

Sligo Abbey and the Dracula connection

Mainistir Shligigh agus an ceangal le Dracula:

CHARLOTTE STOKER'S STORY

AN ACCOUNT OF THE CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN IRELAND IN 1832, BY CHARLOTTE STOKER (1873). MS 11076/2/3; COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, LIBRARY OF TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN.

In the days of my early youth so long ago that I forget the date, our world was shaken with the dread of the new and terrible plague which was desolating all lands as it passed through them. And so regular was its march that men could tell where next it would appear and almost the day when it might be expected. It was the Cholera, which for the first time appeared in Western Europe. And its utter strangeness and man's want of experience or knowledge of its nature, or how best to resist its attack, added if anything could to its horrors.

It was said to have come from the East and Abby Huch says in his "China" that it rose out of the Yellow Sea, going inland like a cloud and dividing into two which spread North & South.

In those days, I dwelt with my parents and brothers in a provincial town in the west of Ireland called Sligo. It was long before the time of railroads, and (I think) of steam boats. At least one had never been there at the time, so news travelled slowly. But still the rumour of the Great Plague broke on us from time to time, as men talk of far off things which can never come near themselves.

"It was in Ireland"

But gradually the terror grew on us, as time by time we heard of it nearer and nearer. It was in France, it was in Germany, it was in England, and (with wild affright) we began to hear a whisper pass "It was in Ireland".

Then men's senses began failing them for fear, and deeds were done (in selfish dread) enough to call down God's vengeance on us. One, I vividly remember, a poor traveller was taken ill on the roadside, some miles from the town, and how did those Samaritans tend him? They dug a pit and with long poles pushed him living into it and covered him up alive. But God's hand is not to be thus stayed and severely, like Sodom, did our city pay for such crimes.

Trenches were now cut across the roads in the direction in which the Cholera was said to come, for the purpose of stopping all intercourse with the infected districts. No use, no use!

One evening, we heard that a Mrs. Feeny, a very fat woman who was a music teacher, had died suddenly, and by the Doctor's orders was buried in an hour after. And with blanched faces men looked at each other and whispered Cholera, but the whisper next day deepened to a roar. And in many houses lay one, nay two or three dead. One house would be attacked and the next spared. There was no telling who would go next, and when one said goodbye to a friend, he said it as if forever.

"A City of the Dead"

In a very few days the town became like a city of the dead. No vehicles except the Cholera carts or Doctor carriages. Many fled, and many who fled were overtaken by the plague and died by the way. Some of the doctors made a good thing of it (as they said themselves) at first, but one by one they too dropped off and others came and filled the gap, and others again filled their place.

Most of the clergy of all denominations fled, and few indeed were the instances in which funeral service was read over the dead.

The great county infirmary/ Fever Hospital was turned into a Cholera hospital, but was quite insufficient to meet the requirements of the occasion. The nurses died one after another, and none could be found to fill their places but women of the worst description, who were always more than half drunk, and such scenes were perpetuated there as would make the flesh creep to hear of. One Roman Catholic priest remained (there may have been others, but I knew of this one). His name was Gilern, and he told us himself, that he was obliged to sit, day after day and night after night, on the top of the great stone stairs, with a horsewhip to prevent those wretches dragging the patients down the stairs by the legs with their heads dashing on the stone steps, before they were dead. The habit was, when a new batch arrived, for whom there were no beds, to take those who were stupefied from opium and nearest death, and to remove them to make room for the new arrivals.

"Buried Alive"

Many were said to be buried alive. A man brought his wife to the hospital on his back, and she being in great agony he tied a red neck handkerchief tightly around her waist to try and relieve the pain. When he came in the evening, he heard she was dead and lying in the dead house. He sought her body to give it a more decent burial than could be given there (the custom was to dig a large trench, put 40 or 50 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 found that there was still life. He carried her home, and she recovered and lived many years.

There was a remarkable character in the town, a man who had been a soldier (of great stature) he was usually known as Long Sergeant Cullen. He took the Cholera, and, as it was thought, died. A coffin was brought and as the coffin maker had always on hand a stock ready (as the burials followed immediately after the death) they were much of a size, and of course too short for Long Sergeant Cullen. The men, who were putting him in, when they found he would not fit, took a hammer to break his legs to make him fit. And the first blow roused the Sergeant from his stupor, and he started up and recovered. I have often and often seen the man afterwards.

But to come to our household: gradually we ceased to go out or hear what went on outside. The last evening, we were out, we went to see the family of the collector of Excise, Mr. Holmes. There was a large family, father, mother, grandmother, three or four sons, three daughters and a little grandchild. We left them all well at half past nine, and the next morning at 9 o'clock we heard that Mr Holmes, his mother, two sons, one daughter and the little child were dead and buried.

"Constant Fumigation"

After that (which occurred on the sixth day of the cholera) we stayed pretty much in the house. There was a constant fumigation kept up, plates of salt on which acid was poured from time to time, were placed outside on all the window and doors. Every morning as soon as we awoke a dose of whisky thickened with ginger was given us all in quantities according to our age.

Gradually the street in which we lived thinned out; by twos and threes our dead neighbours were carried away. One morning (the 9th day) four were carried at once dead out of the opposite house. Our neighbours on both sides died. On one side, a little girl called Sheridan was left alone sick, and we could hear her crying. I begged my mother's leave to help her. She let me go with many tears. Poor Mary died in my arms an hour after and I returned home, and being well fumigated was taken in and escaped [without catching the disease].

Some descriptions of provisions became almost impossible to get. Milk most of all, as none of the country people could be induced to come near the doomed town. We had a cow and many persons (ladies whom we did not know except by sight) used to come and beg a little milk for their young children. The jugs used to be left on the doorstep, filled and taken away.

At night many tar barrels and other combustible matters used to be burned along the streets to try and purify the air, and had a weird unearthly look, gleaming out in the darkness.

The cholera carts and cots had bells which helped to add to the horror and the coffin maker (a man named Young) used to knock at the door and enquire if any coffins were wanted. This was a climax hard to bear, few nerves could stand it. We asked him to desist. He would still come, and one day I told him if he came again I would throw water on him. Next day he knocked as usual, and out went the full of a big jug on his head. The fellow shook himself, looked up with a diabolical grin, shook his fist and said: "if you died in an hour, you shall not have a coffin". "Thank you" said I, "in that case I shan't care." He came no more.

"Evacuation To Ballyshannon"

Days now went by day, without any change. The plague was not stayed. Every morning at daybreak, a cry used to go from room to room over the house, is anyone dead, but we were mercifully spared. In our whole long street only Doctor Little's family and our own remained without loss. On some days the Cholera was more fatal than on others and on those days we could see a heavy sulphurous looking cloud hang low over the town, we heard that the birds were found dead on the shores of Lough Gill.

Early on the morning of the 14th day, my Mother heard a great commotion among the poultry in the back yard, and on going out found several of them dead or dying. We came in and said it is time for us to go pack up. So we put up a few things, sent the cow to the meadow in the neighbourhood where there was water, begged the people near to milk her and make use of the milk. And at 10am we (that is my father, mother, two brothers, myself and a servant) started on the mail coach for Ballyshannon where some of my father's friends resided, who we were sure would receive us for a few days till we could get some place to live in. It was a damp drizzling morning and we felt very miserable as if we had a forewarning of what we had before us.

All went well until we got within a mile of the village of Bundoran, about four miles from Ballyshannon when the coach was stopped by a mob of men armed with sticks, scythes and pitchforks and headed by a Doctor John Shields whom was half mad. He was the one of the first physicians and most respectable men in the country, but he did not take after his father. The coach was stopped, we were ordered out, our luggage taken off and no entreaties could prevail on those men to allow us to pass. Fear had maddened them. After long parley and many threats of vengeance of the Law our coach was allowed to proceed, and we were left on the roadside sitting on our trunks, cold, wet and hungry and well nigh hopeless. My father feared to leave us to go look for assistance, but at the end of about an hour and a half, we saw my uncle's carriage and a hack chaise coming towards us. They had heard of our situation and had come out to try to get us in, and an old servant of the family who had a livery stable brought his chaise for the sake of old times.

"Howling Like Devils"

We got into the carriages, but when we came near Ballyshannon we found we would not be allowed to remain and all we could get leave to do was to drive through the town. My uncle had an old friend in Donegal about 20 miles further on a Miss Walker and the drivers advised our going there and wrote to beg his friend would receive us for a little. Well on we went, my mother and children in the chaise and my father, the servant and luggage in the open carriage. It was now raining as if Heaven and Earth had come together and after driving about 10 miles my father took very ill. Our store of cholera medicines (without which no one moved a yard) were produced but no vessel to mix them in. So, one of the drivers ran to a cabin near in the fields and begged the loan of a mug and a little water. The woman gave it but on being returned she broke it in pieces and when offered money said that if we left it on the roadside she would take it up after a while, but feared to touch anything from our hands.

"Burn The Cholera People!"

My father's illness was not cholera, but the result of cold, anxiety and exhaustion, and he was soon well enough to get on. We entered Donegal but our arrival had been announced in some way and we found the square where we entered full of men, howling like devils. In a trice, ourselves and our luggage was taken (or rather torn) from the carriages, the luggage was piled up in the centre of the square, we placed on it and a cry went out "fire to burn the cholera people" we thought our last hour was surely come and sat as quiet as we could and tried to be resigned to our fate. Fortunately, the Officer in command of the regiment quartered in the town, was a man of promptitude and humanity. The barrack gate opened into the square, and in an incredibly short time he ordered out the men who surrounded us in the hollow square, and faced the mob on all sides with fixed bayonets. We were now comparatively safe but in what condition: cold, hungry, houseless and surrounded by a howling multitude who would not even allow us to go on. Presently a meeting of the Magistrates was held - to decide on what was to be done with us (and I regret to have to tell it of a minister of Christ) the bitterest and least merciful among them against us was the rector of the parish. In the meantime, some kind person sent us out a large jug of hot tea and a loaf which we thankfully received and which was all the food 6 persons had that day till 10 o'clock that night.

"A Medical Examination"

The Magistrates decided that we should not be allowed to pass, but be sent back by the way we came, escorted by the military to protect us from the fury of the mob. So our carriages were again packed and back we went with our escort who left us about 7 miles on the road. We now held a council of war as to what was to be done, and the drivers advise that we should wait till dark and they would drive us by a back way to our cousins house in Ballyshannon where we were sure of shelter if we could get there. They walked the horses and about 10 at night we arrived without detection and were warmly received by our cousins. We were fed and our feet bathed and beginning to feel quite comfortable, when, behold! A great uproar in the street and the voice of our old enemy Doctor John Shields, calling for us to be brought out. But now we had the best of it and our cousins refused to open the doors. The noise continued and presently the chief magistrates of the town and two doctors arrived who civilly requested admittance. They were let in on promising to abstain from violence, and we had to submit to a medical examination. We were declared free from cholera so far, but the house was put into quarantine and no one let out for some days. At the end of that time we abode in peace, till the plague was abated, and we could return to Sligo where we found the streets grass-grown and 5/8ths of the population dead and had great reason to thank God, who had spared us through such dangerous and trying times and scenes.

Sligo was said to have suffered more than any time in Great Britain from Cholera.



Eipidéim an Chalair i Sligeach in 1832:



Dracula first edition (1897)

In 1832, ba é Sligeach an baile tuaithe ba mhó a bhí buailte ag an gcalar in Éirinn agus sa Bhreatain. Taobh istigh de shé seachtaine, ceaptar go bhfuair oiread agus 1,500 duine bás ar an mbaile. Rinneadh olluaigneanna a thochailt taobh istigh den Ospidéal Fiabhrais áitiúil agus sa reilig i Mainistir Shligigh. Bhí an méid sin eagla roimh an gcalar go bhféadfadh sé gur cuireadh roinnt íospartach go róluath sa tsúil go gcuirfí cosc ar leathadh an ghalair. Ag an am, cheap mórán gur galar aeriompartha a bhí ann, ach is é fírinne an scéil gurbh uisce ólacháin éilithe ba chúis leis go príomha. Mharaigh an calar daoine ón uile aicme agus creideamh, agus roinnt mhaith dochtúirí agus altraí ina measc.

Sligo's cholera epidemic of 1832:

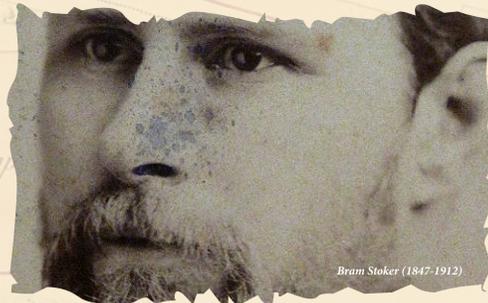


Charlotte Stoker (1818-1901). Her full account of Sligo's Cholera is reproduced here

In 1832 Sligo became the worst affected provincial town by cholera in Ireland or Britain. In six weeks, it is thought up to 1,500 people died in the town. Mass graves were created behind the local Fever Hospital and in the burial ground at Sligo Abbey. Fear of the cholera was so great that some victims may have been prematurely buried in the hopes of preventing spread of disease. At the time, most thought the disease to be airborne, when in fact it was chiefly caused by contaminated drinking water. Cholera claimed the lives of those from all classes and creeds, including many doctors and nurses.

An ceangal le 'Dracula':

Is ann do neart tuairiscí ar stair na heipidéime, ach is cuntas pearsanta tábhacht ar an eipidéim i Sligeach í an aiste a scríobh Charlotte Thornley Stoker (1818-1901) in 1873. D'éirigh léi féin agus lena teaghlach an baile a fhágáil ar deireadh, ach bhí sé riamh ciaptha ina dhiaidh mar gheall ar an méid a chonaic sí. Ba í Charlotte máthair Bram Stoker (1847-1912) agus is é Dracula an t-úrscéal is mó cáil leis (1897). Glactar leis go coitianta gur thionchar ar Dracula é an cuntas uafásach a thug máthair Stoker ar an gcalar i Sligeach.



Bram Stoker (1847-1912)

The 'Dracula' connection:

The history of the epidemic is well-documented, but an essay written in 1873 by Charlotte Thornley Stoker (1818-1901) is an important first-hand account of the epidemic in Sligo. She and her family eventually evacuated the town, but she was forever haunted by what she had witnessed. Charlotte was the mother of Bram Stoker (1847-1912), whose most famous novel is Dracula (1897). It is generally agreed that Stoker's Dracula was influenced by his mother's macabre account of Sligo's cholera.



THE APPEARANCE AFTER DEATH OF A VICTIM TO THE INDIAN CHOLERA (Wellcome Collection)

Mainistir Shligigh agus eipidéim an chalair:

Nuair a tháinig an calar chomh fada le Sligeach in 1832, níorbh fhada gur plúchadh príomhreilig an bhaile. Cé nach bhfuiltear cinnte faoi láthair thromlach na n-adhlacthaí úd, tá tuairiscí ann go raibh boladh fós ar thailte na Mainistreach sna blianta go díreach i ndiaidh na heipidéime mar gheall ar an mórán corpán arna lobhadh a cuireadh in uaigneanna éadoimhne. Moladh reilig úr in 1846 mar gheall ar an riocht 'dainséarach agus plódaithe' a bhí ar an reilig, amhail cónraí 'ag gobadh amach ón talamh mar gheall ar an easpa créafóige lena gclúdach' agus 'na mílte cnámh agus blaoscanna daonna nochta ar fud na reilige'.

Sligo Abbey and the cholera epidemic:

When cholera struck Sligo in 1832, Sligo Abbey, the main burial ground in the town, was quickly overwhelmed. Though the location of most of those burials are uncertain, it is reported that in the years immediately after the epidemic, smells still emanated from the Abbey grounds due to the many decomposing bodies that were buried in shallow pits. The 'dangerous and crowded' condition of the graveyard, including coffins protruding above the ground for want of sufficient earth to cover them' and 'thousands of human bones and skulls exposed all over' prompted calls for a new cemetery in 1846.