

## BOOK REVIEWS

In Search of Dracula: A True History of Dracula and Vampire Legends. By Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu.

Pp. 223, appendices, bibliographies, filmography, 60 black and white illustrations.

Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1972. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Thomas E. Bullard

The popularity of Dracula the Vampire stands at an all-time high today. Besides the late shows that feature him, fan clubs idolize him, magazines and comic books continue his depredations where the frequent new motion pictures that feature him leave off. Ever since Bram Stoker's novel Dracula introduced the count to the reading public in 1897, a question has lingered, asking how much of Stoker's character is history and how much is fiction. McNally and Florescu sift through documents and folklore to conclude that 1) Dracula the man did exist and rule an area of Romania through part of the 15th century, but 2) he is not and probably never has been regarded as a vampire in local folklore. Instead, 3) Stoker's novel draws together the strands of the vampire legends and stories of the historical Dracula to create a new tradition perpetuated chiefly by the movies. But lest anyone feel deprived, the fascinating feature of this book lies in the revelation of the life and deeds of Dracula the man, who, better known as Vlad the Impaler, committed such acts of terror and perversion that the mere living dead of our Nightmare Theaters presents an anemic figure in comparison.

Historical reconstruction based on 15th and 16th century chronicles as well as modern oral tradition is used to piece together an account of the man and his reign. The two-thirds of the book concerned with Dracula the man is organized as an account of his life. A scholarly concern for separating substantial history from propaganda and scare stories is maintained without overwhelming the course of an exciting narrative. Above the reconstruction of a previously shadowy history comes the authors' presentation of the man, who down to this day is regarded in oral tradition as both monster and hero. In Dracula's time Turkish invasions were a primary fact of life, one that affected him from his youth when he was held hostage until his death in battle at age forty-five. His ferocity in battle saved his Wallachian kingdom from Ottoman conquest for a while, and due to his daredevil exploits he is remembered as a hero. Paradoxically, it is the way he saved his country that helps perpetuate his memory as a monster: He impaled some 20,000 people on large wooden stakes which were set like a forest around his capital city, and the Turks fled in terror from the sight. Dracula's fondness for impalement as a mode of execution earned him his nickname, but he possessed a virtuoso imagination for the creation of novel cruelties that was matched only by the dexterity with which he found new victims -- criminals and captured Turks were always tortured, but so were noblemen and subjects pulled off the streets whose only crime was to fail at answering a riddle or to simply displease Vlad. The authors deal with Vlad both as a sadistic, sexually perverted man and as a victim of 16th century propaganda tracts, but the parts dealing with the activities of this fascinating, frightening historical character are the main attractions of this book.

The authors then investigate the question of Dracula as vampire. The folklore of the Romanian vampire is examined, and not only is Dracula not found among

their ranks, but such factors as the Turks carrying off his head to Constantinople reduce the likelihood that Vlad could become a candidate for vampirism. It is in the vampire stories that began entering western Europe through the literature of the early 19th century that we find the characteristics that led to Bram Stoker's character. Stoker's acquaintance with a Hungarian professor added knowledge of relevant folklore, of Dracula the cruel ruler, and of a Hungarian countess who bathed in the blood of young girls in order to remain young, all of which when combined with the vampire of the gothic literature tradition ended up as the novel Dracula.

A section of the book is devoted to the motion picture career of Dracula. It seems that Stoker's novel was hardly published before vampires began appearing in early films, though it was 1922 before the plot of Dracula began to appear. In that year Nosferatu appeared in Germany, a silent film that is a masterpiece still capable of frightening audiences, but due to its violation of copyright was nearly destroyed. The authors go on to discuss the most noteworthy of the vampire films, such as the 1931 Dracula that stars Bela Lugosi and the recent series of films with Christopher Lee as the count. A lengthy annotated filmography includes listings from 1896 till 1971, presenting both American and foreign products with an evaluation.

This book is a history and not primarily a work on folklore, though oral narrative contributes data to it. The study of vampirism is more literary than folkloristic, the historical reconstruction depends more on written records than on oral tradition; but a significant contribution to folklore scholarship is made when the book clarifies the position of the most famous of all popularly known vampires relative to the vampires of folklore, and shows how mass communications can serve as the medium for shaping and transmitting knowledge of the supernatural.

Anyone seeking the most scholarly possible account of Dracula will be disappointed. The authors seek to present an exciting narrative of battles, cruelties, and interesting if somewhat speculative interpretations without encumbering the flow of the account with rigorous justification or exhaustive alternative explanations. In spite of the exciting popular history nature of the book, quite a bit of scholarly apparatus has been included -- the already-mentioned filmography is joined by a thorough bibliography, while translations of German and Russian chronicles are included in the appendix, as are transcriptions of material gathered from Romanian oral tradition. The authors do not swallow the most garish reports for the sake of a more sensational book, but they in fact evaluate the data they incorporate. However, the reader often must accept the accuracy of their judgment, since criteria and argument are sketchy if given at all. Relevant background data on such topics as the Turkish threat and the life of Bram Stoker is included, and the book is not simply a gathering of facts but rather an integrated effort to prove theses on the nature of Dracula the man and his relationship to the novel. Disappointingly, little is said about the current Dracula craze, with comic books and even TV's own Dark Shadows series going unmentioned. The authors mercifully make no attempt at profound psychological analysis, but limit their work to the historical and literary scholarship for which they are trained. Many illustrations of Dracula and landmarks associated with him are included, along with frames from notable films. The book qualifies to be read both as entertaining and as a source of information on a fearsome man of the past and a thriving legend of today.