

Blidworth and District Historical & Heritage Society

Lord Byron and John Polidori

Being still unable to hold our monthly member's meetings, here we offer a piece loosely based upon a talk to our members by Prof Franklin Bishop in October 2016. Entitled "The Vampire of Newstead Abbey"

John William Polidori was one of the earliest pupils at Ampleforth College North Yorkshire from 1804 -1810, he later went on to the University of Edinburgh, where he received his degree as a doctor of medicine on 1 August 1815, at age 19.

He was offered the position of traveling physician to Lord Byron. Polidori was ambitious, well-educated and handsome. Over the objections of his family, he accepted. Polidori had literary ambitions; here was an amazingly famous poet asking him to join him on a tour of Europe. It must have felt like fate was tugging him along. A publisher offered him 500 pounds to keep a diary of his travels with the poet.

It was Spring 1816, and Byron was leaving England forever, never to return, a cloud of infamy hanging over him. He had a carriage made, modeled after Napoleon's. The carriage was so overloaded it kept breaking down. The doctor kept breaking down too, with spells of dizziness and fainting, and for some time the roles became reversed with Byron playing the physician and Polidori the patient. They progressed this way through Belgium and then up the Rhine until they reached their hotel in Geneva.

Byron rented a house Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva where the pair met Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, with her soon to become husband Percy Shelley. Also present was Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont the soon to become the mother of Lord Byron's daughter Allegra.



The Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva

One evening in June, because of the inclement weather, Byron suggests each write a ghost story to scare the others. Mary and Percy worked together on a tale, and then, many nights later, in a state between waking and a dream, Mary had the vision that led to her masterpiece, Frankenstein, the story of a scientist who stitched together a monster to whom he gave life.

Byron began to write an unfinished horror story which he suitably entitled, "Fragment of a Novel" and "The Burial: A Fragment". The main character, Augustus Darvell, was later used by Polidori. First appearing in print in 1819, in John William Polidori's "The Vampyre", which became the first modern vampire story published in English.

Polidori and Byron parted ways in September 1816, after five difficult months in each other's company. Polidori traveled on into Italy where he took on a few more patients before returning to England. He left medicine and began studying law.

Polidori's association with Byron brought him a degree of notoriety with the British public, and taking advantage of the publicity he began to write his own stories using inspirations gained during his late evening discussions with Lord Byron, Mary and Percy Shelley.

His most successful work was the short story "The Vampyre". Although, the writing was at first erroneously attributed to Lord Byron possibly due to a prejudice from Byron's fame. His story, "The Vampyre", was published, without his permission, in the April 1819 issue of New Monthly Magazine. Polidori complained at the attribution, and Byron himself insisted that he was not the author. Polidori acknowledged that some elements of the story came from Byron, but insisted that the form and writing of it was his.

The story in no way detracts from the more well-known 1897 version by Bram Stoker. Just to hear the word "Dracula" invokes for many the image of a black-and-white, cape-clad, fang-bearing man moving slowly yet surely toward his next feed.

John Murray, Lord Byron's publisher, saw potential in the work and wrote a long satirical epistle to Polidori. (A poem or other literary work in the form of a letter) The first verse reads as follows;

*Dear Doctor, I have read your play,
Which is a good one in its way,-
Purges the eyes and moves the bowels,
And drenches handkerchiefs like towels
With tears, that, in a flux of grief,
Afford hysterical relief
To shatter'd nerves and quicken'd pulses,
Which your catastrophe convulses.*

The characters in Polidori's story, his friendship with Mary Shelley and even the name "Polidori", lived on for a great many years. Various authors of books, stage plays, films and TV productions use character names and situations associated with Polidori, Vampires and Frankenstein.

A character named Polidori appears in the 2020 Doctor Who episode "The Haunting of Villa Diodati", which depicts him as a sleepwalker. Doctor Who takes her companions to meet Lord Byron Percy Shelley, Mary and John Polidori.

The character, Polidori also appears in an episode of CBBC children's television show, Horrible Histories, entitled Staggering Storytellers.

Polidori is portrayed in a sketch of the animated series "Frankenhole", and is a regular character portrayed as the immortal lab assistant of Dr Frankenstein. He acts as a conscience for Frankenstein. A voice of reason, "Polly Dolly" (as Frankenstein calls him). Dr John Polidori was the antagonist in the fifth season of "The X-Files" episode, "The Post-Modern Prometheus".

John William Polidori died in 1821 aged just 26. According to his family, he committed suicide by swallowing prussic acid. At the inquest a family servant said that Polidori had recently suffered a head injury after being thrown out of his gig.

The Italian writer and niece of Polidori, William Rossetti, became the editor of Polidori's diaries, although, he never knew his uncle.

Lord Byron died three years after Polidori, from a fever after having traveled to Greece to help fight for Greek independence. Long after news of Byron's death reached England, people still reported seeing him on the street.