

Sir Simon Marsden, Bt

Sir Simon Marsden, 4th Bt, who has died aged 63, was a photographer specialising in spooky subjects such as ruins, moonlit abbeys and graveyards.



Simon Marsden by a tomb in 1994

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Unsurprisingly, he attracted a considerable following among fans of the supernatural. But his photographs were also much admired for their technical excellence, and examples are held by the Arts Council, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Saatchi Collection, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and the J Paul Getty Museum in Malibu.

“It is not my intention to try and convince you that ghosts exist,” Marsden said, “but rather to inspire you not to take everything around you at face value. I believe that another dimension, a spirit world, runs parallel to our own, and that sometimes, when the conditions are right, we can see into and become part of this supernatural domain. The mystical quality of my photographs reflects this ancient order and they attempt to reveal what is eternal.”

Simon Neville Llewelyn Marsden was born on December 1 1948, the younger son of Sir John Denton Marsden, 2nd Bt, and his wife Hope (née Llewelyn). The baronetcy was created in 1924 for a previous John Marsden, owner of a substantial fishing fleet in Grimsby.

Simon was brought up in the Lincolnshire Wolds, at Panton Hall and Thorpe Hall, both of which were reputed to be haunted. He was, he later recalled, “ever vigilant” for the appearance of Thorpe’s famous “Green Lady”, who had committed suicide beneath an oak tree in the park in the 17th century and was said to appear sitting in a tree with seven branches. His father had a collection of books about the occult, and did nothing to discourage this interest. He would tell his four children ghost stories before they retired to bed; Simon was terrified, and said that he spent the rest of his life trying to exorcise these fears.

“My favourite [authors of ghost stories] were Arthur Machen and MR James,” he later observed, “mainly for their emphasis on mysteries as old as time itself, but also for the subtlety of their narrative. In later years I was to discover the works of Edgar Allan Poe, whose dark tales of decaying mansions and moonlit abbeys seemed somehow to mirror my own obsession with the ghosts that haunted them.”

He was educated at Ampleforth and the Sorbonne, although what he studied in Paris is long forgotten (“probably girls’ ankles”, one friend ventured). On Simon’s 21st birthday his father — a keen amateur photographer — presented him with a

Leica IIIg 35mm camera, and from that moment Marsden knew what he wanted to do in life: “What intrigued me most was the magic of time and light and the enigma of ‘reality’ that these elements conjured up. Over the years I have tried to portray this in various forms in my work: the unreality of the ‘real’ and the reality of the ‘unreal’. The first roll of film that I shot was of cardboard cut-outs of ghosts that I arranged in tableaux in the gardens.”

In 1969 he went to work in London as an assistant to the Irish photographer Ruan O’Lochlainn, who specialised in film stills and record covers. O’Lochlainn’s wife, Jackie Mackay, was a master printer who had worked in New York with the portrait photographer Karsh, and Marsden learned the skills of the darkroom.

Three years later he travelled to the United States, where he bought a Greyhound bus ticket and toured the country taking photographs. He then spent two years in New York, where he had several exhibitions. On his return to Britain in 1974 he began to concentrate on the haunted sites which became his speciality.

Over the years he travelled widely — principally in Britain and Europe — and created his unusual style by using infrared film, which gave his images their ethereal, haunting atmosphere. But it was in the art of printing that he excelled — an art that is gradually disappearing in the age of digital photography.

On one occasion, while working at the Rollright Stones, the Neolithic and Bronze Age site at Long Compton, Warwickshire, Marsden suddenly felt a “force” which catapulted the camera out of his hands. He later realised he had bruises all down one arm, and was convinced that this had been an experience of the “supernatural”.

Marsden’s work was exhibited widely in Britain and abroad, and he published a number of books: *In Ruins: the once great houses of Ireland* (1980, with Duncan McLaren); *The Haunted Realm: ghosts, witches and other strange tales* (1986); *Visions of Poe* (1988); *Phantoms of the Isles: further tales from the haunted realm* (1990); *The Journal of a Ghosthunter: in search of the undead from Ireland to Transylvania* (1994); *Beyond the Wall: the lost world of East Germany* (1999, with Duncan McLaren); *Venice, City of Haunting Dreams* (2001); *The Twilight Hour: Celtic visions from the past* (2003); *This Spectred Isle: a journey through haunted England* (2005); *Ghosthunter: a journey through haunted France* (2006); *Memento Mori: churches and churchyards of England* (2007); and *Vampires: the twilight world* (2011). His final book, *Russia: A World Apart* (with text by Duncan McLaren), is due to be published later this year.

In 2002 Marsden’s visits to spooky locations in Ireland were the subject of a documentary/drama film, *The Twilight Hour*, directed by Jason Figgis. “The most chilling sequence was the deeply disturbing and creepily atmospheric ruined Palladian mansion of Woodlawn House in Co Galway,” Figgis recalled. “It was here that we heard the weeping of a woman in some distress. Upon immediate investigation we could find no evidence of anyone in the sprawling mansion.”

Marsden succeeded in the baronetcy in 1997 on the death of his elder brother, Nigel.

He married first, in 1970, Catherine Thérèse Windsor-Lewis. The marriage was dissolved in 1978, and he married secondly, in 1984, Cassie Stanton, with whom he had a son and a daughter. He is succeeded in the baronetcy by his son, Tadgh, born in 1990.

Sir Simon Marsden, Bt, born December 1 1948, died January 22 2012



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