A Notoriously Weird, Troubled, and Eclectic Horror Writer Designs His Own (Horrific/Horrible?) Coat of Arms

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CTHULHU (pronounced *Khlûl'-hloo*[1] for those of the un-initiated) – I could think of no better word to introduce this short piece on infamous author HP Lovecraft's attempt at designing his own armorial bearings than the name of the monstrous science fiction-horror character that sprang from his unfortunately-troubled mind. First appearing in the short story "The Call of Cthulhu,"[2] the legendary god/leviathan is forever tied to Lovecraft's legacy. The character was also known by the titles "High Priest of the Great Old Ones," "The Great Dreamer," and "The Sleeper of R'lyeh."[3]

Rendered by thousands of artists in the decades since Lovecraft's death, each with variations of one sort or another, Cthulhu is almost always featured as immense in size, winged like a dragon, with a tentacled visage.

A woodcut-style illustration of HP Lovecraft, "ententacled" by his most famous creation

While my intent is not to devolve into a biography of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, it should be noted that much of his work was, and is, widely-acclaimed, and is still being written about to this day (again, with Cthulhu being the most notorious character). In fact, "The Call of Cthulhu" was regarded by Robert E. Howard (the creator of Conan the Barbarian, Bran Mak Morn, Kull of Atlantis, Red Sonya, Solomon Kane, etc.) as "a masterpiece, which I am sure will live as one of the highest achievements of literature… Mr. Lovecraft holds a unique position in the literary world; he has grasped, to all intents, the worlds outside our paltry ken."[4] In fact, "(m)any readers consider HP Lovecraft to be the father of modern horror fantasy… the term "Lovecraftian" is frequently used to describe any particularly scary story, book, or film."[5]

Now, to the focus of this essay. I initially ran across reference to a sketch of "HP Lovecraft's Family Crest" on the social platform Reddit. Immediately intrigued, I read through the thread, and then sourced out the primary (digital) source for the topic, along with additional material graciously provided by Dr. Patrick M. O'Shea, FACH.[6] The illustration shown here is in

HP Lovecraft ca. June 1934

Lovecraft's own hand, sketched and colored by the author in a lengthy letter to Frank Belknap Long, Jr.[7] On first blush, the "arms" pictured remind your editor of a mis-assembled jigsaw puzzle, or perhaps a goulash of all leftovers from the refrigerator thrown into one pot. But I digress…

While the entire letter itself is quite lengthy, the relevant text appears on the first page, beneath the author's "masthead" illustration, to wit:
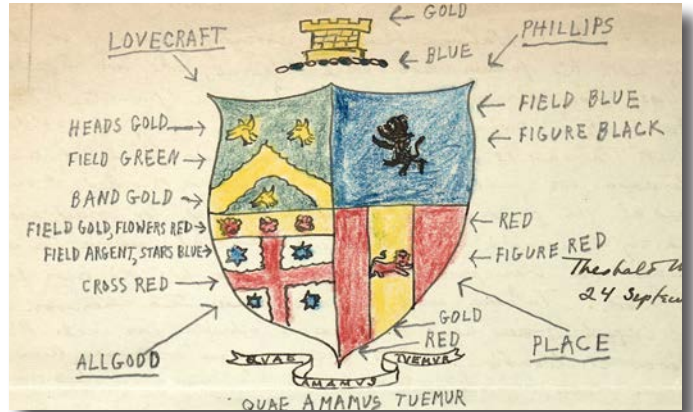

Theobald Manor
*24 September, 1927*[8]

Young Man:

Well, Sir, if you are of a curiously analytical turn of mind, you will discern in the above display of heraldic art the influence of a younger & more actively genealogical mind upon your aged & indolent grandpa.[9] *It is even so – for know ye, that our fair city is once again an[sic] host to that supreme master of heraldry, Wilfred Blanch Talman,*[10] *Gent.; who has transmitted enough of huis enthusiasm to cause the old gentleman to dig up some half dozen ancestral blazonings at the public library,*[11] *& who has (by virtue of his knowledge of the knightly art) drawn out pictorially several coats which your grandpa knew by directions, but did not know how to depict. The above menagerie is a quartering of the four main streams of blood in grandpa Theobald.*[12] *The upper two, left to right, are Lovecraft & Phillips, which I have always known.*[13] *The lower left is Allgood – family of my father's mother – of which I had the verbal description, but which I never saw drawn out till Talman interpreted the language with his facile pen. The lower right is Place – family of my mother's mother – which I had never seen in my life until yesterday afternoon when we looked it up at the library. I may have drawn this last one wrong,*[14] *for Talman had not yet prepared a sketch, but it'll do for the decorative purpose until he corrects it. The crest & motto are Lovecraft. I have also copied the arms of many other ancestors – Field, Tyler, Perkins, Rathbone, etc - & will get Talman to interpret them*
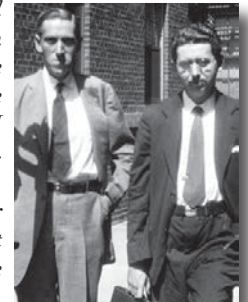
HP Lovecraft and Frank Belknap Long, Jr. in Brooklyn, July 1931

later on. When I get other genealogical tables from my aunt[15] I shall look up all he arms at the library – if my enthusiasm for the subject lasts that long. It is an admirably gentlemanly pastime – but takes too much research, I fear, for a feeble & increasingly childish old man.[16]
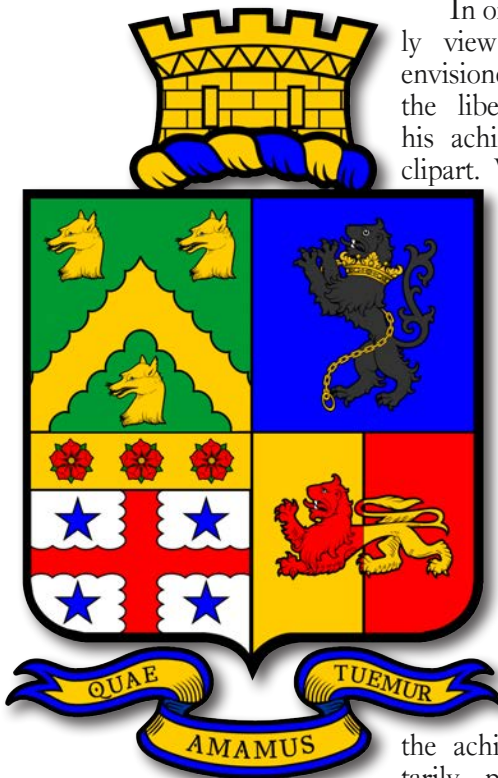
In order to more clearly view what Lovecraft envisioned, I have taken the liberty of recreating his achievement here via clipart. While there is no indication that he actually "assumed" the arms in our sense of the term, he most certainly approached the design with a high degree of genealogical seriousness. His extant correspondence shows his true interest in his family's history.

While I will "recap" the achievement momentarily, perhaps the most glaring incongruity that readers will note is the 2nd quarter, which actually "violates the rules" when it comes to "no tincture on tincture, etc."[17] However, these same arms are listed in *Burke's Peerage* for one Phillips armiger. It is posited (in the aforementioned Reddit thread) that these arms most likely originated from Wales, as do many Phillips (or Philipps). Again, as suggested by a Reddit contributor, "this Phillips family might have been the cadet branch (or related through female line) of the Philipps family of Picton Castle (Barons Milford) who had the arms: *Argent, lion Sable ducally gorged and chained Or.'* (The) same arms (except lion was armed and langued Gules) is carried by another junior branch who still hold the title of Viscount St Davids.

It is evident, then, that Lovecraft made connections to specific historical armigers, based solely on secondary (and even tertiary) resources, some of which themselves contained genealogical inaccuracies and assumptions. To Lovecraft, it was only logical that the four quarters "accurately" represented the different branches of his "family tree:" Lovecraft, Phillips, Place, and Allgood.

To review, in short, my own understanding of his "inspiration" and results:

- **LOVECRAFT** – While Lovecraft does not identify the source of the arms in this quarter, it appears that he claimed ancestry from the Lovecraft family of Minster Hall, and while speculative genealogical studies make this plausible, it remains unproven. As a result, evidently, between Lovecraft and Talman, they somehow "co-opted" Lovecraft of Minster Hall's armorial bearings.[18]

- **PHILLIPS** – Most of the Phillips arms that may be found in sources such as *Burke's*, et.al., were *Argent a rampant lion Sable, collared and chained Or*, though as mentioned previously, there is evidence of at least one such achievement with a Sable lion on an Azure field.

- **PLACE** – The "primary" blazon (or perhaps the most common historical listing) Lovecraft would have come across in his reading would be *Party per pale Or and Gules, a lion passant counterchanged* (but not facing sinister) - as opposed to Lovecraft's attempt, which is *Gules a pale Or, the latter charged with a lion passant guardant of the first* (the Place arms which he would have likely encountered show no evidence of being guardant, as shown in his sketch).

- **ALLGOOD** – This quarter is spot-on (though he was obviously not entitled to bear these arms either), at least for the most commonly found emblazoning(s) of an achievement for an historical individual of that surname (using Lovecraft's public-library-search method).

The crest was another "assumption" on my part – Lovecraft may have actually intended a "full" tower (perhaps inspired by, or based on, another Lovecraft grant the author might have come across in his research, with towers instead of foxes' heads?[19]) and ran out of space in which to sketch same. I have inserted a far-less-common *tower battlement, Or*. After all, why not for a less-than traditional writer?

The motto is one which appears to be part of Lovecraft "mythos," as more than one publication includes it in the original Latin – *Quae Amamus Tuemur* ("We Protect The Things We Love").

As with all potential armigers, we all take baby steps, and quite often missteps, before being pointed in the technically correct direction by heraldists. And HP, in his zeal for heraldry – albeit a zeal hampered by a lack of any heraldic training – is to be forgiven for piecing together a quite "logical" achievement. Thus, by example, Lovecraft's "family crest" is one of the main reasons, if not **THE** primary reason, for the existence of our own organization.

Notes
1. First published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in February 1928.
2. Lovecraft transcribed the pronunciation of Cthulhu as *Khlûl'-hloo*, and said, "the first syllable pronounced gutturally and very thickly. The 'u' is about like that in 'full,' and the first syllable is not unlike 'klul' in sound, hence the 'h' represents the guttural thickness." S.T. Joshi points out, however, that Lovecraft gave different pronunciations on different occasions. According to Lovecraft, this is merely the closest that the human vocal apparatus can come to reproducing the syllables of an alien language. Cthulhu has also been spelled in many other ways, including Tulu, Katulu, and Kutulu. The name is often preceded by the epithet Great, Dead, or Dread. Long after Lovecraft's death, Chaosium, publishers of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game, influenced modern pronunciation with the statement, "we say it kuh-THOOL-hu," even while noting that Lovecraft said it differently. Others use the pronunciation *Katulu* or *Kutulu* or */kəˈtuːluː/*. Source: *Wikipedia*.
3. Source: *Wikipedia*.
4. Quoted in Peter Cannon's introduction to *More Annotated HP Lovecraft*; Lovecraft, Howard Phillips, Peter H. Cannon, S. T. Joshi. Eds. Peter H. Cannon, S. T. Joshi, Dell, 1999, p. 7.
5. Travel Between Pages Blog; https://travelbetweenthepages.com/2018/09/01/the-call-of-cthulhu-2/.
6. Lovecraft, HP (Howard Phillips), "Lovecraft, Howard P. to Long, Frank Belknap, Jr." (1927). Howard P. Lovecraft collection. as collected in "Lovecraft's Parental Heritage," by Kenneth W. Faig, Jr. in *Books at Brown*, vols. 38-39, 1991-1992, page 53: https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:9072/. Brown University Library, Brown Digital Repository, Providence, Rhode Island. The Library holds HP Lovecraft's papers.
7. Frank Belknap Long, Jr. was himself a prolific writer, and was a "prote-

In recent years, some "heraldically adept" fans of Lovecraft have even incorporated Cthulhu into fantasy arms, created for societies (above), bands (below), and many Lovecraft-devoted clubs. The character is unmistakable, and though there have been hundreds (thousands?) of renderings of Cthulhu by artists worldwide, there is no questioning what is being illustrated.
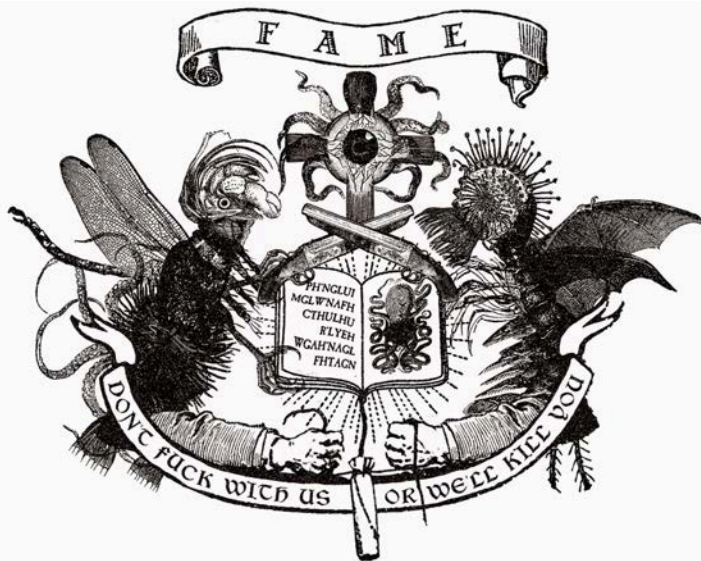
gee" of Lovecraft's, being only 11 years the latter's junior (Long was born April 27, 1901 and died January 3, 1994). Long wrote horror fiction, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, Gothic romance, comic books, and non-fiction books and stories, and won several major awards in the industry. Long was also part of the loosely associated "Lovecraft Circle" of fantasy writers (along with Robert Bloch, August Derleth, Robert E. Howard, Henry Kuttner, Clark Ashton Smith, C. M. Eddy, Jr., and Donald Wandrei) who corresponded regularly with each other and influenced and critiqued each other's works. Source: *Wikipedia.*

8. This letter was sent about a year after Lovecraft finished writing "The Call of Cthulhu," but prior to its publication in February 1928.

9. Lovecraft suffered severe medical episodes throughout his life, most usually attributed as "nervous breakdowns." At the time of his self-description as "aged & indolent" he was only 37 years old (August 20, 1890 – March 15, 1937).

10. Talman, despite Lovecraft's glowing praise for his heraldic skills, had no real training in heraldry (though he is credited with some genealogical research expertise). He was an American Horror fiction writer, most notably known for ac-

tually collaborating with Lovecraft on the short story, "Two Black Bottles." As is evident from this letter, there was obviously an admiration for Talman, and in fact much later Talman actually wrote a 36-page, limited-press-run (600 copies) tribute/memoir of his friend entitled *The Normal Lovecraft,* Gerry de la Ree, Saddle River, N. J, 1973. Though small in size, the booklet contained artwork from some of the most notable science fiction artists at the time of publication, including Tim Kirk, Clark Ashton Smith, Virgil Finlay, Bruce F. Walker, and Mahlon Blaine, with a cover portrait of Lovecraft by Charles McGill. In addition to the title essay (subtitled "A Memoir to Restore Balance to the Shade of Man of Delightful Character") by Talman, it also featured a short piece by L. Sprague de Camp on Lovecraft and his later-in-life-estranged wife Sonia, with excerpts from letters written by Sonia after their separation.

11. The fact that Lovecraft did most of his heraldic research at the public library (most likely in his hometown of Providence, Rhode Island) speaks volumes (no pun intended) to the thought process behind designing his own arms. Just as is the case with many modern-day, eager future-armigers, it is quite likely that Lovecraft found himself a 19th century edition of either *Burke's Landed Gentry* and/or *Debrett's Peerage* (see note 15), looked up surnames that "fit" his secondary-sources genealogical data, and then chose one that best suited his needs. Your editor did precisely the same thing when his initial curiosity in heraldry was kindled.

12. HP Lovecraft was also known by various nom de plume during his career, including Humphrey Littlewit, Ward Phillips, Edward Softly, Percy Simple, and Lewis Theobald. It is this ultimate pen name which may have given rise to his addressing the letter to Long from "Theobald Manor," and then (yet again, self-disparagingly) referring to himself as "grandpa Theobald."

13. It is interesting that Lovecraft "already (knew)" about the Lovecraft arms, despite the fact that I was unable to find any reference to same in a wide number of 19th century armorials, such a *Burke's.*

14. In fact, he did render this quarter incorrectly, as the actual Place arms to which he alludes actually show *a lion sejant counterchanged Azure and Gules*. But it was a good guess. Note: he also reversed the direction of the lion, facing it to sinister for whatever reason. Still further, his "coloring" of the 2nd quarter showed the lion as entirely Sable, while the Phillips arms which he "gleaned" are actually blazoned *Azure, a lion Sable ducally gorged and chained Or*.

15. As he indicates that he received his genealogical information from his aunt, it is most likely she was the keep of the family Bible, which commonly held the various family lineages in at least one line. Thus, his basis for selection of arms from a specific historical grant would have been entirely without proofs, having no professional genealogist's hand in developing any verifiable "family tree(s)."

"The paternal family charts that he borrowed from his great-aunt Sarah Allgood for copying in 1905 (SL 2.179) themselves contained substantial inaccuracies." This quote comes from a much more extensive heraldic/genealogical study of Lovecraft's "assumed" arms, as appearing in the letter, written by Lovecraft researcher Kenneth W. Faig, Jr. in "Clergymen among Lovecraft's Paternal Ancestors," *Lovecraft Annual*, No. 9 (2015), p. 138, Hippocampus Press.

16. Again, he considers himself "infirmed" at age 37, and yet did not pass away (having still been quite prolific in his authorship, even to initiating a collaboration with magician Harry Houdini which was cut short by the latter's untimely demise) for another 9 years.

17. This is certainly not the ONLY instance of such "violation." Such breaking of the "rules of heraldry" have been going on almost since the art was originally developed.

18. "HPL was not immune to 'reaching' for illustrious ancestors even before his introduction to new resources by his friend Talman in 1927… Lovecraft's introduction to these resources [in the Rhode Island Historical Society's collections], which included *Burke's Peerage* and *Burke's Landed Gentry*, proved to be a mixed blessing. Like many amateur family historians of his day, Lovecraft could not resist linking the surnames he found in the Allgood chart to the principal lines included in these references."

"Lovecraft was at best an amateur family historian… On the basis of these charts, Lovecraft claimed that his 2x-great-grandfather Thomas Lovecraft (1745–1826) had been forced to sell his property, Minster Hall near Newton Abbot, in 1823 (SL 2.182, SL 3.361), evidently in order to liquidate debts incurred for 'wine, horses, and the fair' (SL 3.360)." Faig, "Clergymen," pp. 138-139.

19. "According to a note in the Allgood chart, one Thomas Lovecroft bore as arms "a chevron or [i.e., gold] between three towers or on a field vert [i.e., green]" as early as 1500 (SL 2.182). According to the same source, Lovecraft's ancestor John Lovecroft of Minster Hall bore as arms in 1560 "a chevron, engrailed, or, between three foxes' heads, erased, or, on a field vert" (SL 3.360). In fact, the arms "vert a chevron between three towers or" occur only with different tinctures as quarterings in the arms of the Elliott and Boscawen families in the 1620 Visitation of Cornwall (DSF 3). R. P. Graham Vivian, M.V.C., Norroy & Ulster King of Arms, wrote to Henry L. P. Beckwith, Jr. concerning these arms on June 19, 1969: "The fact that it appears only as an ancient Quartering by the time of the Visitations means that whatever it was, and it was unnamed, was extinct in the male line, and even the name lost sight of" (DSF 3). In fact, no Devonshire manor or estate bearing the name "Minster Hall" has been identified." *Ibid.*, p. 138.