A CIMMERIAN WORTHY OF THE NAME, PART THREE

During his crusade to revitalize Robert E. Howard fanzines with his *The Cimmerian*, Leo Grin not only initiated a blog, as we saw last time, but also started publishing a new chapbook series called *The Cimmerian Library*. They were in the same format as the *TC* journal issues, but had reddish copper covers in a run of 100 copies for $15.00 each. He issued four titles (“volumes”): REHupan Rob Roehm’s *An Index to Cromlech and The Dark Man* (2005), REHupan Chris Gruber’s “Them’s Fightin’ Words”: *Robert E. Howard on Boxing* (2006) citing all of Howard’s quotations on the manly sport from his correspondence, with an introduction and index; John D. Haefele’s *A Bibliography of Books and Articles Written by August W. Derleth Concerning Derleth and the Weird Tale and Arkham House Publishing* (2006) with one “Addenda” [sic] (2008); and Don Herron’s “Yours for Faster Hippos”: *Thirty Years of ‘Conan vs. Conantics’* (2007) containing his pivotal critique of REH pasticheurs, especially L. Sprague de Camp, as well as some personal commentary on it and on Bran Mak Morn, Karl Edward Wagner, and Bruce Lee.

And to properly celebrate the Centennial of Howard’s birth, as well as the 70th anniversary of his death, the 60th year since the publication of the landmark Arkham House volume *Skull-Face and Others*, and the 20th year since the first pilgrimage of REHupans to Cross Plains, Texas, Grin wondered what he could “do to make it extra special, to truly convey the respect and admiration I have for the man and his writings?” (Vol. 3, #1, p. 4) He decided to do nothing less than to try doubling his publication rate to 12 monthly issues, an unheard-of rate for an REH fanzine. He also added a vellum Centennial flyleaf featuring a photo of Howard before and after the usual 40 pages. “It’s the Year to make our ultimate tribute to Howard.” (p. 4) Vol. 3 (2006) of *TC* was embossed in gold and sported the art of Dalmazio Frau, a.k.a. Dalmatius.

 Appropriately enough for one of the anniversaries, REHupan Rusty Burke leads off the third volume’s first issue (January) with a reanalysis of Howard’s famous suicide note, which was just the couplet:

All fled – all done, so lift me on the pyre –
The Feast is over and the lamps expire.

Burke himself had been the first to realize that its probable source was “The House of Caesar” by Viola Garvin, rather than the previously assumed “Cynara” by Ernest Dowson, a theory first advanced by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright. [1] In his *TC* article “The Note,” Burke says he thinks Wright must have gotten the idea from correspondence with REH’s father, Dr. I. M. Howard. The crux of the article is
Burke’s realization that accounts differed as to whether the suicide note was found in REH’s typewriter or his billfold. The first mention of any note was in letters from Dr. Howard to E. Hoffmann Price and H. P. Lovecraft two weeks after Howard’s suicide, wherein the note was said to have been found in REH’s billfold. A month later, Wright wrote in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith (CAS) that it was found in Howard’s typewriter, and this is the accepted version that Cross Plains Review editor Jack Scott gave and that REH biographer de Camp repeated. Burke thinks Wright got the typewriter idea from correspondence with Dr. Howard or from an article by Scott, and that Dr. Howard could have been confused or that Wright could have mistakenly inferred the note’s location from Dr. Howard’s statement that it was “no doubt” typed shortly before his suicide. A similar but oral statement to Scott would explain Scott’s misapprehension. Burke attributed the confusion exhibited by Dr. Howard and Scott to faulty memories and possible embellishment, common problems in recording oral histories.

And I don’t know what to make of the fact that in one of his three newspaper accounts of the suicide at the time, given in Burke’s article, Scott refers to REH’s car, in which the suicide occurred, as being front of the house, while the other two give the correct location as in back of and to the side of the kitchen. Scott had said he was at the house shortly afterward, so why the confusion? And he told de Camp he saw the note in the typewriter, which seems to me to be more than simple embellishment.

Grin follows this up with an obituary of Garvin and reproductions of REH’s birth, death, and funeral records. The birth certificate mistakenly gives Howard’s birth date as 24 (instead of 22) January 1906 and his middle name as “Ervine” rather than “Ervin.”

REHupan, rural newspaperman, and self-styled macho man Jim Charles debuts next with a piece on Howard’s knowledge of and fascination with firearms. REH’s expertise about guns is on fine display in several of his western, adventure, and detective stories, and, according to Charles, he seldom made any mistakes about them, unlike many later western writers like Louis L’Amour, who had access to much better reference material than did Howard. REH did have the advantage of experience, being a gun owner and shooter, as is Charles. (REHupan and blogger Barbara Barrett has recently spotlighted Howard’s interest in swords. [2,3])

Richard L. Tierney is represented by the First Triptych of his sonnet cycle “The Doom of Hyboria.” He is followed by Grin’s reportage on the drought-fueled wildfire of 27 December 2005 that destroyed over half of Cross Plains and killed two people, fortunately sparing the Howard House and the downtown. The fire took a house and another building across the street from the Howard House and literally came up to the latter’s doorstep, but the house was saved by a neighbor who kept hosing it down and by a trench hastily dug around the house with a tractor. REH fans contributed to the rebuilding of the town through the City of Cross Plains Fire Relief Fund. This included Dennis Haney and the contributors to a book he edited and published, The Man from Cross Plains: A Centennial Celebration of Two-Gun Bob Howard (McHaney/Lulu.com, 2008), a paperback and, later a run of 23 hardbacks that contained essays by REHupans and others about REH and Cross Plains, all of whose proceeds being donated to the fund. The book also contained the first U.S. publication of Howard’s novella, “The Ghost with the Silk Hat,” and is dedicated to Zora Mae Baum Bryant (1914-2005), whose obituary and photo are the next items in the TC issue, along with Grin’s commentary. Zora Mae was the mother of Jack Baum, then owner, with his wife Barbara, of Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC. She had inherited the publishing rights to REH’s non-public-domain stories from Alla Ray Morris, who in turn had inherited them from her father Dr. Pere M. Kuykendall, the caretaker of Dr. Howard during his final years. Zora Mae often attended Howard Days and made many friends there and in the community. (Wildfires are a hazard to anyone living in rural Texas. In January 2008, novelist and former REHupan Jim Reasoner lost his home and all his possessions to one, he and his family barely escaping with their lives.)
“The Lion’s Den” letter column starts off with a letter from Leon Nielsen, who praises Grin’s Cimmerian Library, updates readers on his successful surgery for bladder and prostate cancer (that would nonetheless take his life in July, 2007), and announces the forthcoming publication of his Robert E. Howard: A Collector’s Descriptive Bibliography, with Biography (McFarland and Co., hardback 2006, paperback 2007), with a forward by REHupan Damon C. Sasser. Nielsen admits that REHupan Morgan Holmes’s opinion, expressed in the last issue’s letter column, could be correct about Howard’s Cimmerians being based on an ancient people described by Homer, but Nielsen still prefers his own explanation that they were inspired by the historical Cimbri, a tribe from Denmark whom REH regarded as Celtic and therefore would have had great sympathy with, though they were more probably Germanic.
“If REH’s inspiration was the ancient Cimmerians, Howard would probably have placed Cimmeria near Zamora or Corinthia on the Hyborian Age map. One should also remember that Howard claimed part Danish ancestry and was proud of it.” (p. 29) (Holmes has pointed out, though, that had that been the case, he would have called them Cimbri [4]. I would add that the Cimbri were finally defeated by the Romans REH despised, but the Cimmerians were not.) Nielsen ends with a lament over the high cost of the Wandering Star Howard books, wondering if profiteering and stonewalling of further publications might be involved.

Kevin Cook considers Holmes’s suggestions of books that Howard probably owned but could have been lost before acquisition by Howard Payne College (now, University), listing several authors and books that are known to have been read by REH or would probably have been of interest to and known by him, while excluding those works that he would probably have read in pulps like Adventure and Argosy and, therefore, wouldn’t have purchased. These authors included Ray Cummings, George Allan England, Arthur O. Friel, Harold Lamb, A. Merritt, and Arthur D. Howden-Smith and some books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Talbot Mundy, and Sax Rohmer other than the ones he is known to have owned.

Next, REH scholar Glenn Lord updates readers about recent Russian Conan books, most being pastiches. From Germany, Cornelius Kappabani writes in about several subjects, opining that, had he lived, Howard would have gone on to write, not just westerns or fantasies, but stories about real life. French editor Fabrice Tortey submits a note about two CD recordings by the French heavy progressive band Mad Minstrel that feature several REH poems set to music.

Critic Don Herron returns, taking shots at Bob Price, Richard Lupoff, Bob Lumpkin, and Darrell Schweitzer, again remarking on inconsistencies in the latter’s defense of Farnsworth Wright last issue. “Under Wright, [Weird Tales] was a joke in the industry, because Wright relied so heavily on crap … If he hadn’t been so indecisive, Wright would have been able to make the magazine better. … But for REH, HPL, CAS and a handful of others, no one would be interested in WT anymore. … In 1936 Howard was cracking the top-rate pulp markets while Wright was only a stop or two away from being summarily fired.” (p. 35)

Burke pens a missive applauding Charles Hoffman for his “Blood Lust” essay on Howard’s spicy tales and correcting Herron on one REH quote, pointing out that its correct, complete form makes it clear that Howard is not criticizing Wright for capricious story rejections, but for the risky business decision of issuing WT monthly. Burke also states that, though Herron cites an REH letter saying Wright had claimed Howard’s former “divine fire” of inspiration was out, the actual letter from Wright only said that the rejected story “The Dwellers under the Tombs” is not up to the standards of “Worms of the Earth” and “The Tower of the Elephant,” which is in fact true.

Armin Kruppel writes in to say that the new Del Rey hardcover of The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian is much better looking than the smaller and comparably priced book club edition. The issue closes with letters from Tim Haberkorn and REHupan Gary Romeo, the latter’s having been discussed in our last installment.

The next issue (February, 2006, Vol. 3, #2) opens with newspaper reporter Rick Kelsey’s coverage of the first REH Centennial event, namely a 100th Birthday Bash in Fort Worth, Texas. Burke and former REHupan Paul Herman conceived of the celebration as miked amateur readings by attendees of favorite poems and other writings by Two-Gun Bob. At first scheduled for the Black Dog Tavern (as proclaimed in a program chapbook and on a commemorative T-shirt by REHupan Official Editor Bill “Indy” Cavalier and on a pictorial bookmark by Herman), the event had to be moved at the last minute by organizer Herman to another tavern, The Torch, when the Black Dog’s owner couldn’t get a bar permit in time. Over the course of 3 hours, about 40 fans from several states read poetry and excerpts from stories,
articles, and letters, proving a slogan used to promote the event, “There is more to Robert E. Howard than you think.” Memorably, Barbara Baum declared that, while most readers of REH are male, “there is something for everyone in Howard.” (p. 7) She described several works ideal for introducing a wife or girlfriend to the author, such as the story “For the Love of Barbara Allen,” and pointed out that many of his stories have well-delineated female characters. (Barbara and Jack Baum were in the process of selling their ownership of REH publishing rights to Paradox Entertainment, which they thought would be better than they at promoting Howard, especially in other than print media.) Appended to the article is a list of the participants and their readings.
Horror author Ramsey Campbell, in his introduction to Scott Hampton’s superb graphic adaptation of “Pigeons from Hell” (Eclipse, 1988) suggests that this tale, the best horror story by Howard and one of the best by anyone, may “have been an attempt by a friend and admirer to outdo Lovecraft for horror.” [5] Possibly inspired by this or by the friendly rivalry between these two correspondents to outdo the other in describing haunted, overwrought imagery, future REH blogger Brian Leno decided to look more closely at “Pigeons” than anyone else had before for HPL’s influence, producing the first-rate essay “Lovecraft’s Southern Vacation.” The influence was there to be found: the two protagonists are from New England, Lovecraft’s stomping ground and preferred story setting, and prove ill-equipped to deal with the horrors of Howard’s South. The one who survives, Griswell, displays the weakness and panic characteristic of HPL’s usual doomed protagonist. As he thinks to himself after his friend Branner has been killed:

I never could think of black magic in connection with the South. To me witchcraft was always associated with old crooked streets in waterfront towns, overhung by gabled roofs that were old when they were hanging witches in Salem; dark musty alleys where black cats and other things might steal at night. Witchcraft always meant the old towns of New England to me – but all this is more terrible than any New England legend – these somber pines, old deserted houses, lost plantations, mysterious black people, old tales of madness and horror – God, what frightful, ancient terrors there are on this continent fools call “young”! (p. 16)

The one character who is able to stand up to the terrors of the Blassenville mansion is the local sheriff Buckner, who can walk “light as a cat” and can shoot “quicker than a cat can jump.” (p. 17) As Leno convincingly argues, Howard must have had the Griswell/Buckner relationship in mind as a parallel to that between HPL and himself. Even chapter titles echo Lovecraft: chapter 1’s “The Whistler in the Dark” recalls HPL’s story “The Whisper in Darkness” and chapter 3’s “The Call of Zuvembie” evokes “The Call of Cthulhu.” Lovecraft likens whippoorwills to psychopomps hoping to catch the souls of the departed Whateleys in “The Dunwich Horror,” while REH’s Buckner tells Griswell that the pigeons infesting the mansion are believed to be “the souls of the Blassenvilles, let out of hell at sunset.” (p. 17) (So much for the “ridiculousness” of the title, as some have charged.) Even the name of one of the Blassenville sisters, Celia, is probably meant to suggest Zealia Bishop, one of HPL’s co-author clients. “‘Pigeons from Hell’ was surely meant to be Howard’s response to HPL’s claims that New England was the setting for horror.” (p. 17) While REH had gone through a phase during which he had imitated HPL’s style with its sub-heroic characters, most successfully in “The Black Stone,” in “Pigeons” he was “Howard writing Howard, not Howard writing Lovecraft. He is sticking to folklore he knew first-hand, and is telling us that in his world the bloody and battered protagonist,” the individual he so exalted and often personified himself, “will come through victorious – that horror can indeed be conquered” (p. 19), with the result that he made the horror more real and believable to the reader than HPL ever succeeded in doing.

Leno then discusses the television version of the story in the Boris-Karloff-hosted series Thriller, the first and best adaptation of any of Howard’s works for film or television. The episode premiered 6 June 1961, within a week of the 25th anniversary of REH’s death, and was the best of the series that many have called the finest horror show ever telecast. Furthermore, the episode’s premiere even preceded the story’s first hardcover appearance in The Dark Man and Others (Arkham House, 1963). Stephen King called the much anthologized “Pigeons” “one of the finest horror stories of our century.” [6] Yet, the Thriller adaptation is not faithful in one significant respect: Celia’s abused mulatto maid is not responsible for changing Celia into a soulless supernatural monster, but is the monster herself. It has been suggested that this change was made because, otherwise, the black character would have been too uppity for social acceptance at the time. [7] If so, it would be still another instance in which Howard was decades ahead of his time.)
Project Pride stalwart Arlene Stephenson contributes her own account of the Cross Plains wildfire, giving an up-close-and-personal look at several residents’ own experiences during the disaster. She attributes the saving of the Howard House to its next-door neighbor, Robert Williams, who, “[w]ith no regard for his own safety, … grabbed water hoses, joined them together to stretch across the street and over to the yard, and sprayed the grass and the house, beating back the orange death swirling around him for several harrowing minutes until other help arrived.” (p. 22) She ends with:

And so, a month later, the coffee conversation is still the fire, and the fantastic way the sleepy little town has coped with the disaster. Without waiting for any government programs to come to their aid, they just rolled up their sleeves and went to work. The prevailing attitude that “we will survive, we will rebuild and we will be a stronger community because of this” was probably part of what kept the big media trucks coming. Local area TV stations competed with the big dogs for coverage. But when CNN and FOX arrived, the world soon learned that although the fire had been quenched, the spirit and soul of Cross Plains, Texas never would be. (p. 22)

Howard House after the December, 2005 wildfire.

After a poem by Schweitzer, Glenn Lord submits an article entitled “A Vulture Comes up Snake Eyes,” surely referring to Byron Roark’s article “Vultures over Cross Plains” [8] concerning REH
pasticheurs like de Camp. In his piece, Lord presents documents detailing the results of the bankruptcy petition by Lancer Books (which had so popularized Conan in the late sixties) and de Camp’s failed attempt to secure the publication rights to the Conan stories before the sale of Lancer’s assets (to Playmore, Inc.) could go through. “As it stood, [de Camp] got fairly little from Lancer, since at the time of the original contract in the 1960s no one had known how well the series would do. But if he could somehow steal the rights from under Playmore’s nose and negotiate with another publisher … then he could get a much larger advance for himself.” (p. 24) The rights were sold to Ace/Prestige Books rather than Playmore, but entailed that the rest of the planned pure-text Berkley/Putnam Conan books be canceled after the three that had already been published (the 1977 *The Hour of the Dragon, The People of the Black Circle*, and *Red Nails*, edited by Karl Edward Wagner) and squelching the publication of any new REH Conan books for 25 years. In 1995, there was a breakdown of the agreement over publishing rights that had involved the creation of Conan Properties, Inc. in 1977, with Lord and Alla Ray Morris suing Conan Properties attorney Arthur M. Lieberman for overcharging for services, Lieberman countersuing, and de Camp and Morris vs. Lord claiming Lord was not entitled to a 5% commission. [9] Later, a judge stayed arbitration sought by de Camp that would have deprived Lord of any say in publishing the Conan stories. [10]

The letter column leads off with a quick note from Sasser and a missive from collector Doris Salley, both of them praising Grin for his hard work on *The Cimmerian*. Salley wonders how Grin is still able to work 60 hours a week at his day job. She is ecstatic about the handsome black slipcases he had started supplying with each year’s issues, embossed in the same matching color. Salley is worried that the Wandering Star Conan series will not be completed, as had happened to the Grant and Berkley series before it. She also talks about available collector bookcases. Dealer Terence McVicker, who inherited the printing and bookbinding equipment Roy Squires had employed to make deluxe Howard booklets, echoes Salley about Wandering Star, but is glad that the Cross Plains fire didn’t derail the Centennial festivities.

The late REHupan scholar Steve Tompkins writes in to take on Nielsen and Romeo for their letters last issue. He assures Nielsen that no profiteering or stonewalling by Wandering Star is involved, but only a dedication to bring the best pure-text editions of REH to the marketplace (an effort in which Tompkins had participated for no pay, as did others as well). He then declares that de Camp’s failure to mention “Worms of the Earth” in his Howard biography *Dark Valley Destiny (DVD)* deserves far more than Romeo’s dismissive rejoinder. About de Camp’s alterations of “The Black Stranger” to convert it into “The Treasure of Tranicos”: “In de Camp’s ‘Tranicos,’ Howard’s demon is no longer a free agent, but is employed first as a Pictland cave bouncer and then as the muscle for Thoth-Amon, the Stygian mage on loan from ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’ and ‘The God in the Bowl.’ It should be noted that ‘Tranicos’ makes it three times that Conan is merely potential collateral damage when Thoth targets someone else by employing a supernatural assassin – repetition that a savvier posthumous collaborator would have avoided.” (p. 29) He further challenges Romeo’s assertion that Howard fandom is Conan-centric, listing many great REH stories about characters other than Conan. Admitting that de Camp had as much right to make money off his work as did Wagner off the latter’s Berkley books and Tor collections *Echoes of Valor* (1987), *Echoes of Valor II* (1989), and *Echoes of Valor III* (1991), Tompkins retorts that Wagner wanted to make more of Howard’s words available to those who wanted to read them, while de Camp acted to deny the same in squelching further Berkley volumes. De Camp’s “stake in the Lancer series created a conflict of interest that is discernible on many pages of DVD.” (p. 30) Tompkins further cites the many comments in de Camp’s Lancer introductions that devalue and besmirch Howard and his legacy, quite the opposite of Wagner’s reverent and insightful forewords and afterwords in the Berkley books, which he believes deserve to be republished. (Perhaps the Robert E. Howard Foundation should consider putting out a volume of classic REH-related introductions at some point.)
Schweitzer returns with a letter expressing dismay at all the amateur psychoanalysis in TC. “I agree there is something fundamentally wrong with REH either way you look at his suicide … Why would a young man with such excellent prospects decide life is just not worth living?” (p. 32) (Didn’t Herron just answer this in the November issue, showing how serious Howard took nonpayment for his work? [11]) Schweitzer says McCollum’s article in December’s issue is silly for calling Howard crazy, noting that good authors often get excited enough about a story to do such things as reciting it aloud. He also agrees with Sidney-Fryer’s “In Defense of ‘Little Boys’,” saying that it is not at all unusual for creative people to be socially awkward and caught up in their own imaginings, and opines that, had he lived, REH would have gone into historical fiction. Schweitzer claims Herron’s every argument is “an emotional sledgehammer followed by an omission of inconvenient facts, hardly worthy of serious reply.” (p. 33)

Comparing editor Farnsworth Wright’s business decisions while trying to keep Weird Tales afloat to his own costly involvement in WT’s later incarnation, Schweitzer expresses admiration for any editor who can keep a starveling magazine going for just creative reasons. “I’ve always read Wright as a man with a genuine literary sense, who felt he had to make commercial compromises to keep the magazine going … This is probably too idealistic for Don Herron to understand …” (p. 34)

Howard later spoke disparagingly of Wright, a man he never met, who had given him more support in his career than any other editor. I can appreciate that it meant a lot to be owed that much money ($2000, the equivalent of about $40,000 in today’s money), but Howard, as we know, was quick to hate, quick to add people to his “enemies” list, and, we have to admit, given to bitching and moaning. There is no reason we should respect REH’s opinion on that point. As for Wright the textual editor, it is true that he sometimes missed things. But if you look at the exchange of correspondence between Wright and Howard over “The Phoenix on the Sword,” as reproduced in The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian[,] and compare the earlier version of the story with the earlier published one, you see a good editor at work. He made shrewd comments, which REH responded to, which made the story better. If you want to be an editor, that is what you have to learn to do. (p. 34)

Schweitzer denies Herron’s claim that Wright’s boss Hennenberger was ever dissatisfied with his editing, much less that he was close to firing him, and asserts that Wright’s later issues were as creative as ever. At the end, Wright was only let go for financial reasons. Finally, Schweitzer notes that, in response to Cook’s letter in the last issue, if REH had bought Argosy regularly, he would have read a lot of Victor Rousseau.

Burke weighs in with several comments on the previous issue, siding with Nielsen rather than Holmes that Plutarch, instead of Homer, was Howard’s source for Cimmeria, as Burke himself had concluded in “The Origin of Cimmeria.” [12] “[O]ne need only refer to ‘The Hyborian Age’ to find Howard explicitly connecting the Cimbri with the ancient Cimmerians. I don’t think his placement of Cimmeria on his Hyborian Age map was either inadvertent or mistaken: he meant for the homeland of the Cimbri to be that of Conan as well.” (p. 36) Burke disagrees with Kappabani that the life of Harald Hardrade had influenced REH’s creation of Conan, since Howard had told Lovecraft in July 1935 that he had only recently bought his book about Hardrade. REH was moody and his opinion regarding Wright varied, but Burke thinks Herron’s characterization of it as “hate” is too strong and believes they could have gotten back on good terms if Wright had paid Howard what he owed. Finally, Burke echoes Tompkins about the credit due Wagner.

After a letter from fan Tom Verhaaren lauding TC, especially Charles’s article on REH and guns, Graeme Phillips writes to remark that Haefele, in his article on REH in the Necronomicon Press, must have omitted some in Crypt of Cthulhu #s 76-101, since TC had reprinted Robert Price’s “The Last Temptation of Conan” (from #93). Haefele responds that he omitted them because those issues of CoC,
though published by Necronomicon, were technically a continuation of Price’s Cryptic Press run. He then lists Howard-related pieces in CoC #s 76, 98, and 100 and admits to overlooking Price’s “Robert E. Howard and the Cthulhu Mythos” in Lovecraft Studies #18. (He also overlooked S. T. Joshi’s Selected Papers on Lovecraft [Necronomicon, 1988], which mentions REH in “A Look at Lovecraft’s Letters.”) Haefele remarks on the calligraphic handwriting of Dr. Howard. (Herron would explain the origin of this in the coming September issue of TC.) He adds that he sides with Herron as to Wright’s editing abilities, observing that neither Howard, Lovecraft, nor Clark Ashton Smith held him in exceptional esteem. Haefele declares that August Derleth and his Arkham House reprints are the main reason that Weird Tales is held in high regard today.

The two towering figures of 20th century fantasy, REH and J. R. R. Tolkien, are usually categorized as being the modern exemplars of heroic fantasy and epic fantasy respectively. Howard’s brand of fantasy is certainly more realistic than Tolkien’s, but Tompkins kicks off the next issue of The Cimmerian (Vol. 3, #3, March 2006) with an essay asking if the difference between the two authors is as wide as commonly stated. In “The Shortest Distance between Two Towers,” he compares their aims and styles. “Lovecraft, Leiber, and Tolkien, for example, remind us not to downplay the weird or fantastic elements of the Howardian canon even while we recognize the importance of [Herron’s “Robert E. Howard:] Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist.” [13] (p.6) As usual, Tompkins demonstrates his wide command of the literature in quoting many writers who compare the two authors, finding those who liken them, like Gene Wolfe, rather than contrast them, to make the most sense. Then Tompkins cites several similar situations and descriptions in the fantasy of REH and JRRT, such as when Conan captained black corsairs and burned galleons by night in The Hour of the Dragon, while Aragorn won a night battle for Gondor by firing many corsair ships in The Return of the King. Though Herron accuses critics of applauding Aragorn’s overcoming great hardships to regain the crown of kingship that is his by heritage, i.e. divine right, while castigating Conan or Kull for deposing corrupt monarchs, Tompkins points out that Bran Mak Morn is forced to earn a crown that should be his by right of primogeniture. Both Aragorn and Bran are the last best hope of their peoples of the West. The paths of each lead to a black stone and a fateful parley, Aragorn’s at the Hill of Erech and Bran’s at Dagon’s Barrow. While Tolkien’s prose is not as violence-oriented as Howard’s, there are certainly scenes of action and bloodshed in the former that are worthy of the latter, and Tompkins quotes some from The Silmarillion and The Return of the King. Ironically, he notes, Tolkien has been as ill-served on canvas (by, e.g., the Hildebrandts) as Howard has been on film, and conversely.

As influential as anything else the two authors did were their accomplishments in world-building, with REH’s being among the first, as well as the most systematic, such efforts ever. Adducing critics both favorable (including Lovecraft) and unfavorable to Howard’s abilities in that vein, Tompkins adds, “[T]he cleverness and imaginative fertility of Howard’s building-by-borrowing have attracted more imitators than Tolkien’s philologically-engendered deep structures.” (p. 10) Claiming the former was more than Burke’s characterization of it as “simply a nexus where elements from different historical eras may come together for the sake of the story,” Tompkins says, “Perhaps we should approach it as an elsewhere rather than an elsewhere, less an imaginary world than the imagined early chapters of our own world’s history.” (p.10) (This is certainly how REH characterized his intentions and systemized them in his “The Hyborian Age” and elsewhere. Though one might think there is no evidence for unrecorded civilizations as early as his, in fact recent archaeological discoveries in such countries as Turkey, Bolivia, and Peru have turned up such evidence dating back to the end of the last Ice Age.) For those who are bothered by REH’s occasional anachronistic slips, Tompkins quotes Sandra Balif Straubhaar: “Anachronisms are built into Tolkien’s epic just as thickly as they are into the multiculturally narrated tales of the Völsungs or King Arthur or into the plays of Shakespeare.” (p. 11) For all the magic that is in both Middle-earth and the Hyborian world, the latter is more akin to the real world in lacking immorality as deep as that investing Tolkien’s Dark Lord and in lacking the magic as potent as that driving Tolkien’s cataclysms. Still, Tompkins notes that:
Some readers who arrive at “The Phoenix on the Sword” by way of Tolkien have experienced déjà vu when they read of Thoth-Amon’s reunion with what is tempting to call his “precious.” He himself addresses the prize “in terrible exultation” as “My ring!” and “My power!” and “[crouches] over the baleful thing,” slaking the thirst of his “dark soul” with its “evil aura.” (p. 12)

Citing still more amazing parallels between the works of the two fantasists, Tompkins states “[N]either man ever stopped thinking about death, or perhaps we should say instead that Tolkien hearkened to the siren song of deathlessness while Howard was unfailingly attentive to the opposite tempter.” (p. 13) He further quotes what he calls a pair of the wisest observations about the two writers, namely Roy Krenkel in his introduction to The Sowers of the Thunder (Grant, 1973):

He was aware of this quality of “things passing” – of time raveling away – as was no other figure in the whole field of literature. It coloured all his work; his best prose is built around it, his best poetry is redolent of it! (p. 13)

and W. A. Senior in his essay “Loss Eternal in J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth”:

Surely, anyone trying to “escape” through the magic portal of “fantasy” would not insist, in volume after volume, tale after tale, on the incalculable devastation and annihilation faced by the denizens of Middle-earth from Fëanor to Frodo. Similarly, it is hard to imagine that anyone seeking to hang onto the past – whether it be the Edenic period of the First Age or the Edwardian era of Tolkien’s own early life – would persist in chronicling, often in passages redolent of the bleakest of Norse fatalism, such appalling destruction across the mythic ages. (p. 13)

Tompkins ends with comparisons between the lives and legacies of the two men, and of these I can’t resist singling out the following: “To be familiar with the anecdotes about Howard’s eccentricities in public is to experience a shock of recognition upon reading in Michael White’s 2001 Tolkien: A Biography that ‘More than once he took delight in alarming his neighbours by charging down the street dressed as an axe-wielding Viking.’” (p. 14)

As is common with Tompkins’s essays, it is difficult to imagine anyone doing a better job of tackling the subject at hand. For this essay, he won the second-place 2006 Cimmerian (“Hyrkanian”) Award for Best Essay. Of it, Grin said, “As is often the case, Steve Tompkins’s most formidable competition in 2006 was himself,” since two of his essays placed in the top four.

I was especially pleased to be the one who published Steve’s essay in its current form, because like him I have long pined for a greater appreciation of the similarities between the two fantasists. Both attracted me as a youth for the same reasons: their lyrical and often heartbreaking use of poetry and language, their inner sense of realism manifested as depressive darkness and Darwinian brutality, their love of the natural world and the way it speaks to the human soul, and of course their immensely imaginative and convincing world-building. Steve has long been championing Tolkien in REHupa … In doing this, he was fighting a lonely battle against a long-standing consensus that Tolkien and his fans were of a different breed than Howard and his ilk – less gritty and fey, more lighthearted and fairy-world frivolous. Steve saw connections of a sort that no one else has, and he made the most of his opportunity to drag Middle-earth and Hyboria together, continental-drift style … [14]
Next in the issue is Romeo with “Once I Was John Wesley Hardin!,” referring to the statement by the history-imbued Howard that:

Long narrative dreams are fairly common with me, and sometimes my dream personality is in no way connected with my actual personality. I have been a 16th Century Englishman, a prehistoric man, a blue-coated United States cavalryman campaigning against the Sioux in the years following the Civil War, a yellow-haired Italian of the Renaissance, a Norman nobleman of the 11th Century, a weird-eyed flowing-bearded Gothic fighting-man, a bare-footed Irish kern of the 17th Century, an Indian, a Serb in baggy trousers fighting the Turks with a curved saber, a prize-fighter, and I’ve wandered all up and down the 19th Century as a trapper, a westward-bound emigrant, a bar-tender, a hunter, an Indian-fighter, a trail-driver, cowboy – once I was John Wesley Hardin! (p. 21)

REH regarded Hardin as one of the three greatest gunmen the West ever produced, after Billy the Kid and Wild Bill Hickok. This may seem strange, considering that Hardin may have killed as many as 50 men, often on impulse, especially if the men were black bullies or carpetbaggers whom the North had dispatched to punish the South for the Civil War. Though he abhorred slavery, Howard, as a Texan and a Southerner, spoke approvingly of the Confederacy and admitted to a certain admiration for men like Hardin, saying about them: “[W]hatever crimes they may be said to have committed were more than balanced by the war they waged against the vandals who were looting the South at the time.” (p. 18) In REH’s time, many people thought as he did. “I certainly don’t consider a man a criminal just because he kills a personal enemy in a fair stand-up fight. Some of these killings are a result of blood-feuds going back thirty or forty years. The men who engage in them are by no means necessarily criminals.” (p. 18) And regarding racialism, de Camp correctly pointed out: “If a racist, Robert Howard was, by the standards of his time and place, a comparatively mild one.” (p. 19) Among other stories illustrating REH’s feelings, Romeo cites “The Dead Remember,” wherein a quick-tempered cowboy comes to a grisly end at the hands of a black woman whose husband he had shot. Romeo’s knowledge of Howard and Texas history enables him to give a sympathetic but balanced interpretation of this rather controversial side of the passionate author.

Herron reappears with another interview of one of the few and dwindling number of people who knew REH personally, namely Marie Baker Andrews of Fort Worth, Bob Baker’s sister, whom Herron and Grin had contacted at Bob’s suggestion. Marie was in high school at the time of Howard’s suicide and was the only one of the Baker children that the de Camps failed to interview for Dark Valley Destiny. Dr. Howard had delivered all the Baker children. To Herron and Grin, Marie says:

As far as I was concerned, Robert was a nut. To us, at that time. Now he wouldn’t be. I just didn’t understand him, you know? He was before his time.

Robert and [her brother] Earl were together a lot. I don’t think later on that they were such big buddies because Robert was so strange and my brother wasn’t. But they were good friends. And I don’t want to say that Robert was crazy like kids are today, he was just quiet. When you went over to the house he wouldn’t say much to you.

Robert was older than I was. I don’t think he was very interested in us. He was always kind of lopin’ around, you know, the way he walked. Kind of a lope. Somber. He just wasn’t very friendly. And I guess I thought Dr. Howard’s boy should be different. Everybody wanted Robert to be like Dr. Howard. You know, more like him. And of course, that’s what Dr. Howard wanted, too. I just don’t think Dr. Howard had a very happy life. He had lots of friends though, I can tell you that. I just remember
Robert always there, around the house. Always busy doing something, typing and things like that.

Robert always had his nose in a book and was doing something like writing. He wasn’t one of those kids who played around all the time. (pp. 23 & 24)

Marie liked Dr. Howard, but her mother wouldn’t agree to his living with them at the end of his life because he was such “a big eater.” (p. 24) As a consequence, he went to Ranger, Texas to live with Dr. Kuykendall, who then inherited the Howard publishing rights and, hence, the later fortune that might otherwise have gone to the Bakers. About Dr. Howard, Marie adds: “He didn’t have much rapport with his son, though. I think he just didn’t understand him, either. And of course Robert was so crazy about his mother. When I remember her, she was always sick. That’s the main thing I remember about her. … I guess if she had been well, he wouldn’t have committed suicide. Or if he had someone else other than Dr. Howard, which wasn’t a good relationship, I don’t think. … Dr. Howard was a wonderful man, and I think he was neglected at home. Of course, he was gone a lot, too, so I’m sure that had something to do with it.” (p. 24 & 25) Of REH, Marie says that his voice was “kind of deep” (p. 25) and that he wore glasses part of the time, as well as a black, floppy hat with a loose brim. She says his mother Hester “wasn’t an overly friendly lady. I don’t think it was all because she was sick. I think it was her attitude, you know. She was just a ‘lady.’” (p. 26)

We all thought Mrs. Howard was just play-acting, for Robert’s attention. And he gave it to her. I guess she was a nice enough lady. I don’t know. We all have our opinions. We all knew how Howard felt about his Mother, but we didn’t think suicide. Of course, there may not have been as many suicides then as there are now.

Dr. Howard was crazy about his wife. A good crazy. He loved her. (p. 26)

About REH, Marie says that “he was so quiet and reserved.” (p. 26)

I just thought he was kind of strange, and I wasn’t the only one who thought that, everyone else did too. But looking back, he wasn’t really that strange, he was just writing. And it was a little unnatural the way he was about his Mother. Not unnatural, but men just didn’t act like that in those days. He sure didn’t have to kill himself for her.

He did have depression, I’m sure.

I think Dr. Howard thought that was what put him over. (p. 26)

Herron’s article is followed by Bob Baker’s obituary. He had died 1 February, 2006. Herron and Grin had not been able to see him again since their interview for The Cimmerian. [15]

After a poem by Robert A. Kane, “The Lion’s Den” opens with a letter from Schweitzer in which he expresses no surprise that de Camp would try to secure the Conan publishing rights from the demise of Lancer, which wasn’t actually bankruptcy but a Chapter 11 reorganization that allows the filer to retain and sell some assets. “The effect of the Lancer affair throughout the whole industry was an insistence on better-written reversion clauses. It was an expensive lesson for the whole field.” (p. 30) He says that de Camp shouldn’t have expended as much effort as he did on the matter. “It was not as if, despite what some REH fans like to believe, his lasting legacy depended on his involvement with Conan or REH.” (p. 30) (This looks to be the case now as de Camp’s importance has faded with time, but he surely did not assume it would be, and he had financial reasons to try to safeguard any part of his legacy.) Schweitzer thinks that the Wagner-edited Berkley Conan books were welcomed because “[r]eaders resented being
forced to pay for twelve volumes which were halfway-full of de Camp and Carter when all the real Howard stories might fit into six.” (p. 30) He goes on to say, “de Camp was a commercial pulp writer of the Depression era, very much like E. Hoffmann Price, who regarded his writing as a ‘trade,’ and really was not thinking in terms of ‘literature,’ much less of literary scholarship in the academic/critical sense. He would therefore not have regarded textual purity as important. More important to have the most serviceable or entertaining text, rather than the most accurate. … I don’t think anybody [during the ‘60s and ‘70s] really cared if de Camp fiddled with the punctuation, changed the three types of helmet to one, or toned down some of the more racist bits.” (p. 31)

Donald Sidney-Fryer returns with a laudatory missive on the January issue, as does Jack Jones on the February issue. Jones thinks that the third Conan hardback’s being published in paperback by Del Rey and in hardback by the Science Fiction Book Club rather than by Wandering Star probably spells the end of the latter publisher. He also feels that the sale of Robert E. Howard Properties by the Baums to Paradox Entertainment, Inc., “where all is ruled by the bottom line, will most likely result in REH products that few of us will ever recognize.” (p. 33) Paradox also purchased Conan Properties when Stan Lee Media went bankrupt. Leon Nielsen next provides a copy of a letter sent him by the Baums announcing their sale. “[B]ecause of Barbara’s health issues and the increasingly complex legal issues surrounding the properties, the family came to the conclusion that it would be best to sell the rights to a group who could better shepherd the works.” (p. 33) Nielsen mentions that his own book on REH would be published by McFarland in the fall.

Herron winds up the issue with a letter marveling at the recent contents of TC and bemoaning the lack a complete Howard letter collection, which would spur REH studies in the same way the Lovecraft Arkham collections did. He sees a parallel between Wandering Star’s high-end artistic objectives vs. their current publishing difficulties and Farnsworth Wright’s faulty editing decisions vs. his business problems, insisting that the first inevitably affects the second. Herron quotes Dwayne Olson as noting: “While both Wandreis [Donald and Howard] had a certain love for Weird Tales, their editorial and payment policies were an author’s nightmare. Low rates, slow payment, and often inexplicable editorial decisions made more than a few authors throw up their hands in disgust.” (p. 37) Herron disagrees that REH could have ever reconciled with Wright rather than moving on to the top-ranking pulps he was starting to break into. His letter ends with more potshots at Schweitzer’s inconsistencies.

As we’ve seen previously, REHupan and El Borak champion Dave Hardy first started discussing the Francis X. Gordon adventures in the second issue of The Cimmerian [16], in particular their historical and literary inspiration, their development over the whole of Howard’s career, and the realism he put into their backgrounds. In the April 2006 issue of TC (Vol. 3, #4), Hardy, in his extensive, first-class essay “Indomitable Wildness, Unquenchable Vitality,” continues by examining the stories even more deeply to probe their connections with historical figures and writers, oriental tales that REH had read, and even others of his own characters, revealing his motivations and aspects of his own personality thereby. First writing Frank “El Borak” Gordon stories when he was a dreaming 10-year-old who enjoyed the Arabian Nights and playing cowboys and Indians, Howard would return to the character when he was at the height of his powers, complicating and polishing the character of Gordon as he worked in many disparate yet intensely personal motifs. An outsider like many of REH’s other protagonists, Gordon was a charismatic Texan adventurer who starts his literary life as a self-centered treasure-seeker and develops into a selfless, avenging hero who would rather serve justice than acquire wealth or power. In this, he resembles Conan early on in both their careers and Solomon Kane later on, combining the swagger of the former with the moral determination of the latter. Gordon is repeatedly affirmed to be an independent man, loyal to his friends and unwilling to bow to political expediency. Physically resembling the Pictish King Bran Mak Morn, Gordon describes himself as being “Highland Scotch and black Irish by descent,” making him a Celt or possibly a descendant of the Picts, and physically able to disguise himself as an Afghan native.
REH’s love for the color and mystery of the Orient shows up in their use, not only in his El Borak stories and fragments, but also in his crusader, fantasy, boxing, and detective stories. These are informed by, but hardly derivative of, histories and travelogs such as those by Lawrence of Arabia, Lowell Thomas, and Emil Trinkler, and by the oriental tales of such writers as Rudyard Kipling, Harold Lamb, and Talbot Mundy, books by all of whom were known to have been owned or read by Howard. Mundy was something of a lifelong con man, consistent with the nature of his protagonists, who survive by wit and misdirection, in contrast to the forthright, violent heroes of REH, reflecting truths about the two very different authors. The many characters of the El Borak tales are well defined and have believable motivations, whether they’re fighting for riches, religion, or right; the exotic setting and peoples are grounded in fact; and the plots often involve intricacies like shifting alliances which are as complex as those in any Conan story. “Had he chosen, Howard could well have written political thrillers on a par with Eric Ambler. But behind the genre elements and all the gaudy extravagance is the real secret of Howard’s success as a writer, his sense of realism.” (p. 8) Seemingly familiar with all the relevant literature, fiction and nonfiction, Hardy appropriately enough concludes with:

There is a fundamental honesty in this boyhood dream transferred to pulp fiction. The image of a Texas gunslinger dwelling among the wild and free tribes on the frontiers of Asia is rooted in the personal interests of Robert E. Howard. It is cowboys and Indians played by a script from the Arabian Nights. It is Two-Gun Bob reveling in the palace of Harun al-Rashid. The tales of El Borak, swift as lightning, strike with a thunder that echoes with heroic tales of fiction and history – Peachy Carnehan, Athelstan King, Colonel Gardner and Lawrence of Arabia, adventurers all. They are as wondrous as the Arabian Nights, as wide as the Central Asian steppes, and as majestic as the Hindu Kush. (p. 20)

Rob Roehm reappears with another of his detective stories about REH, this time about the two humorous westerns “The Curly Wolf of Sawtooth” starring Bearfield Elston and “A Elkins Never Surrenders” starting Breckinridge Elkins, which are ostensibly the same story with just a change of protagonist. Roehm got to wondering about the differences between the various versions and the history behind them. With the help of REHupans David Gentzel and Glenn Lord, he was able to compare them. They consisted of a 1934 typescript of an Elkins story, a 1936 publication of the Elston version in the pulp Star Western, a 1968 serial reprint of the Elkins version in the newspaper The Summit County Journal (just because it served Breckenridge, Colorado), a 1979 reprint of the Elkins version in the Donald Grant hardback Mayhem on Bear Creek, and a 1983 reprint of that in the Ace paperback Heroes of Bear Creek. It turned out that Howard retyped the Elkins original for Star Western after it had been rejected by Fiction House. Lord had changed Elston back into Elkins for the subsequent publications. Finally, Grant had inflicted some of his bowdlerizations on his version to tone down the violence and remove one racial reference (changing “white” to “civilized”). Also, some changes were made by Star Western and by Grant to make the hillbilly slang somewhat cruder (e.g., “where” to “whar” and “running” to “runnin”).

Schweitzer is up next with an interesting article entitled “Two Barbarian Usurpers,” in which he compares Conan with the historical barbarian C. Julius Verus Maximinus, who became the Roman Emperor Maximin I in 235 A.D. Schweitzer starts by quoting science-fiction critic Damon Knight: “The trouble with Conan is that the human race has never produced and never could produce such a man …” (Finishing off the actual quote, he says, “and sane writers know it; therefore the sick writers have a monopoly of him.” [17, p. 13] Knight admitted to having no taste for fantasy, and in his review of The Coming of Conan (Gnome, 1953), he called the tales preposterous and “insulting to the rational mind,” though they were vivid and colorful, and said that all great fantasies were written by “emotionally crippled men” like REH. [17, pp. 12 & 13]) Schweitzer shows Knight to be no better a historian than he was a critic by recounting Maximin’s history, which is every bit as stellar as Conan’s. Maximin was a
giant Thracian barbarian who rises rapidly through the ranks of the Roman military, impressing all with his feats of courage and strength, until he seizes the throne from Severus Alexander, and then goes on to conquer new territories in Germany. Both Maximin and Conan faced opposition from an entrenched aristocracy. Maximin may have even been a better general, says Schweitzer, noting the trap Conan led his knights into in “The Scarlet Citadel,” but Maximin did not win the same favor from his people as did Conan, and he was finally assassinated by his own soldiers. Of course, Howard never did say how Conan’s reign would end.

After the second triptych of Tierney’s “The Doom of Hyboria” sonnets, “The Lion’s Den” commences with a letter from Kevin Cook, who generally agrees with Schweitzer’s missives, but corrects him as to George Allan England, who he says was too early for REH to have read in the pulps. The next and last letter, concluding the issue, is from Graeme Phillips, who takes Leno to task for his alleged bias against Lovecraft in Leno’s “Lovecraft’s Southern Vacation” in the February issue. He says Leno “seems to have little understanding of HPL’s theories/ideas for the writing of weird fiction. Most of the quotes Brian uses are taken out of context, and in many cases actually contradict what Brian says. He also somehow misses all the other quotes in the letters of HPL & REH that disagree with his findings.” (p. 36) Phillips states Leno calls HPL such things as a “snob” and “loser,” and that Leno resorts to generalities when he makes statements for which he has no proof. Phillips states that Leno is wrong for claiming Lovecraft’s stories are not “grounded in realism,” since Lovecraft told Clark Ashton Smith that verisimilitude is essential to produce terror in a weird story. Phillips quotes HPL as saying that he was committed to sincere artistic expression regardless of the commercial implications, in contrast to Howard, who devoted much time to marketing his stories and who declared that “in order to become wealthy … I would quickly sacrifice whatever artistic ambitions I ever had.” (p. 37) There is no proof Lovecraft was upset about REH’s pointing out his linguistic gaffe in “The Rats in the Walls,” Phillips says, and HPL admitted his mistake to other correspondents. Phillips finds Leno’s postulation of Howard’s baiting of Lovecraft by writing “Pigeons from Hell” inconsistent with REH’s professed admiration of HPL and his own emulation of him in such stories as “The Black Stone.” Phillips suggests that “REH’s creation of the Hyborian Age may have been influenced, whether consciously or not, by finding out that HPL had created his own mythology.” (p. 38) (On the contrary, later research, particularly by Shanks [18], has shown that Howard’s motivations in creating the Hyborian world lay in constructing a pseudo-history, rather than a mythology, that would be consistent with what archaeologists and anthropologists knew, or thought they knew, about early Man.)

Leno replied two issues later (June, 2006), denying he was biased against or had anything but great respect for Lovecraft, adding he had called HPL the loser in the REH-HPL epistolary debate, not that he was “a loser” per se. He declares that more is involved here than a linguistic error and that Lovecraft was and should have been embarrassed about being caught lifting a quote from Fiona Macleod’s “The Sin-Eater.” Leno also reminds us about HPL’s assessment of REH’s “basic mentality,” wondering if the Texan knows the difference between Santayana and a brand of coffee, and also stating that REH is not really capable of ‘profound or analytical’ thinking. … [E]vidently Lovecraft, with his superior intellect, feels qualified to praise Mussolini and Fascism, yet Howard, with his ‘prosperous farmer’ mentality is the man who thinks Mussolini is a fool. Who was right?” (p. 33) Leno says he was disappointed with Phillips’s characterization of REH as having more commercial than artistic ambitions. “Evidently since Howard was more of a professional and did write with the ‘reader in mind’ this proves that his stories have very little literary merit and therefore should be consigned to the trash bin.” (p. 34) Leno admits his essay was speculative, but insists there is enough evidence for his thesis to be taken seriously.

The May, 2006 issue (Vol. 3, #5) is another of Grin’s “symposium” productions, this time celebrating the advent of the Lancer paperbacks, whose Conan volumes were the most important publications since the pulps in establishing the character as the pop icon he has become and kicking off the so-called Howard publishing Boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, May was the 40th anniversary
of the first such book, *Conan the Adventurer* (1966), whose impact was the greatest of them, not only because it was the first, but because it sported a particularly memorable cover, one of several masterpieces painted by the dean of fantasy illustrators, Frank Frazetta (1928-2010).

First out of the gate is Romeo with his “Viagra for the Soul,” referring to the exhilaration he and others felt ogling the seminal *Conan the Adventurer* volume and devouring its thrilling contents, namely “The People of the Black Circle,” “The Slithering Shadow,” and “The Pool of the Black one,” as well as the de Camp-completed fragment “Drums of Tombalku.” How significant the Frazetta covers were in the success of the series has always been a question, one Romeo attempts to answer by comparing the number of printings the various books went through, separating those with Frazetta covers from those with covers by John Duillo. He finds no proof that the Duillo editions were markedly less popular. Also, several other non-Conan books illustrated by Frazetta did not do well. All this would seem to indicate that the Howardian contents were the deciding factor. Romeo thinks, though, that Frazetta’s art and REH’s adventures were ideally suited for each other, and that they were helped by editor de Camp’s introductions that informed readers about the life and works of REH, for the first time in the case of most readers. He also believes the timing of the series was perfect, coming as it did during America’s Countercultural Revolution of the 1960s, when rebellious teenagers sought escape from what Romeo characterizes as the repressive ‘50s. Something was certainly timely, since, as Romeo points out, Conan was almost forgotten after the death of his creator, and the Gnome Press hardbacks and the Ace
paperback of *Conan the Conqueror* (1953) were not big successes. (Still, the success of the Lancers could have just been due to the greater prevalence of cheap paperbacks compared to the more expensive hardbacks, coupled with Lancer’s eye-catching covers.)

Noting the birth of regular Howard fanzines in 1959 with *Amra* [19], Romeo observes:

> It was Roy Krenkel’s illustrations in *Amra* that led to his hiring by Donald Wollheim, who was now at Ace, to illustrate Edgar Rice Burroughs’ books. Krenkel brought in Frazetta to help illustrate the books, which in turn led to Larry Shaw of Lancer Books hiring Frazetta to illustrate Conan. Think about that for a moment: if there hadn’t been a nascent Conan fandom, which de Camp contributed heavily to, Frazetta’s career might have played out quite differently. (p. 7)

After Gnome Press went out of business in 1962, de Camp sought markets for Sword & Sorcery, especially by Howard, editing the paperback anthologies *Swords and Sorcery* (Pyramid, 1963), *The Spell of Seven* (Pyramid, 1965), and *Warlocks and Warriors* (Berkley Medallion, 1971), and finally securing Lancer to publish REH paperbacks. Competing with him for the Conan rights was Martin H. Greenberg (not the esteemed anthologist of the same name), who sued to try to stifle the Lancer books, but only succeeded in delaying some of them, explaining why they appeared out of their intended numerical order. Romeo defends de Camp’s posthumous collaborations by citing several other instances of writers completing Howard’s fragments, and endorses de Camp’s decision to publish the Conan stories in career sequence. (Criticism of the latter, however, is not the sequencing *per se*, but de Camp’s use of the resulting “saga” to promote his and others’ pastiches while suppressing further publication of the original stories, as we have discussed in our previous installments.) Romeo lauds de Camp for his Lancer introductions that promoted REH as being “a natural story-teller, whose tales are unsurpassed for vivid, colorful, headlong, gripping action” (p. 10), though he concedes de Camp’s theorizing about Howard’s Oedipalism, latent homosexuality, and misanthropy did not help REH’s cause. “Thank you, Sprague, for your diligence and hard work toward making the Conan series a reality, and making Robert E. Howard known to millions.” (p. 11)

Next up is Anthony Avacato with “The Lancer Legacy of Frank Frazetta,” a paean to the master he is clearly well informed about and simpatico with, his own expertise in and appreciation of art shining throughout. *Conan the Adventurer* was Avacato’s first introduction to Conan, as it was to many other adolescent boys, and it changed his life, just as it did to the artist himself. Tracing Frazetta’s career, Avacato shows how the fortuitous assignation between Howard’s art and superlative artist lifted the latter from “illustrator” to “fine artist” and changed the look and standards of fantasy art forever.

[W]ith the publication of Lancer’s Conan series, it seemed something supernatural and preordained was at work – one is hard-pressed to think of another pairing between artist and writer that meshes so well. Certainly Frazetta’s greatest fame and subsequent fortune were secured during his tenure on the Lancers, whereas Howard was given a new audience, his own fierce genius made more memorable in the process. … Making the brutal beautiful is not easy, but the Lancer covers do so time and again, endowing bloody tableaus with a highly charged eroticism. With equal parts realism and exaggeration, shaped by the precision of Frazetta’s vigorous brushstrokes, the impossible became plausible and the fantastic believable.” (pp. 13 & 14)

Despite the many differences in background between the two men, Avacato discerns that they shared a penchant for dreaming, a gift of heightened sensitivity, and a tendency toward anger, as well as the need to suppress such feelings in daily life. “Howard and Frazetta learned early on the difficult lesson of balancing their creative compulsions with a defensive toughness. … What joined these disparate
individuals were uncompromising powers of imagination and the compulsive need to realize singular visions.” (p. 14) Deftly adapting to the changing tastes and demands of his industry, Frazetta progressed from drawing comic books and newspaper strips to painting paperback covers, movie posters, and magazine covers, all the while displaying ambitious vision, originality, and unshakeable confidence in his talent.

Much as REH in prose, Frazetta “encouraged the viewer to become an active participant by leaving certain objects unfinished or barely visible. All these factors contributed to a unique dynamic, a well-crafted ‘yin and yang’ of hard and soft, of masculine and feminine, of things deliberate and improvised, revealed and hidden.” (p. 16) He “drew upon an empathetic intuition, an innate understanding of the character and its author … He created the Hyborian Age with paint the same way Howard invented it with language. … And, like Howard before him, he combined a host of influences with his own experiences filtered fiercely through the prism of a powerful personality. As a result, these Conan covers are symphonies of violence: operatic in intensity and choreographed by a strong, sure hand that captures each scene at its most manic.” (p. 17)

It would take all his skill and determination to see Frazetta through bouts of serious illness in his later life. Much of his best work is preserved in a museum dedicated to him in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. A wealth of his drawings were published in a new collection of REH writings entitled The Ultimate Triumph: The Heroic Fiction of Robert E. Howard (Wandering Star, 1999). “Like Howard, he was able to give shape to his fierce imagination through a talent without precedent; unlike Howard, he has lived long enough to see these efforts appreciated and rewarded.” (p. 21)

Following this is Richard Lupoff’s memoir of that part of his editing and writing career which involved REH. Lupoff’s love of Edgar Rice Burroughs drew him into a job at Canaveral Press, where he recommended against publishing de Camp’s proposed series of Conan paperbacks, thinking new editions not very long after the Gnome Press hardbacks were superfluous, only to see them snapped up by Lancer Books, edited by his friend Larry Shaw. Acknowledging that the Lancers were cheaply made and that their writers and artists, including Frazetta, were not paid very much, Lupoff asserts that Lancer and other small publishers were doing the best they could with extremely limited resources. He wonders what would have happened if Shaw, like Lupoff, had passed on printing the Conans, or if de Camp had given up on them. “No boom, no comics, no REHupa, no … well, you get the picture. I do believe it was inevitable that Howard would be remembered. But without Larry Shaw and L. Sprague de Camp, his memory might have gloved far dimmer for far longer than any of us could guess.” (p. 26) Lupoff did complete a Howard fragment at Glenn Lord’s request published as The Return of Skull-Face (FAX, 1977) and wrote the final chapter in a round-robin completion of an REH fragment at Jonathan Bacon’s request published as Ghor, Kin-Slayer: The Saga of Genseric’s Fifth-Born Son (Necronomicon, 1997).

The final essay of the issue is Leon Nielsen’s “Pseudo Boom,” in which he documents the fact that the so-called Second Howard Boom of the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the Baen REH paperbacks and continued by Wandering Star, Del Rey, Gollancz, Wildside, Girasol, and Bison, has had nowhere near the same impact at recruiting new readers as did the first Boom. Most of these books are notable for having pure, pastiche-free REH texts and some include expensive collector’s editions with nice bindings and art, but their tendency to saturate the market has already led to declining resale values. Nielsen observes that the focus of the younger generation has shifted from books, movies, and comic books to electronic games, Web sites, and other virtual-reality entertainment, with the result, he believes, that “more potential Howard readers and fans were lost to the electronic revolution than gained.” (p. 28) He sees this as a natural consequence of the general decline in the interest of Americans in reading. The increasing quality of new amateur press publications and communal events such as Howard Days are bright spots in an otherwise increasingly bleak outlook for further promoting of the Texan author and for expanding the number of readers much beyond, or even maintaining, the current number of readers and fans. Nielsen
recommends that increased effort be put into more aggressive promotion and marketing, including that of audio and e-books.

All of Nielsen’s points are well-taken, but I don’t think thoughtful fans believe the Second Boom has brought in a significant number of new readers. It has had, though, the beneficial effects of providing authoritative texts and spurring new scholarship, which in turn should further open the gates of academia and gain Howard the critical recognition for which he is long overdue.

Following a poem by James Ruffini, the issue concludes with the usual bevy of letters. Roehm notes a few more publications to the credit of Viola Gerard Gavin and opines that her poem “The House of Caesar,” which as we saw inspired REH’s “All Fled” epigram, is probably buried in some issue of The London Mercury or Observer or “some other London rag.” (p. 35) Damon Sasser praises TC, especially the handsome slipcases and Romeo’s “I Was John Wesley Hardin!” Cornelius Kappabani also lauds TC, but disagrees with McCollum about REH being crazy, since Howard obviously knew what he was doing. Kappabani thinks REH’s type of depression is common among those who cannot see reality as other than it is. He sides with the views that Wright did more good than harm to Howard and that de Camp published Conan and Dark Valley Destiny for fun, not to fill his purse. Lastly, Kappabani recommends some rock bands that do Howardian songs. Jack Jones writes in to recount his recent Fort McKavett visit and to recommend it. Flensing Hlanith spotlights still another REH-quoting band. Finally, Edward Blohm expresses delight at the recent spate of Howard publications and at Grin’s ambitious TC publishing schedule.

First on stage in the June 2006 (Vol. 3, #6) issue is REHupa’s Official Editor (OE) Bill “Indy” Cavalier, with a fascinating overview of the first Howard Days, 13-15 June, 1986, in Cross Plains, set against the backdrop of his own life and showing the profound, lasting personal impact it had on him. In “How Robert E. Howard Saved My Life: Marriage, Fandom, and the Very First Howard Days,” we follow Cavalier as his interest in comic books draws him into reading and cartooning and then to fantasy through gloriously illustrated paperbacks, first those of Tarzan and then of Conan, starting with Conan the Adventurer. All of this provided escape from an economically constricted childhood and, as it turned out, showed the way to a more promising future. This pattern would continue as his first marriage started to crumble and his retail job security to falter, even as he pursued REH publications and Marvel comics and plunged deeper into fantasy fandom, eventually joining REHupa in December, 1985. Not only would this hobby furnish Cavalier with a distraction from his troubles, it would also forge friendships whose validation and support would see him through still tougher times ahead. He was particularly impressed by a zine, from REHupa Mailing #78 (Nov. 1985) by OE Burke and Vern Clark entitled “Gents on the Rampage: A Savage Journey into the Heart of Texas,” a detailed 18-page photo-illustrated account of their recent visit to Cross Plains before such visits were done much at all. “To this day, I still judge it one of the very best ‘zines ever run through REHupa.” (p. 8) Cavalier submitted his first zine, Cold Steel #1, to Mailing #79 (Jan., 1986) and has had an issue in every Mailing since, totaling 163 as of June, 2013, the longest such run in REHupa history. His zine’s collection of previews and reviews of Howard-related publications and events over the past 27½ years is the most complete record of REH fandom activities we have.

The Burke-Clark foray inspired the proposal of a visit by a larger REHupa contingent that June. Eagerly Cavalier made the 13-hour drive from his small Indiana town to Dallas, where he met REHupans Burke, Clark, horror-writer-to-be Nancy Collins, bookseller Bill Fulwiler, Tom Kovacs and Steve Ghilardi from Switzerland, Graeme Flanagan from Australia, and Mark Kimes (with his wife). Successively visiting Howard’s birthplace of Peaster, an area called Dark Valley where REH had supposedly lived as a child (though recent research by Patrice Louinet has shown that he probably never resided there [20]), and Ranger Junior College (where a group of books and documents called the Robert E. Howard Memorial Collection is housed, including the ultra-rare 1937 Jenkins edition of A Gent from
Bear Creek), the troop pushed on to Cross Plains, where “Robert E Howard Day – June 14th” was being celebrated at the Library. There they were welcomed by town librarian and former student of Novalyne Price, Billie Ruth Loving, and her colleague Joan McCowen. And who should walk in then but Glenn Lord, the world’s foremost Howard fan and scholar. They and Lord went on to visit the Howard House, then owned by Mr. and Mrs. Floyd Carter. The “band of international scholars,” as newspaper accounts later described them, were then treated as guests of honor and to dinner by many more friendly townspeople, including former Cross Plains Review editor Jack Scott, the town alderman, and REH publishing heirs Alla Ray Kuykendall and daughter Alla Ray Morris. Before even meeting Flanagan, several people mysteriously asked them, “Where’s the guy from Australia?” (I solved this mystery recently when I discovered an article in the German prozine Magira #33 [fall, 1980] that described a visit by one or more Austrians to Cross Plains in 1979, when some of the townsfolk confused Austria with Australia [21]).
Later the band paid their respects at REH’s grave in Brownwood’s Greenleaf Cemetery and met Dr. Charlotte Laughlin, an English professor at Howard Payne University and rescuer of the books Howard had donated to its library. (Laughlin had published the first listing of those books in her literary journal *Paperback Quarterly*. [22]) She told them a story that leaves little doubt that REH believed in reincarnation, which of course figures into his James Allison and other tales. It seems that a student from the adjoining Daniel Baker College, when Howard was attending Howard Payne, had heard that REH was “good” at history and so went to find him at the library there and ask him what he knew about Genghis Khan, about whom the student was writing a paper. “Expecting perhaps a few minutes of conversation, the student was shocked as REH proceeded to orate for two hours, even acting out dramatic scenes from the life of said Mongol Emperor. When, after Howard finally wound down, he was asked how he
knew so much about Genghis Khan, Bob Howard bent close to the student and replied, ‘Because, I was there.’ And then, more forcefully, ‘Because I WAS THERE!’ (p. 17)

The expedition of the original Ten to Cross Plains was to be repeated, developing in a few years into the annual 2-day Howard Days festival attended by about a hundred people or more. The townspeople, spearheaded by those the Ten met in 1986, formed Project Pride, bought and restored the Howard House, and hosted the legions of REH fans and visitors year round, as many of them still do today. REHupans, led by Burke and Cavalier, Project Pride, and lately the Robert E. Howard Foundation arrange and often participate in the programming of HD. Cavalier got a better job, found a more supportive partner in his current wife Cheryl, and has served as OE of REHupa from January 1989 through December 1994 and from April 1999 to the present, serving as recruiter, REH torchbearer, and much-needed rudder to keep the organization on an even keel for so many years. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Robert E. Howard Foundation and is administrator of the REHupa Web site. All of this earned him the 2011 REH Foundation Award for Lifetime Achievement. [23] Grin called him “a beloved elder statesman in the Howard fandom community.” (p. 39) And his heartfelt essay for TC won him the first-place 2006 Cimmerian (“The Hyrkanian”) Award for Essay. [24]

Mark Finn is represented in the issue with four pages of excerpts previewing his Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard, the first full-length biography since Dark Valley Destiny and the only one so far to approach being definitive. Eschewing the amateur psychoanalyzing of DVD, Blood & Thunder endeavors to understand the author through his writings and through the influences of his rural Texas background. Published in paperback by MonkeyBrain Books in November 2006 in time to mark the Centennial year, it would be revised and expanded in 2011 when it was published as a hardback by the Robert E. Howard Foundation. The editions would win Finn, respectively, the 2006 Cimmerian (“Atlantean”) Award [25] and the 2013 REH Foundation (“Atlantean”) Award for Best Book [26].

After this is a one-pager by Herron from his 2005 interview of REH acquaintance Norris Chambers, the rest of which would follow in the October issue. This preview merely highlights Howard’s knowledge that the proper pronunciation of “Tarzan” is “TarZAN” and his insistence that “Conan” be pronounced “COnun.” (Grin would have been better off keeping this with the rest of the interview and using the space saved to enlarge the font of the letter column, which as printed is nearly microscopic.)

The issue concludes ends with a poem by Schweitzer and “The Lion’s Den” letters. The first missive, by Romeo, scores Lord’s “A Vulture Comes up Snake Eyes,” as being unfairly biased against de Camp for his attempt to secure the Conan publishing rights from Lancer. “De Camp could have sold the series to Ballantine and perhaps the books would have gotten better promotion and stayed in perpetual print in various editions the way Ballantine treated their Tolkien books.” (p. 30) Romeo admits to not understanding why the Berkley series was canceled, guessing that Lord did it because “he was still a director at CPI, wanted to keep the position, and had a financial interest in not letting it be better known that these stories were in the public domain.” (p. 30) (But the series was actually initiated by Lord and aborted by a vote led by de Camp against Lord; de Camp was also a part of CPI and did not want the series competing with the pastiches he either wrote or arranged for. [27]) Romeo then rebuts Tompkins’s letter in the February issue, pointing out how many REH works are mentioned in DVD, many being non-Conan stories shown in a positive light. “I’m glad that pure Howard is now available. But to constantly berate de Camp for changes that were considered standard at the time is beating a dead horse.” (p. 30)

Tompkins himself engages Leno over the latter’s “Lovecraft’s Southern Vacation,” which Tompkins feels in unfairly slanted against HPL. As one example, Tompkins cites some Lovecraft heroes that are not cowards, and notes that none of the protagonists were “simpering.” He believes HPL would have been impressed by “Pigeons from Hell” had he lived to read it, not dismayed at its supposedly sardonic implications toward himself. Tompkins quotes more statements by Lovecraft and Howard about each
other that further underline their high mutual respect. Then he goes on to express interesting but basically irrelevant (to Leno) opinions about whether horror stories should be grounded in reality, whether their protagonists need be weaklings, how much racialism was involved in “Pigeons from Hell” and “What the Nation Owes the South,” and whether Wagner could have written better Conan pastiches than de Camp.

After Leno’s reply to Schweitzer and Phillips that we discussed earlier, Schweitzer reappears, declaring that most of Herron’s latest remarks not be worth answering, that HPL’s “At the Mountains of Madness” was not such a good fit to *Weird Tales* anyway, that Farnsworth Wright did publish a fair amount of Lovecraft in *WT*, and that there is no evidence that anything but bad health ended Wright’s
career. Schweitzer believes HPL and REH, in their favoring or opposing Fascism respectively in their letters, were merely expressing their lifelong prejudices for preserving German culture or opposing totalitarianism, at a time when the crimes of Fascism were not yet generally known. While disparaging his own Conan’s World and Robert E. Howard, he agrees with Tompkins, in “The Shortest Line between Two Towers,” about the heterogeneous level of technology in the Hyborian Age. “De Camp used to say that Conan seems to be wandering between movie sets.” (p. 35) About Herron’s statement that Schweitzer was trying to be a latter-day de Camp, Schweitzer says he only wishes he could be, as knowledgeable and diligent as de Camp was concerning anything he chose to write about.

Burke is on deck next to answer Herron’s numerous ripostes, dismissing most as ad hominem attacks and demonstrating that Herron’s statements that Howard hated Wright for his capricious editorial policies and that Wright thought REH had permanently lost his “divine fire” were based on quotations that were taken out of context or selectively edited. “I cannot find, in any of Howard’s letters to [his fellow pulp writers], any negative or disparaging remarks about Wright as an editor.” (p. 37)

REHupan Jim Keegan finishes off the letter column and the issue by informing readers of his own efforts to publish an artistically adorned, if not actually illustrated, edition of REH’s Complete Poetry. He believes it, as well as the third Wandering Star Conan volume, would be published, though not soon (and this was indeed the case).

Meanwhile, Grin had been revamping the format of The Cimmerian Blog and, to broaden its fare, enlisting estimable bloggers besides himself, namely Finn, Roehm, and Tompkins. Among other topics, Grin himself did pieces on the Cross Plains fire, the January 2006 Birthday Bash in Fort Worth, the auctioning of “The Grey God Passes” typescript, the collectability of REHupa Mailings, and the German band Bifröst; Roehm surveyed the Steve Harrison detective stories; and Tompkins discussed the Second Howard Boom and Lovecraft.

We have come to the midpoint of The Cimmerian’s run, with no sign of a slackening or decline. Still, will Grin be able to pull off his demanding monthly publishing schedule through the rest of the Centennial year? We will find out next time.

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THE ROBERT E. HOWARD BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY SOURCES, PART XV

The list of articles below is complete insofar as it contains all items relating to Howard, excepting those by Howard himself (being primary references and cataloged elsewhere) and those inspired by Howard, such as poems by others (being primary references by those authors). It is in alphabetical order by author and then by title. The abstract, if any, is in brackets.

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(prozine edited by Leo Grin)

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