

# THE MAN WHO WANTS TO MAKE YOUR FLESH CREEP!

Norman Adams meets Scotland's "King" of horror-writing.

There is even a touch of the uncanny about Michael Falconer Anderson's decision to write horror novels for a living.

He remembers the date vividly: July 11, 1986.

"It's a curious story," said the 42 year-old Aberdonian, whose tales of terror have earned book reviews such as "A new Scottish king of horror", and "Stephen King had better look to his laurels".

Not only was it the day his first horror novel, *The Woodsmen*, was published in hardback but it was also the day his employers offered members of staff voluntary redundancy.

Michael, who was a sub-editor on the *Press and Journal* in Aberdeen, smiled and said: "When you think of the possibility of these two things coming together like that, it's unbelievable! Of course, the opportunity was too big to miss and naturally I snatched at it.

"To go from a secure job with a good income into the unknown was a very big step, but I decided to take the gamble."

*The Woodsmen* appeared in paperback in the United States under the title, *Blood Rite*, and was serialised in *Celebrity* magazine and went into paperback in this country this year. It is a tale of heart-pounding tension as a woman journalist, abandoned in a sinister forest, is pursued by a pair of mad axemen. Or to put it another way: "Evil creatures from the past, engaged in a sacrificial orgy of killing," reads the blurb on the cover of the British paperback.

When Michael gave up his journalistic career his follow-up novel, *The Unholy*, was exciting publishers. It was published in February 1987 and later appeared in paperback in the States, where it was also a book club choice. It was also published in soft cover in Japan and in Britain.

Michael has enjoyed phenomenal success, with six novels published in hardback in

the last three years.

*God of a Thousand Faces*, *The Covenant*, *Black Trinity* and *The Clan of Golgotha Scalp*, are his other spine-chilling works. Some years ago his first-ever novel, a Western, *Warpath*, appeared under the name, Mike Anderson. Now his fiction appears under his full name. Falconer is his mother's middle name. "There is a very good reason," explained Michael. "It is just unbelievable the number of other people called Michael Anderson I have come across on my travels. And I didn't want to use a pen-name."

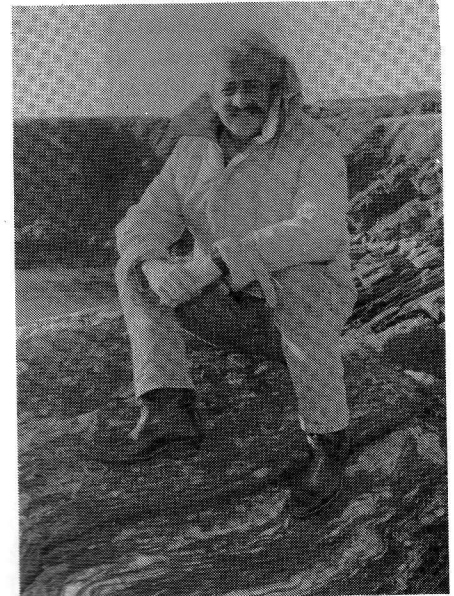
Why horror stories? Michael was 23 when he tackled novel writing, but his early efforts failed to reach the print stage. At the age of 30 he resumed writing books. The subjects varied. Said Michael: "I wrote every conceivable kind of book you could imagine - a character study of a policeman under pressure after becoming a widower, political thrillers, and so on. None of them took off. It was a very tough time because literary agents and publishers were saying, 'This is a marvellous book, and I'm sure you'll find a home for it.'

"Then I thought to myself why not write something completely different - so I sat down and wrote a Western."

Michael went on: "But I decided I did not want to write lots of Western so the next thing to come into my head was the idea for the *The Woodsmen*, which did rather well. I wrote *The Unholy*, and it sort of rolled on from there ..."

"What I like about horror is that you can write about absolutely anything. If you are writing about a private detective in London then that's it ... It's going to be about a certain kind of action. But with horror you can do anything."

Michael is a normal, happy family man. His Austrian-born wife, Hildegard, emigrated to Australia with her family when she was young. Michael, who spent his childhood in Torry, Aberdeen, also



■ Michael Falconer Anderson - draws inspiration from the rugged Kincardine coastline.

moved to Australia with his family - in the late fifties. "I still think of myself as a Torry loon," he said.

Michael and Hildegard married Down Under and their first-born Hugh, who is now 14, was a babe-in-arms when they returned to the UK. They have a second son, Gavin, aged 10. The boys attend schools in Portlethen, where the family live.

Hildegard is an accounts administrator with Aberdeen Computer Services.

Michael, who entered journalism as a 17-year-old all-round reporter in Adelaide, grins at people's reaction to his present profession.

"When I tell them I'm a novelist that surprises them," he said. "But when they learn what kind of stories I write you can see them thinking, 'My God, a horror writer!'. People tend to bracket horror with 'A Nightmare on Elm Street' - that kind of thing, but it isn't always that. Horror can be very inventive."

What scares Michael Falconer Anderson? "I don't really like cut and slash horror," he said. "It doesn't scare me - it repulses me. Something hinted at, suggested at, is far more scary.

"Things that are actually frightening

frequently come from a part of the sub-consciousness I'm not sure we can actually understand."

There was the night he was driving home from work and passed Aberdeen's Allendale Cemetery. "I had the strangest feeling there was something in the car with me. I swear it. There was a chill down my spine. It was very frightening."

Of course, there was the time he was tapping on his word processor at home. He thought he was alone, and the room door burst open. "I almost hit the roof," he chuckled, "then in walked my youngest lad from school. I then realised how involved I was in my writing."

When Michael first started writing novels full time he worked eight hours a day - nine to five. "I wrote 2½ books in six months and I was utterly exhausted," he went on. "I now work every day from two to five. Oddly enough I produce as much between these hours than nine to five."

He aims to write 1000 words a day. It was Hildegard who persuaded him to put away his old typewriter and use a word processor. He draws some of his inspiration from the

countryside and rugged coastline around Portlethen.

He reads a lot, particularly Graham Greene thrillers. He writes poetry (but not for publication) and paints. On the living room wall of the Anderson home is a canvas splattered with blood-red paint. Appropriate? Not at all ... it is entitled, "Sunburst", and it's all Michael's work. What advice has Michael for budding authors?

"They must remember the main points are hard work and discipline and they should read everything they can, no matter who wrote it, on how to write - and every good novel they can read.

"Perseverance - that's really what it is all about. Between the age of 30 and 37 I wrote nine novels, none of which were published."

Michael did get a lot of encouragement. He wrote to Lord (Ted) Willis of Chislehurst, script writer, novelist and creator of *Dixon of Dock Green*. They later met for the first time in the bar at the House of Lords. Laughed Michael: "I almost made a fool of myself by insisting

I buy a round of drinks. Of course you can't do so unless you are a Lord."

Lord Willis read Michael's work and gave him some good advice. Michael never forgot his kindness and sent him a copy of *The Woodsmen* when it first came out.

Two of his recent novels - *When Darkness Comes* (Michael considers it his best so far) and *Adam Butterfly*, a black comedy about a Scottish minister's son, are on offer to London publishers. Two other books - a suspense horror novel and a comedy satire about a Scots schoolteacher trapped in his word processor - are on the stocks.

Michael Falconer Anderson does not intend writing horror stories all his life.

He admitted: "I love writing them - but I would like to write so many different kinds of books. One thing I'd like to do at some time in my life is write something as beautiful and touching as Paul Gallico's *'The Snow Goose'* ..."

Meanwhile he is perfectly content to create a legion of horrors that will curdle your blood at bedtime. Pleasant dreams! ♣

# PHANTOM FOOTSTEPS

## Weird stories of a house in Blackfriars Street.

Empty and barred, 27 Blackfriars Street, Aberdeen, awaits its fate, while, if stories are to be believed, whatever walks inside its dark, dank interior walks alone ...

"Strange things were happening there all the time," recalls Mrs Kath Innes, an 82 year-old Aberdeen widow, who lived in the house during World War One. Kath occupied attic rooms with her mother while her father served with the Gordon Highlanders in France.

Kath's mother only heard of the house's haunted reputation after they had moved in, and they stayed less than a year.

Kath told of the time a neighbour was roused by the patter of bare feet across her kitchen floor. The sound stopped at the mantelpiece, but, on investigation, she found her family fast asleep. The next morning the woman learned her son had been killed in France.

On another occasion Kath's mother was lecturing her after a domestic accident when there was a thunderous knock at the door. Said Kath: "We both got a shock and

when my mother opened the door there was nobody there! The house had a bare wooden stair yet not a footprint was heard going up or down."

Finally, Kath and her mother were chatting with an elderly woman neighbour at her door when there was a loud crash. On checking the old woman found that a huge family bible had inexplicably landed flat on the floor, from the top of a chest of

drawers in her bedroom.

What was the cause of these unusual disturbances? Horror or Hoax? To this day Kath Innes is stumped but she feels it might have been due to the fact the house was built in the former grounds of a 13th century Dominican monastery. A Blackfriar's sandal was found on the site during construction of Aberdeen Art Gallery in the 1880s. ♣



■ No. 27 Blackfriars Street: House of mystery?