

How it all started for me.

By John McCabe

I had been reading a comic when I came across an ad for a Conan roleplaying game. The one-page poster ad was of Conan standing in front of some ruins. To one side was some kind of a brown furred ape creature. I was fascinated by the picture and if memory serves, I sent a letter to the address listed to ask for a RPG catalogue. I had no idea what this was all about but had been playing those 'Choose your own Adventure' game books. The ones that you read from page 1 but after, that depending on what you decided to do, you went to different pages. The early ones I read had no dice involved but that changed when I got Book 4 in the Fighting Fantasy series: Starship Traveller that had combat and Skill checks using two 6-sided dice.

When the catalogue duly arrived, I was stumped. There was so much choice I had no idea where to begin. I came across a listing for Dungeons and Dragons but was unsure which to start with. I had to ask my Dad which was first. The Basic Set or the Companion Set? In my thinking the Companion Set meant you could play with friends whereas the Basic Set possibly meant that you had to play alone. I was advised that the Basic Set was the way to go. I asked for the Basic Set for Christmas with no consideration on how my parents was going to locate this in Ireland. As far as I was aware D&D was only available in the USA and the UK. Much to my delight the Red Box – with the Larry Elmore painting of the Red Dragon - was under the tree on Christmas morning. It was perhaps my best Christmas ever and I spent the holidays reading the books and learning the rules. It seems from reading other people's experiences since that time, that I was not the only person to fail my saving throw against Bargle's spell and Aleena was killed. I was distraught. Stupid saving throws, why could I not save her? It did not help that she was drawn as an extremely attractive woman. At least to my (roughly) 13-year-old self.

Once I had a pretty good grasp on the rules and how to be a Dungeon Master, I gathered my friends together and taught them the rules as best I could. I DM'd all the games at that early stage as I was the only one that had the rulebooks. We would sometimes have to play in a friend's back garden as there were so many of us. Maybe as many as eight in the adventuring party at one time. My games were either quite lethal or the players were quite fool hardy. Whatever the reason, player characters were dying left, right and centre. The good thing was that we never spent much time fleshing out the characters and because I only had the Basic Set no characters went further than 3rd level. If a character was killed or reached 3rd level a new character was rolled up and the process started again.

Eventually I made the trip into town and picked up my copy of the Expert Set – the blue box with the guy on a horse being attacked by a dragon. This box set took players from 4th to 14th level. My head was spinning with the possibilities. The new rules also introduced wilderness adventures. Travelling from Dungeons to Cities to Dungeons instead of just magically appearing at the entrance. Many of my players lost a fortune on horses to get them from the city to the dungeon only to have to tie them up outside while they ventured in. The horses were rarely still tied to the tree if they managed to escape alive. At that stage the group was breaking up and the large numbers of players began to dwindle. My recollections are a bit hazy around of this time. I wish I had kept better notes. I had the chance to play as a character and one of the first if not the first was a fighter called Druss. I was a huge David Gemmill

fan and thought it was an appropriate name for my character. This time I wanted to flesh my character out a bit. I had a look at the map for the Known World in the Expert Set and decided that the most appropriate place for him to come from was as far north as I could see. That placed his birthplace in the Heldann Freeholds. Some new friends came into my circle and we got the AD&D 2nd edition. We played a weird hybrid of BECMI and AD&D 2nd addition. We used a combination of the 2nd addition rules, spells, character classes etc while playing D&D modules as they were written. I had the Basic set to Masters set and I did not get the Immortals set as I did not think we would ever get that high and I was not too keen on playing that level of character. For completions sake I wished I had bought it but I'm not too upset.

Now we were having games with anywhere from one DM with one player, sometimes as many as four players. This sometimes meant the inclusion of NPCs to increase the strength of the party or fill in gaps where they were weak. We still played in what is now called Mystara but this time there were three Dungeon Masters (including myself) which meant I had the chance to play more often. The early games had me continuing as DM for the Known World, one of us was DM for a campaign based in the Hollow World and the 3rd campaign was based in Thunder Rift.

My first Hollow World character was a fighter from the Pearl Islands (with no explanation that I can recall of how he got to the Hollow World). He was called Karnuss and he was a chaotic evil fighter. Probably my first and only foray to the dark side. I think Karnuss was killed by a gargoyle soon after he had become a cannibal. He was only 2nd or 3rd level so although I liked the character I hadn't lost too much. My 2nd character was a Milenian mage called Tyros Darkmane. He adventured with a Beast Man and somewhere along the line found a talisman which allowed him to control a Bone Golem (he called Goliath). The Beast Man died but Tyros still lives on.

Druss was dusted down for his appearance in Thunder Rift. Again, I have no idea how he got there from the Heldann Freeholds but that was not important. Druss was now a Ranger. As information about the Heldann Freeholds became available I fleshed out his back story. The names of his parents changed over time. His father was always a Ranger / Fighter / Woodsman of some kind and his mother was a Heldannic Knight before I had any idea what that entailed. One day I arrived at my friend's house to meet up for a game. The two other DMs had decided that they would prefer to have their own world to run campaigns, which made perfect sense. I played a human ranger called Feral who later became a Harper in the Forgotten Realms. He could shape change into a hawk, thanks to a wish spell but died at around 9th level at the hands of the Zhentarim.

I played a Minotaur fighter with an elven companion in the Dragon Lance campaign and he to my memory still lives but I can't remember off the top of my head what level he reached.

As much as I enjoyed the chance to play, I think I preferred to be DM. In particular I enjoyed playing in Mystara. I loved this world and picked up pretty much every module and accessory I could find and afford. I missed out on the Five Shires Gazetteer as it wasn't one that was on the top of my list of must haves. I don't think I ever considered the line would ever go out of print and I perhaps thought I could always pick up a copy at a later date. I have since got a copy (during Covid when I rediscovered by D&D collection and passion) as a pdf on Drivethru RPG. Not the same as having an original but it would have to do.

I ran some very memorable sessions in Mystara. Two of my consistent players had some fun characters. One player unfortunately had a lot of characters with a bad habit of dying but did manage to keep his Priest of Tarastia alive after we played the first few years of the Wrath of the Immortals campaign. The other player was a lot more cautious and had two characters survive to around 9th level. A Darokinian thief called Matthew Hoff who would later team up with his cousin from Karameikos, Ponder Stibbons, a mage. There were a lot of campaigns as a group and one or two solo adventures which were great for introducing a new nemesis and further expanding on their character's personal stories. The Mage and the Thief in particular had histories that were developing nicely as they survived more or less intact for longer than pretty much all other player characters. The introduction of an NPC elf - Hallístra Jhalavar - who was later revealed to be a Shadow Elf sent to the surface by her people to gather information about the world was also one of the highlights for me. As time passed and we had less time to play together I spent more time writing back stories and ongoing adventures for Druss Ironclad and Hallístra Jhalavar. It was during the lockdowns as mentioned above that I started looking through my D&D collection. It was at this time that I discovered Mr. Welch's Mystara videos on YouTube and started looking at the Vaults of Pandius again. There was so much more information and I was pleasantly surprised that although no longer in print or being supported by Wizards of the Coast the fans had stuck to the task of creating brand new stuff and expanding on the canon with much enthusiasm. I came across the fan made Gazetteer for the Heldann Freeholds. Apart from my Poor Wizards Almanacs, Joshuan's Almanac and the Princess Ark series I did not have a lot of information on this part of the world. The part of the world, that at the time was as far north as we knew of from the original map all the way back in the Blue Box / Isle of Dread days. I was excited to delve into this treasure trove of ideas and finally see what the Heldann Freeholds was all about. I was not disappointed.

This inspired me to go back to my Druss character and add my bit of creativity to the huge amount already there. I read through the Gazetteer and things Bruce Heard had written, combined it with what I had sketched out for my character's background all those years ago and began writing. As I wrote the back story it took on a life of its own. It expanded way beyond what I had intended. It seems that Druss's mother and father wanted their story told as well. So that's what I did. It's still a work in progress and I even went as far as drawing (crude) portraits of some of the characters as they came up. It was and is a very enjoyable experience which I hope to continue for as long as possible. I like the idea of my version of the history of Mystara and my characters having a place along with all the amazing contributions from fans on the Vaults. Some of it is quite incredible. The expanse and detail are truly amazing. I will probably never get the chance to play or DM a session again, and if I was it would most definitely be that weird combination of BECMI and AD&D 2nd edition, but I am alright with that. The story is titled: The Black Lion. When inspiration struck, I grabbed a pen and started writing. This now means I have to type it up, which I am in the process of doing. My love of the Mystara setting has found an outlet in the writing and I hope others enjoy reading it half as much as I enjoyed writing it.