Tim Hodkinson, *The Undead* (Craigavon: Acett, 2016)

It being difficult to escape from the shadow of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) when writing a gothic horror, Tim Hodkinson has done the next best thing: set this tale some years after Victor Frankenstein created his monster, when strange occurrences suggest that somebody has been following in the scientist's footsteps.

The novel is set in 1839, primarily in Belfast, but we see enticing glimpses of Dublin, as well as some of the more rural areas of north-east Ireland. Hodkinson does a wonderful job of depicting Belfast as a truly gothic city: there is a sense of decay — both physical and moral — that is choking the city, as industrialisation increases and murder roams the bleak back-streets. The city seems to exist in eternal darkness and, even during the day, oppressive dull grey tones and impenetrable downpours are a constant feature. The action begins with rumours of a murderer on a killing spree; and when protagonist Constable Abraham Harpur hears that the person responsible is a criminal who had been executed, he begins to realise that he may need some help. Enter the enigmatic Captain Joseph Sheridan (a nod to J. Sheridan Le Fanu), a detective specialising in the supernatural, who has become obsessed with finding evidence of life after death. These two men are joined in their quest by the ambitious Emily Brunty (perhaps again an allusion to another renowned gothic novelist), the niece of a reverend in Belfast, who is attacked by the undead in the opening scene.

We have all the elements in place for a gothic-horror thriller, and that's exactly what's delivered, but there are times when it can read as formulaic and clichéd. We have the mystery of the supernatural, the sensationalism of the gruesome deaths, the brooding anti-hero in detective Sheridan, as well as the idea of place (in this instance, the city of Belfast) as another character. All this does not necessarily impede a novel such as this — indeed the knowing nods and winks to the gothic can be a nice touch at times — but there is sometimes a lack of subtlety here. For example, it's as if the novelist thinks that the idea of the undead roaming a city preying on its inhabitants is not enough, so we have all manner of supernatural beasts included, not least the banshee and faeries. The melodrama that we often see in the gothic novel is also overdone somewhat; we are told on quite a few occasions of hysterical women (and 'nearly hysterical' men) and there is plenty of wringing of hands. Despite this, there are some genuinely unnerving — and in some cases, downright horrific — scenes, particularly as the author gets comfortable with his subject matter, towards the middle and end of the work.

Treating novels set in Ireland, particularly around this time, will inevitably draw on political and sociological themes in order to frame a narrative. All the primary characters of

the story — Sheridan, Brunty, and Doctor Kirwin — are from the upper echelons of society, and it is these characters that drive the story. There is, however, the notable exception of Constable Harpur. Harpur's character is the sidekick to Sheridan's more nuanced intellectual, a man who is at times exasperated at Sheridan's use of logic and reason. Those not from the privileged elite do of course feature in the story, but the events that unfold simply happen to them: they are powerless to impact them, either in a positive or a negative sense. This is despite such characters having on occasion special 'innate' knowledge of the supernatural. In Belfast we learn of divisions between the 'Protestants' and the 'Catholics', but the stories of these people — despite their being fed upon by the undead — are rarely fleshed out in a realistic or sympathetic manner.

On the whole, however, there is the bones of an exciting novel here, albeit one that could do with extensive editing. We have the main components of the quintessential gothic novel, but there are times when cliché and a lack of subtlety interrupt its flow.

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