

**'How strangely things come back to one'
"Bones and I" or, The Skeleton at Home**

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The Crimean War (1854-56) initiated an uneasy clash of cultures for England, perhaps especially with its main allies, France and Turkey. These were not easy bedfellows: England's last military campaign had been fought against France in the Peninsular Wars (1808 – 1814) whilst the British conviction that Turkey had 'sunk, not into mere violent savagery, but into effete and profligate luxury' (Kingsley) were confirmed by even more disparaging journalistic reports and published letters from the Crimea.

The war was also peculiarly well placed both temporally and geographically to contribute to the already vigorous genre of vampire stories developing in Europe over the nineteenth century. Centring on the Black Sea and the Balkan Peninsula, the Crimean War required the British and French armies to be carried into the heart of Vampire folklore (Jones 412). Sailing via Marseilles and Constantinople, the troopships landed at the Bulgarian port of Varna. *The Times* war correspondent covering the Crimea, William Howard Russell, made the seaport infamous in his sensational accounts of Varna's insanitary conditions. At the close of the century, Varna reappears as the port from which Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' launches his own highly infectious assault against England in the *Demeter*.

Immediately to the north of Varna lay Wallachia and Moldavia (both with a long tradition of Vampire belief; Wilkinson 221), with Transylvania lying immediately inland of these to the north of the Danube. Whilst Jimmie Cain cites the 'generalised Russophobia permeating British society since the Crimean War' (108-9) as an early influence upon the youthful Bram Stoker it is remarkable that so little critical attention has been given to the cultural sparks which that

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collision of empires, old and new, must have struck. One such encounter in which the war's influence is discernable is in George Whyte-Melville's *A Vampire*, a story which appears in a series of quasi-philosophical discussions called, "Bones and I" or, *The Skeleton at Home*' (1869).

George Whyte-Melville (1821-78) achieved immediate success as a writer of fox-hunting stories with his first novel 'Digby Grand' in 1854. Having served as a captain in the Coldstream Guards between 1846 -1849 he volunteered as a major of irregular Turkish cavalry when the Crimean war began. "Bones and I" or, *The Skeleton at Home*' is an anomaly to the corpus of his work since it is far from the worlds of the hunting field or the historical romance. Instead "Bones and I" centres upon an urban recluse who lives in a small, modern villa situated in a London *cul de sac* looking out upon 'the dead wall at the back of an hospital'. The narrator is a skilful digressionist who holds an uneasy court with "Bones", a skeleton who resides in a cupboard. The trope of the "skeleton-in-the-cupboard" seems to have entered into common usage in the early nineteenth century, perhaps from a story that circulated in the American South of the drowning and post-mortem preservation of a slave. It usually implies the existence of some generally domestic guilty secret hidden within all families, but Whyte-Melville makes it clear that his "Bones" is an acquisition, he has been 'brought home' (12). Although he is occasionally referred to as a 'specimen', there are times when we learn more of his identity, especially in this chapter called, 'A Vampire'.

'A Vampire' begins with the 'I' of the book's title in idle contemplation of his skeletal companion and picking up, 'a Turkish coin of small value and utterly illegible inscription' which has dropped from the chimney-piece. This souvenir, whose description neatly suggests both the traduced status of the Ottoman Empire and its incomprehensibility to the West, initiates the narrator's memories of riding the 'yellow wave of the Danube' eastwards past a fortress manned with 'Turkish sentries' to the 'thronging.. market-place of Belgrade'. There, he recalls, with mathematical insistence, the signs of a

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'decimation' of the populace through what the native inhabitants believe to be 'supernatural visitation' and the narrator ascribes to 'epidemic disease'. Whyte-Melville describes the belief system which governs the interactions of the vampire and its victims in terms which both demonstrate his knowledge of the particular folklore of Belgrade and which encapsulate the vampire's position as being engaged in what he describes as 'a continual warfare against its kind.(66-72)

Having listened politely to this minor monograph and upon being asked if he believes in vampires, 'Bones' launches into a vampire narrative of his own. His is of a predictably 'wild, unearthly beauty' and a widow, Madame *de* (sic) St. Croix (but an 'Englishwoman nonetheless'), whom 'Bones' first meets in his fleshier days of 'early manhood'(73-75). Her standing as a vampire, whilst it is suggested in a number of ways: by the title, the framing narrative and by the fact that *this* narrative is being related by a reanimated skeleton (!) is never confirmed. Some further provenance for her vampiric status is provided by Whyte-Melville's descriptions which also place Madame *de* St. Croix as a borrowed work of art. Whyte-Melville's painterly description of her,



Straight nose, thin and delicately cut, large black eyes, regular eyebrows, faultless chin, terminating a complete oval, the whole set in a frame of jet-black hair (74),

is both a textual distillation of the central figure in Edgar Allan Poe's vampire story, *Ligeia* (1838), and a sketched facsimile of the seventeenth century *Madame de St. Croix* in Antonius

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Van Dyke's painting of the same name. As such she acts as a signifier which seems continually about to float free of its moorings; her name is an enjoined one and the italicised possessive '*de*' adds a visual/textual emphasis to her objectification and, by implication, her successful resistance to it. Her companion's remark that *St. Croix* is only a designation she bears 'at present' also lends weight to the reader's sense of her as a nomadic '*femme fatale*', literally a '*deadly woman*', dangerously seductive and sexually insatiable.

The story contains no supernatural, marvellous or miraculous elements apart from the undeniably compelling one that Madame *de* St. Croix remains youthful throughout a period spanning two, possibly three decades during which she brings ruin (rather than supernatural infection) to a train of male lovers whom 'Bones' stumbles across at various times in Vienna, Paris, on a 'Peninsular and Oriental steamer', and lastly in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace. What is interesting here is that Whyte-Melville, by investing the stereotypical *femme fatale* with supernatural overtones but keeping her free from the baggage of Gothic occultism (and remarkably free from narrative censure), creates and maintains an interpretive ambiguity throughout the entire story, inviting it to be read both as a contemporary fable *and* as a displaced gothic myth. This bifurcation acts to undermine the reader's sceptical resistance to the uncanny. Whyte-Melville's 'A Vampire' emerges from this tension in some ways as a peculiarly modern narrative; for instance, it offers no resolution, Gothic or otherwise, to restore 'normality' or offer closure to the reader. At the finish, Madame *de* St. Croix simply walks away from the now bath-chair bound 'Bones' into the London autumn sunshine, as unrepentant, as modern and as youthful as ever.

If we accept that this *is* a vampire story then it seriously undermines the claims made by critics such as Valerie Clemens that 'Stoker's [Dracula] was the first to be placed within the context of modern urban life.' (Clemens 205) If we remember, too, that Madame *de* St. Croix is a free, independent woman, travelling alone and is in receipt of only slightly

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mitigated approval by this mid-nineteenth century narrative, then it becomes imperative to interrogate her function in the story in relation to Whyte-Melville's historical moment.

Seen in the light of Whyte-Melville's wartime experiences, it is notable that Madame de St. Croix's string of male lovers, by dint of their racial origins if nothing else, are all threaded on the common strand of the Crimean War. The first of them is an Hungarian Count ('Count V'), the next, a Russian [described as both a 'magnate' (Whyte-Melville 80) and a 'general' (90)], followed by a colonel in the French army, then an unspecified and presumably British businessman and lastly an, 'English..boy.. a poet.. high-spirited, agreeable and unaffected'.(101) There is already a pattern here; a trajectory that begins with the older players from the theatre of the Crimea and ends at 'home' with the Romantic youth of a new generation of Englishmen, relaxing at the heart of British Imperial sovereignty, Hampton Court Palace. It may be profitable then to explore the nemeses Madame de St. Croix visits upon each of her 'victims' in the context of the parts they played in the conflict.

To take each as they appear, the Hungarian Count V— is described by Hughes, the blustering, 'unpaid attaché' (93) at the Embassy in Vienna, as, 'almost like an Englishman' (84), but not *quite*, obviously, as Hughes is recounting the Count's death in a pistol duel with his rival, the unnamed Russian General/magnate. The match is seen as unequal, the Russian is reputedly 'the best shot in Europe' (84), and Hughes laments that the Hungarian,

Never got *one* in at all! ...'I've seen both the seconds since. They were to walk up to a handkerchief, and the Russian pottedhim at forty yards the first step he made. They may say what they like about the row originating in politics
– I know better.

They quarrelled because Madame de St. Croix had left V— and taken up with this snub-nosed Tartar. (85)

That 'the row' could have 'originated in politics' is evidence of

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the story's underlying historical resonance but there is also an interesting ambivalence overlaying Whyte-Melville's stereotypical representation of the romanticised Hungarian. Whilst the Count is,

Handsome, manly, rich, affectionate, sincere, worshipping his deity with all the reckless devotion.. of his brave Hungarian heart (78),

'Bones' also considers him, '..a fool..' who, when faced with the troubling vision of the Russian and Madame de St. Croix together at the opera, stands in the doorway racked by indecision, 'gnawing the corners of his brown moustache'. (82)

Austro-Hungary maintained a positive neutrality towards Russia in the Crimean War at first but later sealed agreements with England and the allied armies against the Czar. While Austria's eventual demand that the Russians withdraw from Silistria across the Danube was crucial in averting an early Russian advance on the Turkish capital it was also widely felt that, as Julian Spilsbury suggests, 'had Austria acted earlier, the entire war might have been avoided.' (Spilsbury 17) Austria was, thus, compromised in its position; drawing veiled criticism from one side and outright hostility from the Czar on the other who, accordingly, threatened 'severe punishment of perfidious Austria.' (Kopecszi) Seen in the light of Austro-Hungary's shifting position in the war, Bones' vision of the Count as,

a stag I once found lying dead in a Styrian pass (with) a golden eagle feasting on him with her talons buried in his heart (81),

begins to invite another interpretation of the story as a political allegory, especially if we remember that the double headed Eagle (that looks both East and West) was then as it is once again, the Russian heraldic emblem.

'Little' Hughes, 'who earned just as much as he received' acts as a mouthpiece for a particular kind of bigotry which Whyte-Melville's narrative seems to license even as it censures. Hughes' denigration of the Russian as a 'snub-nosed Tartar' comes in addition to an earlier reference to him as, '..this cursed Calmuck' (84). These racial insults, if we

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accept their accuracy, also place the Russian in a somewhat equivocal light. The Crimean Tartars were the remnants of the Turkic speaking Tatar Empire who merged with the Mongols of Jenghiz Khan, expanding westward into the Caucasus in 1241. They were the last 'Tater' state to be annexed to Russia in 1783 and the Crimean War caused an exodus of many but not all of the remaining Crimean 'Taters' to Turkey (Rorlich). The ethnonym is complicated by Hughes' additional epithet, 'Calmuck' ; another earlier Tartar tribe whom mid-nineteenth century accounts describe as 'Scythians.. expelled from China' (Vincent 705) and about whom earlier sources (Anonymous) claim that they 'acknowledge themselves subjects of Russia'. That the Russian in the narrative belongs to these is evidenced by the fact that he is described as having been subsequently and, perhaps, somewhat ungraciously, 'banished to Siberia' (Whyte-Melville 90), thus doubling the implication of Russian discredit.

Ten years later, 'Bones' meets Madame *de St. Croix* strolling in the gardens of the Tuileries 'listening quietly and indolently' to the French colonel, '..an old and intimate friend by whose side I had experienced more than one strange adventure in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor' (78). Again, Whyte-Melville's Frenchman almost qualifies as an Englishman, '..fond of society, field-sports, speculation and travelling; essentially *bon camarade*, but thoroughly French in his reflections and opinions.' (78) But again, the Frenchman is 'fool enough to sacrifice both fortune and oppression for her sake.' (91)

As always, Whyte-Melville's concern is to suggest the congenital weaknesses at the heart of all those who Madame *de St. Croix* marks for her own and, in the case of the French colonel, it is his vanity and his juvenile credulousness – he was, '...like a poodle, perfectly childish about her, utterly contemptible.' (91) His fate at Madame *de St. Croix*'s hand is honourable but doomed; he is 'reinstated in the French army and appointed to a regiment of Chasseurs d'Afrique then serving in Algeria' (91) where we learn that he, '...solved the great problem in an affair of outposts with the Khabyles' (92)

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the reader might be inclined to take the 'problem' reference as a euphemism for death, but the point cannot be proven. That it is the Chasseurs d'Afrique that he joins does contribute to the possibility of 'A Vampire's' potential as a veiled political allegory.

The Chasseurs d'Afrique were the French colonial cavalry which Lord Raglan said were 'on the left' in his fatally ambivalent order that sent the Light Brigade charging towards the Russian guns at Balaklava. The part they played in the attack was recognised by Lord Lucan as the manoeuvre that 'prevented the destruction of the Light Brigade' (Spilsbury 181) since they effectively disabled the Russian Fediukine battery on the left of the valley. It is at the head of that cavalry that Whyte-Melville sends him toward death and/or glory against the Khabyles (Berber tribesmen fighting against French colonisation).

'Bones' penultimate meeting with Madame *de St. Croix* occurs upon a 'Peninsular and Oriental steamer' sailing toward Athens. 'Having ventured mind and body in the great conflict' (93), Whyte-Melville elects to return his narrator towards the Black Sea and the Crimean Peninsula on the preferred mode of transport for British officers serving in the war. When, at last, he emerges from his cabin he sees Madame *de St. Croix* absorbed in the pages of a 'yellow-bound French novel.' (94) She is 'good enough to recognise (him) on this occasion,' and gives him 'a large share of her conversation and companionship' and he owns to appreciate why 'so many had succumbed' toward the 'power' of her 'spell'. (94) At Athens she joins a 'trim, rakish-looking English yacht' and its owner, a businessman 'of unfailing success in commerce' the nature of which and whose origins Whyte-Melville leaves obscure, but within a short paragraph 'Bones' has seen the yacht,

...sold at Southampton, for her late owner's name had appeared in the 'Gazette,' and the man himself, I was told, might be found looking very grey and careworn, setting cabbages at Hanwell, watching eagerly for the arrival of a

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lady who never came. (96)

The relevance of this to the possibility of political allegory underpinning the story is unclear at best, but this incident may have two important correlations; Lord Cardigan, who led the suicidal charge of the Light Brigade and who left for home within a month of that catastrophe was known contemptuously among the troops as 'the noble yachtsman' since he habitually dined and slept upon his luxuriously appointed yacht in the harbour at Balaklava. Since Whyte-Melville was unlikely to make too plain an insinuation against the notoriously litigious Lord the unidentified figure in the story may also more obviously represent the relatively new breed of financial speculators who profited from the war. The Crimean War, like most others, was an economic as much as military enterprise and although British policy in this regard shifted considerably over the duration of the conflict and 'business as usual' was not (England's) motto' (Anderson 275) the blockade of Russian exports created shifts in international fortunes and, for instance, afforded American wheat suppliers their chance to expand overseas. Speculation in war is inevitable and it may be that this 'man of commerce' in Melville's story, who ends his days working in the market garden of Hanwell asylum in Ealing, earns himself a peculiarly apposite justice at the hands of Madame de St. Croix.

Freud's concept of 'The "Uncanny"', which plays upon the interdependence of the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, where 'what is originally homely, a place with which we are familiar, becomes unhomely through the process of repression', may give some account of Madame de St. Croix's appearance in the Gardens of Hampton Court Palace. It may mark what Ruth Parkin-Gounelas refers to as 'the crucial moment of defamiliarization to which all Gothic returns' (Parkin-Gounelas 132) but to what does she now lay claim? It may be one thing for Madame de St. Croix to bring ruin upon the foreign players in the empire driven enterprise that was the Crimean War, but her sudden appearance in the London autumn sunshine

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in possession of an English 'boy' who she avows, 'must take his chances with the rest', marks something of a departure or perhaps a reinsertion into the Gothic; of the vampire who must prey upon its young. As such, Madame de St. Croix bears some tantalising concordances with Queen Victoria, herself a widow since 1861, whose portraits at this period bear a striking resemblance to the Madame de St. Croix in Van Dyke's painting and Melville's descriptions. It is also notable that the Queen's portrait in profile on British coins between 1838 and 1868 ages as little as Madame de St. Croix herself.



Indeed, Madame de St. Croix's name lends itself readily to this interpretation as a representation of the cross of St. George as the basis of the Union Jack. Perhaps, in some sense then, Madame de St. Croix may be a latent portrayal of the monarch as a devourer of her subjects engaged, like the vampires of Belgrade, in 'a continual warfare against its kind'.

It is this young Englishman's 'pool of blood upon his

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carpet' (Whyte-Melville 100) which makes the final image of the story but, again, Whyte-Melville maintains his interpretive ambiguity by suggesting both suicide and vampirism in his quotation from Tennyson's 'Lady Clara Vere de Vere' (1842)

'There was that across his throat
Which you had hardly cared to see'

The question raised in parliament on 26 January 1855, which asked why, out of after the 54,000 who had been sent to the East, only 14,000 British troops were left under arms, was an enquiry which led directly to the resignation of the Aberdeen government. It was also a situation which led to the enlisting of 'raw recruits, mere boys with a low chance of survival in the Russian winter' to be hastily shipped to the Crimea (Keller 19) when many mature commissioned officers had absented themselves from the war on the pretext of having 'Urgent Private Affairs' which required their presence at home. Whyte-Melville's story ends with these words about Madame *de St. Croix* which, read in the light of the narrative's Crimean connections, throw into relief the interstices of a text liberally scarred by the first modern, mechanised war in history.

'I wanted to know something more of Madame *de St. Croix*, but he was not listening; he paid no attention to my question. In a tone of abstraction that denoted his thoughts were many miles away, he only murmured,

Insatiate – impenetrable – pitiless. The others were bad enough in all conscience, but I think she might have spared the boy! (Whyte-Melville 101)

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