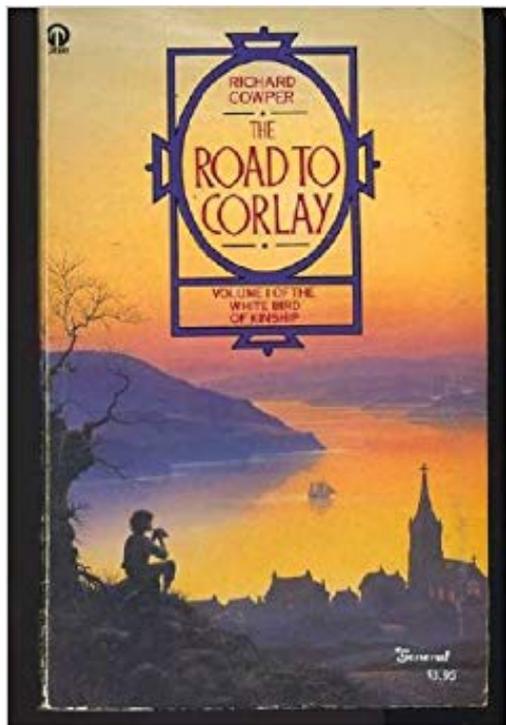


The Road To Corlay by Richard Cowper



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Reviews of the **The Road To Corlay** by Richard Cowper

Kann

Do not be deceived by the deliberate pacing and the shifts in view. This is one of the great SF novels of our times. At turns tragic, uplifting and poetic, it's long been one of those books I return to again and again, to re-read and absorb. I never fling words like "genius" around lightly, but it's the only word for this work that fits. (The two other books are also very good, but never quite reach the heights of the first, but the whole trilogy is outstanding.

It's one of the SF works you need to read if you want to claim that you have read the best.

Landarn

Kind of new agey, I was expecting more realism.

Mullador

Richard Cowper is well known for... well, nothing really. I happened to pick up his novel Profundis

one year ago. I found his writing to be witty, charming and well-educated. I took a shot at reading *The Road to Corlay* because of these characteristics of Cowper's writing. Taking one look at the cover of my edition (Pocket, 1979), it looks like a fantasy novel through-and-through -- my expectations remained aloft even though fantasy isn't my forte.

The 239-page book begins with a 62-page prologue called "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" which is actually a short story by itself and is included in SOME editions of *The Road to Corlay*. A quarter of the book brings the reader up to speed about the history of the region where the novel is set- around the Bristol, Southampton, Exeter region of south England. However, the time of the plot is set around the year 3000 after the earth had been flooded, so the bucolic landlocked English setting is actually a bucolic seaside setting. The prologue/short story is a mini-saga of a man who is a minstrel of sorts and a boy with a lute (ah, but no ordinary lute, you see). With this lute, the boy is able to charm animals (salmon jump to him and dogs cower in obedience) but can also be made to sooth the minds of humans. This special trait becomes known to the wider Kingdom and his following is called heresy by Falconry Church. Their death is demanded.

After the prologue ends, the reader witness the aftermath of the decree one decade later, where the boy's lute-fingering has become legendary and now a following called the Kinship of the White Bird is wide-spread but still secret. From this point on, two stories emerge: one involving a man found at sea and his recuperation at a family's cottage where a young woman possesses the gift of mind-reading and clairvoyance. The second story takes place around 1970 during an experiment in which Michael falls into coma but still exhibits mental patterns of social interaction. This observation infers that he has made contact with another mind in the future. Like Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book* where a physical person travels BACK in time, in *The Road to Corlay* a mentality of a person is transposed into someone in the FUTURE... both highlighting the quaint English countryside.

So yes, for the most part this novel contains very un-SF-like elements. For a seasoned SF reader like myself, the inclusion of mind-reading, Middle English language and kinships are irking. Cowper keeps in lively with a grand search for the heretics, quests for artifacts and the appearance of new characters always adding extra dimension to the plot. The climax and conclusion of both storylines were somewhat solemn but still radiated a sense of completion.

Little did I know that there are two sequels to *The Road to Corlay*: *A Dream of Kinship* and *A Tapestry of Time*. Hopefully, if I'm able to get my paws on these, a link between the two plot lines would become clearer and a more resolute conclusion could be made. For something different and intelligent, *The Road to Corlay* is notable even for an astute SF connoisseur such as myself.

Dalallador

The Road to Corlay opens at the end of the third millennium and the beginning of the fourth. Mankind had been reduced to a fraction of its population when the polar ice caps melted (the greenhouse effect bore fruit). The technological world was wiped out and became a legend that only a few believed (the magic mirrors - TV; the self-propelled carriages and flying machines - cars and airplanes). But part of the legend is that at every new millennium, mankind gets another chance, and there are rumors of the Forthcoming of the White Bird of Dawning that will conquer the Blackbird of Fear. The Church Militant, however, is bent on keeping the Blackbirds (the Falcons) in power. Hope arrives in the form of a young boy, Tom, who has the power to stir the human mind with his magical music. "It was as though all the promise of life was twinkling inside him like sunshine in a waterdrop..." says a witness. Asked what it is that he does when he plays his pipes, Tom says, "I join myself to them. I build a bridge and walk to them over it. I take their thoughts and give them back my own." He makes people see the White Bird - until he is martyred at York and there is nothing left but a lost testament telling of the mysterious Bride of Time, the Bird of Dawning and the Creed of Kinship.

Now segue 1,000 years into the PAST (before the great "Drowning") into a world of cathode ray encephalographs, sine wave frequency, and O.O.B.E.'s (out of body experiences). Seems some British scientists have made contact with Thomas of Norwitch, who is floating in the Somersea (which used to be Somerset) thrown overboard and left for dead because he's a kinsman. The scientist Carver finds himself in Thomas' consciousness. Carver wouldn't be detected at all if not for Jane, the Kinfolk girl with e.s.p. powers who knows he is there and reaches back 1,000 years to contact the Bride of Time in his reality.

At first you might get the impression that this is sword and sorcery at worst or fantasy at best until you get to the second book and you know it's true science fiction. I know of few writers who can pull this off - Ursula LeGuin comes to mind. This novel, because of the "Church Militant", has been compared to *A Canticle for Libowitz*, but for sheer lyricism and philosophical depth, it reminds me most of *Engine Summer* by John Crowley. Cowper made this into a trilogy - the kinship novels - all well worth reading, but this first one, with its sense of wonder and delight, is, in my opinion, his best.

pamhan99@aol.com

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