

Frankenstein may have been based on Scots scientist

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Science editor

Victor Frankenstein — mad middle European experimenter, inspirer of more than 130 movies, and ever-ready metaphor for the overreaching scientist — may have been inspired by a retired Scot.

Christopher Goulding, a post-graduate researcher at the University of Newcastle, reports today that Mary Shelley, author of one of the most influential works of all time, might have learned about how to galvanise a corpse into life by listening to her husband reminiscing about his schooldays.

Percy Bysshe Shelley studied Latin and Greek at Eton. But he was fascinated by science, a subject not taught there. Eton, however, had a list of approved mentors to help those boys who wanted to keep up with the discoveries of the enlightenment. One mentor was James Lind, an astronomer and geologist, and a former ship's surgeon, who had retired to nearby Windsor. He was a cousin and namesake of the surgeon who discovered the causes of scurvy. But he was also the young poet's first guide to contemporary science.

"He was not a famous scientist, but the list of people he knew reads like a who's who of 18th century science. He knew James Watt, Benjamin Franklin, David Hume, Adam Smith, you name it," said Mr Goulding.

Percy Shelley would have learned a lot: he would have heard from Lind of the famous experiments by the Italian scientist Galvani, who made the muscles of dead animals twitch in a current of electric-

ity. But Mary Shelley's interest in Victor Frankenstein lay in the social and moral consequences of his research, not the research itself, Mr Goulding argues in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.

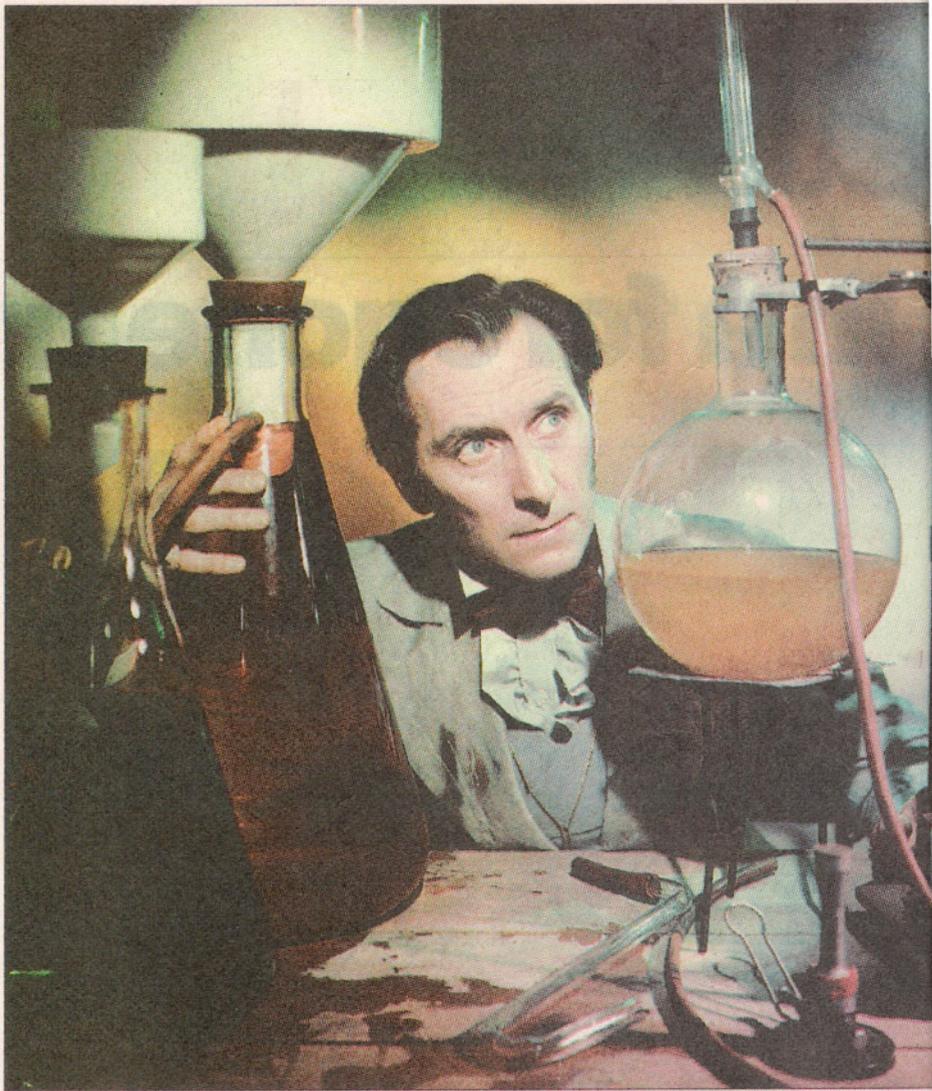
"She does not concern herself all that much with the nuts and bolts of the science," he said. "She is very vague in the episode where the monster is created. There is nothing of the laboratory that is usually represented in the films."

Lind had been a pupil of William Cullen, the Edinburgh doctor who wrote the code for the revival of seemingly drowned people. "In those days it was very much a medical hot potato, because it was regarded as blurring the boundaries between life and death. It was regarded as controversial," Mr Goulding said. There are two such resuscitations in *Frankenstein*.

Lind heard of Galvani's work through Tiberio Cavallo, an Italian physicist friend who lived in London. They corresponded about making "dead frogs jump like living ones".

Mary Shelley was just 18 when she went to stay at Lord Byron's villa on the shores of Lake Geneva, where she began the novel, in 1816, the notoriously bleak "year without a summer".

"Mary Shelley, when she wrote years later, telling how she came up with the idea for the novel, described how she had been a 'silent listener' to her husband's conversations with Lord Byron on scientific subjects," Mr Goulding said. "So I think she is more likely to have got the detail from Percy Shelley. The evidence in the novel is quite strong."



Peter Cushing as Baron Frankenstein in the 1957 film *The Curse of Frankenstein* Picture: Kobal

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