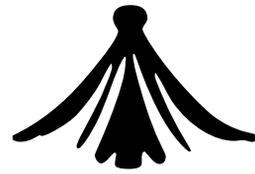




above: Former professional hockey player and castle builder Jason Hall seems very at home in the medieval surroundings of his Stone Hall Castle.

Castle of Stories

— story & photos Lionel Hughes —



In the heart of Regina sits a medieval castle. Its resident and builder waits by the door, inviting visitors onto the elaborate stage he has created.



“I’m going to take what Mr. Darke started and finish it.”

We will get to the particular Mr. Darke to whom castle-builder Jason Hall refers momentarily. First, we must wrestle with context—the context for a 16th-century castle arriving virtually *ex nihilo* on a major Regina thoroughfare, College Avenue at Cornwall Street.

To say that the castle appeared on College Avenue out of nothing is an injustice to the 13 years and millions of dollars Hall has spent importing 1,000-year-old Greek stone and widely varied original art from centuries past. The castle, incidentally, cleverly bears its builder’s name: Stone Hall Castle.

The building has carried other significant names in its past. The first iteration of this structure was called the Darke residence, also after its builder, Francis Nicholson Darke. A former mayor of Regina, Darke underwrote the creation of the University of Regina and is remembered by the always impressive Darke Hall on the university’s campus.

Darke died in 1940 and his wife, Annie in 1964. The house was sold and Helmsing Funeral Home occupied the structure from the 1970s until Hall bought the building in 2003.

Another diversion before we seek to understand Hall’s ambition to complete the work that Francis Darke began.

He knew what the wind was doing to them, where it was taking them, to all the secret places that were never so secret again in life.

— Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

I was probably 12 years old one particularly wholesome autumn when the pumpkins had matured with unusual orangeness and maple leaves had scattered heavily on waning grass. Grass and leaf smoke censed my neighbourhood. That is where I met the Mr. Dark of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. The fictional Dark is the mephistophelian director of an autumn carnival that visits a small town, enticing its residents into inescapable shadows using each person's deepest longings to work its evil enchantment. I read Dark's antagonisms with a mix of horror and pre-adolescent fascination.

Not long after, I became absorbed in the complex person of Abraham Van Helsing, Bram Stoker's somewhat ambiguous hero in the seminal vampire tale *Dracula*. Helsing, of course, is phonologically very similar to Helmsing. Van Helsing's complexity, on one level at least, is that he sees through the fictions presented by the evil count and is caught between an impossible occult reality and the mythologies held by the count's victims.

You are probably seeing where I'm going with this.

Somewhere in my teens I traileed over the adventures of Don Quixote. I admit that as an adolescent I found Quixote's odd adventures less compelling than those of Mr. Dark or Van Helsing. Medieval landscapes and cultural practice were somehow less accessible. But the blurry lines between reality and fiction and where the two can intersect to reveal truth was plain enough. At the very least, I learned to be cautious when calling someone's actions Quixotic as that can have unintended implications.

So then, I have to admit that on first meeting Jason Hall in the elaborate dining room immediately to the right of his castle's entrance, I thought of Don Quixote. Hall was, after all, framed beneath a gorgeously carved stone balcony and ornate candle holders draped in melted beeswax. Around him stood authentic, full suits of armour from the late medieval period and overhead hung an elaborate family crest dated 1723. The former professional hockey player turned Regina real estate investor managed an interview and relentless alerts from his phone without really answering the burning question that his castle provokes: why? A dozen years in Europe would instill a love of medieval architecture and art in almost anyone but would it drive a man to exert 13 years of labour and spend millions of dollars to recreate the period with

astonishing accuracy as far from its origins as you could possibly get?

Hall's references to Darke, the building's original owner, and the almost too elaborate connection to Dracula that Helmsing Funeral Home suggested made me wonder seriously if the whole thing was meticulously premeditated. Could it be possible that these insinuations from the world of literature are merely accidents?

The answer to that takes us back, finally, to Francis Darke and his beloved wife Annie. What exactly was the work that Darke began with his elaborate home on College Avenue?

The house was for Annie. It was, in large part, a stage on which she could live in manageable tension with her fears. Because of the devastation caused by the cyclone that tore through Regina in 1912, she was terrified of tornados. Annie's fear of another violent storm is said to have compelled Darke to build a house of such mass and substance that Annie could live unafraid of wind and weather.

"I believe when the home was built it was a compromise of a married couple," says Hall. "I think he did the outside for himself and he did the inside for her. The interior finishing was plain and mundane. Nothing Gothic like some of the Albert Street homes."

So Francis Darke undertook to create a space for Annie, or more specifically, a space for Annie and her phobia. That was a very loving gesture. Mr. Darke's counterpart, Ray Bradbury's Mr. Dark, creates a similar theatre but with a diabolical twist. "Funerals, bad marriages, lost loves, lonely beds," he says maliciously. "That is our diet. We suck that misery and find it sweet. We search for more always. We can smell young boys ulcerating to be men a thousand miles off. And hear a middle-aged fool like yourself groaning with midnight despairs from halfway around the world."

To be transparent about it, Hall's reference to Darke's work had, I think, to do with the heft of the building. "It was already built like a fortress," he says. "We just took it to another level." But the castle is a theatre, not just a bulwark against heavy wind. There are fictions, many fictions, already built into Stone Hall Castle and the visitor has to contend with that right from the front entrance.

"I tell visitors three different stories when I start my tours about how the castle came to be here," says Hall. One of the stories is outright fiction. The second blends a bit of fact and fiction. And the third is as true as stories get. Throughout, Hall teases



left: The stone fireplace in the Stone Hall Castle library was carved in Greece. The bear's origin is not specifically known but adds a decidedly medieval feel. right: The chess room features a massive candelabra and authentic tapestries.

visitors to see if they can guess at the actual truth. If they have memories of Helmsing Funeral Home, he urges them to see if they can remember Grecian stone in the original. If they are afraid of ghosts, he offers them the 10,000 bodies that populated the several decades of a funeral parlour's past.

"This is a hands-on experience," insists Hall as he opens and closes doors, or asks guests to, and extinguishes candles as he exits rooms into labyrinthine halls, or asks guests to snuff out flames as they follow. "Would you," he asks, "like a picture on the bearskin rug by the fire?"

Let me be very plain on this: I do not think Hall is Quixotic. I do not think he tilts at windmills, to misappropriate the Cervantes reference. But, my goodness, he is theatrical, and I think he's on to something.

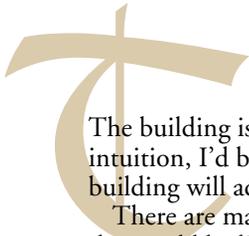
Bradbury's Mr. Dark, Abraham Van Helsing, and Don Quixote all existed in the spaces between fiction and reality, between mythology and mathematical fact. Dark's carnival or a mundane midwestern town: which is true? Europe's

entrenched folk cosmos or Van Helsing's occult alter-reality: on which depends life and death? Don Quixote's hilariously inaccurate perceptions or the paradoxes of medieval Spanish society: in which is there real nobility?

So then, the indisputably real world of a medieval castle or the anti-romance of a busy Regina street: on which canvas do we choose to express our story, to articulate what is real about ourselves? This is what the castle asks.

One thing is for certain. Hall wants stories to accumulate around Stone Hall Castle. "You step in," he says, "take away the iPhones, change your clothes, and you're in a movie set. But it's real. I see the castle attracting people from everywhere, even if they're world travellers."

To that end, the castle is available for overnight stays as well as the tours Hall leads several times a week. The rooms are appointed with serving staff provocatively identified as wenches, an abundance of fragrant beeswax candles, and enough atmosphere to bring out the medieval in anyone.



The building is already saturated in story. Hall's intuition, I'd boldly guess, is that his iteration of the building will add to that inventory of story.

There are many, many physical things about the castle that could be listed—there have been a few identified here. To document them all would make a very long list, but not an infinite one. The infinite one is the list of what Aristotle called accidental properties attributable to an object, in this case a medieval castle on the prairie.

It is the fireplace carved by a Greek mason that begins to smoke while you listen to the barely audible traffic through the castle's stone walls. Then it's the pleasant inhalation of candle vapour and oregano in the dimly lit upstairs suite kitchen. Or maybe it's the sudden and irrepressible impulse to actually consider the passage of 10,000 bodies through the building as you stare at a centuries-old Dutch painting of long-deceased peasants. Perhaps it's the crossing of two paths at a fountain during a business conference and the conversation that the stone idol observes.

The castle is a stage where fact and fiction can move freely for Hall the host and for his guests. It is a theatre that waits for actors.

Tours of the castle are available and the facility can be rented for special occasions. For information visit www.stonehallcastle.com or call (306) 539-3170.



above: The dozens of candles that light every room in the castle are handmade by owner Jason Hall and his staff. below: The exterior of the castle convincingly resembles a facade from an Italian village.



more on the web

See more images of Stone Hall Castle at www.prairiesnorth.com