

THE WALKING DEAD **EXCLUSIVE!** THE GOVERNOR INTERVIEWED



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#232

EXCLUSIVE REPORT!

GAME *of* THRONES

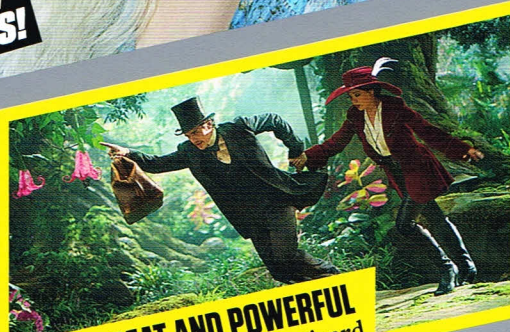
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FEATURING:



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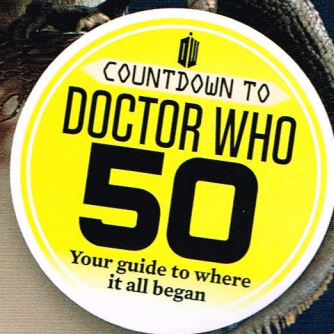
OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL
Sam Raimi's off to see the Wizard



HANSEL & GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS
Gemma Arterton goes into the woods

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BLACK MIRROR • BEING HUMAN • CAPTAIN BRITAIN
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TIME MACHINE

THE STORY BEHIND THE SF AND FANTASY OF YESTERYEAR

1976

CAPTAIN BRITAIN

He was America's British answer to Captain America. Confused? Sean Egan explains all

RARELY CAN A COMICS CHARACTER HAVE experienced such a turnaround in credibility as Captain Britain.

Even though reinvention and rejuvenation of superheroes is now commonplace, so unprecedented has his journey been from ridiculous to sublime that the *Captain Britain* omnibus released as a 700-page, hundred-dollar hardback in 2009 would literally have been a laughable notion back in 1976 when he made his entrance before an underwhelmed public.

In the mid-1970s, Marvel Comics' UK operation was still churning out the diet of American reprints that had been its *modus operandi* since its formation in 1972. When it finally decided to originate material, it did not do things by halves. Writer Chris Claremont recalls talk of a spearhead for grand plans, namely, "Let's see if we can come up with an iconic UK hero that we can introduce in Britain and use it as a foundation for perhaps a larger cluster of characters that could then be reintroduced over here."

With no editorial structure in place in the UK, Claremont admits of the project, "It was very much a US-centric production." However, Marvel did at least try to deploy people halfway familiar with British culture. Herb Trimpe was chosen as penciller because he happened to be living in the UK, while Claremont got the gig based on the fact that before his family relocated stateside he was brought up in North-West London and "tended to bounce home two or three times a year".

Marvel supremo Stan Lee sat down with Claremont to devise



Our Cap could be just as violent as an American hero...



OUR AND NICK FURY, AGENT OF S.H.I.E.L.D.!

COLOUR!

AND GREATEST-SUPERHERO OF ALL!

CAPTAIN
BRITAIN

10P

YOU
DEFEATED
ME LAST
TIME
HURRICANE!

NOW
IT'S MY
TURN!

CAPTAIN
BRITAIN!

LONG,
JUM!
TIME
FINISH
OFF!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN



"We were tying it into mythology, a twist on the Merlin legend"

the figure intended to be a bookend of Captain America while Trimpe executed design sketches. "Then the struggle back and forth was, 'Do we have him with a costume that fully covers his head a la 'Cap'?' recalls Claremont. "Because of

the era, they went with the cut-off hood, which always struck me as impractical because if you try wearing anything like that, your hair just goes crazy." He adds, "Initially, I was thinking of having him as younger. Stan was thinking of him more in terms of Don Blake, hence the scene in the first issue where's he's walking around the nuclear centre smoking a pipe." The latter was just one example of a creaking, American idea of Britishness about which many would complain, but Claremont reasons, "Cigarettes were just flat out and cigars weren't right."

MERLIN MADE MODERN

Origin-wise, Claremont says, "We were tying it into the whole idea of traditional British mythology, in this case going for a twist on the Merlin legend." University undergraduate Brian Braddock is working at the Darkmoor Research Centre (yes, they went to the trouble of not spelling it "center") when the place is overrun by villains. Braddock comes off his motorbike in the pursuit that follows but he is saved from seemingly inevitable death by the giant ghostly hovering form of Merlin (although not named as such) and a lady companion. In an inversion of legend, Merlin gives the hero the choice between a sword in a stone and an amulet. He chooses the latter and is transformed ("This costume, appearing out of nowhere - fitting me as if it's tailor-made - and my body within the costume. I feel... bigger, faster, stronger - literally bursting with power. But how - and why!?!"). His costume came equipped with a red, white and blue retractable staff to beat off the baddies. Explains Claremont, "We were trying to find equivalent icons of Thor's hammer, Cap's shield. Since it was a book intended for younger audiences we could not go with a sword, although traditionally speaking that would be the most appropriate." The staff later became a mini-sceptre.

Captain Britain made his debut in his own eponymous weekly in October 1976. By now British Marvels had glossy covers and black-and-white interiors but *Captain Britain*, though it had ordinary paper covers and the usual reprints as back-up strips, was two →



thirds glorious colour, which served Captain Britain's uniform – rich red, golden lion rampant on chest, Union Jack mask – well.

Claremont admits that, used to 17-page stories, he found the cramped nature of British comics (in which he had a maximum of eight pages with which to work) “extremely difficult”. He wouldn't have to deal with that problem for long, writing only ten instalments before being fired by editor Larry Lieber (Stan Lee's brother) and replaced by Gary Friedrich. Claremont says: “I approached stories how I approached adversaries, building the mythos. Larry had a more traditional comic book approach.”

Claremont therefore missed out on the inevitable battle/team-up between Captains Britain and America (issue 16; Captain America: “This guy's no slouch!”). “But I did Captain Britain and Spider-Man,” smiles Claremont, “which was a lot more fun.” That story spanned two issues of American monthly *Marvel Team-Up*. When this tale was reprinted in the British weekly, it was as a damp squib ending to the Captain's career. March '77 had seen his title diminished by the dropping of colour. Following issue 39 (July 1977), *Captain Britain* was subsumed into *Super Spider-Man*. The character staggered on for just four more months before disappearing from the pages of that comic.

It may be that the low sales of the title and poor reception to the character were the result of a generation of British kids – weaned on the new antiheroes of UK weeklies like *Battle*, *Action* and *2000 AD* – no longer being interested in traditional, clean-cut heroes like Brian Braddock. Either way, it seemed that the experiment of a British superhero had been a miserable failure.

Captain Britain, though, was not dead. First he made a modest reappearance in 1979 in the pages of *Hulk Comic*, playing a subordinate role to the Black Knight in a series of myth-oriented stories written by Steve Parkhouse and illustrated by John

Stokes. Come 1981, Paul Neary – senior editor at Marvel UK – was proposing that the character be revived again. Interestingly, he tasked rookies with the job, appointing Marvel UK editorial assistant David Thorpe as writer

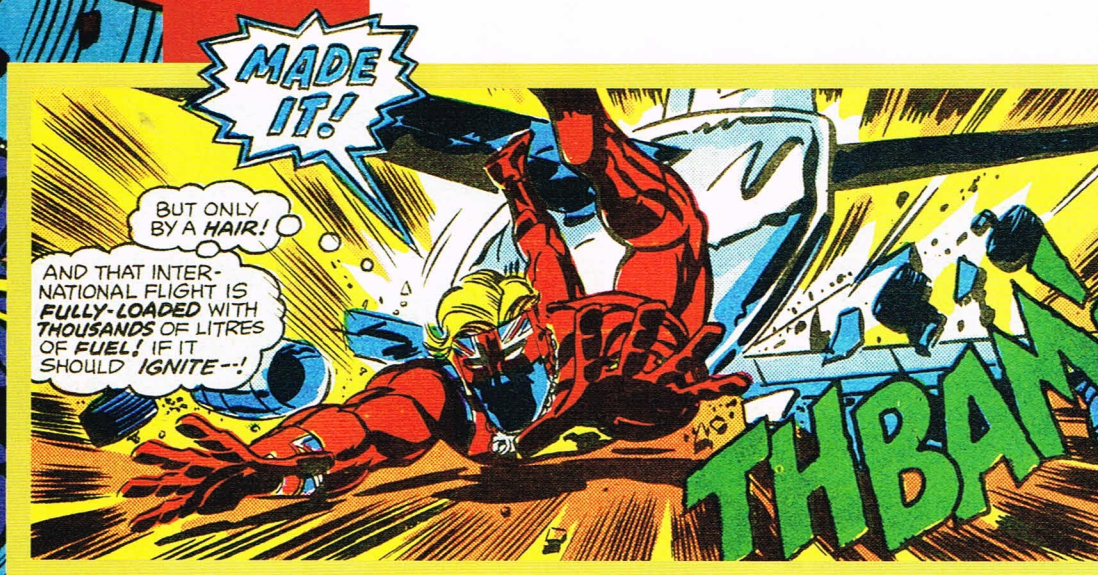
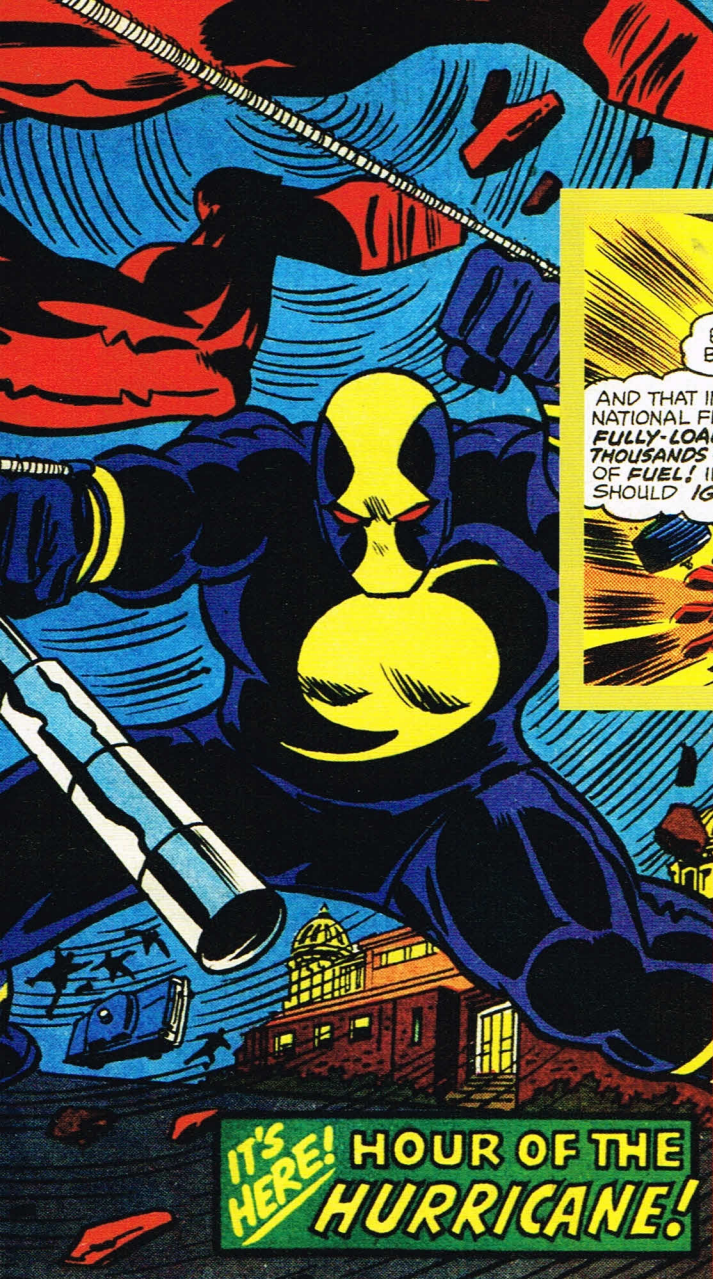
“The Northern Ireland story turned out to be very bland”



and Alan Davis as artist. Recalls Thorpe, “I think it was the case that Paul wanted to start producing home-generated material again and basically Captain Britain was really all there was so he kind of saw it as a flagship... It was a very tentative experiment to see how the fans responded to it.” With the character having been a failure once already, reviving his own title was not an option: his re-entrance in September '81 was merely as a strip in the otherwise reprint-filled monthly *Marvel Super-Heroes*.

BRAND NEW THREADS

Another no-no was bringing him back exactly the same as before. The Captain's costume was completely overhauled. Davis opted for a militaristic look, albeit leaning more toward a dress uniform than battle fatigues, with expanses of white and thigh-high boots. A combination mask and helmet replaced the old open-topped headgear and a Union Flag-style cross superseded the golden lion. The writing, meanwhile, had what Thorpe calls a “different sensibility.” He explains, “The only thing I thought you could do with a character who went around draped in a Union Jack in a multicultural Britain was to seat it in a surreal way, in line with the great tradition of British writers like Lewis Carroll and Jonathan Swift. Humour, high adventure, over-the-top characters and layering on interesting political or ecological themes.”



could Marvel UK be dismissed as the poor relation to America's self-styled House of Ideas. Claremont was one of those duly impressed. "You had one of the finest writers in modern comics history, one of the finest artists in modern comics history and because they were at the start of their game I suspect neither of them had any concept of limitations. So they just threw everything and found a way to make it work. I found the same sense of excitement and wonder I used to have when I was reading *Dan Dare* as a kid and I couldn't wait for the next issue."

Though Moore himself eventually departed in rancour, he had left the Captain a far more nuanced and credible character. So much so that in 1985 Captain Britain was granted his own monthly UK title (though it only ran for a year) and in the noughties he effectively won a monthly US title when he headed the eponymous team in *New Excalibur*. An American Captain Britain book had of course been the long-term objective back in 1976, so who better to write it than Chris Claremont? Having followed with joy his creation's progress, Claremont says, "Alan Davis and I were all set to just go to town."

Though he crops up in miniseries and guest roles to this day, Captain Britain has never quite managed to sustain an ongoing title. However, this itself is partly a function of him developing into a resolutely non-mainstream character – quite a change from those bland '70s beginnings.

"The first chunk of issues were a work in progress but that work in progress started a chain of events," observes Claremont of Captain Britain. "He had a bumpy ride for a long time but it's turned out surprisingly well in the end." **SFX**

By this point in Marvel history, the days when Stan Lee or anyone in America exercised control over Marvel UK were gone: it had been licensed to computer manual publishers the Babani Brothers. However, Thorpe found problems closer to home when his decision to embroil the Captain in sectarianism in Northern Ireland was vetoed. He resigned in disgust.

"I thought I can't come down on one side or the other of the Catholic-Protestant divide," Thorpe explains of his decision to put Captain Britain into the thick of the Troubles. "I'll just be even-handed and I'll essentially say that Captain Britain is aware of what's going on over there." However, both Davis – who lived in an area with a strong Orange faction – and the comic's editor Bernie Jaye raised concerns and the latter decreed a change. Thorpe: "The story that finally appeared was a very bland story about warfare between gangs in different blocks of flats. It was very dispiriting and discouraging."

Thorpe admits that he did regret quitting so precipitously. However, the consensus is that his loss was unequivocally comics' gain. Retaining Davis, Marvel handed the writing reins to Alan Moore, another relative novice, for what transpired to be the golden age of the character and a high-water mark in the medium. Though the outlet varied from *Marvel Super-Heroes* to *The Daredevils* to *The Mighty World Of Marvel*, the two Alans' Captain Britain output was consistent in its sky-high quality and unutterable weirdness as they embarked on the epic, dimension-hopping Jaspers' Warp story arc that ensured that never again

Middle-Class Marvel?

Perhaps inevitably, Captain Britain's alter ego Brian Braddock had to conform to the upright image of the British that then predominated stateside. Says Claremont, "If you went down the economic scale into the working class it brought along too much edge, political and social. A mainstream superhero has to stand for the society that he is defending. The conceptual visualisation was derived very much on the reading I had growing up. You're talking *Roy Of The Rovers*, *Eagle*, *Dan Dare*, *Swallows And Amazons*, for god's sake. This was the stuff that my gran would send me so I wouldn't lose all touch of home. A very middle-class indoctrination."

