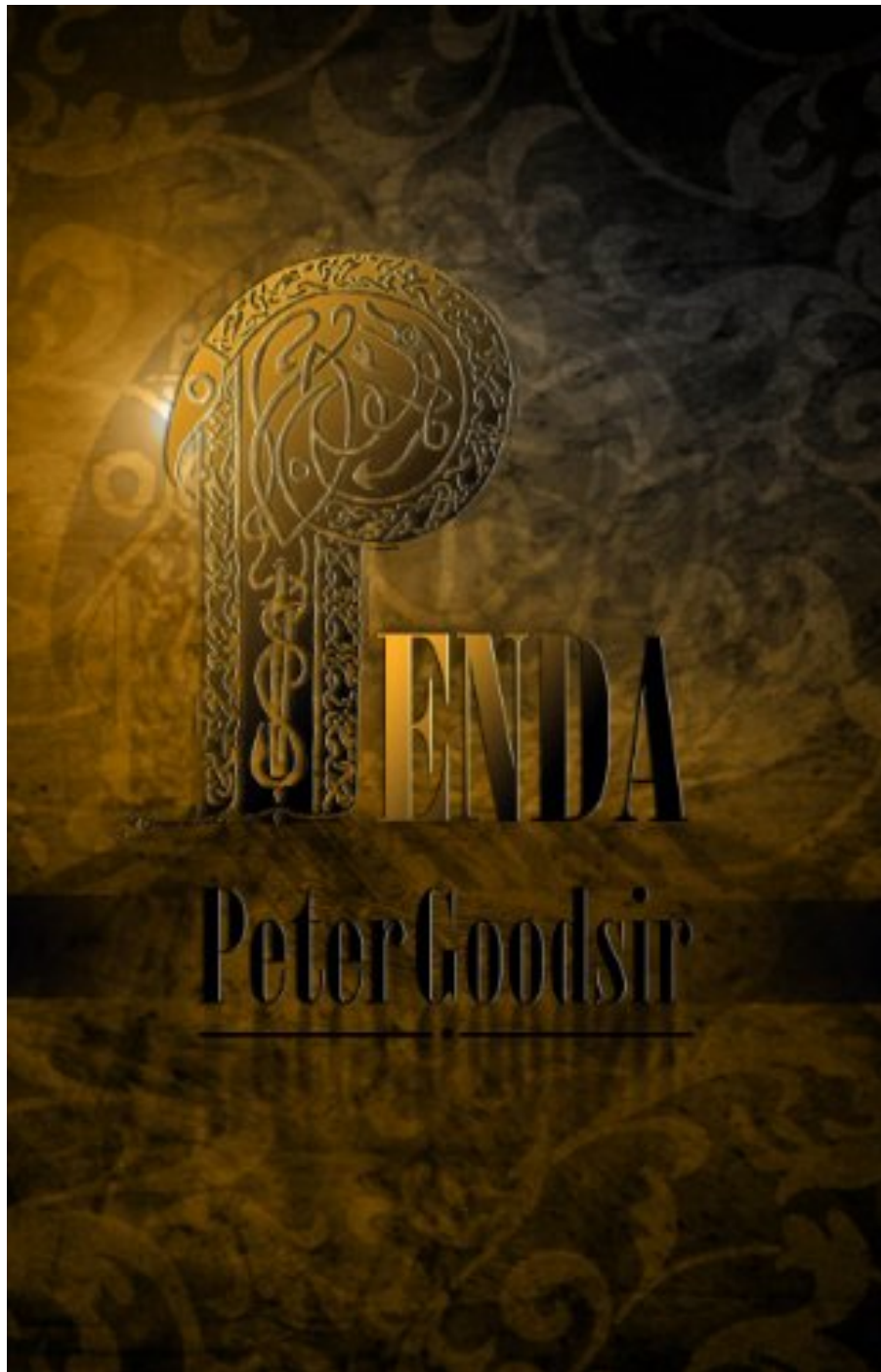


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In 410 AD the Roman legions marched away from Britain to bolster the numbers of the continental armies who were embroiled in a struggle that threatened the future of the empire. The fertile island was left to the protection of small militias comprised of veterans and farmers led by local chiefs. With the help of Anglo-Saxon mercenaries, invasion by the Picts was averted – but at a cost.

A century later, Angles, Saxons and Jutes struck out from the lands gifted to them in the east, in an attempt to conquer more territory. They were defeated in several battles by the legendary war-leader, ARTHUR, which brought a temporary halt to the westward advance.

A century later still, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes possessed the heart of the island, with the British kingdoms confined to the west and north. The Pope sent envoys to convert these new pagan princes of the island to Christian ways. The new kingdoms were locked in a power struggle, making and breaking alliances with British princes as well as other Anglo-Saxon rulers. At this time, a British princess gives birth to a boy child. The son of a chief of the Mercians (border dwellers); he is given the name Penda.

From an early age, Penda is thrown into a world of magic, intrigue and ancient feuds. He soon learns that his life's path has been planned since his birth and that he has a major destiny to fulfil.

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Swinging between bad and brilliant but reaching a point of equilibrium that is excellent

By Bill Greenhalf

I stumbled across this book on kindle while searching for a history of Mercia and I wasn't at all looking for a novel. I downloaded the sample anyway and it proved to be very substantial, taking us through Penda's childhood all the way to the first major historical event in Anglo Saxon history which could have involved our hero. I don't want to give too many spoilers in this review - but I don't think anyone can object if I say that this event is the battle of Chester.

Unfortunately, I cannot imagine that many readers will bother to pay to go on beyond the sample. The style is as clunky as a diesel version of a Soviet era Lada. The dramatic entry of a Cassandra figure into the hall of Penda's father is greeted by the Lord with the words "nice of you to drop in" (it is a good idea to avoid trying to use pseudo contemporary language - but this can be taken too far). The author (on kindle there were no illustrations so I guess this is just Peter Goodsir) also seems in this early part of the book to be rushing to set the scene using some very tired clichés, for example there has to be a childhood fight with another boy after which they make up (boys will be boys) and then become lifelong best friends, in this case this takes a couple of paragraphs between an unprovoked assault and the hand shake.

So why did I bother going on beyond the sample? I'm far too tight fisted to pay money for dross. The reason I went on is probably that even from the sample it was apparent that behind the clunky prose was a superb story line. It was also pretty clear that this was going to be an attempt to show the history behind the Arthurian legends. It might seem a little strange explaining the legend of a Celtic Christian icon by referring to a pagan Anglian King. However, it is not a new idea and in fact Penda is the most probable source of at least some of the legends. So I was interested to see how the story would develop, also despite the style the characters introduced in the sample were really good. The book is positioned somewhere between Rosemary Sutcliff and Bernard Cornwell, but the people in the book seem to be more rounded adults than in Sutcliff and are far more credible than the Sharpe character in all his different guises within the Cornwell books.

My expectations were low of the downloaded full text. I just hoped that the story wasn't going to get too mystical, I wanted as much history as possible with only a dash of magic. I was genuinely shocked at the change in the book from the very moment the battle scene finished. It was like a different author had taken over, although I imagine it is more likely that Mr Goodsir felt that once he had firmly anchored his story in a historical context he was free to write the book he had wanted to write from the beginning - and that is a very good book.

The novel I imagine Peter Goodsir wanted to write, and in the end did write, does have an awful lot more mysticism and magic than I'd originally wanted. However, on reflection this is not such a bad thing. To understand why the historical events surrounding the rise and fall of King Penda of the Mercians could have inspired the creation one of the world's most popular legends I think we need to understand that the people creating the legend genuinely believed in magic and the best way to do that is put yourself in their position by becoming absorbed in the story as they might have imagined it.

In short this is far more than just a ripping yarn and I hope it gets a wide audience. Please read on beyond the sample.

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