

# INTERVIEWS

**S**omewhat fittingly, Belfast-born Sean Hillen is bemoaning the fact that the fog surrounding his Gaeltacht home is so thick he won't be able to go out on his boat and catch dinner. Hillen, whose work as a journalist has seen him cover the Troubles; the Communist regime in Romania and the Gulf War, lived for almost twenty-years in the vampire heartland of Transylvania, a correspondent for The Times. He is the author of 'Digging for Dracula', a book which charts the former Times journalist's strange, humorous adventures in search of the long-toothed creature in Transylvania, Ireland and America, published in 1997, the centennial of the publication of Bram Stoker's gothic classic. It seems the Irishman's links with the Count were inescapable...

## Is it true that your dad looked like Christopher Lee?

Sometimes I wonder how on God's earth my mother managed to have five children. He looked like Lee who she didn't like; she hated Dracula! When he came on TV at the weekend, she would literally within seconds stand up, move out of the living room and head for the kitchen and put on music, one of the Rat Pack singers.

## Where did the idea for this book come from?

I was working in Romania at the time, but I hadn't even read the novel Dracula. Like most people, I'd heard the story, read a few pages, seen some movies. What really ignited the spark dramatically was when The Times of London asked me to cover the first World Congress of Dracula. I was amazed at the number of people that turned up, from all over the world, and their intelligence. They were bright, creative and they came and paid a lot of money to little old Bucharest - where nobody ever came at all.

## Tourism hadn't arrived yet?

Not at all. Romania had a very bad image; people would associate the country with two things: street children and AIDS. So it made these people who came for a Dracula convention all the more incredible. The Times then wanted more and more stories that particular week - which you'd normally only be asked for in a war zone like Israel. So I wrote four pieces. Think of The



Times and the solemnity of that paper, and then my editorial, which was on Dracula and vampires!

## Did you begin to have a taste (excuse the pun) for all things Dracula?

Well yes, because I got speaking to these people, about the things they did, the societies they belonged to. Then it dawned on me that I was the only Irish writer living in Romania, married to a woman from Transylvania, and that the author of Dracula, Bram Stoker, was also from Ireland. Between this point and writing the book was about three years later, as it was the centennial of Stoker's classic - a great time to write the book, it came once in a lifetime!

## You say our fascination with Dracula and vampires is "the fact that people love to have the sh\*\* scared out of them"!

Ha! I don't like watching horror movies, myself, strangely... But the attraction is linked to our fascination with death and where we're going - if anywhere. Secondly, our fear about where we might go makes us want to

not go anywhere. Thirdly, it's about sex, eroticism, being bitten in the neck and what that could lead to. That's a pleasing thought to a lot of people! The Catholic Church banned Dracula when it came out for those sexual overtones.

## You meet some fascinating people in your book...

That's right, like the man who has unfortunately since passed-away, that lived in California. He was married to the sister of the Shah of Iran, and then married a well-known Italian actress. Nice guy, but he would dress up as Dracula, and was involved in the biggest garlic festival in the world. He offered €10,000 to the person who would bring him a real-life vampire, and lined up doctors to authenticate the find.

## You seem to have a very humorous way of writing...

There are several ways one can react to life, and often it depends on what experiences you've already been through. In my case, growing up in West Belfast there were bombs and bullets. My mother worked in the Emergency Room at a hospital, so you can imagine the stories she came home with. Then I worked as a medical writer in the US, so I was seeing horrible stuff in American hospitals; then I covered the Iraq War, the Romanian revolution... These things either drag you down or you come out the other side with a finer perspective on life, and humour about the good things life can offer.

## What is Transylvania like as a destination these days?

It reminds me a little of Northern Ireland; it has an image problem which is getting better, but it's a slow process. The North has always been and still is to a certain extent a well-kept secret. People used to be scared to go there. That's the same as Romania; people don't know about the hundreds of kilometres of Black Sea beaches, the rugged mountains where time seems to have stood still, and the Danube Delta, the largest Delta in Europe.

*For more information and to buy your copy of 'Digging For Dracula', visit [www.diggingfordracula.com](http://www.diggingfordracula.com). Halloween Offer: the book-in-a-coffin Digging for Dracula is available for €19.95 instead of €29.95 (plus P&P) until Oct 30th 09.*

**N**ever mind the teen swoon-inducing Twilight and HBO's True Blood - Bram Stoker was the man that first brought the sexy concept of vampirism to life (or is that death?). 'Dracula: The Un-Dead' by Dacre Stoker - the Canadian great-grand-nephew of the famed novelist - is being advertised as the 'official sequel' to 'Dracula' and has been endorsed by the Stoker Estate. One of the biggest-selling books after the Bible, any follow-up to the Gothic classic novel was going to be a huge deal. 'Dracula: The Un-Dead', written one hundred years on, has already caused a huge splash in the publishing world, and they say a movie is already on the cards.

The 49-year-old's sequel kicks off in 1912, 24 years after 'Dracula' ends, and revisits the characters of Mina and Jonathan Harker, Dr. Jack Seward, Arthur Holmwood and vampire hunter extraordinaire, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, but - though its style is very close - it brings in elements that are more shocking to a modern reader, such as the details of Seward's morphine addiction, and the lesbian misadventures of the deadly 16th-century Hungarian countess Elizabeth Bathory. Without giving the game away, it is the character of Dracula himself that has been, ahem, re-vamped the most...

More something I haven't been too bothered with. As a child growing up in Canada other people would bring it to our attention, especially around Halloween time, when they'd joke and go 'Ooh Stoker, what happens if we go trick or treating at your house?! As I got to drinking age they'd go, 'What are you going to have, a Bloody Mary?' There were those pokes and prods from friends, but us Canadians are pretty humble. It's best to stand on your own merits.

## Has the Stoker legacy ever felt like a burden?

When screenwriter Ian [Holt] got a hold of me! Ian had been a real Dracula buff growing up, and he went off to Dracula 97, the 100th anniversary in LA and found a Stoker, but she wasn't sure how she was related to the clan. She introduced him to my uncle Patrick, who said he wasn't really interested, as Hollywood hadn't treated the Stokers very well! Ian found me, and to cut a long story short told me he was a screenwriter, he wanted to write a story and he wanted a Stoker involved. I said "Yeah, I've never written a story - let's fumble through this together!"

## When did that change?

So you started throwing ideas around... Yes, and we both had our own ideas ... I didn't know much about Bram or Dracula. I did one paper in college, which looked at some of the motivations Bram may have had to write his

**THE** **SHELLEY MARSDEN** talks to Sean Hillen, author of 'Digging For Dracula'

**HILLEN** **KIND**