

FREDERICK LEES, *The Arthuriad of Catamandus*. Hong Kong and London: Crane Books, 1996. Pp. 428. ISBN: 9-6281-1003-9. £15.99. (cloth). ISBN: 962-8110-02-0. £11.99. (paper).

The prologue of this novel tells us that it is based upon a manuscript recently discovered in Alexandria, and ascribed to a certain Catamandus (or Cadfan), written in Greek. It precisely covers the span of Arthur's middle and later life as well as narrating Catamandus' visits to Britain between 496-518 A.D.

Ah, if only there were such a manuscript! Yet the yearning Arthurphile may perhaps stop and be refreshed by this work of fiction, with its intriguingly different narrative standpoint. Catamandus, the narrator of this book, is none other than Cadfan, one of Arthur's by-blows on a Gaulish woman. Brought up in a Gaulish household and raised to take over his putative father's business, Catamandus is the cultured, classical pagan who ranges the Mediterranean, making astute political and business alliances. Underlying his upbringing is his constant curiosity about his real father and his exploits. After his meeting with the young Merlin, doing his druidic 'Grand Tour' of the Mediterranean mystery centres and fleshpots, Catamandus is fired to discover more about his father. This opportunity soon arises when the Emperor Anastasius engages Catamandus to become his envoy to Britain, ostensibly to send back word of the state of the country, but more particularly to ascertain whether Britain might still be a useful source of support to the Christian Empire.

In Britain, Cadfan finds himself in a totally different world: a kind of third-world Empire, where individual local tyrants have their own proud sensibilities and misty loyalties, where Christian and native beliefs occupy often the same space, where one or more generations of south-eastern Britons have become the slaves and sub-workers of Saxon settlers. This is the Britain described by Gildas, but in better, balanced focus. In the common memory of the people is the death (actually, the brave defeat) of Gerontius, the militant strategies of Ambrosius, the shame and decimation of British nobility at the Night of the Long Knives—from which only Vortigern escaped.

Above all these factors, as hope and palladium to the people, shines Arthur, the Dux Bellorum, who alone coordinates, by his special magic, the disparate factors of Britain into a triumphant defensive ring. What makes this novel such a triumph is that we are able to contemplate the wreck of Britain without depression because of the incandescent power of Arthur to infuse the land and its co-defenders with a superabundant light that is truly radiant.

Cadfan is there at all the major events, including Badon: a tour-de-force which will make readers weep with the immediacy of the struggle and the smashing victory that it brings to Britain in real terms. Not since Rosemary Sutcliff have I enjoyed this kind of uplift! The historical immediacy of Lees' writing of Badon is perhaps best conveyed by recalling events from the still living memory of the Battle of Britain in the Second World War; a last-ditch affair in which deeds of personal and corporate bravery cancel many defeats.

Readers will discover in this novel the nature of the Grail and the Wasteland and the secrets of Arthur's passing, and I am not going to spoil that discovery with any further discussion here.

Cadfan is a lusty, vaguely dissolute young man, but a cultured and inquisitive one, in the manner of a Greek Alexandrian. His wider focus on the state of Britain comes from an Imperial perspective which skilfully highlights the stubbornly entrenched, gloriously brave and foolish, mysteriously druidic and ideologically murky nature of the British temperament. Cadfan holds his father in veneration and tender love, their relationship far more straightforward than between Arthur and his other sons—the doomed Amr and the ambitious Medraut. Cadfan sees the strain of maintaining the shining Camulos (Camelot) veneer which falls heaviest upon Gwenhwyfar and Arthur: the royal pair emerge as real people, with that old-fashioned sense of duty to their people, whose cost only monarchs can reckon up in the loss of personal lives.

Saxon and Britain, Christian and Druid are all given their due in this fine novel: each has virtues and failings. There are courageous and enlightened Churchmen as well as narrow and predatory bishops. As well as the urbane Classical paganism of Cadfan, there are the blood-sacrifices and chthonic spells of Igrayne and her daughter Morgan.

The novel is slow to start, sometimes lazily retrospective, perhaps in keeping with a fictionalized 'manuscript,' and it could do with the services of a good copy-editor to bring clarity to the parenthetical clauses throughout, (commas are sometimes strangely absent) and to provide shorter paragraphs, which are easier on the eye of the reader! However, I would recommend this book as a good read in its own right and as an antidote to the slew of cross-plagiarizing and Disneyfying Arthurian fiction which has flooded the market in the last few years. Lees has something uniquely insightful to convey in his novel, which market-conscious publishers have foolishly chosen to disregard.

The depth of mood and style of narrative are comparable only to John Cowper Powys' *Porius* (recently reprinted in its entirety). Lees does not have the opaque or mystical style of a Powys, but his narrative has the same deep power which surges up from the roots of the land of Britain itself into an epic recreation of the Dark Age Arthurian world. Lees has steered his way skilfully through the complex shoals of 6th century events, finally giving a rich and long-overdue credit to Arthur which Gildas so resolutely sought to deny him.

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