TV's AVENGERS return! See page 5



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30 YEARS IN COMICS:

Joe Colquhoun Speaks Out!



Striking Joe Colquboun artwork from LIOW 6th May, 1961. The layout of this "Paddy Payne" page is quite dramatic for that period, when layouts were very pedestrian in A.P. comics. Copyright IPC Magazines 1982.

JOE COLQUHOUN

Joe Colquboun(pronounced Co-boun) is perhaps the ultimate British comics artist. His career has covered the period from the first boom in adventure comic strips in the early 1950's to the present day, yet it was not until recently, with the addition of credit-lines in BATTLE that he was able to gain proper recognition for his work. Over the past thirty years he has been working solidly, constantly producing strips of the highest quality over the entire field of juvenile adventure. Though he has suffered the anomymity of all British comic artists there can be few people who are not familiar with his work, be it on Football Family Robinson; Zarga, Man of Mystery; Zip Nolam or many others. He is currently producing, in conjunction with Pat Hills, some of his best work ever on "Charley's War" for BATTLE. Joe Colquboun is a true professional and is held in high esteem by his colleagues, the staff at IPC and the young lads who write to BATTLE praising his work.

The following interview with Joe was conducted early in 1982. The inter-

S.O.: How and why did you enter the comics field?

viewer is Stephen Oldman.

J.C.: I'd always wanted to draw, ever since I was old enough to pick up a pencil, and of course I spent all of my spare time drawing. In fact I got hold of an old ledger when I was pretty young and used to draw page after page of stories I'd made up, mostly in the adventure line; desert island; war, which I suppose, even in that early stage, served me in good stead for what war to come.

I was brought up on the usual diet most kids had in those days; "Comic Cuts" we used to call them. Then there were the "tu'penny Bloods"; HAGNET; CHAMPION; TRIUMPH; WIZARD; HOTSPUR, which were all written stories, and very well written for what you paid, with one-off illustrations. I always remember a chap called Simmons in CHAMPION and TRIUMPH and a chap called Chapman, who stood out to me as very good artists.

Kids with above-average drawing ability were often lionized at school and one got a false sense of one's capabilities at the time because there was no competition. Though I was interested in the comic strips in its very minor form it wasn't really my ambition to be an artist. The war was about to start and we didn't think too much about the future. Anyway, I managed to get into a local art school, Kingston-On-Thames, about halfway through the war and did a short spell before joining the Navy. I came out of the Mavy about 1947 and went back to the art school on a more prolonged course in book illustration. This knocked a lot of the rough edges and crudities off my work. I still had a dormant hankering for the comic-strip field but the field was very, very limited at the time. EAGLE had just come out, but at my present stage of development I realised I hadn't a hope in hell of getting in there. Them suddenly I saw an advert in a trade magazine for artists to submit samples to a new project publishing independant comics, and I jumped at this with alacrity. I met a couple of ex-G.I.'s and they seemed quite pleased with the samples I had from art school, though, as I subsequently found out, with the fees they paid they'd have been glad to get anybody. They paid the princely sum of £1.50 per page. Our work was crude and rushed; it had to be. The printing was atrocious, and though we had a foothold in the market we rarely saw our work in print. The very first publication I saw of my

own work gave me the most cuphoric feeling I've ever had. It's like learning to ride a bike or having your first woman I suppose; never to be repeated. We were doing one-off stories, covering war, westerns, space stuff. espionage; very American orientated, pretty well written, all done by the Yanks. I was there for 7 or 8 sonths and certainly didn't earn a fortune though I learned speed and a certain amount of slickness. However, the general consensus was that the outfit was done for we hadn't been paid for a hell of a time, I'd just got married and things were pretty grim. With nothing to lose, I managed to get an interview with the editor of EAGLE. I showed him the specimens i'd managed to salvage from the Americans and he was very compassionate but obviously it wasn't quite what he wanted. He said "Why don't you go across to A.P. (Amalgamated Press), they ve just brought out a new comic called LION", so I thought "What's to lose?". I saw there agother nice chap called Stan Boddington LION was a bit more down-market than EAGLE and he seemed quite impressed. Unfortunately, all the stories were tied up in LIOW so in desperation I said "Of course, I write scripts as well"(in truth, I'd never done anything in my life)!He pricked his ears up at that, and sent me away to do a specimen adventure strip. So, very influenced by my U.S. debut, I flogged out a story about the Mavy in the Pacific war. My symopsis produced an epic of 100 instalments, ranging from a fairly logical beginning to a rambling climax. It didn't go down too well. They irined it out at a story conference, and we thrashed it out and condensed it down to quite a neat four-story jub! Then they relegated me to the elangeling CHAMPION, which was still mainly written stories. They did have a two-page centrespread and they got me to write and draw another epic, which ram for 44 installments, called "Legionnaire Terry's Desert quest" which was all very much my own work with very little interference from the sub-editors who subsequently became the bane of my life in script writing.

S.O.: How did this script writer/artist arrangement work out in practice?

J.C.: Just for the record, the first four instalments of "Roy of the Rovers" were written by Frank S. Pepper, and I was relieved to think I'd finished with script-writing but unfortunately, Pep, I suppose, was getting on a bit and couldn't cope. I was asked to carry on the series. I had some great reservations about this because I knew damn all about soccer really but they said they'd help with the technical detail and strategy. We had endless story conferences which necessitated me going up to the office dry-mouthed month after month. It wasn't a terribly happy time. Other than those four instalments, up to the end of the first 5 year stint on "Roy of the Rovers" I wrote and illustrated all the stories I did. I never wrote any scripts for any other artists but I consider myself an artist first and a writer second; the writing was a happy expedient to get into A.P. Writing never came terribly maturally to me, compared to the drawing. They seemed to like it quite wall, though it got progressively more that a hell of a lot of it was edited out, until I got so frustrated 1 eventually hurled the scriptwriting in.

S.O.: So how were the payments arranged?

J.C.: Despite the writing coming less naturally than the artwork, it didn't take as long.A two-page script for Roy certainly didn't take as long as two pages of artwork, but the ratio of pay was less though I think it was proportionally about right per hours work.

S.O.: In those early days, what were your main artistic influences?

J.C.: The artist that influenced me most in this field was good old Alex Raymond of "Rip Kirby" fame.I thought he was a genius.His distinct style, economy, a super ratio of black and white, a minimum of hatching...it was the quintessence of what I felt I'd be happy to emulate, and this influence stayed with me a long time, until my own technique and style developed. If the influence still shows I'd be bloody happy.

S.O.: Have you ever been affected by the changes in ownership and organisation at A.P./Fleetway/IPC?

J.C.: Yes, two or three times. I can't recall exactly whether it was the change from AP to Fleetway or Fleetway to IPC, and there have been several changes in the hierarchy, but a few heads have rolled from time to time which was very disconcerting. The changes affected me adversely initially, though in the end I came off better financially. At the time of the change from AP to Fleetway a lot of strange new faces appeared in the Editorials and caused upheaval in an attempt to modernise and update what were becoming rather pedestrian publications. As freelancers, we worked, in varying degrees, far away from the office and didn't know what the hell was going on. I at the time, was working on "Paddy Payne" for my second or third year and I never realised anything was in the offing until suddenly I was told to belay my last work and stop the instalment I was doing, and that was it! No explanation - I was out of work! Finally, what we were told, due to the reconstruction of LION and TIGER they were calling in. as trouble-shooters, a lot of Continental artists. I presume the new regime thought these guys a lot slicker and technically superior to us, and possibly they were, though ultimately I was returned to "Paddy Payne" with a slight increase in fees. It caused a fair amount of resentment amongst the British guys. We thought these guys were pretty good but they didn't seem to offer much more than we were able to supply and they were being paid less, the rate of exchange being favourable to us at the time. Thereafter I felt pretty insecure; I was shaken out of my complacency. It has never occurred to that degree since, though I've had other upsets. Though the new faces never intentionally did the dirty on me they weren't averse to insisting I drop a steady job. Case in point; "The Football Family Robinson" which I really enjoyed. They asked me to drop that and pilot a great new project, and in time this "great new story" would be shelved indefinitely. There I was, no job, and no apologies. In the end I made my feelings known. I told them: "This is bloody ridiculous; this is jeopardizing my career". I came to a good agreement with them but no contract; they never signed any contract. Since then I've never had any trouble.

S.O.: How do you wiew the realism in the present day "Roy of the Rovers"?

J.C.: I must admit I haven't kept in touch with the storyline of Roy, though I think Barrie Tomlinson, who was the group editor until very recently, influenced the tendency of Roy to progress to a more realistic and sophisticated level. I have an open mind about it. Barrie did a lot to liven up the storyline but I don't think it would hold much sway with the average reader. All I know is that it wouldn't have been allowed to happen in my day, due to the policy at the time.

S.O.: Were you then, subject to a lot of editorial pressures?

J.C.: Yes, we were really limited. A lot of it was sub-edited. Perhaps they played down to the readers too much them, and perhaps they play up too high above the readers now. Perhaps a compromise is the thing. I got very frustrated because I think it's awfully difficult for an adult writer to relate to the mind of a youngster. At the time there was almost a boarding school, monastic mentality in the strict censorship. You were never allowed to mention women. Once, I managed to bring in Roy's landlady and even that was suspect. It's unbelievable in this day and age, but that's the way it was.

S.O.: Have the weekly schedules caused you many problems?

J.C.: From the beginning, serialisation is one of the world's worst ways of making a living. The deadlines and pressures become pretty punitive from time to time. The worst thing is when you're trying get ahead for a holiday, and up comes bloody Easter and the office rings up to say you've got to gain another four days. When you're working six or seven days a week it's practically impossible, but you do it somehow. There were periods when I was a bit more ambitious, or needed to earn a bit more money, that I took on annual jobs as well, and even though you could be a bit more slap-

dash, it was still a hell of a grind. Now, I take on as little work as I can do and still remain solvent. I try to work Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, but it just depends. If there's a cast of thousands in the strip), with the 5th Ablutions going over the top it takes me a lot longer.

S.O.: Does your attitude to your work vary with the job you're doing?

J.C.: I think I can say with a certain satisfaction that I've always tried to do the best I can in any job. You know there's a readership out there somewhere, so you feel you want to do the best for your own pride, as well as to justify your wages. Of course, bad scripts do have a depressing effect; I feel happier when I know I have a rapport with the author, even if I've never not the guy. The time when I was least interested in my work was when I ended up on BUSTER. I enjoyed "Zarga" very much, but this was rather short-lived and I was relegated to a rather childish script "The Ski-Board Squad", and "The Runaway Robinsons", a Little Orphan Annie type of thing, which wasm't quite my line. This was no fault of the author, it just wasn't my scene. I think I've always tended to put a bit more in my work than a few of my colleagues. I think they're wiser, they seem to have learnt the economy of line, omission is always more difficult than over working. I think my main failing in this type of artwork is that I tend to put in everything and the kitchen sink; a lot of it gets lost in the reproduction, therefore in strict terms it's a waste of time, and, in this game, time is money. I've been a bit of a mug in that respect but the leopard can't change its spots.

S.O.: You obviously put a lot of care into your colour strips; "Football Family Robinson" and "Kid Chameleon". Would you like to do more?

J.C.: I really enjoyed doing the culour work. In some respects it's much more fulfilling than black and white. The next best thing is line and wash, which I was able to do for a fair time in TIGER because of the litho printing. With letterpress it's a very limited medium, with the cross-natching and moulding. I'm not as happy with that as I am with colour wash or line and wash techniques, but again it's the old, old story of economics. Even if there were an opportunity to go back to colour work I would like to do it, but only if they paid a justifiable fee for the considerable extra work and expertise involved.

5.0.: Do you have a lot of difficulty getting a change of jobs when you're becoming bored with the strip you're working on?

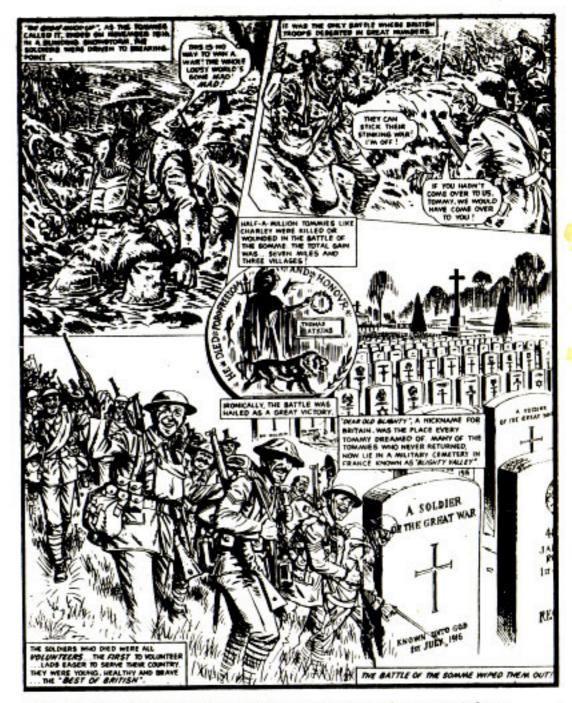
J.C.: Since I've been on BATTLE I've felt no desire to change, but I found the attitude amongst editors to be most prevalent when I was on "Roy of the Rovers", round about that period. I found Roy a bit of a boring subject, not being a great fam of football, and after four or five years of drawing those bloody hairy-arsed footballers tearing around morning, noon and night, it got me down a lot. I wanted the "Faddy Fayne" slot in LIOM, and it took me a hell of a job to get off Roy. The continual ploy was "We can't get anyone else to do it", but if it had come to the crunch they'd have found another bloke within five seconds flat, I'm sure of it. In fact, when I finally insisted I wanted a change they found someone to do it, and do it pretty successfully as far as I could see. The main problem was finding another artist willing to move on from the slot you wanted. This really was a bigger problem than the inertia of the editors. The inertia did exist; around the late 1950's to mid 1960's there definitely seemed to be a conspiracy of editors to keep you on the same slot if it was proving successful. This also happened on BUSTER, and I had a bit of a job wangling onto BATTLE.

S.O.: Was your agent helpful?

J.C.: I've never had an agent, I'm glad to say, as they take, what is it, 20% of ones earnings, which is a fair old slice on top of the income tax and National Insurance.

S.O.: During the 1960's your work was published alongside such greats as Eric Bradbury, Nike Western, Geoff Campion, etc. Were you aware of them at the time?

J.C.: No. You must remember that, up until very recently, IPC always insisted on anonymity. Even if you signed your name at the bottom, out of sheer pride to



This page, from the "Charley's War" episode in BATTLE 16th August, 1980, is perhaps one of Joe Colquhoun's most memorable pieces, illustrating both the horror and futulity of war. In the symbolic final panel, cheery young British troops unwittingly follow the path of patriotism which is to lead to their graves in the terrible Battle of the Sonne. The page is so emotive that even Colquhoun, its' artist, was close to tears when re-reading it. Copyright IPC Magazines Ltd. 1982.

in your work, they whited it out. We remained anonymous until very, very recently when the credits went up in BATTLE, which is very gratifying in a way. However, I gradually got to know who the various artists were, if only by reputation, and formed a few opinions. I wann't familiar with Western's work in the sixties, but Bradbury, Lawrence and Campion I thought were excellent stuff. Campion's work recently has seemed to have fallen off a bit, I hate to say, it may be the chap's been ill; he may be getting on a bit.

S.O.: What about the newer artists?

J.C.: I never seem to get the time to study other publications, but I'm very aware of Cam Kennedy's work, which I think is really top notch stuff. One little exception; he tends to leave the backgrounds a bit vacant, but the presentation is superb, his detailed and accurate drawing of war material is spot on, to my mind, and he's a damn good figure draughtsman; there's a very good action and attitude about them, they could almost be stills from a movie.

S.O.: How about the Europeans?

J.C.: I'm not very familiar with any of these artists, with the exception of Ezquerra, who has quite a strong, gritty, abrasive sort of style which doesn't appeal to me personally but I can see why he has a following, it's a unique style he's got.

5.0.: You've worked on a wide variety of strips, but are there any you'd have liked to have done more of?

J.C.: That's easy. "Football Family Robinson" was rather cut off in my prime. Even though it was football, it was football with tongue-in-cheek, and a lot of rather ribald humour, and offered some good characterisation of the entire family. It appealed to me, the zaminess of it really, and it had a good author, Tom Tully. The other one, humour again, "Cap'm Codsmouth" my very first slapstick, cartoon humour, and I was quite pleased with it. Also, I wrote the script, the first time I'd written a script since I'd packed in after Roy. I felt I was just getting into my stride when it was cut off. The only other was "Zarga - Man of Mystery". Anytof the others, I think, had reached saturation point, and I was quite happy to move on.

S.O.: Obviously, you have a leaning to humour. Was there any humour artist who particularly appealed to you?

J.C.: One who appealed to me I think was called Nobby Clarke, who drew in TIGER.I also believe he did "Buster's Diary". He had a nice, clean, flowing line, amiable little characters and he drew super little dolly birds when it was allowed. Other characters he did were "Wild Bill Hiccup" and a Luftwaffe pilot from World War Two called "Messy Schmitt". I thought he was an absolute scream. I think I'd like to do more humour work. "Charley's War" is all very well, but it's a sombre subject and believe it or not, when you're stuck doing it day after day, it can be bloody depressing. It would be nice if I could find the time or the opportunity to do a one-page on "The Goodies" or "Cap'n Codsmouth", just to relieve the tension.

S.O.: "Charley's War" is regarded by many fans and pro's alike as one of the best strips currently produced in Britain. How do you feel about it?

J.C.: First of all, I can only say how gratified and quite suprised I am that it's viewed so favourably even by quite upmarket intellectuals. I was astounded that one learned professor equated it with "All Quiet On The Western Front" as a social document. That seems a bit high-flying for me, though I'm beginning to understand it in a way, thanks to the inspiration and dedication of Pat Mills. I think this has really rubbed off on me. I don't want to let him down, and again I'm very interested in the subject, even though at times I find it very depressing and emotive. Particularly the sequence at the end of the Battle of the Somme. You'll find it hard to believe, but when I re-read that in its printed version I was close to tears. Just shows how involved you can get I suppose.

When I was first asked to take on "Charley's War" after "Johnny Red" I said to the editor "God Almighty, how are you going to make any subject matter 12



Above: A sample of Joe's cartoon technique from the humour strip "Cap's Codsmouth". This example is taken from JAG 6th July, 1968 Copyright IPC

out of such a static subject as trech warfare?", and Dave Hunt(the editor at the time) said "We've got a damm good author - he'll be able to pull it through". I'd never met Pat or knew of him, I was still a bit sceptical, but as it developed I began to realise that we were onto something, it seemed to catch on. I've tried very hard to bring out the realism in the trenches and most of the sequences in the story are based on factual incidents. That might lead to a certain amount of authenticity which is possibly lacking in the more blood and thunder, action-packed World War 2 stories. Finally, and this is my opinion, it illustrates a period that was already dying then. When words like Honour, Duty, Patriotism, meant something. I think most decent kids reading this epoch will have a sneaking, almost atavistic feeling that in this present rather sick and selfish world, with violence and amorality seeming to pay dividends, they may think they're missing out on something. That's a bit pretentious, but think about it.

S.O.: How do you see Charley developing?

J.C.: It's really up to Pat, but I think the best has gone. The Somme sequence, had the greatest impact, and we're now in the greater horrors of Passchendaele. After that there's only 1918 and the Armistice. However, Pat will probably pull something spectacular out of his tin-hat!

S.O.: Since the mid-sixties there's been a steady decline in the number of titles published. What do you see as the reasons?

J.C.: I would think, or rather hazard a guess, that the decline is due:
a) to the ever increasing costs of production, b) inept management policy
by promoting new publications at the wrong time with inedequate market
research. Also, some comics tend to duplicate subject matter, a case to prove
that in a way: LION and TIGER, companion papers, survived together for a

S.O.: One question I meant to ask earlier: I've never seem any science-fiction work by you. Would you like to do work for 2000 AD?

J.C.: No, not that I've studied 2000 AD too much. This seems to imply an awful indifference but it's really lack of time in which to study these things in depth. But I don't think I'd be creative enough to dream up the weird and wonderful situations, characters, in these stylised stories. Wot by any means. I prefer to do contemporary or period subjects such as "Charley's War", for which I can easily obtain reference.

S.O. : Before you wrote the profile for Dez Skinn's FANTASY ADVERTISER, were you aware of an organised fandom?

J.C.: I had absolutely no idea before Dez Skinn's profile, and I was quite intrigued by it. However, until you contacted me about this interview, I'd not been aware of any other such publications besides Dez's. I'd assumed there must have been some around, but I've no knowledge as to whether it's extensive or limited.

S.O.: Do you think fandom is useful in anyway?

J.C.: It serves as a recruiting ground almost, and a good training ground for up and coming artists who may desire to become professional. I don't know how developed it is in this country, I must admit, but I'm pleased to see that FAN-TASY EXPRESS is geared to British comics. From my point of view, and I'm sure for a lot of other artists, being in contact with chaps like you is a very good barometer to find out what's happening, what the current trends are, and the general gossip in this particular trade. I for one don't get much information from any other source, especially from the office. It's like getting blood from a stone - they're so busy.

S.O.: How do you see your own future?

J.C.: In these uncertain times I don't like to delve too deeply in the future. Being self-employed offers little security, even in this welfare state. You get no pension other than the basic one, even though we've paid a high carmings-related insurance. You get no fat, golden handshake when we decide to hang up our tak pen & brushes. Frankly, after thirty years of concentrated comic strip work, I certainly have no desire to carry on at this pace for another ten or fifteen years, which is about all I've got left in active life. I think the ideal way to bow out gracefully would be to, if economics permit, reduce gradually my output of work, and enjoy an increase in leisure until my official retirement age.

5.0.: And how do you see comics in this country developing?

J.C.: If costs can be kept to a reasonable level and inflation doesn't get out of hand, I would hazard rather a pessimistic guess that they'll stay virtually the same in format and story content. Rather a sobering thought. I've a feeling they've passed their heyday and will never be as prolific again. In an ideal world I'd like to see some new vigorous company take up the challenge, like the old EAGLE did in the '50s. I'd like to see a batch of new publications to challenge the stagnation. Lots of full colour work, good artists, with an abandomment of letterpress, which I've been particularly restriced by, in favour of photolitho. And on that, here endeth the first lesson.

S.O.: Thanks for this interview, especially as you're so busy on "Charley's War".

J.C.: Thanks for your interest.



Biddle & Webb Auction Rooms is located on the No. 8 bus route, or take advantage of the free cosch service available from outside Nostalgia & Comics. 14-16, Smallbrook Queensuay. Tel. 021-643-0143

Dealers tables include :- New Imports, Eurrent Insues, Hack Issues, C. F. & Fantasy Paperbacks, Movie Posters, Stills, Gum Cards, Ancords, Flyls Freeley Stall, and many more jowl slobbering goodies:

On hand to give advice and opinions will be professional artists and writers, including representatives from 2000 A.D. & Marrior. You are invited to bring along samples of your artwork.

