

FREDERICK LEES, *The Arthuriad of Catumandus*. Hong Kong and London: Crane Books, 1996. Pp. 428. ISBN: 9-6281-1003-9. £15.99.

This is one of that breed of historical novel which presents itself as an eyewitness account, the eyewitness in this case being a purely fictitious character, Catumandus, who visits Britain around the end of the fifth century. Through the words of Catumandus, we are offered an image of the so-called 'historical' Arthur: the sub-Roman warlord at war with Saxon invaders and rebellious compatriots. The setting will at once be familiar to those who have encountered such works as Nikolai Tolstoy's *The Coming of the King* (1988), John James' *Men Went to Cattraeth* (1988) or Tom Clare's *King Arthur and the Riders of Rheged* (1992). Like the authors of these three novels, Frederick Lees has absorbed the appropriate historical source-material and, following a trend which seems to be a natural progression from such reading, he has drafted as many as possible of the period's famous people, places and events into his book. All the ubiquitous Arthurian characters are present: Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot, Galahad, Guinevere and Mordred, their names suitably 'Celticized' by Lees. These key players are supported by a recognizable cast of second-string figures drawn from history and fable: Cato of Dumnonia, Lailoken, Maelgwn Gwynedd, to name but three. From the romances, Lees culls the motifs of Camelot, Grail, and Round Table, each accompanied by suitable information to justify a fifth century origin. In short, everything one might expect in a modern novel about the Historical Arthur is included, none of the 'facts' are overly far-fetched, and all the key characters—with the exception of Merlin (on whom see below)—operate within milieux which are familiar and uncontroversial.

The characters act out a storyline which itself is conventional, with the unfolding of Arthur's political and personal careers to his death at Camlann providing a backdrop for the activities of Catumandus during his British sojourn. The potential for originality in the *Arthuriad* lies in its portrayal of a hypothetical interaction between the cultures of sub-Roman Britain and the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, whence Catumandus has been despatched as an envoy of the Emperor Anastasius. Catumandus is by blood a Briton, no less than an illegitimate son of Arthur. Raised in Gaul, he eventually travels across Continental Europe where, through his eyes, we have brief encounters with some of the erstwhile great cities of Late Antiquity: Lyons, Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople. The author's descriptions of the cities seem rather truncated, prompting a suspicion that his background research did not encompass the relevant archaeological literature on these places. Thus, by the time Catumandus reaches Britain, his characterization as a visitor from an exotic culture appears somewhat underdeveloped. On the other hand, Lees does not paint a hackneyed portrait of the sub-Roman Britons as untutored barbarians listening awestruck to tales of imperial grandeur in the East. Such a portrayal must have seemed tempting, but instead Lees gives us the cameo of Gwenhwyvar pretending earnestly to question Catumandus concerning Alexandria and Constantinople. 'Her eyes,' we are told, 'were wide with feigned ignorance.'

There are some bizarre episodes, which certainly provide an unusual slant on one or two familiar Arthurian figures. While visiting Rome, for instance, Catumandus

frolics in a graphic orgy with Myrddin and a couple of female pilgrims. Myrddin is throughout the book depicted in typical New Age guise as a druidical relic and prophet. Catumandus himself is an effective narrator and has a well-drawn personality, his characterization perhaps benefitting from not being burdened with the pseudo-historical baggage which attaches to the more familiar players. Of the other principals, I found Gwenhwyvar to be the most developed character, but Arthur considerably less so.

The *Arthuriad* emerges as a conventional Historical Arthur novel and, as such, it makes for an entertaining read. It claims, on the dustjacket, to be ‘epic in scale,’ which seems to me an overstatement. True, it is not a short book, but epics are not measured by word-count alone. It is almost two hundred pages shorter than *The Coming of the King*, to which I find its atmosphere akin, but of the two I would judge the *Arthuriad* to be more readable and more tightly structured.

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