

The Onnwalish Character

From the writings of Ciryen Quellan - poet, minstrel and wanderer, penned upon the 16th day of Planting in this, the Common Year 591.

"In my wanderings over the face of the Flanaess, I have found that one question is foremost in my mind when I first arrive in a new land - what is the character of the people that dwell there? This is a most useful question for a traveller in a strange land to ask because it is fundamental to understanding the country and how it works. So when I arrived some weeks ago in the town of Sornhill upon Onnwal's Storm Coast, I asked myself - what is it that typifies the Onnwalish character?"

The first thing that struck me was their great practicality and their emphasis on the here and now. An Onnwalon has little time for idle musings on life, religion or the arguments of sages - but focuses all his energies into what is tangible and before him.

The most obvious example of this can be seen by looking at the faiths the Onnwalons hold dear. Gods of the sea and winds, gods of the fields and hills, gods to bless their trade. Practical gods whose churches touch the everyday things that matter - the fishing boat upon the sea, the crops in the fields, the cargo in the hold. In matters arcane too, the Onnwalons value the practical. Weather-shapers are greatly valued, as are those who can lend aid in battle. Artisans and their crafts are well respected. In architecture - buildings are constructed solidly (often in the stark rectilinear forms favoured by many Oerids) and decorated simply and tastefully - for there is beauty in simplicity for the people of Onnwal. Anything else is a waste of time, an extravagance. Though theirs is a bountiful land and they are not a joyless people, extravagance is something most Onnwalons frown upon, most especially in times of need. It may be that this is due to their experience as former subjects of the debauched Overkings of Rauxes and their lackeys in the South Province, whose excesses weighed oppressively on the people of Onnwal. Some might say that this obstinate practicality can lead to shortsightedness or shows a want of imagination or of flair. This can at times be true, but in the present climate of strife and woe, the people of Onnwal are served well by their unwavering concentration on the task before them - the liberation of their homeland.

Comfort is something earned rather than expected in Onnwal. When the task is done, then the labourer rests and makes merry as is his due, but not before. In terms of merry making - most farmers have a small patch of vines somewhere about their land, while the Gildenlea is famous for its grainfields. Small wonder then that wine (universally red) and beer (from barley, wheat and maize) are the Onnwalon's beverages of choice. Dancing is a particularly popular form of entertainment and musicians find a ready welcome in most places, especially in the south.

Onnwalons are never afraid of hard work or hardship. If a task is to be done, then they will do it - this can be counted upon. Responsibility is taken very seriously and is an honour rather than a burden. I am reminded of the master of a small fishing ketch upon the quay at Sornhill. It was his responsibility to ferry supplies across Notxia Bay to the garrison holding the tower of Osprem's Light against the Brotherhood troops that beleaguer it. The road around the north side of the bay is held by Hochebi and therefore impassable. Upon this day, a spring gale was blowing out of the north-east, churning the cold grey waters of the bay into white wave caps - called Procan's Mares by the local folk. The prospect of steering a small open boat laden with cargo into the teeth of such weather was not one I, or I think many others would have relished facing. I saw from his eyes, glinting out from under his pigskin hat, that Kerdhel, the master of the boat, thought much the same.

"Well," he said. "If I don't go out 'cross yonder, then the garrison'll go hungry. Suppose they've a pile a 'hings to worry about without adding a hungry belly to it."

Without further fuss or delay, he cast off and set out for the dim beacon of Osprem's Light glimmering wanly through the sheets of rain. This is but one example of the unshakeable sense of duty that typifies the Onnwalon - duty and a willingness to do that which must be done with a scant regard for the cost. Onnwalons are not by nature heroic in the sense that many troubadours sing of - seeking out danger recklessly and needlessly for the sake of doing it. Their heroism is a more stoic matter - facing peril when it needs to be faced and doing so unflinchingly.

Travelling through the country, it is not hard to see the tight sense of community that binds the villages and towns of Onnwal together. Every person has his place, and every person will do what he can for others in their community. Hand in hand with this is a strong feeling of pride in one's home. The result is often a friendly rivalry between neighbouring villages, though sometimes - especially in contests of prowess or sport, which are contested fiercely, friendship is forgotten and matters come to blows. The Onnwalons can be a passionate people - fast allies as rule, but fierce when insulted or threatened. Feuds and vendettas, some of longstanding are not unknown in Onnwal.

However, when faced with outsiders, rivals will band together to stand up for their Cantred, their Province, their Land, their differences forgotten in their love for what is theirs and what they are a part of. The fault of this love is to make some Onnwalons overly parochial and unappreciative and naive of the outside world. This complacency cost them dear when the tragedy of the Greyhawk Wars over took their beloved land and eclipsed for a time their freedom. The Occupation has left deep, but invisible scars upon Onnwal's people. Where once there was a generous welcome - fear, suspicion and a spear point now more often greet strangers in Onnwalish villages. Even within communities, the experience of betrayal from within has eroded some of the bonds that held neighbour fast to neighbour. Fear of the Brotherhood and its spies holds the people of Onnwal tight in its grip. In response to this, the Onnwalish cling more tightly to those they know and trust and watch against the outside world that hurt them so much in the past. However is so drawing together against the foe, their fear weakens the bonds between communities and the land becomes a patchwork of tiny camps where paranoia rules. The efforts of Szek Destron and Rakehell Chert have served to ease this fear slightly - certainly those that can prove they fight for Free Onnwal are warmly received everywhere and the people will make great sacrifices for them - but the problem is likely to linger for long years into the future.

My remarks so far have dealt with the Onnwalish character in general. However, as in any land, there is a wealth of variety in the people that live there. This variety is nowhere more obviously demonstrated than about the campfires of the Army of Rebellion, whether within the walls of Sornhill or in the armed camp that is the town of Kildeer. There fishermen from the Storm Coast break bread with farmers from the Gildenlea, while merchants from the shores of the Azure swap tales with hardened veterans from the Marchlands. Each Province has its own distinct character, often moulded by use into a stereotype. Tales say that the Storm Coast breeds canny, fearless sailors and fiery-tempered sorcerers with lightening crackling from their fingertips. There is some grain of truth in this - for the people of the Storm Coast have more of the Suel in them than most in Onnwal. With the blood comes the fearsome temper and the fierce pride. It is not wise to insult a Storm Coaster's family or his home - both are dear to his heart. Whatever the cause - the ridges and vales of the Storm Coast breed some of the best sorcerers and mages in Onnwal. Magic is respected here as a craft in the same way the Marchlanders appreciate war - especially if it is practical. Unsurprisingly then those who wield power over the elements often hail from this Province.

The plains and vales of Gilderond are peopled with hard-working and honest folk. Extremely practical and highly resourceful, they have a quiet, yet intense pride in their fertile land and an unwavering determination to make the most of its bounty. Though generous to those that are deserving in their eyes, they have little time for wastrels and frivolities. Their strong work ethic can be seen by some as being joyless - especially by their more easy going neighbours on the Azure Coast. The best known stereotype of the Gilderonders is that of the farmer's wife walking before the plough with a torch so that her husband can plough his fields by night as well as day. On the other hand, the stereotype of the Azure Coaster is either a minstrel sitting in the shade of an olive tree strumming a lute, eating oranges all the live-long day nor a well-travelled merchant dripping with silks, pearls and tall tales. Gilderonders consider them lazy and vain. This lambasting is not entirely fair, for though the people of the Azure Coast tend to enjoy life more than their neighbours inland, they work almost as hard to earn those comforts. Azure Coasters love song, dance and storytelling and some of the best minstrels in Onnwal hail from there. They are intensely proud of their land, and with good reason - for it is a most pleasant corner of the Oerth.

Furthermore they consider themselves the most cosmopolitan and well travelled people in the land. There is some truth to this (though Azure Coasters are infamous for their exaggeration and tall tales) - as well as minstrels, the province produces many merchants, who in past times grew rich both on the road and sea routes between Idee, Irongate and Scant, as well as further afield.

The people of the Eastern Marchlands are somewhat apart from the rest of their countrymen - being almost cut off behind the Headlands' fence of peaks. The Marchlands were once looked upon as somewhat of a backwater - though no longer, for obvious reasons. Perhaps due to this isolation Oerid blood runs almost true here and leaves its mark upon the character of the people. The stereotypical Marcher is the ever-vigilant sentry on the wall. War and martial pursuits have always been foremost in the minds of the Marchlanders, but after over a century of being Onnwal's bulwark against the aggressions of the South Province - this has solidified into a siege mentality. Marchers are solid, stoic folk, ever vigilant and ever prepared for danger. Here more than anywhere in Onnwal, the all-pervading sense of duty and community is most intense. Each has his part to play in defending the whole. Order and discipline are considered essential, a fact that can make them seem humourless to some. Nonetheless they enjoy merry making as much as anyone else - as long as a watch is kept and weapons are close to hand.

Weapons are central to many aspects of Marchland life, as the famed Marcher Spear Dance¹ illustrates. Forging of weapons and armour, or skill in the construction of fortifications are highly valued crafts. Like many Oerid dominated cultures, the profession of soldier is an honourable one. Soldiers are thought of as craftsmen, with war as their craft. Great victories are as revered in the same way other people appreciate great works of art or craft.

Considering all this it is small wonder they have such ties with the Dwur of the Headlands - with whom they share many aspects of their worldview.

In summary then, the Onnwalish people are a good-hearted people, true and good. It is tragic that they should be so oppressed by the yoke, which these dark times have been like to lay upon them. Yet they bear that burden without complaint, with a steadfast determination to cast off the tyranny that hobbles their freedom and stand tall and proud once more among the free peoples of the Flannaess. Looking across from Sornhill to Osprems Light from whence he had just returned, the sails of his boat tattered in the gale, Kerdhel the boatman said to me: "We have it easy here. It's them that has it hard, that keeps the flame burning in the night. While Onnwal has the likes of them, she'll never founder."

¹ The Spear Dance of the Eastern Marchlands involves a pair of dancers carrying unblunted spears engaging in a whirling display of agility and skill to the sound of pipe, drum and cymbals. The climax of this astonishing performance comes when the dancers simultaneously fling their spears at each other, catching the other's spear before it strikes. A true test of skill and nerve, only accomplished performers use unblunted spears to complete the dance.