

Bram Stoker (1847-1912)



Bram Stoker c.1906

On 26 September 1891 the great and the good of Bristol gathered at 38 Corn Street for a luncheon party given by Bristol Liberal Club in honour of the greatest actor of the age, Somerset-born [Henry Irving](#) (1838-1905). Among the 66 (all male) company were JW Arrowsmith of the well known Bristol printers and publishers based in Quay Street, and James Macready Chute proprietor of The Prince's Theatre, Park Row, where Irving performed many times. As Irving addressed the room with stories of his childhood spent in Bristol, a tall, well-built, red-bearded Irishman sat, perhaps idly writing notes on his lunch menu. This was Bram Stoker, Irving's personal assistant and business manager of the London's Lyceum Theatre for 27 years.

The notes Stoker may have been making could have been for the novel [Dracula](#) for which he was to become world famous after it was published six years later in 1897. It is believed Irving was Stoker's real life inspiration for the eponymous vampire Count. Dracula's mannerisms and sweeping gestures are similar to Irving who was over six foot tall, slim with a long face and sardonic presence which

fascinated and intimidated those around him. There are also several physical similarities between Irving and Dracula: an aquiline face, hollow cheeks, thin lips, pallor and vitality. Many believe that Irving was in fact the love of Stoker's life, but sadly his devotion was unrequited. When Stoker gave Irving a stage version of *Dracula* to read, hoping he would play the title role, Irving's response on reading it was one word: "dreadful".

Born in Dublin, Bram Stoker met Irving in 1876 when he was appearing in the city and Stoker was a theatre critic for the *Dublin Evening Mail* as well as working for the Irish Civil Service. Stoker wrote a glowing review of Irving's performance. The two men met and became friends. Soon after Stoker moved to London to become Irving's manager for nearly 30 years.

In 1898 Stoker married [Florence Balcombe](#), a celebrated Irish beauty whose former suitor was [Oscar Wilde](#). Wilde and Stoker had first met in 1872 when Stoker attended Oscar Wilde's mother's literary salon evenings at their home in Dublin. Stoker became a friend of the family and he and Oscar became acquaintances for more or less the rest of their lives.



Henry Irving, 1878

Stoker began researching and writing notes for *Dracula* in 1890 and his close and intense male friendships and the homoerotic aspects of the novel has led to the widely held belief that Stoker was a self-repressed homosexual who used his writing as an outlet for his sexual frustration. Stoker's marriage was more or less sexless and produced an only son. It is said that he began to write *Dracula* in a state of self-loathing only weeks after Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction for gross indecency in 1895, possibly inspired by the terrible press coverage.

At the age of 24 Bram Stoker had written a letter of admiration and adoration to his literary idol, American poet [Walt Whitman](#) who was then 55. Stoker had fallen under Whitman's spell after reading his 1855 collection of poems *Leaves of Grass* which had been described as obscene for its overt sexuality. Whitman had also written a self-help guide *Manly Health and Training* which recommended beards, nude sunbathing and swimming. During his life Whitman had several intense friendships with men and boys, in particular Peter Doyle, an Irish bus conductor 24 years his junior.

What Stoker wrote to Whitman had "all the breathless intensity of a love letter" but he did not send it. Four years later, on Valentine's Day 1876 he wrote a second letter which he did post enclosing his original letter. He began the 1872 letter:

"If you are the man I take you to be, you will like to get this letter.... How sweet a thing it is for a strong, healthy man with a woman's eye and a child's wishes to feel he can speak to a man who can be, if he wishes, father and brother and wife to his soul."

He ends with the words "I thank you for all the love and sympathy you have given me in common with my kind." It is not hard to wonder what Stoker meant by "my kind".

The rich homoerotic overtones of *Leaves of Grass* are similar to *Dracula* which reverberates with echoes of similar themes. Three weeks later (which means immediately by transatlantic mail standards of the time) Whitman replied "My dear young man....you did so well to write to me so unconventionally, so fresh, so manly and affectionately too."

The two were eventually to meet when Stoker and Irving were on a theatrical tour of America in 1884. Stoker's letters to Whitman were only printed in 2016 in David J Skal's biography *Something In The Blood: The Untold Story of Bram Stoker, The Man Who Wrote Dracula*. Skal also uncovered an abandoned homoerotic literary sketch by Stoker.

Stoker and Irving visited Bristol many times when Irving performed at The Prince's Theatre in Park Row. Opened in 1867 it was originally called 'The New Theatre Royal'. Renamed The Prince's in 1884, it was Bristol's top touring theatre until destroyed in a wartime air raid in 1940. Today there are two apartment blocks on the site, one named Irving House.

Henry Irving performed at The Prince's at least eight times between 1876 and 1904. Stoker and Irving regularly stayed at The Clifton Down Hotel, a byword for Victorian luxury on Sion Place (now Bridge House apartments). They also often visited Irving's widowed father and aunts who lived at 9 Ashley Road, Stoke's Croft. In 1912 Irving's actor son, Laurence, was presented with a bronze plaque commemorating his father's association with Bristol which was later erected on the house.

Stoker and Irving's last visit to Bristol was in June 1904 for a grand luncheon party held in honour of Irving at the Royal Hotel, College Green. Bram Stoker also accompanied Irving in February 1905 when Irving unveiled a memorial plaque to 18th century actor [James Quin](#) at 4 Pierrepont Street, Bath, followed by a luncheon at The Guildhall.

Bram Stoker wrote 12 novels and several short stories and non-fiction, but nothing compared to the popularity and longevity of *Dracula* thanks mainly to the numerous stage, film and television adaptations. Stoker dedicated the book to [Hall Caine](#), another male novelist he had a close friendship with.

Much has been written about the homoerotic and sexual aspects of the novel. When the hero, Jonathan Harker, is surrounded by predatory vampire brides who are keen to sink their teeth into him as much as satisfy their sexual lust, Dracula dismisses them with the command "This man belongs to me!". In his first outline of the book in March 1890 Stoker had written "This man belongs to me, I want him!". Dr Van Helsing says to Arthur Holmwood "I have grown to love you - yes, my dear boy, to love you".

Stoker's last book, published in 1911, the year before he died, was *The Lair of the White Worm* which often appears in lists of the 'best of bad books' and is now best remembered from Ken Russell's 1988 luridly phallic film version.

Sir Henry Irving died in 1905 in the foyer of the Midland Hotel, Bradford. His last words to Stoker were "Take care of yourself old chap. Good night. God bless you". Despite their long association Irving left Stoker nothing in his will.

Stoker published a memoir of his years with Irving in 1906 and outlived him by seven years, dying in 1912. Hall Caine wrote of the relationship between Stoker and Irving that, on Stoker's part at least, it was "the strongest love that man may feel for man".

Jonathan Rowe 2021

Links:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bram_Stoker

<https://www.biography.com/writer/bram-stoker>