THE HARP IN ENGLAND

"Church, anybody?"

Con Reports by WALT WILLIS

The Harp in England

The British Convention Reports

Walter A. Willis

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The Harp in England
London "Festivention", 1951

The First International Convention: May 1951

On the 8th of May the entire fan population of Ireland migrated to England for the First International Convention. One fifth of it flew over, but the other four – James White, Bob Shaw, my wife and myself – all of whom suffer rather badly from hand-to-mouth disease, went steerage on the boat. When we had found our berths and got over our relief to find that this part of the ship wasn't called "steerage" because of the cattle kept there, we all gathered on the poop deck, keeping an eye open for poops and making puns absentmindedly as the lights of Belfast faded in the distance. Bob said the Captain must have found out he was a science fiction fan, because he had given him a wide berth. James said his theory was all bunk. There was a short silence while I vainly tried to work in a rather clever one about berth and confinement and mal de mere. It's a terrible thing to work with people so uncultured as not to understand puns in French. We behave like this all the time at home, you know. Stray visitors have been known to go quietly outside and shoot themselves after half an hour of it.

By this time we were almost sure we were not going to be sick, even with the puns, though we all had plans worked out to deal with the problem if it came up. I favoured spinning around rapidly on my heel, using the principle of the gyroscope, while Bob planned to compensate for the movement of the ship by holding two spirit levels in his teeth and balancing himself so as to keep the bubbles centered. However I was shortly able to announce that according to my reckoning we had already passed the point at which we should have been sick, and though my reckoning must have been dead at the time, we all agreed it was probably accurate enough. We decided we must be a viable mutation designed for sea and space travel, or that sea sickness was a mere affectation. And so to bunk. We slept well, too, although there was a gale blowing. The engine kept knocking, but no one let it in.

On the day before the Convention we went to the Festival Exhibition on the South Bank of the Thames. About this I'll just say that of all the

works of man on this planet, this is probably the most worth seeing. Incidently I saw the egoboo machine I mentioned a few months ago in *Q*. It was working, too. They had it slung on the back of a big statue of the White Knight from *Alice* and there it was, patting and praising at a tremendous rate.

In the evening we made our way to the White Horse, a tavern where the informal pre-convention meeting was to be held. As we were walking toward it from Fleet Street, I thought to myself that this was the first London building I had seen with concave walls. The walls returned to normal when I opened the door, but 17 fans flew out and lay gasping on the sidewalk. Trampling them underfoot – they were only letterhacks – I plunged into the throng. It absorbed me greedily, like an amoeba, but since my feet left the ground almost immediately, I could make no independent progress. I carried on a series of short conversations with everyone whose ear I happened to find in my mouth – Ted Carnell, Peter Ridley, Arthur C. Clarke, Derek Pickles – and eventually a sort of Brownian movement swept me to the far side of the room. There I was ejected into a little backwater inhabited by a suntanned young American soldier. Remembering that there was only one GI fan at the Convention, I made a masterly deduction. "Lee Jacobs?" I gasped. "Fan Mathematics, *Spacewarp*?" He was very pleased, and when I told him his article had been immortalized in *Fanspeak* – it's amazing the amount of egoboo that lies around uncollected – he was so delighted that he swore he had heard of *Slant*. I promised to lend him my copy of *Fanspeak* –he hadn't received one himself so he must have been a member of N3F – and we sat on the stairs leading to the "Gents" and talked about FAPA. It was an interesting discussion, though interrupted by the necessity of remembering whether to stand up to let people pass or not. There was only one lavatory in the place and because of our strategic position we got the job of preventing it being a "Ladies" and a "Gents" simultaneously.

After a while the place began to get really crowded, and from where we sat we had a fine view of the top layer of fans. Through breaks in the clouds of smoke, we could see as far as Alan Hunter of *New Worlds* and *Phantasmagoria*. On the outer fringes of his beard was Ben Abas from Holland. Both were strenuously praising each other's artwork, and though Ben was at somewhat of a disadvantage because Alan had only one sketch with him against his own 20, he did such a good job on that one sketch that it blushed visibly. Just beneath us Bob Shaw and James White were carrying on an extraordinary conversation with Sigward Ostlund from Sweden. James was doing a magnificent job of interpreting, considering

the fact that he didn't know a single word of Swedish. It was pathetic to see poor Sigward. All his life he had been learning standard English to be able to talk with the people he was going to meet in England, and the first one he comes up against is Bob Shaw. However, every time Bob said something in that armour-plated brogue of his, James would repeat it very loudly and clearly and some vestige of the meaning would seep across. In the middle distance, Derek Pickles was telling people what he thought of the London Circle. Not far away the London Circle was saying what it thought of Derek Pickles. Weird electrical discharges leapt between the two clouds of blue haze.

It was a wonderful evening, at least for the ones on top. Finally, however, all were shovelled out into the street. I wondered for a moment what the funny smell was. It was fresh air.

Next morning at the crack of 10 a.m. I went down to The Epicentre. This is the name of the apartment where Vince Clarke and Ken Bulmer camp among the debris of 15 years of fanactivity. They call it the Epicentre because it is supposed to be the centre around which English fan activity revolves. I have been unkind enough once to refer to it as the *dead centre*, but I must admit that when anything is done by London fandom, it is done here. I had never really believed that fandom could be a way of life until I saw this place. It is a fan's paradise and a housewife's nightmare. Books, prozines, fanzines, letters, typewriters, mimeographs, stencils, artwork are heaped about in great mountain ranges. Behind them are presumably walls, but rumours that a floor has been seen once or twice must be discounted. Archaeological expeditions have definitely established that the Epicentre is built on a solid foundation of old fanzines, stretching from strata to strata down to the eternal fires of Vom.

On this morning I followed the dangerous trail into the inner fastness of the Epicentre with the idea of helping Vince Clarke to finish the Official Programme. I found the Official Programme had nearly finished Vince. On the kitchen table was the big rotary duplicator (mimeograph, to you). It had stopped working. On the floor was a smaller rotary duplicator. It had never started working. In the next room was a flatbed mimeograph. It had never worked. It was like The Revolt of the Machines. On the left of the door a gas cooker was going full blast with the oven door open. Apparently none of the duplicators can be even expected to work unless the temperature of the room approaches that of the centre of the sun. On the right of the door, half way down a dangerous slope of fanzines, were a few battered stencils. That was the Official Programme. Amid this chaos crouched Vince Clarke, trying to intimidate one of the mimeographs with a

screwdriver. Knowing nothing of mimeography I could do nothing for some time but hover about making encouraging noises. This I did to the best of my ability until I saw what Vince was trying to do and offered to take one of the machines into the other room and grapple with it.

At this point in walked two stalwart Liverpool fans, masters of mimeography. Subduing the great rotary machine with one terrible look, one of them made a few mystic passes over it, and turned the handle. Paper began to pass through it and emerge on the other side bearing decipherable marks. I hastily revived Vince by waving a copy of *Amazing* under his nose, and we all went into production. Although the Convention had already started, we had 200 copies of the 12 page Programme run off, collated and stapled by lunch time.

Meanwhile Ted Carnell had declared the Convention open. He began by introducing the more distinguished guests, keeping the most distinguished 'til last. Finally, after some unintelligible remarks about ointment and flies, he introduced me. Of course I wasn't there. Anyone who says that the round of applause came *after* that fact was noticed is a dirty liar, and probably in the pay of Ken Slater. I hope to have signed statements to prove it when my friends get the bandages off their fingernails,

Walter Gillings, ex-editor of *Fantasy Review* and *Science Fantasy*, then started off the proceeding with a whimper. He was billed to speak on the growth of British sf, but apparently he could only think of a malignant growth. Change and decay in all he saw around. Science fiction ran in cycles, and we were now freewheeling into the seven lean years. Only apparently this lot was caused by a *surplus* of corn. The British market was being swamped with trashy pocketbooks. America could afford to maintain honourable magazines like *ASF* and *Galaxy*, but evidently Gillings thought that honour was without profits in his own country.

Having thrown the convention into a fine state of dejection, he brightened everyone up again with the assurance that Bill Temple was bound to disagree with him. Just to make sure, he insulted him two or three times, and then sat down, amid loud applause for a brilliant if depressing speech. The English love to take their pleasure sadly.

However, it was the last depressing note in a convention which in retrospect seems to be the most heartening event in the history of British stf, and possibly the most important Convention ever held. Certainly it was brilliantly successful, and a large part of the credit for this goes to the next speaker, Forrest J Ackerman.

The Convention Hall turned out to be in a long wide street in a rather

pleasant area of London. There was a large square nearby, the centre of which was laid out in a little public park. Here during the intervals the Convention delegates would sit in the sunshine, recovering from the shock of finding out what their correspondents looked like. From the side of this park an enormous Hotel stretched into the infinite distance, like a building in a van Vogt novel. About two hundred yards along was the main entrance, which the Convention Committee warned us we were not to use. Here among the potted palms and plate glass there stood a resplendent commissionaire, provided with a forty foot pole for not touching science fiction fans with. The further along from the park you went, the lower the tone of the place sank, until in the sordid distance you find a non-descript door, evidently disowned by the hotel, which was the entrance to the Convention Hall. There was a notice "International Science Fiction Convention", an entrance foyer, and then the Hall itself. This was a long low room with a speaker's dais along one side facing about a hundred chairs grouped in a semi-circle. Round the walls were paintings and drawings and tables filled with books and magazines.

I arrived on the scene during the Lunch interval. The Convention carried on as if nothing had happened – it was almost as if nothing had. I had come by subway, escorting the two Liverpool fans with all the savoir faire, and sore feet of a subway traveller of two days standing. And I do mean standing. Vince Clarke and Ken Bulmer brought up the rear in a van, an extraordinary vehicle which the automobile industry has begged me to refer to as a horseless carriage. Personally I think it was a last model sedan chair with the arms broken off and a hole cut in the floor boards. We handed out the Programmes to those fen who had already arrived back from lunch, or who just didn't eat. They were all very pleased to find out what they had been doing all morning.

When we arrived back from our own lunch, Forry Ackerman was just about to start speaking. Most of us had already met him at the preliminary sessions, but this was his first public appearance, and here seems to be the time to say what we thought of him. Briefly, we were impressed. I remember reading somewhere a criticism of Ackerman by Laney or someone, the gist of which was that although FJA had produced some very fine fanzines, in fact some of the finest in fan history, he was still a man who had failed to realize his potentialities. His zines lacked personality, that indefinable character that a good fanzine has, which makes it not just another amateur magazine, but a sort of reader-editor symbiosis. Something that makes you feel not only that you want to continue reading the zine, but that you would very much like to meet the editor. Something

that *Quandry*, for instance, has to the nth degree. Not that Ackerman's zines didn't have personality of a sort. The point was that the personality wasn't the interesting and agreeable one of Ackerman himself, but some synthetic and comparatively unsympathetic one which Ackerman had invented for the occasion. His idea of what an editor should sound like, much in the same way that some people have a special voice for the telephone or public occasions.

I never realized how just these criticisms were until I met Ackerman myself. From his articles and letters I had formed quite a clear mental picture of a thin dark and neurotic type, eccentric and egocentric in his ways, quick and impatient in his speech. Recently I had come to know him better through his letters. He had, for instance, taken the trouble to write to Manly Banister, thanking him, as it were, on behalf of fandom for donating the printing press to *Slant*. It was a sincere and thoughtful gesture which both Banister and I appreciated a great deal. And then recently I was quite moved by Ackerman's defense of his fan record in FAPA. He had just resigned from the organization, and apparently Harry Warner had started running obituaries of all the old fans who do this, summarizing their fan record and appraising their achievements. Apparently his reasoning is that since FAPA is a Home for Retired Fans, fans who retire from FAPA must be considered to have finally died. His obituary of Ackerman questioned his right to be known as No.1 Fan. This evidently hurt Ackerman, because he replied with a long letter about his fan life which is just about the most sincere and moving document I have ever read. I realized almost with a shock that FJA is a true fan in a way that most of us don't come within a mile of being. He really *believes* in fandom, and he has maintained his faith thru twenty years of frustration and disappointment. He still insures his life for $5,000 every time he sets out for a Convention, in favour of the Convention Committee, so that if he is killed by some travelling accident on the way, he will be worth more to the Convention dead than alive. (From what I saw of what Ackerman did for our Convention, $5,000 wouldn't be nearly enough.) His will still provides for his priceless library to go to fandom. It will be inadequate compensation. There are two things that every neofan learns even before the Eva Firestone Stage. One is that Campbell is the editor of *ASF* and the other is that Forrest J Ackerman is No.1 Fan. For my money, Ackerman's position is infinitely stronger. I am sold on Ackerman.

Though I had recently revised my estimate of him, his appearance came as a great surprise. I found a big easy-going giant of a fan, quiet spoken and gentle mannered, very different (if I may dare to say so) from

some Americans abroad. There was no loudness or ostentation about him at all, and he was very easy to talk to, once you got used to a disconcerting habit he had of going “Mmmmmmmmmm?” with a rising inflection whenever you paused for his reactions to what you were saying. Maybe everyone does this in California, but it certainly derailed my train of thought the first couple of times. I did, however, have several interesting conversations with him, though, as is usual at times like these, you only remembered what you had really wanted to say when it was too late, and someone else had snatched him away. Though Ackerman was first there every day and last away, as enthusiastic as a neofan from a small town, there never seemed to be time for a proper conversation. This Convention was not like an American one, of course. Everyone went home or to their various hotels each night, and there were none of those all night sessions which seem to be the main thing in American Conventions.

I think Forry came as a pleasant surprise to everyone. Certainly you could feel the moment he started to speak that the audience found him easy to listen to: you felt they would have listened with pleasure if he had been talking about seaweed. Actually he didn’t talk about seaweed, but about American sf publishing. However, he began his remarks with the usual ones about how glad he was to be here. (He was nearly not going to be able to come on account of some peculiar mix-up in the arrangements for his passage, over which there were some wild recriminations among the London Circle.) He mentioned that he was sorry that his severest critic in England, D.R. Smith, wasn’t among those present, and in his absence he called upon Severest Critic No.2, a Mr. Youd, whose name was a very big one in prewar fandom. Whether Mr. Youd was annoyed at being relegated to the position of second severest critic, or whether he was taken aback at being called so suddenly out of his retirement, I don’t know, but he dashed redfaced to the microphone and bit out something about how he noticed that Mr. Ackerman was still murdering the English language. I hadn’t noticed any corpses laying around, except the walking dead of extinct fans, but everyone laughed tactfully so that Mr. Youd wouldn’t retire hurt. Forry then went into his commentary on American sf, delivered in a pleasant California drawl. He gave a lot of news which was interesting at the time, but which is common knowledge now, and he also read a cable-gram from Anthony Boucher hotly denying a rumour that *F&SF* was going to fold. Since no one in the audience had yet heard the rumour, their feeling at this point was rather mixed. They looked a bit like an audience of Catholics who had suddenly been informed by the Pope that he was now pretty certain that God did exist after all.

Next William F. Temple was billed to speak on the technique of writing serial sf. Fortunately he did nothing of the sort, at which no one who knew him was in the least surprised. He seized the opportunity to strike a joyous blow in the Temple-Clarke feud which has been amusing British fandom for some 20 years. Arthur C. Clarke, incidentally, is a thin fair-haired nervous sort of chap, with a dashing manner. At least, every time I saw him he was dashing somewhere. I expect one of these days when he is particularly excited he'll reach escape velocity and that's the last we will see of him. He is nicknamed "Ego." Temple, on the other hand, is a small dark plumpish chap, very quiet spoken, and with a dead pan style of humour. The only flashes in the pan were when he looked up over his heavy glasses to see how some of the more subtle witticisms were going. Usually they went very well, especially when he touched on dianetics with a mention of "a womb with a view". I assure Rory Faulkner, who as far as I know first used this crack in Vernon McCain's Wastebasket, that Temple undoubtedly arrived at it independently. In his day the man was the most brilliant of fan journalists, and he could be so again today if he wanted to.

Temple's contribution took the form of a synopsis of a serial about the first space flight. The Government, having been badgered and chivvied by Clarke for years, had finally built a spaceship in a desperate attempt to keep him quiet. The crew consisted of two men, one of whom was Temple for the sole reason that even Arthur C. Clarke couldn't be both of them. Besides, someone had to do the housework. After a beautiful parody of the Arthur C. Clarke first-step-on-man's-journey-to-the-stars style, Temple described how when the rocket cleared the earth's atmosphere it came to a dead stop. Apparently Clarke was wrong after all – in spite of all his arguments and proofs rockets do *not* work in a vacuum. There's nothing for them to push against you see. The two intrepid astronauts are never seen again. The story carries on with their descendants. Clarke 2 is an even bigger bore about space flight than was his ancestor, but no one will listen to him since the rocketship fiasco. At last, however, he happens upon the lesser known scientific fact that mitogen rays emitted by certain growing plants have a small but definite pushing power. From this it is but a matter of time 'til he breeds a plant in which the rays are so powerful that they can be used as a space drive. The second space ship is therefore an enormous onion, with a small hole scooped in the middle for the crew. This consists of a Temple and a Clarke again, for the same reasons, and again there is something wrong with Clarke's calculations. In accordance with a well-known precedent, they miss the moon and hurtle on to Mars.

Since they haven't enough food for such a long trip they are in a terrible plight. Finally they are reduced to eating the ship.

There was lots more of this – how they are saved from a hideous death by the discovery of some breath cachous, how they fall on Mars amid a colony of vegetarian monsters, etc, etc – but some of you will be able to read it yourselves before long. I was onto Temple for first fanzine rights as soon as I could get to him. But Lee Jacobs (curse him) got there first and it will appear in his FAPA zine.

Next came a "radio play" by Milt Rothman – that is, a play read over the PA system. This has already been done at an American Convention, so I won't say anything about it except that I thought some of the commercials were quite good. Like: "Why smell like a human being? Use *Armpitto* and smell like nothing on earth."

After the afternoon tea break the organizers put on a recording of a discussion on stf between some authors and journalists. I don't think anyone listened to this except a fan called Terry Overton, who asked Clarke why he had said "The Moon is Hell" was such a lousy book. There is a great disagreement among the Irish contingent as to what actually was said at this point, but I could have sworn that Clarke was so annoyed with Campbell he said he wasn't going to send him any more stories. But I must have been wrong, because nobody else remembers anything of the sort. Maybe Clarke said that Campbell would now be so annoyed with him that he wouldn't *accept* any of his stories.

After that came the auction and then the buffet, which was a bit of a sell, too. According to the dictionary a "buffet" means a slap in the face, and that's just what this one was to us poor Irish immigrants who had been relying on it to help us live in London. Last time I was in London I lived on spaghetti because I found you could get more of it for your money than anything else. I ate so much spaghetti I came home with an Italian accent. Unfortunately I couldn't find any spaghetti dives near the convention hall, but in a way the buffet did save us money – after one look at it you never wanted to touch food again. Mind you I'm not saying a word against the catering arrangements at this hotel. It's just that it's the first one I've seen where they have a fifth place on the cruet stand for a stomach pump. After the buffet, all the fans who were still alive were propped up on chairs to listen to John Keir Cross talking about his troubles in trying to put sf over on the British Broadcasting Corporation. It was so complicated it sounded like the World of Null-BBC. Mr. Cross was so eloquent, and the spirits of the fans were so cowed by the buffet, that no one asked how come that Mr. Cross had made such a lousy job of the sf serial he *was* allowed to produce

on the air. *The Other Side Of The Sun*, this was, and the author, Paul Capon, was down to speak as well as Cross. Evidently he didn't think he could, for he mumbled some words the only one of which was distinguishable was "laryngitis" and sat down again. I was furious about this, since this was the only way I could think of getting out of making a speech myself, and now Capon had spoiled it.

I left at the end of this, and missed a talk by Arthur C. Clarke on television and sf. I'm told he was very good, and I can well believe it. The man is a genius. In fact, he has been heard to admit as much himself. When I got back, feeling a little better (I think the trouble may have been something I didn't eat), there was a film show going on. There was supposed to have been a guest authors' session at 8:30, hut things were running so late everyone had forgotten there ever was such a thing as 8:30. Besides, there were no guest authors, which would have made things a little difficult. The show was of a silent version of *The Lost World* a film about prehistoric monsters. It was a bit of a prehistoric monster itself. However, parts of it were quite good. For instance, there was a terrific battle between two great monsters who must have been all of 18 inches high. It was awe-inspiring. At one moment I thought one of them was actually going to knock a piece of plaster off the other. In the corner Arthur C. Clarke was busy jockeying discs for incidental music. Occasionally the reins slipped and the music sounded more accidental than incidental. A wild elephant stampede loses something of its effect when accompanied by a Viennese waltz.

Nothing more of interest happened that night, except that on the subway home my wife, Madeleine, was left behind in the crush and got carried on to Shepherd's Bush. I went over to the down platform and hardly had I got there when she got off a train. It was like a matter duplicator. In fact, I still have an uneasy idea that there is another Madeleine roaming helplessly around Shepherd's Bush.

At about 11 the next morning, Convention Time (this is about half an hour behind ordinary time and gets progressively later) Ted Carnell got up to speak about *New Worlds* and its future. Perhaps it was not his fault if he had to begin by talking about Walter Gillings and his past, but certainly the ghost of Gillings haunted the proceedings like an absent fiend. Gillings, as you know, was the editor of the other British prozine *Science Fantasy* until he recently resigned for what were supposed to be reasons of health. There has always been, it seems a certain amount of what we might call rivalry between Gillings and Carnell, even before the disagreement as to which of them should have gone to America under the Big Pond Fund as

representative of British Fandom.

Ted started by saying how sorry he was that Gillings wasn't there, and you got the impression that his grief was mainly due to the fact that there were a lot of things he wanted to say to his face that he didn't like to say behind his back. However he managed to overcome this handicap pretty well. All that was missing was a little wax image of Gillings. First he contrived to make it quite clear that Gillings's resignation was not due to illness, unless you think bad blood is an illness. Then he announced that he himself was taking over the editorship of *Science Fantasy*. The magazine had apparently been losing money like a fanzine, but nevertheless he paid a glowing tribute to Gillings's work on it. Obviously Gillings had every quality of the ideal editor except ability. There was absolutely nothing wrong with *Science Fantasy* that a complete abolition of all traces of him wouldn't cure. The format was to be changed to conform with that of *New Worlds*, not one of Gillings's backlog of stories was to be used, and the vestigial remains of the old *Fantasy Review* were to be purged.

This last fiat brought a gentle reminder from Fred Brown, the well-known collector and reviewer, that the mag was after all a co-operative fan enterprise, and not Carnell's exclusive property. He deplored the abolition of book reviews and pointed out that American mags like *ASF* and *Galaxy*, miserable rags as they were compared with *NW* and *SFY*, managed to run book reviews and keep their heads above water. Carnell was charmingly generous in his reply, offering no less than three mutually contradictory explanations. Blinded with science, Fred Brown remained silent. The audience sat entranced with this exhibition of multi-valued logic, and Carnell took the opportunity to sound off at some British authors who in their unholy greed for dollars sold their stories to American zines instead of to him. Since it seemed to be the fashion to jump on Arthur C. Clarke, he did so. Apparently after Carnell had been pestering Clarke for several months for a story, Arthur would dig something out of an old trunk that had been written in capitals on a child's exercise book and send it off magnanimously to Carnell. When it was returned he went around telling everyone that he had been rejected by *New Worlds* again! I can see that this must be very annoying, especially the last part. The implication is that being rejected by *NW* is the sort of thing a big name author can afford to laugh about, as if it were Botwinnik telling with relish the story of how a schoolboy caught him with Fool's Mate; or that being rejected from *NW* is a sign that a story is good, as for instance when Peon gives a "Rejected from Marvel" Certificate of Merit to one of its stories. Curiously, Carnell

laid himself wide open for a crack like this, by mentioning innocently that the stories he liked best always finished at the bottom of his Anlab and vice versa. I half wished Gillings had been there to point the obvious conclusion. Incidently, it was a curious thing about this part of the convention that although there were a great number of very controversial points raised, there was no acrimony at all. The reason was of course that Carnell has great personal charm and tact, and his conduct of the Convention was so competent and friendly as to disarm all criticism.

Towards the end of his speech he revealed that as an experiment in crass commercialism the next NW was going to feature a Beautiful Unclad Maiden on the cover. This threw the audience into a state of excitement bordering on torpor. Clarke got up and made a short and pungent speech to the effect that all this trying to pass sf off under a phony sexy front was all wrong. Were we or were we not trying to sell sf as sf. The time had come for us to stop apologizing for sf and take it to the people. This speech of Clarke's, while silently applauded by all true fans present, was the signal for a counterattack by the dealers and business men. One after another they got up and said that sexy covers sold magazines and that we would never get anywhere without them. It was fascinating to see a hundred fans who had probably spent the better part of their fan life pasting Earle Bergey, gradually come around to accepting the idea of having that hated type of cover on their own magazine. The final note was struck, and held some twenty minutes, by an elderly gentleman called Hill whom no one had ever heard of before. With a strong Austrian accent and a wealth of gesture he told the audience that the only thing an editor had to go by was his net sales, that the audience was not representative readers, and that their opinions weren't worth a damn. The audience applauded him vigorously to show how well they could take criticism, and then filed out for lunch, picking their way carefully among the fragments of Gillings's shattered reputation.

After lunch came the International Discussion. "Our overseas guests tell us of the state of sf in their countries." While the guests were being called to the rostrum I cowered in the shade of Derek Pickles, making a noise like an old overcoat, but Carnell mercilessly penetrated my disguise and summoned me to join the row on the dais. To give the man his due, he had warned me about this a couple of days ago. The prospect had been weighing on my mind ever since and I had been hoping it would fall through. I had pleaded with Carnell that I was terrified of public speaking, but he was quite adamant about it. (Incidentally, I wish he would use tastier boot polish.)

Reflecting that there was always the hope that an atomic war would start within the next hour, I sat and listened to the other speakers, mentally discarding every note I had made as I saw the way the discussion was going. The symposium was opened by Lyell Crane, whose interest in international fandom is so intense that it might almost be called vested. He began by informing the audience that he had an absolutely open mind and was willing to change it at any time. With this reassurance, he went on to tell the audience how important they were. Fandom, he said, had built up the prozines of America to their present standard and kept them there. Fandom was directly responsible for *ASF* and *Galaxy*, and for the prozines in other countries. But for fandom, etc., etc. Fandom, in the person of one fifth of it gathered in the Convention Hall, received this accolade in pleased if incredulous silence after the cold douche administered by Mr. Hill. Crane then produced copies of each issue of *Interim Newsletter*, one for each hand, and semaphored them at the audience. Still fanning furiously, he told all out-lying fans who were pure fans and not pros, to get in touch with him. With a final flourish of *Interim Newsletter* he sat down, having almost accidentally revealed one item of interest, that his coeditor, Julian May, was a girl.

The next speaker was Ackerman, who delivered another of his pleasant and intimate talks. Like everything Forry said, it was listened to with pleasure and interest.

To my relief, Carnell then jumped right across the Atlantic and called on Georges Gallet from Paris. Georges brought a sheaf of notes to the microphone, and apologized for reading from them; he couldn't speak English very well. He talked about the French reprints of various American sf books and about his own projected French prozine.

Next, Ben Abas brought a sheaf of notes to the microphone and apologized for reading from them, but he couldn't speak English very well. He talked about a Dutch prozine.

Next, Sigward Ostlund brought a sheaf of notes to the microphone and apologized for reading from them, but he couldn't speak English very well. He talked about a Swedish prozine.

Carnell then called on me. Having failed to similarize myself through the floor, I toyed desperately with the idea of bringing a sheaf of notes to the microphone and apologizing for not reading from them because I couldn't read. But in this probability-world I tottered to the microphone and told the Convention about the recent pocket-book in Gaelic. It didn't take very long, but I salved my conscience with the thought that the proceedings were already behind schedule. No doubt the audience would

think I could have made a brilliant oration lasting some hours if it hadn't been for my thoughtfulness and unselfishness. I sat down mid applause, some of which I'm afraid was left over from Carnell's introduction. My best friends tell me the speech was very good, but too short (bless their loyal hearts) and that it came over the PA system with a strong Irish accent. Since I have no trace of any accent at all I find this very difficult to understand, but my English friends (all of whom have atrocious English accents) say I always sound that way to them.

The convention rallied, and survived. Speeches by Wendayne Ackerman, Ken Paynter, Lee Jacobs, and Frank Edward Arnold, were listened to attentively by everyone except the last speaker who was still swimming around dazedly in a pool of his own sweat. A discussion followed, centering mainly around two points, one as to how many fans were scientific workers or vice versa, and the other as to how many of them were women. On the first, Clarke said that he used to send copies of *ASF* for circulation among the people at Harwell Atomic Laboratory, and he never got any of them back. Since this is the normal experience of lending magazines, the point seemed rather inconclusive. It was finally decided that some scientific workers were fans and some were not. On the second point, Forry thought that the number of fem-fans was increasing. He instanced the proposed *Star Science Fiction*, a mag that would have been aimed at women if someone hadn't dropped it. Derek Pickles stood up and deftly inserted a neat little plug for N3F, giving statistics of how many members had been found on superficial investigation to be female. Incidently, this seems a good place to mention that not only were there quite a crew of fem-fans there, but that the standard of looks was very high. Apart from my own wife and Alan Hunter's, there was a chap called Robert Conquest (a well-known poet who recently managed to get into *The Listener*, the BBC's literary review, a really excellent poem plugging sf) who had a really stunning wife with him. Not only was she extremely attractive, but she was a Bulgarian, which Alan and I thought wasn't quite fair. And of course there was Audrey Lovall. She is attached to the London Circle, and they are crazy about her, too.

Lyell Crane then closed the discussion. He got up and solemnly announced that he *had* changed his mind. The audience silently approved this decision, but didn't notice any appreciable difference. He also said he learned a lot from the proceedings, but he didn't say just what. Finally he gave his name and address very slowly and clearly for the benefit of the wire recording, which happened ungratefully to be out of action at that point. It was an interesting tableau: the recording engineer desperately

trying to insert a new spool, and Lyell speaking very deliberately and obviously wondering what the audience was gesturing about. Eventually Lyell tumbled to what was going on, and contented himself with hanging up a notice. I'm sorry, by the way, if I have seemed a bit sarcastic about Crane. He is a worthy chap, but just a little inclined to take himself and fandom a bit too seriously.

There followed one of the most important events of the Convention, the presentation of the International Fantasy Award for the best work in the field during 1950. This is the first of a series of annual awards sponsored by the London Circle, and consists of a desk ornament in the form of a silvered spaceship on an inscribed plinth with a globular cigarette lighter. The lighter works, too, though through some slip up or other it is not atomic. The awards for 1950 went to George Stewart for *Earth Abides* and to Ley and Bonestell for *Conquest of Space*. The actual presentation was made to Forry Ackerman on their behalf. He made a short and graceful speech of acceptance, and mentioned that he felt very jealous. American fandom had been talking about this sort of thing for years, and British fandom had gone ahead and done it.

After a break for afternoon tea, Wendayne Ackerman gave her talk about dianetics. It was listened to quietly, almost somnolently. This was mainly because Carnell when introducing her had explained very clearly and firmly that no discussion whatever would be allowed. The principal anti-dianeticians had already been warned about this and I suspect that some of them had had to be bound and gagged. Carnell gave one final glare around the Hall and then sat down on a box of tear gas bombs.

Mrs. Ackerman, an attractive creature, began by reading a letter from Ray Bradbury to the Ackermans which if it is ever published, will ruin his reputation. I happen to know the truth about Ray Bradbury. In the course of negotiations between Proxy-Boo Ltd and Vernon McCain Incorporated, McCain revealed: "I do a bit of work for a chap named Bradbury who lives down in California and wants oh so badly to be a writer. He just hasn't what it takes, but I haven't the heart to tell him so. So I have him send me each story he writes, do a complete re-write and polish job on it, and then for 10% commission I allow him to sell it under his own name. Not exactly ethical perhaps, but I like the boy. However, I *do* have trouble, since he has a remarkable lack of ingenuity in devising plots for his stories. He's always coming up with the same old thing. I've burned much midnite oil trying to put a new slant, some original viewpoint on that old 'deserted on Mars' plot he keeps sending me."

Wendayne then started on dianetics. This part of her speech went over

most people's heads, mainly because their heads were practically on the floor. These were the anti-dianeticians who had to be silent but believed that sleep was a form of criticism. Wendayne paid a tribute first to Elron Hubbard, whom she described as a "masterful personality". I had little difficulty in equating this description with Laney's of him as a "loud mouth braggart." Mrs. Ackerman compared him with Louis Pasteur, on the grounds that both were described as quacks. Reports from France later spoke of a strange whirring noise from one of the Paris cemeteries. After the Convention, the Ackermans went to France: they haven't been heard of since. As a sort of "before-and-after" advert for dianetics Wendayne instanced the case of A.E. van Vogt. Before dianetics, she said, he was a quiet shy sort of chap whom no one ever noticed in a crowded room. Since dianetics it appears he has come right out of his shell and is a "masterful personality" like Elron, the sort of person who can make a room crowded all by himself. Of course I know I'm queer, but I can't help thinking I would rather have liked the old van Vogt.

Immediately Wendayne had finished, Carnell stood up with almost indecent haste and announced the second auction. This was the part of the Convention which left gaping wounds in the hearts of collectors who had no money and in the bank balances of those who had. Forry Ackerman donated to the Convention many priceless books and magazines, and despite warnings from everyone who knew just what an impoverished lot English fandom was, put them all into the auction without reserve. The result was ghastly. If I were to give only two of the prices that were fetched there would be a wave of mass suicide among the readers of *Fantasy Advertiser*. I will cut Roy Squires's circulation only by half, and reveal that van Vogt's own copy of *The Weapon Makers*, containing copious revision notes in vV's own handwriting, went for $13.00. My heart bled for Forry Ackerman and for the artists whose original paintings and drawings were going for less than a dollar each, sold in lots. Pausing only to notice with interest that Arthur C. Clarke's autograph was apparently worth 75¢, I stumbled off to the bar. There I found Walter Gillings, a very small man with a very large beer. He had a sombre look on his face, as if he was thinking about Ted Carnell and had decided to jump in and end it all. I wondered had Gillings been there all the time, having been driven to drink by his own speech. But no, this was more or less his normal expression. He stood me a drink on the strength of an article I wrote attacking Ken Slater for attacking him. We had a long conversation about this and that, principally that. We discussed a former sf publisher and writer who had gone into the pornographic literature business in a big

way. I must say I liked Gillings a lot. We got on very well, but after a while I thought of all you people and the Report I had to write, so I went back to the Convention.

There was a second radio play going on by that time, which was rather better than the first if only because the entire original cast was too drunk to go on. After that, the last item was another film show. The first one was on experimental rocket ships with a running commentary by Arthur C. Clarke. Both were very good indeed, though I recognized one of his gags as having been lifted from a *New Yorker* cartoon. The rest of the films were Forry Ackerman's own. They were good, too, but I gather they've been shown at American conventions, so I don't suppose I need bother describing them.

When everything was over and everyone was saying goodbye to everyone else and trying to remember who they were, Ackerman invited some of us to his hotel room. I was thrilled. I felt that I was now really at a convention. Not only had I talked to Forrest J Ackerman, actually and literally, but I was going to a fangab in a hotel room! On top of that I had just had the ultimate piece of egoboo. I was asked for my autograph! I don't know who it was, but it was probably someone who could trade ten of mine for one of Redd Boggs.

The group that finally set out for Forry's hotel room consisted of Forry, Bill Temple, John Beynon Harris, Lee Jacobs, James White, Bob Shaw, myself, and some unidentified stranger whom no one seemed to know and who never said a word the whole time. We refer to him as Yehudi because Bob can't remember him being there at all. But he must have been, because when we were going into the hotel Forry asked the waiter to bring up eight cups of tea.

Lee Jacobs, ignorant of the London licensing laws, paled visibly. You could see he didn't believe his ears. "Beer," he said quietly, just so there would be no silly mistake. The waiter explained that beer was not available. Lee seemed to regard this as a joke in the worst possible taste. With the air of a minister of religion reproving levity on some sacred subject he said again, firmly, "Beer." The waiter mumbled something about it being against the law to serve beer at this hour. Lee seemed unable to take this terrible news. A hideous jest, of course. Ha ha. "Beer." he repeated again with determination, holding fast to his one sheet-anchor of sanity in this suddenly crazy world. He said it in such utterly reasonable tones that it seemed that the waiter must now surely come to his senses. But the nightmare continued. Beer could not be served. Lee aged before our eyes. A Convention and no beer. Could such things be? He decided to

compromise. “Seven teas, one beer,” he suggested, as one reasonable man to another. “No beer.” said the waiter, a man of inflexible will. Lee was suddenly a broken fan. Obviously THEY had struck. “Seven teas,” he muttered, and started to reel up the stairs. He had the look of an aristocrat climbing into a tumbril, his world crashed into fragments around him. The waiter, like Mrs. O’Leary’s cow in the Great Fire of Chicago, obviously felt dimly that some terrible catastrophe had occurred for which he bore some responsibility. In the only way he knew, the wretched man tried to make amends. “Do you not want tea, sir?” he asked. This was too much for Lee. This was the last ton of straw. His mind snapped under the strain. “Tea!” he screamed hysterically. “Tea. Ha ha ha,” he laughed maniacally. “No! I’m a tea-totaller. I’m a tea-totaller. I’m a tea-totaller!” And so on up the stairs. Poor Lee. We shall not look upon his like again. Until the end he was faithful to the great Ghod Bheer. May we adherents of another faith be capable of such devotion to Roscoe.

In Forry’s hotel room we made Lee as comfortable as we could and distributed ourselves about the chairs and beds. I don’t remember much of what we talked about and indeed there wasn’t much time because Bill Temple and us three had to leave very soon to catch the last subway train. We were perfectly willing to walk the 5 or 6 miles to where we were staying, but we hadn’t the slightest idea of how to get there. In London we would go underground at one subway station and come up at another, and then we were all right, but we hadn’t the slightest idea what direction we had come from, nor what lay between.

I do remember all the same discussing with John Beynon Harris the retitling job done by Wollheim on his story, “No Place Like Earth”. Wollheim had changed this to “Tyrant and Slavegirl On Planet Venus”. I’d wondered what on planet earth Harris had thought about this, and apparently it wasn’t much. I remember, too, that Forry nearly disrupted the *Slant* staff by throwing on the bed between James White and Bob Shaw a Dollens Portfolio, “for the *Slant* artist.” Since they were both artists an ugly scene was only averted by my generously taking custody of the portfolio myself and promising that they could both look at it as often as they liked. Such is my selfless devotion to my staff. I want *Slant* to be a *happy* magazine.

Far too soon we had to make a wild rush for the subway station. It was unlit when we arrived, the ticket booths were closed, and the elevators weren’t working. However, the stairs were, and we dashed down them faster than light, hoping to go backwards in time. All that happened was that my suitcase acquired infinite mass, but finally we arrived at a dim

platform in the bowels of the earth. Not a motion was to be seen, only a dark figure pacing up and down in the distance. After ten minutes James decided to ask him if there was another train tonight. We saw him approach the stranger and engage him in animated conversation. After about twenty minutes he came back and told us that he didn't know. Apparently however, he had told James the story of his life – people have a habit of doing this with James – and it turned out he came from Iceland. Bob said it was no wonder he was so familiar with James – he must be the one who has been getting all our mail. We once had a letter redirected from Iceland, you know. It was stamped "Try Ireland". *Stamped*, you notice; it must be happening all the time.

Eventually a train came along. It must have been the last train very late or the first train very early.

The next night there was supposed to be a sort of hangover session at a pub in Holborn, but most people had already gone home and very few turned up. Forry Ackerman was there of course, and us three, and Derek Pickles and Alan Hunter of Phantasmagoria, and Vince Clarke and Ken Bulmer and J.M. Rosenblum. All the chronic fans. I got some material from Rosenblum for my forthcoming history of British Fandom, "The Immortal Teacup", and I had a long talk with Pickles about faneds' problems.

Just before closing time we bought some bottles of Guinness and beer and soda water and took them up to the Epicentre. The soda water was for James, who made a beast of himself with the stuff in London. Glass after glass of the raw liquid he would toss down with wild abandon. I pointed out to him what dangerous stuff it was – after all, carbon monoxide will do for you in five minutes, and it's only CO. Soda water is CO_2, twice as bad.

When we got in we had a job at first to pry Bob away from a book he had found – *Of Worlds Beyond*, "the science of science fiction writing". However he was forcibly restrained from dashing off a 100,000 word novel in van Vogt's recommended 800 word episodes, and we talked well into the morning. It's funny, but of all that I can only remember one piece of dialogue.

James: "Have you got your article for *Phantas* ready to see yet?"

Bob: "Only in crude and unintelligible form."

James: "Well, they printed it that way last time."

For some reason this seemed very funny at the time partly because Bob didn't get the point at all, and partly because it was so unlike James. He is usually the straight man in the trio, a big quiet chap, though occasionally he does come off with some devastating remark. The three of

us seem to have acquired somewhat of a reputation for wit at the Epicentre, though when we did say something we thought clever it never seemed to go down as well as the ordinary give and take of a *Slant* editorial conference. The truth is that we are not clever at all, but that this Irish accent we are supposed to have gives us a flying start. Actually Ken Bulmer and Vince Clarke are about the two most intelligent fans we have met yet, as well as two of the nicest. They make a wonderful combination. Ken (editor of Nirvana) is dark and impetuous of manner, with a wonderfully wacky sense of humour. I remember the time he invented the steam engine. We were all sitting in the kitchen before supper when the kettle started to boil. The lid jumped up and down at a tremendous rate. Ken looked at it for a while and then said thoughtfully, "You know, there must be a way to harness all that energy..." But probably that would only sound funny if you had been there. Vince Clarke is tall and fairly thin, with a very round head. He looks like a rather distinguished toffee apple. He talks with a slow drawl but on paper he is pungent and brilliant. His fanzine (SF News) contains some of the cleverest writing in fandom, very subtle and elusive, rather like my own stuff at times, only better.

But I'm getting nostalgic, as I usually do when I think about the times we had at the Epicentre, and anyhow Ken and Vince will be over here later in the summer. There will be quite a lot of activity in Belfast this year – Forry Ackerman and Poul Anderson are also expected – and probably you'll hear something about all that later. In the meantime I've now come to the end of the Convention Report. We all had a grand time. Sometime it might happen, though I don't see how, that I might attend an American Convention and see how it should be done, but even if yours are only half as much fun as ours you'll find it very worth while. Go to the NOLACON and see. I only wish I could be there, too.

June-August 1951

Afterthoughts

The British Convention of 1951 was the first I had ever been at, and the 15-page report on it I wrote for *Quandry* was frighteningly uninhibited. At least it frightens me now when I re-read it: if it had all happened in New York, I'd probably still be in jail. It didn't frighten me at the time partly because I didn't yet know personally any of the people on the official programme, and partly because I was under a peculiar misapprehension about them. I thought of them as pros, remote godlike figures who moved

and had their being on a higher plane altogether. Nothing a scruffy little fan could say about them could ruffle their Olympian composure. So I was cheerfully caustic about everything on the programme, from the food (I'm not saying a word against the catering arrangements at this hotel. It's just that it's the first I've seen where they have a fifth place on the cruet stand for a stomach pump) right up to the Convention Chairman.

This was poor Ted Carnell, whom I saw as a Machiavellian figure who had manoeuvred Walter Gillings out of his central position in English science fiction. This theory was based on nothing more than doubt as to whether Carnell was really a better editor than Gillings, reading in old fanzines about their long standing rivalry, and a speech which I reported as follows:

> Ted started by saying how sorry he was that Gillings wasn't there, and you got the impression that his grief was mainly due to the fact that there were a lot of things he wanted to say to his face that he didn't like to say behind his back. However he managed to overcome this handicap pretty well. All that was missing was a little wax image of Gillings. First he contrived to make it quite clear that Gillings's resignation was not due to illness, unless you think bad blood is illness. Then he announced that he himself was taking over the editorship of *Science Fantasy*. The magazine had apparently been losing money like a fanzine, but nevertheless he paid a glowing tribute to Gillings's work on it. Obviously Gillings had every quality of the ideal editor except ability. There was absolutely nothing wrong with *Science Fantasy* that a complete abolition of all traces of him wouldn't cure....

And so on. The first warning I had that the Olympians could be ruffled was a letter from Vince Clarke to Madeleine, whom he affected to believe was my widow. Then George Charters told me he had had a letter from Carnell in which he asked me to pass on the message that my convention report "stank". I'm relieved to see that I didn't respond to this by a grovelling apology: in fact I was almost defiant.

> George Charters was here this evening and passed on your comment on my convention report.
>
> If you mean the report stank as a report, OK, but if you are objecting to the way you appeared in it yourself I can't agree with you so easily. This was a frankly impressionistic account and that was the impression I got....

Nevertheless I was, judging from carbons of other letters to friends at the time, quite upset about the affair and Ted's reply was a relief. It was to the effect that my report had stirred up a lot of "shall I say, discord" but it was now all water under the bridge as far as he was concerned. I found out later that immediately Bill Temple got his copy of the Quannish (he was at that time the only London pro on Lee's mailing list) he had telephoned Ted Carnell and probably the others and read out the juicier bits.

March 1962

This looking-backward piece continues with "The Quannish was of course the 100-page anniversary issue of Quandry, *I think the largest fanzine ever published up to that time." and segued into memories of* Quandry *and its editor Lee Hoffman, with no further discussion of the Festivention. [Ed.]*

The Harp in England (2)
London, 1952

The LonCon

Just to be awkward, my bus doesn't pull in where it's supposed to, but sneaks guiltily round the corner and deposits me in a side street, as if it was ashamed to let the other busses see what it was reduced to carrying. So I have to drag my suitcases along to the proper arrival platform, where Vince Clarke is patiently waiting. I catch sight of his head across a couple of acres of traffic and wave madly. He sees me and embarks on the perilous journey across. Every now and then I catch glimpses of him defying death under the wheels of some car, keeping his eyes averted from me in the way people do when they don't want to wear a fixed grin for several minutes. At last contact is established and we make for Victoria Station where I deposit the suitcase I won't be needing until the Convention. Just as we're moving away from the Left Luggage Office we notice the porter lift a woman's suitcase off the counter with the contemptuous ease of an Earthman on the moon and swing it stylishly onto the rack behind him all in one practised movement. The technique is graceful, but just a little ostentatious, so we pause for a moment to see how he gets on with my case, which is stuffed full of fanzines and prozines and is really pretty heavy. Tidal waves flooded three Irish coastal towns when I took it aboard the ship. The porter approaches it innocently, expecting just another few pounds of pyjamas and toothbrushes. He picks a spot on the shelf behind him, casually grabs the handle of the case, and goes into his act. The case grinds forward over the counter for about four inches, balances for one dreadful moment on the brink, and then plunges relentlessly downwards to embed the porter's foot in the floor. Satisfied, we resume our journey to Earls Court to meet James White who should have got in from Paris about half an hour ago.

True enough, he is waiting for us at the Tube exit, sunburned and with a sort of travelled, worldly look about him, which on James you notice. Maybe it's the open-necked shirt and the white shoes. He throws his arms around Vince and kisses him on both cheeks. I glance round nervously to make sure Laney isn't looking and then pin an imaginary Legion of Honour ribbon on his chest and he starts to tell us about his

adventures in Paris. I don't know where they're going to be published now that *Incinerations* has folded. We go and have something to eat at an Italian cafe, where I give James his water pistol which he had had me bring to London for him. He didn't want to have to take it with him to Paris because he thought he might have difficulty explaining it to the Customs Officials, who mightn't have heard of the feud between James and Chuck Harris.

Next stop is the White Horse. Compared to last year the place is as lively as New Orleans fandom after the Nolacon. Nearly everyone has been to see a preview of "The Thing". After a while they begin to drift back. Bill Temple is showing everyone a newspaper clipping about the filming of his *Four Sided Triangle* and looking for sympathy because the book, which took Bill several years to write (it's the one he mentions in that letter I quoted in Burwell's *SF Digest* as having been twice destroyed in the war) has been rewritten for the screen in nine days – and by somebody else for a fat fee. With consummate tact, I seize the opportunity to tell him about a mistake I found in the book, where on one page the heroine didn't know who her parents were and on the next she was worrying about her grandmother having committed suicide. He ponders for a moment and then announces gravely, "Racial memory." I am satisfied. We turn our attention to one Dennis Gifford whose ceaseless effort to sell his production *Space Patrol Handbook* was quite a feature of the Convention. He even persuaded the redoubtable Ted Tubb, prince of auctioneers, to accept a copy as part payment for a magazine he had bid for. But this night, flushed apparently with the success of having sold two copies in as many hours, he rashly tries Bill and me. We have him go through the whole thing on the grounds that we don't want to buy a pig in a poke, and after some twenty minutes of wisecracks about the contents gravely explain that we don't need to buy one now cos we've read it. However we do, because Gifford turns out to be a Pogo fan from way back and we Pogo fans must stick together – especially when there's a chance of borrowing some old issues of *Pogo and Albert*.

Meanwhile other important personages have begun to appear, including Bert Campbell, looking as if someone had run a lawn-mower over him since last year, Fred Robinson, taking compromising flashlight photos of everyone including one of James White holding a pair of glasses and making a spectacle of himself, Dave Cohen lobbying for the Manchester Con, Alan Hunter, Peter Ridley, Norman Ashfield, Ron Buckmaster, Jim Rattigan and many others. But the most distinguished of them all is the great Ken Bulmer himself, editor of the almost legendary

Nirvana. He is accompanied by the remarkably attractive young lady with whom he has been sublimating his fan instincts, but my audience with him has not progressed far before I realize that this great brain has been far from idle. Besides his work on *Nirvana*, which proceeds with undiminished force, he has been giving serious thought to the epoch-making concept which he advanced last year in our presence. You will remember from the last Quannish (I hope) how while waiting for our tea in the Epicentre Bulmer's keen brain was inspired by the homely sight of the kettle boiling on the stove to speculate as to whether some use might not be made of this potent force. As if to show that he is no idle visionary, but a man whose piercing intelligence can penetrate the veil of the future and discern the practical aspects of these flashes of intuitive genius, Bulmer then and there confided in me his latest theories, which are so imaginative in concept, so breathtaking in scope, that I scarcely dare to divulge them here for fear of ridicule. Suffice it to say that Bulmer is convinced that it is possible to devise a simple means whereby the vast hidden power of this steam may yet be harnessed for the benefit of all mankind! He actually went on to suggest in all seriousness that by some system of wheels and pistons this mysterious energy could be used as a means of propulsion for land vehicles! Fantastic, you may well say, but at the time Bulmer was so plausible that he convinced us that he was on the right lines. We told him so and at our words his mighty brain leaped on ahead of ours to yet another development connected with the surface on which this vehicle would move – a development so incredible that I hesitate to describe it. Our imaginations boggled at the immensity of Bulmer's conceptions, with their vast potentialities for mankind, whether for good or ill, and James was so carried away as to make the foolish suggestion that one of these "steam machines" – as we agreed tentatively to call them – might be attached to a floating mobile base and used to move ships across the sea. It should have been obvious to him that, as Bulmer tolerantly pointed out, the "steam machine" would have to be fitted to an iron frame and that iron could not possibly float. But that is the trouble with these world-shaking conceptions – they attract a lunatic fringe of crackpots and unpractical dreamers. We rashly took Derek Pickles into our confidence later during the convention and with typical extravagance he made some ridiculous suggestion about using those fireworks children set off on Guy Fawkes Day as a means of propulsion, proposing that several of them could he fitted into some sort of container like a thermos flask and ignited at once. We coldly pointed out that they would never work in a vacuum, hut we adopted his suggested name, "The Rocket", for our first "locomotive", –

for no logical reason.

At about half ten the party broke up and I set off with Vince on the long and complicated journey to his home. Everyone sympathized with me as if I were going to Devils Island. No wonder – we probably passed it on the way. What a journey! At one time I reflected that at least my descendants would probably get to our destination, provided there was no mutiny among the mutants. It started off like a pageant of transport through the ages. First a tube train, then an ordinary train, then a bus – after that there were probably ferries, dog sleighs, sedan chairs and mule trains, hut I was too bewildered to notice. But after a few years subjective time we arrive, and to my amazement the people are still speaking English. After supper Vince shows me up to my room. Actually it was really his room. I don't know where he slept while I was there, and I never liked to ask in case it was on the mat outside the door: this room, you see, houses The Collection. It consists of a bed entirely surrounded by science fiction. The walls are concealed by shelves containing virtually complete files of several prozines – though not of *ASF*, the April 1943 issue being absent. I verified this carefully before I untied Vince and allowed him to show me the rest of the Collection. About 3 a.m. the more interesting items were exhausted and we went to bed likewise.

The Convention proper was supposed to start at 11 a.m. the next morning with "Informal Sessions and General Introductions". I collected my suitcase and a dirty look at Victoria Station and hurried to the Convention Hall to find that this was the Convention Committee's way of saying that us fans could come in the morning if we liked but as far as they were concerned the Convention wouldn't start until the afternoon. I took the opportunity to arrange my exhibit, which consisted mainly of current issues of virtually every worthwhile fanzine in the world including (in no particular order) *SFN*, SFNL*, Newscope, Straight Up, Quandry, Confusion, Utopian, Rhodigest, Stop Gap, Operation Fantast, Spaceship, Wastebasket, Opus, Journal of SF, Shadowland, Fantasias, Mad, Oopsla!, TLMA*, Phantasmagoria, Sludge, C/SFD*, Fantasy Advertiser, Shangri La, The Outlander, Hyphen, Peon, STF Trader, Nirvana, Ghuvna, Asmodeus, TNFF*, Fanfare, Sol, Explorer,* and, just because I thought it was such a credit to fandom, Redd Boggs's beautiful *ASF Story Key*. I had all these bound in a huge folder and it collected quite a lot of attention. Some people were seen to sit down for several hours and read the whole thing, staggering away afterwards with a glazed look. I ought to say that more enquiries were made about *The Ray Bradbury Review* than anything else. I forgot to list it above.

** Abbreviated titles include C/SFD for* Cosmag *and* Science Fiction Digest*, often distributed together; SFN for* Science Fantasy News*; SFNL for Bob Tucker's* Science Fiction News Letter *(formerly Bloomington News Letter); TLMA for* The Little Monsters of America*, clubzine of the eponymous early-1950s US group; and TNFF for* The National Fantasy Fan*. [Ed.]*

After lunch James was showing me the false beard and dark glasses he had brought for his encounter with Chuck Harris but I hadn't time to slip them on before Ted Carnell spotted me. He took a load off my mind – my last Conreport had been on my conscience a little – by being as friendly and as pleasant as could be and then put another one on by asking me if I'd mind saying a few words about sf activity in Ireland. I couldn't very well refuse but I wished to ghod I could have come to the Convention as an ordinary fan, which is all I want to be and all I would be if I hadn't happened to be born in a separate country and have to make like a delegate. Besides I didn't know what to say. We don't have organizations or publicity drives or do any of the exciting things that the Manchester group does, such as going on conducted tours of gasworks and biscuit factories – all we do is fan. And I can't very well stand up and tell everyone how many pages of / or – we've done or how many articles we've written. Besides, here in Ireland, we belong to American fandom more than English, and there were probably more people there that hadn't heard of me than at the Westercon. While I was racking my brains various people were making speeches about the site for next year's convention, the Northerners arguing that London was too expensive to get to and the Londoners pointing out how many other attractions London had to offer. I was listening vaguely to all this when Ted unexpectedly called on me. Since I couldn't care less where the next con was held as long as it wasn't in Belfast I couldn't think of anything but make a short speech on behalf of James suggesting that the next con be held in Paris, with the slogan "Gay Paree in 53". It is not true that this speech was delivered in French.

Quite demoralized by the fact that my little jokes had been received by resounding silence I returned to my seat and listened to all the old arguments being repeated, after which it was decided to have some more of them tomorrow and then hold a vote. Then Ted called for the reports from the regional centres and I said my little piece about sf activities in Ireland. It is not true that this speech was delivered in Irish. I sat down again and for the rest of the Convention imagined miserably that Ted Carnell was glaring at me. Where he sat on the dais the light caught his glasses and they seemed to gleam at me fiercely like Gort's, or maybe

Groucho Marx's, as if to say that here I go to all the trouble to arrange this brilliant meeting of minds and you stupid foreigners have to come and spoil it with unintelligible speeches. I was deeply sorry, but I had done my best. Seemingly whenever I get near a microphone I trip over the threshold of inaudibility and into a timewarp wherein my actions are speeded up beyond human comprehension. Worthy contributions to the symposium were however made by Dave Cohen, Fred Robinson, Tony Thorne, Les Johnson, Ken Potter, Frank Edward Arnold and others, and the convention adjourned for tea very little the worse.

After tea there was a recording of a speech by Arthur Clarke made for the Convention before he left for the US. It was very good indeed, and they'd have been better to let it go at that and perhaps have asked Bill Temple to do a series of footnotes – or even interruptions – rather than anti the climax with a recording of a talk Arthur had given on the radio about sf films. It was all very sensible but we'd heard it all before, and from Arthur. There followed a discussion on the subject "That science fiction is true to the facts of human experience", whatever that means. Contributions of great merit were no doubt made to this burning topic, but I didn't hear them because I'd been called out into the lobby to interview a reporter about fandom and brief him on fan jargon. The usual incredibly distorted version appeared in one of the London papers the next day.

The Convention had been pretty dull up to now, and it began to look as if the absence (enforced) of Forry Ackerman and Arthur Clarke and the non-participation (voluntary) of Bill Temple and Walter Gillings were going to kill it. I don't know why Bill Temple didn't speak, but at least he was there, whereas Gillings didn't appear at all. Evidently he had been dealt so many grievous blows by the god of sf that he had given it up as a bad Job. Someone suggested that two minutes silence' should be observed in his memory. He was missed, though, and we all hoped he'd be back next year to make his usual forecast of the death of science fiction and be chief mourner over the beer.

But the pessimists had reckoned without the ability of Ted Tubb to make the lowly auction the high spot of the Convention. He was utterly magnificent. An auction conducted by Ted Tubb is more than an auction – it is an artistic experience. Vince Clarke and I spent ecstatic hours on the fringes of the crowd nudging each other and trying to jot down the richest of his remarks before they were followed by others. The result of course is that I can't read half the scrawls I have here. I'll try to reconstruct some of his patter but of course it'll suffer by the absence of Tubb's terrific delivery and the disarming enthusiasm which he would lavish on some

incredibly undistinguished paperback, like for instance the BRE of Farley's *Immortals*... "A FIRST EDITION! THE PLATES HAVE BEEN SMASHED! ...REMEMBER, THIS BOOK WAS BANNED IN BOSTON. (At this point he would open the book at random and pretend to read a lascivious passage – he has a wonderful talent for improvising whole paragraphs in any particular style.) AN HOUR OF EROTIC ENTERTAINMENT. THIS SORT OF STUFF WILL MAKE YOU INDEPENDENT OF YOUR GIRL FRIEND. DID I HEAR A SHILLING? COME OUT FROM BELOW THAT CHAIR AND SAY 1/3. WE SOLD ONE OF THESE FOR TEN BOB AND IT WAS STOLEN FROM THE PURCHASER BY AN OUTRAGED FAN. THIS BOOK WAS BURNED IN EFFIGY IN FRANCE, SMUGGLED INTO THIS COUNTRY UNDER THE GUISE OF NYLONS. WHAT, ONLY 1/3 FOR THIS HIDEOUS TRAVESTY OF HUMAN DRAMA? (Tragically) THIS IS THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS. ALL RIGHT THEN, 1/3. I'LL TAKE YOUR TROUSERS FOR DEPOSIT. AND NOW... (He pauses dramatically, holding up a copy of *Authentic* with his own first novel, 'Alien Impact', in it. He waits statuesquely for utter silence. Then, solemnly –) *THE GREATEST PIECE OF LITERATURE EVER WRITTEN*... I HEARD THAT!!! COME ON NOW. DO YOU WANT ME TO COMMIT SUICIDE RIGHT HERE ON THE FLOOR? I DIDN'T HEAR THAT BID. WHAT? VERY WELL THEN, SOLD CURSE YOU. (Now, holding up some issues of *FA* and *Amazing* and waiting for the jeers to die down –) NOW NOW, DON'T DERIDE THE LITERATURE YOU LIVE ON. WHAT AM I BID FOR THIS THICK WAD OF READING MATERIAL GUARANTEED TO LAST AT LEAST THREE NIGHTS. IN PERFECT CONDITION. THEY'VE ONLY BEEN READ ONCE I ASSURE YOU. OLD COPIES OF THE BIBLE FETCH THOUSANDS OF POUNDS AND *THIS* IS A RELIGION. ALL RIGHT THEN. SOLD FOR 3 SHILLINGS... NOW, WHAT AM I BID FOR THIS BEAUTIFUL PAINTING? PEOPLE HAVE OFFERED POUNDS FOR IT BUT WE JUST WOULDN'T SELL. WHY, THERE MUST BE FIVE SHILLINGS WORTH OF POSTER COLOUR ON IT. PUT IT BEHIND THE AQUARIUM OR OVER THAT SPOT ON THE WALL WHERE BABY FORGOT HIMSELF. HANG IT IN YOUR DEN IF YOU'VE GOT ONE. (MY DEN HAS A CHAIN HANGING DOWN THE SIDE.)... WHAT OFFERS FOR THIS BOOK BY OLAF STAPLEDON? THERE'LL NEVER BE ANOTHER OLAF STAPLEDON YOU KNOW – THERE WAS ONLY A LIMITED SUPPLY. LOOK AT IT. BEAUTIFULLY BOUND IN GUN METAL GREY, SHOWING UP FINGERPRINTS TO

ADVANTAGE. OBSERVE THE NARROW MARGINS – NO HUNTING ALL OVER THE PAGE FOR THE PRINT. FOR ANOTHER SIXPENCE I'LL SIGN IT FOR YOU....” And so on, inexhaustibly. It was a tour de force. Audience participation at the beginning was on the level of those humorous bids of “one penny”, or even more wittily, one halfpenny – on which incidentally George Charters comments in his report that “Although I have heard this hundreds of times, having worked as an auctioneer's clerk for two years, I still do not think it is funny.” – but it soon began to improve and for the first time the convention became a corporate entity, a happy state symbolized by the presence in the air of delta wing paper darts.

There is nothing like a common affliction for drawing people even nearer together, and this was provided by the film show which followed. A member of the Committee was at pains to tell me it was all the fault of the fellow that owned the projector insisting on showing his own films, so they must have felt guilty about it. They should have. It was awful. First we sat through an interminable “interest” film about sheep dogs and snake bites and fencing and ghod knows what – all the worst afflictions of the supporting programme except talking animals and the royal family – just to see a few rocket shots that we'd seen before and didn't want to see again. Then there were more instructional films about aeroplanes and “How Talkies are Made” and “How Television Works” and so on and on. As yet another of these oozed its way on the screen Ken Potter shouted sarcastically “How To Talk On The Telephone” and there were ugly murmurs of “Call this a Convention?” But with a tenacity worthy of a better cause the wretched projectionist stuck to his guns and the dreary parade continued. The only item that had any interest at all was a French film about astronomical phenomena, and that was only because some rash fan – not me, thank Roscoe – had undertaken to translate the captions as they were thrown on the screen. Since they were very long and full of technical terms he got into serious difficulties, which were greeted by snide comments by the frustrated audience. The commentary soon developed into a cross talk exchange between the commentator and the fans. After all this the main film, *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*, seemed almost worth seeing. It wasn't though.

For some inadequate reason the Convention was to start next day with a repeat of the Arthur Clarke recording, so Vince and I dawdled over breakfast... I've seldom seen a meal more thoroughly dawdled over... and ambled down to the station at the crack of 11 a.m. On the platform I opened my wallet to put away my ticket and noticed with a sinking feeling

that yesterday's return half was still there, though I distinctly remembered having given up some ticket last night. This could mean only one thing: I had surrendered the return half of my ticket to Belfast. I shamefacedly explained the situation to Vince and we traced the ticket collector to his lair. For what seemed like hours we waded knee deep in tickets, looking for one which I vaguely remembered having been green, but we finally had to give up. (In case you're worried the ticket collector found it himself a couple of days later and brought it round to Vince's house. I wish he had given it to me outside, because it turned out to be blue and Vince saw it and made some caustic comments about colourblind Irishmen.)

By the time we arrived at the Con we'd missed the pro-editors' session, which James tells me was the best thing at the Con. Ted Carnell and Bert Campbell were the speakers and someone had had the brilliant idea of getting them to answer questions on behalf of each others' magazines. It must have been rich. During the lunch interval, and later, members of the Con Committee kept coming to me one after another and saying they'd heard of me losing my return ticket and that the Committee would gladly advance me my fare home if I was stuck. I thought this was very nice of them – unless it was just that they wanted to make sure I did go home – and in fact everyone at the Con this year was very nice to everyone else. I'm not sure how much if anything I had to do with this – last year I wasn't above exaggerating some signs of dissension which, quite unexpectedly to me, caused some discord in the London Circle – but it makes it very difficult to write an interesting report. Apparently impossible, you will say.

After lunch there was another forum by various authors and artists, including Ted Tubb, Brian Berry, Dave McIlwain (author of an excellent sf play recently broadcast by the BBC), Dan Morgan, Bert Campbell, Alan Hunter, Sid Bounds, fluent Frank Edward Arnold, and other vile pros. I thought Bert Campbell made the best speech, but Bounds read a thoughtful and intelligent paper about where he thought the future of sf lay, throwing in a plot synopsis of "The Green Hills of Earth" only slightly longer than the story itself. After the invited pros had said their pieces John Brunner got up and came to the dais where, as Britain's most up and coming young author, he made a competent and interesting little speech. I envy him his self assurance: also the 600 odd dollars he's just got for a 21,000 word novelette sold to *Astounding*.

Next Les Flood introduced the International Fantasy Award, including among his descriptions of the judges one of me as the leader of "articulate fandom". This was the best joke of the Con, but nobody

laughed. The elegant little table lighters cum space-ship ornaments were then presented to Ted Carnell on behalf of John Collier for *Fancies and Goodnights* and to Arthur Clarke's brother for *The Exploration of Space*. This was followed by the second auction. Ably assisted by Fred Brown, Ted Tubb was again incomparable, but the real star this time was a stray cat that kept wandering over the glass roof and peering down at the auction through a missing pane. We onlookers at the back were vastly amused, but we never really hoped that anything would come of it, just as telephone linesmen never fall off their poles no matter how long you wait. But this was the day of days. Oh joy! To our incredulous delight the cat could finally contain himself no longer and, pausing over the broken pane, expressed his considered opinion of the *Fantastic Adventures* than being auctioned. He passed on it from a height. Ted Tubb uttered a terrible roar and leapt dramatically backwards as if to say "Apres moi, le deluge" but some of the fans who were clustered round him poring over the books weren't so lucky. They got poured over themselves. It was a glorious moment. I would like to nominate this cat for a special award for the most fluidly expressed contribution to the Convention.

As a matter of fact there was a special award later, to Ted Tubb for his "Alien Impact". Maybe I should explain that though Ted is, on the evidence of his really superb stories in recent *New Worlds*, the best talent to appear in Britain since Arthur Clarke, his novel in *Authentic* was little more then a competent potboiler. Tony Thorne of Gillingham, one of the very brightest of the newer fans, had prepared a special International Fantasy Award for him, and this was now presented in a lovely parody of the official ceremony. The Award consisted of a whisky bottle, symbolically emptied, to which had been glued a toy spaceship and a box of matches. This was received by Ted enthusiastically, and this little unrehearsed Joke was one of the funniest things at the Con. Thanks Tony.

There followed more speeches about the site for the next Con, in which various rude remarks were made about Manchester's weather, where it is supposed to pour cats and dogs the whole time. This was most unfair because I knew a man who passed through there in 1923 and there was only a thin drizzle – besides after what had just happened London was in no position to make cracks about rain and cats – but despite this and a drily humorous speech by Derek Pickles about White Horse beer (we knew he couldn't stand it) it was almost unanimously decided that the next Con would be held in London. The vote had been declared about 1½ seconds when Ken Bulmer referred to it as the Coronvention.

The final event was a showing of *Metropolis*, which was in a way the

best part of the official programme. This was because there was no incidental music to drown fan comment on the action, some of which was brilliant. Dan Morgan shone especially. When the hero suddenly mimed exaggerated alarm the way they do in silent films and dashed madly for the door Dan remarked “FIRST ON THE RIGHT”. That started it and the whole worthy but rather dull film was enlivened by a ruining commentary from the audience which I wish I’d space to quote – like “THE MANCHESTER CON” when the underground city was flooded by torrents of water.

There was no formal closing of the Con and people just stood around saying goodbye. The best parting shot was Bill Temple’s account of how he was walking down the Strand one moonlit night with Arthur Clarke’s brother, just after Ego had left for America. Bill stopped suddenly and pointed at the moon. “My God,” he said, “Arthur’s left it behind!” “It’s all right,” said the alter Ego, “He’s got an American edition.”

The last fan to leave the Convention was James White, of whom more was heard in the days which followed.

August 1952

The Coroncon
London, 1953

or Through Darkest England Burning the Candle at Both Ends

Halfway to the dock gate we were met by Dave Gardner who had been up since six and lost no more time in celebrating Bea's* arrival by presenting her with a complimentary copy of the Liverpool group's newly published symposium *Sex and Sadism*. Bea gracefully accepted this bouquet of neuroses, opened it casually at one of the lewdest illustrations ever published in the fan press, and quickly closed it again. Shortly an enormous black car loomed up driven, appropriately enough, by vile huckster Frank Milne of *SFService*. We found later, however, that it hadn't been bought with the money bled from us poor fans but had merely been hired to take half the population of Liverpool to the Convention. We all got in and strolled about the interior, avoiding the dangerous overhanging slopes of *Sex and Sadism*, until we arrived at a sleazy cafeteria which was all Liverpool had to offer at this hour of the morning. Breakfast was over and the waitress was polishing the table with a dirty rag and a black look, when Eric Frank Russell made his entrance. He stepped immediately into his natural niche as life and soul of the party, greeting Bea with the remark that while in his writing career he had often said what he would like to do to pro editors, he'd never imagined it could be a pleasure: and proceeded thus outrageously to skate on the thin ice on the brink of bad taste without once putting his foot in it. Larger than life and a great deal more interesting, he manages to set the standards in any company in which he finds himself. But at one point he took time off from good-humouredly insulting everyone present and warning Bea against the Londoners to tell the plot of an as yet unpublished story. It was one of those warmly human short stories of his which show Russell, beneath his bluff exterior, to be one of the most sensitive writers in the sf field and he told it so well that we all felt we only needed to have learned shorthand to be sure of a Galaxy cheque. Even the people at an adjoining table stopped talking to listen and when he had finished there was the moment of silence which is the supreme tribute to an artist.

** US editor Bea Mahaffey had toured Ireland before travelling with the Willises to the London convention. [Ed.]*

After breakfast EFR drove us to Chester, passing through about ten feet of Wales just so Bea could say she'd "done" it, then back to his house for a magnificent lunch, and then down to the station where we said goodbye to the hospitable Liverpudlians. It was a relief train and we had a carriage to ourselves for the whole of that golden journey to London. We talked and laughed and sang the whole way, except when we were reminiscing nostalgically (already) about the trip round Ireland. James found the key of his room at Portballintrae which he'd forgotten to hand in, and carried out an investiture of Bea with the number-plate as with the Legion of Honour, not forgetting the most trivial detail of punctilio, and, carried away, proposed to her several more times. Next time she'll know to bring a suitcase of rejection slips.

Shortly before the train got into Euston, where "Harris" was to meet us, James filled his water-pistol and began to hum "High Noon"; but when we got out Chuck was nowhere to be found. James suspected an ambush and began to talk wildly of erecting barricades, but I finally ran Chuck to earth at the wrong platform. He had a girl with him whom we took to be his sister; however it later turned out to be Rita Krohne whom as a friend of our idol Robert Bloch we'd been ready to welcome with open arms. In the taxi we proceeded to let our old friend Chuck in on all the fannish nonsense we'd had so much fun with in the trip round Ireland, until Rita pointed out that the expression "George" which poor Bea had taught us was actually quite passé. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where they are evidently right up to the minute on these matters, George went out over a year ago and had been superseded by other expressions which we can't remember now, possibly because we couldn't feel the same affection for them as we had for the now discredited George. Mourning the dear departed, we finished the journey to the Bennington in sober silence; then on to the White Horse where our spirits were lifted by the warmth of the London Circle welcome.

The Convention next morning was due to start at 11 a.m., and we took care and a taxi to arrive shortly afterwards so that in the event of its actually starting on time we should be on hand to carry out those who had fainted from the shock. But all was well – at 11:30 Ron Buckmaster was still asking everyone if they had seen the microphone. Evidently someone, probably a Northerner, had taken the mike out of the Convention already. Someone suggested he should call for its return over the PA system. While the Committee were mulling over this we all milled around to the strain of

Stan Kenton records.

At 11.43 precisely Chairman Fred Brown apologized for the delay. He offered no explanation, and nobody expected one. He also announced the last minute cancellation of the showing of *Destination Moon*, due to the London County Council's unexpected objection to the showing of inflammable 35mm film in unlicensed theatres. Evidently the Government had sneaked through the Cinematograph Act of 1909 without informing the Convention Committee.

He also read a postcard from Peter Hamilton regretting that he might not be able to be present. Since Peter was actually standing just under the Chairman's nose, it looked as if he had delivered the postcard himself to save postage. Fred also announced the cancellation of the Junior Fanatics play, adding rather tactlessly that something better would be substituted.

This, incidentally, was the first Convention I've been at where there was a special item listed in the official programme as "announcements of unavoidable changes". A wise precaution, and one which I hope portends a new era of more realistic programme booklets. Perhaps we shall one day have a really accurate printed programme scheduling such normal features of the average Convention as "unavoidable delay", "breakdown of PA system", "confusion", "collapse of Chairman", "utter chaos" and "Committee blind drunk".

After all this excitement we adjourned for a nice restful lunch interval, during which we watched James and Chuck trying to trap one another in a wildly revolving door, James and Chuck having a running gunfight with water-pistols in Southampton Row, and a film company shooting a crime melodrama in a side street. James and Chuck were much the best, we thought. Then back to the Bonnington for the introduction of notables. The London Chairman was much gentler than Korshak, Bea and I agreed; all he threatened to do was "run over us quickly", and he hadn't even got a bicycle on his nose to do it with. There was warm applause for Bea, and also for Chuck Harris attending his first convention.

William F. Temple then led off the pro authors panel. He began by saying he was supposed to speak about the future of science fiction, but he never read the stuff himself and he didn't believe it had any future whatsoever. Instead he would talk about the friends he had made through sf. He had a list here of 23 of them, 20 crossed out and the remainder trying to live down the film of *Four-Sided Triangle*. One of them was Honest John Carnell, the man who had made more undeclared money out of sf than anyone since H.G. Wells. We shouldn't hold *New Worlds* against Ted – he took the job as a mistake, being under the impression that

it was paid. Ted had come a long way since then and he, Temple, hoped he was going a long way. The second was G. Ken Chapman. Fantasy was still Ken's first love, apart from beer, his favourite story being Algernon Blackwood's "The Tree That The Dogs Loved". Referring to Ken's appearance, he said he was very much of a middle man, having beaten most of his contemporaries to the paunch. He always thought of Ken when he heard Cabal in *Things to Come* calling war "an ugly spectacle of waist". Finally there was Arthur C. Clarke, the "C" in whose name stood of course for "corn", the same corn we had stood for so long. Arthur was one of those people who know everything, including the fact that they know everything; though even Arthur had his moments of self doubt and could be sometimes heard saying to himself "I wonder if I'm really as good as I know I am." Of course we all knew his books – *The Exploitation of Space*, *The Man Who Sold the Moon* and so on. He had recently found some excuse to go to America again and was now underwater fishing in Florida, engaged in submersive activities. After his experience of editors and agents he should be quite capable of dealing with sharks. In fact Temple was sorry for the sharks.

The main defect of Temple as a Convention speaker, in fact come to think of it the only defect, is that he doesn't like speaking (extraordinary in one who does it so well) and insists on being put on early, with the result that everything else is something of an anticlimax. However Tubb kept the standard high, cynically advancing the theory that the reason for the bookshops being loaded with sf was that nobody would buy the stuff, and disposing competently of an inane interruption about flying saucers from a character called Burgess, who resembles nothing so much as Hal Shapiro's conception of Ken Beale. (Other parallels which occurred to Bea and me were Bill Temple=Robert Bloch, Peter Phillips=GOSmith, and Dave Cohen=Henry Burwell. America doesn't seem to have any equivalent to Norman Wansborough.)

Other pros who spoke were John Brunner ("I predict a rosy future for sf – I have some more stories in my drawer"), Vince Clarke ("as half author of two books"), C.S. Youd ("No time to read sf"), and Frank Edward Arnold ("Haven't read anything new for 12 years"). Apparently nobody in the London Circle reads anything but their own stories. Carnell then invited questions and inevitably Spillane was brought up, as indeed he must be by anyone with a sensitive stomach. Frank Milne took his opportunity and rose up from the body of the Hall to flog a copy of *Sex and Sadism* to Carnell, who had been talking about it for ten minutes without having read it. Someone in the audience who had heard of

semantics asked for a clear definition of "bad" – a subject which might have kept everyone talking until well into the Supermancon had not George Hay got up and disclosed that different people had different ideas as to what good and bad were. Youd said It Wasn't As Simple As That. It was a difficult point, but he knew what it was when he saw it. Helen Winnick said coyly that she hadn't read the Spillane story in question because none of her men friends would lend it to her. An unidentified voice from the audience, who sounded like Havelock Ellis, said that all forms of literature were substitute activities for sex. However science fiction being more constructive was, he stated astonishingly, more likely to produce an orgasm. Goaded by the Mystery Voice, Youd said sarcastically that it must get a different thrill out of sf than he did, and for no apparent reason then went recklessly on record with the opinion that Bester's *The Demolished Man* was "just Spillane on a lower level". Fred Brown said he thought the Spillane story in *Fantastic* was "jolly good" and he'd pay 35¢ for it any day, adding equally gratuitously that he wouldn't give tuppence for a Youd story. Someone in the audience whom we only knew as Sidgwick and Jackson then said something inaudible in a refined accent and Carnell asked him to speak up. Sidgwick and Jackson, in a near shout, then announced that their sex life was satisfactory (I almost left the Convention Hall to send a cablegram to Francis Towner Laney) and resented the charge that sf was a substitute activity. George Hay, obviously determined to go one better than anybody, declared that sex itself was a substitute activity. So, he added sweepingly, was science. Proceeding into even higher realms of thought, he said profoundly that it was a matter of opinion what was essential and what was not essential. The human being selects his effective field. He wondered if he had made his point clear.

Obviously perturbed lest the Convention spend the next few days worrying itself into a nervous breakdown over what sex could be a substitute *for*, Carnell hastily closed the discussion and made a belated introduction of another visitor from America, a Mrs. Solibakke of Seattle, Wash. (In fairness to Mr. Hay, though, I think I should say that in my opinion he was actually working towards a very sound theory first propounded by another Deep Thinker, name of me, when in last year's conreport I accused Ken Bulmer of sublimating his fan instincts with a woman.) Mrs. Solibakke from Seattle was, Carnell revealed, a member of N3F. Suitably impressed, we applauded warmly. However I am sorry to say that Mrs. Solibakke seems to have detected a note of insincerity in our tribute, for in a letter published since in G.M. Carr's *Gemtones* she reports that "the N3F is not popular among the fans here". Presumably we should

have bowed our heads and stood in silent tribute to the noble organization, firing the British representative over its grave.

Carnell then made the first public mention of the Fund that had been started by an American fan group to bring a certain English fan to the Philcon. The fan in question had been unable to go after all and Don Ford and the Cincinnati group had generously thrown the offer open to any other British fan we chose who could risk having to pay most of the cost himself. Carnell didn't disclose the English fan's name but I see no harm in saying it was Norman Ashfield, who hasn't been active in fandom for quite a while but who has evidently kept up his correspondence with his friend, Don Ford.

After this came the play by the Junior Fanatics, the Committee evidently having been unable to get something better after all. The production suffered somewhat from under-rehearsal, the hero living in Lancaster and the heroine in Bournemouth and neither having very strong voices, and it rather lacked the polish and brilliance we have all come to associate with Seventh Fandom. There were also some slight difficulties at first due to them having forgotten their own lines, but with a fine spirit of co-operation they soon overcame this by reading each other's. The heroine was a new fan called Shirley Marriott who looks like a brunette BRE of Lee Hoffman. She has the same first name too, but I'm afraid I never found how much further the resemblance went; these younger fans keep very much together and don't mix with us old has-BNFs.

Dave Cohen followed with an address on what was wrong with the London Circle and was so convincing that Chuck Harris changed his London Circle badge to a Belfast one before he had even finished. One of Cohen's accusations was that the Londoners didn't support the last Mancon and in his speech of rebuttal Brown promptly put his foot in it right up to the neck by saying he didn't know about the Mancon. Since the last London Convention had been virtually knee-deep in Mancon propaganda, this was an unfortunate defence. Bentcliffe asked with deceptive politeness whether Brown hadn't seen the notices. Brown pulled the ground in on top of him by saying, too craftily, that he hadn't been up to the White Horse much during that period. Bentcliffe patiently pointed out that the notices in question had been in the Convention Hall and that Northern speakers there had publicly asked for support and been given to understand they would get it. Angry murmurings from Northerners in the audience confirmed this. At this point Bert Campbell came in and poured oil on the burning waters. He apologized for being late, he said disarmingly, but he had been up until four in the morning discussing sex

with some visitors from the United States. The Northerners, he went on, couldn't expect celebrities to come to their Convention ("Well, I'm a celebrity, aren't I?") unless they made it attractive and publicized it properly. He further endeared himself to Northern fandom by pointing out how well the Londoners publicized *their* conventions. (I remembered the time Alan Hunter wrote to me in Belfast four days before the '52 Con to ask did I know whether it was still on and did I know where it was.) You couldn't go wrong, said Campbell blithely, if you followed the London Circle. They didn't just stick something on the wall in the hope someone would notice it. Fred Brown rubbed salt into the wounds by saying that the London Circle didn't have to pay anything at all for their publicity. (One wondered whether this meant the Mancon Committee could also expect free advertising in *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy* and *Authentic*.) As illustrations of their ingenuity he instanced the fact that they wrote to *Eagle Comics* (apparently without result) and designed a poster for a showing of *War of the Worlds* (which was not accepted). One felt his examples could have been better chosen.

During the tea interval which followed copies were handed out of the Harris/Slater "Looniecon" oneshot, a supremely fannish production. I seem to have spent the rest of the Convention explaining regretfully that I had nothing whatsoever to do with it and that it came as a complete surprise to me.

I didn't hurry my flock back from the tea interval.... I'd noticed something called *Whiskers** in the program and I didn't want to be in at the death. This was a Thing I'd started while recovering from pneumonia, been too weak to finish, and had passed on to the London Circle to show that at least I'd tried. When I realized they were going to put it on just as it was, my only consolation was that people never listen to plays done over the PA system, when there are no actors visible to receive either applause or tomatoes. But when we did arrive, about half way through, I was astonished to find that they were not only listening, but laughing in some of the right places. I stood savouring this entirely new form of egoboo and realizing I'd overlooked two things: the fact that audience reaction time is slower than that of readers, so that poor jokes go over well, and the fact that there are some very talented actors in the London Circle. The piece was done superbly well, especially by Bill Temple as Winston Churchill and by Bert Campbell as Bert Campbell, this last a particularly fine piece of type casting.

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* *The script for* Whiskers *is included in the TAFF ebook* Willis Discovers America and other fan fiction. *[Ed.]*

After this there were various quizzes, discussions and games. Audience participation was so poor as to be tantamount to a civil disobedience campaign, as it was all through the Convention. I think the reason was mainly that the weather was too hot for any form of exertion except jumping to conclusions; the principal ones seem to have been that the Convention was dull and the audience morons, and I don't think either was correct. Unfortunately I can't prove it, because it was apparently too hot for taking notes. It's a pity, because from the few I have it seems that quite an interesting variety of subjects was discussed. Bert Campbell said his own stories were years ahead of their time. Carnell said, "Poor fellow. He lives in a world of his own." Ted Tubb lectured on atom bomb protection, advising either brown paper or a very deep hole in the ground. Bert Campbell said that authors were parasites. Youd said he had sold Carnell three stories that had previously been rejected from *New Worlds*. Someone said they knew a girl with three heads and a calf with wings. Campbell said old fans were jealous of new ones. Ted Tubb said ant-eaters wouldn't be accepted in the French Foreign Legion. (l don't know quite how ant-eaters got into this discussion about how to retire from fandom; maybe someone suggested the best way was to tapir off.) Ted Tubb also presided gloriously at the auction but I didn't take any notes of this either, having come to an agreement with Vin¢ Clarke to let him immortalize Ted this year.

We'd been invited to a party in the Liverpool suite that evening but when I went up there I found it still empty, so we accepted an invitation from Bert Campbell. On the way Burgess appeared and tagged along, with evidently no intention whatever of crawling back into the woodwork. Campbell looked helplessly at me and I had an extraordinarily vivid sensation of déjà vu, of having been in this exact situation before. As of course I had, and the heat and the long carpeted hotel corridors brought Chicago back even more vividly. It was that tightrope again. The inherent tendency of American-style conventions, as this one now was, is for everyone to gravitate in one enormous loud and drunken party, which no one really enjoys. The secret of enjoying oneself, on the other hand, is to gather together a few congenial friends and hide. Between the two alternatives stretches the tightrope, one false step on which means either frustration or the hurting of other people's feelings. I learned a lot about the tightrope at the Chicon and Bea is probably the foremost expert at it – notice how she has walked gracefully through British fandom, leaving them all at each others' throats for "monopolizing" her and not one of them blaming her – but Bert hadn't been to the Philcon yet. He couldn't

think of anything but to open the door and usher everyone in.

The party was being held in Rita Krohne's room, since someone was having hysterics in Bert's. There was no space here for anything like that – there wasn't enough room to swing a cat, never mind a cataleptic. The room was so small I wondered we didn't have to pay a penny to get in. I counted 26 people in it, and that was only the top layer. I arranged a code knock with James and left the Black Hole of Calcutta to reconnoitre the Liverpool suite again. On the way up I ran into Ken Slater, whom I'd met for the first time a few hours ago. We went to his room, opened a bottle of whisky, and discussed the Transatlantic Fan Fund. Then we went up to the Liverpool suite. I'd only been there a few minutes when James and Madeleine arrived with the news that they'd all just been thrown out of Rita's room and that the rest of Bert's party had gone along to Soho to get something to eat. We decided to wait until they came back, but in ten minutes or so the same porter came along and threw us out of the Liverpool suite. Madeleine and James and I felt there was no future in this and went home to Rainham with Chuck, where we got to bed about three.

So ended British fandom's first gallant attempt at an American style convention. I felt a little guilty about it all since this movement seemed to have started after my glowing accounts of Chicago, but it still seemed to me that everything would have been fine if the hotel had had bigger and more soundproof rooms and a more tolerant staff. The fans seemed to take naturally to it. The Liverpool Group, for example, fought a gallant rearguard action from room to room, succeeded in getting the porter drunk, and made a historic last stand on the roof. There they invented an entirely new convention pastime, that of dropping empty bottles down chimneys. Admittedly the only reason this idea has never occurred to American fans is that their hotels don't have chimneys, but no one can deny that the Liverpool group have made a valuable contribution to Conventionship, and one that is in the true Ben Singer tradition.

That's where I left this conreport three months ago, and despite numerous requests (well, two's a number, isn't it?) I don't think I'll ever finish it. Every time I think of that second day I feel again that utter tiredness resulting from a combination of the heat, convalescence from pneumonia and driving 800 miles without my L plates. I still think it was a good convention, but I don't want to go back to it... except for a few stray memories. James White's helicopter beanie falling off the coatstand at a Lyons and being returned to him by a dear old lady with "Is this yours?".... A copy of *Slant* 3 fetching 5/6 at the auction.... Bea Mahaffey saying that *Other Worlds*' editorial policy was "flexible" and I asking Vin¢

prophetically if she meant the magazine folded easily.... And that all night party at the Rattigans'....

Us True Fans had started a splinter party in the kitchen to get away from the poker players and dancers but our hostess was worried about us. About 4 a.m. she came in with the immortal words: "THERE HAVE BEEN COMPLAINTS THAT NO ONE IN HERE IS DRINKING!" We denied the foul imputation. About dawn Fred Robinson opened the door to the living room and called us to have a look. It was like a morgue. Bodies lay here and there in what appeared to be advanced stages of decomposition. The sunlight wakened some to pseudolife and they stumbled out into the garden. We walked up the road for no apparent reason and then back again. Apparently everyone had thought everyone else was going somewhere. Bulmer took my arm and pointed at the rest of them. "Of course," he said, "These are all artifacts of Proxyboo Ltd."

"I don't need a helicopter beanie," said Fred Robinson mournfully. "The top of my head just spins round."

October 1953/January 1954

The Magnificent Flop Manchester "Supermancon", 1954

The sun was shining on Manchester when Irish Fandom arrived. Before we could explain to the bewildered inhabitants what it was, we were met by Fred Robinson and Terry Jeeves, plenipotentiaries for Eric Bentcliffe, and escorted to the hotel. After everyone had fed their sensitive fannish faces we drifted along to the Convention Hall to make sure that everything was all right. It was... the public address system had just broken down. Pleased to see that all was proceeding on traditional lines we drifted out again and mounted guard on the front steps to look out for the motorized convoy of Londoners. After an hour or so the others – fake fans all – got tired of waiting and deserted their posts. I held my ground steadfastly, scanning the horizon with keen eyes and directing other strangers to Manchester to various places, and was eventually rewarded by the sight of a London taxicab tearing past loaded to the gunwales (the zapgunwales) with fans, the top layer consisting largely of Walter Gillings wearing a tropical pith helmet with a home-made aluminium propeller on top. My opinion of Gillings soared.

I waved and shouted at the taxi and it drew up at the next corner and began to disgorge an apparently inexhaustible supply of fans. I welcomed them to Manchester and helped them in with their luggage. I got no tip, except that Bert Campbell's motorbike had broken down outside Rugby and nothing had been heard of him since. This was so completely what might have been expected that nobody believed it for quite a while, end the Northerners obviously expected Bert to materialize in their midst at any moment. I think it was this, and not the official programme, which was responsible for the general air of expectancy throughout the Convention that any moment something might happen.

At precisely 11:30 I went along to the Convention Hall to see if the Londoners would carry out their secret plan to draw attention to the official starting time with a rocket take-off count. Judge of my horror to find some brash Northern neofan called Harry Turner getting up to declare the Convention open and calling for witnesses that it had started on time. Some of the older fans would have collapsed from shock at this unheard-of

breach of hallowed tradition, had not Dave Cohen swiftly restored an atmosphere of security with a few ritual apologies and by failing to introduce half the notables present.

One of the apologies was that because of the failure of the public address system it was not going to be possible to start the proceedings with a rocket takeoff count as the Manchester Group had planned.

After this the lunch break was declared. When we got back we were told that the Convention Hall had been moved from the First Floor to the Ground Floor. I assumed at first that the Manager had been warned about sf conventions and had decided to move the Hall down a floor before this took place in the normal course of events, but in fact it turned out that his ignorance of Conventions was so blissful that he was only worried about his newly decorated walls being disfigured with sellotaped notices. He didn't seem to realize how lucky he was he still had walls. At any previous Convention the notices would have been fixed on with thumbtacks, nails or even daggers.

However the gentlemanly Manchester fans had spent the entire lunch break moving everything from one hall to another, and were still running around in little circles uttering plaintive cries. My heart bled for them, and for future Convention Committees. This was another Mancon "first". Many terrible things have happened to Convention Committees, but having to move to another Hall in the middle of the Convention is a new and ghastly weapon in the armoury of Fate.

Among the exhibits now on display was a full-size water-closet marked "Vargo Statten" and a roll of toilet paper with the same marking fixed to a placard reading "Cause & Cure". I took this to be another courteous London Circle gesture to the Guest of Honour on the lines of the "International Fantasy Award" they'd proposed to give him – a tiny gallows – but they and everyone else I asked disclaimed responsibility. I'd like to have been there when Vargo saw it – I wonder if he'd have been flushed.

After some more apologies, including one for the number of apologies, the afternoon sessions started a mere 55 minutes late. The first item was billed as "a talk on radio-activity by Frank Simpson". Most of us owe Frank an apology for not realizing this was a sublimated thiotimoline type of hoax, but there was an excuse. The first stages of a Convention – in fact probably any stage of a Convention – is not the proper atmosphere for this rarefied type of humour. Poor Frank lost most of his audience during his deadpan introduction, while he was still waxing enthusiastic about the table of elements. Norman Wansborough walked out in disgust, but the

restiveness of the others manifested itself in another Mancon "first" – the passing of notes among the audience containing interlineation-type quotes and comments. I'm not sure whether it was Ken Potter or myself who started this, but the inspiration was probably Vin¢ Clarke's "quotecards" – small pieces of pasteboard bearing fannish messages which circulated all during the Convention. There were a thousand of them, with 100 different messages. Later Chuck Harris took to handing them gravely to passers-by in the street, sometimes with a muttered "Ghod bless you, Sir" and sometimes with a glance up and down the street and a finger pressed to the mouth. The rest of us lagged behind watching the victim's reaction to such items of information as "I HAD A POCTSARCD FROM GHOD THIS MORNING – *Hyphen*" or "BLOODY PROVINCIALS". While we were walking around the square one evening he gave one to an old man sitting on some steps and the expression on the recipient's face was so peculiar that we had to run after Chuck and find out what the card had said. It had been "DEFY THE DEROES WITH DIANETICS – Redd Boggs." Another made a wonderfully appropriate appearance at the Chinese restaurant where we had lunch, just as our orders had arrived and we were staring at them in a wild surmise. It was "IF YOU DON'T WANT CROTTLED GREEPS, WHAT DID YOU ORDER THEM FOR? – Filler." We left this one tucked inside the cellophane cover of the menu.

After a monologue by Geoff Lewis which went over very well in parts (the parts nearest the speaker) we had the Medway Group's offering. It suffered not only from the continued defection of the public address system but from the fact that the script and timing weren't adequately adapted to the slower reaction time of a large audience. As last year Tony Thorne was reduced to asking ruefully "Did anyone see that gag?" and it was no comfort to be interrupted two minutes later by a dazed shout of "My Ghod, I've seen it!" The slightest diffidence of the actors, though disarming, didn't help either. Apparently to be funny in public you must above all have *authority*. Alistair Peterson for instance, who came next, made some of the feeblest jokes it has ever been my misfortune to be exposed to, but he produced them with such confidence that the audience was confidence-tricked into laughing.

He also made some good ones, like "I had some notes but I lost them, so I'll just have to B natural" (this fell rather flat) and "*The Vargo Statten Mag* has a circulation of over 50,000; if you don't believe me I can show you the cancellations." And on the pocketbook situation, "Some of them are incredibly bad; perhaps the ones I don't publish aren't any better,"

After this, a day early and put on without announcement so that I

hadn't time to escape, came the play I had written; brilliantly performed on tape by the Liverpool Group, who also deserve credit for the parody of US commercial radio inserted in the middle. This playlet seems to have become a yearly chore of mine, and it's a very welcome one – I can now refuse to make speeches with a clear conscience. I made up my mind a couple of years ago that I'd never speak at a Convention again – there's no point in trying to change one's psychological make-up at my time of life, and I don't see any other reason why I should force myself to do something I dislike so much. I did it at Chicago and Los Angeles, where it was necessary, but that experience didn't make me like it any better. Any more than being successfully buried alive is a cure for claustrophobia.

Later there was a curious interlude when Cohen announced that the London Circle was now going to demonstrate how to put on a Convention. Nothing happened for a very long time and eventually most people got up and went out or stood around talking. Finally Ken Bulmer went to the microphone and announced calmly that "The London Circle, having thoroughly organized this Convention, now hand over to the Manchester Group." I didn't know quite what to make of this... whether it was deliberate sabotage or a piece of London Circle self-criticism.

The talk at tea-time was all about the startling news that the film show that evening was to be *Things to Come* – NOT *Metropolis*. Shocked murmurings were heard when the announcement was made. Small indignation meetings were held. Neofans staggered about white and trembling, their world crashing to ruins about their ears. Old fans shook their heads forebodingly. No good would come from this mad craze for novelty. A Convention without *Metropolis*! It was unthinkable. As Rick Dalton was heard to complain, "It should at least appear on the programme!"

But there was even worse to come. No one discovered that the show was illegal under a twenty-year-old statute, the films arrived safely, on time, and wound the right way, no one ran around asking the audience if anyone had a 35mm projector, the projector did not break down, the film was not put on backwards, or even upside down.

In fact the whole showing went off without a single hitch. It was terrifying, like the end of the world.

Unable to stand the strain, many people went upstairs to parties. The London Circle had one for which the admission charge was ten shillings, but the passports you got for this were the best thing about it. There was nothing that you couldn't see at the seaside for free with a pair of binoculars. I thought of making love to my own wife, but I was afraid the

London Circle might be shocked, so we went upstairs to the Liverpool party. Someone there had taken to heart the maxim that the recipe for a successful party is too many people in too small a room. It was the Black Hole of Calcutta... with zap guns. It was a wonderful party though, especially after John Roles and others had run amok with soda syphons and schwepped half of the people out. Sometime previous to this we'd gone down to have another look at the London Circle, but we still had the feeling we should have brought a portable keyhole with us to watch them through. Besides the party was supposed to be exclusive, but Burgess had been issued with a passport and Ken Potter had been turned away. We felt we were in the wrong place and went back to the more congenial Liverpool gathering until it was broken up by the night porter.

Many interesting incidents occurred that night which I cannot report here because of my innate sense of decency and my respect for the English libel laws. I'll report them in Oopsla instead. But I could mention the interesting affair of Burgess's entrails. These were several pounds of assorted livers, lights and other internal organs which Burgess had bought in London slightly too long ago, brought to the Convention, and deposited in Peter Hamilton's room for safe keeping. Unfortunately he had omitted to tell the occupant of the room about them and when Peter Hamilton found them he thoughtlessly threw them out of the window into the canal. Burgess came around later to collect them and was highly indignant at Peter for putting out his lights. He explained that he had intended to put them in Norman Shorrock's bed. I am sorry to say however that this eminently reasonable explanation was not in accordance with the facts. Actually the entrails were part of the props for a highly secret item the London Circle proposed to put on tomorrow – a fake human sacrifice to culminate in Ted Tubb throwing entrails among the audience; just another of the wonderful London Circle ideas which when the time came they found they hadn't the guts to put on.

Next day, Sunday, everyone was awakened at some godly hour by an unearthly din from the bells of the cathedral across the road. Indignation was widespread, and Vin¢ Clarke was heard to complain "Can't these bloody Mancunians afford alarm clocks?" It was a Good Thing that the parties had been broken up fairly early in the morning, because it meant there was still some fight left in the conventioneers. I came in towards the end of the fmz session to be told by George Charters that someone had objected to reprints of my stuff because it would discourage young fan writers. I made a grateful note of this argument to use against faneds who ask me for original material, but honestly, you young fans, don't let my

example discourage you. I was like this even before I started fan writing. After this came John Gunn, who went off quite well, and then John Russell Vargo Statten Fearn, whom George Charters had referred to as the Jest of Honour. He was interesting mainly because he was so disarmingly frank – but then he has so much to be frank *about*.

After this Ted Tubb began to take over the Convention. Little more was seen of the Convention Committee, and nothing of 11 of the 22 items listed on the official programme. Instead Tubb reigned supreme, first ad libbing his way through the remnants of Terry Jeeves's script for the mock trial of Bert Campbell – with good-humoured and often brilliant co-operation from Terry himself, who struck me as one of the nicest people there – and then winding up the Convention with a riotous series of monologues and interviews, including one with Norman Wansborough. Tubb was wonderful. It seems to me it would be worth the while of any Convention Committee to hire Ted Tubb along with the hall.

Among this glorious melange of Tubb-foolery there occurred one of the most extraordinary events I've ever known happen at a Convention. No one, it transpired, had the slightest intention of bidding for the next Convention site and it began to look very much as if the Supermancon would adjourn without anything having been decided. Tubb fixed that. In the space of about thirty seconds he called for nominations, heard none, announced that the next Convention would be held in London, and appointed Shirley Marriot to take subscriptions. All this, apparently, quite on his own initiative. However, the London Circle appeared to accept it as their destiny.

People had started to leave for trains quite early in the evening, and the usual post-mortem had started long before the Convention was scheduled to end. Dave Cohen and Eric Needham stood by the door with distraught faces and courageously asked representative fans what they had thought of the Convention. There was a startling unanimity in the replies. Every one that I heard was to the effect that the official programme had been a fiasco, but that they, personally, had enjoyed the Convention.

That was what I had thought too, but there seemed to me to be more to it than that. Usually I don't express any opinion about the merits of Conventions because whether one enjoys it or not depends so largely on one's own subjective impressions, but the Supermancon was such an extraordinary affair that I find myself getting all philosophical about it.

For instance, take the situation in British fandom just before it. Bitterness between one group of Northerners and another, hostility between both groups and the Londoners, tension between Hamilton and

the London pro-editors, the Londoners full of diabolical plans to sabotage the Convention, the Northerners under a desperate compulsion to justify their contempt for London inefficiency. All this amid the greatest burst of British fanactivity since 1933. It seemed to be an explosive situation, one that would wreck British fandom. All the disenchantment, recriminations and bitterness which normally follow conventions would be magnified to cataclysmic proportions. But instead the incredible happened. The opposing stresses met, surged briefly and silently... and dissipated themselves in an atmosphere of good humour. The Supermancon seems actually to have strengthened fandom, a thing which no Convention has ever done before.

Apparently the Supermancon Committee wrought this fannish miracle by staging the worst organized Convention fandom has yet seen. You can almost see a mystical symbolism in what happened. It was as if all the sins of British fandom – the smugness of the North, the malice of the South, the snobbery of the Old Guard – as if they were all expiated by the Supermancon Committee as they crucified themselves in the Grosvenor Hotel. The point was that they bore their agony in such a way as to demonstrate the inherent goodness of fan. If they had showed signs of bitterness or pomposity in their ordeal things might have been very different. Instead they met every disaster with such informality and good humour that they won people's sympathy. In face of this sporting attitude the London Circle (though admittedly things might have been different if Bert Campbell had arrived on schedule) dropped their plans for sabotage. Not one of the fiendish plots hatched over the last nine months in Operation Armageddon* was put into effect. The official programme was allowed to die peacefully by mutual consent.

** The London Circle's Operation Armageddon plans are described in some detail in Instalment 15 of Walt's regular fanzine column "The Harp That Once or Twice", collected in 2023 as a separate TAFF ebook with the same title. [Ed.]*

It was the way it died that was important. Last year in London it lingered on in agony. People sat around, bored and irritated, waiting for life to be pronounced extinct. This year people realized at quite an early stage that the official programme was already part of the pavement of Hell, and it was at this point in time that the British Convention completed the transition that had begun last year in the Bonnington. As I pointed out in "Initiative Inc" two years ago, American fans have long been accustomed to regarding the official programme as a sort of running buffet. But such was the force of tradition that English fans, as long as an official

programme existed, would have felt compelled to sit around and watch it. When the official programme collapsed at Manchester, British fans were forced into the American style of Convention. They took to it like a duck to water, and I don't think we'll ever see the old "desultory lecture sessions" type of convention in Britain again.

The Supermancon Committee deserve credit for other things than committing suicide. They booked an almost ideal hotel – not too respectable, only slightly too big, and above all with plenty of lounges where people could talk, in a sort of perpetual party. The Liverpool Group also deserve a bouquet for their tour de force in booking a lounge for a late-night party – a completely new development in convention techniques. But the very success of the Supermancon as a social event poses, it seems to me, a new problem for British Convention organizers. If everyone is enjoying themselves the way they learned to do at the Mancon, who's going to put on the official programme? The Supermancon will go down in fan history as a success only because all the reports will be written by actifans. What about the neofen who turned up to see the sort of thing that was advertised in the promags and went away disgusted? Either we're going to have two Conventions, one for ourselves and one for the public, or we've got to let the pros take over the official programme, and run it as a commercial proposition.

July 1954

The Bloggy Bloggy Do Kettering "Cytricon", 1955

After an interesting journey through, round, along and under some mountains which concealed themselves so haughtily in clouds that I assume they must have been the Pique District, the special early train from Manchester carrying Frances and Cyril Evans, Ethel Lindsay, Frank Simpson, Madeleine and a few hundred less interesting people, including me, arrived at the base camp from which the ascent into Kettering may be attempted. Scorning the assistance of native porters the expedition eventually mounted to the George Hotel... a mere 20 minutes after Dave Cohen, who had foolishly waited for the ordinary late train. We watched as he masterfully unsettled the booking arrangements for his party and at length I was provided with a key like that for a baronial castle, attached to a length of a drawbridge. I dragged it and our two suitcases up to our room. Pausing only to make sure it had an unoccupied bed we went downstairs again to be greeted by Chuck Harris, Joy Goodwin and Vin¢ Clarke. It was now clear what had happened to the Clarke follicles, who had not been heard from for some time. Desperate after years of wandering through vast echoing caverns, the few survivors had made a misguided sortie out onto his upper lip, where he now bore a sort of crew-cut moustache. I entered Chuck's book title contest with *The Weird Shadow Over Vincemouth* and we all went and sat in the corner.

Among the large but select company were Mal Ashworth and a young lady with the fine old North Country name of Sheila O'Donnell and a nice line in humour. (As a married man I do not of course notice such things but I am assured by the President of the Union of Fully Certified Sex Maniacs, a Mr. Harris, that her other lines are commendable too.) There were also Ron Bennett, who seemed much nicer than last year and who was to become the first fan to play Rugby at a Convention out of doors, Brian Varley (who is not married), Denny Cowen, Convention Secretary, and lots of other very agreeable people. Dave Cohen engaged Denny Cowen in conversation and Chuck called to the latter across the room "Dave giving you some tips on how to run a Convention?", adding in a reflective aside audible only on the ground floor, "Fans have short memories, haven't they? Look at people talking to Cohen!" He then went on to speculate on the fact that Ted Tubb was engaged in earnest

conversation with Frances Evans. I told him Frances was married. “That’s all right”, said Chuck. “Ted isn’t superstitious.”

The scene here in the bar lounge was picturesque in the extreme. Everyone seemed to be wearing helicopter beanies, all home-made and each more picturesque than the next. Sheila wore hers, a double prop job, through the streets of Kettering without attracting more than cursory attention... which is a commentary on women’s hats. Eric Jones’s was by far the most imposing, incorporating as it did a radar antenna, several Van Der Graaf generators and a spaceship complete with launching bowl. He didn’t so much wear it as shelter beneath it. During the official programme Terry Jeeves lit a small fire under the spaceship. It presented a most imposing sight but Eric Jones remained oblivious, even when Burgess came up from the back of the hall and extinguished the conflagration with his zapgun. The presence of all these helicopter beanies... far more than can be seen at a dozen American Conventions... was fascinating to the fan historian. The helicopter beanie was first introduced to fandom by Ray Nelson and (I think) George Young many years ago, but they’ve never been conventional headgear in America as they now are in British fandom, and they owe their currency, it seems to me, solely because of their convenience as a recognisable symbol for fan artists – mainly Lee Hoffman. As with Conventions themselves, British fandom is acting out what US fandom only dreams.

After a while the strain of carrying on seventeen different conversations at once began to get too much for me and I thought I’d take a quiet stroll over to the Convention Hall. I’ve never yet been able to have a good look at Convention exhibits. I was making my way past groups of people at a speed of about two knots an hour when Pete Taylor ran up to me with an “Is There-A-Doctor-In-The-House?” expression and told me that three local people in the bar were perplexed about the beanies and wanted enlightenment. He dragged me in front of three well-dressed matrons and promptly scampered off the sinking ship. I gave the three good ladies a brief synopsis of the history of Defiant Goshwowboyohboyism, of which I take the beanie to be a facet, from 1939 to date. They seemed reassured, which was more than could be said for me. My nerves finally shattered by this experience, I gathered a little party consisting of Madeleine, Chuck, Sheila and Mal and fled upstairs in search of peace and quiet. We found it in the dark and deserted Residents’ Lounge. We lit one of the table lamps and talked contentedly in the little tent of light until gradually other people began to arrive.

The size of the party increased according to the well known

exponential law governing Convention functions, until the hideously inevitable Burgess manifested itself. Chuck, resourcefully, immediately sent him away for some tea. He came back with some story about it not being available until half ten. Recklessly, Chuck told him to go and find Wansborough and Reaney and bring them up too. He was more successful in this quest and presently ushered in Wansborough, just after Ken Slater had rung for tea again. Aghast, Ken exclaimed "That wasn't what I rang for!"

Shortly afterwards I thought we might as well go to bed. As I was escorting Madeleine out we passed by Norman Wansborough. He leaned forward confidentially and said, "Walt, I wish I was in your shoes." I told him I wouldn't be wearing any, and went on out. Though now I come to think of it, this was a mean and selfish attitude. Why shouldn't we share these things with those of our friends who are less fortunately situated? I shall send Norman a pair of my old shoes by the very next post.

When we got to bed I found that my body didn't agree with my mind that this had been a sensible thing to do. After lying awake for an hour I got up again, put on my jacket, trousers and shoes over my pyjamas, and went out in search of fannish good cheer. I was nearly knocked down by a fan swaying from side to side and looking for the lavatory. I directed him to the door marked "Bath", figuring he couldn't miss it, and continued on to the Residents' Lounge. There was a small party there, consisting of Ken Slater, Dave Cohen, Brian Varley (who is not married), Archie Mercer, Mike Wallace and John Brunner. Ken Slater was anxious to talk about TAFF but the atmosphere wasn't suitable for sober discussion. I had locked our bedroom door after me lest Madeleine should be awakened by drunks looking for their room or Wansborough wanting to try on my shoes, and after a while I went back to make sure all was well. To my remorse I found a note lying in the corridor. It read "SOS. Walter has locked me in and I'm dying of thirst. Would someone please tell him to bring me a drink." I went in and was told that the hotel taps provided only hot and cold running chlorine, and went out again for a glass of cider.

Having stayed her with flagons and comforted her with apples, like it says in The Bible, I went back to the Lounge, where I had the privilege to be present at the most historic intervention of a Night Porter in Convention annals. He shambled onto the scene at 2:45 a.m. We had been making a fair amount of noise and were prepared for the usual retribution to overtake us. Everyone had practically thrown themselves out before he opened his mouth. When he did we could scarcely bring ourselves to believe what he was saying, but eventually it seeped into our numbed

brains that the unthinkable was happening. There was no reproving reference to “complaints” from that mysterious horde of antifans who furtively follow us from Convention hotel to Convention hotel spoiling our innocent fun by selfishly trying to sleep. There was no Message From The Manager. No tactless reference to the lateness of the hour. No sinister suggestions about non-residents. Instead the man was talking *about science fiction!* He was a *fan*... at least of the BBC programme *Journey into Space*. Actually he looked more like a *Weird Tales* fan – in fact he looked like a weird tale – but Boris, as he came to be called, was a very fine fellow. There was a proposal that he be appointed Official Night Porter to British Conventions and be provided with his own travelling coffin.

Eventually I went to bed again, about 3:30 a.m. Next day someone asked me how I’d enjoyed the previous night and I said, “Fine: I went to bed twice.”

“Yes”, said Madeleine, “and with the same woman!”

The Official Programme began next day at 2:18 p.m. with a 50 cycle hum on the PA system and speeches by Ted Carnell and Bert Campbell. I hear that Denny Cowen had attempted to start it at the advertised time of 11 a.m, but no one was there to appreciate this whimsical gesture. It came to an end some 90 minutes later, but no blame can be attached to Ted or Bert. Ted maundered on for a while, first about short stories not selling, and then about increasing people’s reading speeds... as if he was resolved to convert all stories into short stories and put an end to the whole sorry business... but he soon became again the engaging soul of indiscretion we enjoy every year. Bert was at first uncharacteristically subdued under heavy fire directed at his fmz reviews... a sitting target... and was also most unbertlike in his defence of the *Authentic Book of Space*. He allowed his old enemies to retire in triumph from the field after the following brisk bombardment....

Eric Jones: “At what age was the *Authentic Book of Space* aimed?”

Bert: “We are always very hopeful, optimistic –”

Eric Jones: “So was I when I sent for it.”

Eric Bentcliffe: “I have sent a copy of it to White Sands, and now I hear that all tests have been cancelled.”

But after this just retribution by two of the famous Misfits, Bert brightened up a bit and became more like his usual outrageous but likeable self.

After this came the Liverpool Group’s famous tapera, which was so good that the sensitive fannish audience subconsciously realized that

anything else, even Ken Slater lecturing with laryngitis, would be an anticlimax. They voted for an interval with their feet, leaving a publisher who had begged a five minute spot in the Programme for a plug with the task of selling his spring list to 120 chairs. (My brain received a message from the rear what they could do with them.)

We arrived back from tea in time for the tea interval, as usual, and to welcome the Convention Chairman, Bill Panter, to the empty hall. Then I contacted the custodian of the Liverpool tape recorder, a nice bloke whose name I have stupidly forgotten, to see if I could play on his machine two tapes made at San Francisco and sent to me by my Literary Executor, Peter Graham. I had been fighting a losing battle with these tapes for months. The first machine I borrowed played both tracks simultaneously, one forwards and one backwards, so that the fans' voices were drowned out by what sounded like a heated conference of Russian agents. The second played them separately, both backwards. This one played them separately, and in the right direction, but at half speed. I give up. Will any US fans who send me tapes in future please enclose the tape recorder they were made on... or at least a Russian dictionary.

At lunchtime that day the hotel manager had laid on lunch for fifty at 8/6 per head (or at least per person.) At one o'clock the vast organization had completed its preparations and stood ready to swing into action. Six waiters stood poised for zero hour, sworn to deal with the mad rush of starving fans or go down beneath their feet. By two o'clock six fans had appeared, the rest of them by this time finishing their fish and chips in cheap cafes. Denny Cowen didn't seem at all worried. He said the Manager had asked him for advice on how many he should provide for at lunch. 75? 100? "Well," said Denny thoughtfully, "I think you could safely allow for about six. Maybe seven. Or, if you want to take a chance, perhaps even eight." The Manager was incredulous. There were over a hundred people there; surely most of them would want lunch. "Not," said Denny firmly, "at 8/6 a throw." And so it turned out. I didn't have lunch there myself, but I hear the service was pretty good.

Next day the hotel put on what was evidently a "Fans' Special" at 6/-, but it was too late; the pattern had been set. The imperturbable Cowen took the view that the Manager had had fair warning and had only himself to blame, which was quite true. In any case the hotel cleared enough on the bar to win on the swigs what they lost on the roustabouts. They say Norman Wansborough took a bath in cherry brandy every night.

My nerves were still shot to pieces; I was, as the old gag has it, shaking like an aspirin. Ever since the Chicon I seem to have been living

Conventions backwards... I start off with the hangover and finish on top of the world. The turning point this time came when Arthur Thomson, Roscoe reward him, recommended Alka Seltzer and went out with me to buy some. We came back, ordered two glasses of water from the astounded bartender and drank the mystic potion. Having carefully read the booklet of instructions I began to feel better at once and, hearing that Mal Ashworth was ill with flu I went up to his room with Chuck Harris, the bottle of Alka Seltzer and an unsolicited testimonial. Poor Sheila was speculating mournfully as to how much it would cost to ship a body back to Bradford, but after we'd been talking to him for a while Mal brightened up in sheer self defence and began to fight back. Sheila, still morbidly minded, had pointed out that there were tiny skulls in the wallpaper pattern. "It must have been meant for a scullery not a bedroom," said Mal. Satisfied that he was going to live... though whether or not he deserved to was another question... we went back downstairs.

Some time during the afternoon word had been spread by runners through the various lounges that *War of the Worlds* was going to be shown that evening. My Ghod, we thought, the Official Programme walks again. I dropped in about half an hour after it had started to make sure that the Martians hadn't found out about Alka Seltzer, and discovered the makings of an even worse catastrophe. Someone had decided to help defend Terra against the alien hordes with his little zapgun. Apparently these high class silvered screens are allergic to water and the maddened operator had called in the Manager, complaining that his screen had been ruined and his projector was in imminent danger. He said he would cancel the show if he wasn't afraid the audience would riot. I assured him he needn't worry about that and if he'd explained the position to them there'd be no more trouble. Then after discussing it with Vin¢ I told him we'd lift a collection to pay for the damage to the screen. I got Bill Panter to make the announcement and the film show went on without further incident. During the interval Vin¢ and I went round with beanies and collected £2:12:3d. The operator settled happily for £1:10 and of the remainder 10/- went to TAFF and the balance in gratuities to the hotel staff.

Some people said afterwards that the people who did the damage should have paid for it, but I don't see how it could have been done in practice. I took the collection from the main culprit, a professional man with a University degree, and he only gave me 2/6 and was far more concerned about his confiscated zapgun than anything else. Besides until recently zapguns have been quite comme il faut at British Conventions and in a convivial atmosphere anyone can be forgiven for failing to take into

account the possibility that a film screen may be something other than an ordinary white sheet.

All the same this incident could have ruined the Convention, and it seems to be the general opinion among the leaders of fannish thought that the zapgun should be outlawed. It had its uses in the dry-as-dust British Convention of a few years back, but we all know how to enjoy ourselves now without mechanical aids to informality. Many of the actifans left them behind in 1954 and hardly any BNFs toted them at Kettering. The trend will probably continue.

There was some speculation next morning as to what would take its place. Ken Slater was demonstrating a potato gun, but one hates to think of what fannish ingenuity might develop from this. Bombs loaded with cold mashed potatoes, bazookas firing half a stone at a time, french fried shrapnel, long range rocket missiles... maybe even guided potatoes, with electronic eyes. A horrible thought. Mal Ashworth and Ken Bulmer came up with the best idea – a double-barreled shotgun with one barrel loaded with tar and the other with feathers. It could be used for running people out of fandom... such as thoughtless zappers.

After the film show a number of us had a very pleasant party in the Residents' Lounge... or at least I enjoyed it. Not too many people, only one talking at once, and everyone participating. Arthur was drawing cartoons, as usual – his graphic commentaries were one of the best features of the Convention, and became a sort of illustrated quotecard – and Pamela stole a particularly brilliant one for *Ugh*, hiding it down the neck of her dress. ("She's wearing a strapless evening cartoon.") But after a while the word began to go around that we should mingle. For some reason everyone went to Bert Campbell's room, which was already crowded. It was about the size of two telephone kiosks and at one time contained 35 people, not counting the ones under the carpet. When there was a knock at the door I reflected that if it was the house detective asking if Bert had a woman in there he could have called out, "Only about 17." I asked myself what sort of creature would go to this place when there was a perfectly good lounge. The answer was a lemming. Eventually everyone else had the same idea and we went down to the "Basket Lounge" where the Liverpool Group, those masters of conventioneering, were throwing another classic party. It had quietened down by now, and you could almost see the other end of the room. This was more than could be said for the floor, where a well known femfan was holding court. Under the impression that one of her satellites was a certain Northern faned, Chuck said "I'll bet Ted Mason doesn't report this" but when the police arrived at 4:20 a.m. it fortunately turned

out to be someone else who *was* registered at the hotel. Chuck said, “I’d rather go to jail myself than be Ron Bennett.”

The rest of Sunday passed in a happy blur and then there was the usual mad rush round saying goodbye to people. Not as many as usual this time, because it seemed that all our friends were coming to see us off. There were the Bulmers, Vin¢ and Joy, Mal and Sheila, and Eric Bentcliffe. Even Eric Needham, who had just arrived on his motorbike. (The one with the wide handlebars, of which he had been heard to say “It’s a good bike, but rather susceptible to forked lightning.”) I heard him asking Chuck for a light for his cigarette. Chuck obliged, saying: “A light from Chuck Harris! Light an eternal flame from it or something.” Eventually Madeleine, Chuck, Arthur and me, accompanied by our entourage, arrived at the platform and the train came in. We said our last goodbyes and started to clamber on. Suddenly the air was filled with confetti. Every one of them had been clutching a handful of it all the way from the hotel.

Madeleine and I leaned out of the carriage window dripping confetti – technicolor dandruff, as Bob Shaw calls it – laughing and waving goodbye. As the train moved off Ken Bulmer shouted, “Give our love to your children when you get home!”

June 1955

Convention Afterthoughts

What a happy, friendly affair it was... at least for us who already knew people there. It may have been worse than the Supermancon for strangers, but then there was less publicity to mislead them into expecting a lecture session. It was whole-heartedly a fannish Convention, and as such the best of all time. # New personalities of the year: Sheila O’Donnell & Denny Cowen, the latter a trufannish type whose mordant wit was wasted on Kettering astronautics. # If the fannish ingenuity and energy used to promote the Liverpool Group’s BLOG could be prostituted for commercial purposes we could incorporate fandom as an advertising agency and retire from our jobs.

Two stray memories; Wansborough proudly showing a pin-up photo of Irene Baron in a green bathing suit. Seems she’s promised him a date if he can get to Los Angeles. Prozines, anyone?... Turning a comer in Kettering and coming on a shop front emblazoned in huge letters with the name MILDRED K. BLEWETT. Chuck standing stockstill to exclaim,

“Not *THE* Mildred K. Blewett!!”

June 1955

Snug in the Fug
London Worldcon, 1957

This is assembled from fragmentary Willis reports in five issues of three different fanzines, as detailed in Original Appearances. Occasional repetitions have been left as written. [Ed.]

Prologue

The London Worldcon was comfortable, relaxed, casual, conversational, friendly, informal, unpretentious and epoch-making. I'm not going to write any detailed report about it, partly because I haven't got the necessary notes and partly because it seems to me to have been one of those occasions where what happened wasn't important so much as how people felt. When you come to think of it, that's true to some extent of most conventions. You can read page after page of conreport full of details about the programme or of meals, meetings and movements, and at the end of it you find that all the writer had conveyed of what was the important thing about the convention what it felt like to be there – was half buried in an almost accidental phrase or an unconsciously revealing incident. In your mind your subconscious takes the conreport and shreds it down, throws away all the bones of hard fact except for a few flavoursome events, and boils the rest down until you're left with the pure, rich essence of the convention. This is what you remember, what distinguishes that convention from any other. It should be possible to perform this operation at the plant and supply the finished produce direct to the consumer. I'll try.

Imagine a quiet old part of London just outside the heart of the city, Bayswater. Stately old stone-faced terrace houses with balconies, rusty iron railings and desultory trees. Nobody can afford to live here any more and the main streets are all small shops, offices and restaurants. But in the quieter streets, like Leinster Gardens, the old houses linger on almost unchanged as hotels. Like the Kings Court.

We approached it from the tube station by a curiously circuitous route and the first thing we noticed about it were two tattered doormats wedged against the stone pillars on each side of the door, like hair growing out of nostrils. Directly inside the door was the reception desk with two pretty girls behind it talking to someone with an American accent whom I didn't

recognize, an island of order in a sea of chaos. The lounge opposite them was strewn with unassembled electronic equipment, paint pots, junk, shavings, paper and rubbish. Overalled workmen were everywhere; there was a smell of turpentine and a sound of hammering. The carpets were up, of course, but it looked as if they might come down again by Christmas. No such glowing hopes could be held out for the stairs, where work had hardly yet started. Probably the decorators had had a look at the bedroom floors and decided there was no point in encouraging anyone to go up there. The corridors had a definite air of being reconciled to demolition, being neither straight nor level, so that you found yourself brushing the walls or now and again running downhill... very disturbing in the early hours of the morning. This was because the hotel had been made by knocking three or four houses together and of course they didn't quite fit. Every now and then a flight of steep stone steps led down to a dirty lavatory or bathroom. There was not much the management could have done with the antiquated plumbing at short notice but they might, in deference to the susceptibilities of our refined American friends, have segregated them into male and female.

Downstairs again I found Bobbie Wild and Dave Newman, Convention Secretary and Programme Committee stalwart respectively, both talking at once to a dark, plump, disgruntled man of about 35. They introduced him as the manager who had, they enthusiastically affirmed, been "very cooperative". I formed the impression that they were tying to butter him up and tried to do my bit. "Ah, M. Maurigny!" I exclaimed joyfully with my best mixture of French accent and Irish charm. So this was the wonderful M. Maurigny, proud representative of the best of French cuisine and continental gaiety and blood brother of the Convention Committee. Bobbie and Dave looked slightly taken aback and hastily explained that M. Maurigny had just sold out, leaving the sinking ship to this new manager, Mr Wilson, who had had a Raw Deal but was being Very Cooperative. Very Cooperative, they repeated fervently. Apparently the villainous Maurigny had handed over the place in dilapidation and chaos, leaving the cooperative Mr. Wilson to cope with redecoration and a convention simultaneously. But convention or no convention, the redecoration must go on. I also learned that several of the Americans who had come over on the chartered plane had checked out of the hotel in high dudgeon already, some without paying their bills, and one of them had felt so deeply about it he had gone to the trouble to telephone a complaint about the hotel to the British Hotel Association. I scanned through the list of their names anxiously and was somewhat relieved to find I didn't

recognize any of them except Gray Barker, the flying saucer man. Feeling that my intervention hadn't been too helpful I slunk away to get something to eat. It was only 15 paces from there to the dining room but in that distance three people told me the hotel food was unspeakable so we invited the last of them (Harry Harrison) to eat outside and had a worried curry at an Indian restaurant two blocks away. No matter how you look at it, it wasn't a good start for a Worldcon.

That was Thursday, but by Friday evening things were looking up. There were nice new carpets everywhere downstairs and even some bits on the walls. At least they were covered with an odd, hairy wallpaper, all little patches of short, red fur. I remember asking Moskowitz if it was science fiction plush. I'm sorry to be talking so much about the hotel, but believe me it was important. It set the whole mood of the convention. The lounges were the key. There were five of them, altogether, all quite small, and furnished with comfortable armchairs and coffee tables. Waiters with trays and girls with trolleys patrolled them until dawn plying the fans with food and drink. The drinks actually had *ice* in them. Yes, ICE! (Only those of us who have been to Europe will be properly impressed by this.) It seemed to me it would take an awful lot of dirty bathrooms to outweigh all this. The most important result was that we had lounge parties instead of bedroom parties, a quite different thing... smaller, more intimate, more fluid, little congenial groups constantly forming and reforming. The only interruption we had was when the staff wanted to run a vacuum cleaner over the nice new carpets about five o'clock in the morning. I remember one night when we were asked to move twice and Bob Silverberg suggested we have a party in his room. Barbara was tired and said no, let's go to bed. Bob said, all right, we'll have a party of two. The waiter overheard part of this conversation and said, if you're going to have a party in your bedroom please don't make too much noise. Bob said: "We'll be as quiet as possible in our Barbaric American way."

That was about the most trouble we had with the staff. There was no house detective, of course, and no need of one except when Ray Nelson and his skiffle group started to bring complaints from the people across the street about 4 a.m. one morning. (Didn't I tell you Ray Nelson was there? Yes, Fifth and Sixth Fandomers, THE Ray Nelson! He's living in Paris, had been in London on business, heard about the convention by accident, rolled along and had been there for two days before Chuck Harris saw his name badge and rushed to me to either confirm his identity or expose him as a hoax.) Yes, the staff stuck it well, being kept working all night, banging away in the kitchen which was centrally situated on the ground

floor. This fact led to an awe-inspiring convention first. This was the first convention ever where *the fans complained about the staff making a noise during the night!*

I'll have to cut this short here but I must mention the most important impression of all; that Francis Towner Laney is a fool. The American fans we met were *fine* people. But more about that next issue.

The First Evening

(Written at 1:00 a.m., Saturday September 7, 1957)

London, England; Friday, September 6, 1957: The 15th World Science Fiction Convention opened at the Kings Court hotel this evening at 9:07 p.m., seven minutes late. Chairman Ted Carnell explained that they could have opened on time, but feared to flout providence by defying what appeared to be a law of nature as regards science fiction conventions. He also said that when making the bid for London at the New York Convention last year he had promised only one thing: that whatever it would be like, it would be different from N.Y. Even from the little the audience had already seen, they would realize that this promise was going to be fulfilled.

There was a murmur of agreement at this, because few World Conventions can have been held in such a hotel. In the first place, London is not a Convention city. All conventions in England are held at seaside resorts, and none of the first rate hotels were prepared to allow the necessary facilities – e.g., separation of fans from mundane guests so that conventioneers could enjoy themselves without being annoyed by complaints. So it was a choice between going, out of the city altogether (and the feeling was that Americans expected the convention to be in London itself, so that they could take their hangovers to the Tower of London, etc.) and falling back on a lesser hotel. The deciding consideration was that the less pretentious hotels were more likely to be tolerant of the idiosyncrasies (I venture to suggest modestly that few fans could spell that word, even incorrectly, on a borrowed typer at 1 o'clock on the morning of a convention.) The Kings Court Hotel seemed to be a prime example of this... an informal and unpretentious hotel with a friendly and understanding staff. But when the time of the convention came nearer there were added complications.

The hotel was sold. The new owners and manager immediately decided to rebuild it. The unusual result is that the convention is being held

in a hotel which is being slowly rebuilt, rather than one which is being rapidly destroyed.... Ellis Mills commented that since the hotel was being extended it should be renamed the Builtmore; I suggested that since a new wall was being erected across one of the public rooms it should be called the Walledoff. Unfortunately, some of the visitors didn't take the inconvenience of the alterations to staff and premises with the same good humour and checked out; they are however people (from the chartered plane from New York) whose names are not known to anyone here. The vast majority seem to be having a fine time. Sitting here at one end of the hotel I am almost deafened by shouting and singing from the lounge at the other end.

But to get back to the official programme, what there was of it (this session was purely introductory), Ted Carnell introduced John Wyndham Harris, who introduced John W. Campbell, the Guest of Honour, who received a prolonged and enthusiastic welcome. He made a short speech about the work of an sf editor ("Whatever was good yesterday, we don't want tomorrow.... We have to live in the future, now.... The editor has to be a prophet; if he's no prophet, there's no profit.") With this desperate attempt to wrest George Charters's laurels as the Convention's most depraved punster, JWC introduced Dave Kyle with some sympathetic remarks about the troubles of Convention Committees. Dave introduced the TAFF delegate Bob Madle, who was warmly welcomed despite widespread disagreement which had been expressed earlier in British fandom with the method of voting – the objections were solely towards the possible future abuses of the system itself, not to the present representative.

This concluded the programme for the evening. There had however been interviews with representatives of the press and BBC just before. I wasn't there myself, but I heard that Rory Faulkner went over big. There had been invitations issued to the press for this press conference, but as it worked out, many of them came along during the day to try and steal a march on each other. I guided the representative of Reuters' News Agency round myself, and he talked to some dozen of the fans who happened to be present... who fortunately included Forry Ackerman. Forry made an excellent job of conveying to the reporter the function and mood of the Convention and modern sf. Excellent interviews were also given by Steven Schultheis and a 16-year-old German fan called Rainer Elsfeld.

The Second Day

(Written at 11:00 a.m., Sunday September 8, 1957)

Saturday, September 7, 1957: The convention programme proper began this afternoon with the banquet. There was some confused delay over the seating arrangements, which may have been a blessing in disguise since it gave many people time to recover their appetites from a late breakfast; though indeed this was unnecessary since the banquet food was quite good, the duck being definitely not the fowl ` from New York.

After the toast to the Queen (another Worldcon first) drunk in Burgundy (*imported*), Arthur Clarke introduced John W. Campbell with a brilliant little speech in the serious part of which he referred to Campbell as a scientist rather than a technologist, this being, he suggested, the difference between Gernsback and him. Campbell, in his response, took him up on this, and said he thought of himself rather as a philosopher, physical science and sociology being mere facets of this field. He went on to more abstruse realms of thought where, after four hours sleep and fortified only by one cup of coffee, I am unable to follow him. However, his speech was, of course, interesting and well received.

Bob Madle followed as TAFF delegate with a few well chosen words, in the course of which he pointed out that this was really the first Worldcon. Later, Sam Moskowitz was to revive memories of the first titular World Convention in 1939, pointing out the remarkable fact that there were no less than 8 of those original attendees present, 18 years later and 3,000 miles away. One difference, he pointed out to the general amusement, was that they had tried to throw out Dave Kyle, and here he was in a seat of honour.

Between those two speeches there were short informal addresses by John Brunner, Forry Ackerman, Lars Helander of Sweden, and Rainer Elsfeld of Germany. All were excellent, but Rainer Elsfeld registered a remarkable personal success, the sensation of the convention so far. This 16-year-old boy, speaking in a strange language in a country he was visiting for the first time, spoke so fluently, interestingly and sincerely that in fact he received a louder ovation than any of his predecessors, even Campbell himself. Some of the speakers had undoubtedly had more to say, but at about 4:30 Peter Daniels pointed out it was just about time for tea, so of course the session was closed.

There was some delay in starting the evening session because the recipient of one of the achievement awards, John W. Campbell, had gone off to dinner with Eric Frank Russell, who had appeared later in the afternoon for his first convention for something like 15 years. An auction period was substituted.

About 20 minutes later, Ted Carnell got up to make a grave announcement. The remainder of the programme had been delayed by a serious calamity; the Convention gavel had been stolen! Fortunately, the affair had immediately been put in the capable hands of a famous detective agency, not the FBI, but an organization of similar scope – The Goon Defective Agency. At this moment James White arose in the body of the hall, drawing a gun. At the other side Arthur Thomson plunged into the hall, shouting "Vile agent of Antigoon!" and a running gun battle ensued, after which White collapsed on the floor (after having dusted it with his handkerchief), and was carried out attended by Sister Ethel Lindsay, as Stephen Schultheis made a triumphant entry with the missing gavel. The whole thing took a mere two minutes, but it certainly started off the Programme with a bang... or 13 of them to be exact... and is to my knowledge the first time such a purely fannish affair has figured in a Worldcon. After a short but interesting talk on the new London Planetarium by a representative of Madame Tussaud's, the convention adjourned for the Masquerade Ball.

This and the subsequent dancing and festivities were slightly hampered by a flock of technicians from BBC television, who had come to make a few minutes' film of the fancy dress parade and stayed for some six hours interviewing people and fiddling around with lights and tons of equipment. (One of the people interviewed was Rory Faulkner.) They finally left at 5:15 in the morning to the cheers of the Conventioneers and shouts of "Weaklings!" because they were going to bed... a thought which still doesn't seem to have occurred to many people.

To me one of the most fantastic events of the convention occurred at about 3:00 a.m. Chuck Harris came dashing up with the news that there was someone wearing the name badge of Ray Nelson; naturally I thought it was a hoax, but it was incredibly The Ray Nelson, fannish cartooning genius and originator of the beanie. I recognized him from the 1952 Chicon.

The Fourth Day and After

Proceedings opened with the business session, the only programme item scheduled for the morning. Presumably on that account it was sparsely attended. A few minor amendments were made to the WSFS rules, and Belle Dietz and Dave Newman (the latter a stalwart of the Liverpool Group and tower of strength of the Convention) were elected to vacant

directorships. The meeting then went on to the real business, the selection of the site for the next convention. A sense of destiny seemed to pervade the air as the great moment drew nearer. Chairman Ted Carnell announced that there was only one bid but that as a matter of form brief nominating and seconding speeches would be made. Those were made briefly and eloquently by Forry Ackerman and Rory Faulkner, and the Chairman called on those in favor to raise their hands. Everywhere hands shot into the air with an audible whoosh. There was no need to ask for contrary votes – it was obvious that everyone had at least one hand up, many had two, and I thought I saw someone with three.... As I felt, and other fans said to me afterwards, it was a great and moving experience to sit in a convention hall and actually vote for South Gate in ’58 – awe-inspiring, as if one were living in a legend. It seemed somehow wonderfully fitting that after all these years and 6,000 miles away, it should be here in London that the dream of South Gate should come to life, because London is a city of tradition and South Gate is very much a matter of tradition, as hallowed in the history of fandom as any in that of the mundane world.

The afternoon sessions began with an sf quiz panel in which Forry Ackerman, Bob Madle and Sam Moskowitz fought for supremacy as foremost expert on the lore of sf and fandom. The standard of answers was evidence of either superhuman powers of recall or of prior collusion, but it was fine entertainment and enlivened by several witty asides, principally from Forry.

After this Sam Moskowitz delivered a remarkable speech summarising the results of a professional market survey of sf readers, one of the most startling conclusions of which was that the field is in effect supported by a hard core of a few thousand multiple buyers of magazines – i.e., fans. According to the statistics 9.8% buy 32% of all copies sold: if these reduced their purchasing to the average, only five magazines could continue to exist. It was unfortunate that John W. Campbell was called out of the hall during this speech for a press interview, because many people felt he would have felt bound to deal with these disclosures instead of psionics. As it was however, the psionics session went on as scheduled and lasted for several interesting hours. One of the questioners and subsequent speakers from the floor of the hall was Eric Frank Russell, who made an unexpected and welcome visit to the convention, the first he had attended for many years.

As the end grew nearer the convention seemed to get better and better, for during the evening Ted Tubb took over the auction. He had been scheduled to auctioneer previously but had been unable to attend because

of domestic difficulties and many people had been very disappointed, especially those British fans who, like me, had lauded Ted as one of the major attractions of an English Convention. However, he made a last minute appearance and at once struck his highest form. Word went round the lounges like a bush telegram and the Convention Hall filled rapidly. The inspired Tubb... so inspired that he frequently went on selling items after they had been bought and had to be assisted by Ken Slater to deal with the actual crude commercial side of the auction... was hastily recorded on tape, some of the official business being erased to make room.

Everything ended late that evening and people drifted away to various points in England and the Continent. In the week subsequent to the Loncon, many North American fans have been travelling around the country to fan centres from Belfast to Bad Homburg, cementing new friendships made it the convention. To British fandom, by far the greatest thing about the convention was the transatlantic fans, who made a very fine impression. We'll miss them.

The results of the BBC film made the night of the masquerade ball were shown on the TV programme *Tonight* the following Monday... interviews with Rory Faulkner, Ted Carnell, the Dietzes and Kyles, John Brunner, John W. Campbell, Jean Bogert, etc. The programme was sensible and sympathetic, though humorous in a wacky fannish way. For instance, the programme terminated with Ruth Landis Kyle pulling a zapgun on the interviewer, who disappeared through a neat piece of camera trickery.

Epilogue

By now several British Worldcon reporters have broken the startling news that the American contingent at the Worldcon behaved themselves with modesty and discretion. Please don't be offended, American fans, by their undertone of surprise. You must make allowances for the fact that the mental picture which the average British fan has of American fandom is coloured by the fulminations of Laney, newspaper reports of American delinquency and personal experience of a certain class of American tourist and GI. He really knows Americans are nice people: it's just that when he confirms it for himself his subconscious can't help giving out a little sigh of relief.

America could be proud of the people it sent to the Worldcon. Since 1952 I've thought that the average US fan was more sensitive and

perceptive than the average man in the American street and now, having seen how they compare with ordinary tourists, I'm sure of it. It was for all the world as if they had carefully studied every characteristic of the American tourist that had ever been criticized and then taken immense pains to guard against them. For instance, not one of them could be induced to make uncomplimentary comparisons about anything they saw in Britain. Even what criticism was made of the amenities of the Convention Hotel – and there was a lot to criticize, especially from the American point of view – was made, as it were, from our side, as fellow fans. There was no implication that US sfandom could have done better, or would even have wanted to choose another type of place. They all seemed quite determined to "do as the Romans do" and take inconveniences as part of the interest of living in a foreign country... like the wet streets in Venice.

The one thing that really surprised me about them, seeing them side by side with British fandom, was how well they were dressed. We were a shabby-looking lot, I must say. Even James White's sartorial perfection (and he's a professional in the new clothes racket) was dimmed beside the magnificence of Steve Schultheis in his more-than-immaculate blue suit made of a cloth I haven't seen the like of outside the lining of expensive chocolate boxes. I remember Arthur Thomson telling me in awed tones of Steve sorting through his file of trousers. He would take out a pair which looked to Arthur to be practically still in their cellophane, run a finger along the crease and then, it being but the work of a moment to wipe the blood from his hand, drop it on the floor saying, "Better have those cleaned and pressed." And then there was Beau Raeburn with his spectrum of sports clothes... I don't know, maybe it's something to do with the fact that I was an adolescent in the Thirties, when the correct dress for the young intellectual was what we thought of as casual, which usually meant baggy flannels and a sportscoat with pockets bulging with books. We would have thought any concern with clothes sissy, if not actually pansy. Obviously times have changed; but of all the habits of modern teenagers, dressing up as Edwardian dandies is the only one I find incomprehensible. Why, when I was that age there were so many things I wanted to buy – books, records, radio parts, a motor bike (never did get that) – that I regarded spending money on clothes as just throwing it away. I still do, I suppose, but Boyd Raeburn's clothes shook me. I'd like to wear things like that if I could. Usually good clothes, when I have to wear them, make me feel constrained, but his looked comfortable and casual.

Which reminds me of another thing I noticed about the Americans,

how careful they were with money. I don't mean they were mean, just that they seemed to be careful to avoid throwing it around ostentatiously the way some Americans abroad have been criticized for. They positioned themselves on our standard of living, as it were, with the result that going about with them was just like going about with British fans... sort of comfortable. They fitted in.

There were, of course, a lot of individual impressions – Silverberg's dry sense of humour, so exactly like Bob Shaw's and a perfect foil for James White; Boyd Raeburn's impeccable manners; Wally Weber's unobtrusive wit and likability; Sam Moskowitz's geniality; Steve Schultheis's flair for fantastic fannish humour; and so on – but that was the main one. They fitted in. It was as if for all those years there had been gaps in British fandom which we'd never noticed, just the size and shape of each one of them, and at the Worldcon, suddenly... CLICK! There they were in place. We're going to miss them. Roll on, Gay Paris in '63.

Final Footnote

Walt explains why he called James White's long Loncon report (for Hyphen*) "The Quinze-y Report", ponders some alternatives and looks back at the convention. [Ed.]*

That distant thumping sound you hear is me beating my breast in remorse. In case you don't know the remorse code, the message is that I'm sorry about the title I inflicted on James's con report. For those of you who are happily innocent of the more sordid manifestations of abnormal psychology, I had better explain first that this World Convention was the Fifteenth, and the french for fifteen is "quinze". (I'm sure even Jean Linard knows of the Kinsey Report.) Also that, although James unfortunately omitted to mention it, an extraordinary number of people lost their voices after the Convention, and quinsy is a disease affecting the throat. So there: in the immortal words of James himself on a previous such occasion, "It's not good, but it's obscure."

The only excuse I can offer is that I did try very hard to think of something else. Other potential titles included MEANWHILE BACK IN THE OTHER LOUNGE, OLDE WORLDECON, SWEET FIFTEEN, THE RETREAT FROM MOSKOWITZ, KINGS COURT AND COMMONERS, PHAR AND PSNEER, CON FUSION, YNGVI WAS A LOUNGE, THE WORLDCON THE FLASH AND THE DEVIL and DUST ON THE CONFLAKES. We liked the last one best, thinking it

would make a fine refrain for a fannish folksong, but Tucker stole it from us in some sneaky telepathic way. In any case none of than seemed to really sum up the mood of the Convention, which was unique in so many complex ways. You want something to evoke not only its casual, relaxed, friendly atmosphere but its climactic, historic quality. And it should contain some references to the fantastic environment, like the unreconstructed hotel and staff and that corridor-like convention hall, so obviously made by knocking several small rooms together. (I don't know what the one at the end had been, but my seat had a hole in the middle.) But the most important impression of all was how wonderfully the European and American fans bleshed* together. Towards the end I asked Vin¢ Clarke what had struck him most strongly and his answer was, "How wonderful it is to talk to people I'd never seen, and have them understand because they have the same background." That was just the way I remember feeling at the Chicon. After a few minutes it was hard to believe those people were nominally foreigners. We felt we'd known them all our lives... or at least, we wanted to. Some day, we must all meet again. The best thing is that we can say that not from the usual post-con frustration of having failed to talk to the people you wanted to meet, but because those people are now friends whom you want to meet again. Partly thanks to the Programme Committee and partly thanks to that much maligned hotel (bless you, Bobbie Wild) the affair was a stupendous social success. I remember fearing beforehand what the post-con reaction might be – you know the way every previous convention has seemed to wipe out a section of fandom, and here was one that could blast the whole thing out of existence – but there seem to have been no harmful after-effects.

July 1957 to February 1958

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* *"Blesh": a portmanteau of "blend" and "mesh" used to describe the linking of the multi-person Gestalt in* More Than Human *by Theodore Sturgeon. [Ed.]*

The Revenant
Manchester "Mancon 5", 1976

People kept asking me, with tactful assurances that the question implied no dismay, how did I happen to be at Mancon 5 after 11 years' absence from such scenes. The only answer I could give was that two other people were to blame: James White, who had, after every convention I missed, made me feel like a bowman who had overslept for Agincourt; and Chris Priest, whose *Inverted World* told my wrinkled nose that the true spirit of science fiction was again being distilled.

However as I arrived at Manchester I was still fervently wishing I had stayed at home, playing golf and painting the house. (I have this very long-shafted driver with a hairy head.) It was obvious I would know nobody there, for the few I remembered I would not recognize: I would have nothing to talk about and nobody would want to talk to me: I would seem staid and feel bored, and spend the whole wet Manchester weekend brewing coffee in my lonely room and contemplating the folly of trying to bathe twice in the same ship canal.

Well, it wasn't like that. Within minutes of our touching down at Manchester the Convention reached out for me with friendly warmth, in the form of a message that Dave Kyle was coming to meet us. The name and then the familiar face unlocked, like Terry Carr's skate-key, year after year of half-forgotten happy memories, beginning with the picture of Dave with his head caught in the baggage rack in Lee Hoffman's room at Chicon 11 in 1952. It was exactly the same face now, except of course for the baggage rack, and from that point I never looked back. At Owens Park the process of absorption continued and accelerated. My mundane life, all-important a few minutes ago) receded into insignificance. I was a fan again.

One perpetual question was, what sort of a fan? To one person I was just an old friend. To the next, some sort of unknown celebrity. To most, just another new face, another neofan. But the abrupt role-switching required was itself stimulatingly evocative, involving the recapitulation in minutes of the 20 years of my previous incarnation. I was all three, alternatively and at once, and each with equal pleasure. I enjoyed meeting old friends and finding we recognized each other at once, and just carried on where we left off. I enjoyed listening to incredible stories about de luxe

editions of *The Enchanted Duplicator* and the prices old *Hyphen*s fetched. And I enjoyed, with a more subtle and partly vicarious delight, tagging respectfully behind James White and Bob Shaw as they held court and made speeches, and generally bore the load that had oppressed me for so long. I tell you, friends, it's soft at the bottom.

In fact the only flaw was the realization that I had left behind a small but vital baggage called Madeleine. She was missed.

Apart from that everything was just right, instantly and comfortingly familiar, even down to the traditional complaints about the programme and the accommodation. Both seemed to me reassuringly normal.

The programme for instance was in every respect, foreseen and otherwise, exactly the sort of thing I was accustomed to. There were of course a few developments, as was only to be expected. The print of *Metropolis* had apparently finally worn out completely, to be replaced by a variety of highly coloured modern plastic substitutes. And in my day professionals did not dare to read extracts from their works instead of making a speech, not even John Russell Fearn. I assured Harry Turner that the title of Silverberg's turn was just one of Bob's gags, and told the author himself that I was looking forward to his readings from selected editorials of *Spaceship*. But, lo, Bob actually did hold the audience transfixed with readings from his own pro works, just like Charles Dickens used to wow the Victorians. (You understand I don't actually *remember* that.) All except me, that is. I cannot bear to be read to, finding it rather like walking with one's shoelaces tied together, and left the hall as inconspicuously as possible while Bob was pausing for breath.

As for the accommodation, it was quite adequate for us simple Irish peasant folk, and there was the additional and unparalleled luxury of having one's own coffee making arrangements to hand. The fact that everything was actually there as promised impressed me with its awesome efficiency. Had fandom changed that much? However the presence of unmistakeable crottled greeps in the dining hall fare reassured me, as did the traditional complaint from an American about the lack of showers. (It seems they have finally given up asking for iced water.) The fondness of Americans for washing in running water is one of the characteristics they share with the Russians (though the absence of washbasin plugs in Russia was invariably ascribed to technological ineptitude), and one which I acquired myself in 1952. However I ran down a shower in my own building, using my patent Howard finder*, and thereafter had no complaint to make about the residential accommodation.

** US fan Jan Howard Finder was one of those who had been vocal about the lack of en-suite showers. [Ed.]*

It did seem to me however that the concourse was too small and there were too few seats. If I stand for a long time in one place it sometimes happens that I fall down unconscious, causing consternation in the vicinity and interrupting in most cases the conversational flow of the person I was talking to, and it is one of the few characteristics I have in common with Guardsmen. Several times I had to leave interesting groups to find a seat, hoping someone would follow me.

It also seemed to me that the rooms were too small for the sort of room party which most people like, and that they led accordingly either to the formation of a Black Hole or to an uncontrollable expansion of the space-time continuum. It's interesting how the nature of a convention is determined by the physical configuration of the environment, as the layout of housing developments affect community spirit and vandalism, and the way things are nowadays it's only a matter of time before some lucky post-graduate gets a research grant to study the phenomenon.

As for the fans themselves, it was clear that they were more prosperous nowadays. It also seemed to me that in general they were more literate, more congenial, more courteous and more homogeneous. I noticed no signs of the old polarizations of North/South or fan/pro or any of the other cleavages which used to be so noticeable. It also seemed to me that there was more contact with US fandom, which was something I had always tried to bring about, and I was delighted to see TAFF still going strong. I was pleased to see that they had got such a fine delegate as Roy Tackett and thought how strange it was that I had never met him before.

It was even stranger and more poignant that I had to go to Manchester to meet for the first time two young Belfast fans from opposite sides of the barricades.

Finally, I was struck by the fact that Convention bidding had become so polished and sophisticated, like a Presidential nomination convention, and more so than I had seen in America itself. I wondered if, once again, British fandom had unwittingly outstripped the Americans. This happened once before, the first time British fandom ran a convention in a hotel, with room parties and everything. On that occasion British fandom tried to imitate American fandom, but what they imitated was a convention as idealized in fanzine convention reports, with the result that they had a convention better than anything ever seen in America.

To sum up, it was like being home again. I met a lot of old friends, I made what I hope will be new ones, and I'm glad I came. Thank you,

James and Chris.

July 1976

Original Appearances

The source fanzines cited below were edited as follows: *Hyphen* by Walt Willis (replaced by Vin¢ Clarke for issue 9) and Chuch Harris (not issues 4 or 6), *Maya* by Rob Jackson, *Oopsla!* by Gregg Calkins, *Quandry* by Lee Hoffman, *Science Fiction Parade* by Len Moffatt and *Scottishe* by Ethel Lindsay.

- "The Harp in England" – *Quandry* 11, June 1951; *Quandry* 12, July 1951; *Quandry* 13, August 1951; "Afterthoughts" (so titled for this collection) excerpted from a "Warblings / I Remember Me" column in *Scottishe* 27, March 1962.
- "The Harp in England (2)" – *Quandry* 22, August 1952.
- "The Coroncon" – *Hyphen* 4, October 1953; *Hyphen* 6, January 1954.
- "The Magnificent Flop" – *Hyphen* 9, July 1954.
- "The Bloggy Bloggy Do" – *Hyphen* 14, June 1955. (The endnote "Convention Afterthoughts" was a page-filler elsewhere in the same issue.)
- "Snug in the Fug" – "Prologue" in *Oopsla!* 23, December 1957; "The First Evening" and "The Second Day" in *Science Fiction Parade* 6, July 1957; "The Fourth Day and After" in *Science Fiction Parade* 7, October 1957; "Epilogue" in *Oopsla!* 24, February 1958; "Final Footnote" in *Hyphen* 19, January 1958.
- "The Revenant" – *Maya* 11, July 1976.

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David Langford, 2023

The End

This free ebook is exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

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