

Review of *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (2003)
The Fully Illustrated Robert E. Howard Library, Volume One

As reviewed by Brian Murphy in *Mythprint* 48:10 (#351), *Sword Woman and Other Historical Adventures* (2011) represents the eleventh volume in the ongoing Fully Illustrated Robert E. Howard Library published in the United States by the Del Ray imprint of Ballantine Books. The Library is of great importance to students and enthusiasts of fantasy and historical fiction, and except for one volume has never been reviewed for the Mythopoeic Society. A series of reviews will therefore be appearing intermittently in *Mythprint*, starting with the Conan material in Volume One and moving through the remaining titles in chronological order.

The Fully Illustrated Robert E. Howard Library began in 2003 with the publication of *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (in the U.K., *Conan of Cimmeria: Volume One [1932–1933]*), the venture of British publisher Wandering Star to restore and publish the long-out-of-print, forgotten, and sometimes expurgated originals of Howard's many Conan stories. By 2005, and under the editorship of Patrice Louinet, the series had published the entire corpus of Howard's original unedited versions, including all fragments, drafts, and unprinted manuscripts, as well as many pertinent notes, letters, and poems. It marked the first time such a collection had been published, and to this day the Library's three Conan volumes represent the closest thing that exists to a scholarly edition of Howard's most popular works. Individual volumes dedicated to Howard's other heroes have also appeared, including *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane* and *Kull: Exile of Atlantis*, as well as two eclectic treasuries, and a collection of Howard's horror stories. Much yet remains of the writer's entire oeuvre for the Illustrated Library's editors to draw upon, including his poetry, westerns, and boxing stories. Nevertheless, the vast bulk of Howard's sword-and-sorcery, historical fantasy, and supernatural material is now available, offering no better opportunity for readers to acquaint or reacquaint themselves with one of the most important pioneers of conventional modern fantasy. Since the Library began, Howard scholarship has also been complemented by Mark Finn's biography *Blood & Thunder* (2006), the best and most thorough since Don Herron's *Dark Barbarian* (1984).

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian (2003) contains the thirteen earliest of Howard's Conan stories, including both the published version and first submitted draft of the "The Phoenix on the Sword," Conan's original adventure. It also includes the well-known classics "The Tower of the Elephant," "Queen of the Black Coast," "Black Colossus," and "Rogues in the House," as well as three works unpublished in Howard's short lifetime: "The Frost-Giant's Daughter," "The God in the Bowl," and "The Vale of Lost Women." Mark Shultz's four plates and many in-text drawings are excellent, portraying an uncommonly complex and careworn Conan. Shultz also wrote the Foreword, which lays out his feelings about reading and illustrating the iconic figure. Editor Patrice Louinet provides both the Introduction and a lengthy essay "Hyborian Genesis," which is continued in the second and third volumes of the series. Ushered in by the poem "Cimmeria," *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* contains the stories of Conan in what are arguably his most recognizable roles: "a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth..." (*The Phoenix on the Sword*, 7). They provide without a doubt the most rewarding introduction a new reader can have to Conan, comparable in their ability to captivate to the earliest work of Stephen King. It should become recognizable within only a few pages why Howard's writing—though technically pulp fiction—remains fiercely appealing seventy-five years after his death. The collection is supplemented by a miscellany of synopses, fragments, and notes including "The Hyborian Age," Howard's sweeping political and demographic history of the Conan setting. Two of Howard's hand-drawn maps are included, showing Europe divided among the many Hyborian kingdoms and realms, including Conan's

Cimmeria (Scotland through southern Norway and central Sweden) and his eventual kingdom of Aquilonia (involving France, Northern, Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and eastern Germany). Editorial notes on the typescripts conclude the volume.

There is hardly room here to go story-by-story, or even to cover in much detail the representative elements of *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian*. Suffice it to say that Howard's writing is aflame here, and that Conan comes at us as something seemingly long-established. As Louinet recalls in "Hyborian Genesis," Howard claimed in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith to have hardly conceived of Conan deliberately, but rather that the barbarian sprang from his mind fully-formed. We learn in Herron's *Dark Barbarian* that Howard imagined Conan holding him hostage as he wrote, the barbarian standing behind him with sword drawn. Much has been made of Howard's own relationship to his creation, a popular notion being that Conan was a clear altergo of the imposing, moody, and brilliant young Texan. Although every literary character is in some sense an extension of the writer, Howard's well-documented misgivings toward civilization are clearly echoed throughout this volume, in particular the first story. Consider one of the fictitious verse epigraphs of "The Phoenix on the Sword":

What do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the craft and the lie?
I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky.
The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing;
Rush in and die, dogs—I was a man before I was a king.

Readers will nevertheless find that Conan is an old-fashioned sort of barbarian, at least compared to the examples found in the racier modern films, as well as recent historical fiction series such as Starz Entertainment's *Spartacus*. When it comes to scantily-clad women, he is far more the facetious swashbuckler than a ravishing brute, though Howard often tries to smokescreen it using Conan's overconfident brand of chauvinism. In the borderline-erotica *Xuthual of the Dusk* (originally published as *The Slithering Shadow* [1933]), Conan is fought over by the Stigian (sic) dominatrix Thalís and his delicate companion Natala. As he and Natala escape across the desert, Conan sums up the experience: "'Crom and his devils!' he swore. 'When the oceans drown the world, women will take time for jealousy. Devil take their conceit! Did I tell the Stigian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!'" (*Xuthual of the Dusk*, 247). With respect, and though *The God in the Bowl* has its moments, some of the posthumously published stories are valuable for revealing what Howard's writing is like when he is relatively *off* his game.

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian exemplifies heroic writing through more than its eponymous character. The enthralling pace of its stories—their narrative decisiveness and undawdling aestheticism—shows how the contemplative artform of literature can nevertheless be made to convey an active and existentialist ethos. One cannot put it any better than Conan himself, who encapsulates himself in the following statement to a lover:

Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flames and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is an illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content."

(*Queen of the Black Coast*, 133)