Robert E. Howard:
Lone Star Fantasist
by Mark Finn

Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must ultimately triumph.

Robert E. Howard
"Beyond the Black River"

It is impossible to calculate the impact of Robert E. Howard's work in pop culture. It cannot be done. He has influenced as many people as J.R.R. Tolkien, if not more, and did so from a small house in Cross Plains, Texas. In a professional career that spanned only twelve years, Robert E. Howard generated a lifetime's worth of fiction and single-handedly created the genre of heroic fantasy. His fiction has crisscrossed the world, been translated into a dozen different languages, and continues to inspire and move new generations of writers and fans some seventy years after his death. Known chiefly as the creator of the world-famous Conan the Cimmerian, Howard's literary barbarian and his world was less the culmination of his writing career and more another notch on a literary belt so varied that it defies categorization.

Robert Ervin Howard was born January 22nd, 1906, in Peaster, Texas. His father, Dr. Isaac M. Howard, was a country doctor, tending to farmers and their families. Dr. Howard moved his wife, Hester Jane Ervin, and their young son all over Texas, hopping from small community to small community. Howard leaned heavily on his mother for companionship, and she encouraged his reading and studies. Howard was an imaginative boy, able to absorb and retain oral stories as well as written fiction, and he read everything he could get his hands on.

By 1919, the family settled in Cross Plains, Texas, just slightly ahead of the oil booms of the twenties. These two booms brought huge numbers of people into the area, increasing the population and causing local businesses to thrive. Thousands of people thronged to the small town, looking for legitimate work in the fields, but also setting up jobs that would service the workers. And with this crowd came the con men, gamblers, drifters, saloon girls, and of course, the fast-talking businessmen and speculators looking to make a quick buck before the opportunity—and the oil wells—dried up.

These images of sudden civilization, indolent cruelty, thievery, and boomtown decadence indelibly colored Howard's perceptions of the world, and these views of civilization in decay would turn up again and again in Howard's fiction. In a letter to Farnsworth Wright, written in the summer of 1931, Howard said this: "I'll say one thing about an oil boom; it will teach a kid that Life's a pretty rotten thing as quick as anything I can think of."

Cross Plains was the largest community that the Howard family had lived in at that time, and coupled with the influx of people chasing black gold, offered plenty of amusement for young boys. Howard's vivid imagination and knack for making up stories

and plays gave him an outlet for acceptance with the local kids. Howard's love of boxing also helped him fit in with the boys.

In high school, Howard was an average student, but his skill at writing singled him out amongst his fellow classmates. At the age of fifteen, he had decided to make his living as a writer when he submitted a story to *Adventure*, one of his favorite pulp magazines. It was promptly rejected. By the time he was sixteen, Howard was winning prizes for stories and essays in the school newspaper. Howard continued to write stories, working through his reading sources and influences, looking for his voice.

After Howard graduated high school, he made his first professional sale, a caveman story called "Spear and Fang," to *Weird Tales* at the age of eighteen. Howard had accumulated a number of rejection slips, too, but that sale rekindled Howard's desire to make it as a professional writer. He redoubled his efforts and was rewarded with additional sales to *Weird Tales*. During the early 1920's, Howard submitted a number of stories to *Weird Tales* and other pulp magazines while he worked at a variety of jobs in Cross Plains, everything from stenographer to soda jerk, from errand boy to oil field reporter. An accomplished poet, Howard wrote reams of verse with historical subject matter, much of which wouldn't be seen until decades after his death, though he did sell several poems to *Weird Tales*. However, *Weird Tales* paid on publication, not acceptance, and as a result, Howard was forced to find work. His father, too, added to the pressure by wanting Howard to follow in his footsteps, or failing that, go to college and find a vocation. Howard hated all of these menial jobs. He hated punching a clock, and he didn't like being told what to do by others.

Howard wrote to H.P. Lovecraft: "... it is no light thing to enter into a profession absolutely foreign and alien to the people among which one's lot is cast; a profession which seems as dim and faraway and unreal as the shores of Europe ..." The Howards enjoyed some prestige in Cross Plains, and Robert was expected to fit in by either taking up his father's mantle or, at the very least, an occupation that would not diminish their reputation. To some, it appeared as if Robert was sponging off his parents. Others considered him a little strange (an opinion not helped by his bookish side) because he lacked the same opinions and desires as those around him.

This weighed heavily on him, and his writing became sporadic. He occasionally blew off steam at the local icehouse by boxing with other roughnecks. Through bodybuilding and exercise, Howard grew into a heroically proportioned man with a devastating punch. His wins at the icehouse allowed him a measure of self-respect, but his job situation and the nagging at home persisted.

He struck a deal with his father: he would take a bookkeeping course at nearby Howard Payne University, then would be given one year to find success as a writer; if that failed, he would become a bookkeeper.

Now the die was cast. He received his diploma for the bookkeeping course in 1927, and set to work immediately thereafter, determined never to rely on it. Howard needed to produce saleable stories. Motivated by the mundane world around him and a fervent desire to make his own way, he dipped into childhood fantasies, European history, and his own rough surroundings to create a host of memorable characters.

While taking his bookkeeping course, Howard came up with a character and a story that would be very influential in his later career. He went back to the manuscript, polished it up, and sent it in to Farnsworth Wright, the editor of Weird Tales. Howard was overjoyed when it was accepted for publication. "The Shadow Kingdom" was the first sword and sorcery story ever written, a combination of horror and heroic fantasy starring King Kull. Himself an Atlantean barbarian, Kull ascends to the throne of Valusia and is beset on all sides by conspiracy, weird menace, and diplomatic intrigue.

"The Shadow Kingdom" was Howard's biggest sale to date. Thereafter, he began to sell steadily to *Weird Tales*. Shortly thereafter, Weird Tales published "Red Shadows," featuring another character Howard resuscitated from his adolescence, Solomon Kane—the dour and puritanical swordsman who fought pirates and cannibals along the coast of England and darkest Africa. "Red Shadows" begins in France as Kane hunts the French brigand Le Loup, who has murdered an innocent young woman and her village. The chase takes Kane all the way to Africa, where N'Longa the witch doctor helps him exact revenge on Le Loup for the innocent lives that he has destroyed. Seven Kane stories were ultimately published in *Weird Tales*, contributing greatly to Howard's income and to his prestige as an author of heroic fantasy.

Howard's second break came in 1928 when he sold "The Pit of the Serpent" to *Fight Stories* magazine. The story featured Steve Costigan, Howard's most personal and most overlooked character. An able-bodied sailor, Costigan roamed the Asiatic Seas with his white bulldog, Mike, in a series of picaresque boxing tales. Steve was a gorilla-ugly, bare-knuckled fighter with a heart of gold, fists of steel, and a head full of rocks. Howard's flair for vivid action served these stories well, as conflicts often revolved around a boxing match, prizefight, or in the back alleys of some foreign port. These humorous stories paid Howard a living wage and were extremely popular in the pages of *Fight Stories*, *Action Stories*, and later *Jack Dempsey's Fight Magazine*. By the end of 1928, any discussion about Howard becoming a bookkeeper was dropped.

While the Costigan series provided steady income, Howard gave voice to another pair of childhood characters, Bran Mak Morn, King of the Picts, who clashed with the Roman armies in Britannia, and Francis Gordon, a.k.a. El Borak, the swashbuckling gunslinger who traveled the Orient, in addition to various horror, action, and historical stories. These stories appeared mostly in *Weird Tales* and its companion magazine, *Oriental Tales*.

Howard wrote in every genre, and was able to write well, quickly, and with an economy that the editors liked, since most of them paid by the word. That's not to say that Howard just knocked them out, either. He wrote multiple drafts of most of his stories, often incorporating suggestions from his editors. Howard wrote intuitively,

trusting his instincts, and was able to work at a manic rate, writing stories and casting them aside, then picking them up, rewriting them, submitting them to editors, rewriting them again when they came back, and submitting them to different editors and markets. For all of his effort, Howard had yet to create his most famous character, the one that would far outlive him and doom him at the same time.

In 1932, Howard created and sold his most famous character, Conan the Cimmerian. "The Phoenix on the Sword" was the first Conan story to debut in *Weird Tales,* and it was an immediate hit. In the story, Conan has already ascended to the throne of Aquilonia and now wears the crown of rule on an uneasy head. His right-hand man is lured away by a point of diplomacy, leaving Conan vulnerable to an assassination plot (which is helped along by the wizard, Thoth-Amon). Conan is tipped off by a ghost, however, and makes ready to welcome his would-be slayers. The conspirators, loyal to the old king, are unprepared for a half-armored Conan and he mops the floor with them in a characteristically fierce battle:

> Conan put his back against the wall and lifted his ax. He stood like an image of the unconquerable primordial—legs braced apart, head thrust forward, one hand clutching the wall for support, the other gripping the ax on high, with the great corded muscles standing out in iron ridges, and his features frozen in a death snarl of fury—eyes blazing terribly through the mist of blood that veiled them. The men faltered—wild, criminal and dissolute though they were, yet they came of a breed men called civilized, with a civilized background; here was the barbarian—the natural killer. They shrank back—the dying tiger could still deal death.
>
> King Conan sensed their uncertainty and grinned mirthlessly and ferociously.
>
> "Who dies first?" he mumbled through smashed and bloody lips.

"The Phoenix on the Sword" has all the primal ingredients of Howard's Conan stories: magic, adventure, swordplay, politics, and, most importantly, a little of Howard's own philosophy: barbarism must ultimately triumph. In many stories, we see the barbaric Conan behaving with more honor and dignity than the cultivated aristocrats around him. Howard had explored this theme in his earlier Kull stories. In fact, "The Phoenix on the Sword" is actually a rewritten, unsold Kull story, titled "By This Axe I Rule!" The revised Conan story now included supernatural elements as well as fast, furious action; it was the birth of heroic fantasy.

Other stories followed, each one detailing a different phase of Conan's varied career: pirate, mercenary, thief, wanderer, and king. In the pages of *Weird Tales*, Conan was an unqualified hit. Howard was mentioned frequently in the letters page, drawing praise from fans and fellow writers. Even now, Howard is referred to as one of the "three Musketeers" of *Weird Tales*, along with H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. These three writers set the standard for quality and originality.

No one had done anything like Conan before. As both a character and a genre, it was utterly unique. Howard's inspiration was a varied and fickle thing. He told Clark Ashton Smith that: "(Conan) is simply a combination of a number of men I have known...some mechanism in my subconscious took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers and honest workmen I have come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian."

That Howard was able to vividly conjure up a historical world that never existed and a character that was the American "everyman"—an orphaned immigrant who pulls himself up by his bootstraps to become a king—all from a small town in Texas, is astonishing. Even more remarkable was Howard's determination to succeed as a writer without moving to one of the major publishing centers like Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York. Howard was merciless in his onslaught of fiction markets. When one story came back, rejected, he would turn around and send it to another publisher. Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird Tales*, was most directly responsible for Howard's income, although Howard continued to sell stories in other magazines for the rest of his life.

In 1934, Howard turned to the Southwest to construct new stories. He started another popular series in *Action Stories* in the style of his earlier burlesque boxing-sailor stories, about a mountain man named Breckenridge Elkins. A refined mix of action and comedy, the stories continued to run in the magazine until two years after Howard's death. Howard also wrote modern westerns, serious westerns, as well as weird westerns with supernatural trappings. He returned to the theme of civilization being an inherently corrupting influence, which played very well within the western mythos. His correspondence with fellow Lovecraft Circle writer August Derleth shows Howard's love of folklore, Texas history, and tall tales in the same tradition, as both men regaled each other with information about their respective states. They were particularly sympathetic to the plight of Native Americans, and discussed local tribes in some detail. Howard's letters to H. P. Lovecraft also show him defending the concept of the noble savage.

In spite of great success making a living as a writer in a small Texas town in the middle of the Great Depression, Howard's home life was less than satisfactory. With his father gone for extended periods of time, Howard was left alone to care for his mother, who suffered from tuberculosis and all of the complications that condition brought with it. He was prone to fits of depression, what he referred to as his "black moods." He had many friends and acquaintances, and kept a regular correspondence with many fellow writers, but had very few people close to him that he could open up to.

When his mother went into a coma in June 1936, Howard wrote a final couplet:

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

He committed suicide on June 11, 1936. He left behind a large inventory of completed, unpublished stories, as well as his poetry. He was thirty years old.

During his lifetime, Howard never saw any of his work printed in books. After his death, what began as affectionate tributes would snowball into a pop-cultural phenomenon. In 1946, Arkham House (set up as a publishing house for the works of H.P. Lovecraft) published *Skull Face and Others*, a collection of some of Howard's horror and dark-fantasy stories. Gnome Press published the Conan tales in several volumes starting in 1950: *Conan the Conqueror*, *The Sword of Conan*, *King Conan*, and *The Coming of Conan*. In the late sixties, the series was picked up by Lancer, a paperback publisher, and reprinted again with striking covers by acclaimed fantasy artist, Frank Frazetta.

With the aid of literary agent Glenn Lord, the rest of Howard's prodigious inventory found other publishers. For the first time, collections of Howard's characters were released in single volumes. As the market for fantasy grew in the seventies, Howard's work was translated into multiple languages and published all over the world.

In 1970, Marvel Comics published *Conan the Barbarian #1*, and brought Howard to a new audience altogether. The comic book, along with its sister publication, a black and white comic magazine called *The Savage Sword of Conan*, enjoyed a twenty-five year run and is still sought after by collectors.

All of these factors contributed to the creation of the movie, *Conan the Barbarian*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. This more than anything locked the character in the public's mind, and he remains one of the most recognizable literary characters to this day.

To keep up with the demand, new authors were conscripted to write the further adventures of Conan. The character was licensed for a variety of products, including computer games, toys, and even an animated series aimed at children. Conan became a worldwide phenomenon. As a result, more people knew of Howard's creation than the creator himself.

Only at the end of the twentieth century has Robert E. Howard and his work been seriously studied by academics. Thematically, he has much in common with writers like Ernest Hemingway and Jack London. His economy of prose has been compared to fellow pulp scribe Raymond Chandler. His world, the Hyborian Age, is every bit as detailed as Tolkien's Middle Earth or other places of fantasy. Most importantly, Howard's brand of heroic fantasy (also called sword and sorcery) was unlike anything previously published: a combination of historical setting with magical or "weird" elements blended in. His stories spawned a slew of imitators, with very few coming close to his level of craftsmanship, and as a result, Howard was critically lumped together with a number of lesser writers, and his work was not taken seriously.

What draws authors, scholars, and collectors to Howard is his intensity as a writer and his unique way of telling a story. Howard liked to revisit certain themes, such as man vs. man (usually a lone specialist against vast, innumerable hordes), or the birth and decay of civilization and the decadence that comes from said civilizations. Howard was fascinated with primitive cultures and featured them heavily in his work. He was also able to create

a sense of place, in both scope and scale that was very real and immediate. His stories read naturally and ring with authenticity. His love of poetry served him well and allowed him to paint vivid, immediate pictures with very few words. But Howard's most notable skill was his portrayal of action. Few authors are able to come close to the edge-of-the-seat, nail-biting action sequences that Howard was famous for. Whether he was orchestrating a swordfight on the beach between two pirates, or a grand sweeping battle with thousands of participants, his poetical skill for violence, coupled with a flair for conversational storytelling, mark him as one of the greatest adventure writers of the twentieth century.

I was the first to light a torch of literature in this part of the country, however small, frail, and easily extinguished that flame may be.

Robert E. Howard
to H. P. Lovecraft, June 1933

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