burial than could be given there. The custom was to dig a large trench put in 50 corpses without coffins throw lime on them and cover the grave. He saw the corner of his red handkerchief under several bodies which he removed, found his wife and saw there was still life in her. He carried her home and she recovered and lived many years. Furthermore, Stoker heard stories of people digging pits (graves) and pushing people who were still alive not with their hands but with long wooden poles, so they didn't have to touch them, literally burying people alive.

His mother's influence didn't end here. Stoker listened to stories about the famine and the mass graves with corpses left on the side of the road and people looking like the walking dead. She would have seen the famine at its worst, emaciated ghastly figures walking around in the trance of extreme hunger.

Stoker, as a child, would often play with friends in cemeteries. His mother's family had burial plots at Saint Michan's vault, and a young Bram Stoker visited the vaults which contained coffins with mummies. These mummies were preserved for hundreds of years as if there were still sleeping – which is exactly how Dracula sleeps in Stoker's book.

All influences may not have begun or ended with his Stoker's mother. According to *The History of Ireland*, written in 1631, by Father Geoffrey Keating, there is a town named Slaghtaverty, in Co. Derry, where a large stone slab is overshadowed by a Fairy thorn tree and known to the locals as Dracula's grave. This could be the oldest vampire tale in the world and one story Stoker most likely heard. As the story goes, many years ago, there was an evil ruler and powerful magician called Abhartach (pronounced Av-ar-chack). He was small and deformed but he ruled the people with a strong and evil hand. The people were terrified of his tyrannical ways, so they wanted to be rid of him. But no one had the courage to kill this magical man, so they got a chieftain from a neighboring village to do the job. This warrior named Cathain stepped up and killed Abhartach and buried him upright as was the tradition for a Celtic chief.

Unfortunately for the towns people, Abhartach eventually rose from the dead and demanded large bowls of blood from his subjects to sustain his corpse. Three times Cathain killed and buried Abhartach and three times he rose from his grave seeking blood from his people. Finally, Cathain killed him with a wooden sword through the heart and buried him face down, with a large stone slab on top and planted thorn trees around the grave. Abhartach was never seen again though the stone slab and a lonely thorn tree still stand in the field to this day.

The novel *Dracula* has been translated into 44 different languages and is recognized as the one of the largest selling books of all time. The first authorized version of the *Dracula* story was released in 1931 with Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula. Newspapers reported that members of the audiences fainted in shock at the horror on screen! The film became a box office sensation and is regarded as the first full length horror movie. *Dracula* is considered the most filmed fictional character ever, apart from Sherlock Holmes. The story has lived through the ages and will no doubt continue to scare children and adults alike for years to come. It's interesting how one Irishman's early life experiences can shape his future accomplishments. Well, after all this being said, if you strip away the Romanian accent from Bela Lugosi, what are you left with? A dead man with an Irish brogue.