

The Invisible Hand of the Vampire

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PROTECT THE LIVING.

BY MICHAEL BLANDING

It must have been a somber procession that trudged through South Cemetery in Belchertown, Massachusetts, on the morning of July 21, 1788. Justus Forward, the town's Congregationalist minister, stopped before his 21-year-old daughter's grave. Surrounded by his parishioners, he signaled to start digging.

Not so long ago, the Reverend Forward had been the father of eight living children. But three had died of an illness that had turned them pale and thin, eventually filling their lungs with blood and slowly suffocating them. And now another daughter had just begun coughing up blood.

With an invisible malevolence stalking his family, Forward had to do something, he later wrote to a friend in Stockbridge. He "had consulted many about opening graves of some of the deceased," he explained, "to see whether there were any signs of the dead preying on the living."

The townspeople had first exhumed his mother-in-law, who had been buried three years ago in the old cemetery up in Hatfield, thinking if anyone was tormenting the family from beyond the grave, it would be her. But they just found a desiccated skeleton, her face fallen in, with some residue of lungs that "seemed like meal, a little wettish."

Now prying open the coffin of Forward's daughter Martha, who'd died almost six years ago, they found a corpse shockingly less decomposed. She had always been "considerably fleshy," Forward thought; but her lungs and liver seemed strangely intact even after all those years in the ground. He told the town physician, Dr. Amasa

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MAURA INTERNANNI/GLOBE STAFF/ADOBE

Scott, to open the body. As he cut into the lungs, Scott discovered coagulated blood inside—“perhaps several spoonfuls” in all—which he judged to be no more than 26 hours old, evidence of life within the corpse.

A graduate of Yale Divinity School, Forward tried to rationalize the difference in decomposition between the two bodies, thinking perhaps it was due to soil quality—Hatfield was sandy and loamy, while Belchertown was gravelly “with many roundish stones.”

But the man of God couldn’t rule out the other possibility: His daughter was a vampire.

FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS, in the 18th- and 19th-centuries, a vampire scare gripped rural New England, with townsfolk believing that invisible spirits were preying on their loved ones. The belief grew from fear of another invisible killer, consumption, a disease that took its name from the way it consumed victims from the inside out. By the mid-19th century, scientists had given it another name: tuberculosis.

At the time, the disease was the most common cause of death in the United States, ravaging whole families as husbands and wives, sons and daughters grew pale and wasted away. In a desperate attempt to stop a sickness that seemingly descended without cause, some resorted to extreme measures, digging up deceased kin to check for liquid blood in their heart or lungs, seen as evidence of a kind of demonic possession.

“Sometimes they called it an ‘evil angel’ inhabiting the body,” says folklorist Michael Bell, “draining the life out of a living family member.” He stands at the site of the 1788 exhumation on a bright October day, with the foliage just beginning to turn at the fringes of the burial ground. Nearby, a giant white oak that may have been a sapling 235 years ago spreads its branches over Reverend Forward’s family plot, including the crooked, lichen-covered headstone of his married daughter, Martha Dwight, one of the earliest known “vampires” in New England.

Thin, with pale features and a shock of white hair, Bell might seem a touch vampiric himself, if not for the animated way the 80-year-old talks about the belief. Unlike “your average Dracula,” Bell says, “Nobody ever came out of the grave.” Instead, the evil spirit was thought to drain the family member’s life by “sympathetic connection” without leaving the ground. “And that to me is much more frightening,” Bell says. “If you see something you have a chance to name it, to ward it off, to kill it.”

Once a body had been exhumed, villagers performed a ritual to sever the spirit’s connection, often burning organs or the entire corpse, and sometimes making living relatives inhale the smoke or ingest the ashes. In Martha’s case, Forward oversaw the placing of his daughter’s decomposed liver and lungs into a special box, which was then reburied about

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MICHAEL BELL AT THE GRAVE OF MARTHA DWIGHT, EXHUMED BY HER FAMILY IN 1788.

a foot above her coffin.

Bell started investigating vampires in New England in 1981, when he led a grant to explore the folklife of Southern Rhode Island. For his doctorate at Indiana University, he’d studied voodoo practices in the American South. So he was intrigued when one of his interns discovered a local character in Exeter, Rhode Island, named Everett Peck, a fount of local lore. The intern told Bell enigmatically, “Be sure to ask him about his family vampire!” Bell barely had time to turn on his tape recorder before Peck launched into a story about an ancestor, Mercy Brown, a 19-year-old consumption victim exhumed in 1892 under suspicion of draining the life from her brother.

Intrigued, Bell began digging, finding several contempo-

aneous accounts backing up the tale, including a scholarly article in an anthropological journal of the day, and a lurid newspaper article in *The Providence Journal*. Soon, he was unearthing similar tales all over New England, describing 20 of them in his 2001 book, *Food for the Dead*. In the two decades since, he’s found 87 in all, gathering them in a new book, *Vampire’s Grasp*, slated to be published next year.

While accounts of vampirism span New England, with some even in New York and Pennsylvania, the epicenter is Southern Rhode Island, home to 17 cases. “I think Rhode Island was more open to what we’d call a magical worldview,” says Bell, who lives part-time in Cranston, and notes that the state was originally founded by heretics fleeing Puritan Massachusetts. “People were more unfettered in their beliefs.”

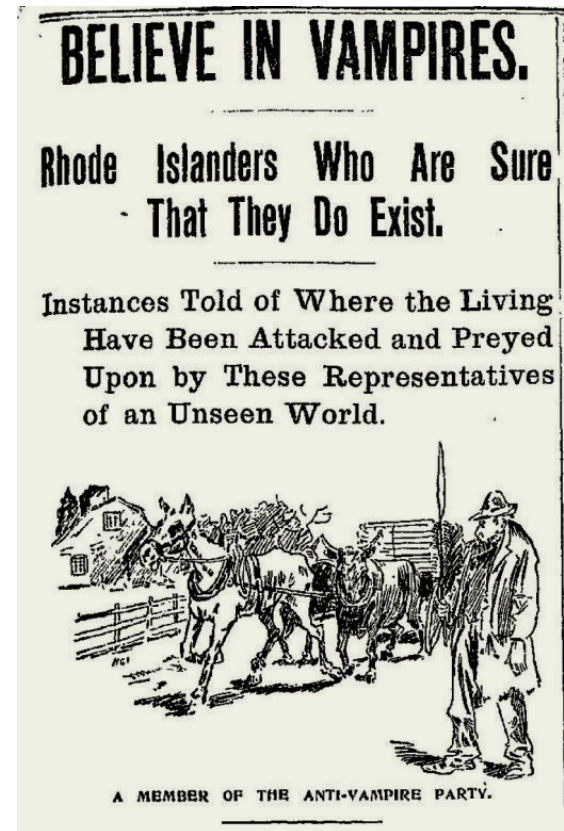
Bell can’t say where the superstition originally came from; he finds no trace of similar practices in England. In the earliest case in the United States, from Willington, Connecticut, a town official complains of a “quack doctor, a foreigner” who persuaded Isaac Johnson to exhume his family members in 1784. Bell speculates the practice arrived during the American Revolution, brought by Hessian mercenaries who transplanted Central European folk cures to New England soil.

After that, the practice spread from town to town. In another case in Cornwall, Connecticut, farmer Eliza Ford saw her father and five brothers and sisters die, before a visiting stranger searching for new cow pasture told her about the ritual—Eliza dug up her sister Emily in 1869. Two years later in Pennsylvania, a transplanted Rhode Islander advertised in the local newspaper that he’d be disinterring several family members. Some 100 curious neighbors showed up to observe.

EXHUMATIONS WERE USUALLY shared only within families or local communities, unlike the very public witch trials in Salem that preceded them, which is why many New Englanders have never heard of them. “I think the experience was so traumatizing, it didn’t really make it into local folklore the way ghost stories or even witch stories did,” says Faye Ringel, an expert on gothic horror. Today, we might “associate this with Halloween and a thrilling, pleasurable terror,” she says. But if you lived at the time, “It’s just scary, one of those beliefs you lived with and hoped you wouldn’t have to act upon, but you might.”

Ringel first came across the belief in H.P. Lovecraft’s novella *The Shunned House*, where he refers to the vampire myth as the “Exeter superstition,” in reference to the southern Rhode Island town. She didn’t know what that meant until working at the *Norwich Bulletin* in Connecticut the 1960s, when she came across an old article about Jewett City—now part of Griswold, just over the border from Exeter—where in 1854 residents dug up the bodies of consumption victims Horace Ray and his three sons. “It was ten minutes from my house,” Ringel says. “I was hooked.”

The writer of the old article condemned the practice, deeming it something from “the darkest age of unreasoning ignorance and blind superstition.” That was typical of newspapers of the time, says Ringel, a professor emerita of humanities at the United States Coast Guard Academy, who wrote about vampirism in her 1995 book, *New England’s Gothic Literature*. “Each time there was a case, the reporter would say, ‘This is unprecedented, this unbelievable superstition. Who would believe we would find it in our enlightened times?’” But at the



AN 1896 BOSTON DAILY GLOBE ARTICLE ON SUSPECTED VAMPIRISM.

same time, Ringel notes, supposedly “enlightened” city dwellers were performing seances in their elegant parlors, under the guidance of mediums who practiced spiritualism.

Popular interest in vampirism peaked with the Mercy Brown case in 1892, which set off a “media frenzy,” Ringel says. A news clipping found its way into the papers of Bram Stoker, whose *Dracula* was published in London in 1897. Some once believed Brown’s story might have inspired Dracula’s vampire consorts, until discovery of Stoker’s journals showed he’d been working on the book since 1890. “Mercy Brown didn’t influence the female vampires of *Dracula*,” Ringel says. “*Dracula* influenced the following perception of Mercy Brown.”

It’s no accident, she says, that most of the bodies exhumed were young women, just as ghosts and witch-

es—and for that matter, mediums—were often female. Such lore is “a two-edged sword,” Ringel says. “A way for the powerless to have power, but a fear of powerful women as well.”

As macabre as exhuming family members may seem to us, or even to urbane Bostonians of the time, Ringel and Bell both have sympathy for the families who performed them. It’s almost impossible now to put ourselves back before the germ theory of disease, when doctors were split on whether consumption was hereditary—a “taint” or “stain” on the family—or caused by mysterious environmental factors, such as damp or “bad air.”

Attributing the disease to invisible spirits was in some ways closer to the true bacterial cause of the disease. “They knew it was contagious,” Bell says. “They didn’t know the agent.” Even the ritual of burning bodies and having family members inhale the smoke or ingest ashes made a kind of sense as an inoculation, a practice introduced for smallpox years earlier. “The ritual may not have been rational or scientific,” Bell says, “but it was reasonable.”

By his estimation, the ritual only appeared to “work”—that is, no further family members died—a little better than half the time. But it must have made people feel like they were doing something in the face of a hopeless scourge. “You can imagine, you’ve got a family of twelve, and six of them have died, and now maybe your wife or others are sick,” Bell says. “Are you going to do nothing? Or are you going to grasp at straws?”

To answer that question, we only need to look at the COVID-19 pandemic, when panicked Americans pursued remedies from drinking bleach to swallowing horse dewormer. “Let’s



BONES OF SUSPECTED VAMPIRE "JB55," ARRANGED TO WARD OFF SPIRITS. A COMPUTER RENDERING OF HOW JOHN BARBER WOULD HAVE LOOKED IN LIFE.

not break our arms patting ourselves on the back," Bell says. "We're not smarter than they were—we just have more information. When we come against an unknown disease that's going to kill us, we still have fear. And when we have fear, we have to look for hope."

IN 1990, A "VAMPIRE" DID RISE from his grave in Griswold, Connecticut. Two kids were playing in a sand and gravel pit after heavy rain, and as they slid down the hill, several skulls slid down with them. Police initially thought the bodies might be victims of a serial killer, until the state medical examiner determined the skulls were over a hundred years old. They called Nick Bellantoni, then the state archaeologist.

A graduate of the University of Connecticut, Bellantoni was trained in osteo-archaeology, the study of human skeletal remains. As he examined the pit, he recognized the remains of grave shafts. Eventually, Bellantoni's team identified 29 graves at the top of the hill, remnants of an old burial ground.

Several of the graves were particularly unusual, including a brick-lined crypt with a small wooden coffin—on the lid, brass tacks spelled out the number 13 and the initials NB. ("I wasn't too thrilled because those are my initials, too," Bellantoni says.) Another grave nearby was lined with stones, and a coffin with "JB" and "55" spelled in tacks on the lid. Bellantoni discovered bones—a decapitated skull and two femurs crossed in an X-shape over the chest, like a pirate's skull and crossbones. "I was just totally befuddled by the whole thing," Bellantoni says.

As he considered the possibility of grave robbers, a colleague asked if he'd ever heard of the "Jewett City vampires" a few miles away. Eventually, Bellantoni got in contact with Bell, who speculated this was yet another New England variation on the vampire ritual. The bones were transported to the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Maryland, where they were discovered to have lesions on the ribs characteristic of tuberculosis.

"It's clear he'd been in the grave five or ten years before someone dug him up to see if he was undead," Bellantoni says. Apparently convinced JB55 was a vampire feeding on the living, the townspeople couldn't burn the heart—it was too far decomposed—but they had to do something. "So they decapitated him," Bellantoni says, "and crossed his bones to keep him from leaving his grave."

Bellantoni deduced that JB55 and NB13 were probably father and son, ages 54 and 12, since people at the time counted a person's age at death by the year they were in (so a 54-year-old was in his 55th year of age). Searching historical records, however, Bellantoni and his researchers couldn't find a combination of JB and NB with the correct ages. At the same time, the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory—an agency charged primarily with identifying remains of service members—extracted DNA from the bones of JB55, but wasn't able to match it to any living ancestors. The story appeared in local papers, and for nearly two decades, stories of the "Griswold vampire" spread.

Independent researcher Katie Gagnon remembers hearing the story as a child, causing her to avoid cemeteries for years. By 2009, when she was looking into tuberculosis, she became obsessed with determining JB55's identity. "I have a chronic disease and am disabled, so I'm always keenly aware of how people with disease are treated and how they are turned into monsters," Gagnon says. "This was somebody's father and husband, and a relative to people still alive today." She scoured genealogical records and even visited the bones in Maryland, to no avail. Finally, in 2016, a new test by the lab sequenced the DNA on the Y-chromosome, inherited exclusively by the male line, and matched it to a database assembled by commercial company Family Tree DNA to find two matches, both with the same surname: Barber.

"All of a sudden, I started seeing Barbbers everywhere," Gagnon says. In a database of cemetery inscriptions and newspaper notices, she found a death record for a Nathan Barber, who died in Griswold in 1826, at age 12—and whose father was named John. "It was the only thing that mapped out that could possibly be right," Gagnon says. She hasn't been able to pin down the family history of John Barber, though there are several John Barbbers in town records who might be candidates for the exhumed corpse.

Meanwhile, the Armed Forces lab was able to determine that JB55 likely had brown or hazel eyes, dark brown hair, and fair skin with freckles. Analysts shared the information with Parabon NanoLabs, a Virginia-based forensic DNA lab, which used software to superimpose those features onto scans of the skull to create a 3-D likeness of what John Barber likely looked like, creating the first lifelike portrait of an accused vampire.

It's satisfying to put a name and face to the historical record, says Gagnon, who hopes that with more people uploading their DNA to the database, she may be able to narrow his identity further. "Especially now, after our country dealing with a really recent pandemic," she says, "it's wildly important to humanize these situations."

Earlier this October, Jackson Barbour, a 28-year-old salesman from Kansas, uploaded his own DNA to Family Tree, and was shocked to find that among notable connections was "John Barber, Griswold Vampire." "I was like, *Who the heck is this?*" says Barbour, a history lover who'd traced his ancestry to Barbbers from Rhode Island but had no clue a distant cousin was suspected of being possessed by an undead spirit. "My wife was cracking up," Barbour says. "I never turn on the lights—she'll come into a room and I'll be sitting in complete darkness. And I'm not a big fan of garlic."

Once the surprise wore off, Barbour spoke with Gagnon, who explained the historical basis of the vampire legend, and Barbour vowed to recruit more relatives for testing to help bet-

ter pin down John Barber's story. "It just honestly seems really sad to think about how desperate these people were, to dig up a relative," he says. "I can't imagine the horror you have to go through to do that."

GERMAN SCIENTIST ROBERT KOCH finally isolated the bacterium that causes tuberculosis in 1882—and eight years later, boldly claimed that he had discovered a cure as well. In reality, Koch's cure didn't work. It would take more than another half-century before scientists created a vaccine to prevent the disease.

Even after Koch's discovery of the cause of tuberculosis, the vampire ritual continued in New England—including the most famous case of all: Exeter's Mercy Brown. In December 1883, Mercy's mother died of TB when Mercy was just 11 years old. The next June, her sister Olive followed her into the grave.

"Mercy would've lost her mother and her elder sister about six months apart," says Christa Carmen, a horror author from Rhode Island who has written an unpublished novel based on the legend. She stands now by Mercy's grave in Exeter's Chestnut Hill Cemetery, where she's taken it upon herself to clean up cigarette butts and other trash that often litters the plot, and spruce it up with a vase of dahlias and a small pumpkin. Carmen is petite and waifish, with long black hair parted in the middle, and wears a pumpkin-orange dress along with shoes with little motifs of black cats and jack-o-lanterns.

Mercy, she says, lived another eight years before dying in January 1892 at age 19. She was put into the cemetery crypt while gravediggers waited for the ground to thaw, and she was transferred into her grave two months later. Meanwhile, her brother Edwin showed worsening symptoms of consumption. When attempts to travel to Colorado for a fresh air cure failed, he returned to Exeter, confined to his bed. That's when

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THE GRAVE OF MERCY BROWN, RHODE ISLAND'S "LAST VAMPIRE."



terrified townspeople began petitioning Mercy's father, George Brown, to dig up his family to check for signs of vampirism.

"George was very vocal about not believing in this superstition," Carmen says. "But he did give permission for his daughter to be exhumed." Neither George nor Edwin was present in March when their neighbors dug up the body, finding that only Mercy's heart still showed traces of blood. Then, they made a pyre right there in the cemetery and burned it. They mixed the ashes with water and brought them to Edwin's bedside, forcing him to drink the burned heart of his dead sister. "Of course, it didn't work," says Carmen. Edwin died in May.

Mercy's story, however, took on a life of its own when the tabloid newspapers of the era ran with it as an example of the superstitions of the benighted rural populace. Locally, her notoriety echoed down the years as Rhode Island's "last vampire."

Growing up in coastal Westerly 30 minutes away, Carmen heard the stories about teenagers daring each other to spend the night in the cemetery or leaving plastic vampire fangs on her grave. Ghost hunters claimed to see spectral lights and supposedly recorded her disembodied voice speaking from beyond the grave. At one point, her tombstone was stolen. (It was later recovered and is now bolted into concrete.)

Lost in the gruesome legend, Carmen says, was the 19-year-old girl who was probably terrified of the disease haunting her family. "She was left to do all the housework on the farm, taking care of three younger siblings," Carmen says. "What would it be like during those eight years, knowing the disease could come for you at any time?"

As she researched the story, Carmen became convinced the true monster was Koch, a brilliant scientist to be sure, but also a megalomaniac who carried out dangerous experiments on a teenage mistress and, driven by rivalry with other scientists, prematurely announced a cure, setting research back decades and costing lives. "This man who was flawed in a lot of ways is remembered as a hero and this girl is remembered as a vampire."

In her novel, Carmen redeems Mercy, having her team up with Koch's recently emigrated assistant to search for a cure for consumption before her death. "I love spooky things and Halloween and I love the legend that has given her life after death," she says. "But in a way, it has always bothered me that she's called a vampire and people leave fangs on her tombstone."

Carmen was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award for a short story last year, and her first novel, a gothic mystery called *The Daughters of Block Island*, is due out in December. She hopes she can publish her Mercy Brown novel too, offering Mercy a different fate than the one she's had for over a century.

"It's important to remember she was a 19-year-old girl. And just like how scary it was when we were going through COVID and didn't know what was coming, she lived through that fear for eight years," Carmen says.

Maybe by offering Mercy some grace, she hopes, she can also give her a little rest. ■

Michael Blanding is a Boston-based investigative journalist and book author, most recently of In Shakespeare's Shadow: A Rogue Scholar's Quest to Reveal the True Source Behind the World's Greatest Plays. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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