

CAPTAIN BRITAIN

FROM OTHER-WORLD AND BEYOND

It had been a childhood ambition to work for Marvel. Following a conversation in 1980 with editor-in-chief **Jim Shooter** at the New York office, I contacted the London office in Kentish Town to ask if there was a vacancy for a writer. **Paul Neary**,

then editor, told me that one would materialise soon and in the meantime would I like a job as an editorial and art assistant? I jumped at the chance, hoping that my degree -- in Dada and Surrealism -- would prove adequate training.

It proved more than adequate: nothing could have been more surreal than working for Marvel UK at that time.

The rickety-floored office lay above a cobblers and a second-hand shop. Marvel UK was then licensed by an absurd duo, the **Babani Brothers**, whose main interest was and still is publishing technical manuals, and who employed someone to polish their Rolls-Royces out the back while we toiled on meagre wages. **Bernie**

Jaye edited the monthly anthologies, in one of which, *Marvel Superheroes*, Captain Britain would appear.

After a few weeks Paul explained his plan to me for relaunching Captain Britain, who had lain moribund in comics limbo for a good while. He wanted to team me up with a new artist, **Alan Davis**, and completely overhaul the character with a new costume, introducing him to an alternative England in order to create a different identity to the

Chris Claremont- Herb Trimpa creation and **Steve Parkhouse's** Celtic epic. The idea was to produce a superhero relevant to a modern British readership that would reflect something of contemporary UK. It was Paul who, despite my reservations, came up with the idea of a comic sidekick in the form of an elf on a surfboard.

Both Alan and I had much enthusiasm but little experience - we were learning on the job. I concentrated on creating a new pantheon of villains and supporting characters to populate a new storyworld. I realised that we had to do more than import an American formula to make Captain Britain work. Comics like *2000 AD*, at the time the most popular amongst the target readership in the UK, had a totally different flavour to American comics. They are more throwaway, humorous, self-aware and anarchic - they don't take themselves so seriously. Americans are generally prepared to be much more nationalistic than us and use their flag patriotically. Over here only fascists do that with the Union Jack. Captain Britain can never be an Anglicised Captain America.

So I introduced a peculiarly British surrealism, drawing on the tradition of **Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, HG Wells, John Wyndham** and **Doctor Who**, embodying eccentricities which I associated with the upper-class world that Brian Braddock comes from; hence characters like the Avant Guard and Mad Jim Jaspers. The latter is a take on the notorious "Mad" Frankie Fraser from the Richardson Gang which operated in London in the '60s and '70s. They had a turf war with the Krays and another gang called -- seriously -- the Quality Street Gang. Calling James' gang the Crazy Gang actually seemed less surreal than the reality.

(As an aside, even more surreally, I was asked eight years later by gang-leader Charlie Richardson and Frankie Fraser themselves to write his life story in comics form, clearly a case of reality imitating comics!)

My thought was, you had this muscle-bound upper class twit with a brain the size of a pea draped in a Union Jack jumping from tall building to tall building -- what can you do that isn't ridiculous? Nationalism had to be avoided, which I did in several additional ways.

The first story had an environmental theme - *The Junkheap That Walked Like A Man* - environmentalism being a parallel passion in my life. Another story introduced a multicultural flavour, as I was living in Brixton, and so had Captain Britain taking a young Afro-Caribbean girl for a fly-around, to convey a sense of wonder. I developed an overarching storyline of cosmic proportions involving Saturnyne, a beautiful enigmatic figure from another dimension modeled visually on **Lauren Bacall**, and developing the concept of alternative Captain Britains -- Captains UK, England, Albion, etc -- and Merlyn's overall control theme.

Many of these characters and concepts were developed and expanded upon by subsequent writers such as **Alan Moore** and the **Excalibur** team.



Captain Britain made his long-awaited return in *Marvel Super Heroes* #377, September 1981.



The dramatic moment where Captain Britain and Jackdaw leave Otherworld for new adventures and Cap's costume transforms; from *Marvel Super Heroes* #377, September, 1981.



After I had been working on the strip for about a year I received a letter from a reader pointing out that a younger me had written to the first **Captain Britain** comic, wondering what the Captain might think about political issues such as the civil war in Northern Ireland. This had completely slipped my mind, but everyone knows Marvel fandom's memories put elephants' to shame. It set me thinking, and in some ways I regret receiving that letter because of what was to follow.

I figured this reader and therefore others wanted to see such a story and drafted one which made reference to the conflict in Northern Ireland -

then spilling over to a bombing campaign on the mainland - trying to avoid favouring one side or the other. I wanted it to sympathise with kids living there caught up in the conflict. It revolved around a sad, true story, which seemed to epitomise the tragedy of the province, of two children who had met and become friends while away on holiday. But when they returned home to Belfast they realised that they came from opposite sides of the divide -- one Protestant and the other Catholic. So when one visited the other's neighbourhood he was attacked. Captain Britain, flying overhead, on a mission that was part of the overarching storyline, noticed this and came down to break up the fight. That was the sum of it. I naively felt that as this was an alternative world we could play around with it without risking offending people.

Boy, was I wrong.

First of all, Alan Davis, who lived in Corby where there was an Orange (Protestant) population, refused to draw it. In response, to soften it, inspired by Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. I changed it into an allegory and made the names into anagrams -- e.g., Belfast became Fablest. This cut no ice with Davis. I remember sitting one evening alongside Bernie Jaye as she scrubbed out every reference to Northern Ireland. This explains why the bland story you'll read in



Captain Britain reflects on the beautiful and powerful Saturnyne; from *Marvel Super Heroes* #384, April 1982.

these pages, seems just to be about gang warfare between rivals in different blocks of flats. How utterly flat. Jaye - a woman with a sociology degree who tried vainly to conduct debates on feminism in the letters pages of the *Savage Sword of Conan* - actually said that if she received one letter from an irate vicar in Surbiton her job would be on the line. I found this hard to credit, but this was an object lesson in how censorship happens - people fear for their jobs. We were two years from 1984 but in Marvel UK it had already arrived.

I thought we would get away with it because Alan Moore was already writing his own 1984 - *V for Vendetta* - but more relevantly, Marvel US had in the Seventies run a *Captain America* story written by **Steve Engelhart**, reflecting the Watergate scandal and its resulting political upheavals. In it, Steve Rogers (a.k.a. Captain America) had stopped being Captain America because he believed that the founding values of America had gotten lost. Engelhart created a symbolic new identity for him -- Nomad, the man without a country -- and the title had no Captain America in its pages for 14 months, until Rogers eventually resumed his old identity, concluding that "the values I stood for still apply even if they're not embodied in the present administration". I greatly admired Engelhart's work and thought if they could do that in America surely I would be able to do a much milder thing here.

But it was ahead of its time -- eight years later, in the overtly political *Crisis* comic, Fleetway was to publish **Garth Ennis' True Faith**, about the Troubles (but even that graphic novel was scandalously withdrawn from sale, following complaints).

Paul and Bernie did ask me to come up with further storylines, but did not accept them, and I was terribly disillusioned. I left to take a scriptwriting course in film and television scriptwriting, and went on to produce independent comic stories such as *Doc Chaos*, and to edit for publishers such as Titan and McDonald-Futura.

Alan Moore took over, continuing with many of my ideas but losing interest in what he saw as a two-dimensional character so that he became a mere punchbag, which I know offended Alan Davis.

Davis and I had had dreams of Captain Britain becoming a kind of superhero **Doctor Who**. Personally, I think it is when his stories approach this kind of feel, and don't shy away from the complexities resulting from the Union Jack on his spandex, that he is at his most engaging and dramatic.