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# SFX

#232



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# CAPTAIN BRITAIN

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

**R**ARELY 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!

GREATEST-SUPERHERO OF ALL!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN

10P



YOU DEFEATED ME LAST TIME HURRICANE!

NOW IT'S MY TURN!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN!

LONG, UM! TIME FINISH OFF!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN



WE'RE IN TIME! YOUR BROTHER AND SISTER ARE STILL ALIVE!

BUT THEY WON'T BE FOR LONG--UNLESS WE DEFEAT THEIR NAZI KIDNAPPERS!

The team-up that was always going to happen.

"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”**



Never carry a metal baton into a thunderstorm.

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.”



