AN AMERICAN BARBARIAN STORMS FRANCE

The first Howard story published in France was “The Phoenix on the Sword” in the magazine Planète #24 (Sep./Oct., 1965), translated by Jacques Bergier, who devoted part of his book Admirations (Bourgois, 1970) to REH. But it would take the bestsellers of Stephen King in the 1970s to spark modern French interest in fantasy and horror. In 1969, François Truchaud, a film critic who for years had been trying to get Howard published in France, edited [Cahier de] l’Herne #12 (Éditions de l’Herne, Paris), one of the first critical anthologies on Lovecraft, which even included Howard’s poem “The Dream and the Shadow” in English. Three years later, he had translated two of the three Conan books published by Jean-Claude Lattès. These were supposed to be French versions of the Lancer paperbacks, but, being only moderately successful, they ceased after two volumes.

Trying again, Truchaud put out L’Homme noir (i.e. The Dark Man, 1976) for Libraire des Champs-Élysées before this line also stopped. Then he collaborated on three special REH issues, #s 8, 9, and 13, of L’Écho des savanes – Spécial USA (E.D.F., 1978-1979) reprinting translated Marvel comic book work by Roy Thomas and others. More French translations of Marvel adaptations followed from Éditions Lug in Lyon and Éditions Arédit in Tourcoing. All these gave by far most French fantasy fans their first introduction to Howard.

Hélène and Pierre-Jean Oswald sensed that the time was right for a new line of paperbacks featuring pulp and new writers, and so issued the Nouvelle éditions Oswald (NéO) collection. The 200- to 300-page oversized trade paperbacks had nice stiff covers, but their high prices and their distribution system initially caused problems. Fortunately they were soon flying off the shelves. [1] The second book in the series was Le Pacte noir (The Black Pact, 1979) by Howard, followed by 34 others of his non-Conan stories, all edited and translated by Truchaud at an incredible rate that reached seven a year. He also prefaced them with critical introductions, the earliest ones being the most impressive as essays. As French REHupan Patrice Louinet states:

Truchaud’s enthusiasm showed in his introductions, sometimes at the expense of literal truth: for whatever reason, Truchaud once wrote that Howard was “a giant of a man,” a “colossus,” “nearly two meters tall (6’6”).” Truchaud’s biographical information on Howard being to this day the only available in this country, it is almost impossible to find a Howard description in France where the Texan is not described as a “colossus” or a twin-brother to Conan. [1, p. 182]
The nice, decadently sensuous cover art was by Jean-Michel Nicollet, who did both illustration and comic book art, such as that for the innovative French magazine Métal hurlant, translated in the USA a few years later as Heavy Metal. Meanwhile, both Truchaud and Nicollet were putting out the French versions of the Lancer/Ace Conan series for Lattès. [1] Though working from flawed texts by L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, and others, Truchaud did an excellent job capturing the spirit of Howard’s prose, unlike some other French translators of Conan. Quoting Louinet again (who, as we’ll see, has done much such translating himself):

I think Howard is quite difficult to translate; French is more verbose than English, by some 25%, meaning that it usually requires 125 French words to translate 100 English words. Hence, if what Howard writes can be translated easily, it is quite harder to keep the pace and punch of the original text. [2]

With the exception of the Conan stories (published elsewhere) and the western burlesques, NéO, that is to say Francois Truchaud, had managed to publish a total of 35 Howard books in the collection plus two non-series in less than ten years. All the stories about Kull, Solomon Kane, Bran Mak Morn, Steve Harrison, Cormac Fitzgeoffrey, Cormac Mac Art, El Borak, Agnes de Chastillon, Turlogh O’Brien, James Allison, Brent Kirby and Butch Gorman, Kirby O’Donnell, Steve Costigan, Dennis Dorgan, Terence Vulmea, Wild Bill Clanton; all the weirds, all the fantasy and horror tales, all the “weird menaces” and detective stories, all the “Spicies,” all the adventure tales, all the boxing ones, and a good portion of the juvenilia, unfinished and plain uncategorizable material. All illustrated by Nicollet, all edited and translated by François Truchaud, all in the same collection.

Fifteen years later, the NéO books command higher and higher prices on the collectors’ market. … This upward trend shows no sign of weakening, quite the contrary.

There had never been anything like the NéO Howard books. There has never been anything like it since. [1, pp. 187-188]

In 1986, NéO initiated a series of special Arkham House reprints, including 500 copies of Chants de guerre et de mort (Poems of War and Death) by Truchaud and Nicollet in 1987. It presented 53 Howard poems bilingually, specifically those from Always Comes Evening aside from some that had already appeared in NéO books. Beautifully illustrated by Nicollet, including two color plates, it is a 155-page folio in a waxpaper dustjacket and cost $120. It sells now for about $380. A trade paperback version was published in 1988.


Still, Howard remained a cult figure through the 1980s. The Conan pastiches were never successful. The comics did not take off until after the first Conan movie in 1982. REH was then forgotten in the 1990s, only to emerge a popular and recognized as a pioneer fantasist later, primarily due to Louinet’s translations. The latter started with those of the Wandering Star/Del Rey books in 2007 and then continuing through eight more to date of Louinet’s own devising, all for Éditions Bragelonne, namely Solomon Kane – L’Intégrale (2008), Bran Mak Morn – L’Intégral (2009), Le Seigneur de Samaracnde
(2009), *Les Dieux de Bal-Sagoth* (2010), *Kull le roi atlante* (2010), *El Borak – L’Intégrale* (2011), *Les Ombres de Canaan* (2013), and *Agnès la Noire* (2014). Each has an introduction and notes on the texts and typescripts by him. The hardbacks have print runs of 8000 and the paperbacks runs of 12000. These have been selling well and are garnering many new Howard readers, especially among gamers. All reviews have been very positive. Lacking the historical and cultural background of America, the French do not appreciate westerns by REH or anyone else, not to mention American dialects. Lovecraft started becoming mainstream there in the 1960s and has been helped by a Cthulhu video game. Clark Ashton Smith is unknown.

Born in 1967 in Limoges, France, Louinet had become interested in Howard through French translations of Marvel comics in 1983. His reading of Charles Hoffman’s essay “Conan the Existential” [3] inspired him to study and write about REH. He was the first to do pre-doctoral and doctoral theses based on Howard. While working on his Master’s Degree memoir in English literature in 1989, he visited Howard scholar, collector, and fandom founder Glenn Lord of Pasadena, Tex. [4-6], with whom he toured Howard’s hometown of Cross Plains. [7] Later Louinet did a pre-doctoral thesis on REH. He has acknowledged his indebtedness to Lord for extensive guidance, information, and copies of typescripts of Howard stories and letters. [8-9] It was through the close study of these typescripts that Louinet became an expert in their provenance, dating, and typography. He found he could date transcripts from typewriter artifacts and REH’s idiosyncratic spellings.

Louinet’s work on the Conan typescripts led to his appointment as editor of the Wandering Star/Del Rey pure-text editions of Conan, which, as we mentioned, he later translated into French. By careful
inspection of the typescripts (several of which he was given access to by their owners) and working with REHupans Rusty Burke and David Gentzel, Louinet was able to place all the stories in the exact order they were written. Dating the transcripts was essential to determining which were the most authoritative versions to use in the pure-text books. Louinet favored presenting Howard’s Conan stories in the order in which they were written, rather than that based on their internal chronology, in order to better reveal the development of REH as an author and world-builder. Thus, there would be no de Campian Conan saga. This worked well in the pure-text Wandering Star and Del Rey books, which were designed mainly to appeal to scholars and serious fans, but would not have worked as well as the chronological approach taken by the earlier books that first popularized the character. Still, the Wandering Star and Del Rey editions were essential in establishing a complete and standardized set of Howard’s fiction, critical to establishing him as an important author worthy of academic study and literary recognition.

Reading Howard in English made Louinet realize how bad existing French translations were, so he started translating the stories himself. Working as a translator gave him much insight into REH’s maturation as a writer. Howard’s earlier work is bursting with ideas, but he later learned how to control that proclivity without compromising his creative imagination. “The Dark Man” and “Kings of the Night” of 1930 are about the time he became a mature writer. Louinet thinks that Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright’s suggestions often improved REH’s stories. [10] During his translations, Louinet puts much care in his word and phrase selection in order to duplicate, as nearly as possible, the effect that Howard’s style and mood have upon the reader, despite the inherent differences between English and French. [11]

Part of Louinet’s apprenticeship was spent in REHupa. Between July, 1990 and November, 1992, he put out nine fanzines at first called Clontarf and then The French Connection. He said he was appalled by how mercenary the exploitation of Conan had become and how bastardized the stories were, most of which he would lay at the feet of de Camp. Louinet also collaborated on a French zine Le Cimmérien, with a print run of 50 to 100. He knew of another zine, Cimmérie, that put out 20 issues, mostly xeroxes of Marvel comics.

Together with Stéphane Labrousse and Lionel Londieux, Louinet published two issues of the typed text-only fanzine/journal Unaussprechlichen Kulten: Études et Textes de Robert E. Howard in October, 1990 (Grands Anciens, Limoges) and July, 1992 (Editions Samarcande, Limoges), with a cover price of $4.00. They contained both REH esoterica and literary criticism.

The 44-page (plus paper covers) issue #1 contained first appearances of the Howard story “Revenge” and of his poems “Counterspells” and “Custom,” as well as “Bran Mak Morn: A Play” and “Bran Mak Morn (Untitled Synopsis),” reprinted from the rare Robert Price chapbook of the former name (Cryptic Publications, 1983). Labrousse and Louinet then interview former Cross Plains Review editor Jack Scott about his memories of REH and his death. [12] All these are in both French and English; the remaining articles are only in French. Labrusse submitted “1979-1989, Les Années Howard,” surveying the Néo books. [13] Christophe Dulon’s “Au Delà du Vallum” (“Beyond the Wall”) is about the historical Picts, REH’s depiction of them, and the themes involved, including fatalism and a way of life doomed by encroaching civilization. [14] “Les Derniers Celtes” (“The Last Celts”) by Louinet covers Howard’s Celtic period of cultural interests and of his fiction, starting with his association with Harold Preece and culminating in Conan, as reflected by his evolving characters and by his own Celtic persona. [15] This evolution, Louinet points out, makes Conan different from other pulp heroes like The Shadow, who never changed as a character. (And I add: it also belies Howard’s reputation for supposedly neglecting characterization.) Regarding REH’s Celtic period, Burke differed with Louinet on its inspiration. Instead of attributing it to the catalysis of REH’s meeting Preece, Burke believes it was due to Howard’s discovery of Chesterton’s The Ballad of the White Horse. [16] Lionel Londieux’s essay “Almuric”
interprets the novel as REH’s commentary on humanity and civilization, not just as escapist adventure, paralleling themes in his other work, including evolution and racial miscegenation. [17]

REHupan Vern Clark reviews the issue in his REHupa zine, calling it a “worthy addition to the field of Robert E. Howard studies.” [18]

The 40-page (plus paper covers) second issue featured the first appearance of the story fragment “The Jade God” and the first appearances of poems “The Phases of Life” and “These Things Are Gods”; all are in both English and French. Dulon has “Turlogh O’Brien, Celte de l’an Mil” (“Turlogh O’Brien, Celt of the Millennium”), which discusses the historical background of the Turlogh and Clontarf stories, REH’s sources, and his amplification of favorite themes. Labrousse follows with “Turlogh O’Brien, le Fléau des Dieux?” (“Turlogh O’Brien, Scourge of the Gods?”), in which he looks at Turlogh as an instrument of divine will, with implications as to REH’s own religious and racial beliefs and supposedly puritanical thinking.
The issues sell now for about $70 each.

In 1990, Louinet completed his Ph.D. dissertation on Howard. In 1992, he received his Diplôme d'études approfondies (DEA) graduate degree with a 100-page pre-doctoral thesis, again on REH. [19]

Louinet started the REH-fans@xenite.org discussion board in 1997. After several essays for amateur publications and fanzines, his first professional publication was “The Birth of Conan” in the journal The Dark Man #4 (1997). In it, he takes on the arduous task of determining the chronological order of all the versions, in typescript or otherwise, of all the earliest Conan stories, as well as Howard’s “The Hyborian Age” essay. His idea is to see whether Conan’s birth as a character was as simple as REH claimed or, if not, just how long it took and what steps were involved. It seems that Howard engaged in world-building at a furious pace, but whipping the stories into consistent and acceptable shape was a chore. [20]
In 1997, REHupan Jim Van Hise put together and published a critical anthology consisting mainly of selected REHupa articles, entitled *The Fantastic Worlds of Robert E. Howard*. It contains Louinet’s essay “Conan, Kull and Bran Mak Morn: The Kings of the Night,” in which he traces the genesis, developing personality, and political ideals of those characters, as well as their Celtic influences. [21] In particular, he notes REH’s favor for the more populist monarchy of the Celts over the absolutism of the Roman emperors and medieval kings.

Louinet published the essay “Waiting for the Barbarians” in *The Ultimate Triumph: The Heroic Fantasy of Robert E. Howard* (ed. Rusty Burke; Wandering Star, London, 1999) in which he compares REH’s barbarian vs. savage characters, saying both types of characters share a hatred of the extremes of civilization and savagery. [22] He also advances some fascinating theories on whether their eye colors and phonetic names involve psychological connections with Howard’s views on barbarism and civilization.

Louinet has done a great deal of work on REH’s genealogy, manifested in his REHeapa (http://www.robert-e-howard.org/home.html) zines of 2001-2002 (as well as his REH: Two-Gun Raconteur Blog posts later). In “The Red-Bearded Viking of Skaggerack: Robert E. Howard, Genealogy, Racial Memories & Sam Walser,” he traces REH’s fascination with and research into his ancestry and how that infused his Nordic and Celtic dreams and stories, particularly the reincarnation tales involving the character James Allison. [23] It was one more way in which he would put himself into his stories, heightening their sincerity and vividness.

Delving into REH’s biography, Louinet has turned up much new material, in the process often correcting shoddy research and debunking fallacies engendered by de Camp while writing his biography *Dark Valley Destiny: The Life of Robert E. Howard* (Bluejay Books, 1983). Case in point is Louinet’s investigation of the Howards’ sojourn in Bagwell, Texas, in 1913-1915, reported in his REHeapa zine “Pigeons … from Bagwell,” which fills in details and contradicts de Camp misstatements about Howard’s boyhood there. [24] REH’s famous horror story “Pigeons from Hell” owes much of its plot and atmosphere to one of the stories that “Aunt” Mary Bohannon, the Howards’ biracial cook, told the young Robert. Louinet even turned up information on Bohannon.

Louinet’s interest in Howard’s family has brought much clarity to the characters of and relationships between REH’s parents. [25] In his REHeapa zine “Grief & Greed?,” Louinet examines Isaac’s actions and correspondence in the wake of his son’s death, finding many contradictions between Isaac’s sorrow and his desire to preserve Robert’s legacy, even to the point of seeming downright mercenary. [26] Louinet’s other REHeapa zines show Howard’s sensitivity on the occasion of his dog Patch’s death [27] and only a rough correspondence between REH’s life and the events recounted in his novel *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, unlike the close correlation de Camp assumed. [28]

The Picts are the only subject Howard wrote about over the whole course of his career, ever since reading about and being fascinated by them in a popular British history book. But his role for and portrayal of them changed with time as he learned more about their pseudo-historical basis (in pop anthropology and Theosophical occultism) and he would lose empathy for them in favor of Celtic characters. In fact, he dropped his one great Pictish character, Bran Mak Morn, after his first use of him as a viewpoint character, in “Worms of the Earth,” the way he would successfully use later protagonists like Conan. This may have much to do with how connected he felt with, and hence inspired enough to write about, each character, which in turn probably related to how well he “put himself” into his best stories. All this is expounded upon in the essay “Robert E. Howard, Bran Mak Morn and the Picts” by Burke and Louinet in *Bran Mak Morn: The Last King* (Wandering Star, 2001; Del Rey, 2005), edited by Louinet. [29]
Louinet continued his research on the dating and the composition and publication background of the Conan stories, presenting it as a series of three essays entitled “Hyborian Genesis” in the Wandering Star and Del Rey editions of the Complete Conan. He also considers REH’s motivations and influences. In the first essay, these include, for the Conan tales of 1932-1933, reincarnation, Bulfinch’s Mythology, Sax Rohmer, & Southwestern history. [30] In the second essay, for the Conan stories of early 1934, these involve Talbot Mundy, the pulp Adventure, the British book market, Almuric, Arthurian legendry, and Shakespeare [31] And in the last essay, these include Robert W. Chambers, civilization vs. barbarism, civilization decay, The Scarlet Letter, sex, and the Lincoln County War. [32]

In 2003 Louinet published “A Short History of the Conan Typescripts” in Robert E. Howard: The Power of the Writing Mind, in which he describes and reveals the fate of all such known documents and discusses REH’s typing practices. [33]

In his 2006 article “The Mysterious Island” in The Dark Man, Vol. 3, #1, Louinet analyzes the inspiration and motivation for and drafts of Howard’s story “The Isle of the Eons.” [34]

In his “A Short History of the Kull Series” in The Dark Man #6 (2001), Louinet had discussed the conception and publication history of those stories. [35] He expanded on this while editing Kull: Exile of Atlantis (Del Rey, 2006; Subterranean Press, 2008). In his afterword “Atlantean Genesis,” he explores REH’s realism-based invention of Sword & Sorcery; his world-building that mixed Crô-Magnons vs. Neanderthals, the Atlantis legend, and Theosophical occultism; his reflecting both an affinity for the Biblical Saul and appearance vs. reality paranoia in “The Shadow Kingdom”; his musings on metaphysics; and his taking cues from Shakespeare in “By This Axe I Rule!” [36]

Louinet became an inaugural member of the Board of Directors of the REHF in 2006. He rejoined REHupa in February, 2007, and did nine more zines between then and October, 2009, calling them Wulfhere Hairsplitter’s French Quarter. Speaking of French Quarter, he was the first to notice that Howard’s mention in a letter of the infamous ax murder of the Cortimiglia family in New Orleans in 1919 allowed one to precisely date the Howard family’s visit to the city [37-38]

In his second Wulfhere zine, Louinet published his essay “My Old Trusty Typewriter …” on REH’s Underwood No. 5 machine. [39] As he explains, his close inspection of all available Howard transcripts led him to conclude that the typewriter belonging to Mark Corrinet of Oregon and billed as REH’s machine is in fact bogus. Another typewriter that probably belonged to Howard’s father has turned up in Missouri, but it was manufactured in 1928. Since, according to Louinet, REH used the same machine from 1925 to 1936, it probably ended up in a dump. [40]

Louinet won the 2008 Cimmerian (“Black River”) Award for Special Achievement, namely editing The Last of the Trunk (Robert E. Howard Foundation, 2007). [41] He refused the award, however, on the grounds that the award process, in its departure from a one-person/one-vote procedure and confinement to the readership of The Cimmerian journal, was insufficiently democratic. [42]

In his ninth Wulfhere zine, Louinet reveals that an unnamed descendant of REH’s cousin, with whom he had been corresponding about the Howard family genealogy, had made him the surprise gift of (among other items) an original photograph of REH, namely the one called “studio – alternate” in profile with a fedora [43-45]

In 2010, Louinet discovered one of the few known copies of the Jenkins (1937) edition of REH’s A Gent from Bear Creek via an abebooks.com e-mail search alert, his timing aided by his location in a time zone well east (hence, earlier) of any other serious REH fans. He was able to pick it up for only $30
because the unnamed seller did not realize its value, which was over $10000. [46]

As part of his effort to increase the awareness of Howard as a literary figure in French academic circles, Louinet published the paper “Robert E. Howard, Founding Father of Modern Fantasy for the First Time Again,” which summarizes the conceptual development, printing history, and rise of popularity of Conan, the advent of pure-text editions, and recent French publications of Conan and about REH. [47]

Louinet edited and wrote the introduction to REH’s Spicy Adventures (Robert E. Howard Foundation, 2011).

Louinet won a Special Award from France’s 11th Imaginales (Imaginary World) Convention in 2012, that country’s most prestigious fantasy prize, for his work editing and translating Howard. [48]

In his article “One Gent Too Many on Bear Creek” in REH: Two-Gun Raconteur #16, Louinet discusses the origins and characteristics of the various extant typescripts of A Gent from Bear Creek. [49]
In a series of six posts on the REH: Two-Gun Raconteur Blog in 2013, Louinet examines the genealogy of and the history of the relationship between REH’s parents Isaac and Hester, turning up several more instances of sloppy research by the de Camps. [25] The portrait of the family that emerges is a far from happy one, with Hester, coming from a family in which she was accustomed to affluence and refinement, had passed up a prosperous suitor she had loved in favor of marrying a dashing young country doctor who could not provide her the security and social status she felt she deserved. De Camp had detailed the friction between REH’s parents (which, I add, could not have been easy on the sensitive young Robert). And though Louinet has doubts about whether Hester had tuberculosis [50], REHupan Barbara Barrett has made a good case for that. [51]

In 2013, Louinet received the Robert E. Howard Foundation (“Black River”) Awards – Special Achievement [52] for sharing his discovery of three new photographs of Howard taken with Faustine and Leroy Butler, REH’s neighbors in the mid-1920s [53], along with a photo of Hester and Patch. [54] He had happened upon these during his genealogical research into the Howard family, when he made personal contact with the Butlers. At Howard Days 2015, the Butler family presented the originals of these photos to him as a gift, plus four more, three of which having never been seen before, featuring the Butler kids with Howard, the famous photo of Howard drinking out of a giant beer schooner, and a photo of the Butler house. [10] Louinet’s contact with Brad and Jeff Howard, grandchildren of a cousin of REH, led to the discovery of their copy of the ultra-rare Jenkins (1937) edition of A Gent from Bear Creek (though only in fair condition), whose cover we pictured previously. [55] The Howards brought and displayed their Family Bible, which was published in 1857 and lists many ancestors going back to 1837, including REH and his parents, though it is not complete. The book should give us significantly more information about the Howard family. [10]

Also in 2013, Louinet published French translations of Charles Saunders’s complete Imaro and Scott Oden’s The Lion of Cairo. He also edited the Proceedings for Editions-ActuSF of two conferences: Imaginales 2013: Conférence Conan, l’intégrale and, with David Dunais, Sévres 2013: Conférence 90 ans de Weird Tales, HPL, REH, CAS.

With REHupans Chris Gruber and Mark Finn, Louinet co-edited the four volumes of Fists of Iron (REHF, 2013-2015) collecting Howard’s serious and humorous boxing fiction. Louinet wrote a series of articles called “The Lord of the Ring” in each volume discussing the typescripts and giving context to REH’s efforts to break into and succeed in the boxing fiction market. In the first installment, Louinet gives this insight into the practical roots to Howard’s innovative combining or “hybridization” of genres:

Howard’s tactic when tackling a new market was to mix familiar elements in his repertoire with the requirements of the new market he was trying to crash. And since his only market to date had been Weird Tales, his first boxing story would mix the fantastic and the ring. [56, p. 411]

Louinet was Guest of Honor at Howard Days 2014, at which he won the Robert E. Howard Foundation (“Black Circle”) Award for Lifetime Achievement in REH studies. [57]

Louinet returned to REHupa in 2014, starting a line of zines dubbed Collateral Damage. In his first such zine, he discovered that the book Howard employed to glean details about the Comanche and Kiowa abduction of Cynthia Anne Parker in 1836 (which he used in “The Vale of Lost Women” and for his depiction of Picts in “Beyond the Black River”) was Norman B. Wood’s Lives of Famous Indian Chiefs (1906). [58]

Always wanting to promote the reading of Howard and to expand public knowledge beyond films and comics, Louinet has done many interviews on REH and his own Bragelonne translations in France on
radio, television, and for major magazines, Web zines, and fanzines and has participated in several convention panels. [59-63] He also saw an opportunity to promote Howard as an advisor to a French effort by Monolith Games to produce a Conan board game. And being an REH purist, he wanted to make sure that the game would be true to its source material. The cloud-funding Kickstarter campaign has raised $3.3 million, the largest amount ever pledged for the development of a board game. The game will debut at GenCon 2015 in July/August. [10]

As another venture to promote REH in France, Louinet has recently published Le Guide Howard (Éditions-ActuSF, 2015), a pocket-size 288-page paperback that gives a biography of REH, including his character, environment, friends, and worldview. It also debunks past prejudices about him and discusses all his major characters (especially Conan, including adaptations such as games), his correspondence with but limited influence of Lovecraft, and the irrelevance of Howard-related movies. Louinet is working on an English version. Popularization of REH is paralleling a general trend in fantasy to focus more and more on the dimension of pseudo-historical fiction. As we know, Howard’s fantasy is not escapism involving noble causes and happy endings, but is grimly realistic, describing human existence as absurd and futile.
Currently Louinet is working on a television documentary and on another doctoral degree in Anglophone Studies at the Sorbonne involving a dissertation on Howard. He is also consulting on Modiphius’s Conan role-playing game (to help keep it authentic) and is translating his twelfth book for Bragelonne, *Almuric*.

Louinet is a teacher and lives in Paris with his wife Sheila and a son.

Turning to other Howardists in France, Simon Sanahujas is one of the founders and managers of the *Les Chroniques Némédiennes* (http://nemedie.free.fr) Web site, the best Howard site in France, and is a vital force in French REH scholarship. He contributed six of the seven articles in a special Howard issue of *Faeries: Toutes les Fantasy* (#5, autumn, 2001). Interviews with Sanahujas, Fernandez, Louinet, and Finn, along with other REH-related material, appears in the French magazine *Presences d’Esprits* #50 (Feb., 2007). In 2008, Sanahujas wrote and edited *Les nombreuses vies de Conan* (The Many Lives of Conan; Les Moutons Électriques, 2008) with contributions by Julien Sévéon, Matthieu Baumier, Christophe Fernandez, and Laurent Kloetzer. It contains essays on the life and world of Conan; on the themes, psychology, and evolution of his saga; and on other REH heroes, with bibliographies and maps. Also that year, Sanahujas and Gwenn Dubourthoumieu published *Conan le Texan* (Les Moutons Élec-

Speaking of Échos de Cimmérie, the award-winning critical anthology edited by Fabrice Tortey, we reviewed its contents and pictured its cover previously. [64]

As should now be no surprise, France has more in the way of Howard publications and fans than any country except the US, which is of course surprising in that it is not even an English-speaking country. These facts are all the result of the efforts of a few dedicated individuals, in particular François Truchaud and Patrice Louinet, and is testimony to what a few fans can accomplish. And to this achievement Louinet can add an impressive list of scholarly and promotional publications in both languages that have done much to advance the knowledge about and literary stature of the Texan author. Louinet did this by learning English well enough to appreciate Howard’s prose with all its uniquely American color and style, joining REHupa, visiting the US, doing extensive research, and publishing a pivotal new line of pure-REH-text books translated so skillfully that they simulate the same effect on French readers that the original texts have on English readers. We are indeed lucky to have him.

We conclude with my translations of all the critical articles in the two issues of Unaussprechlichen Kulten (with Louinet’s “Les Derniers Celtes” replaced with his expanded translation from REHupa Mailing #108), as well as Labrousse and Louinet’s interview of Jack Scott from Kulten #1.

**BEYOND THE WALL**

By Christopher Dulon from Unaussprechlichen Kulten #1 (Oct 1990), pp. 15-18

Only a few authors of the first century AD (Tacitus ...) mention, and that very vaguely, the race of the Picts at the time of the Roman conquest of Britain. A few decades after the landing of 43 victorious legions, they fought some furious battles with “painted men” (Picts) steadily northward. These were the only natives, with the masses of the Celts of the West, to oppose them with serious resistance. In fact, the Romans were unable to broach the masses of Grampians [in Scotland] – LAB], and had to resolve to build, from 122 to 127, the powerful Hadrian’s Wall, crossing the island from West to East. The Wall called Antonin built further North – in fact a simple mound of earth – had to be abandoned very quickly, by 180, after thirty years, in the face of incursions as the Picts surged into the rich lands of the province of Britannia. Contact with the culture was therefore broken; we do not know anything about this pre-Celtic civilization held in “quarantine.” This people being illiterate until their evangelization centuries later, there were only sporadic allusions concerning them in the sixth and seventh centuries. Similar official statements of incursions disappeared during the collapse of the Romans and the early part of the years 400-410. This period of the fifth to eighth centuries has been dubbed “The Dark Ages” due to the darkness of the conditions on the British Isles, and we must accept that we shall never know more of the Picts ...

How Robert E. Howard would have been fascinated by the Celtic people shrouded in mystery, in perpetual revolt against the established order of Pax Romana that governed three-quarters of the known world?
The theme that haunted him since his youth was, however, little exploited during his professional career, since only three more stories appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1927, 1930, and 1932. At that time, the Great Depression worsened, restricting the pulp market (good texts were then returned by magazines in distress). REH had to optimize his production. This led him to abandon the “emotional” characters who had but little import to the prosaic and popular US boetian [i.e. stupid, foolish, dull-witted – LAB] public, in favor of the more profitable western/detective/spicy/boxing stories, his Fantasy vein therefore limited to Conan.

What interest does the reader feel immersed in Howard’s “Bran Mak Morn” cycle at hand?

It is not so much a historical background rendering – by the third century – found in other cycles of mediaeval fantasy or oriental stories (Turlogh Dubh O’Brien, Cormac Fitzgeoffrey, Cormac Mac Art). Note first that the Picts appear here as the protagonists of major stories. As in other cycles, belonging to other eras – symbols recur throughout his work – Howard has represented them either as secondary characters (Kull) or as adversaries (“Beyond the Black River,” Conan).

But what impresses most is the weight of the context of Bran at the time: it is not about a wandering adventurer, forever banned by vendettas from his home country. Bran is a sovereign from an immemorial family – see “Kings of the Night,” which shows its origins back to the proto-historic times of Kull. As such, he is responsible for a race doubly threatened. First, for the decline, due to the weight of immemorial antiquity. And we find REH’s underlying theme here of the time decay factor for all races, “which will disappear as a cloud over a summer sea.” In the case of the Picts, the decay is accentuated because of their merger with lower strains, which produces a degenerate people, simian in appearance. A veiled allusion to the fate of the influx of Slavic/Latin/Eastern immigrants which “threatened” old-stock American society in the twenties (against which Lovecraft vituperated)? The question deserves a long debate.

But a second, more tangible, threat are the people watching this decline: the invasion of Rome, which would then impose its iron fist on older peoples of the earth, which, although declining, have always maintained their independence.

It is against this immediate danger that Bran is trying to unify their race, split into clans. Over the episodes of the cycle, the situation becomes clear: in the early work “The Lost Race” – some geographical errors! – he sees a Pictish tribe. In “Men of the Shadows,” we are presented Bran and the glorious past of his people. This new addition involves physical characteristics of the King – and purity of blood in a degenerate race – in fact the symbol of a “revival” of Pictish nationalism. Hence, the challenge of the mental duel that he won with the witch (representing the vegetative status quo), after which she agrees with Bran. The evocation of the distant racial past, traced by the sorcerer, is stupifyingly beautiful: Lemuria, Atlantis, successive waves in the Celtic British Isles, the embodiment of all the greed of the Roman Caesar ... Here is REH at his best, mixing the myths into a splendid proto-historical edifice.

“Kings of the Night” is an even more significant story because of the hovering threat that materializes: Bran, head of a heterogeneous coalition – Pictish clans united for the occasion, and Cymric British Gaels, Norse raiders in 300 – will this time repress an entire legion. About the history, one might regret that Howard (very “comics”-like) mixes his heroes. Yet we must recognize that the intervention of semi-dreamlike Kull allows REH to write beautiful lines on the entanglement of past and future, reality and illusion. Ultimately, the diplomatic efforts of Bran, Kull’s intervention and its corollary, the crushing of the legion, will grant a respite to the Picts before their inevitable extinction.
But the peak of the Bran Mak Morn cycle is the later “Worms of the Earth,” acclaimed upon its release as a “macabre masterpiece” (A. Derleth). In fact, the story would be this successful with a monster haunting an unfathomable lake, as with repulsive and hybrid creatures inhabiting the underground of old Wales (see A. Machen ... or HPL!)

But beyond its technical qualities, it is a poignant tragedy, where Bran is seen in alliance with these damned degenerate things to avenge the arrogant Titus Sulla. Making a deal with the immemorial enemies of his people, he will go back down to what is base and ignoble in him. He is now implicitly discredited as leader of the struggle of the Picts against the invader.

Thus, unlike the other heroes of REH, Bran, his favorite hero – see the letter quoted in the preface to the NéO volume – has a fate that seems dark: through this ignominious allegory of its king, it is perceived that the Pictish race is doomed. And the new “The Dark Man” (the Turlogh Dubh O’Brien cycle taking place at the beginning of the tenth century) confirms this ultimate decline: the Pictish people are reduced to fighting for a symbol, the statue of their former king, before returning to the mists of oblivion (historically, the Picts disappear in 844 after their forced merger with the Scots).

Ultimately, it is the unparalleled degree of fatalism that emerges which distinguishes the Bran cycle. And in fact, in our opinion, it is the most endearing part of the Howardian work.

The Celtic soul, a “mood” always very dark ... and the restoration of gray skies and desolate moors of Caledonia ... had REH read Ossian?

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FRENCH


The fragments “Bran Mak Morn: A Play” and “Untitled Synopsis” (which is undoubtedly the first draft of the novel which REH alludes to in the above letter (NéO 60, p 14)), unpublished in France to this day, appear for the first time in this issue.
A CONVERSATION WITH JACK SCOTT

By Stéphane Labrousse and Patrice Louinet from Unaussprechlichen Kulten #1 (Oct 1990), pp. 26 & 28

(The following lines are excerpts from a conversation with Jack Scott, former editor of the Cross Plains Review, the newspaper of Cross Plains. This interview was conducted Monday, March 6th, 1989. Since it was more a conversation than an interview, we have taken the liberty to arrange it in the following way.)

When I first met Robert E. Howard, I was about twelve years old. He must have been about eighteen, something like that. I don’t believe we were ever in school at the same time. He finished school here when he was about fifteen or sixteen years old. Howard left here and went to Howard Payne Academy. He took a business course as I recall; when I finished here I went to a military school and took two more years before I went to college. I just said that to show you that our time in school didn’t overlap very much.

I would speak to him and he would speak to me, but we never had very much in common. I was interested in baseball, tennis, football, etc. ... I can’t remember Robert Howard showing much interest in those things. We thought Robert Howard to be a lot different from the rest of us – and he was! But I guess he is probably now the best-known man that ever spent a night in this town.

I have never in my life had a conversation with Robert of political or special significance at all. Robert Howard was not known to be a world-renowned figure at that time, and his opinion was of no more interest to me than the man next door. He knew everybody here, spoke to them, but he was not close to that many people. He was close to Dave Lee, Lyndsey Tyson whose father was also a doctor. Lindsey was his closest friend. And with some few other boys he would go to prize-fights in Brownwood. They once had a terrible car-wreck coming home: Howard tore his car and Dave Lee lacerated his face. But I can’t remember Howard being interested in activities most young people are concerned with. I imagine you are 100% right to say that he was interested in individual sports. I never boxed with him; at that time, I was a skinny kid! I don’t remember him showing any interest in politics, or expressing opinions, if he was a democrat or a republican.

It’s been a long time, 53 years, since he killed himself. I ran a little newspaper here, but I was also a stringer for daily newspapers and Associated Press; I supplied them with items and every time something of significant interest happened here, I would run on top of it, because I was having a pretty rough time making money out of the newspaper, and the fact I could pick up sane money there was important to me. I remember the day he killed himself. I knew his mother had been very ill for about three weeks and I heard: “Howard killed himself!” I got my car and ran there and the yard was full of people. All the neighbors were around and I wanted to get a statement out of somebody, you know, the fact that he killed himself; I needed somebody to say officially that he killed himself. I saw the old Judge of the Peace; you might call him the coroner; in rural communities the Judges of Peace serve as coroners. He came out of the house and I walked up to him and said: “Have you got a rule in this thing?” And he said: “well, come in, I’ll show you something”; he took me to the typewriter in the study, and here Howard had written four lines on that typewriter. “What do you think that means?” I don’t really think the old Judge of Peace understood:

All fled – all done, so lift me on the pyre,
The feast is over and the lamps expire.
I don’t think he knew what a pyre was, most people here didn’t. I said: “well, my opinion is that he killed himself.” And I remember that when I reported to the newspaper, I said: “official verdict has not been rendered, but the Judge of Peace is considering a possibility of self-infliction.” The next day, the verdict had been rendered. I remember I sold a good many stories on REH, him and his funeral, and the papers ran them all, the dailies in Fort Worth, in Dallas, etc. His funeral was one of the biggest things I have ever seen here. It was held in the tabernacle, there were about four or five hundred people, and every seat was taken because Dr. Howard had a lot of friends here. There were some friends of Robert, and many of Dr. Howard who had delivered five hundred babies in this country. …

THE LAST CELT

By Patrice Louinet from his The French Connection #4, pp. 5-10 in REHupa Mailing #108 (Mar., 1991)

Note: This article is an expanded version of the one published in the first ish of Unaussprechlichen Kulken. But this one is longer and was translated in English by yours truly.

As early as the autumn of 1922, Robert Howard left Cross Plains for Brownwood to complete his final year of school. It was there that he was to meet Truett Vinson and – some months later – Tevis Clyde Smith. The three of them all had literary ambitions, Vinson being involved in Lone Scout journalism, Howard and Smith soon collaborating on “Under the Great Tiger,” an unfinished tale published serially in Smith’s amateur All-Around Magazine. Furthermore, Howard first appearances in print were already several months old, with the publication in The Tattler, the school publication, of a few (very) short stories.

While the biographical data on this period of Howard’s life is sketchy at best, the correspondence with Vinson no longer surviving, and the letters to Smith being written from – and dealing with – Cross Plains. It is thus difficult to establish clearly how the three young men would behave together. However, Novalyne Price Ellis actually knew Tevis Clyde Smith at that time, and would come to know Vinson and Howard in later years. Thus, from her knowledge of the three, she was able to give a picture of what the relations between them must have been: “( ... ) they felt that they were intellectually separated from, as Clyde would have expressed it, the “common herd.” While I can’t say that they were snobbish, because they were too interested in life, too interested in opinions.” Day of the Stranger, Necronomicon Press, July 1989, p. 7). “Separated from the common herd.” Such considerations were nothing short of commonplace in the “roaring twenties,” dominated by an unprecedented intellectual agitation, and which saw the formation of several political, philosophical, or literary coteries. Social darwinism, taylorism, socialism were the “in” words, and Robert Howard was no exception.

As a consequence, we have this surrealistic image of “this” Howard: writing fiction, but not a yet a professional writer, joining the Economic Division of Howard Payne in the fall of 1926, and devoting several letters to Upton Sinclair (see Selected Letters 1923-1930, Necronomicon Press, Oct 1989, letters 10 & 11). Interestingly enough, it is from this precise period that date almost all of Howard’s attempts at writing “realistic” fiction. Texts such as “Spanish Gold on Devil Horse,” the dozen or so Confession stories, and, of course, his semi-autobiographical Post Oaks and Sand Roughs. Prior to these attempts, Howard’s literary range was centered around history, with a clear affection for the theme of savagery, as we will see later. This is not to say that history (or adventure) was forgotten, but to state that it was clearly pushed into the background.

The end of this “realistic” phase is a striking one. At the end of Post Oaks, when the events of the novel catch up with real life, the book itself becomes part of the fiction. Steve Costigan realizes that his
literary career is not a viable one, and that his realistic novel is a bad one. He knows it won’t be accepted, and thus leaves his homeland to roam the earth. In Cross Plains, Howard does not leave, but, in common with Steve Costigan, he knows that his novel is a bad one. And what started out as a realistic novel ends as a total fiction. So will the rest of his career.

If the last months of 1928 mark the end of this phase, the first months of the next year show an evident change. Not visible at first in his income, we can see a change of tone in the correspondence. Late in 1928, Howard “crashed” Ghost Stories, and, sometime later, Fight Stories; the stories would not appear until several months, and neither would payment, but increased sales to Weird Tales confirmed all this to Howard. In April 1929, Howard wrote an enthusiastic letter to Clyde Smith: “(...) On my return here, I found a returned ms. from Adventure, with a line or two from the assistant editor, telling me to submit more of my work, and soon after returning I got a letter from Argosy, accepting that story I told you about. They said it was still far too long but they’d cut it down and make the necessary changes themselves. The day after getting that letter I got a check from them for $100. Also a letter from Weird Tales with the advance sheets of a story appearing in the next issue. Farnsworth said he intended publishing a sonnet in the next issue after that and then “The Shadow Kingdom” which is a $100 story, and after that a shorter story. I believe he’s paving the way to publish the serial I sold him (...)” (REH to TCS, in Selected Letters, p. 35).

This letter is very interesting for several points, but the most important ones are that Howard seems quite enthusiastic and confident. The fact that the editors of Argosy will re-write the story themselves makes Howard looks like a real pro; the stress here is not on “changes” but on “themselves.” The other point is that Farnsworth Wright has become “Farnsworth,” just like a friend. Howard is right in assuming that his career is booming, and despite numerous rejections, he knows he has succeeded in becoming a professional writer.

* * *

The problem now resides in explaining how the would-be writer Howard/Costigan became the Robert E. Howard we know and appreciate. A simple analysis of dates reveal that this literary “boom” is not the simple chronological consequence of his failure at selling realistic fiction. His letter to Clyde Smith of February 1929 giving statistical data on his writings (see Selected Letters, pp. 28-32) proves that “The Apparition in the Prize-Ring,” his first sale outside Weird Tales was written sometime in 1928, that the two Kull stories “The Shadow Kingdom” and “Mirrors of Tuzun Thune” were finished in 1927 (!), “Skull-face” sent in 1928, etc. ...

* * *

It was on Monday, August 22, 1927 that Howard and Truett Vinson took a room at the Stephen F. Austin hotel, in the town of the same name. Vinson was to meet one of his correspondents, one Harold Preece, also member of the Lone Scouts of America. It did not take long for Howard to get into the discussion; talking with Preece, the latter casually mentioned the name of one of his friends: Maxine Ervin. She was none other than a cousin of Robert. The topic of their conversation was immediately found: Maxine had in several instances insisted upon her pure English stock and would talk at length about “her admiration for the English society of fixed social classes” (Harold PREECE, “The Last Celt,” in Glenn LORD (Ed.) The Last Celt, D. GRANT, 1976, p. 97). Howard had always been proud of his Irish ancestry, and, in the months that followed started to correspond with Preece. It is important to note that several of these letters contain lengthy passages on various Celtic names, either Gaelic or Brittonic, and even with listings of Norman names. Howard intended to prove his Celtic lineage, and nothing was going to stop him. (See, for example, the letters from September 1921 & March 1931; I do not know where or if these letters have been published.)
The correspondence between the two men, who could scarcely see each other, lasted until 1931, but they met for the last time in 1936. Thirteen letters to Preece survive, but none to Howard, alas. Preece was a fervent adept of Celtica, and this particularity gave a different tone to the letters. The two men rarely seeing each other, the letters were not full of the trivialities one finds in the letters to Clyde Smith (and would have expected to find in the other side of the correspondence or in the letters to Vinson). Against all odds, since already quite fluent in Celtic knowledge, Preece became the unquestioning pupil of Howard. Going further than simple listings of names, the letters soon indulged in Celtic folklore, linguistics, history and legendary. At the same time, Howard, whose knowledge in this part of History was not that developed, began to read book after book on the subject, and to give his impressions to his friend. Doubtless this worked on the other side, witness this letter of November 24, 1930, where Howard declares himself interested by a book Preece mentioned him.

This sudden pan-Celtism on the part of Howard reveals itself much too important to be confined in his correspondence with Preece alone; early in 1930, Howard ceases to start his letters to Clyde Smith with “salaam” and replaces it with “Fear Finn” (White Man); in the same time, Howard becomes “Fear Dunn” (the Brown Man) and he occasionally changes his signature to “Railbeard Eiarbhin hui Howard.” A minor controversy on Howard Phillips Lovecraft’s use of Celtic language in his story “The Rats in the Wall” helps Howard initiate what will became his most important correspondence, in terms of quality as well as quantity ... In a mere two years, Howard had become “the last Celt.” By 1931, the correspondence with Preece drew to a close, but things had changed in an unalterable way.

* * *

Was Howard aware of all these changes? Certainly, though maybe not in a conscious way. When he writes Post Oaks in the latter part of 1928, few are the details from his life he omits; he alters the chronology of some points, exaggerates the importance of others, but does not omit anything, except his meeting with Harold Preece. Preece simply does not appear in the book at all, whereas Vinson, Clyde Smith, and even Herbert C. Klatt do! One may may wonder about the reason of such an omission; maybe Howard knew that Preece was bringing him new perspectives, far removed from the old ones ...

On a more important level, Howard talks at length about “The Shadow Kingdom” in the book. It appears that the story was started as early as 1926, but could not be finished before 1927. It is in my opinion that Kull was not conceived as a series character, but that he became one sometime later (some examples a contrario being Solomon Kane or Bran Mak Morn). It is only in his letter of February 1929 to Clyde Smith (the one with the listing of his stories) that Kull is mentioned, at least indirectly: “‘The Shadow Kingdom,’ barbarian king ruling a mythical antediluvian kingdom.” (Selected Letters, p. 30). In Post Oaks, the name of the character is never mentioned. The fact is that this story was undoubtedly begun as an Atlantis-in-disguise story and ended up as the first story starring King Kull and exploring Celtic themes. Begun as an Atlantis story since we know that the first drafts of the story date from 1926. At that time, Howard’s lifelong interest in Atlantis was at its peak. A few months earlier Howard had begun, but never finished, despite the existence to this day of several drafts, a story centered on Atlantis and Lemuria: “The Isle of the Eons” (in The Gods of Bal-Sagoth, Ace Books, 1979). Interestingly enough, scattered throughout the story, the reader finds names he has become accustomed to while reading the Kull stories: Valka, Hotath and Valusia; even the race of the Serpent Men is mentioned! “The Shadow Kingdom,” at least in its early drafts seemed to resemble the story, being described by Howard himself as a “wild fantasy” (Post Oaks, p. 109). The story was eventually completed during the summer of 1927, after school. If his meeting with Preece had already occurred at that time, this may explain why the story was rediscovered, rewritten and sold. At any rate, this story is in no way representative of the series, and may explain its sale to Farnsworth Wright. The other Kull stories are but explorations of various Celtic myths: the theme of the undersea city in “Delcardes’ Cat” of a nonlinear
time in “The Striking of the Gong” and “The Kings of the Night,” of the status of reality and illusion in “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune,” and of the status of the king and of governments in almost all the stories. (Glenn LORD in his article “An Atlantean in Aquilonia” (The Savage Sword of Conan, 1, Marvel Comics, 1974, pp. 58-61) notes that “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune,” while brooding and metaphysical, was accepted, but that “the writing rather than the theme was the predominant factor in its acceptance by Wright”). I engage those interested in the comparison to read some books on the subjects (or to ask Rusty to give them interesting books to read; my references in the domain are all in French, and thus, of no use to you).

Following Kull, several Celtic (or of Celtic origin) characters make their way in Howard’s fiction: The works of Brian Donn Byrne, notably of Crusade with his half-Irish, half-Norman character will be a definite influence on the creation of Cormac Fitzgeoffrey (for further details, check out Rusty’s excellent reviews of this author’s books in REHUPA 98). A “real” Cormac Mac Art existed, but he lived about two centuries earlier than Howard’s character; even Steve Costigan bears an Irish name. This Celtic influence will also have a very important mark on Howard non-series, non-Celtic characters, namely his historical tales from 1930-1932. It is in my opinion that the constant touch of pessimism and even nihilism that marks these, and makes them rank as some of Howard’s finest fiction ever (and anyway the best and most gripping histories I have ever read), comes from the Celtic mood of some of the characters (some of which, incidentally, are Irish) and of the author.

This attraction to the Celtic warrior will also be the major consequence in Howard’s career in an indirect way. Prior to this, Howard’s world was roughly divided into two opposite sides: the “civilized” and the “Barbarians,” with typical examples of the first being the Romans and of the second the Picts. The Celts will be introduced as “Barbarians,” too, but with a different meaning, and this will lead to a confusion for the readers, which has subsisted to this day. I have developed at length this particular point in my “Death & Decay in REH,” which I will run serially in REHuppa beginning with next mailing. In the meantime, I suggest you compare the words used to describe the Picts of the Bran Mak Morn stories, the Picts of “Beyond the Black River” and the “Red People” of “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth,” and then to re-read carefully Howard’s final sentence to “BBR,” to see what “Barbarism” really stands for here …

Howard appreciated the Picts because of their resistance to the Roman oppression. The arrival of the Celts will change everything. From 1930 onward, many of Howard’s best stories will follow the same pattern: the Barbarians allied with the Savages (which Howard also referred to as barbarians), either voluntarily or not, but always in a temporary way against “civilized” forces. This is the pattern for “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth,” “Hawk of Basti,” etc. … and even of “Red Nails” in a very peculiar way, which I have attempted to demonstrate in “Death & Decay” …

In “The Kings of the Night,” one of the first tales following this pattern, and one of his tales Howard liked best, judging from his correspondence, he put on paper his lifelong hate for Rome, using a temporary alliance between Savages and Barbarians. The latter won this battle. As he could not repeat the same story, it will be progressively that Howard will leave historical accuracy to arrive to imaginary settings. The first step was Turlogh Dubh O’Brien and “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth,” a true Celtic warrior, perhaps Howard’s “most Celtic” character. The second …

Early in 1932, Howard created Conan the Cimmerian, who would come to be recognized as his best creation, and who was his last great Celtic character, his interests drawn more and more toward the western lore from 1933 on. (I have written several pages on Conan and his Celtic roots in an article entitled “King Conan and the Celtic Dream,” now in the hands of Rusty.). However, few things have been said about the origin of the name “Conan the Cimmerian.” For Conan: some people have talked about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle … (!!!) More seriously, Harold Preece has written about the influence of
James McPherson and of his so-called translation of Ossianic poetry in the eighteenth century. Howard had read and appreciated McPherson: “So you’ve been reading McPherson? Well, don’t take him too seriously. He’s a damned fraud. I like his stuff because of their beauty and imagery” (Letter to Harold Preece, circa Feb 1930, Selected Letters, p. 40). As for “Cimmerian,” no explanation has been given except de Camp’s: The nation of his hero’s birth Howard named Cimmeria after the fogbound western land visited by Odysseus in The Odyssey (Dark Valley Destiny, p. 265). As usual in cases like these, de camp does not cite in sources; if he has some, I will bow to them; if not, I have another explanation (and will have one line to add to my catalogue of “theory elevated to fact status by thought-power” …): the choice of a country so foreign to the Celtic tradition, and the facts that the Celts are, according to “The Hyborian Age,” descendants of the Cimmerians, would have been odd. However, it is known that Historians from the past used to mix the Cimbri (probably a Celto-German tribe) with the Cimmerians (who were Thracians). This theory was progressively discarded, but one of the latest books to subscribe to this theory was Harold Peake’s The Bronze Age and the Celtic World, published in 1922. This book was not in Howard’s library, but in a letter to Harold Preece, postmarked November 24, 1930 (Selected Letters, p. 74), Howard answers: “Nor have I read TBAATCW, though the title interests me highly and I intend to read it as soon as I can obtain it …” Which theory do you agree with: Sprague’s or mine?

Howard’s “Celtic” period ceased around 1932-1933 to be replaced with a greater and greater interest in the Western lore. This is not to say that he was not a Celt in his soul any more, but that all these elements had been assimilated and were to be found in his writings till his death. So many people have had the tendency to state that Howard remained constant throughout his life, that they have failed to see his evolutions. For four years, Howard was “the last Celt”; it is impossible to judge him before, during and after this period in the same way. As a consequence you cannot treat his characters as static and unchanging like Doc Savage or the Shadow. The Kull of “The Shadow Kingdom” is not the same Kull as the one of “Delcardes’ Cat”; the Bran Mak Morn of “Men of the Shadows” is not the one of “Kings of the Night” and the Conan of The Hour of the Dragon is definitely not the one of “Beyond the Black River.” Perhaps this is the key for a better understanding of the characters, the evolutions, and Howard’s tales …

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**ALMURIC**

By Lionel Londieux in Unaussprechlichen Kulten #1 (Oct 1990), pp. 15-18

“Howard was at his worst when he began to imitate consciously (...) and Burroughs and London in Almuric” Lyon Sprague de Camp, Dark Valley Destiny, 1986, p. 295.

“Howard has had less success with the other work undertaken in 1936. He almost finished a novel of 50,000 words (...). As Burroughs, Howard is not interested in scientific plausibility, and projects himself into the story more than ever before. We can assume that he intended to sell to an SF magazine (...) the vitality of the tumultuous story can be appreciated without trying to ask questions, for readers who would take care to ignore its inconsistencies and absurdities. (...) in some ways, this is one of the worst stories written by REH (...) (Almuric is filled) with noble savages and a certain romantic primitivism.” Lyon Sprague de Camp, ibid., p. 342-343.
Almuric is generally regarded as a simple escapist story of poor quality, as stated above by the well-informed businessman.

But back for a moment to the facts: Almuric is in fact a paste-up of the first draft full of Robert Howard with a second draft revised but unfinished, a paste-up engineered by Farnsworth Wright, editor of Weird Tales, who would publish the serial novel in the May, June/July and August 1939.

Howard wrote the novel in 1936, a few months before his death. Here is what many already suspect in the opinion of a “certain critic.” After all, is it not striking to find in this novel many themes and scenes with typically Howardian tics? Is it not striking to say that this novel was one of the latest writings of a man who would commit suicide? Is it not striking to finally find a theme in this novel also decidedly Howardian? Enough to give Almuric a totally different scent that was to bring about much desired release.

* * *

From the first pages is presented a character totally disproportionate. A man who would be “the best built on Earth” and “stronger,” who “confused, unsatisfied, (runs through) the world in search of an outlet for the immense vitality that bubbles in him, vainly seeking some form of living pretty wild and rough to satisfy his feverish desires, inherited from the red and hazy days of youth of the world.” A Howardian character without a doubt, but an ultimate figure as well.

As a concentrate of all the Howardian heroes, the result of the sum of the whole series of characters from Howard. As if he had brought to his personal gallery this final specimen, or hero and author merge in a combination of the qualities of the first and the fantasies of the second.

The result? Esau Cairn, a real monster, outside his own world by nature excessive in every way. The man is fully human in a world that no longer is. A world that has become perverse, hypocritical, cruel, cowardly. So many adjectives apply to Boss Blaine, one through whom all things come, the first pivot in the narrative of Almuric.

Boss Blaine, crooked politician, tries to manipulate Esau Cairn, who will react with full force, killing him.

Here is a first explosion, which can be read on many levels. First, that of the novel: Esau Cairn, conscious of his power and his strength has always bullied so as not to harm anyone. So Boss Blaine suffers the explosion of a lifetime of frustrations. It’s also probably the destruction of the embodiment of civilization, this being the vile, corrupt politician without honor. But above all it is indeed the symbolic destruction of Cross Plains, the stifling universe, symbolic of repression, of all prisons, for Howard. Moreover, the phonetic similarity between “Boss Blaine” and “Cross Plains” leaves no doubt. The desire to escape from Howard is well known; see end of Rebelle [Le Rebelle (NéO, 1989) = translation of Post Oaks and Sand Roughs – LAB] for all desired confirmation.

Then, everything plays out. Esau Cairn fled, not out of fear or cowardice, but reason. He knew that even in death, Boss Blaine has a long arm and that he will pay with his life at the hands of the corrupt police. Now the last hope of Esau Cairn is to die by selling his life dearly: a typically Howardian attitude, if there is one.

Then comes the second device bringing the narrative story throughout its development, namely the meeting of Esau Cairn and Professor Hildebrand, inventor of the “Great Secret” that can enable one to travel through space, to be transported to other worlds and universes.
It is a commonplace to say that Howard was not interested in SF and the scientific side of the “Great Secret.” This is for him only a device that allows one to switch the novel to the field of pure fiction, far from any reality.

We could probably venture a symbolic passage from one world to another. Namely a symbolic suicide. After all, didn’t he write in “The Tempter” that “suicide transports (...) from darkness to the day?” Life was in fact the only real death, while the true life is elsewhere ... There, on the other side? It is still a tribute to Burroughs and his John Carter, published in 1912 in The All-Story.

All this part is a tragic portrait of Howard himself, the world and his relationship with it. Howard hates his world, his time, where everything is distorted, perverted. Some may find it odd the little part that Howard is given when this is analyzed. But this world is lost forever and for a long time Howard knew he could not change it, unlike Herbert Wells, Jack London, or Hemingway, who continued to struggle. Also he would not linger there, preferring by far the dream of the planet Almuric.

Almuric is a real theater where Howard will be able to play all of its major themes, without restraint. Almuric is the territory of the absolute as Two-Gun Bob will finally be able to develop all its unlimited thematic credibility. The theme starts from the first pages. Everything is already fully Howardian including a fundamental element of his work: violence. Physical violence, the response of a strong body, then life itself, in relation to its surroundings.

The trip physically violent up to his arrival, Esau Cairn meets the first living being, and the first response is physical confrontation. This first encounter is the beginning of many more, precipitating the flight of Esau Cairn to the hills, one of the wildest places of Almuric.

Here Esau Cairn will have to prove to his new world his right to survival. If he is strong enough, he will survive, for him to fully adapt to nature. A Howardian theme, man first of all must be in total harmony with his environment. Esau Cairn will have to harden, recover a new virginity. He must be reborn on Almuric – an ideal man according to the Howardian concept. Be monstrously strong and hardened, by a hundredfold, to survive on his new planet, which presents a very hostile nature. Everything in this novel is exaggerated, multiplied; one does not live on Almuric, one survives. Each element, natural, human, etc. ..., is taken to its most extreme limit, everything is in its quintessence.

This is the beginning of the journey of initiation for Esau Cairn. When fully integrated with his environment, so incredibly brutal, hard and unforgiving, then he can go to meet “human beings.” “Desire for company” is written in the novel, or the thematic art of conduct and realism of the human soul on the same front. A small detail is also quite significant about the journey of initiation of Esau Cairn: when the latter lived in the hills, he was never been able to make fire, and only when he descends into the plains in order to meet “men” does he find flints. It is this same fire, a natural dominant element (one overlooks nature after it has been built) symbolic of human consciousness, that Guras will discover long before Esau Cairn arrives at the gates of Koth.

There, stunned and imprisoned, Esau Cairn will be meeting with the Guras people, which will be a great fight. Again, the body, physical strength and primitiveness are the first means of demarcation and source of respect in facing the Guras, the ape-men of the country of Koth.

The Guras, the ideal people, the Howardian utopia on paper, illustrating perfectly the creed of Two-Gun Bob: “the natural life of humanity is a fierce struggle for existence against the forces of nature, and any other form of life is artificial and devoid of any real meaning.”
Indeed, the Guras have evolved into Barbarity, and remained there, not degrading in the wild, and not changing either, having found an ideal form of life.

Barbarism is the perfect setting for Howard. Man lives fully, physically, but is still endowed with reason. The Guras are barbaric and aware. We must distinguish totally the difference between barbarism and savagery if we are to understand Howard’s position. Savagery is a destructive force, blind and stupid. It is the power of bestial chaos, sterile and without nobility.

By living fully, completely, the barbarian does not have to ask existential questions, he lives. Moreover, barbarism is the perfect link between Nature and Man (if not culture), the man is just dominant, it is just the level of consciousness and evolution that allows him to be more or less master of his environment by his achievements, yet still completely tied to nature. Allowing him to live in complete naturalism and therefore not sink into intellectualism (it is Howard’s intellectualism that leads to self-destruction). In addition, Two-Gun Bob said of the Guras that their “exuberant barbarism makes them look like a young and recently appeared people.” Besides the obvious emphasis placed on life that characterizes these people, Howard insists that the young and recent race of Guras look young and alive, as opposed to old age and its sinister decadence.

It is clear that the society of Guras is a utopia, an absolute, an ideal. Thus, everything about the Guras is superlative. As for males, they are very virile; Howard describes them elsewhere as ape-men, covered with hair, overly muscled, loud, gruff, brawling, enjoying every second of their lives, existing for the moment. No wonder that their whole culture is oral, as that of another race that fascinated Howard: the Picts. And many parallels would very probably apply between these two races.

But Guras also have a parliamentary democracy (the “trial” of Esau Cairn ...) and are “good husbands”; their code of honor with respect to their companions is quite strict: monogamy, respect, protection and some consideration. “Some” consideration because women still having no access to life is a “policy” of the tribe (it would not do to push it!). These women are on the other hand Guras of great beauty and sweetness. They are very female, reverse twins with respect to “men.”

One of the first findings is that, with males more close to the monkey than the appearance of man, Esau Cairn/Howard becomes the most beautiful man of Almuric, and the most intelligent and grown. Because Guras are still described as giants with “big simple hearts,” i.e. honest, loyal, devoid of hypocrisy or malice within the meaning of the word evil. Recall also that the qualities of Guras (democracy, parliamentary attitude, respect for women ...) are the result of the barbaric level of consciousness, which does not detract from the point of view of their race’s survival.

Once among the Guras, Esau Cairn will again prove his right to life, and again by physical combat. For it is through that he will show courage, determination and the will of man. There is no cheating possible. One could almost say that at the time of the fight the man finds his original purity, while most of his life he defends it. There is no more room for intellectualism carried through all his burdens, ease and cowardice. No way to hide behind words, formulas, or lying. Then the fight, one has intrinsic value, the will to live ... away from the madness and suicide caused by the intellect.

Esau Cairn continues his voyage of discovery with this fight against Kossut, “the Bonecrusher,” where there is neither victor nor vanquished, but where is born an indestructible friendship and not just with the terrifying Kossut, but with all the Kothians.
Esau Cairn has proved his worth, his courage, he is now one of them. Perfect Stranger on his own world because of the nature of man, he becomes Kothian (“Almurican”) by the same fact, and symbolically reborn under his new name: Iron Fist.

On numerous occasions Howard says that Almuric is like the Earth while being quite different. For the simple reason that Almuric is reversed twin of Earth. The latter is corrupt and cannot be saved, while Almuric is still pure, and if there is a danger, it can still be fought. This danger is already at that level by the story of legends whispered by the fire: the terrible Yagas. But for now, Esau Cairn/Howard worries about another (the fantasy continues): the interest shown by a young girl missing Gura: Altha.

Esau Cairn took his own way of living with Guras, which are perfect (“I lived, burned and glowed with life (...) filled with the dynamic flow of life that chanted, clapped and hummed”), participated in the hunting, and there, far from the protection of the city, discovered Altha, pursued by the Thunderbird. Saving her, Esau discovers in her a strange and tortured one, contemplating suicide, dissatisfied with life in Koth and confessing her love in hints. In fact, Altha could be seen as the reverse twin of Howard/Cairn on Almuric. Indeed, he has found his ideal of physical life, and Altha will be restored as the complement of the true Howard, both physical and intellectual.

So much so that she said something that could summarize the terrible inner struggle of Howard in the period when he wrote his novel: Altha wanted to die, and yet she called for help, and when Esau asked her the reason for this paradox she replies, “self-preservation is difficult to overcome” ...

This whole scene with Altha is seen as responsible for a lot of sense, but it also introduces into the narrative the sinister and cruel Yagas, living in the city of Yugga Yuthla on the rock of the riverside Yogi, in the country Yagga, and having the sinister Queen Yasmeena. The stunning repeat of the “Y” is surprising, but still very enigmatic. One of the best hypotheses proposed is undoubtedly the following: in English, “Y” sounds like “why,” which adds to the Yagas as defined in the story.

The Yagas, cruel and ruthless, will capture Altha and then, after various vicissitudes, Esau Cairn (different incidents where cannibalization appears from other stories by Howard). They appear as the image of civilization, and Howard is having intellectual pleasure, denouncing it throughout, without any concession or half measures. He puts it all on the table, covering in a few lines all the foundations of our human organization. The Yagas are cruel as only the civilized know to be, that is to say free, for the pleasure of seeing them suffer. Same traits, fine, elegant, hard, reflect the cruelty of a race so far from the human being that they cannot be touched by emotion. A race that is enclosed in a narcissism full of pride, seeking only its own pleasure, which does not recognize morality. No matter how good and evil, the Yagas are gods and therefore are placed above good and evil. Their military superiority is in fact due only to their ability to fly. It is interesting to see that Howard gives Yagas the physical appearance of angels, fallen, of course. The Yagas dominate Almuric as civilization dominated the Earth, without respect, without honor, without glory and without humanity, insensitive monsters. They pillage, rape, eating human flesh (but they are so advanced in the dehumanization that we can hardly treat them as cannibals). The Yagas consider themselves as superior, and any other race as livestock. An idea that is echoed in our own tragic history and the full understanding of the logic of civilization by Howard.

If one dwells upon the organization of the rock of Yuthla, we see that it is the symbolic representation of a social ladder.

Below, the Akxis, degenerate people, working as real workhorses in a mixture of terror and of worship for people from above: the Yagas, lazy and brutal masters.
Howard strikes fairly and strongly, undermining the system at the base of the exploitation of man by man, a perverse system that makes them less real, ignorant, naive, incapable of rebellion, enslaved for too long (their work clothes are blue), and other greater wrongs, decadent and inhumane.

Howard dismantles the system of the social ladder, rung by rung, updating each element of slavery, the maintenance of the mass in ignorance, the workload causing the fatigue, killer of any possibility of reflection, and well on the nail of religion that drives the point home.

Yasmeena, the queen of Yagas, was made goddess and reigns over the imagination of Akkis, imposing on them – not evil, because of help from the social order – a superstitious terror which permanently closes the lid of a total slavery. All by means of rather pitiful illusions. Indeed, Almuric is a lot like Earth. All this makes even more sense if one recalls that Howard has experienced the brunt of the crisis for 30 years.

There is still a point that Howard discusses, albeit with the same violence, but also more ambiguity: namely Yagas’ sexual deviance. Their evil is denounced with great firmness, but in a context of fascination; the attraction/repulsion is not negligible. When Yasmeena expresses her intentions to the lustful Esau Cairn, we feel that it is not necessarily obsinate ...

It was said that Howard had this type of fascination for civilization as a whole. Perhaps it would be more fair to overlook the sexual vice. Because the latter is by far the more sulfurous, the most mysterious, most like a fantasy land. All this could only fascinate a romantic like Howard.

Otherwise, you still have to realize that it is civilization that made Howard; where he was born, there are social and cultural roots, and he was part of it, even if only in small proportions. He cannot therefore reject them completely; it would be denying a part of himself and of his daily life. After all, Howard is also defined by the great battle between the socio-cultural identity of the 30s and his despotic Almuric.

The Yagas are now also well-defined and the two ends of the chain are in place: on the one hand, the barbaric Guras, on the other, the civilized Yagas. It remains for Howard to make the two sides clash. Of course, this will be done through Esau Cairn, driving the story.

The Yagga exploit and dominate, but the barbarians of the impetuous temperament require only a few sentences from Iron Fist to scream to revolt and revenge. The Guras cry in rage before the testimony of Esau Cairn reporting the abuse to their wives.

The eternal movement of history is underway, driven by an Esau Cairn, flagship of the Howardian ideal. The young people will destroy the ancient and decadent race. Destroyed inside and out, the race of Yaggas – like any civilized race – will collapse on itself. For who can attack the rock Yuthla defuses Guras’ terror of superstitious Yagas, making the winged and deadly race accessible by fire and steel, like every biological species?

Esau Cairn! He who knows better than anyone civilization and its weaknesses.

In the latter part of Almuric, we see several scenes of importance: first, that the Akkis remain faithful to the end. The part that speaks of their enslavement, and what Howard thinks. This explains the speed of the “terrestrial” part of the novel: there is no hope.

Similarly, the Yagas will perish where they ruled, EsauCairn through the temple and the secret passage that allowed Yasmeena to dominate Akkis for decades.
Finally, the winged people will complete her story in a final, massive suicide. Yasmeena, certain of the end of her supremacy, releases the monster of civilization, the blind force of destruction and foulness. This makes us irresistibly think of the other end of the chain, savagery. The loop is closed. Self-devouring civilization, self-destructive in itself, collapses under its own weight, driven by the young and impetuous race of barbarians. The fact that the monster is an electrical Yasmeena surprises anyone. In this apocalyptic roaring Esau Cairn will put an end to this orgy of death. Its barbaric vitality permits him to kill the monster, putting an end to Yaga and civilization, so that finally LIFE returns to Almuric. The demonstration of the Howardian theme is perfect. What is there to say?

We pass rapidly over the last few lines of text, where Esau Cairn says he will bring civilization to Almuric in a view totally opposite from the rest of the novel; clearly, these lines are not from the hand of Robert Howard.

Many have criticized the lack novel-like coherence of Almuric, arguing that it is more like a series of stories than a novel. But of course, if one sees in Almuric a nice little adventure story, the story seems inconsistent. But consistency is not in that; it is in the topic discussed.

But how can one claim for a second that Almuric is a novel of adventure and escape, imitating Burroughs or London?

It is easy to make money by looting and vampirizing the work of a great author to make a serious analysis. But do not linger, Robert Howard’s colors are red and black, that of Sprague de Camp will always be green. Duly noted.

Aside from all low quality criticism, Almuric is a wonderful and deeply moving literary legacy of Robert Howard. A novel that offers an ideal narrative [? – LAB] the evolution and the willingness to go even further in civilization, in fact, a novel anti-American in spirit, which probably explains the poor reception that it receives lately in its country of origin.

But no matter, Almuric is the ultimate reversal of Howard on his work, the final mapping (which explains the cannibalized scenes).

There is in these pages all the philosophy, all the hopes, despair and fantasies of a gigantic author, screaming for the last time his convictions in the face of a lost world.

Almuric, or the Howardian dream, was never attained, which will be instrumental in the decision on a certain morning in 1936.

No, Almuric is not a novel of escape.

Limoges, 24/09/90.

Thanks to Glenn Lord for his bibliographic information.

All quotes are taken from the Almuric volume published by NéO in 1986. The translator is François Truchaud. He does so again blessed by the Black Gods.
TURLOGH O’BRIEN, CELT OF THE MILLENNIUM

By Christophe Dulon in Unausspechlichen Kulten #2 (July 1992), pp. 5-9

The cycle of Turlogh O’Brien, born in the course of 1930, is, in the Howardian oeuvre, a hinge between those Kull and Conan. But the Hyborian and Thurian worlds were created from parts by REH, through the amalgamation of various references found over his abundant readings on Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Turlogh, like Pictish Bran Mak Morn before him, evolved in a historical context, that of the medieval British Isles. We could also say semi-historical, as scarcity, drought and the fabulous character of the sources (Gildas, Bede, the Saxon Chronicle, Nennius, some monastic annals) give the period a vague and truncated image.

Apparently born in the year 990, Turlogh O’Brien is prince of the House of Dal Cas, whose stronghold is in Munster, the southwest Irish province. At the time, the island seems to be emerging from centuries of chaos, violence, and anarchy. For 500 years it was ruled – nominally – by supreme kings (Ardrigh) from the lineage of the great Niall (Niell) of the Nine Hostages. But this apparent homogeneity is illusory; Ireland, as Saxon England in the same period, is divided into rivalling kingdoms, five to eight depending on the period; these are also sometimes subdivided, like Munster, consisting of Desmond and Thomond. This fragmentation of powers weakens the authority of the Ardrigh, sitting at Tara, in the central kingdom of Meath.

This situation will also promote the implantation of Viking settlers in the early ninth century. If Finn-Galls (Norwegians) are simply raiding and looting, the Dubh-Galls (Danes) will be carving coastal settlements in various parts of the island. The Irish, in total, being more resistant than the Franks, Slavs or the Anglo-Saxons, have offsetting wins and losses all through the ninth and tenth centuries. But this commendable resistance is sporadic, and the long litany of wasted cities and monasteries reflects pillages. A constant state of disorder reigns on the island at the time.

In the story “Spears of Clontarf” written in spring 1931 (then reworked into “The Grey God Passes”), R. E. Howard evokes one of the great dates in Irish history.

During the last quarter of the tenth century, we are witnessing a growing strength of the ambitious King of Munster, Brian Borumha. In the years 970-980-990s, he won local success with his Celtic neighbors as well as with “Danes.” In 999, he already inflicted on Scandinavians of Dublin and Leinster their Mailmora ally, a severe defeat at Glenmama. In 1002, he intimidates the Ardrigh Malachi II into abdicating. Henceforth, it is the race to the final clash between Brian and the powerful kingdom of Dublin; it will take place in 1014 in Clontarf, under the walls of the northern capital.

For this campaign, Brian had the challenge of uniting most of the free Celts under his banner; in addition to his Dalcassians and parents of Desmond, he commanded the men of Connacht, plus the Meath contingent under the orders of his former rival Malachi. Only small northern kingdoms abstained, while Leinster (a southeast province) is traditionally allied to the “Danes.” Moreover, Brian gets help from Scottish auxiliaries; their country had had to drive back four years ago the invasion of the Norwegian, Sven Forked Beard.

To trace this battle, Howard used the small P. W. Joyce book, A Short History of Ireland he possessed.* A chapter devotes twenty pages to the event. There is found the outline presented in the Howardian tale: the cunning Queen Kormlada, the gathering of forces, the description of the various leaders and their respective motivations, and finally the fight and appalling losses it occasioned.
Yet far from directly plagiarizing Joyce’s pages, REH gives them a new dimension; he made of Clontarf a shock between two civilizations, two cultures, the turn of an era. Following the success of an obscure people in a remote island in the ocean, there opens a new era for Europe, now freed of a canker gnawing the past 200 years. What negotiations Charles the Simple began a century earlier, Irish axes bring to fruition. Then can start the great temporal and spiritual adventures of the cathedrals and Crusades ...

The character of Turlogh O’Brien is marked, in this regard, with some ambiguity. Despite his innate savagery, he is already more barbaric, but not yet a courtly romance hero. He is, ultimately, a man of “The Dark Ages,” in which the archipelago of Britain is just emerging. References made to the character this mysterious period seem to intermingle the darkness, violence and myth, barbaric and wonderful. The Arthurian myth illustrates this dichotomy.

It is therefore not surprising that, in “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth” (published in the October 1931 Weird Tales), Turlogh and his companion on the way, the renegade Saxon Athelstane are making a journey to the west worthy of that of St. Brendan. Like him, they end up in Terra Incognita. This is not the Hy-Brasil of St. Iriandais, but Bal-Sagoth, “the oldest empire in the world.” In both, the heroes will face wonders unknown to Europe of their time, illustrating the beliefs popular among sailors of great Spanish-Portuguese discoveries in the late fifteenth century: the fantastic character of what lies beyond the horizon in the Western Ocean ...

“The Gods of Bal-Sagoth” is a very good story in sum, very characteristic in style and Howardian thought. A negative aspect is, as often with him, the abuse of the screenplay process that are the coincidences. Furthermore, the action is speeded up too, and obviously did not proceed beyond two days, which detracts from the credibility of the story. At another level, we must report a very characteristic theme of Puritan thought among many Americans in the Howard’s era; the city is billed as a place of physical and spiritual perversion, where deceit vies with cruelty. REH was four years later to develop this theme in “Red Nails.” One thinks inevitably of the sermons of Baptist pastors in the twenties Midwest and Deep South stigmatizing major cities on the East Coast, populated mostly by “dagoes” (Jews, Slavs, Latins), and teeming with all aspects of the vice that promotes promiscuity. In contrast, this argues for the healthy character of “rustic” living in deep Anglo-Saxon America.

It is interesting to note the presence of these themes in “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth,” a 100% Howardian story, while in “The Grey God Passes” they are missing, REH sticking to the historic canvas found in Joyce.

Another story of the Turlogh O’Brien cycle, “The Dark Man,” illustrates the world of evolving character of this period: the Picts, an ancient race, are a shadow of the great people of Bran Mak Morn; while Christianity, in the person of the priest, appears as still weak and far from the dogma of the 13th century reigning over Europe. It is still, for a time, the Viking Age, a cruel era where the law of the strongest reigns, under the gaze of Aesir gods who despise weakness.

Perhaps Howard was considering continuing the Turlogh cycle. But in late December 1931, he received a letter from F. Wright, editor of Weird Tales, who announces his refusal of “The Grey God Passes” on the pretext of too many characters, which would only cause “the reader to lose all interest in this confusion of proper names, and have trouble guessing who is who.”** A characteristic reaction characteristic of much of the American readership of the time, seeking above all in literature, the proper escape account, where everything must yield to simplification. It explains why Howard stopped his work on “The Shadow of the Hun,” sequel to “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth.” Turlogh and Athelstane arrive at the Black Sea, maybe to plunge “toward the East into the shrouded mists of mystery,” then maybe a full
wind-up to it all. Pechenegs, Bulgarians, Khazars, Russians, or Ghaznavids disputed the vast plains of the empire of Atilla, a memory still persisting after centuries.

Considering the interest that we find in the cycle of Conan (created the following year in accordance with the American public’s more standardized tastes), it is regrettable that the young visionary of Cross Plains did not pursue this fresco of a world so little known, but fascinating because of all the myths and images it conjures.

**: Ibid., p. 95. Cf. The Last Celt Glenn Lord (D.M. Grant, 1976)

NOTE: The Howardian writer magnifies the event at Clontarf, leading to some inaccuracies; thus the strength of 40,000 warriors present is exorbitant for eleventh century armies. It should be reduced by a third or even half. On the other hand, the figure of 6-7000 deaths in the “Viking” army is authentic, because two independent sources quote one or the other. Dublin is a “big” urban center for that time; it could be assigned some 15,000 inhabitants – in the time of millennial Europe, emerging from centuries of invasions and feudal decline, the population remained stagnant. Toulouse or Lyon had 20 to 25,000 inhabitants, Paris 40-50000 at maximum – and therefore 3-4000 warriors formed the left wing. The right consists of Leinstermen, was probably equivalent in strength. The center was run by the Viking foreigners: the only figures that we have are that Brodir and Amlaff in 2000 brought 50 “snekka” (“Viking ship” is a barbarism) and that the total foreign breastplates were 1000. With the forces of the Hebrides, the Orkneys, Shetland, and some contingents from France, Germany, and Scandinavia, one could add a hundred vessels. This would, for the total of the “Viking” army, a dozen thousands, at most: a remarkable figure for the time, which demonstrates that this army was virtually exterminated.

For the Irish, we are totally in the dark. In 1013, Danes had inflicted a severe defeat to Malachi, killing 200 of his men. If he left the fifth or a quarter of its army on the battlefield, it does not give one an idea of exorbitant strength. Brian, in forty years of ascendance, could reach the level for the Dublin/Leinster coalition of 6-7000 men. If we add some thousand semi-barbarians of Connacht and a few hundred Scots, we reach a total comparable to that of the opponents. And the figure that chance has preserved, 4,000 deaths for the Irish, is well known.

**TURLOGH O’BRIEN, SCOURGE OF THE GODS?**

By Stéphane Labrousse in Unaussprechlichen Kulten #2 (July 1992), pp. 11-15

The intervention of deities, good or evil, is a common occurrence in fantasy literature. Although in most cases it falls under a genre artifice, it sometimes allows the writer to address religion, consciously or not.

The Turlogh O’Brien cycle may allow a reader an approach to “Howardian thinking” in this area. Indeed, the relations between human hero – Turlogh – and various divinities are particularly frequent: In the story “Spears of Clontarf,” he took part in a battle where “the challenge … was much more important than deciding who would be the masters of Ireland, the Danes or the Gaels. During this battle Christians and pagans, Jehovah and Odin, fought.” The second version of this story – “The Grey God Passes” – is even more explicit since Odin in person attends the battle. In “The Dark Man” Turlogh becomes the protégé, “friend of the Dark Man,” Bran Mak Morn, the last god of the Picts. He will be one of the main protagonists of an old prophecy – for which one can assume a divine origin – who announced the destruction of a kingdom in “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth” and finally in the unfinished story “The Shadow of
the Hun.” Howard leaves us again assuming that his hero is invested with a “divine mission”: “All eyes turned to Turlogh. Primitive peoples are prone to detect omens – good or bad – and draw conclusions. It seemed to them that the coming of Turlogh was not a coincidence; certainly the unknown forces that are at work behind the Veil had been sent to assist them.”

In the different texts, there appears a number of recurring, but also often contradictory, ideas.

At first Howard’s position seems clear: if Turlogh declares himself a Christian, out of respect for O’Brien clan traditions to which he remains bound by blood despite his banishment, then like the Saxon Athelstane, he feels “more pagan than Christian.” Moreover, for Howard, the Battle of Clontarf is the symbol of the victory of Christianity over paganism; the end of an era. Turlogh knows that he now belongs to that bygone era: “The Grey God has disappeared; we also are disappearing [...]. Dim days are approaching and a strange feeling hangs over me, as if our era was in decline.” Turlogh, in particular dramatic episodes, finds his pagan instincts, as evidenced by the death scene of Moira in the story “The Dark Man” where he engages in a kind of barbaric ritual with the dying girl, beheaded by Thorfel, a sign of his vengeance and his homage.

The reasons for the preference of paganism are to REH the same as those for why he prefers barbarism to civilization. To Howard, while barbarism is the natural state of man, religion can only be pagan. Paganism extols the warrior values of man. Christianity can only be the religion of civilization and therefore cannot be ephemeral. He fails in his goal to end the “reign of blood” that “will last as long as humans last.” Turlogh will become the comrade of Bran Mak Morn, who has the spirit of a king, more a god than a warrior. This is the warrior prowess and courage that will bring to Turlogh the benevolence of a Pictish god.

Robert Howard experiences a constant distrust with respect to any organized system that tends to eliminate the individual for the sake of the masses. For him it is a sign of decadent civilization, not war (in the Nietzschean sense). Christianity is no exception to this rule. What matters in a man to Howard is not his convictions, whether they are religious or political, but the valor he shows when faced with certain situations that serve to reveal his deepest being. Thus, at the end of “The Dark Man,” Turlogh goes to ask the priest to spare the life of Athelstane, not because of the priest’s faith, “but because he too is a man and he has done his best for Moira,” thereby revealing his paganism.

Yet Howard, like Turlogh, cannot deny that Christianity is totally part of the full-fledged culture of a nation which he believes to have originated. He cannot escape his environment, his heartland of 20-30 years, and often expresses in his stories a significantly Puritan position, still in a less than conscious way.

In the story “The Shadow of the Hun,” Turlogh lends a hand to a Christian Slavic tribe which is about to engage in a decisive battle for survival against Muslim tribes. It is above all his taste for war that induces Turlogh to take part in this conflict, but Howard does not hide the intervention of Providence in the process that leads the Celts to join the Slavs, “the same basic Aryan race!” (and we know how much racial and religious concepts can be closely linked in parts of the southern United States). Although “The Shadow of the Hun” is an unfinished text, the reader knows that the arrival of Turlogh is the determining element that will tip the balance in favor of the Turgaslaw. So Turlogh becomes the instrument of God, his weapon intended here to rescue some of the “Flock.” Unlike Solomon Kane, Turlogh is unconscious of his mission or the fact that he is manipulated by one or more gods, though, when facing The Dark Man in the story of the same title, he thinks for a moment: “all this was his work and he, Turlogh, only played a pawn in the game.”
In “The Shadow of the Hun,” the head of the Slavs, Hroghar, states that “Our gracious Lord God made us (the Turgaslavs) the masters of all other races.” While it would be without doubt unfair and wrong to attribute these words directly to Howard regardless of the distance that is required between the character created and the author, we can see the extreme Puritanism that emerges from these remarks, tending to assert a superiority of the white race as a kind of “divine right.”

But this underlying Puritanism is mainly present in the story “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth.” Howard describes a city whose residents are decadents. As he often does, REH makes us glimpse the slow degeneration of a people with a glorious and remote past. In this city “of all sins,” filthy gods are celebrated. And, worse, they are beast idols – Grothgolka – or human – like Brunhild. In the case of the Nordic youth whose sin is more serious than opportunism, she tries to elevate herself to equality with God, which is without doubt unacceptable to the role of an individual of the white race.

Thus Turlogh and Athelstane will become the instruments here of divine punishment that is, as for Sodom and Gomorrah, imposed on this depraved city. A city that will be “cleansed” of its sins by a purifying fire.

It might seem paradoxical that these are red-skinned savages who are “executing” the divine sentence: one must keep in mind that the Puritan influence is not conscious in Howard; he presents a completely opposite picture – that of the pagan – and represses his puritanical culture that makes its voice heard through the same theme of the story.

In the field of religious ideas as in many others, Howard demonstrated both originality of thought born of his own reflection and the inclination to believe if not pagan at least a deist, but also conformity linked to his environment, that of the Texas “WASP” ’20s, which gives his writings a certain whiff of Puritanism. REH, once again, will meld freely these two conflicting sources into a single thought, without resolving the many contradictions it thus gives birth to.

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<td>Baudry, Martin-Pierre</td>
<td>“Howard le barbare” [“Howard the Barbarian”; REH’s personality, influences, style, ambition, &amp; popularity; Patrice Louinet is editing a new series of French pure-text REH books pubbed by Bragelonne; how different REH was from his portrayal by de Camp; REH’s fictional civilizations, their bases, &amp; their conflicts with barbarism; in French] in Chronic Art #40 (Paris, Nov., 2007), pp. 48-49; reprinted in Patrice Louinet’s Wulfhere Hairsplitter’s French Quarter, Vol. 1, #4, pp. 10-11 in REHupa Mailing #208 (Dec., 2007)</td>
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