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## A Forgotten Children's Fantasy: Philip Woodruff's *The Sword of Northumbria*

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Gives a brief biographical sketch of the author and describes his historical fantasy novel. Illustrations.

### Additional Keywords

Woodruff, Philip—Biography; Woodruff, Philip. *The Sword of Northumbria*

# THE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN'S FANTASY

## Philip Woodruff's *The Sword of Northumbria*

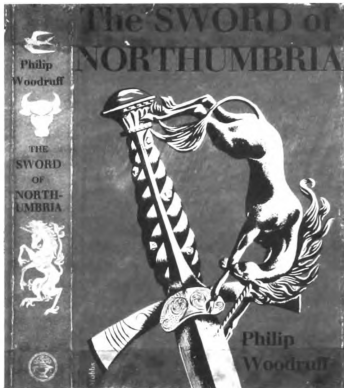
WILLIAM A.S. SARJEANT

**D**uring the 1970's, the Newcastle Publishing Company of California made available to contemporary readers a series of what were styled "Forgotten Fantasy Classics." These were produced as large-format quality paperbacks with new and attractive cover paintings and, in some instances, new introductions. They included little-known works by well-known writers like Lord Dunsany, William Morris and Sir Henry Rider Haggard, together with titles by such unjustly neglected authors as Leslie Barringer and Kenneth Morris. All were worth reading and some truly memorable; they are justly becoming collector's items.

Yet such a series could not hope to be comprehensive; moreover, it concentrated on works long out of print and out of copyright. One writer who did not figure was Philip Woodruff. It is to his single contribution to our genre that I propose to dedicate this paper.

"Philip Woodruff" is the pseudonym adopted for his fictional writings by an Englishman, Philip Mason. He was born in Finchley, London on 19th March, 1906. However, he grew up in Derbyshire and was sent to school in Sedburgh, high in the Pennines on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire; thus he acquired a lasting love for hill country. After taking his degree at Balliol College, Oxford, Mr. Mason had a long and distinguished career with the Indian Civil Service; this began in 1928 and did not end until just before that country's independence in 1947. He was for a while Deputy Commissioner of Garhwal (1936-1939), an especially happy time among some of India's highest mountains and made more so by his marriage. Subsequently he held a series of appointments with the Defence and War Departments, serving as conference secretary of the South-East Asia Command (1942-1944) and eventually as joint Secretary of the War Department (1944-1947). As India was nearing independence, he served for a few months as tutor to the two sons of the Nizam of Hyderabad, before returning to England and a farm in Dorset.

This long service garnered him many honors, including the Order of the British Empire (1942) and the Companionship of the Indian Empire (1945). Later he was to write extensively under his own name on history, politics and literature, his books having such titles as *The Birth of a Dilemma: The Conquest and Settlement of Rhodesia* (1958); *Kipling: the Glass, the Shadow and the Fire* (1976); and *The Men Who Ruled India* (1985). In particular he became concerned about race relations, writing or editing a series of books on this theme and serving as Director of the Institute of Race Relations in London from 1958 to 1969. He wrote



*The Sword* (dustjacket of *The Sword of Northumbria*, 1948). also an autobiography, *A Shaft of Sunlight* (1978). All in all, his career was one of high achievement, in both personal and social terms.

It was also a career which afforded little opportunity for leisure; yet, during it, Mr. Mason found time to write quite an array of excellent novels and short stories. For these and for two of his early works on India, he adopted as pseudonym his mother's maiden surname, becoming 'Philip Woodruff'. Several of these novels and stories were set in the India he knew so well; indeed, *Call the Next Witness* (1945) and *The Wild Sweet Witch* (1947) are both based upon his own experiences, respectively in Bareilly (United Provinces) and in Garhwal. However, their themes ranged widely. Most were intended for an adult readership, but one at least was written for children: *The Sword of Northumbria* (1948).

We learn from the 'Foreword' that the story was first told to Susan Janie. She was the elder of Mr. Mason's two daughters, a child attractive enough to be known in India as 'Sundari Devi', the beautiful goddess. Yet he informs us also that:

...part of it belongs to older friends and a game we used to play long ago, when 'the world-wide air was



Philip Mason (Philip Woodruff) at work in camp in India.  
From *A Shaft of Sunlight*, 1978.

azure, and all the brooks ran gold.' So I end the story as I began it by drinking the health of KENNETH, surnamed The Magnificent, King of Wessex  
WALTER, King of Mercia  
JAMES, King of Valentia  
MORRIS, King of Kent and later of Wessex... (p. 13)

His autobiography *A Shaft of Sunlight* (1978, p. 54-55) tells us something of this game. It was played during term-time at the University of Oxford with friends who were fellow students at Balliol College. (Mr. Mason has told me, *in litt.*, that "In our day, we did most of our qwork in the vacations. None of us in those far-off times spent the vacations earning money for his fees.") This was one of the several games with which his fellow students and he entertained themselves. Most were shortlived enthusiasms, but:

...The Heptarchy on the other hand lived much longer. It supposed a Britain divided into seven kingdoms, in a mythical period based loosely on Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Britain. But you were permitted, in this game, to draw on any source you liked; the Heptarch of Wessex and Lyonesse used for his public documents a stately prose from the early seventeenth century; James Fergusson of Valentia — that is Lowland Scotland, the Roman province — expressed himself in a lawyer's Lallans, full of 'quhilks' and 'quherefores'.

The game had three main departments — war, diplomacy and ceremony. If one of the Heptarchs felt it was time, he might summon a meeting and state a grievance against a brother Heptarch. The matter might be settled amicably by bargaining but it might lead to war, some-

times after two or three evenings of diplomacy. War again might take several evenings; it was played on a huge map of England and Scotland with flags on pins. When I succeeded Robert Birley as Heptarch of Northumbria, my kingdom was in rather a poor position; I suspect that he had only given half his attention to the last War. Wales held Cheshire and Lancashire, while a previous King of Valentia had encroached so far down the Cumbrian coast that I had no outlet to the western sea. I felt I owed it to my people to restore the ancient glory and freedom of Northumbria so I made secret treaties with Mercia and Kent and assumed the title of Prince of Strathclyde, which I knew James Fergusson of Valentia would regard as a *casus belli*. It was a very glorious war and I took two outlets to the sea, leaving a Valentian enclave south of Carlisle ripe for later acquisition.

"Morris of Kent" was his friend Morris Whitehouse, "Walter of Mercia" was Walter Oakeshott and "Kenneth the Magnificent" was Kenneth Johnson. Appropriately, the 'Foreword' is signed 'NORTHOMBRIE'.

The story which Philip Woodruff based upon memories of this game likewise supposes a Great Britain divided into seven kingdoms. However, the 'kings' who were his fellow players gain no mention in the story; nor do any kings of whom we have historic record. As for the geographic circumstances, they differ from those that had any past reality. Were Anglesey and Man ever colonies of Wessex? Surely not; the geography is a historical fantasy, with touches of reality given only by the use of present and past place-names.

No ambitious King of Wales ever did beguile a King of Mercia into aiding him in conquering Northumbria; yet that event is the prelude to the story and was the intended prelude to a larger conquest that would bring all of England under Welsh rule.

Gethryn, King of Wales, is indeed this tale's greatest villain. As such, he is eminently satisfactory:

...a man of medium height, immensely broad of shoulder and long of arm. The dark hair grew low on his forehead and his lower lip stood out before his upper. There was no beard on his face and his lean jaw was like a wolf's. He wore the purple surcoat of Wales, and above the golden harp the personal sign of his house, a golden scorpion, the claws sharp to grip, the tail curved to sting. It was the sign in the stars under which his father had been born, that nameless man who had usurped the throne; he had had no other sign to take. (p. 73)

Gethryn's own casual cruelty is well exemplified by the following paragraph:

The king began to speak again but as he did so a hound that lay by his side yelped in its sleep, its feet hurrying jerkily as it hunted in a dream. The yelping drowned the king's words. Deliberately, not in anger, he drew from his belt a bright steel dagger with a handle of jet, leaned forward and thrust the blade into

the hound's heart. The creature started in its sleep and a little blood ran from its mouth. Its body was still twitching when the king withdrew his dagger and went on speaking. (p. 108)

The Mercian-Welsh conquest of Northumbria had a bloody sequel in the treacherous murder of the Northumbrian nobles, including the king (p. 29). Yet, almost at the very hour of the king's murder, a son had been born to his queen. Through the courage of a knight who had chanced to evade that treachery, the baby was borne away to safety. It is that boy, now approaching manhood, who is the hero of this story.

Edward has been reared on a farm by foster-parents and, when we meet him first, he is keeping watch over the farmer's sheep. Though the special tuition received during childhood has made him conscious that he is no mere farm-boy, he is quite unaware that he is heir to the Northumbrian throne. When Leofric, the rightful Earl of York, comes to find him, he does not tell the boy of his rank. Instead, the earl sets Edward a test in strategy and courage, only revealing the truth to him after Edward has shown his worthiness. When Edward asks why, Leofric answers:

I wanted to know if you were worth making king. If you had been weak, a coward, if you had lost your head, if you had not been able to make a plan and stick to it, I would have gone away and left you to be a farme. We shall lose men's lives in what we are going to do. It would not be worth the loss unless in the end we were going to have a king who was a man. You are a man. We will make you king. (p. 40)

Accordingly, Leofric gives Edward the sword that was his father's, the sword of Northumbria. With the help of other noble survivors from Gethryn's treachery — in particular the saintly Bishop Simon of Durham, tough old Peter of Wensleydale and hot-headed and impetuous Godfrey of Redesdale — a patriot army is gathered and trained. The Northumbrians gain a series of minor victories, then inflict a major defeat upon the Mercians and Welsh at Thrush Hag. As for Edward, he demonstrates his bravery amply.

However, the Northumbrians have been warned by a prophecy of trouble ahead. At the battle of Hebblethwaite Ghyll, they suffer a calamitous defeat. The survivors contrive to escape through a cave, only because some of them have been left behind to fight as rearguard and, inevitably, to die.

In this episode, Edward shows his kingly qualities in a fashion unusual in children's stories. After speaking inspiringly to his soldiers of their land and his hopes, he tells them bluntly:

...I want a score of men to hold the gorge while the rest march away. For them, there will be no charge at the end, no victory; they will get no soft bed to sleep in, no feasting in hall. They will not go back to their homes. They will stay here till their duty is done and the others are clear. They will have no reward but the



"Sundari Devi" (Susan Janie Mason).  
(From *a Shaft of Sunlight*, 1978).

song Robin will make of their deeds. Who offers himself for a long sleep in the gorge of the Ringing Keld Gutter?"

The lines of men swayed forward together, each man seeking to move before his neighbour. (p. 117)

Edward makes his choice, but the deciding is profoundly painful for him.

Edward's face was stiff with the strain of not letting his friends see what he felt. But when he moved away from that bonfire of all their hopes and efforts, he could not help it, his mouth and cheeks were salt and wet. As he followed Mark and Godfrey towards the caves, he heard, faint above the roaring water, the war-cry of the twenty men he had left to die in the cold and dark. (p. 119)

Nor is that an end to his tribulations. Ere Edward and his remaining followers escape, there is a terrifying battle within the caves against Welsh soldiers brought there by a Northumbrian traitor. This serves further to sicken Edward's heart.

So far, then, the story is more historical fiction — albeit set in an imagined history — than fantasy. From that point, however, matters change. In the prophecy, Edward has been warned that he will not regain his throne till he wears on his finger the lost Ring of St. Ardan. In quest for that ring, Edward, Godfrey and a Welsh-speaking Northumbrian named Mark voyage to Ireland. Edward does not



The arms of the Seven kingdoms. (rontis. to *The Sword of Northumbria*, 1948.

enjoy that voyage, for he and his companions are all miserably sea-sick (p. 133). At its end they are shipwrecked and Edward falls seriously ill, recovering only after many weeks in a monastery. Though they resume their delayed quest, Edward has been altered by these experiences:

Even when he seemed quite better, weeks later when he was riding over the mountains of Ireland, as strong as ever in his body, Edward did not quite lose that feeling that he was watching himself from a long way off. It was there all the time, sometimes much more, sometimes much less, but it never quite left him so long as he was in Ireland. And afterwards, when he remembered those days, he found it very hard to make up his mind just what had happened. So much of Ireland seemed a dream that he almost felt that nothing that had happened there was real. (p. 140)

There are indeed particular episodes of dream—the tranquilly playing child on the altar of the stone circle (pp. 154-156) and Edward's meeting with the unicorn and the Princess on All Hallows Eve (pp. 185-188). Yet there are also times of alarming reality; an encounter with murderous robbers in an inn (pp. 168-174); and combats against the champions of Connaught (pp. 189-198), combats that bring two victories and a defeat more useful to them than the victories.

At last, however, Edward comes to the hill of Unsnagh where, he has been told, the Ring of St. Ardan is to be found in the tomb of King Angus. Yet to reach that tomb and claim the Ring, Edward must brave the hill's enchantment and vanquish its defenders. One of the hill's guards tells Edward: "We hear them at night. They are no beasts of earth. He crossed himself and prayed." (p. 201) Edward enters through the gate in the wall surrounding the hill and walks slowly and warily upward. All too soon, he sees some of those beasts:

...He was aware of something skulking, crouching in the bracken, away to his right, something too big to be wholly hidden even by the biggest fronds. The bracken moved and shook, there were more of them, there were many, he could not tell how many, nor could he guess what they might be. He had a moment's glimpse of the ridge of a great back, a curved tail for an instant showing above the green. The bracken was shaking, the whole pack were in it, they were moving through it slowly towards him like hounds drawing a cover. He stood frozen, straining eyes and ears. Then one of them stood up.

He saw a beast taller than the tallest man he had ever seen, so thick in the barrel that the arms of two men would hardly meet round its chest, with forearms like a man's thigh, standing half erect on bandy legs and stooping forward. It was covered from neck to feet in fur, striped and barred in black and gold, orange and white. Forefeet and hind feet alike were armed with claws longer than a man's fingers, daggers curved to rip and tear like knives. Most fearful of all was its head, for the rich fur stopped at the neck and the head was naked, hairless, all of yellow leather, an ape-like skull that was like a man's, but like a man so beastly that he was more ape than man. For there was no forehead, noble with thought, but the head ran back from the brows like a swine's head or an ape's; there was no chin, but a rounded under-jaw below slaverling lips; there was no nose, proud with command, but two deep nostril-pits, flat and black; the eyes, small, restless and savage, moved in deep sockets like a skull's.

Edward knew what it was, for he read in old books of the mantichore that is half man and half tiger. But it seemed to him now that this beast was three parts tiger and one part ape. As he watched, it beat its breast with clenched paws, and then raised above its head clutching hands shining with evil claws, and roared with a cavernous roaring, deep as the caves by the sea; and the rest rose from the bracken, a dozen of them, moaning, grunting and howling. The sound was like the sound of a sty of pigs at feeding-time if the pigs were as big as elephants.

They stood there on the edge of the bracken, half erect, beating their chests and howling, with foam running from their mouths and falling on the fur of their bodies. Slowly they moved, one by one, howling and snarling, each dropping on all fours and running, with its rump in the air, and its tail curved over its back like an ape's, till they had made a half-circle round Edward. Then they began to move towards him, still on all-fours, slowly, but their howling did not cease. (pp. 202-203)

Though Edward contrives to slay some of the mantichores, it is only the arrival of the hill's most formidable guardian that saves him from them:

Coming down the hill, its legs moving ponderously in rhythm, its tail arched in a great double curve above its back, its breath spouting, in jets of vapour so hot that they did not form into steam till they were two yards from its nostrils, there came a dragon. It was a fierce, beautiful creature. From tail to nose, from toe to wing-tip, it was covered with scales, bright metallic scales, that glistened blue or green as the light caught them, but turned to the colour of flames at the tip of its tail, in its ears, and on the horn at the end of its nose. Its legs were like the legs of an eagle, but thicker than a man's body. They were set close together, the four of them, green and blue in the stout thigh, orange below where the great feet like a bird's feet clutched the ground, the claws steely-blue.

The teeth were white and shining in the long mouth, like a crocodile's mouth save for a horn on the tip of the nose that curved back and then forward like the prow of a Viking's ship. Clear ruby-red were the eyes, and behind them the brow curved up to a ridge of steely bone. The ears were upright, but they curved back and then forward like the tail of a scorpion. The great ribbed wings were like a bat's wings, bluish-black and leathery.

The dragon was coming down the hill, angry because it had been disturbed by the howling of the mantichores. Its breast was puffed out with anger, its tail was raised above its back, its breath came in force puffs, its legs thrust its great body along. (pp. 206-207)

Edward slays the dragon also, yet that act gives him no pleasure:

...Slowly it turned, but away from the hurt in its left side. Slowly it turned and went up the hill, while the great wings drooped like wet black leather, the great tail sagged and fell. Blood poured from the wound, glowing red-hot like molten steel when it left that cavernous side, cooling, dulling from the fierceness of red embers to the grey, the black, of ashes. Slowly it went up the hill, back to its home, slowly and more slowly, and as it went the bright beauty of green and blue and silver dulled in its scales to lead. A tree in its way seemed to its failing sight a foe, and for the space of five breaths colour came again to its scales and fire to its nostrils as it rent the tree with claws and teeth and swung its flail-like tail in one last tremendous blow that tore it from the ground like a radish; but that was all. A few last slow steps and it stood still, dulling, dulling, till the eagle haunches failed and it sank on the ground, dull, dull, dull and dead.

Edward stood and watched it die. It would have killed him if he had not killed it, yet he felt sad when he saw it die because it had been beautiful and now it was not... (p. 213)

So Edward gains the Ring of St. Ardan. The subsequent adventures of Edward and his companions in Ireland include a terrifying pursuit by bloodhounds, evaded only through Godfrey's courage and by chance. At last they



HE DROVE HIS SWORD INTO ITS THROAT

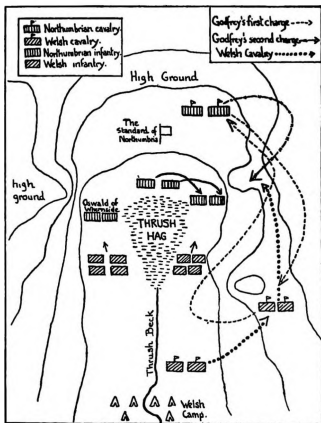
Edward battles a mantichore.

(Drawing by E.M. Mason: from *The Sword of Northumbria*, 1948.)

return to Northumbria. Then, with his people rallying to him, Edward wins a decisive battle against the Mercians and Welsh amid the snows of Netherdale. Afterwards King Guthryrn is slain, not by Edward, but nevertheless in a satisfactory fashion — the fashion in which he had himself, in cruel wrath, contrived the slaying of his own chief adviser (pp. 245-246). As the story ends, Edward is wondering anxiously what to say when first he meets his mother, a mother he has never known.

There is much else in this fine tale of adventure. There is even romance, for King Edward intends to return to Ireland and seek the hand of the dark-haired Princess Maelmaire, encountered in both reality and dream. However, following the conventions of the time of its publication, their love plays no large part in the story.

The whole book is written in a direct and lively style, with much reported speech and an avoidance of archaisms; nor is it overburdened with imagery. There are many songs, for the Northumbrians sing often and gladly. Ancient carols of Christmas are among these, but other songs were composed to suit the tale. All in all, *The Sword of Northumbria* can be recommended to readers of any age, from the earliest teens — the age at which I was fortunate first to read it — and upwards.



Plan of the Battle of Netherdale.  
(From *The Sword of Northumbria*, 1948.

Yes of course, the knowledgeable reader of fantasy will find comparisons with other and better-known works. The fashion in which the dragon was slain finds its parallel in *The Hobbit* (1937). However, though the ring stolen by Gollum is important in Tolkien's story, it was a chance find by Bilbo, not the object of a quest as was the Ring of St. Ardan. Moreover, 'Philip Woodruff' had neither read or even heard of *The Hobbit*. He was still resident in India — specifically in Hyderabad (Mason, 1978, p. 210) — when he wrote *The Sword of Northumbria* and Tolkien's story, though already attaining critical attention in Britain, had not yet been recognized as the masterpiece it is.

Edward's reaction to the dragon's death echoes, in some measure, the emotions of the Orkney children in T.H. White's *The Witch in the Wood* (1940) after they had slain the unicorn; but Edward's act is bold, not treacherous. Nor is White among the many authors to whom, in his autobiography, 'Philip Woodruff' pays tribute. The songs and the overtly Christian elements might seem like echoes from William Morris; but then, Morris was himself echoing the romances of the Middle Ages that he admired so much.

In a letter of 29th September, 1993, Mr. Mason tells me that "there were many influences" upon his fashioning of the story; but not the ones I have discussed. Among them, he notes, were E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*; the

"Jurgen books" of James Branch Cabell; and, for the Irish passages, James Stephens' *The Crock of Gold*. In addition, as his children noted, particular incidents echoed Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* and Charles Kingsley's *Hereward The Wake*. However, the weave of this story is very much his own and any echoes from those works are not apparent to the reader.

As for the battles in *The Sword of Northumbria* — yes, of course, they fall within the long tradition of tales of war that extend back to the time of Froissart and beyond; but, for all that, they are original and gripping. 'Woodruff' reports that Field-Marshal Lord Wavell, when sent a copy, was sufficiently impressed that he "...replied with a staff-college commentary" on the tactical strategies involved.

Indeed, *The Sword of Northumbria* is a work of great charm and originality. Beyond doubt it deserves to be brought back into print, to be enjoyed by present and future generations.

**Acknowledgements**

I am very much indebted to Mr. Philip Mason ("Philip Woodruff"), not only for his permission to reproduce illustrations and quotations from *The Sword of Northumbria*, but also for his courteous reading of, and kind comments upon, an earlier manuscript of this paper. These have enabled me to make many important corrections and revisions.

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