

Mummy hold my hand...

IRELAND
BY MARIAN MCGUINNESS

IN A back street of Dublin, on an ivy-covered wall, the brass plaque of St Michan's Church (founded 1095) ushers visitors to the adjacent stairwell. It's almost hidden on this dreary Dublin day. After climbing the dozen steps, long, wet grass clings to my ankles like cloying fingers emerging from the consecrated ground I am walking over.

Grey-slabbed gravestones lean at varying angles depending on how many centuries they have been marking their owners' spots. Some are ivy-tendrilled, the inscriptions long gone to God. Other gravestones are so weathered they have taken the form of misshapen ghouls rising from the ground.

I am in an ancient cemetery as rain now sheets the 15th-century battlement tower that looms overhead.

The atmosphere seems a prerequisite as I walk in the youthful steps of Dracula's creator, Bram Stoker, who visited the many crypts beneath St Michan's to see the naturally mummified bodies of the nun, the thief and the crusader.

Before buying my ticket to visit the vaults, I check out the church to see the organ that Handel practised *The Messiah* on, before its Dublin premiere in 1742.

Today, the church is austere and quiet, but there are forces at work. Outside, the wind and rain have accelerated. There's a downpipe scraping the stone like fingernails down a blackboard. Another couple is wandering here as well. Then the church door slams and we all jump. "I'm glad you're here," the four of us chorus.

In the anteroom I buy my ticket to see the mummies that lie beneath. "So it's the crypt ye be wanting to visit," comes the slightly menacing

voice of the volunteer.

Our party of four is told to follow Peter, the church caretaker. He leads us out into the rain and back through the bleak-stoned graveyard. Peter has taken on a lean and starts to drag his right leg as he beckons us onward. The whole scenario is deliciously gothic.

Peter balances against a pair of sloping iron doors, unlocks the chain and drags the doors open. Contorting our backs in a macabre limbo, we bend under the arched entrance being careful not to slip on the dark, stone stairs glossed with moisture and moss. There are cobwebs at ear-level and then, down, down we tread into the musty 900-year-old vault.

Peter seems to be channeling Vincent Price as he tells us the history of five long burial vaults that catacomb St Michan's.

The church's foundations were built in 1095 to serve the remaining Vikings who



OUT OF THE CRYPT: Australian visitor Gary Smith exits the vault at St Michan's into the fresh air.

were banished beyond the city walls after the slaughter in 1014 by Wolf the Quarrelsome, alleged brother of the high king, Brian Boru.

Then situated in a poor part of the city, unemployed men were paid to carry the coffins into the candlelit crypt. Scared out of their wits, they often threw the coffins in. And that's how they were found centuries later.

The dry limestone walls absorb the humidity and the

former swampland beneath produces methane; both are preservative qualities for mummification.

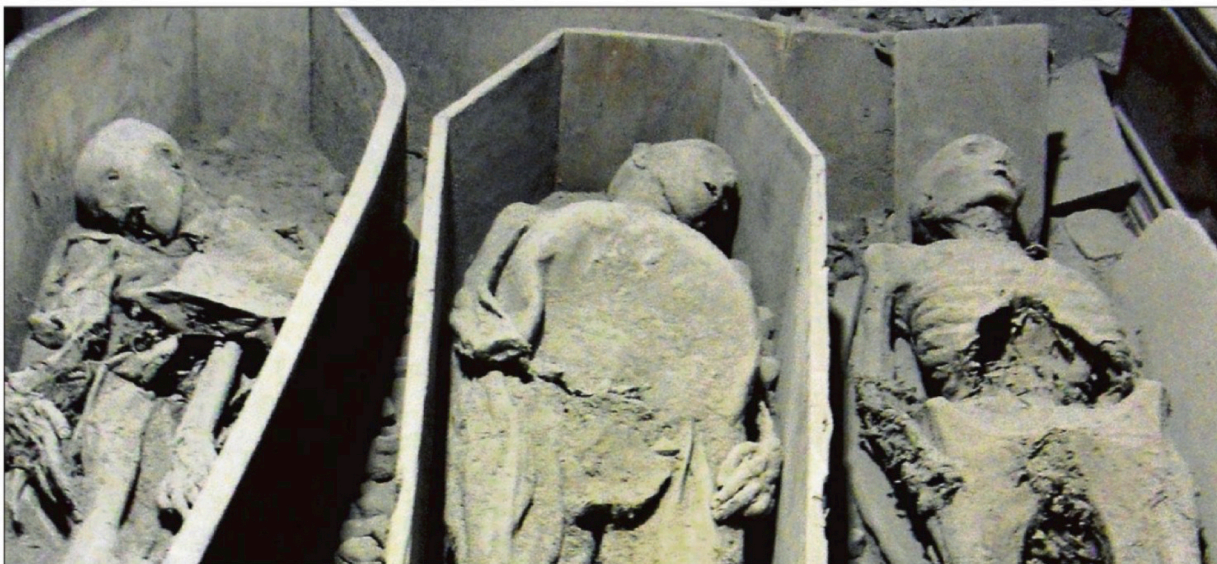
While the bodies are preserved, the coffins are disintegrating. As the wood falls away, the mummies are exposed. Herein lies the loophole. It is forbidden for the Church to break open a coffin, but should the mummy reveal itself, then so be it.

We squint through peepholes and see skulls, bones

and death masks.

Peter leads us to the end crypt. "Come over here," he gestures. We look into the sepia vault. There are several dusty open coffins side by side and one behind them against the back wall.

As always, I am madly taking notes. "Ah, Madame le Penne," Peter says as he guides me to look closely at the first mummified body of a nun, only four feet six inches tall, and 100 years old.



OH SO GOTHIC: The mummified remains of the nun, the thief and the crusader. Unemployed men were paid to carry the coffins into the crypt. Scared out of their wits, they often threw the caskets in.

"Look at her hands and feet. Very delicate fingers. Look at her fingernails. They are virtually intact." I recoil at little. "Now look at her toenails... everyone has to see her toes, there's no hiding, here."

The second coffin contains the thief. He has no feet and one hand has been cut off. The conundrum is how he was buried in consecrated ground. Did he repent, or was he a priest who was too tall for the standard coffin

and had to have his feet amputated? But the hand? "You must decide," says Peter.

The coffin at the back contains the crusader. Buried 800 years ago, he would have been in the Fourth Crusades, which ended in the sacking of Constantinople. He was nearly seven feet tall and, even in death, is imposing.

His hand rises out of the casket. In Victorian times it was seen as good luck to touch it. Today we are al-

lowed to touch his finger, again, to bring us luck.

I step across the flagged floor and tentatively lean over his coffin, hoping I don't fall into it. The crusader is open-mouthed as he looks up. His ribs are exposed and his shoulders broad. His legs are crossed, as that was how crusaders were buried. His finger is leathery to the touch. I am in awe of this moment of connection.

Little wonder the young

Bram Stoker, visiting these crypts as a child, grew up to become Ireland's poster-boy of Gothic literature.

■ St. Michan's Church, Church Street, Dublin 7 - www.introducingdublin.com/st-michans-church

WHILE YOU'RE IN DUBLIN...

STILL hungry for history? A visit to Dublinia is a must.

The site, in Synod Hall, a neo-Gothic house on the

ruins of the medieval St Michael Church, combines four exhibitions:

Viking Dublin, where you can channel your inner Norseman by donning period clothes, listening to poetry and sagas, learning the runic alphabet and more.

Medieval Dublin, for a living lesson in warfare, crime, punishment, death, disease and more.

St Michael's Tower, a 17th-century edifice that

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beckons with its sweeping views of the city.

History Hunters, where amateur archaeologists get the dirt on how Dublinia's experts are uncovering the city's past.

Dublinia is at Christ Church, the crossroads of St Michael's Hill, Patrick Street and High Street, in the city centre. It is connected to Christ Church Cathedral by an archway.

■ www.dublinia.ie