

The Hyborian Review

Volume 2 Number 1

January 31, 1997

A Super Bowl of Reviews...

Great REH Quotes

From a letter by Robert E. Howard to Clark Ashton-Smith, dated July 23, 1935.

Sent a three-part serial to Wright yesterday: "Red Nails", which I devoutly hope he'll like. A Conan yarn, and the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reactions of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung. It may sound fantastic to link the term "realism" with Conan; but as a matter of fact--his supernatural adventures aside--he is the most realistic character I ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian.

Howard's Home -- Our 'Graceland'

Ten years ago, a small group of local citizens, aided by fans around 'the whole wide world,' bought and restored the Robert E. Howard home in Cross Plains, Texas. The home is now operated as a museum in REH's memory, and visitors are encouraged. The highlight, of course, is the room Howard lived in as he authored his immortal works. Since the museum does not keep to a regular schedule, if you ever plan to make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Cimmeria, make arrangements in advance, by writing Project Pride, P.O. Box 534, Cross Plains, TX 76443.

For an even better time, coordinate your trek to coincide with Robert E. Howard Remembrance Day, set in June. You'll not only see how a small town celebrates its best-loved son, you'll have a chance to view the rare, original REH manuscripts on display at the local library.

Also, consider joining Project Pride even if it is doubtful you will ever make the trip. Drop them a line -- it's only 32 cents for a stamp...

Page Four: An FAQ for alt.fantasy.conan?

P. 4: Necro press has hard-to-find Howard lore

Book Review

by Garret H. Romaine

Conan the Valorous

Author: John Maddox Roberts

Tor; 1980 280 pages. Cover Art: Boris Vallejo

The older I get, the more I appreciate stories of Conan as a middle-aged warrior, especially as a king of his own country. I suppose that in the fullness of time, I will come to know better *Conan of the Isles*, where the gray-bearded old grandfather battles his way west across the Atlantic Ocean.

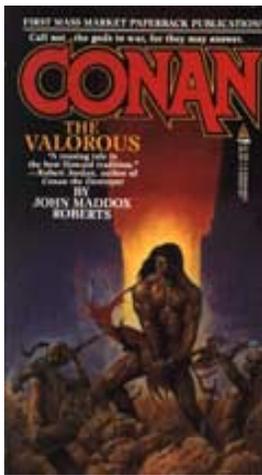
Having said that, for my money, the best Hyborian fantasy features Conan as a youth. I like him best sacking Venarium, or chasing Ymir's daughter. Maybe it has to do with first meeting up with him in the pages of Marvel Comics when I, like he, was a mere stripling. Perhaps it has to do with the purity of that young brawler, strong and stubborn as he wandered the world. But the details of his life in Cimmeria have always proved elusive. Maybe that's one of the reasons why I like *Conan the Valorous* so much -- the way the book sheds light on the ways of Cimmeria and Cimmerians.



The daily struggles of any Cimmerian to cheat death didn't get covered well in the 18-odd Conan stories actually penned by Howard. That's no disrespect toward the master, just a fact. Anything he offered up was brief and anecdotal. As this month's REH Quote shows, Howard was almost jolted into penning Conan's stories, and they seemed to almost tumble out of him. But the emphasis was on story, on action, and on fantasy, not periodically teasing the faithful with small clues with which to piece together the Hyborian Age.

Even so, Howard gave us more than enough to go on, and the truth is he gave us a lot. Fans have plenty of ammo for discussion, but there aren't too many arguments over "What Howard Really Meant." In some ways, the mystique is part of the allure -- readers and fans are free to piece parts of the puzzle together, imagining and theorizing to keep the settings straight and the overlap down. But it's one thing to argue about climate variation in Kush, and something far more intriguing to learn about Conan's homeland, it's taciturn settlers, it's unforgiving savagery.

Conan the Valorous provides an excellent insight into Cimmerian village life, their beliefs, their moods – it's all there. Roberts does a masterful job of filling in a



story around the outlines of an anthropology field trip to the heartless climes that spawned Conan.

I had been planning to review *Valorous* this spring anyway, figuring it was 16 years old, and Roberts' first Conan yarn. But then a fan e-mail came in from Cindy Stewart – a first for *The Review*. In it, she waxed philosophical about Roberts, flatly stating: "Without a doubt, the single greatest book I have ever read

... is *Conan the Valorous*. If you haven't read it, do it, it's awesome." And she was right!

To start the tale, Roberts uses the legendary Cimmerian belief that his word is his bond. The Stygian wizardess Hathor-Ka tricks the Cimmerian into taking her gold in exchange for a chore to perform back in his homeland. He is to build a fire in a cave, high up on the mountain of Crom, and toss in a potion. The wizardess will then transport across the Hyborian world to Cimmeria, there to presumably wage battle with Crom himself.

One might ask why Conan wouldn't just give back her gold and laugh, but he has uttered an oath, swearing by Crom. And, unstated, may be the thought that if Crom cannot stop this Stygian bitch, what use is he? Grinding his teeth, the young Cimmerian knows he has been tricked, but he will not take back his word. Roberts uses one of the court lackeys to ask the question, "What does a savage know of honor?" Says the Stygian: "More than you would think. Honor is a barbaric virtue, of which civilization retains only the empty forms." [Note: For those of you with Internet access to the newsgroup alt.fantasy.conan, we've been debating this very issue.]

One of the favorite scenes from any good hero story is the prep scene, where the hero chooses and straps on all his weapons. In *The Terminator*, the cyborg visits the gun shop, and after picking out an Uzi and a pump shotgun, asks for a "phased plasma rifle in da 40-watt range." For Conan, it is a visit to the swordsmith. He picks up a fine weapon, but won't even look at the armor, considered 'effeminate' by his fellow Cimmerian countrymen. In dozens of asides such as these, Roberts reminds us, yet again, that we are going with Conan back to Cimmeria and that we are going to be learning more about Cimmerians very soon.

And as Conan pays off the smith for polishing up the weapon and fixing a new grip, Roberts tosses out a pearl from the first Conan movie:

Conan paid the price gladly; he would have paid more. Gold was nothing, and it always seemed to trickle through his fingers like water. Steel a man could trust.

Thus begins the journey north. Before long, Conan feels, before he sees, a group of riders tracking him. He picks out some high ground, calmly waits, and then one after the other, cuts down four of the five assassins. The last assailant asserts that he is not as soft as the first four; he is a Gunderman:

"Gundermen die as easily as other men. I slew many at Venarium, and I was only fifteen then."
"Venarium!" spat the Gunderman. "I've sworn to kill a dozen Cimmerians for every kinsman I lost in that slaughter. Their blood calls out for appeasement. I will send them another black-haired servant this day."

Fat chance. Roberts then serves up a beautiful paragraph that recalls a scene in *Lawrence of Arabia*, after the Arabs slaughter the Turks outside of Damascus:

Behind him he left the bloody mound. In a year's time the gnawed bones would be scattered abroad, cloth and leather would have rotted, and there would be nothing to mark the battle except some rusting bits of iron and a slightly greener patch of grass. Later, even those would be gone, leaving only the limitless plain, which had drunk the blood of uncounted thousands.

Animal Abuse

The journey north is then slowed by Conan's injection into a bloody local feud. Enter the 'love interest' in the form of Aelfrith, chieftainess of Cragsfell.

Her face was obscured by a horned helmet which left only a Y-shaped slot for vision and breath, but her body was as splendid as that of a warrior-goddess of Vendhya. Her full breasts were protected by cups of polished bronze, and her wide, powerful shoulders tapered to a small waist cinched by a wide belt covered with silvered scale. Bronze greaves covered her shins and knees, leaving her thighs bare except for a dagger strapped to the right. Except for her armor and the straps that held it in place, she wore nothing except for a narrow loincloth of black silk, not even sandals.

She is fighting a rival chief named Atzel, whose son she slew. The old man retaliates by hiring Zamoran kidnapers to take the woman's daughter, but Conan steals the girl back. Unfortunately, Aelfrith is captured and turned into a naked stepstool for Atzel. Conan becomes her champion and gains her release by defeating a gigantic black bull with his bare hands:

[Conan] was ready for a fight, be the enemy man, demon, god or wild beast. Then the terrific bellow sounded once more, and an immense black shadow filled the gateway.

Conan blinked, trying to see into the darkness of the passageway. Surely, no natural bull could be so huge! Then the animal trotted into the full sunlight, and Conan's heart sank... truly, Conan thought, if cattle had a god, this must be it.

Conan gets in a couple hammer-like fists to the brain of the beast, but this is one big animal...

"Now Conan was eyeing the beast warily, and it was regarding him with equal caution. After the usual pawing it drew itself up and charged toward Conan once more.

And Conan turned and ran. A loud groan went up from the spectators...

However, fear not, for Conan induces the beast to break off one of its horns on the stone wall of the fighting pit. Conan finally snapped its neck. It took a full five days to recuperate, but the night before he resumed his traveling, the fair warrior woman visited his bed and implored him first to stay, then to return after his duty is discharged. But he cannot.

"So be it. I am a chieftainess and you are a hero. I'll not beg and you'll not yield." She leaned forward and pinched out the flame of the candle. In the sudden darkness Conan heard the faint rustle of silk as the green robe whispered to the floor...

Add A Wizard or Two...

No good Conan story would be complete without some sorcery, and this one has plenty. First, there is a cackling old Khitan fortune-teller, who befriends Conan and gives him a life-saving amulet. Then there is Jaganath, traveling via water to reach the cave before Conan. Jaganath enlists the aid of Starkad, a Vanir bandit chief to protect him on the journey. Roberts turns the discussion again to Cimmerians with this exchange:

"You have spoken of your Aesir enemies," Jaganath said, "but do you not also raid among the Cimmerians?"

"Yes, by Ymir, we do! It's a trading of hard swordstrokes with them, too."

"Do you raid them to take wealth?"

"Wealth, no. The Cimmerians are a poor folk, with little silver or gold. The poorest As or Van is a chieftain compared to the richest Cimmerian."

And there is this exchange about Conan's kin:

"...Cimmerian children bring a high price in the South. Properly brought up, they make the best of slaves. Work them as hard as you like, on short rations, and beat them to your heart's content. Nothing seems to kill them."

Yet the bandit is no fool. Roberts even gives us a Cimmerian geography lesson in the chief's warning to the wizard:

"...To get to the foot of Ben Morgh we must go to Conall's Valley and cross the Field of the Dead. All the great war-chiefs of Cimmeria are buried in the Field of the Dead. If they know that we are coming, there could be a gathering of the clans. To protect the bones of their ancestors they will put aside the feuds of generations, as they did when they put Venarium to the sack."

The Prodigal Son Returns - To No Party

Finally, Conan stables his horse and walks alone into the land of his birth. Milach, a cattle herder and Chulainn, his son, both spy Conan as he nears:

Far below, the growing figure was leaping from one rocky outcrop to another, rather than scrambling around them. "Yes, that's Conan, the blacksmith's son."

"Conan?" the boy said. He knew the name. The smith's unruly son had made a name for himself before seeking his fortune in the lowlands. "I'd thought him dead long ago."

"As did I," agreed the elder. "He was with us when we took Venarium. Only fifteen years old in those days, younger than you are now, but a proven warrior."

"Venarium," breathed the younger enviously...

The greetings are less than cordial; no hearty bear-hug, no handshake, no smiles. For to go south was to go where a man grows soft...

"How did you find the southern lands?" Chulainn asked.

"I found them much to my taste," Conan said. "They glitter with gold and the folk wear silk instead of sheepskin. The food is rich and spicy, and the wine is sweet. The women are soft and smell of perfume instead of peat smoke and cattle."

"Men have no need of such things!" snorted Milach. "Things like that soften a man."

"Best of all," Conan pressed on, "they fight all the time, and a man who's handy with his weapons can make something of himself."

"Fighting?" Milach asked. "Is that what you call it? I'll wager they've taught you to fight from the back of a horse, as if a man's legs were not good enough, and to wear armor into a fight instead of your own good skin."

The argument continues, and it is great stuff. To feel the pride in Conan's words as he talks of his life, to hear him standing before an elder and justifying his life, is as timeworn as any son returning to face his relatives. "What do you know of it?", Conan demands. "I've been on battlefields swept with the thunder of ten thousand horsemen, when the drums beat and the trumpets snarl and the banners blind you, so bright are they."

The boy listens, enraptured, while the elder scoffs. And Conan has to concede one point especially, when the talk turns to wizards:

“Aye, there are a plagued lot of them,” Conan admitted uncomfortably. “Never content to leave men to their own follies and always stirring up some mischief with gods and demons and such.”
“You see?” Milach said.
“Still,” Conan went on imperturbably, “I’ll accept them as part of the price of a life that’s worth living. I’d rather be dodging some wizard’s spells than watching cattle and sheep, or breeding a pack of brats and huddling around peat fires for the rest of my life.” Conan lay down on the stony ground and rolled into his cloak. After a moment he sat up and reached out a long arm to scoop up an armload of snow, which he packed into a large, hard ball. When its shape suited him he lay back, rested his head on the snowball, and was soon asleep.
Milach watched Conan gloomily. “You see?” he said to Chulainn in a voice of great sadness. “This is what living in foreign parts can do to a man. This was once a mighty warrior, but so soft has he grown that now he must have a pillow to sleep!”

Is this not classic stuff? Roberts even gets the details straight, when breakfast is served by Milach’s wife Dietra the next morning:

Conan made a wry face. It was oat porridge, almost tasteless. He had forgotten about oat porridge.
Dietra caught the look. “Surely you did not expect wheaten bread? Wheat grows in the lowlands, oats in the mountains. In hard years, we live on naught else.”
“Do not be too hard on our kinsman,” Milach said innocently. “He’s grown accustomed to better things down in the soft lands.”
Conan glowered at him. “You’d have gone there, too, years ago, had you the spirit.”
Dietra cracked him across the back of the head with her ladle...

As in, don’t forget about Cimmerian women, young man. Thus, the table is almost set. Even before the Vanir host knocks over tombstones in the Cimmerian cemetery, a bloody spear is sent around to tell the Cimmerian tribes to forget their feuds and come together. Wulphere the As finds himself ensnared in the affair, as Conan pulls in an old blood debt. And there is now one more wizard: Hathor-Ka, who sent Conan on his journey in the first place, finds she must team up with Thoth Amon to complete her task. Bad magic is at work against them; a flesh-eating cult has been slaughtering villages all over Cimmeria, Vanaheim, and Asgard.

Of course, all of this can be handled with a good broadsword in the right hands. The ending is predictable enough:

Around him the fighting was over, and men stood panting from the terrible exertion. Canach approached Conan. “That was well done, kinsman,” the chief said. “It is good for the young men to see a real warrior at his work.”
“The battle was ill done, though,” Conan said, glaring at the heaps of dead. “We lost too many just to kill so few Vanir, not even a hundred of them. They must have taken at least as many of us. There are ways to handle such a situation without such losses.”
Canach shrugged. “That is not our way of fighting, and the Vanir are doughty fighters, not like your soft southerners. Besides” -- the chief managed a faint smile--“I did not notice you holding back and pondering stratagems.”
Conan grinned ruefully. “You have the right of it. In the end, I am as Cimmerian as the rest...”

Say what you will about the whole pastiche controversy, but Roberts can spin a good story, one that even Robert Jordan called “a rousing tale in the best Howard tradition.” Isn’t that all any writer can hope for? - **GR**

ALT.FANTASY.CONAN

Anyone interested in helping with the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for the Conan newsgroup should get online and volunteer. The pace and frequency of the discourse there has picked up quite a bit lately.

Necronomicon Is Alive After All...

If you’re trying to reach them through the “oneworld” address, the ISP unfortunately went out of business a few months back. Needless to say, this put them in an awkward position, but they’ve since recovered and have a site available at <http://www.necropress.com>. Please update your bookmarks to this new site, and pass along word to anyone you know about the change of address. They have an awesome collection of Robert E. Howard materials available through mail order – stuff you need to round out your own personal library. Some of their publications are available nowhere else.

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. Try <http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan/publications/menu.html> for reprints.

NEXT Issue: A new Tor offering, *Conan and the Death Lord of Thanza* by Roland Green. And more!

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