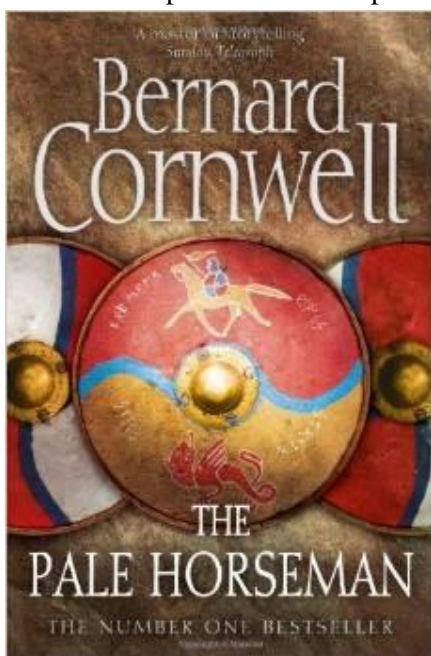


'The Pale Horseman'

By Bernard Cornwell

Review by Jonathan Aird

Bernard Cornwell has become incredibly prolific in recent years and has produced books set in eras far removed from the Napoleonic background of the Sharpe novels with which he made his name. 'The Pale Horseman' is, I realised soon after starting it, not the first book in his Dark Age series of six stories -- it's actually the second. This isn't an issue since, as is usual in such cases, there's a reasonable synopsis of the main features of the first book provided in the opening chapters which quickly brings the reader up to speed.



The protagonist of the novel is Uhtred, a Saxon raised by Danes who has a tenuous loyalty to Alfred, the king of Wessex. The novel is narrated by Uhtred in the first person past tense -- which gives it the lively feel of a story being directly unfolded by the main actor, with all his prejudices and points of view -- including his self-justifications for what can only be impartially regarded as a worrying propensity for treachery. This first person narrative is a bit of a problem, especially in the first third of the book, as Uhtred is arrogant, self-serving and venal -- his loyalties, both personal and political, blow with the wind. This naturally does serve to make him a highly believable character living in difficult times -- but he's hardly a likable hero. He also has a fairly simplistic outlook on the world -- and is a young man driven by passion rather than by careful thought, and his narration of the story reflects this. Things are very black and white to Uhtred and sometimes it would have been nice to have had a more nuanced voice as his

approach is often to act first and think later ... much ... much later ... if at all. Of course, the other problem with the first person is that it does remove the element of surprise -- periodically Uhtred has to fight some combats where it seems that the odds are heavily stacked against him -- will he survive? Well, yes he will, he is narrating the story after all.

Uhtred is a displaced Saxon noble who was raised as a hostage to the Northern Danes, a situation which complicates his adult behaviour as he eventually found friendship amongst them, and adopted their religion. However, as the story unfolds -- with Danish invaders taking over Wessex and Alfred driven from his halls -- Uhtred has to decide where his real future lies. As others give him derisory nicknames based around his perceived deviousness and even his friends bluntly tell him that they don't trust him at all, Uhtred slowly sees that he must change his ways -- well, some of them at least. He remains a warrior first and foremost, and stands as the opposite of his king -- Bernard Cornwell portrays Alfred in a way that is quite believable but rather at odds with the received wisdom of King Alfred the Great as a Saxon equivalent to King Arthur, a great warrior holding back the hordes of invaders. Alfred is studious and pious and at times seems weak and reliant on the ruthless warriors who serve him -- but he has his own core of steel, even when he appears at his most unworldly.

I won't dwell too much on the unfolding plot, other than to say that it's a good rather than a great read; I'd have to admit that it took me a long time to find any warmth at all for the hero of the narrative. On the plus side for the wargamer, there are no lack of combats of all sizes and kinds ó ship-borne raids, skirmishes, surprise attacks and battles both great and small -- which could form the basis for a campaign on the tabletop. As 'The Pale Horseman' is a few years old now, there are any number of second-hand copies on Amazon for the nominal price of £0.01 + postage, so it certainly won't break the bank.

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