Pulp History

CARLO ROTELLA

PULP HISTORY IS to the history taught and written in the academy as pulp fiction is to canonical literature: wilder, more eventful, less encumbered by the demands of verisimilitude, darkly suspicious of standard-issue cultural credentials as signs of intellectual timidity or even of complicity in some elite plot against regular folks. Pulp history rips away the veil—the official version according to accredited experts—to reveal alternative accounts of human affairs ranging from almost outright fantasy to arguments that earnestly question the received historical record. Conspiracy theories finger a set of usual suspects that includes the Bavarian Illuminati, the House of Rothschild, and the Trilateral Commission. Sweeping single-factor explanations reduce history to a series of alien visitations, or paranormal experiments, or now-obscure catastrophes. Countertestimony is gathered through spirit work, visions, channeling, recovered memories, and a thousand other means that won't hold up in court or in a tenure review. Weird science reveals the secret, life-shaping potency of crystals, mind control, weather control, telepathy, magnetic fields, and comets. Fantastic archaeology, filtering technique through wishful thinking, places Vikings in Boston centuries before Columbus, Atlanteans among the Mayas, Lemurians on Easter Island. Hidden connections and esoteric knowledge are the rule—as in the Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings thesis, which posits a secret high-tech epoch antecedent to recorded history on the evidence of a handful of old maps that, if you squint a little, appear accurately to show the contours of Antarctica beneath the ice sheet. If academic history is *The Bostonians,* pulp history is an issue of *Weird Tales.*

Pulp history cannot resist a lost continent or vanished epoch, the former presence and current absence of which hold the key to all that needs explaining: why your brother is in Afghanistan; the secret

links between the frightening, ostensibly disconnected things you see in the news; this feeling you've had for some time that all is not quite right. A continent that sank beneath the waves, an era expunged from the official record, is something big and meaningful that once was there, completing a pattern, but has now disappeared (or been made to disappear) so entirely that the approved techniques of conventional scholarship cannot recover it. You must venture to the fringe, then, to gain access to its import, to complete the pattern once more. If conventional medicine can't treat phantom nerve pain from an amputated limb, you go further afield into alternative medicine, quack therapies, whatever might work, because it really does hurt.

Pulp history has institutional home bases in esoteric magazines and institutes, on talk radio, in the outer precincts of TV Land, and, of course, online, where creative half-truth extends to the cyberhorizon in all directions. (Clicking on crank.net's "Crank o' the Day" link, which I do almost every day, frequently renews my faith in the human imagination.) Because it entertains at least as well as it edifies, pulp history has a foothold in commercial publishing, too. At the high end are middlebrow best-sellers like Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*, the *Roots* of ancient astronaut theses. The low end teems with outsider arts and sciences, often self-published, some of it so patently crazy that merely turning the pages makes you fear that you're losing your mind.

Pulp history inhabits the academy, too, but as a rodent in the walls, an obscure long-running insurgency. Or at least that's what academics can tell themselves. But if you stop and listen for it, you begin to hear echoes of it all over campus, from the Foucaultian excess of bad cultural-studies arguments that neatly explain away everything there is to know about consumer capitalism to the copy-room rants of that whey-faced senior colleague who comes to life only when inveighing against a single towering menace—taxation, say, or syntax—that lies at the root of all unhappiness. Pulp history in the academy is the spooky uncle who embarrasses everybody at Sunday dinner with his paranoid monologue about the New World Order. You want to tell your amused, faintly alarmed fiancée that he's a black

sheep, a freak, but you fear that he might, in fact, be the key to understanding your family.

That's because pulp history springs from the same source as academic history: the urge to make sense of what happened in the past. Unencumbered by peer review or footnotes or the carping rules of evidence, pulp history is in some ways the purer, more elemental expression of that urge. Academic history, with all its self-limiting cautions, elaborates the pure impulse but also degrades it by domesticating it, *civilizing* it. Pulp history is often more perfect in its explanatory elegance because it doesn't have to appear to measure up in the same way to reality; it doesn't have to truckle to irony or contingency, or to the incompletenesses great and small that flaw the pattern. And that's why pulp history haunts academic history: it's what academic history would become if it didn't have to play by its own rules; it's what academic history does become when, in its rage to leave no loose ends, it abandons its duty to humane imperfection.

Falling somewhere between literature and history, pulp history overlaps with both where they in turn overlap with each other, and also in places where they don't. It splits the difference between beauty and truth, and if forced to choose between them will often choose beauty—when, for instance, the bold sweep of an argument overwhelms the evidence deployed to support it. Like academic historians recruited to their calling in their youth by *The Adventures of Robin Hood* or the Greek myths, readers and writers of pulp history are often recruited by pulp fiction, then cross over to nonfiction. Sometimes they keep on going into scholarship. There are weird tales at the root of more than one academic career. That's where my first-person survey, my own pulp history, begins.

Literature

In the beginning, there was Conan. For me, he came before the loss of readerly innocence attendant upon growing awareness that people made prejudicial distinctions among different orders of truth and beauty, before I performed all the hoop-jumping necessary to

obtain a passport and work permit issued by the Republic of Letters. Conan and his pulp epoch, the Hyborian Age, came before and behind the history and literature I read, and the cultural history and literary criticism I eventually wrote, in school. I had a first inkling of this when, at the age of seventeen, I had the curious experience while taking the SAT of realizing that I was racking up additional points on my verbal score because I knew fake-archaic swords-and-sorcery words like *riven* and *sophistry* and *stygian.* Getting help with college admissions from the barbarian autodidact whose exploits had for several years constituted a principal refuge from doing whatever I was supposed to be doing was like being awakened from a nap on the couch in front of daytime TV by somebody calling to offer a job.

Starting at around the age of ten, I bought Lancer, Ace, and Berkley paperbacks of Conan stories for pocket change at a used bookstore near my school. Each volume taught an object lesson in artistic breakthrough and exploitation-by-formula. On the cover would be a painting by Frank Frazetta, the Gérôme of the van-art and black-light-poster set, or by one of Frazetta's imitators or inferior competitors. The volume would typically contain a couple of Robert E. Howard's original pulp magazine tales of the 1930s, padded out to book length with pastiches written by imitators who had worked from Howard's fragments and outlines, rewritten his non-Conan adventure stories as Conan stories, invented entirely new tales to fill in gaps in Conan's career, or otherwise sought to extend the franchise.

The pastiches had all the requisite elements, of course. Conan had his square-cut black mane, dark scarred face, and pantherish grace, his lusty dialogue ("Killing is thirsty work, by Crom!") and heroic appetite for chines of beef and deep draughts of ale. Blades crunched through breastbones, skulls were crushed to jelly, and freshly hacked-off limbs and heads trailed smoking founts of gore as Conan wove a deadly web of steel amid swarming enemies. Mighty thews quivering and sinews cracking, he hefted massive stone idols of disturbing aspect and hurled them full into the maws of the onrushing horrors that slithered, hopped, and flapped from nighted catacombs untold thousands of years more ancient than the sinister temples

built above them. Runaway slave girls and kidnapped princesses shrank, moaning, from cruel talons that tore away flimsy garments to reveal tender alabaster flesh, which would subsequently be bruised in Conan's rough embrace when the slave girl or princess threw herself into his arms after he saved her from the taloned menace.

But even I, a vague sort of fellow with his head in the clouds, could tell that the pastiches did not measure up to the originals, just as the cover artists who were not Frazetta did not measure up to Frazetta. The pastiche writers dutifully played all the notes, but they never caught Howard's undertone of epic melancholy (the stories are fundamentally blue, even at their most red-blooded), and, more important, their prose just didn't swing the way Howard's did. His Conan stories did not lack for unfortunate habits of theme or language, but when Howard was just saying what happened, one damned thing and blood-and-brains-splattering blow after another, the sheer pace and rhythm of his sentences picked me up and bore me along.

Gary Gianni, a post-Frazetta illustrator, likens reading Howard's Conan stories to a childhood memory of watching a local strongman knock down a shack with a sledge hammer. "The clouds of dust combined with the groaning timbers created an illusion of a fantastic battle taking place. . . .When the last perpendicular post was hurled onto the pile of wreckage, the man climbed atop the heap, leaned on his sledge hammer and grimly surveyed his handiwork." Gianni's anecdote evokes the noir-Bunyanesque feel of Howard's action—and of a Frazetta painting that Gianni first saw on the cover of *Conan the Adventurer,* in which the barbarian stands with broadsword planted point down in a charnel heap of the vanquished while a pneumatic odalisque entwines herself around one of his wide-braced legs—but it also serves as an apt image of how Howard told a story. He set up a simple frame of structural pieces and then knocked them down one by one in a fury of shrewd blows until there was nothing left to smash.

Howard's forward-pressing style, well suited to its subject, tended to runs of rolling prose punctuated with adverbial clunks and awkward flashes of forced poetic effect, like a bebop soloist backed by a drummer dropping bombs off the beat. Here, for instance, in

"Red Nails," a she-pirate named Valeria finds herself in a tight spot, with one blood-mad opponent grappling her legs (there's a lot of leg clutching, both coed and single sex, in these stories) and another closing in for the kill, until Conan comes to the rescue:

> The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast.
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> She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his head back so that the white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph—and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat.
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> "Conan!" gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. "Dog of hell!" Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room.

As much as the action, it was Howard's diction that drew me, one ringing blow after another until the shack lay all in pieces on the ground.

I read the books to tatters, returning to *Conan the Usurper* or *Conan the Freebooter* for the fifteenth or twentieth time even though, I told myself, I really should be reading something better, something new, something else. But I needed Conan. For me—a kid adrift on the South Side of Chicago in the High Seventies, abstractedly navigating a landscape of head-shop aesthetics and stagflation, encroached upon by wake-'n'-bake stoners on the one hand and peacoated, sideways-Pittsburgh Pirates-hatted aspiring Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords on the other—Robert E. Howard was P. G. Wodehouse. I came back to Conan over and over because the

formulas and language and momentum were the opposite of exciting. They soothed me.

Theory

At some point in my reading of Howard I stumbled across "The Hyborian Age," an eight-thousand-word master account he wrote of the history and geography of the world of Conan, the details of which a reader can only glimpse in stroboscopic background flashes of exposition and setting as the stories race along from one ripe foreground scene of slaughter to the next. Having an essay on the big picture to refer to proved useful for an action writer who worked fast, episodically, formulaically, and in great volume, as the pulp magazine business dictated. Howard wrote the Conan stories as they came to him, not in biographical order. By situating them in relation to "The Hyborian Age," which he wrote between drafting the third and fourth of what eventually became twenty-one finished Conan stories (seventeen published in his lifetime, all in *Weird Tales*), he streamlined the process of imparting thickness to Conan's world and consistency to the various episodes in the barbarian's career—from his birth on a battlefield in bleak Cimmeria through his world-spanning adventures as thief, soldier, bandit, treasure hunter, and pirate to his ascent to the throne of the civilized kingdom of Aquilonia after strangling the previous occupant with his own hands.

Howard borrowed the specifics of his template in "The Hyborian Age" from history and mythology. Aquilonia resembles medieval France and England, and its rough-and-ready frontier-defending auxiliaries are like Americans of the colonial era; the Zingarans are like Spaniards, the Stygians like ancient Egyptians, the Turanians and Vendhyans and Khitaians like various Oriental exotics, the Shemites like Arabs or Persians, the Kushites like the Africans familiar from jungle tales on the model of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes,* the lean and wily Afghuli hillmen like Afghans, the fierce Picts like Bronze Age Celts crossed with James Fenimore Cooper's Mohawks and Hurons, the Aesir and Vanir like the Norse, Conan's

Cimmerians like the Irish of the heroic age, and so on. The narrow angle of difference between the world of the Hyborian Age and our own, or at least the vision of our own world one might find in the manly adventure genres, allowed Howard to range freely and with great expository economy across extant formulas that readers would know well. "From story to story," points out Patrice Louinet, who edited Del Rey's recently issued definitive three-volume collection of Howard's Conan stories and related writings, "Conan could be a king in Medieval Europe (*The Scarlet Citadel*), a general in an antique Assyria torn with rivalries between city-states (*Black Colossus*), or a member of the wild kozaks—the term is transparent enough—of the east."

Howard puts the Hyborian Age 10,000–15,000 years in the past, between mythological and historical time, a favorite location for pulp history's secret epochs. It begins with a series of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and other geological cataclysms that sink Atlantis and Lemuria and set in motion a complicated series of race drifts, flinging barbarian tribes on the rise against collapsing decadent civilizations. Eventually the Hyborians, warlike "tawny-haired" Western barbarians, rise to civilization and empire. The Hyborian Age ends with advancing glaciers, foundering continents, and another round of clashes between barbarism and civilization. The shifting world map gradually takes on the familiar configuration of our own, and the invented folk movements gradually give way to recognizably historical events, the most important of which is the reentry on the stage of historical time of the Hyborian Age's conquering Northern barbarians, now identified as Aryans: "The blond Achaians, Gauls, and Britons, for instance, were descendants of the pure-blooded Aesir. . . .The Gaels, ancestors of the Irish and Highland Scotch, descended from pure-blooded Cimmerian clans," and so on, accounting for Danes, Goths, and a variety of Cimmerian by-blows that include "the Cimbri who fought Rome. . .as well as the Gimmerai of the Assyrians and Grecians, and Gomer of the Hebrews."

"The Hyborian Age," much of it written in a you-are-there present tense, often employs the swinging diction of the Conan stories, as

in "They are the descendants of the Atlanteans, sunk back into the squalling chaos of jungle-bestiality from which ages ago their ancestors so laboriously crawled." Like the stories, too, it is ludicrously eventful, chock-full of heaving and plunging landmasses and peoples. Almost overnight, it seems, fresh mountain ranges can thrust up out of the earth's mantle and civilized peoples can be hurled back into stone-age brutishness. But, for all that, the essay has a learned air of dutiful, near tedious completeness as it makes sure to tick off every last emerging geological formation or subdrift of ape men who never quite make it up the evolutionary scale before being exterminated by barbarians on the march. The essay is almost boring, compared to the Conan stories, in a calculated way that makes it feel like a pulp burlesque of History. In a world-turned-upside-down pulp version of school, where one would read Conan stories in English class, draw Doc Savage comics in art class, and study the physics and biology of catapulting plague-ridden cow carcasses over the walls of besieged towns in science class, the history textbooks would read like "The Hyborian Age."

"The Hyborian Age" merges pulp fiction and conventional history, borrowing from the form and content of both but conforming entirely to the standard of neither. It echoes the sanguinary and thunderous style of the Conan stories for which it supplies the backdrop, but, despite its forthright self-labeling as "simply a fictional background for a series of fiction stories," it also partakes of the charge of history. Its insistence on catalogue-like completeness, its various tricks for blending invented and real events, and its animating notions of race-drift as a Spencerian struggle between competing gene pools all bring it closer to the sort of grand-scale narrative of peoples in motion (not only across the globe but also up and down some fanciful evolutionary scale) that captivated the American historical imagination in Howard's own time and the half-century before it, an era of bewilderingly swift and copious immigration and urbanization.

"The Hyborian Age" isn't pulp history, since it admits to being fiction, but it draws on and even parodies pulp history in all sorts of

ways: lost continents, a secret epoch, a potently explanatory prehistory beyond the reach of official history, a sweepingly counterfactual thesis (the triumph of barbarism) that accounts for all and brooks no counterargument, a reliance on sketchy linguistics (similarities in nomenclature) and bad science (cartoonish geological processes and racial characteristics) to connect the peoples and places of our world to those of the Hyborian Age. And, like pulp history, Howard's essay invites its reader into the borderlands between history and fiction.

I accepted the invitation. "The Hyborian Age" provided the route along which I first ventured into the kind of critical reading in historical perspective that I came to do for a living. Even the preadolescent me, looking ahead to the next swordfight or primer on wenching, couldn't help but notice that both "The Hyborian Age" and the Conan stories harped with single-minded passion on Howard's great theme, the struggle between barbarism and civilization, in which the irreducible barbaric principle always prevails in the end. His faithfulness to this theory of history, which split eugenics from the notion of progress and then used the former to beat the latter to death, trumped even his conventional racialism.

Reading the uneven Conan collections, trying to make sense of the awkward fit between Howard's original stories and his successors' pastiches, also turned me into a reader of introductions, my first brush with critical apparatus. When they weren't misreading Howard as a natural-born storyteller who swept aside psychological complexity and other effete literary habits with a superhuman swipe of his brawny arm, the introductions offered snatches of his biography and mused darkly about Howard's impression that the character of Conan had suddenly appeared full-blown in his imagination and poured the stories into his ear in a kind of spirit-dictation. They helped me to see that Howard had arranged the elaborate racial movements of "The Hyborian Age" to make Conan beget him, a white man and a narrating presence with a usable past. I also couldn't help noticing that Howard's successors imagined him as a literary avatar of the eternal barbarian, a down-home Homer from Texas, descending with fire and sword upon the soft decadent literati of the East and

the critical establishment that had ignored or dismissed him as a hack, overwhelming them all with the elemental force of rousing tales well told. He would strangle the effete Jameses and Faulkners and Pynchons with his own hands and supplant them on the throne of American Literature, triumphing in the end when everybody finally recognized his genius—and, by extension, that of his fans and imitators. It all seemed desperately wishful to me, replete with unplumbed mysteries of adult motivation, but not without significance.

For me, reading Conan became tangled together with assembling a critical reader's toolkit: diction, word music, style, form and theme, genre and formula, stylistic genealogy, cultural moment, ideology, the literary-historical imagination, the crosswise shaping influences of the market and aesthetics. Indistinct precursors of these notions, looming half seen like the nameless demons that stalked the Cimmerian in nighted crypts, gathered around the Conan stories and became part of the business of reading them, even if what I thought I was doing was escaping the ever-escalating routine of thinking purposefully when reading. When I fled into the Hyborian Age to avoid schoolwork and the future of professional reading and writing it increasingly implied, I found myself running in a spiral, sinking with growing familiarity into the critical reader's signature double consciousness. Even as I lost myself in gory momentum, I was also more and more aware of Howard back there and myself up here, each situated in his moment, the one writing, the other reading.

History

No matter where you go in the academy, you can never leave pulp history entirely behind. Plenty of accredited scholarly argument raises echoes of it, as I discovered when I got to graduate school. Just about every loose association of idealized perps in American history, from the Populists to skate punks, had its own heroically transgressive "movement culture." Late capitalism had caused the daughter of a noted theorist to listen to bad music and pierce herself. The complete absence of topic X in the work of author Y was clear evidence

that author Y's entire oeuvre was shaped by a pervasive refusal to engage with topic X, now shockingly revealed as the central problem of his time. Daisie and Michael Radner's taxonomy of the generic attributes of pseudoscience in *Science and Unreason,* adapted by the archaeologist Stephen Williams to describe the genre of fantastic archaeology, applies equally well to both pulp history and bad cultural studies: anachronistic thinking, using mysteries and myths as hard data, a grab-bag approach that indiscriminately mixes different kinds and orders of evidence, irrefutable hypotheses, and a taste for argument from spurious similarity. Like pulp history, bad cultural studies characteristically hurls itself toward a denouement that is at once too precariously founded in fact and too perfect in explaining away every last possible doubt. The genres have in common the speciously brilliant removal of the veil as their central drama.

But bad cultural studies is the soft stuff, pulpy in a watered-down fashion. The need to appear respectable keeps it from achieving the fullness of its weird potential. If you want serious pulp, the hard stuff, take a look around just beyond the edge of campus. A deep affinity, a mutual attraction of like to like as well as like to unlike, draws some of the purest, wildest pulp history, excluded from academia as crackpot delusion, to scratch at the barriers that separate it from its estranged sibling. Pulp history presses on the fringes of official academic history in much the same way that Howard's barbarian Picts are forever testing the defenses of Aquilonia, the Hyborian Age's mightiest civilized nation. That's why you can often pick up pulp's spoor at the academy's edges.

I used to live near the campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a company town where the company is the academy. Not far from both my old apartment and Harvard Yard, there's a historical marker tucked away in a narrow strip between the blank rear wall of Mount Auburn Hospital and fast-moving traffic on Memorial Drive and Fresh Pond Parkway, about a hundred yards from the Charles River. The marker is on relatively few people's regular walking routes; passing runners and bikers typically don't stop to read it. On the flat rectangle of stone is inscribed *On this spot in the*

year 1000 Leif Eriksson built his house in Vinland, an assertion so precariously founded on such paltry evidence that it probably qualifies as a lie. No one has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that Leif Eriksson *didn't* build a house on this exact spot in the nice round year 1000, but, then again, why would anyone bother to?

There's more to Viking Boston. Across the river, in the wide median of Commonwealth Avenue in the Back Bay, between downtown and Boston University, Ann Whitney's statue of a lissome Leif Eriksson in breast-enhancing armor strikes a Whitmanian "Hello, Sailor" pose—wrist to hip and palm shading eyes, as if checking out members of the fleet as they debark after many pent-up months at sea. Then there's the piled-stone Norumbega Tower on a hill by the Charles River in Weston, near Brandeis University. A large plaque at the base of the tower telegraphically recounts the story of the region's discovery and settlement by Vikings, who landed on Cape Cod and moved inland to build a great city of "NORSE CANALS · DAMS · WALLS · PAVEMENTS · FORTS · TERRACED PLACES OF ASSEMBLY." The last ship went back to Iceland in 1347, says the plaque. One relic of their former presence that the Vikings left behind was the word "Norumbega," the "INDIAN UTTERANCE OF NORBEGA THE ANCIENT FORM OF NORVEGA · NORWAY · TO WHICH THE REGION OF VINLAND WAS SUBJECT." The etymology is as fanciful as the archaeology that inspired randomly scattered rocks to rise up and throw themselves together into an unlikely secret civilization.

The existence of the statue, the tower, and the marker can be traced to the efforts of Eben Norton Horsford, a professional chemist and amateur archaeologist, who in the late nineteenth century devoted himself to proving the existence of Viking Boston and creating tangible memorials to it. Ten thousand Norse colonists, he believed, had occupied the country along the Charles; he understood himself to move through the ghost landscape they had left behind. Horsford had authoritative academic credentials, but in a different field. At Harvard he had held the Rumford Chair, established to promote "the utility of the physical and mathematical sciences for the

improvement of the useful arts, and for the extension of industry, prosperity, happiness, and well-being of Society." He had also owned, with a partner, the Rumford Chemical Works in Rhode Island, where he made his fortune by applying science to the useful arts in the manufacture of Prof. Horsford's Phosphatic Baking Powder, condensed milk, and other important new conveniences for women in the kitchen and armies on the march. In 1870, Horsford met Ole Bull, the Norwegian violinist and booster of Norse culture, when Bull visited Cambridge. Horsford and his Brattle Street neighbor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose poem "The Skeleton in Armor" came out of the encounter with Bull, were swept up by Bull's version of the theory of Carl Christian Rafn, a Danish scholar, that Vinland, the New World colony described in the Norse sagas, was not way up north in Canada but farther south, in New England.

Horsford realized, with a mounting sense of fateful significance that suffused his writing, that he might well be living right in the middle of Vinland. The everyday landscape of Boston and environs was suddenly supercharged with portent. Having retired from Harvard in 1863, and having sold his share of the chemical business to his partner, Horsford had plenty of time and money in the closing decades of the nineteenth century to elaborate on Rafn's theory, pursue his own archaeological inspirations, and finance the excavation and memorializing of Viking Boston. He did some digging near his house in Cambridge, found stone foundations filled with colonial-era artifacts, concluded that the artifacts were trash from a later period cluttering up the site of Leif Eriksson's riverside manse, and caused the marker to be erected. That and the statue on Commonwealth Avenue were for starters. The Norumbega Tower would be his masterpiece.

Picture the academy and its body of approved ideas as a walled and gated city. Without proper scholarly credentials, you can't own property, vote, or enjoy the right of free speech in that city, or even enter its gates. Outside the walls lie successive rings of suburbs, both well-heeled ones and shanty towns; then outlying towns and farms, some cozy, some hardscrabble; and then the wilds of forest and desert, all peopled by unaccredited enthusiasts and their enthusiasms in

descending order of respectability. That's the view from within the city, of course. Like Bostonians, academics act as if their city were the center of the universe, even though others may regard it as nothing more than a provincial capital populated by obscure eccentrics who talk funny. As an accredited academic chemist and the author of *The Theory and Art of Bread-Making: A New Process without the Use of Ferment,* Horsford enjoyed full citizenship in the walled city, but as a retired chemist turned dabbler in archaeology and history, he did not. Horsford the amateur proponent of Viking Boston, a pulp historian, occupied a posh inner-ring suburb, somewhere between the scholars within the walls—many of whom remained in his social circle—and the sandwich-boarded wing nuts who wander the distant barrens, hoarsely declaiming fresh theories of dinosaur extinction and alternate readings of the Book of Revelation. His Norse enthusiasm had carried him beyond the walls; because he wanted to canonize his version of history and because once you've held academic credentials in any field such credentials tend to matter to you, it was important to him to get back in.

While some academic gatekeepers did dismiss his account of Viking Boston with varying degrees of contempt, Horsford had prospects for successful reentry into the walled city. The field of archaeology was professionalizing, but it still made plenty of room for moneyed amateurs, who could win the academy's respect and attention with a significant find. Horsford was not in the class of Schliemann, the amateur who found Troy and confounded the experts, but he wasn't considered a loon, either. At worst, he was a bit dotty in a learned para-academic way that has long been acceptably familiar in Boston and places like it. And let us not forget that plenty of scholars and respectable nonacademic intellectuals of the time found attractive the notion of Northern Europeans crossing the finish line five centuries ahead of the spaghetti-bending Christopher Columbus, especially when the finish line could be moved to Boston, one of the nation's cultural capitals. Horsford's alternate European-American history, dramatically extended back to the year 1000, recentered the emphasis on the encounter between Northern

Europeans and Indians, seeming to push to the margins not just Columbus but the whole contemporary rush of immigrants—with Catholics from Italy and Ireland in the forefront—who were remaking and claiming as their own the history of Boston, New England, and the nation. Gloria Polizzotti Greis, a local historian who has written about Horsford and his moment, describes him as a sort of WASP race man who told a story that people, including people in the academy, wanted to hear. (Scandinavians weren't Protestants yet in the year 1000, of course, but nineteenth-century race-thinking could plausibly cast Vikings as ancestral proto-WASPs in the rough, guiding their longships to new lands and swinging war axes with the special vigor conferred by the purest of Aryan bloodlines.)

Horsford directed his appeal to those within the walled city of academic convention, as well as to city fathers and fellow buffs, by making his case for Viking Boston in several handsome self-financed books and occasional papers that resembled closely reasoned scholarship. But it was a burlesque of scholarship, just as his unearthing of the site of Leif Eriksson's house had been a burlesque of archaeology in which he had wandered impatiently around his neighborhood with shovel in hand, his head ringing with the language of the sagas, until deciding that he'd found the right place to dig. He sounded like a historian or archaeologist as he dutifully catalogued rocks, mapped trace remnants of watercourses that might have been canals, and offered creative rereadings of the sagas to supplement the material record with textual testimony, but he would lose patience and pass into fancy, passion overcoming reason, as he overstated the case.

Here, for instance, he describes his discovery of the site of Norumbega as a flight of revelatory deduction akin to automatic writing: "when I had eliminated every doubt of the locality that I could find, I drove with a friend through a region I had never visited, of a topography of which I knew nothing, nine miles away, directly to the remains of the Fort. These remains, and the region immediately about, were at once surveyed and mapped for me by the City Engineer. In a certain sense there was, in this discovery, the fulfillment of a

prophecy. . . . *I had predicted the finding of Fort Norumbega at a particular spot. I went to the spot and found it.* No test of the genuineness of scientific deduction is regarded as superior to this." His discovery had the mystical fatefulness of prophecy, but he claimed scientific rigor for it, too, and a witness to boot.

Ten thousand Vikings ought to have left a lot of junk lying around, but there was no physical evidence of their presence that couldn't be chalked up to nature, Indian workmanship, post-Columbian provenance, or forgery. That didn't stop Horsford from claiming that his "conclusions might be tested by the spade." For instance, "Here is an Indian arrow-point picked up on the field of the battle between Thorfinn and the Skraelings, in which a man of distinction, Snorri Thorbrandson, fell. His body was found, so the Sagas say, with a *sharp stone* sticking in his head. If the 'sharp stone' may not have been a flint arrow-point, but a stone tomahawk, here is a sharp stone that may bear that name, which was found on the same battlefield." Any arrowhead or tomahawk—or, in fact, even a naturally pointed stone—that you might find anywhere near the Charles River, which ordinarily would seem to be proof only that Indians had been there or that nature can produce a sharp stone, served as proof of his creative rereading of the sagas as a factual account of the Viking settlement of Boston.

Horsford died in 1893, and, despite the continuing skepticism of academic experts, he had to be pleased with the progress he had made toward institutionalizing Viking Boston. His amateur enthusiasm and baking-powder money had helped to produce books, maps, the marker, the statue, the tower, and other memorials. He had rallied to his cause a number of fellow believers, some prominently placed, some even established within the academy. He had played a major part in inspiring a turn-of-the-century architectural fad for Viking motifs that produced, for instance, the longship-themed decorations in stone on Harvard's Weld Boat House, the Longfellow Bridge, and the old Boston Board of Trade building next to the Custom House. He had gone far, in other words, in establishing Viking

Boston in the landscape and the popular imagination, and if he had not yet succeeded in establishing it as firmly in the academy, he had prepared a campaign that could continue after his death. Popular acceptance, on the one hand, and academic-looking books, on the other, were siege engines that might someday, in the hands of his inheritors, be used to reduce the walled city's defenses and send Leif Eriksson charging through the long, echoing halls of the university to wrest from that overrated ginzo the title of America's discoverer.

When you consider that Horsford's vision of Viking Boston, like Howard's vision of the Hyborian Age, was a manly adventure fantasy almost entirely imagined out of thin air or creatively misappropriated from available sources, you have to give him credit for proceeding as far as he did in making it real. Viking Boston really did exist. It rose in the late nineteenth century, founded by Horsford and his fellow enthusiasts, and it fell in the twentieth, done in by skepticism and the waning of the moment when WASPs in high places could hang on to the notion that the history of the Americas was a fundamentally Northern European affair. I live among the romantic ruins of this city. Out for a run along the river, I can visit several of them. Eastbound on the north bank in Cambridge, I pass the false historical marker on the site of Leif Eriksson's house on my left, then the boat house on my right, then I cross the bridge into Back Bay, swinging past the statue on Comm Ave on the way home to Brookline, perhaps the least Viking place one could possibly imagine. If I run the other way along the river, I can make a longish reach west from the boat house and marker out to Norumbega Tower. These ruins are not memorials of Viking Boston; they *are* Viking Boston. Horsford founded it and lived in it, and I live in it, too, even if Leif Eriksson never did.

Once set in stone in the landscape—fixed in the city's physical endowment, so to speak, where it can continue to accrue cultural interest in perpetuity—Viking Boston can become part of lived history. It's part of my own routine of contemplation-on-the-move, the nocturnal runs that weave body and mind more tightly to the city in which I live and write. The Norumbega Tower, wrapped in romantic

solitude, is the kind of place where I would have hung out when I was a kid, a natural magnet for potheads and couples. A declaration of love, a notable freak-out, or, less dramatically, the simple life-patterning repetition of visits can turn it into a significant place. Similarly, the Longfellow Bridge's longship-prow motifs or Ann Whitney's rendering of Leif Eriksson as queer icon can inspire a little place-making heroic fantasy in passing rowers, pedestrians, or drivers.

Material purchase, then, allows pulp history to cross over into lived history. So does the institutionalizing power of the library. You can find Horsford's books in the collection of fantastic archeology that the distinguished emeritus professor Stephen Williams has amassed for Harvard's Tozzer Library to teach archaeologists about their field's extensive syllabus of errors, but you can also find them in academic and public libraries all around town, where they sit on the shelves next to more reputable works. There's no special flag to mark Horsford's books as pulp history. The only way to make that distinction is to read them. By the time you've done that, of course, they're part of your pulp history, too. Who knows what sort of readers, thinkers, and writers they have recruited and will recruit, and to what unlikely causes?

In "The Hyborian Age" the Picts, aided by the Cimmerians, finally prevail in their centuries-long struggle with Aquilonia. The barbarians sweep east from the forest and south from the hill country in inexhaustible numbers, looting and slaying, until the Aquilonian Empire, weakened by its own excesses, perishes "in fire and blood." Pulp history cannot storm the academy all at once like that. The dramatically instantaneous reversal of fortunes and status of which pulp historians dream (picture the foot-high headlines: Atlantis Found!) will never happen. But pulp history, gaining strength from the currency it can achieve in popular thought and from the natural sympathy of intent that makes it more like academic history than either will admit, seeps in through the cracks in the academy's walls, accomplishing with patience and subtlety what it cannot achieve with overwhelming force.

Rogue professors

Academic historians, caught up in their specialized world, affect not to notice pulp historians operating beyond it, except when complaining that popular culture clutters people's heads with ideas that prevent them from accepting the professionals' account of what really happened. The outsiders have a more complex relationship to the official historians. Contempt for cloistered academics' self-interested refusal to accept the truth of unofficial history competes with envy of their credentials and status. *Those credentials should rightfully be mine* vies with *Who needs academic credentials? They just inhibit your thinking.*

It's obvious why an uncredentialed outsider might see himself as a kind of knowledge barbarian, and why he might both envy and revile the accredited professors who arrogate to themselves the right to confer respectability on ideas. The soft, blinkered professors cry out to be despoiled and supplanted by those whose intellectual vitality is nailed, as Howard put it, more surely to their spines. Sean McCann, whose *Gumshoe America* is by far the best critical study of pulp fiction, has persuasively argued that some pulp writers of the 1930s saw themselves similarly in relation to more "civilized" writers of "serious" literature. Some of those barbarous pulp writers—Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, for instance—eventually managed to enter the keep of literary respectability and hold it as their own. It makes sense that pulp historians would like to accomplish the same sort of thing, and that they resent the academics manning the walled city's defenses. Pulp historians, always eager for a fresh revelation that proves the existence of Lemuria or the truth of accounts of alien visitation, resemble those who invested deeply in the idea that the turn of the twenty-first century would cause a worldwide computer shutdown, destroying civilization as we know it. Avid prophets of a Y2K cataclysm, seeing themselves as marginal, drew perhaps their deepest prospective satisfaction from imagining how the great crash would ratify their marginality as authenticity and crush the drones who had dutifully gone about getting ahead in

their careers, accumulating property and retirement income, planning comfortable lives for their children, and otherwise pursuing the steady mainstream course mapped for them by the keepers of conventional wisdom.

But why would a professor, especially one safely situated atop the profession at Harvard, act as if he were an intellectual outsider with nothing to lose? Eben Horsford, it turns out, is only one in a line of self-defenestrating Harvard professors, a curious recurring type. I don't mean professors who dabble in genre fiction—a cat-loving literary critic who writes mystery novels about a cat-loving literary critic, or a J. R. R. Tolkien figure who pours his booklearning into fantasies with high literary ambitions. There's little risk in such excursions into popular storytelling; the professor wanders out of the walled city's gate for a while and wanders back in again, unchallenged. I mean, rather, those professors who, unsatisfied with the superb academic credentials they already have, risk those credentials—as well as their reputation and job security—by violently abandoning the walled city to pursue a wild-eyed adventure in a far-distant field of study that isn't their own. Then, of course, acceding to ingrained habits, they try to win reentry into the walled city with the new and suspect set of credentials. It's an old story—practically a tradition, it seems. In *Fantastic Archaeology,* which gently but remorselessly undoes crackpot accounts of American prehistory like Horsford's by taking them seriously enough to consider whether they're persuasive, Stephen Williams (who was the Peabody Professor of North American Archaeology and Ethnography at Harvard) observed, "There must be a Cantabrigian strain of the Fantastic Archaeology virus."

The immediate occasion for Williams's comment was his assessment of Barry Fell, a marine biologist turned visionary linguistic and ancient historian who for many years occupied an office around the corner from Williams. Fell made a splash in popular culture in the 1970s with an account of American prehistory in which practically everybody—including the Norse, Iberians, Sumerians, Celts, Egyptians, Carthaginians, Hebrews, Romans, Libyans, West Africans, and

Basques—got here before Columbus and left traces of their presence that the hidebound professionals of the academy infuriatingly failed to recognize as such. Viking Boston was one of the few versions of pre-Columbian colonization that Fell didn't accept as true (pulp history parallels the more respectable kind in pursuing its own learned differences of opinion), but he did have pre-Columbian Vikings making rock inscriptions in Massachusetts, as well as building a tower in Rhode Island and inscribing the Kensington Rune Stone in Minnesota.

Then there's Leo Wiener, a professor of Slavic languages and literature (and father of the path-breaking cyberneticist Norbert Wiener) who argued strenuously for the pervasive pre-Columbian influence of Africans on New World cultures. And if we go further afield from alternative prehistories, Fell, Horsford, and Wiener are joined by other self-defenestrating Harvardians, like John Mack, the psychologist whose study of people who believe they were abducted by aliens turned him into the most distinguished of ufologists, and Elaine Scarry, the English professor turned pulp scientist, who knows why planes crash. Harvard isn't the only place such characters can be found, of course. The "rogue professors," as Williams calls them, who roam the pages of *Fantastic Archaeology* come from various disciplines and institutions. For instance, there's Ole G. Landsverk, a physicist trained at the University of Chicago who remade himself as a runic cryptographer to defend the Kensington Stone's authenticity; and Cyclone Covey, a Wake Forest historian trained at Stanford, who progressed from conventional studies of Roger Williams and Cabeza de Vaca to an account of an ancient Roman colony in Arizona.

What motivates the rogue professor? Why leave the walled city of academic respectability to join those regarded by the professor's academic colleagues as crackpots? The question acquires a sharper edge when applied to Harvard professors, who occupy the academy's most exclusive and privileged real estate. What can they be thinking?

I can't say for sure. That I'm an adult myself now doesn't mean that I find human motivation any less mysterious or unplumbable.

But, as an academic who makes a point of keeping one foot out of the academy, I can make a few educated guesses.

First, professionals in an elite capital of disenchanted modernity may be especially sensitive to the pull of reenchantment. By that logic, tenure at Harvard might itself fuel the urge to become a pulp historian, just as being a famous moralizing cleric seems to fuel the urge to lie, cheat, steal, fornicate, drink, and do other such things for which the cleric righteously condemns others. The analogy to the ministry suggests that we should also draw the causal arrows the other way: just as a taste for sin can lead to the ministry or an attraction to criminality can lead to a career in law enforcement, the urge to engage in the practices of pulp history may well trace to the same root as the scholarly impulse that leads to academic respectability in the first place.

Second, a cozily credentialed academic can be seized by an intellectual passion so powerful that it inspires him to take the risk of uncozying himself. Eben Horsford was not that different from Robert E. Howard in rearranging history to come out as a usable past for himself and his imagined tribe. That project mattered deeply enough to him that he was willing to exit the walled city of academic respectability and undertake a sojourn in the wilderness of pulp history. Pressure from time and place, the larger cultural moment, contributes an influence as well. Horsford and Howard shared a context of reaction to new immigrants asserting themselves in American life and in the telling of American history. Barry Fell, for his part, seems to have been at least partially unmoored from the disciplinary straight and narrow by the ambient Aquarian nuttiness about opening the doors of perception that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s.

Third, there's the natural hubris of the tenured academic, especially one tenured at Harvard, who can count on his own aura of unimpeachability to make quackery respectable. (Rogue professors have tenure, almost by definition. When they go rogue before tenure, and therefore don't get tenure, they're something else—self-defrockers, near-misses.) Like other accomplished professionals, too, the rogue may believe that he can do great things in any

superficially similar field in which he chooses to exercise his talents. Just as Michael Jordan fell prey to the mistaken belief that he could play baseball, professors fall prey to the delusion that being smart—as everyone has been telling them they are, often from early childhood—is all it takes to turn any product of your thoughts into worthwhile knowledge. That delusion reinforces the tendency of specialized training in one field to produce contempt for other fields, which can take the form not just of dismissal but also of assuming that anybody can do it. For instance, says Stephen Williams, "A lot of scientists look at archaeology and think, *I could do that. It's just puttering around with a shovel.*"

Fourth, never underrate academics' craving for celebrity within and beyond their field. The yen to make a splash and cause a paradigm shift, to be seen as formidable and important, can be strong enough to drive a professional scholar out beyond the academic pale —because he has had such an experience of splash-making in his field and wants to have it again, or because he has never had it.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, venturing beyond the academy can itself become an attraction. *I'm crossing over, going out into the world to get hot new stuff,* the rogue professor can say to himself, *while my colleagues persist in their tiny little routines.* Often, too, the rogue's new field seems to promise more in the way of popular recognition, which can be especially attractive if he feels that he has hit the ceiling of professional celebrity within his academic specialty. One way to be an academic rock star, many scholars believe, is to get out there beyond the academy where you can collect new material with which to amaze and astound both your colleagues and your suddenly extensive general readership. But once he's out there, of course, the rogue professor turns his longing gaze back upon the walled city and realizes that he wants to get back in.

I'm not unsympathetic to this set of motivations. I guess at them with some confidence because I've observed something similar in my colleagues, and in myself. I've felt, and exercised, the impulse to go beyond the walls and see what people are up to out there, to write in genres that the academy doesn't always recognize as sufficiently

serious. I found my way not into the anything-goes free-for-all of pulp history but into the commercial writing trades, and especially into journalism, a profession with credentialing routines and rules of evidence as rigorous as the academy's. But I can identify with the feeling of freedom and adventure that comes when, after years of monkish diligence within the academic keep, you put a leg over the sill and feel a fresh breeze blowing from somewhere beyond the horizon. I keep one leg on the academic side of the sill, and I like it up there in the window, but I can find within myself respect and fellow feeling for the self-defenestrators who go all the way. There's something heroic—even if it can also be foolhardy and clownish—in throwing off the bonds of the profession to break through into what feels like greater truthsaying.

Perhaps that's why their collective crossing over has the odd effect of making pulp history seem more academic to me, at least in its aspirations, and straight academic work seem pulpier. The footnotes and other scholarly apparatus now seem like an elaborate system of restraints, the only thing preventing the argument from tearing off to some not-so-distant region of unreason in the grip of the raw urge to say what happened and what it meant.

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James Churchward's *The Lost Continent of Mu,* a classic of Lemurian prehistory, has a footnote citation that, in its entirety, reads "Various Records." I consider that footnote to be a literary flourish, and not just a hilariously deficient scholarly gesture. Churchward based his argument about the world-historical importance of Mu, the root of all ancient civilizations, on the pulpiest of evidence. His main sources, on the existence and content of which you had to take him at his word, were certain ancient clay tablets of an intensely mystical and secret nature that a holy man in a temple in India had allowed him to read. Churchward regretted that he couldn't reveal the identity of the holy man or the location of the temple. There's a certain charm to his taking cover behind the implication that it would be a bad show, unworthy of a gentlemen and a former colonel of the

Bengal Lancers, to reveal his sources. "Various Records" is a reproach to academic rigor, a mockery, as well as a threadbare attempt at miming it.

Does it come as any surprise that in his Introduction to *Fantastic Archaeology* Stephen Williams explains that he became an academic archaeologist, eminent enough to serve as one of his profession's chief gatekeepers in charge of debunking pulp archaeology, because as a boy he read *The Lost Continent of Mu*? Churchward, a hokey charlatan whose only possible lasting merit might be as a literary stylist advancing a comic critique of modern routines for authorizing knowledge, took the young Williams's mind by storm and set it permanently on its path into the distant past. *The Lost Continent of Mu* was Williams's "The Hyborian Age." Pulp often comes first, before and behind what credentialed academics recognize as truth and beauty, recruiting them to the cause. That's not ironic, really; the affinity between pulp history and academic scholarship is bred in the bone.