

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY

THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

A tall, broad-shouldered figure in a black cloak crouches by the sandy shoreline; he stares across at the wave-lashed Scaurs, black, unyielding rocks in the North Sea...

This was Bram Stoker, creator of the world's most famous vampire, Dracula, and, for a few months each summer, resident in the old village of Port Erroll at Cruden Bay. Although respected and loved by the community, the Irish author and theatre manager did sometimes act very strangely when writing his Gothic tale of the blood-sucking Count. His wife Florence and son Noel would avoid him when he was "acting up", but it was no surprise when we discover his employer was Henry Irving, the foremost actor of his day and perhaps, the inventor of "method acting". Irving would seek to feel the actual emotions of his characters so as to give an authentic performance. It would therefore seem this had rubbed off on Stoker who stomped about the cliffs near Cruden Bay and Whinnyfold, trying to feel like his vampiric creation.



Slains Castle, Cruden Bay

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

Although Whitby, North Yorkshire, has been closely associated with Dracula for decades, as it appears in the novel and many film interpretations, it was to this remote fishing village in North-East Scotland that Bram Stoker came to find inspiration for his Gothic masterpiece. Cruden Bay also symbolised a retreat from Stoker's responsibilities as the business manager of the illustrious Lyceum Theatre in London, the latter owned by the aforementioned Henry Irving. Stoker had a very specific remit, his proposed bolthole had to be on the east coast, in the north of Scotland, and, having consulted many Ordnance Survey and geological maps, be somewhere between Peterhead and Aberdeen. He took a train from London in the summer of 1892 (according to a later article by the local newspaper, *Buchan Observer*), and started walking from Peterhead along the coast.



Cruden Bay

Despite being a very sickly youth in his native Dublin, Stoker had become a sportsman; at over six feet in height and well-built, he was an imposing sight. He had already published two books before he came to Scotland, but had a long-standing interest in Gothic literature through his friendship with fellow Irishman, Sheridan Le Fanu, famous for his own female vampire *Carmilla*. Cruden Bay, it turned out, was exactly what Stoker was looking for. He telegraphed Florence and Noel to join him immediately, and thus the legendary association began.

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY
THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

The Kilmarnock Arms Hotel, then owned by James Cruickshank, still has the visitors' book containing the Stokers' signatures, which helped trace their visits during the period 1892-1910. Stoker latterly stayed at two different cottages in the village, Crooked Lum Cottage, owned by Isy Cay, and Hilton Cottage, which belonged to the hotel. It was at Hilton Stoker had a view from the garden of the imposing Slains Castle, seat of the Hays of Erroll. Stoker would sit in there every day and write at a small table with the castle in sight. It is no surprise that he was influenced by it.

The evidence for this influence appears early in *Dracula* when Jonathan Harker meets the Count for the first time and is escorted into an octagonal room. Slains has an identical room which still exists today and served as a reception hall with doors leading out to the rest of the property. Local resident Mike Shepherd, while researching Stoker's love affair with Cruden Bay, was sent a photograph from the present-day Hay family, showing the "octagonal hall" in 1900. The written description in *Dracula* fitted perfectly. Thus it is very likely Stoker, who mixed with the cream of London society in his work, had been invited to visit Slains by the Earl of Erroll, and had seen the room and used it as the template for *Dracula's* entrance hall.



Kilmarnock Arms Hotel, Cruden Bay

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY
THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

Stoker was heavily influenced by the folklore of the area in the first book he wrote while in Cruden Bay. This was *The Watter's Mou*, a smuggling tale set in Port Erroll, using actual personalities as models for his characters, such as the local coastguard, whom Stoker befriended. By the time Stoker wrote *Dracula*, he was well-versed in tales of supernatural happenings and the local Scots dialect. Mike Shepherd discovered that Stoker referenced his fisher neighbours by putting a Doric phrase into the mouth of a Whitby fisherman in *Dracula*, namely "Dinna fash," i.e. don't worry. This is not a Yorkshire phrase, and used almost exclusively in Aberdeenshire, thus Stoker clearly wanted to demonstrate the book's origins.

Bram Stoker loved Port Erroll, and found the fisherfolk "authentic", according to his great-grandnephew, Dacre Stoker, a Canadian sports coach. Dacre suggested that the London elite with whom his ancestor mixed were somewhat superficial, but the Scots had no pretensions, which Bram loved. Taking part in local events such as fundraising fêtes, horticultural shows etc, the Stoker family were generously accepted by the communities of Port Erroll and Peterhead. Even after Bram died, Florence contributed a recipe for "Dracula Salad" to a cookbook published by the local Women's Rural Institute.

Thus, Slains Castle, the fisherfolk, the folklore and the landscape served to inspire Bram Stoker to create his vampire nobleman, and to write nine other books, some also with Gothic overtones such as *The Lair of the White Worm* and *The Mystery of the Sea*. *Dracula* has inspired filmmakers, writers and actors to this very day; in 2019, local theatre and circus skills group *Modo*, based in Peterhead, created a performance piece entitled *Doricula*, using a script written in Scots by author Robert Stephen (already known for his Scots edition of *Aesop's Fables*), performed at Slains. To hear "Dracula" speak in Scots was a confirmation of the area's influence on the character and the book's landscape.

Slains Castle, though now a ruin, is exactly what the visitor would expect, a crumbling Gothic ruin above treacherous cliffs, battered with sea spray. The *Kilmarnock Arms* still operates to this day; anyone can come and experience Stoker's Cruden Bay for themselves.