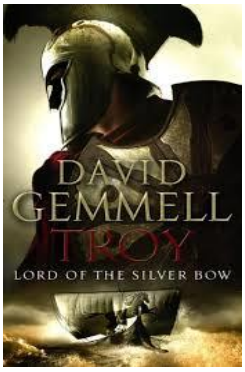
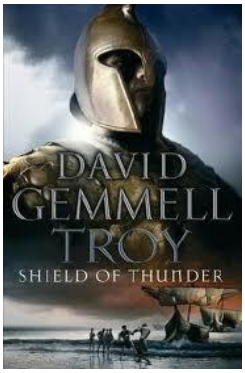
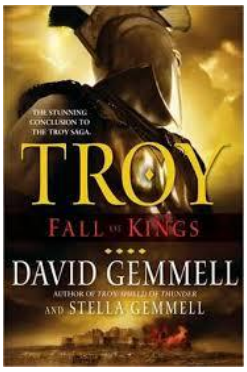
David Gemmell's Troy trilogy
Review by Jonathan Aird







David Gemmell's trilogy of books ï ñLord of the Silver Bow,ò ñShield of Thunder,ò and ñFall of Kingsò -- retelling the tale of Troy has been available for some years now (the last book appeared in paperback in 2007). I recently picked up the three volumes second-hand and set to reading them in quick succession ï well, relatively quick as together the three books total around 1800 pages. They are a gripping read, and led to quite a few late nights engrossed in the expanding story. Over the three volumes, David Gemmell spun a complex tale of the time of heroes and the build-up to, and prosecution of, the Greek city statesô war with Troy. Sadly, the author died before the third volume was complete, but his wife Stella Gemmell finished the book from his notes in a seamless manner.

ñLord of the Silver Bowò is a story of kings and city states in an uneasy peace. Everywhere, there is the threat of war as Agamemnon, the king of Mykene, looks with covetous eyes on the golden city of Troy, ruled by the priapic King Priam. Heroes abound -- there is Odysseus ñthe man with no enemiesò (although he has a darker past as ñThe Sacker of Citiesò), Helikaon The Burner, elder brother to Diomedes, the child king of Dardania. The characters are well developed and complex, and although one is clearly meant to ally with Heliakon and Odysseus, both men can be repugnantly violent -- it is a hard and tough age and the good are distinguishable from the bad only by the very occasional act of kindness and a slight tendency to agonise over their more heinous deeds. It is, however, a book that rips along at a great pace, creating a wholly believable world for these legendary names to move through. The great heroes are at once very mortal and also, in some cases, already deemed by those about them to be semi-divine -- Hektor and Achilles being preeminent amongst the latter. It is a world haunted by superstitious fear and also a world which is starting to move toward a scientific approach. There are several occasions when thought and observation are shown to be superior to sacrifice and magic. This is balanced though with as many occasions when what can only be deemed as pure magic is shown to correctly describe the world -- it is this balance which creates a dynamic atmosphere in the story -- is this person a true prophet or a fake ? Was that action a miracle or a trick?

The second volume is far more concerned with the common man. Although there are plenty of cameos for the nobility and the recognised heroes, it's mostly the story of Kalliades and Banokles, two Mykenen soldiers who have been outlawed by Agamemnon and have taken service in Troy. This leads to my first slight niggle with Gemmell's writing -- he allows his more earthy characters to swear continually, but attempts to avoid offence by using the Cockney epithet "cowson" (roughly equivalent to "bastard"). Itôs a word previously most

famously used by the Rockney group Chas'n'Dave in their song "Gercha" (it'll be on Youtube if you really want to know!). So every time the word is used I mentally picture a portly middle-aged south Londoner, rather than a Greek warrior of the heroic-age! I've also never been overly convinced that it's necessary to report every occasion of swearing a trooper might make: in theory it's meant to be more authentic, but it isn't really -- unless the author also record's every belch or visit to the ablutions. However, this is a minor stylistic issue and doubtless many like to see it.

The final volume, ñFall of Kings,ò is concerned with the dramatic, cataclysmic events which conclude the Trojan wars, and especially with the siege of Troy. Itôs very well-conceived as, although the final end of the story is well known, there is enough ñwiggle-roomò in Gemmellôs telling to allow for the unexpected to occur. It draws the two strands of the previous books together, neatly closing off everyoneôs story be they the highest or the lowest.

It can be said that the characters in David Gemmel's trilogy are in the process of myth making -- one of the pleasures of the narrative is seeing how the well-known myths are constructed from, often, very minor events. Well-known characters constantly appear -- some remain surprisingly minor whilst others take on greater importance. A constant amongst the heroes and great warriors is their ruthlessness: even those the author is steering the reader towards seeing as noble or particularly heroic are, fundamentally, repugnant, psychopathic killers. One may be more cultured than another, with an appreciation of the arts or sciences or being capable of a noble courtly love -- but given the right circumstances or provocation then they are as likely to nail someone to a gateway, slaughter a household or commit some similar atrocity. Even the spinner of tales, Odysseus king of Ithika, perhaps the most sympathetic male character of the novels, only achieves this status by having completed the majority of his slaughtering some twenty years before the story is set. This is, of course, very credible but it does mean that the reader is left with a choice of bloody-handed murderers to choose to favour.

There is a lot of fighting across these three books, not surprisingly the tempo increases as the series progresses, culminating in the near constant warfare of the siege of Troy. Again, it is a matter of taste, naturally, but the detailed descriptions do tend to pall after a while. There is a paucity of the vocabulary of violence -- after a battle extending across two or three pages, one wonders just how many more times there will be a ñlightning blowò or someone will be ñhalf decapitatedò or that most vital of combat techniques, the head butt causing a broken nose, will occur. As I say itôs a matter of taste, but for myself these sections came to drag by the third book -- which is possibly a fault of reading them one directly after another.

So much more important are the passages which draw out charactersô stories -- Priamôs relationships with his many sons, the central love story of Andromache, the twisted skeins of Helikaonôs life story are all splendidly wrought. Of especial note is Kassandra, one of the greatest creations of all story telling -- the prophetess who is always right and always ignored. David Gemmell takes great delight in playing with the reader with this intriguing aspect, to the extent that the tension created by Kassandraôs often painfully clear warnings being wilfully ignored becomes a highlight of the storytelling.

Across all three volumes, there are more than enough battles on land and at sea, with constant raids and the pressure from the external empires of Egypt and the Hittites adding a further twist to the mix. These are all grist to the scenario writer when the books are viewed with the wargamerôs eye -- but really these are books that should be read for themselves, as David

Gemmell was a fine writer with many wonderful turns of phrase and a beautiful eye for details. They stand as superior examples of the craft of the historical writer, and one of the best retellings of the Trojan Wars I have ever come across.