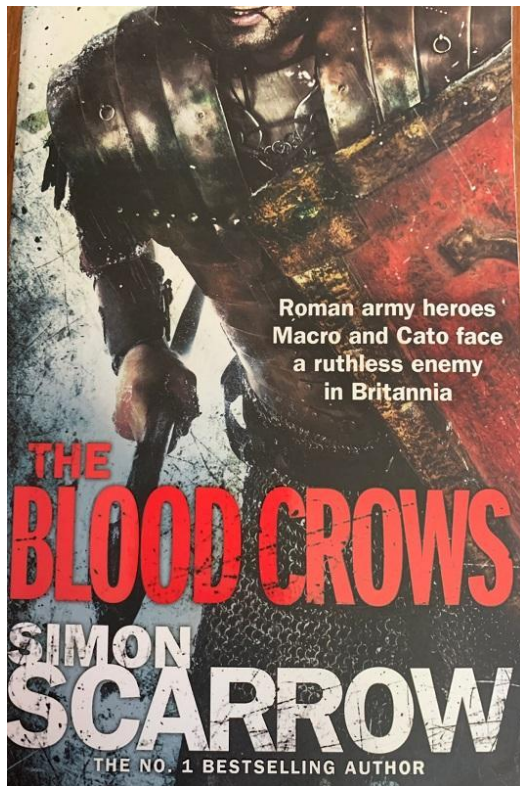


The Blood Crows - Simon Scarrow

Review by Jonathan Aird



The twelfth instalment of the Macro and Cato saga sees our heroes seemingly leaving their lives as roving spies and trouble shooters for the Roman Empire and going back to the Roman Army proper, and also going back to the not-quite-yet-settled colony of Britannia where the story all began in *Under The Eagle* (which came out in 2000!).

The Blood Crows is the first volume of a linked trilogy set against the backdrop of the campaigns to defeat Caractacus. From their previous exploits the pair have been promoted. Cato is now a Prefect and outranks senior Centurion Macro which leads to some interesting interchanges as the pair adapt to the reversal of their roles in the military hierarchy - Cato is still young enough that it is something of a wrench to start correcting Macro on occasion, and to adapt himself from looking at him almost as a father figure to being more of a friend who is closer than a brother.

On arrival in Britannia they first settle Macro's mother in Londinium - an activity which takes up some time and then disappears from the narrative, presumably her new life as a tavern proprietor will impact the next two books - and then head off to their new roles, still deployed together to the furthest Western borders of Roman occupied territory in what we would now call the Welsh borders. Cato has been given command of an Auxiliary cavalry Cohort with a fearsome reputation, and Macro is in charge of the two Cohorts of Legionaries who are occupying the same outlying fort. Naturally they soon find themselves surrounded by enemies, both the Britons outside the fort and the unruly Auxiliary cavalry leader who Cato now outranks and has been used to doing things his way, whatever the Roman Army rulebook and the orders from the Governor of Britannia might say. There is just a hint of *Heart Of Darkness* (or, if you prefer, *Apocalypse Now*) about this part of the plot.

I'd had great hopes for *The Blood Crows*. I'd preferred the earlier instalments in the series when Macro and Cato had been participating in the military campaigns of an earlier Emperor over the later "roving troubleshooters" stories, so it was good to see them return to the place where it all started. There is, of course, no real going back and old friendships are put under strain as the campaign to finally pacify Britannia gets under way. And there is also no escaping the past - the shadowy enemies the pair had acquired as they foiled plots in previous novels come back to haunt them along the way, as do the Druids who once more are trying to put some revolutionary zeal into the tribes of the Britons. And naturally there is a lot of combat, with skirmishes, battles and a siege. Without the historical framework of someone setting their historical novel in, say, the Napoleonic Wars, the battles and sieges in these books can begin to blur into each other - didn't Cato get stuck in an isolated fort under siege by barbarians before?

I did at first wonder if it was just me not properly connecting with the story, but the sense of reused scenes is rather unfortunately enhanced by Simon Scarrow's choice of doughty Barbarian champions. In the battles making up the large part of the second half of the novel Macro and Cato are faced by not one, not two, but three giants of men wielding double handed axes who they then fight with blow by blow detail. It's not the same foe three times as (spoiler alert!) they kill them one after another. By the time the third one showed up I was thinking that the author was just padding the book out.

There's also a running narrative on the acceptability - or otherwise - of cruel and abusive treatment and torture particularly when inflicted by the military. Early on Macro and Cato are shocked by a native ritual that involves a blood sacrifice - seemingly unaware that similar rituals occur within their own religion, and perhaps also surprisingly unaware of what goes on in the Gladiatorial arena. They are seemingly disapproving of overly harsh treatment of enemies - except when they are meting out the torture themselves. These scenes of shock and outrage followed, later on, by doing much the same thing themselves, don't really work. The ever pragmatic Macro one can imagine justifying it all on the basis of "if I'm doing it then it must be necessary and therefore is ok" but the contemplative Cato would surely be more alive to the contradiction, but, whilst the reader might, they never seem to really go back and question their previous stance in the light of what they find themselves doing.

Simon Scarrow does, however, provide the wargamer with a good amount of inspiration - there are single combats that could be recreated as heroic skirmishes, there are patrols that encounter enemy forces unexpectedly, there's a huge siege and a pitched battle both of which include plenty of incidents that could be extracted to make for a smaller game. *The Blood Crows* is also a reasonable read, formulaic and not particularly full of surprising incidents - there aren't many, if any, "I didn't see that coming" moments - but entertaining nonetheless.

Moderately recommended.

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