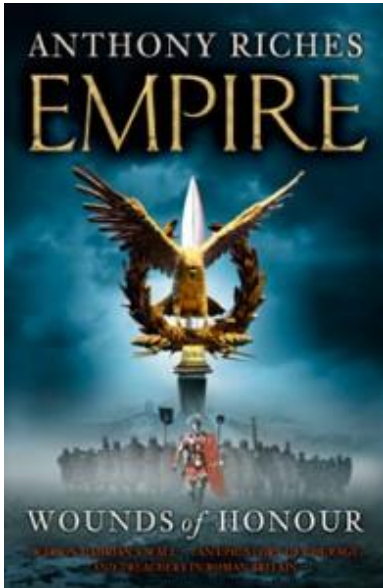


'Empire: Wounds of Honour'

By Anthony Riches

Review by Jonathan Aird

And here we are back in Ancient Rome once more -- and more specifically we are back in the Roman Army, and more specifically yet we are in the Roman Army in Britain. That's a popular place for English writers of historical fiction to visit, and no part of it more so than Hadrian's Wall. Anthony Riches, on face value, stepped into a crowded market with this volume -- few of his potential readers can be unfamiliar with Simon Scarrow's Eagle



series -- and his heroes Centurions Macro and Cato spent around 2,000 pages in Britain. However, Riches' hero -- the Praetorian Marcus Valerius Aquila -- has arrived around 150 years later and is a member of a very different Roman Army. And as a sometime reader of Scarrow, it takes a while to adjust to this new take on a familiar organisation. Simon Scarrow has villainous soldiers, but there's generally a feeling that when the chips are down they are all comrades in arms. Anthony Riches has auxiliaries whose loyalty is to Britain, and who despise Romans, whilst the legions are stuffed full of self-serving and generally malicious soldiers. Scarrow sees the legions as an unstoppable killing machine; Riches is far more tentative on this aspect -- an early skirmish of a patrol against three times their number of barbarians would be a walk in the park for Scarrow's Romans, but Riches has them (literally) wetting themselves with fear.

So, hopefully, that is now very clear: Riches isn't Scarrow -- but is this book any good? Anthony Riches has a gritty style, and his story has plenty of twists. Early on there are, perhaps, a few too many explanatory monologues that allow his complex story to actually start moving. It is an interesting theme -- Marcus Valerius Aquila has been sent from Rome with a secret message for the commander of the Sixth Legion, stationed in Britain. He is unaware that just after setting out on his mission his father was arrested as a traitorous plotter against the Emperor. His father, and, it is presumed, all his family out to distant cousins, have been rounded up and executed -- Marcus is thus the last of the family line. With the help of some unexpected allies and new friends he escapes an assassination attempt or two, and then under an assumed name attempts to re-join the Roman Army, again coming in immediately as a centurion in an auxiliary cohort. A secondary plotline running alongside this sees a shadowy figure scheming to bring about the destruction of the legions of Northern Britain at the hands of the barbarian tribes that live to the north of the wall. There's certainly a lot going on. Some of the plot does stretch credulity -- the relative ease with which Marcus gains a command being one. Additionally, Marcus was trained by a gladiator and attempts to pass on some of his "moves" to his men, alongside sharpening up their more usual drill; this also seems to be drifting into the region of fantasy.

The characters have some familiarity to them -- Marcus is the callow youth holding the high rank of centurion in the Praetorians thanks to a purchased commission. Then there is Rufius the older centurion who takes him under his wing (does this sound at all familiar?), and Dubnus the dispossessed barbarian prince who is torn between loyalty to his people and a begrudging love for the legions that have become his family. Anthony Riches does fairly well in giving his

secondary characters some motivations for their actions -- the Legate who seems too helpful has a reason, the hostile camp commander who early on takes Marcus in against his first instincts does spend some time being convinced. However, the troops who at first resent Marcus' presence are won around in a fairly unconvincing manner, and all move from hostility to lapdog faithfulness ó it gives Marcus his õgangõ but, well it seemed very contrived.

There's no dearth of incident and action as Marcus sets out to forge his cohort into a first-class elite fighting unit, just in time to encounter the imminent barbarian attack. And this can hardly do less than inspire even the most slightly susceptible wargamer to either brush off existing armies, or start perusing the catalogues for suitable figures. Anthony Riches does spend quite a lot of wordage on fights and he tends towards the blow-by-blow description that some readers may be familiar with from over-enthusiastic Dungeon Masters. The fights do tend to go on a bit ó and there are a lot of them!

There are some niggling points with the narrative and style ó perhaps the most irritating is the number of people that Marcus reveals his true identity to after having taken a õsecret identity.õ And there are too many named characters. It sometimes feels that Marcus is destined to be on first-name terms with every inhabitant of the British Isles. For all that though, this is a fairly well told if somewhat familiar feeling story, and certainly worthy of a perusal. Naturally, although it comes to a satisfactory close, it is the first book of a series. Currently, there are four sequels. However, if one is to believe Wikipedia the plan is to tell the full tale of Marcus Valerius Aquila over 25 volumes. If that is the case, then I will confess to feeling I won't last the whole course. One last comment though -- and to return very briefly, and for the last time, to my earlier comparison to Simon Scarrow's novels -- some believe that Macro and Cato swear a lot, and some are put off those books because of this. Well, compared to the language used by the inhabitants of "Wounds of Honour" Macro and Cato are the equivalent of elderly maiden aunts -- so if you're easily offended by soldiers who swear like ... troopers ... then all I can say is *caveat emptor!*

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