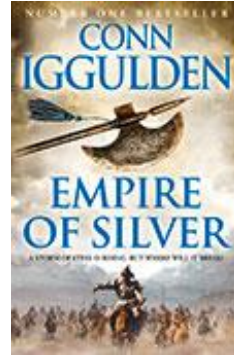
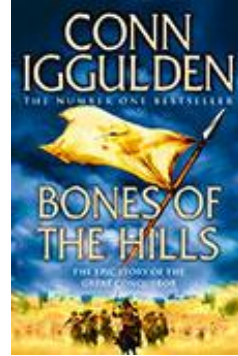
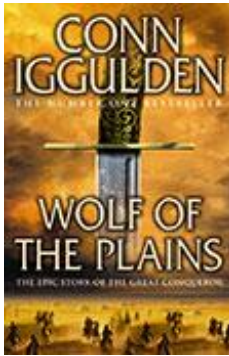


The Conqueror series of historical novels

By Conn Iggulden

Review by Jonathan Aird



I recently picked up the first four volumes of the Conqueror series by Conn Iggulden and have read through them in quick succession -- always a good sign that a series of novels has enough about it to maintain the interest of the reader. The books cover the rise of Genghis Khan, and the foundation of a unified Mongol state and the subsequent rapid acquisition of other lands from the kingdoms and empires which surrounded the Mongol homeland. It's a dizzying saga made all the more amazing for being true. I'll try to avoid any spoilers as there are a number of twists and turns that have surprising outcomes -- well, surprising unless the reader is already a student of the Mongol Hordes. The books do have some maps and family trees included in them at the front of the book -- I'd have preferred to have these hidden at the back in the historical notes which accompany each volume, as they do reveal a few of the plot twists (especially when the family tree indicates that someone is clearly going to die early on!).

The first book -- "Wolf of the Plains" -- is concerned with the early life of the boy who will eventually become Genghis, and it paints a vivid picture of the struggle for life of the small family groupings that were the norm at this point in Mongol history. Small tribes are forever at the mercy of Tartar raiders or even larger Mongol tribes -- and if any tribe looks to be becoming dominant then the representatives of the Chin Empire bribe others to attack them in order to keep both the Mongols and the Tartars weak through continual self-destructive warfare. There are many small skirmishes and minor battles described in this book which are highly suitable for wargaming. Importantly, the characters of Genghis and his brothers are well drawn as they vie for their father's attention as the khan of their tribe -- The Wolves. It's a colourful story that is well told and with twists aplenty it keeps the reader turning the page. A great start to the series, although there are already hints of what is to come in the sometimes seemingly endless paragraphs of "riding about a bit and then riding back to where you started from after you get to wherever it was you were going." This, and comments on archery and horses, the eating of lamb and the chewing of milk curds are recurring themes.

The second chronicle -- "Lords of the Bow" -- sees Genghis now a great leader looking to take revenge on the Chin Empire for their long meddling in the lives of his people. It also develops on the rivalries between his brothers and on how they will fit in with this new world their great brother has created. And it is also the first part of the story of the rivalries between the great Khan's sons, both keen to be the favoured one who will be named as eventual heir. There are still sieges and battles aplenty, and a couple of side adventures which could either be adapted for Role Playing Games or be played as a series of linked skirmishes. Much is made of the quality of the men that Genghis leads, as well as of their horses and bows -- we're clearly supposed to forget about the English longbow men as the premier archers of history! There is a long sub-plot involving Genghis' younger brother -- Temuge -- and his attempts to become a shaman and wield magical power.

Throughout, Conn Iggulden does a good job of keeping us interested in what Genghis wants -- he is quite openly revealed to be an unrestrained psychopath quite happy to lay siege to a city and then kill all of the inhabitants when it finally falls to him. And yet the reader cares about whether he succeeds.

The third part of the saga -- "Bones of the Hills" -- sees Genghis attempt to impose his will on Iran after one of his parties of envoys (or, as the Iranians probably correctly thought it, parties of spies!) to the region are killed out of hand. This time as well as field armies and sieges he has to face the deadly cult of assassins. There is more on the growing rivalry between his two elder sons. And Genghis grows older, his armies grow bigger and his chief general, Tsubodai, is ever more successful. It is, by the way, clearly Conn Iggulden's intention to make Tsubodai better known in the West, as he obviously rates him as one of the greatest strategists of the ancient world and to a large part responsible for the Great Khan's continued success in warfare. In a lot of ways, this is very similar novel to the previous book, except that the Chin Emperor is replaced by the Iranian Shah as the chief --baddy.

The fourth volume -- "Empire of Silver" -- sees things move ever further into political intrigue. Genghis is dead, but the brothers of the great Khan are still alive but aging. Several of Genghis' children are competing outright for the title of Khan and risking civil war to do it. To further complicate matters, there are a number of the Great Khan's grandsons who are approaching adulthood and must in some way be accommodated within the power struggles of the ruling family. I could almost have wished the series had ended with the death of Genghis as I personally found this part of the saga quite dull -- as the empire grows it acquires the trappings of civilisation that it had spurned in previous times. It needs spies, communications, administrators, cities and palaces -- and whilst the armies are still out conquering new lands to the far north, there is less room to follow them within the book, and even on the march the majority of the narrative relates to the power struggles between the old men of the Mongol nation -- Genghis' brothers and his great general Tsubodai -- and the young bloods that are Genghis' grandchildren, now raised as generals in their own rights.

Simply because there are so many factions and important characters in "Empire of Silver" there is less room to really develop each of the new names as real personalities. In "Wolf of the Plains," a lot of time was spent in the company of the band of brothers and their well-

defined characters were carried forward into the subsequent books. However, with each new generation an additional three or four characters comes into each family and many of these new faces remain sketchy or even somewhat generic. Fortunately, once a critical event has passed and one branch of the family is in the ascendency there is then space for Conn Iggulden to relate the clash of the Mongol armies with the Christian knights of Hungary which makes for an excellent finale.

Overall though, this is a well written, well researched and (mostly) believable telling of the history of the great Mongol Empire. The author does take a bit of a free hand with history where it suits him – changing the timings of events, for example, or making one more powerful and significant character to represent what historically was actually two people. These changes are explained in the notes at the end of the books and so are not too unreasonable in the service of a more exciting story. For the wargamer, the series has the added bonus of battles and sieges which just cry out for tabletop recreations. There is a fifth volume – ‘Conqueror’ – which came out in paperback towards the end of 2012. I think I’ll probably be getting that as well as the next phase of the dynasty has now been resolved which should mean we’ll be back on track with a greater focus on the endless wars and battles. There has been a very clear hint that the Sung Empire, which has so far avoided the attention of the Mongol Hordes, may have annoyed the Khans enough for them to want to do something about it -- I’m deliberately not reading up elsewhere on the history so that I cannot spoil the next part of the story for myself!