Mike Shepherd, *When Brave Men Shudder: The Scottish Origins of Dracula*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Wild Wolf Publishing, 2018, 244 pp. £12.99 paper
ISBN: 978-1907954696

Carol Senf

So much has been said about *Dracula*, arguably one of the most popular books ever written, and so much of what is said is largely speculative (was Stoker a feminist or a man who feared and/or hated women?) or entirely false (he modelled his literary vampire on Vlad III of Wallachia). It is therefore a genuine pleasure to read and review a book that explores the Scottish inspiration for *Dracula*, as well as several of Stoker's other novels and short fiction. *When Brave Men Shudder* may not answer all your questions about *Dracula*, but Shepherd's extraordinarily well researched study definitely belongs on the bookshelves of all people who are interested in Stoker and his most famous work. It also provides a number of insights into Stoker's writing process and demonstrates how he wove together various materials.

The man responsible for this extraordinary study is not a literary critic but a geologist who lives in Cruden Bay, where Stoker spent at least twelve holidays, and where he also wrote parts of *Dracula* and also set *The Watter's Mou'* (1895) and *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902), as well as "Crooken Sands" (1894). Prior to writing *When Brave Men Shudder*, Shepherd wrote a geology textbook and *Oil Strike North Sea*, a history of North Sea Oil. A native of North East Scotland, Shepherd pored over archival material, interviewed local people, and visited the localities associated with Stoker, including the Kilmarnock Arms Hotel and nearby cottages, Slains Castle, the Skares, and the Watters' Mou'.

Even though the title promises to focus on *Dracula*, it is really about Bram Stoker and includes chapters on Stoker's life, pagan beliefs he learned about in Scotland, the influence of Whitman, sites around Cruden Bay, and several of Stoker's

works. It also includes a very brief introduction by Dacre Stoker (whose great-grandfather was Bram Stoker's youngest brother) that describes *When Brave Men Shudder* as a book that "aims to understand Bram Stoker using source material from those who knew him" (4). While much of the biographical material will not be new to people who are familiar with Stoker's life, much of the material that focuses on Scotland is genuinely new and insightful. As someone who had read the existing biographies of Stoker, I knew that he spent vacations at Cruden Bay and nearby Whinnyfold, and that he used those holidays away from his responsibilities to Henry Irving and the Lyceum to write, but Shepherd filled in the specifics and reminded me that Stoker spent at least twelve of his summer holidays in Cruden Bay (between 1893 and 1905 when Irving died and Stoker became a full-time writer).

As readers might expect, there is material on *Dracula*. While Shepherd is not the first writer to observe that Slains Castle might have served as an inspiration for Dracula's castle, Shepherd includes an entire chapter on Slains, including the locally-known connection between an octagonal room and Stoker's description of a similar room. Although the castle is now a ruin, it is widely accepted that Bram Stoker visited it during one of his trips to Cruden Bay. Observing that "Slains Castle looks to play a minor role in the description of Castle Dracula," Shepherd notes that its "sense of isolation from the rest of the community is also a characteristic of Castle Dracula; it adds to the psychological landscape in the early chapters" (114).

More interesting are chapters on Stoker's other novels, including *The Water's Mou'*, which weaves the tragic love story of Sailor Willie and Maggie MacWhirter with a realistic tale of smuggling along the Scottish coast, and the even better chapter on *The Mystery of the Sea*, which oddly is one of the final chapters in the book. This chapter observes that "the main character, Archibald Hunter, is a barely-disguised version of the author" (188), but it also looks at one of Stoker's most interesting characters, Gormala MacNeil, an ancient woman gifted with second sight, as well as Stoker's interest in geology, shipwrecks, and folklore. Because Shepherd lives in Cruden Bay, he is especially well suited to comment on Stoker's use of the landscape. Indeed, the book opens with maps of North East Scotland and Bram Stoker's Cruden Bay at the beginning of the study and ends with photographs (many of them taken by Shepherd himself) that supplement his text. Included in these photographs are Cruden Bay Beach, Slains Castle, the Skares, and the Water's Mou', as well as copies of historical photos (Port Erroll in 1890 and an undated photograph of the Octagonal Hall in Slains Castle).

Another insightful chapter examines Stoker's appreciation of the natural world, including a discussion of the pantheism in *The Shoulder of Shasta* (which most biographers agree was probably written following his second visit to Cruden Bay in 1894 and published in 1895). Most useful perhaps is Appendix 1, which documents Stoker's visits to Cruden Bay based on evidence from multiple sources, including biographers, letters, the Kilmarnock Arms guest book, and a cookbook that features two of Florence Stoker's recipes.

Reading *When Brave Men Shudder* helped me to understand Stoker's writing process, especially the way he integrated his conversations, his ruminations, and his reading into what he was writing, and Shepherd's insights about Stoker's other fiction were especially useful. Everyone has an opinion about *Dracula*, but very few people care about *The Watter's Mou'* or *The Mystery of the Sea*.

No book is perfect, of course, and my criticism includes the obvious point that a number of chapters provide little that is new to people already familiar with Stoker and his novels. I also questioned the organizational plan, but I found the absence of a table of contents and an index to be especially irritating. These are minor quibbles, however, in a book that I recommend highly. If you are interested in *Dracula* or other Stoker works, *When Brave Men Shudder* belongs on your bookshelf.

Recommended citation

Senf, Carol. 2019. Review of Mike Shepherd, *When Brave Men Shudder: The Scottish Origins of Dracula*. *Victorian Popular Fictions*. 1.1: 124-126.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/DDPF9943>