

The Serious Scientific Talks



BOB SHAW

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Bob Shaw

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Original Appearances

Publisher's Note

The Serious Scientific Talks is not the first book of Bob Shaw's fabled Eastercon and Worldcon speeches, but it's the most nearly complete and contains fifteen talks. Five of these have never before been collected, despite the three previous compilations *The Eastercon Speeches* (1979), *Serious Science* (1984) and *A Load of Old Bosh* (1995) – see the [Appendix](#) for full details.

Ideally the title of this ebook should be *All the Serious Scientific Talks*, but there is a problem. A sixteenth and final talk was delivered by Bob at Confabulation, the 1995 UK Eastercon, and with slight changes later that year at Intersection, the first Glasgow Worldcon, but can no longer be found. Its tone was somewhat different from the usual knockabout fun. As I wrote after Bob's death in February 1996:

“His ‘serious scientific talk’ at Intersection downplayed the traditional puns in favour of a moving appreciation of his 50-year association with sf and fandom; even before the dismal clarity of hindsight, many of the listeners felt that Bob was saying goodbye.”

If anyone can help with a copy, transcription or recording of that final speech, Rob Jackson and I will be delighted to add it to this ebook collection – with a finder's credit, of course – tell the world we have closure, and maybe even change the title.

Thank you again, Bob, for all the hilarity over so many years.

David Langford
November 2019

Introduction, 1979

Mike Glicksohn

It has become a cliché of hard core fannish fandom (that small but dedicated group who believe the only reason conventions are held is for people to drink and talk and socialise with their friends) that experienced con-goers “never attend the program.”² Some fans even brag about their perfect record in avoiding the formal structure of the convention and to some extent this is understandable. When one has sat in on a dozen panels investigating “Penis Envy In The Works Of Robert Holdstock” there is little to be learned from the thirteenth; and if the only alternative is a lecture by Pete Presford on “Fanzines: The Path To Increased Literacy” then the bar does indeed seem most attractive.

Thus is it that on both sides of the Atlantic the most often heard response to the introduction of a notable or to a question concerning the whereabouts of a well-known writer or fan is “He’s down in the bar!” (That pronoun was rather carefully chosen, by the way; for some reason famous females in fandom don’t seem to spend as much of their time in bars. There’s probably a Masters degree for the first person to investigate and explain that phenomenon.) And there are those who apparently believe that nothing can entice these diehards from their comfortable den. My reaction to and refutation of that claim amounts to a single word: “BoSh!”

With over a hundred North American conventions in my past and a single British Eastercon to boot, I’ve seen just about everything, but I’d be hard-pressed to dredge up a more surprising sight than an entire bar filled with happily and heavily drinking British fannish fans *voluntarily* abandoning their womb in order to sit in on a program item. At first I thought some fiend had introduced an emetic or an aphrodisiac into the beer supply, but when everyone filed into the main program hall at the 1975 Eastercon in Coventry I realised I was witness to a truly unique fannish phenomenon. An hour or so later, I understood that unusual hegira perfectly: I’d just heard my first Bob Shaw speech!

For more than a quarter of a century, Bob Shaw has been recognised as one of the finest writers fandom has produced. Unfortunately, his first

productive period was before the fan Hugos were instituted and since the second coming of BoSh the fan-writing Hugo has been dominated by a mass-circulation somewhat schizophrenic critic-economist who has deprived Bob of his richly-deserved formal recognition. (But no fan with an I.Q. above 50 ever really believed that Fans Are Slans anyway.) Still, the establishment of special funds to take Bob over to America and the very existence of this series of volumes devoted to making available his best output indicates how strongly he has impressed and influenced several generations of fans.

I've only heard one of Bob's famous Eastercon speeches but that was more than enough for me to understand the incredible impact he's had on recent British cons. I could attempt to wax eloquent and lard on the superlatives about how well-crafted the speeches are, how tightly conceived and structured, how filled with convoluted word-play and punnery, but nothing I could possibly write could be as complimentary as the fact that the Pickersgills, Kettles and Brosnans freely left the bar in 1975 in order to hear what Bob would say. It is a rare speaker indeed who can prove themselves to be more attractive than a keg of Guinness!

And one of the joys of a BoSh speech is that it *reads* almost as well as it sounds. (It is a major advantage to have heard Bob talk at least once, however; having done so, one can very clearly *hear* that soft, lilting voice and visualise the deadpan expression as he sits there, one large hand clasped around a pint mug, and delivers the words that render an entire audience helpless with laughter, his face mildly troubled by an expression which clearly wonders "What are they all laughing at when I'm completely serious about this scientific theory?") I well remember getting my copy of *Maya* 11 and making the mistake of reading the reprinted version of Bob's 1976 Eastercon speech while walking down one of the busiest main streets of Toronto. Crowds of normally truculent rush-hour pedestrians parted before me like the Red Sea for Moses as I staggered along laughing out loud with tears literally streaming down my face. Later that night, I sent Bob a telegram congratulating him on the funniest fanzine article I'd read in years: I've read well over five thousand fanzines in my years as a fan and I've sent exactly one telegram. That's how good a Bob Shaw speech can be!

This volume – the second of the series – reprints the BoSh Eastercon speeches from 1974 through 1978, each one acknowledged a major highlight of the fannish year in which it was originally presented and published. If you've never encountered these *tours de force* before, I envy you the treat

you have in store. But even if you've heard Bob give them in cities all over England, you still have a treat to look forward to: you'll undoubtedly discover bits of drollery you missed the first time, along with devilish puns that went unheard amidst the laughter of those sitting near you.

Bob Shaw has long been recognised as one of the pivotal contributors to fandom and this volume is going to help explain and enhance that reputation. Of the seven different definitions the Oxford English Dictionary has for "bosh", I like best the one that reads "to cut a dash, to make a show." Pour yourself a glass of Guinness, sit back and enjoy this collection. I think you'll understand what I mean.

– Mike Glicksohn

Introduction, 1995

Alison Scott

The talks collected in this volume were given at ten conventions, from 1974 to 1988. Those of you who have not heard one of Bob Shaw's **Serious Scientific Talks** may be wondering why we think it's appropriate to preserve them in this manner. Those of you who have will be in no doubt.

My first science fiction convention was Seacon '84, and the fans I was with informed me, in no uncertain terms, that I would have to attend the Bob Shaw talk. I was familiar with Bob's SF, but nevertheless I was dubious. After all, I'd never really been interested in serious scientific talks. What I had failed to realise was that this was not a serious scientific talk, but instead a Serious Scientific Talk. In fact, it was *Ten Years, but Not Decayed*, and it is included in this volume.

I laughed so much my sides hurt for days. Or perhaps that was the beer.

However, that was a few years ago. I was concerned that the talks might not have aged well, or that the material had become part of the general fannish ambience. I needn't have worried. As part of the preparation of this book, I transcribed three of these talks. There were several occasions when I found myself laughing so hard I was physically unable to type. Of course, that might also have been the beer.

I should also mention the production of this book. One of the pleasures of running conventions is the opportunity to make good use of the skills of your guests. Roger Robinson has published a wide variety of tomes under the guise of Becon publications, and in the process has raised thousands of pounds for the RNIB. So when he offered to produce a book for Confabulation, we were very pleased to take the opportunity. Vast numbers of people reminded us of the Zoocon game, in which a similar venture always results in disaster, but we were not deterred. I hope you agree with me that we took the right course.

– Alison Scott
(Chairman of Confabulation)

A Note from the Author

Bob Shaw

The articles which you are, I hope, about to read were originally given as talks at various conventions, mainly British Eastercons – and for that reason each one is *written as a talk*. There is a vast difference between material which was written to be read and material which was written to be spoken. Choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, type of humour, pacing, emphasis – all these things are affected, with the result that a speech comes out looking rather different from an article proper. Possibly these considerations are important only to the author, but I thought I'd let you know.

– Bob Shaw

This point is expanded in Bob's foreword to [Corn Is the Lowest Form of Wheat](#) below.

The Speeches

The Need for BAD Science Fiction

Tynecon, Newcastle, Easter 1974 Guest of Honour Speech

I think most of us have a clear idea of what we mean when we say a piece of SF is “good”, or when we say a piece of SF is “bad”. Our ideas remain clear even when we hear misguided people classifying a story that we know to be “bad” as “good”, or one that we know to be “good” as “bad”. And our ideas go on remaining clear even when we discover that a story we used to think of as being “good” was actually rotten all the time, although we hadn’t realised it. I dare say our belief in our powers of judgment would remain unshaken even if the reverse happened, and we found out that a story or book that we had once thought rather useless turned out to have been “good” all along – although this seems to happen very rarely.

For some reason, about the only people it happens to are influential critics who have published reviews of my books. A few years ago I wrote a book called *The Palace of Eternity*, which some people liked, and which others hated. Greg Benford, the reviewer for *Amazing Stories*, was in the latter category and – being a friend – he sent me an advance copy of the unfavourable review he had written.

This is another curious phenomenon which sometimes afflicts a writer. Every now and then my friends take turns in deciding to prove that our relationship is strong enough to embrace honesty and straight talking. For months on end they come along, my friends, one after the other, and explain to me, at great length, how rotten everything I write actually is. Sometimes I get the impression that I have the most honest and candid set of friends in the entire universe!

Anyway, I happened to be in Boston a couple of months later for that year’s World Convention, and Greg Benford came up to me and said, “Bob, you’ll be pleased to hear that I’ve re-read *The Palace of Eternity* and I’ve completely changed my mind about it. I now think it’s a really good book.”

I said, “Thanks a lot, Greg. I was a bit worried about the review you sent me going into print.”

And he said, “Oh, it already has – it’s on the stands this month. I just

thought you'd like to know it's all wrong."

I gave him a sort of inward smile – one that was very difficult to catch – and thanked him to the best of my ability. Strangely enough, exactly the same thing happened with another reviewer about the same book. Perhaps it was a delayed action book, like van Vogt's *World of Null-A* was supposed to be when John W. Campbell first serialised it in *Astounding*. I don't know how many people would remember that far back, but in his blurb for the final instalment Campbell said that the full impact of the story wouldn't hit you until 48 hours after you had finished reading it.

This statement ruined an entire weekend for me.

I finished *Null-A* about 8 o'clock on a Thursday evening, analysed my inner being, and realised I hadn't benefited from the experience to the predicted extent. This was a disappointment, but then I remembered Campbell's words about the story being constructed like a 48-hour Coldrex capsule, and realised it would all hit me like a bomb at 8 o'clock the next Saturday night. The next two days were an agony of anticipation; I even refused to go out with my friends on Saturday night, because I didn't want my translation to a higher level of understanding spoiled by my being full of Guinness and meat pies.

Come 8 o'clock on Saturday night I was sitting alone in the house – and nothing happened! As the minutes ticked by I tried to console myself by saying it was something to do with British summer time, or with the U.S. being five hours behind the U.K., and that I'd have been all right if I had read the British reprint edition of *Astounding*. Then, after about two hours, came this blinding flash of revelation. I realised I would have been better off out getting full of Guinness and meat pies.

Now, I was talking about the definition of "good" and "bad" science fiction, and the difficulties and ambiguities of such definitions. I'm fairly clear in my own mind about what constitutes SF in either category, but the situation is complicated by the fact that there is SF which I know to be "good", but which gives me no pleasure when I read it; and there is SF which I know to be "bad", but which I really enjoy reading.

In the little piece I wrote for the Tynecon programme booklet, I mentioned at some length the financial importance to the continuation of SF publication of the beginner or casual reader. When you've been closely involved with SF fandom for a long time, it is easy to start thinking that it is congruent with the readership a publisher aims at or gets when he publishes a

book. And because members of SF fandom are usually highly vociferous, there is even a danger they can convince the publisher that they do indeed represent the general SF audience. I use the word “danger” because the first step in any commercial selling operation is to identify the customer, and anybody who fails to make this identification correctly is in trouble. A good example of what I’m talking about was the Scottish SF magazine *Nebula*, which was published from Glasgow during the Fifties. Its editor, Peter Hamilton, was a very nice person who became deeply involved with fandom. As a result his magazine became more and more like a fanzine. It employed fan artists, had chat columns written by well-known fan writers, and had a fanletter section. All this was great from the point of view of somebody like me, who knew all the people concerned; but to the casual reader it presented an irritating in-group image, and as *Nebula* became more fannish its circulation dropped, until in the end it had to close up shop.

The disappearance of *Nebula* was a bit of a blow to me, because it was there that my first half-dozen SF stories were published. It is a peculiar thing that very often when I sell to certain magazines or publishers, I hear soon afterwards that that magazine or publisher has got into financial difficulties. I keep telling myself that there is no connection between the two events, but during periods of depression (such as are brought on by reading Isaac Asimov’s jokes) I wonder; did they buy my stuff and then get into trouble because of its effect on their sales; or were they in trouble in the first place and only bought my stuff because no other author would submit anything to them.

Anyway, as I was saying, Peter Hamilton was an extremely nice person, and keen on SF fandom. He even started attending conventions, his first one being at Manchester in the mid-Fifties. Well, I say it was his first convention; it was also his last. This was due to an unfortunate experience which led to a series of rows with the hotel manager, and the starting of a petition to have the Manchester Ship Canal cleaned up on the grounds that it was a danger to public health.

Conventions those days weren’t the sober and respectable affairs we have now. The hotels tended to have wall-to-wall managers... and hot and cold running women in every room. A regular feature was the Humming and Swaying session, an experiment in mild mass hypnosis conducted in utter darkness in the Con hall. (I never had much to do with them, mainly because I had usually been humming and swaying all by myself since shortly after the

bar opened.)

On this particular occasion, a well-known fan (who shall be nameless, because he is bigger than I am) arrived carrying a heavy cardboard box. He explained to Peter Hamilton that it was equipment which would be needed later during a ceremony, and asked him if he could store it in Peter's room. Peter said it was all right, not realising that the ceremony referred to was the annual sacrifice of virgins which always took place during the Humming and Swaying session. (The virgins shall also be nameless – because they were bigger than I was as well.) Nor did he realise that this well known fan had become so carried away in his quest for realism during the ceremony that he had gone round to his local butcher and obtained about half a hundredweight of animal intestines, which he planned to produce and brandish in the air as evidence that the virgin had been well and truly sacrificed.

Well, I remember that it was very hot in Manchester that year. The Humming and Swaying was on the second or third day of the convention – and the intestines had been none too fresh to start off with. They were offal! All that Peter Hamilton knew was that his room was filled with a ghastly stench, which became more unendurable as the long hot days dragged by; and he never thought of looking in the cardboard box, because he thought it was full of robes and regalia and so forth. That was what started all the complaints to the management, and when the source of the smell was finally located, old Peter was so embarrassed that he quietly packed up and left soon afterwards.

Talking about British SF magazines reminds me that I once had ambitions to be a science fiction artist, and I came close to doing the cover for its first issue of one magazine. Its art editor was another well-known fan, and the trouble was that *he* wanted to do the cover as well. The magazine's editor resolved the issue by having a competition in which we submitted a cover painting. This sounded eminently fair to me – until I discovered, when it was too late, that the competition was to be judged by the one other competitor, the art editor who wanted to do the cover himself. In due course he considered the entries – and decided his was the best. He told me afterward that the reason he had picked his own painting was that he had been so pleased with the way he had achieved a two-dimensional effect. As paper is pretty two-dimensional to start off with, I regarded his achievement as a rather minor one, certainly not worth blighting my artistic career for.

All this is straying a bit from the definition of “bad” science fiction. As I was saying, it is very difficult to give a hard and clear definition of “bad”

science fiction because everybody has his own ideas and even these can vary over the years. But one very interesting thing which can be said about “bad” SF is this – it is very often, even usually, the SF which is classified as “bad” which brings new readers into the field.

SF readers tend to be born rather than made, so I’m mostly talking about young people, rather than those who come into the field in their maturity. And, as well as being economically essential to SF, those youngsters are vital in another respect – because it is from their ranks that the writers, artists and editors of the future are drawn. One of the things which usually makes an SF story “bad” in my eyes is if it contains a blatant scientific impossibility or logical flaw which the author happily served up in the belief that his readers will not notice it, or – perhaps worse– in the belief that if they do notice it they won’t care, because it doesn’t matter.

An example of the sort of thing I mean occurred in the film *Planet of the Apes*. Charlton Heston’s spaceship is thrown forward several hundred years into the future (I forget the exact number) and lands back on Earth – but the crew don’t recognise it as the Earth, for no other reason than that it is important to the plot that they shouldn’t. Now, one handy way to recognise the Earth would be by looking up at the sky and recognising the Moon, but this opportunity is denied them by “a strange mist which covers the sky every night”. That’s a hard one to swallow, but you might just get it down your imaginative gullet except for one thing: the Moon appears in the sky just as much by day as it does by night. And there was no mist in the daytime sky. A few vapour trails, perhaps (probably the same ones I noticed in *Alexander the Great* and *How The West Was Won*), but no mist.

Another good clue as to where they came from was the apes themselves. Surely an alert mind, surely even Charlton Heston’s mind, could have drawn some kind of inference from the fact that these apes spoke perfect English! With U.S. accents! (The apes, incidentally, seemed to have progressed from inarticulate banana-gobblers to intelligent, articulate machine-tool makers in a few hundred years. At that rate they must have been evolving nearly as fast as the constitution of the British Science Fiction Association. They were able to make rifles and seemed able to turn their willing hands to anything – at least, their fingers were willing, but I noticed that their thumbs were opposed.)

In contrast to the inanities of *Planet of the Apes*, Pierre Boulle has written a rather nice SF novel called *Garden on the Moon*, in which Japan is

able to win the race to the Moon by the simple expedient of not hampering their space rocket with the means of getting the crew back to Earth. The final chapter, in which the cosmic kamikaze lays out for himself a little garden composed of moon rock and personal trinkets and then commits suicide, seemed to me to be first class SF.

On the subject of stupid, careless flaws, the TV series *Star Trek* is another winner. And I'm not talking about the grammatical idiosyncrasies of the opening voice-over: "... to boldly split infinitives that no man has split before." I've talked at length at various conventions about the strange command structure of the Starship Enterprise, so I won't go into it again. Not much anyway. As you know, there are hundreds of people on that ship, but the chain of command seems to be such that when the Captain and First Officer are otherwise engaged, which they frequently are, the Chief Engineer takes over; and when he is crawling under the floor, personally adjusting the main drive system – by re-arranging plastic Lego blocks – the Medical Officer takes over!

That is weird enough, but it has lately occurred to me that as all the adventures occur when Kirk, Spock, Scotty and McCoy are all on duty, assuming they work an eight hour shift the Enterprise must have two other complete crews that we never see, to whom nothing ever happens!

If Jim Blish ever feels like including a satirical piece among his *Star Trek* books, I offer him the idea of writing about a chap called, say, Arnold Dinkelschmaltz, who has been night commander of the Enterprise for years, and who becomes paranoid through boredom, and the fact that the day shift man – Captain Kirk – gets all the fun, all the women, and all the glory.

I was talking about new young SF readers, and what they like about the game. My own children enjoyed *Planet of the Apes* and *Star Trek*, and when I tried pointing out some of the flaws I have just mentioned they said, quite reasonably I suppose, that the apes had to speak English otherwise the people watching the film wouldn't have understood them. They could see the flaws, when they were pointed out, but were willing to accept them in order to get the other things they like: the other-worldliness, the colour, the glamour, the new concepts, the adventure, the strangeness, the sense of other places and other times.

And I found I was rather sad in a way. A good religion would be one in which belief was strengthened by enquiry; to my mind, a piece of SF should be constructed in the same way. The fact that so much of it isn't constructed

in this way might account for another phenomenon I have noticed. This is that all children are SF fans by instinct, and then at a later stage, usually about puberty, most of them cease to be SF fans. Because of the timing of this change of heart, I once wrote a carefully worked-out fanzine piece in which I attributed the swing away from SF to the dawning of sexuality; but it could also be said that it is caused by nothing more than the dawning of reason and the critical faculty. The sad thing is that there is no need for faulty workmanship in the building of a story. By working harder, taking more time, thinking harder, the author could, in almost every case, find a way to solve all the logical problems in the construction of a story – and at the same time retain, or even enhance, those qualities I mentioned, the other-worldliness, the colour, the glamour, the new concepts, the adventure, the strangeness, the sense of other places and other times. And if he can't find a way to solve all those problems, this means that the story should never be written.

I am, of course, assuming that it *isn't* the flawed nature of many stories which is the magnet for new readers. It is only when you have been reading the stuff for a long time that you can appreciate the real SF kitsch for its own ghastliness. An old favourite of mine is a line of dialogue which was discovered many years ago, I think by Ken Bulmer, and which went “‘Rat!’ he hissed.” Now how do you hiss “rat”?

Perhaps paradoxically, after talking about the flaws which cut down the number of recruits for SF, it is worth mentioning some characteristics of the consciously “good” SF which I believe to have a similar effect. During the last decade or so there has been a move away from the old hard sciences and towards the social and biological sciences. This isn't a bad thing in itself, but it has somehow led to SF adopting a negative approach to the future. Authors tend to look at the future through morose-coloured spectacles; but I feel that doom stories can only be appreciated when mixed in – like All Bran – they provide roughage in a diet of optimism. (To go right off the subject for a moment, I wonder how many people have been put off taking up astronomy for a hobby by the fact they couldn't discuss it with other people, because they didn't know how to pronounce the names of stars. There is one star in particular that I avoided mentioning because I didn't know if I should call it *Aldebaran* or *Aldebaran*. In order to be able even to think about it, I christened it All-Bran. Perhaps I had decided it was a *regular* variable.)

Doom stories are part of the SF trend towards contemporary social realism, and they proliferate largely because the surest way to arrive at a

doom prognosis is to try solving tomorrow's problems with today's resources. This is an attempt at realism, of course, but a more real realism could predict escalation of our problem-solving ability as well as an escalation of our problems. That's harder to do because, by and large, we can see tomorrow's problems quite well, whereas tomorrow's solutions are hidden from us. The point I'm trying to make is that the vital new recruits to the SF field are likely to be turned away if they come to think of it as a literature of disaster.

The same thing might be said of the tendency some authors have towards writing SF novels which become more and more like ordinary novels, and less like SF. I was going this way in my own work, until it dawned on me that the only reason a person picks up an SF novel in preference to a mainstream novel is that he expects it to be *different* from a mainstream novel.

Authors who go in for this literary unisex – books that are neither SF nor mainstream, or which are both – feel a compulsion studiously to omit all the traditional props of the SF story. Spaceships become taboo. Time machines become taboo. Extraterrestrials become taboo – except, perhaps, as philosophical sounding boards, who are supposed to have been born in another galaxy, but who can handle the English subjunctive like Oxford dons.

Properly done, this kind of story has its place – after all, SF is a very flexible and accommodating field – but it rarely seems to achieve its objectives. Perhaps a writer who has had his grounding in the pulp magazines never quite manages to shake off that thick, dusty, choking, evocative smell that an old *Astounding* exudes.

Well, that's about it. I think what I've been trying to say is that the old traditional SF had its good elements, and its bad elements. And that one of the tasks of the SF author today should be to examine those elements very carefully: that he should retain and develop the truly good; that he should discard the truly bad; and that he should be very clear in his mind about which is which.

Time-Travellers Among Us

Seacon '75, Brighton, Easter 1975

A question that is frequently asked in the SF world is: If time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?

Only this morning I was talking to a well-known SF author in the bar, and I said to him, “Can I have that fiver you borrowed last Easter?”

He scrutinised me keenly for a moment and said, “Bob, if time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?”

It's possible, of course, that he was trying to divert my attention to other matters. Now that I think of it, it *was* a bit strange the way he rushed out of the bar muttering something about having left his Hieronymus machine on a double yellow line.

Anyway, the point of the story is that – quite apart from the moral that you should never lend money to SF authors – the SF world is deeply concerned with the searching question: If time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?

There are a number of possible answers to that question – a favourite one among SF writers being that anybody who visits us from the future has to obey the Prime Directive that you do not interfere in any way with a culture in a less advanced state of development than your own. This Prime Directive is applied without fail, whether the visitors are arriving from the future or from another world, say, beaming down on a strange planet from the USS Enterprise.

It is applied so often, in fact, and repeated and chanted and intoned that it is easy to get the impression that it has the status of a universal law – like the one about toast always landing on the butter side when you drop it on the floor; or the one about ICS courses which states that no matter which course you do with them – accountancy, draughtsmanship, dress-making, it doesn't matter – you always end up as foreman of the machine shop. I've seen it all in the ads in the back of old *Astoundings*, and I know.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that the Prime Directive was

invented by SF authors and prompted by them for no other reason than that it provides a useful bit of plot complication. If Kirk, Spock and McCoy were allowed to do the logical thing and shoot any warlike primitives who attacked them, many episodes of *Star Trek* would have been over in five minutes. Which mightn't have been a bad thing – it would have let you get on to the good SF on TV, like the Cadbury's Smash commercials.

What it boils down to is that visitors from the future have to dress up in the clothes of the period they're in and be careful not to make themselves conspicuous, or to do anything which would influence the course of history. If they don't obey the rules the Chrono Police come after them, or the Paradox Police, or the Legion of Time...

Great stuff this! If any of you missed the Golden Age of SF – this is what it was all about. Mind you, I don't know what would happen if a time traveller carelessly changed the course of history, and the segment of the future he wiped out was the one in which the Paradox Police were formed! Anyway, they're still a fine body of men.

The point about time travellers blending in with the background is important because it means that the apparent evidence that the time machine will not be invented in the future is not admissible evidence. You can take it from me that time travel *will* become possible; and I'm going to go on to present a reasoned, carefully worked out, irrefutable, logical proof of that statement.

Unfortunately, I can't reveal exactly how it will be done.

One perhaps likes to think of a time machine as being something like a telephone booth, or a cage made up of shimmering rods which are joined together in a way which produces a curious wrenching pain in the eyes when you try to follow their geometries. More Golden Age stuff, this...

I once actually drew a time machine, on a Gestetner stencil, for the cover of a fanzine. I chose to draw the telephone booth type... mainly because I didn't have a proper stencil-cutting stylus, and it's almost impossible to portray shimmering rods and subtle mind-twisting geometries on stencil with a dried-up Bic ballpoint.

The drawing showed the time machine – it was labelled a Chronoclipper Mk.II – in a shop window. There was a notice on it quoting the price at £2,000 – but there was an extra bit saying that you had four years to pay.

This happened a long time ago, but I think the idea of the joke was that – if you were a quick thinker – you could put down your deposit, get in, drive

four years forward, and reappear when you owned the thing. The only trouble was, I never figured out who actually made the payments in the meantime. This goes to show you what a complicated thing time actually is.

I'm firmly convinced that time is complex in its nature, and not a linear thing in the way it is so often regarded. It has always struck me as strange that time – the one dimension we know least about – is the one about which people are most dogmatic. For example, people often get precognitive dreams. It's an established fact. I've had them lots of times – and yet orthodoxy says they're impossible.

There's this fantastic explanation about one half of your brain receiving its data a fraction of a second later than the other, thus creating an impression that an event which actually is new to you is one that has already occurred, already been experienced.

This neurological trickery is used to convince you that the evidence of your senses is unreliable, in some special cases, i.e. the ones where the nature of time is called into question. Your senses are considered good enough, however, for minor things like giving evidence in a murder trial.

I mean, if you were walking along a street and heard a shot, and then saw a man running out of a house, and then looked in the window and saw a body lying there beside it; and if you swore to all that – they would be prepared to take some poor wretch away and hang him. *But...* if the defence counsel got up and said, "The witness saw the defendant running out of the house, and *then* he heard the shot, but because one half of his brain receives its information a fraction of a second later than the other this gives him the impression things happened the other way round," he would be laughed out of court.

In the case of the precognitive dream, they always ask if you wrote it down or told anybody before the predicted event occurred. And – naturally – you haven't. When you got up in the morning, faced with the prospect of working all day, late for the office, feeling like death, ready to burst into tears, you can't be expected to take two or three hours off to tell people everything you dreamed during the night.

Even if you tried it you would probably pick the wrong things, because precognition occurs in odd little fragments of dreams which aren't recognised as significant until the event.

A perfect example is a dream I had at the last Novacon.

On the Friday night I dreamed I was in a room helping somebody to

look for their contact lenses, which had fallen on the floor. I looked down and saw them lying on the carpet, right at my feet, but they were much larger than I had expected and looked like solid hemispheres of glass.

Next day I was ordering some drinks at the bar, and the barman dropped an ice cube which fell at my feet. I don't know if you remember this, but the ice cubes in the Imperial Centre in Birmingham aren't cubes at all – they use fancy bits of ice shaped like two hemispheres joined together on the curved side, like very squat hour-glasses. This ice cube which fell had split in half, and when I looked down there were the two little glassy hemispheres lying on the carpet at my feet, just as I'd seen them in the dream.

In spite of the difficulties involved, I have *tried* to tell people in advance, just to get the precognitive thing established with them – but it is a very curious fact that events you decide to relate to people are the very ones which never actually occur.

The only logical explanation is that there must be a kind of feedback from the future which is triggered off by your voicing a dream, and which modifies the subsequent course of events. In all probability there are Time Guardians – an undercover branch of our old friends, the Paradox Police – whose job it is to prevent anybody setting himself up as a successful seer. No doubt they think they are very clever, but it was by seeing through their scheme that – in 1957 – I was able to save the life of our greatest statesman, Sir Winston Churchill!

The fact that Churchill was in London at the time, while I was 5,000 miles away, living in Western Canada, only goes to show the extent of the fantastic powers we are dealing with here. There was a period of about two weeks in the summer of 1957 when I got a continuous run of precognitive dreams. Every night I would dream about something, get up in the morning, go to the drawing office where I worked, and when I walked into the office the other engineers were discussing the very thing I had dreamed about.

I got mild enjoyment from the phenomenon for about a fortnight – then came the night when I had a vivid dream that Sir Winston had died. This put me on something of a spot.

On the one hand, I wanted the supreme vindication of my precognitive powers; on the other hand, it was the time of the Suez crisis, and all that, and Britain had dire need of Sir Winston's presence among the living. In the end I did the unselfish thing.

I hurried out to work without turning on the radio, dashed into the

design office and – before anybody could utter a word – shouted, “I dreamed Sir Winston Churchill died last night!”

The other engineers stared at me in silence for a moment – perhaps in some dim way they could sense the great combination wheels of time moving into new positions, or perhaps they just thought I had flipped my lid. In any case, I had the satisfaction of knowing that by voicing the dream I had tricked the Time Guardians into sparing the great man’s life. As it turned out, I had wangled Sir Winston an extra eight years, and – even though he didn’t do too much with them – the whole episode shows you how a good knowledge of science fiction and fantasy can be put to practical use in everyday life.

It may seem – to those of you who recall that we are supposed to be discussing time travellers among us – that I have strayed a little from the subject. But, in fact, my remarks have been very pertinent.

The point is that, because of the very nature of SF, its writers and keen readers have acquired insights into time that are denied to ordinary people. You must admit that this afternoon you have heard me say things about time which mundane outside society would view with some scepticism. We – the writers and readers of SF – are the biggest danger to secret time travellers, *because we are alerted to the sort of things that go on!*

If anybody is going to spot visitors from the future and queer the works for them, it is *us* right here in the convention hall!

At this point in my talk I’m going to stray away from hard scientific fact and become a little speculative. It is my considered opinion that in a very short time – just a year or two, perhaps – some SF writers and readers will have deduced and learned too much about the activities of the time travellers among us that the time travellers will have to take action to preserve their secret.

And what action will they take?

At first I found this problem insoluble, then the other night I was sitting having a few pint whisky shandies and the whole thing became obvious to me. To preserve their secrecy, the time travellers have only to kidnap any SF people who get on to them, carry them back into the past, and maroon them there!

I predict that, in a year or so, leading SF authors and fans will begin mysteriously vanishing. Even without me reminding them they owe me a fiver. That may sound improbable, but here the Time Guardians have slipped up again – because the evidence is available for us all to see... *in the pages of*

our history books!

The Time Guardians obviously expected the kidnapped SF people to sink without trace in the vast swamps of history – but they reckoned without the genius and drive and ability for sheer hard work which all SF authors have in such abundance. I would like you to look for a moment – with an unprejudiced, unbiased eye – at any fragment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from the valley of the Nile. These are, in fact, the very first appearances in print of Roger Zelazny stories.

His initials are clearly visible down in the right hand corner of most of them. The obviously mythological figures are, of course, a Zelazny trademark, one that he has built up in many of his novels. As far as I can tell, when Roger found himself stranded back in the ancient world he decided to cash in on the situation, so he went around to different countries *inventing* mythologies and spreading them all over the place so that he could write SF novels about them in the 20th century. This explains why all the various myth figures fit so neatly into his stories. Good thinking, Roger.

Other marooned SF authors and fans have made their presences felt in similar ways – going around carving drawings of space men and rocket ships in places where they were most likely to be found by later generations. The person I feel sorry for in all of this is poor old von Däniken, with his *Chariots of the Gods* and so forth. Possibly the carvings were put there maliciously in the first place, just so he would grab the wrong end of the stick. That's just the sort of thing Brian Burgess would do.

One of the things which put me on to all this was my visit to the King Tutankhamen exhibition last year. I looked closely at his sarcophagus – they can't touch you for it – and thought to myself, "Where have I seen that face before?" The beard gave it away: King Tut was John Brunner.

And when you look dispassionately at the history of the Trojan Wars, isn't it obvious that the whole thing was written, scripted and masterminded by Harry Harrison? I mean, that business of hiding inside a giant horse and springing out of it at night is straight out of a Stainless Steel Rat story. Nobody else would have thought of such a crazy idea.

The next significant event in history is the decline and fall of the Roman Empire – of course, entirely engineered by Isaac Asimov so that he could work out what he was going to put in Volume 3 of the *Foundation* series. The Dark Ages came next, mainly brought on by L. Sprague de Camp, and then – because SF writers had been so active in the preceding centuries – an early

form of SF fandom began to flourish.

Britain led the way with the invention of conventions, and the first permanent convention hall was built, at Stonehenge. News about the good times they all had at these affairs filtered across the Channel to French fandom, who promptly got jealous and came over here on a giant excursion – in 1066. Because they were principally interested in finding out about conventions or cons, this invention was known as the Norman Con Quest.

Things settled down after that for a while, until we had the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund – in 1492. Columbus wasn't a very good TAFF delegate. He only won the election because he had a lot of votes bought for him by Queen Isabella, and I suspect he wasn't an SF fan at all, but some magazine huckster like Rog Peyton or Bram Stokes.

Legend has it he hurried back to Isabella, not even taking time to write his TAFF trip report for *Speculation*, and reported to her – all excited – that he had found a country where the natives were so simple they were prepared to barter land against trinkets.

“That's marvellous,” Isabella replied.

“I know,” Columbus replied. “Here's three strings of beads I got – we've got to be out of Spain by next Thursday.”

Other SF people did get across the Atlantic later on, though. Frank Belknap Long went over and settled on Long Island. Michael G. Coney went over and settled on Coney Island. Volsted Gridban went over, but he was refused entry because there was no way the Americans were going to stand for part of their territory being labelled Gridban Island.

Dan Morgan sailed for the Caribbean and became a successful pirate. And John Russell Fearn went over and started all the ghostly legends of Sleepy Hollow by rustling a few ferns...

Back on this side of the Atlantic things weren't going too smoothly – a lot of the feuds which mar or enliven the SF scene today began to break out. In the 16th Century there was a lot of trouble with the New Wave element, led by Martin Luther. And up in Scotland, a dispute about *Analog's* editorial policies led to the Massacre of Glencoe – in which the John W. Campbells slaughtered the John D. MacDonalds.

Anyway, I hope I've said enough to let you see that this threat to SF authors and readers is deadly serious. Now that I've let you all in on the secret, you are more at risk than ever. In fact, I think I've noticed that a few people have disappeared from the back of the hall already!

“What can we do about it?” you are asking yourselves.

Well, *most* of you are asking what time the bar opens, but some of you must be asking what we can do about this threat from the time travellers among us. My answer is that we shouldn’t wait around, passively, to be kidnapped. We should carry the battle to the enemy by going into the future and destroying their time machine factories.

Our technology hasn’t yet reached the stage of being able to build time machines, but – luckily for us – some years ago Walt Willis invented a non-mechanical method of time travel, which I have named the subjective induced acceleration technique.

You know how slowly time goes when you are miserable? And how quickly it goes when nice things are happening to you? Well, to send a volunteer into the future you start off by bringing time to a virtual standstill for him by putting him in a cold grey room, with a Lena Zavaroni record playing, with nothing to drink but tea brewed in the Novacon hotel, and make him read right through a file of *Wonder Stories Quarterly*.

After a day of so of this, when he’s really in the stasis, you pull a lever and he drops through a trapdoor into a luxurious suite where gorgeous nude girls cluster round him offering him cigars and glasses of champagne. This speeds his time flow up so abruptly that he goes into a kind of temporal overdrive, and vanishes into the future.

Last night, while the rest of you were enjoying yourselves at room parties and so forth, a group of us serious-minded types got together and started on this project by sawing a hole through the floor of Brian Aldiss’s room into the room below. All we need now is a supply of champagne, cigars, and gorgeous nude girls.

All contributions should be handed to the convention chairman out in the bar, which is where the rest of us will be in a few minutes from now.

The Return of the Backyard Spaceship

Mancon 5, Manchester, Easter 1976

I expect you're all wondering why I brought you here tonight... Heh! Heh! Heh!

Well, you must admit this *is* a bit like one of those old movies where an assorted bunch of people find themselves invited to spend a weekend at some really creepy, out-of-the-way spot. I got a couple of mysterious, anonymous notes telling me to come here, and a strange map – just like in the movies. The main difference is that in a film the weekend guests always find themselves in a huge, gloomy, draughty, creaky place, miles from anywhere, with no means of escape. And nobody could say those things about Owens Park. Could they? They're fake fans if they do. But come to think of it... the hall porter does look a bit like Boris Karloff.

This has got me wondering what crimes we all committed in the past. Who did we mortally offend and wants to take revenge on us? Hands up anybody who has ever kept a magazine belonging to the BSFA chain library. Hands up anybody who has ever used *Science Fiction Monthly* to wrap up fish and chips. Hands up anybody who has ever sent a fan letter to *Space: 1999*. I thought so: quite a few of you. That means you'll all start disappearing, one by one. If I'm not mistaken, some people have started vanishing from the back of the hall already! It's funny, but that happened during my last talk, as well...

This talk is going to be about alternative technology, but the subject of *Space: 1999* has cropped up... and in a way, it features alternative technology, too. I mean, the technology in it is *impossible*, and that's a genuine alternative to all this plausible stuff that people like Niven and Asimov and Clarke keep churning out. I missed the first couple of episodes of *Space: £19.99p* – for some reason, that's how I think of that show – because I pay 10p a week for the *TV Times*, to get extra programme information, and it kept saying that it began at 7.30, whereas it really began at 6.30, and I kept switching on too late. “Just another readers service from

Independent Television Publications...” Mind you, it sometimes takes me about an hour to find the programme pages in the *TV Times* anyway, so I might have missed those episodes regardless.

I do know, for example, that in *Space: £19.99p* they are journeying around the galaxy on the Moon, but I never found out what propelled the Moon out of the Solar System. All I know is that it must have been one hell of a powerful explosion, because they reach a different planet every week, and if you grant a high density of stars – say they’re about four light years apart – that means the Moon is belting along at 200 times the speed of light! Luckily for Commander Koenig and company, the retro rockets on those Eagle craft seem to be pretty effective – even though they only emit little puffs of smoke, more in keeping with somebody having a crafty drag down in the toilets – and they can always land and chat to the local inhabitants. The residents of these planets all speak English – which is a very lucky thing, too – because I run into language difficulties if I go abroad as far as Italy or Holland or Macclesfield.

Other things I’d like to know about *Space: £19.99p* are: When are they going to show us the vast underground factory which builds the Eagle spacecraft? (A minimum of four of these explode or suffer spontaneous combustion every week, so there *has* to be a big production facility.) When are we going to be told that Barbara Bain is really a robot? Why does everybody in the Moonbase whisper all the time? Why have they got Moon gravity outside the Moonbase and normal gravity inside it? (Maybe *that’s* why everybody whispers and looks gloomy – they’re introducing extra gravity into the situation.)

Thinking it over, the key to some of these mysteries could lie in something I’ve already mentioned – the fact that the Moon is travelling at 200 times the speed of light. This means time in the Moonbase is running backwards, and all the characters in it are heading into their own pasts instead of their futures. Martin Landau is contemplating Missions that are even more Impossible; and Barry Morse is extending the hunt for The Fugitive into interstellar space. “That was no one-armed man, Jansen – that was an inhabitant of Rigel IV waving his proboscis, and you can’t touch them for it.”

Back to the main subject of the talk – “Lunar Rock: Will It Ever Be As Popular As Martian Country And Western?” No, that can’t be right – that’s Graham Charnock’s talk. Mine is about alternative technology space drives. As you know, space flight is the most common theme in science fiction, and

the fact the Moon landings have been accomplished in reality has wiped out whole areas of speculation which many a writer relied upon to earn his living. NASA is taking the bread and butter out of the mouths of science fiction authors, which is not only an immoral thing to do – it's downright unhygienic! Driven out of what used to be their own private territory, SF writers are becoming poorer and poorer. Things have reached the stage at which some of them have to use their Access cards to weigh themselves. Every time I have to take some money out of the bank I feel ill for a couple of hours afterwards – I think it's called a withdrawal symptom.

There is, however, a ray of hope for the future in that present day space technology is not really adequate or suitable for the tasks it has to accomplish, partly because of the fantastic expense involved, and partly because of inherent weaknesses in our whole concept of the space rocket. All the big space powers are looking around for other more efficient, more reliable and more economic ways of getting hardware into the sky, and it is quite possible they will turn to science fiction for fresh, original ideas – for which, I hope, they will pay an appropriate fee. This notion isn't as far-fetched as it might sound, because many leading space technologists have acknowledged the stimulus they get from science fiction. Only the other day I read an article by a big man in the communications satellite business who said he had lost millions of pounds because in 1947 he had thought of, but failed to patent, Arthur C. Clarke. People even come to *me* and ask technical questions. Questions like: "If you put a hole in the middle of a Gemini spacecraft would that make it Apollo?" Or, "Up there in the emptiness of space, what would Isaac Asimov push against?"

Of course, not all the ideas that science fiction has put forward for space ship propulsion are worth following up. A giant gun about a mile high which fires people into space in a bullet is obviously not feasible – partly because of the tremendous accelerations involved, but mainly because you'd never get enough leather to make a holster for it. And it's no good talking about building it underground, with the muzzle at ground level., because it's against the law to have a concealed weapon. You see, it's practical little details like these that trip up some of our most visionary thinkers, but which us hard SF writers have built our reputations on.

A compatriot of mine, who has an equally down-to-earth approach, has pointed out on TV the difficulties that Bell got into when he invented the telephone – it was absolutely no use to him until he had invented another

telephone that he could ring up. Then he got carried away and invented a third telephone, and when he rang up the second one it was engaged. That's what's called technological redundancy.

In contrast to some of the quaint old ideas in science fiction, the proposal for a new type of space ship propulsion unit which I'm going to outline to you has all the advantages of being inexpensive and totally practicable. The inspiration came to me one evening when I was sitting at home in an armchair... (have you noticed that chairs are good for sitting on? I keep half a dozen of them round the house for no other reason) ... idly toying with a half-pint whisky shandy. My intellect was wrestling with some of the great imponderables of our time, questions like, "Why was the book *The Man Who Folded Himself* written by David Gerrold and not John Creasey?"

Actually, the inspiration came in two parts – just the way Arthur Koestler said it should. That's the way you do creative thinking, by taking two imaginative elements out of your mental stock and synthesising them into something entirely new. I was sitting there watching my television set... (have you noticed that TVs are good for watching? I experimented with watching fridges for a while, and then sideboards, but after this period of trial and error I settled on television sets.) ... and a commercial about saving energy came on. It explained, the way they always do, that a big percentage of the heat loss in a house occurs through the windows. That's where your heat goes – right out through the glass of the windows. This information wasn't new to me, but – under the benign influence of the whisky shandies – my intellect was in a highly receptive state, and the stuff about the behaviour of window glass seemed to hang in the forefront of my mind, reverberating in a cryogenic chill. (I copied that last bit out of an *Analog* editorial.)

It's amazing the things which reverberate in the mind after you've had a few drinks – that's why you have such interesting conversations in pubs. The part I like best is when non-SF pub customers start talking about things which we – as science fiction fans, usually with some awareness of science – tend to regard as our own conversational stomping ground. I remember sitting in a little country pub once having a pint with the landlord. Although this was in the Spring, it was a bitterly cold day outside – a fact which seemed to have a depressing effect on mine host. Quite out of the blue, in the middle of a conversation about the price of lettuce, he announced that he had worked out exactly why it was that the weather had become so unseasonable in recent years. My interest perked up at once because I had been speculating about the

same thing ever since I saw that *Horizon* programme on BBC which told us that a new Ice Age was going to start the following Tuesday afternoon.

“It’s these leap years that’s doing it,” the landlord explained. “They keep sticking in this extra day every fourth year, and they’re all adding up and putting the calendar out of step with the seasons.”

Although he didn’t realise it, this man was a living proof of Weston’s Theorem – invented by Pete Weston – which postulates that interest in science fiction usually springs from an underlying appreciation of astronomy. I spent a good thirty minutes with this man trying to make him understand what is actually meant by the terms “year” and “day” and why there’s no cosmic linkage between the two, but I simply failed to get through to him. However, this is straying from the point.

The second part of the discovery I was talking about came later on that same evening, when my gaze fell on the second inspirational element, the vital catalyst – which in this case happened to be the inside back cover of the *Radio Times*. You’ve noticed the way in which certain publications are associated with different types of advertising – the *Daily Telegraph* for jobs; *Penthouse* for saucy French undies; the old *Astounding* for surgical trusses. Not that there’s all that much difference between the latter two... between saucy undies and trusses, I mean... in the little illustrations they look equally complicated and disconcerting. Well, the back cover of the *Radio Times* used to be devoted entirely to ads for garages and greenhouses. Nowadays it tends to be given over to glossy adverts for Peter Stuyvesant – the cigarette the tobacconist refuses to sell you unless you produce your passport; and dry Martini – the drink the wine merchant refuses to sell you unless you can produce a licence to fly a seaplane.

At the time I’m speaking of, however, it was still garages and greenhouses, and I got to wondering about the famous Greenhouse Effect. For the benefit of anybody who hasn’t read the science column in *Tiger Tim’s Weekly*, I should explain that the Greenhouse Effect is a scientific phenomenon, all to do with changing the wavelengths of radiation, by which greenhouse glass refuses to allow heat to pass out through it, thus keeping the greenhouse nice and warm. This was the point at which the two halves of the inspiration began to come together, reaching critical mass.

There’s something funny here, I thought, taking a diminutive sip from my whisky. In an ordinary house the glass in the windows lets all the heat out – but in a greenhouse the glass keeps all the heat *in!*

Suddenly the inspiration was complete.

It dawned on me, there and then, that we could solve all our home heating problems... and save the countries of the West billions of pounds in home heating bills... simply by taking the ordinary glass out of our windows and replacing it with greenhouse glass!

The idea was so devastatingly simple that for a moment I thought there had to be a flaw in my scientific reasoning. But, no! There was no denying the facts... window glass lets heat out, greenhouse glass keeps heat in. Q.E.D. I celebrated my discovery by finishing off the Scotch – reflecting that I could probably afford it now that the Government was likely to vote me an honorarium of a million or two. Then I toddled off to bed, too excited even to bother with my nightly digestive biscuit and cup of Slippery Elm Food.

The big let-down came on the following morning when I was having my usual breakfast of two lightly poached aspirins. There was a flaw in my scientific logic, and I cursed myself for not having spotted it immediately. I had done a lot of research into glass while writing my “slow glass” stories, and I knew for a fact that the glass factories did not manufacture two different types – one for ordinary buildings, and one for greenhouses. My gleaming inspiration of the previous night had been the tawdry glitter of fool’s gold. (That last sentence was a little literary bit I put in as writing practice in case they ever revive *Planet Stories*.) The realisation that I had been wrong lay heavily in me for a while – just like a Brian Burgess meat pie – but then I began to rally as the day wore on. I asked myself, “Would Einstein have given up so easily? Just when things were getting tough, would he have abandoned all his sculptures?”

I think I have pointed out before that it wasn’t a huge I.Q. which made Einstein a great scientist; it was his simple and childlike approach – and for all I know, I might be even more simple and childlike than Einstein.

Returning to the problem, I decided that my basic premise about greenhouses had been right, but that I had not been in possession of sufficient facts to construct a viable theory. A vital clue was missing, but what could it be? (It is just like an episode from *Microbes and Men*, isn’t it?) By this time I was hot on the intellectual trail and I consulted my library of science reference works, spending hours going through abstruse works such as *The Penguin Dictionary of Shells*; *The Shell Dictionary of Penguins*; *Teach Yourself Embalming*; *Stand and Deliver – A Treatise on Overcrowding in Maternity Homes*; *Bionic Men – Would You Let Your Transistor Marry One?*;

Black Holes – A Successful Treatment Without Surgery. I even glanced through a manual on dog handling, hoping it might give me a strong lead, but to no avail. This is the weird thing about reference works – I never seem to get anything out of them. I’ve had a *Roget’s Thesaurus* for years, and so far I haven’t managed to get a single word out of it. So, it was up to my unaided powers of scientific deduction.

The basic problem was that the manufacturers produced only one grade of glass for normal domestic and commercial use – and yet when sheets of this glass were put into a greenhouse their physical properties mysteriously changed. *Why?* Well, it was Sherlock Holmes who said to Doctor Watson, “When you have eliminated all other possibilities the one which remains, no matter how unlikely, is the best that Conan Doyle could think up on the spur of the moment.” With this truism in mind, I suddenly remembered the reports which have been in science journals lately and which state that vegetables are intelligent. Could it be, I wondered, that vegetables are even smarter than we think they are? Could they be changing the properties of greenhouse glass by mental control, so that they are kept warm and healthy?

Some of you might think that this idea is a little far-fetched – this notion that vegetables have thoughts and feelings – but is it any more fantastic than some of the things which Einstein asked us to accept in his various theories of relativity? Do you really believe that two men can stand at each end of a moving train, and flash signals to an observer on the bank without getting thrown off by the ticket collector?

These reports that vegetables have nervous systems and are telepathically aware of their surroundings are perfectly correct, and I can even foresee the day when – perhaps by hormone treatment – we’ll be able to give them mobility. There might come a day when vegetables will be accepted as domestic pets, and there’s no doubt that in some ways they are more suitable for this role than animals. For example, vegetables like to feed on manure. So you could have this situation in which the average citizen goes out for a stroll in the evening with his pet cabbage on a lead. It would be trotting along behind him – on its little roots – *unfouling* the footpath!

You might even find keen gardeners writing to the newspapers and complaining about how every time they put dung on their roses some thoughtless vegetable-lover allows his pet turnip to stray in and clean the place up. Obviously, there’s a whole new field of research here, in deciding which vegetables are the most efficient at modifying glass. I myself suspect

the tomatoes, because every time I stare into a greenhouse at them I see them turning a little red.

The more I thought about all this, the more certain I became that I had hit on the only logical answer. Therefore, to save all those billions of pounds on heating bills, all we had to do was put all our glass into greenhouse frames, wait until the tomato plants, etc, inside had altered its transmission properties by mental control at the sub-atomic level, then take it away and install it as windows in our houses. Once that was done, all the heat would be kept in, the country would be rescued from the clutches of the oil sheiks, and the national debt would be wiped out in a couple of years.

The only thing which prevented me from immediately phoning the Prime Minister and giving my idea to the nation was the sobering realisation that all the big, powerful combines would seize on it and make even more money than they have now. In particular, the giant glass manufacturers would make vast fortunes overnight and I didn't like the idea of that – mainly because when I was in junior school I was once spat on by a boy called Pilkington. This deeply philosophical consideration decided me to keep my discovery to myself, but I give it freely to everybody at this convention.

Some of you – the ones who remember the title of this talk – are saying to yourselves, “What has all this got to do with spaceship propulsion?” Actually, most of you are saying, “What a load of old cobblers!”, but *some* of you are saying, “What has all this got to do with spaceship propulsion?” Gerry Webb is, anyway, if he's here.

The answer lies in a straightforward, logical development of the basic idea. To make a really efficient drive unit, all you have to do is take a piece of greenhouse glass and fashion it into a tubular shape and attach it to the back end of your space ship. Up in space the unshielded heat of the sun will pour into this tube and, as we have established that the heat will not be able to escape out through the glass again – the temperature inside will quickly build up and up to a tremendous level. If you feed water into one end of the pipe it will explode into steam and be exhausted through the opposite end at great speed, producing the thrust needed to propel your starship.

Now, if there are any members of the British Interplanetary Society in the audience, they'll no doubt be thinking to themselves that they can see a major objection to the Hot Water Bottle Drive I have just outlined. Those of you who *aren't* technically minded might think it is something to do with the glass of the drive pipes perhaps losing its properties and cooling down. This

could indeed lead to a sort of story situation in which Dan Dare is up front piloting the ship when he notices a loss of power and send the engineer, Scotty, back to investigate. Scotty immediately realises what is happening, so he picks up the intercom and goes, “Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are cooling.”

But that’s comicbook stuff – the real drawback to the Hot Water Bottle Drive which will be troubling all the propulsion engineers in the audience is the old one about reaction mass. They’ll be saying you could never carry enough water to give the ship interstellar, or even interplanetary, range. This is a perfectly valid objection – I’ve read *The Cold Equations* and I know all about this sort of thing – but I’m sure you’ll be both pleased and relieved to hear that, through my researches in another scientific field altogether, I’ve come up with the answer to that one as well.

The inspiration came when I was considering a problem in nutrition. In general, researchers in this field are concerned with lack of nutrition, but in my case the problem seems to be an excess of it. I’ve checked with other beer-drinkers and they confirm the same thing – every time they have a pint of beer they gain a couple of pounds in weight as well. Now, the really intriguing scientific aspect of all this is that a pint of beer weighs only one-and-a-quarter pounds!

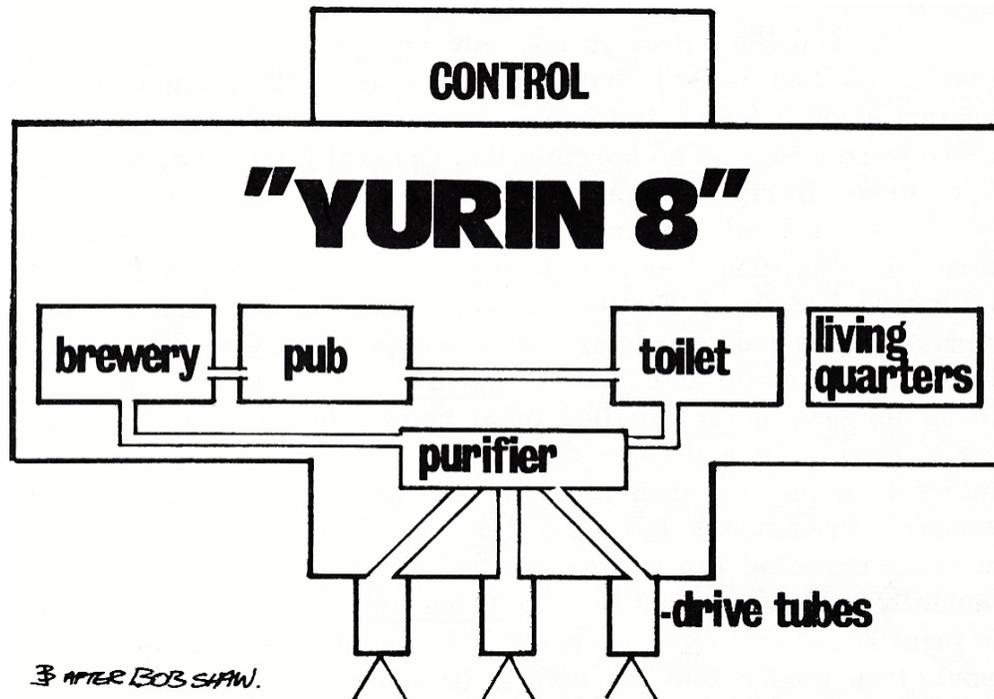
This means that three-quarters of a pound of mass appears from nowhere!

Incredible though it might seem, this process of matter creation within the human body is well authenticated – and it doesn’t just happen with booze. Anybody who is a bit fat will tell you that eating just one measly little two-ounce cream bun makes them a pound or two heavier the next day. It’s even possible that the entire mass of the universe was created by people eating cream buns and drinking beer, but I’m not interested in cosmology – it’s much too airy-fairy and theoretical for me. I prefer to stick to solid, provable facts – such as my discovery about beer.

What, you must be saying to yourselves, does this new discovery of Shaw’s do to the Second Law of Thermodynamics? Where, you must be wondering, does this extra fluid come from? Well, I don’t know where it comes from, but I know where it goes. And this knowledge is the final building block needed for the design of the perfect spaceship.

You start off by installing a small but highly efficient brewery. Next to it goes a well-designed pub with an atmosphere that is conducive to sustained

drinking; and beside the pub you, of course, have a toilet. The outlet from the toilet leads into a purifying plant, which receives roughly one-and-a-half pints of liquid for every pint that has been drunk in the bar. Out of every pint-and-a-half of fluid that gets purified, one pint is recirculated back to the brewery – as part of a self-sustaining closed ecology – and the extra half-pint is fed through control valves into a cluster of our greenhouse glass pipes which provide the motive force. Living quarters and a control deck make up the other major compartments.



With this ship you can go anywhere in the Solar System, provided you have a crew of dedicated people who are willing to sit in the bar, for day after day, drinking free beer, with no thought in mind other than getting mankind to the stars. Oddly enough, I think we could round up quite a good space ship crew right here in this hall.

Before you rush away and start building a ship, I should perhaps warn you that life on board won't be all beer and skittles. The beer-drinking complement would be a vital part of the ship, and heavy demands might be made on them. For instance, if the ship got into a dangerous situation the Captain, in his control room, would pick up his microphone and say, "Increase speed to Booze Factor Eight," and all the toppers down in the bar would have to start drinking twice as fast, whether they wanted to or not. It could be hellish.

Nevertheless, just in case my services are ever called upon to get us to the moons of Jupiter, I think I'll go out to the bar and put in a little practice...

The Bermondsey Triangle Mystery

Eastercon '77, Coventry, Easter 1977

Pardon me if I don't seem my usual robust self today. I went round a few room parties last night, living it up – now I'm trying to live it down. Actually, the night started to go a bit wrong when I found myself at a temperance room party, which wasn't quite what I had planned on. I'm not saying the host was unfannish – but that was the first convention party I'd ever been to where I was expected to buy Tupperware.

I got out of there in a hurry, because we've got all the Tupperware we need at home. Our fridge, the pantry, all the cupboards, are filled with Tupperware. There's no room for food – just these heaps and heaps of plastic boxes which break your nails when you try to open the lids. When I die I'm going to be put away in a Tupperware coffin – I think I ordered it last night – and the worms just won't be able to get near me. When alien super-beings land on the deserted Earth in a few thousand years from now and start looking around for a human being to resurrect, I'll probably be fresh as a daisy in there. The only trouble is, the alien super-beings probably won't be able to get my lid off...

Anyway, by the time I got to a proper room-party I hadn't had a drink for about half an hour, and you know how it is with booze – a long period of abstinence like that really whets your appetite for it. I think I may possibly have imbibed a little too much, because this morning I had a bad headache, and there was no Alka-Seltzer or aspirin. Luckily, one of the committee was kind enough to nip out and get me some pain-killer they make in a little shop just around the corner from here – it's a local anaesthetic – and that enabled me to come here as planned to tell you all about the Bermondsey triangle mystery.

Now, to me, one of the most intriguing and sinister things about the Bermondsey triangle mystery is that nobody has ever heard of it!

I mean, practically everybody has heard about the old Bermuda triangle mystery, and it's even got to the point of popularity where the mystery is self-

perpetuating. Did you know that the last three ships to disappear in the Bermuda triangle were carrying cargoes of books about the Bermuda triangle mystery? There's so much demand for them in that area that whole fleets loaded up with the books are charging about all over the Caribbean, running into each other, getting sunk, and adding to the legend. They're littered about all over the seabed, and what worries me is that pup paper is terribly absorbent. One of these days we're going to hear a loud slurping noise – and the Caribbean will disappear! And Castro will blame it on the CIA...

There's even a new TV series about the Bermuda triangle – called *The Fantastic Journey* – which combines the scientific authenticity of *Space: 1999* with the gripping story quality of *Look at Life* on a visit to Bootle. I mustn't start being sarcastic about *Space: 1999* again, though – last time I did that I offended the show's regular viewers, and they both wrote to me about it. And I think one of them had even gone to the expense of buying a new crayon! Mention of *The Fantastic Journey* reminds me that one of my problems with the show is that, after all those *Planet of the Apes* programmes, I can't bear to look directly at Roddy McDowell any more. All I see is Galen... skinned! It's hard to think of anything more revolting.

But I was talking about the self-perpetuating nature of the Bermuda triangle mystery, a process which I find interesting. A vaguely parallel case has occurred up in the Lake District, where I live. There's a local confectionery called Kendal mint cake which, for some reason, is always brought along by climbers who are tackling Everest. The manufacturers set great store by this, and on the waxy wrappers always list the numerous mountaineering expeditions of the last fifty years which sustained themselves on difficult climbs by eating Kendal mint cake. What they carefully don't mention is the fate of the Peruvian Everest expedition of 1949, which was swept away on the south face, not by snow... but by an avalanche of discarded Kendal mint cake wrappers.

This shows the dangers of being a litter lout. It really is antisocial to go around throwing down old bus tickets and chocolate wrappers – except, of course, on the Continent, where they have a much better class of litter. One of the things that appealed to my snob instinct on my first trip across the Channel – it was on a day trip to Calais – was that even the garbage was in French.

But this is getting away from the Bermondsey triangle mystery, which is my main subject today. “What is the Bermondsey triangle mystery?” you

must be asking yourselves. If you aren't, I've been wasting my time up here throwing out all these tantalising hints, planting fish-hooks. That's something that authors do, you know. They go around planting fish-hooks. Other people plant seeds; authors plant fish-hooks. It's really stupid – because nothing ever grows from fish-hooks. I think the worms come along and eat them. Especially if they're worms like the ones I've got in my garden. The soil in my garden is so poor that the worms go around in gangs attacking birds. One of them savaged the postman last week!

I know, I know! This is getting away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle mystery, as well. In fact, some of you are saying I can't get away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle mystery when I haven't even got near it. Some of you may even be entertaining doubts that there is a Bermondsey triangle mystery.

Well, let me tell you... There's another funny thing – that business about entertaining doubts. Why do we always entertain doubts, while the best that can happen to more deserving cases such as beliefs and convictions is that they'll be firmly held? It hardly seems fair.

Now... what was I talking about? Oh, yes – the Bermondsey triangle mystery. This first came to my attention about twenty years ago, and I want to emphasise that I'm talking about direct, first-hand experience here – unlike those literary charlatans who write sensational books based on old newspaper clippings which were probably all wrong to start off with.

My first tiny and apparently insignificant clue was... You know, I love the way all tales of scientific discovery start off with a tiny and apparently insignificant clue – though I suppose it has to be that way. When James Watt was getting ready to invent the steam engine the only thing he had to inspire him was the bobbing up and down of the lid of a hot kettle, and his genius lay in seeing its potential. I mean, if he had been watching the kettle boil and suddenly it had gone toot-toot and shot off in the direction of London, picking up passengers and collecting mailbags, anybody could have got the idea of the steam locomotive from it. Though James Watt, being a true genius, might have jumped up and said, "If only we could harness this energy to make tea!"

(Come to think of it, perhaps that's what actually happens – the tea I get on British Rail tastes like it came out of the engine, though only a tea connoisseur like Ethel Lindsay could be absolutely certain. In view of that fact, I feel no guilt about telling you the method I have devised for getting

free tea on train journeys. They operate a two-man system when they're bringing the tea around – the first bloke comes along asking who wants tea, and if anybody does he takes his money and gives him a plastic cup, which acts both as a tea container and a receipt. A few minutes later the second bloke works his way along the train, filling all the cups. So all you have to do, before leaving home, is to make sure you pack a few plastic cups, and set one out in front of you at the appropriate moment...)

But all this is straying away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle mystery. I don't know why it keeps happening – must be something I wrote. This tiny and apparently insignificant clue I started to tell you about was a strange aberration in the otherwise fairly unremarkable behaviour of James White. Jim, of course, is a writer whose name is well-known to all readers of journals such as *Analog*, *New Worlds*, and *Stubb's Gazette*.

He is also, as everybody knows, a very steady, respectable and sober person – compared to many other science fiction writers, that is. Admittedly, he has done a few odd things in his life. There was that time when he worked for a tailoring concern, and an encyclopædia salesman called at his home one evening... Jim brought him in and sold him a suit!

But occasional lapses like that apart, he lives a very even sort of life – which is why my curiosity was aroused when Jim abruptly disappeared for four days. I remember the occasion very well, because it happened one Easter – a time when you would expect a man like him to be at home with his wife and family, helping the children roll eggs down hillsides, and spoiling the whole thing for them by lecturing about the mechanics of inclined planes, and about how it was all just another way of demonstrating Newton's ideas about inertia and gravitation. All authors who have sold to *Analog* tend to go on like that.

Unlike a ship or plane which disappears in the Bermuda Triangle, however, Jim reappeared in his old haunts a few days later – but he was a changed man! He was tired and shaken, his eyes were glazed over, there was a strange spirituous smell from his breath, and he was incoherent about what had happened to him. He had obviously been through some traumatic, mind-warping experience which was too awful to talk about, perhaps too awful to comprehend.

I have to admit that I didn't investigate the matter fully at that time, because I was busy with other important scientific researches – namely work on my perpetual motion machine. I slaved away over that machine for many

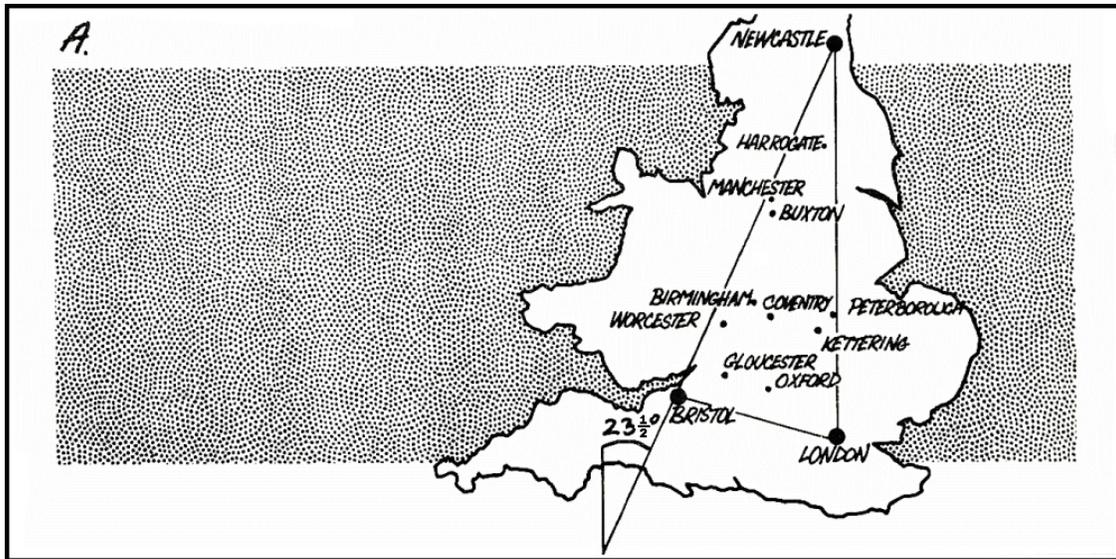
years before reluctantly giving up. In the end I was forced to admit that – no matter what ingenious mechanisms I invented, no matter what clever refinements I tried – there was just no way to stop the blasted thing. This was a big disappointment to me, but at least it gave me more time to study Jim White’s behaviour, which had steadily grown more mysterious and intriguing.

He kept on vanishing every Easter – always returning in the same comatose condition – and then, to my horror, it began to happen in November as well! His condition was obviously deteriorating. I began following him on these strange excursions, regardless of any physical danger involved – us dedicated researchers are like that, you see – and found that the same thing was happening to hundreds of other apparently normal men and women. Twice a year they were drawn, lemming-like, to some mysteriously prearranged point, where they milled around for several days – often having no rest throughout the entire period – before disbanding and returning to their normal lives.

What, I wondered, was it all about? What occult power was influencing them to make them behave in this fashion?

Well, the first thing a scientist does when investigating a widespread phenomenon like this is to organise the data and impose some kind of order on it. Actually, that’s not quite true. The very first thing a scientist does in a case like this is to apply for a Government grant, to keep him in beer and smokes during his labours, but I knew I wouldn’t get any money from the Establishment. There had been ill will between me and the authorities ever since I reported a smuggling gang, run by a chap called Leacock, to the Customs and Excise and they failed to do anything about it. It turned out that this gang were fiendishly clever – they only smuggled stuff there was no duty on! The authorities are powerless against men like that... so naturally they resented me for exposing their incompetence. They covered up their embarrassment by threatening to prosecute me for wasting their time, so I knew there was no point in applying for Government money.

Instead I drew a map of the country and plotted out all the locations where I knew the strange mass hysteria had occurred. and it came out like this:



Note the significant shape of the plot! A triangle! Can this be a coincidence? I ask you, can this be a coincidence? Of course not!

Because this is just a rough diagram I can't show you the precise trigonometries I calculated, but suffice it to say that the bottom right-hand corner of the triangle is positioned in the London borough of Bermondsey – hence the name I have given to the entire area involved. (In actual fact, the corner of the triangle proved to be located a little further south... To be totally precise, it is in the back room of a Chinese take-away in Peckham High Street... but who in his right mind would want to hear a talk about the Peckham triangle mystery?)

Now, as soon as I got an inkling of what I might be on to, I realised I needed expert help in unravelling the mystery involved, and I began looking around for somebody with the necessary intellectual qualities. My first choice was L. Ron Hubbard, but I had lost touch with him soon after he invented Scientology and... I have to be careful about how I say this... made a cult of himself. I then contacted a friend who shall be nameless, because he is on the Seacon '79 committee. He had the right sort of mental attributes, but he was too busy getting Brighton ready for its first convention. In fact, when he heard I would be addressing this convention he asked me to pass on a message to all of you who have asked questions about Brighton in general, and in particular about the famous Brighton peer.

Talking about the Brighton peer, he said, "This criminal lunatic, who operates from the rooftops of tall buildings in central Brighton – thus forcing people to carry umbrellas at all times of the year – has not been apprehended

at the time of writing, but the local police are confident he will be behind bars by 1979. There is some doubt about which bars he will actually be behind, but a close watch is being kept on all licensed premises in the area. A new clue about his identity has come from a tip-off that he is an East German who defected over the Berlin Wall. ‘That is a super-human feat, considering the height of the wall,’ said a spokesman for the Brighton police, ‘and shows the calibre of the man we’re up against.’”

That’s getting away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle again, but I thought you deserved the break – after all, none of you has done me any harm. I was saying that I was at a loss about who to turn to for help in sorting out this mystery, then I thought of the perfect man for the job... that great German – Irish writer, scholar and scientific researcher – Von Donegan!

I had trouble finding Von Donegan, because he moves around a lot – with the sort of books he writes he finds it advisable. I tried his various clubs – the Playboy Club, Foyle’s Book Club, the Shillelagh (that’s an Irish club) but he wasn’t at any of those places. I was getting desperate when I remembered reading that you have only to stand in Piccadilly Circus long enough and you will eventually meet everybody in the world. This seemed a good logical approach, so I went and stood there and, sure enough, I did meet people from all parts of the globe, and some from the One Tun as well.

Piccadilly Circus really lived up to its reputation, because one of the first people I met was a genuine Bolivian Indian! He told me he was in England to research a science fiction novel he was writing about Ian Watson. Then I was approached and propositioned by a lady of the town, but when she noticed my BSFA badge she made an excuse and left. I have often since wondered what she thought BSFA meant. She possibly figured out that BS meant Bob Shaw, but the mind boggles at what she might have made of the rest. The next person to come along was Ian Watson, who told me he was a bit worried by a new delusion he had about being followed everywhere by a Bolivian Indian...

And finally, just as the immutable laws of probability said he would, along came Von Donegan. To those of you who don’t understand the mathematics of chance this might seem an unlikely coincidence, but probability math is a wonderful thing. For instance, if two people lose each other in a large department store the laws of probability say there’s no guarantee they’ll ever meet up again unless one of them stands still. When you think of it, this is not a very helpful statement. In fact, it makes the poor

lost person's dilemma even worse – because now he doesn't even know if he should start searching around or just stand there. And if you stand around too long some sales assistant will come along and start undressing you. This could be quite good fun, except that they always start by detaching your arms and head.

Anyway, I was talking about my meeting with Von Donegan. Strangely enough, he didn't seem very pleased to see me. He was hurrying past with a furtive expression on his face when I stepped out of a shop doorway and grabbed him by the lapels of his raincoat. He stared at me... and we danced for a while... then he said, "Are you following me?"

"Certainly not," I said.

"Thank God for that," he said. "I must be losing my mind – I keep thinking I'm being followed by another science fiction writer and a bloody Red Indian."

"Bolivian," I said.

"No, it's true," he said.

I took him into a nearby pub to steady his nerves and ordered two large gin-and-tonics. He grabbed both bottles of tonic and poured them into his own gin.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Diluting my gin," he replied. "I always use two bottles because I'm part German – this is typical two-tonic efficiency."

"That's a good one," I said, trying to humour him. "What squirts out of a siphon into your whisky glass and makes sarcastic remarks?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Caustic soda," I said. "Do you get it? Caustic soda."

"My God," he said nervously, "and I thought I was going mad – I knew I should never have ventured inside the Bermondsey triangle."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said, seizing the opportunity. I ordered two more gins, and three tonics, and over the next hour or so got the scientific explanation for the Bermondsey triangle mystery out of him.

The story goes back some two million years, or it might be ten million years – Von Donegan didn't want to be pinned down too much on precise dates – and it turned out that my Bermondsey triangle was, in fact, the cradle of civilisation on Earth. Forget all that stuff about Lake Victoria and Lake Rudolph and Mesopotamia and the Valley of the Nile – this is where it all

happened. Right here!

And not only did the human race start off here, but the area was inhabited by no less than four non-human civilisations, as well! There's one thing you can say for Von Donegan – he certainly gives value for money.

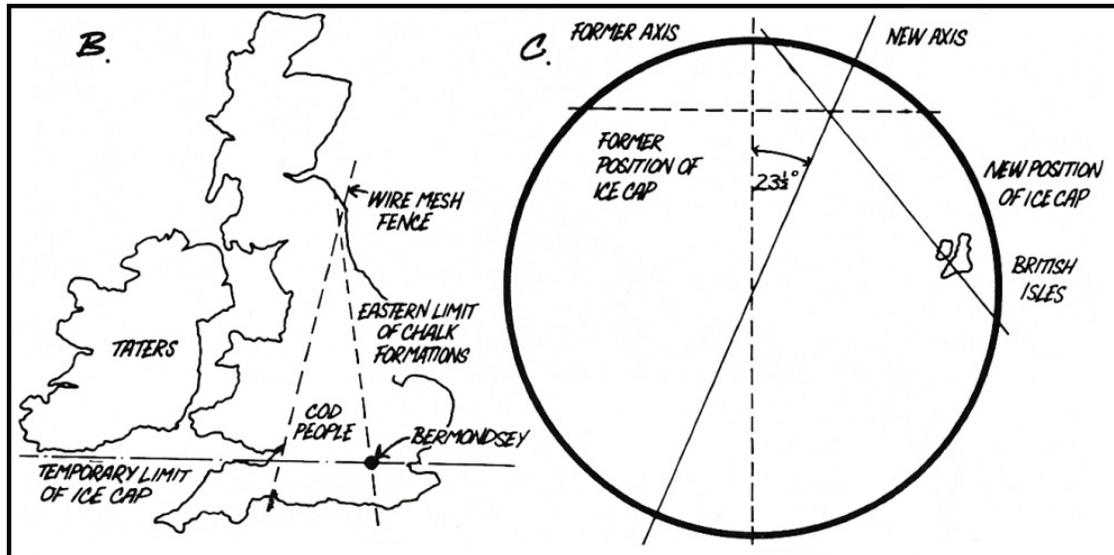


Diagram B shows the British Isles as they were two million or ten million years ago. There was Ireland on the west, looking pretty much the way it looks today. Then there was the high ground of Scotland and Wales close by. The reason they are so close is something to do with the science of plate tectonics. At one time – it sounds ridiculous, I know – all the continents were whizzing about all over the place on plates!

And at one stage, America and Canada came shooting across the Atlantic and crashed into Ireland – which must have played hell with their no-claims bonus. As well as pushing Ireland closer to England, that same collision formed the mountains of Wales, the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands – that's what I call typical tectonic efficiency. America and Canada, having done all that damage, then sneaked back to where they had come from, without even leaving a note with their names and addresses.

At the time I'm speaking of, the whole east and lower side of England was covered by a shallow sea, the waters of which were warm and clear – and which provided an ideal breeding ground for a very large and intelligent species of cod. The civilisation of the Cod People flourished apace for many centuries. They were a happy, contented sort of race, whose only vice was that they liked to get a bit high every Saturday night on their native drink, which was known as codswallop.

The only thorn in their sides was that a short distance to the west, in the fertile plains of prehistoric Ireland and Wales, another intelligent race had sprung up. They had quite literally sprung up, because this was a species of giant tubers, known as Taters. I have spoken on a previous occasion about the ability of vegetables to develop intelligence, and this new research vindicates everything I said. The civilisation of the Taters flourished apace for many centuries, as well... (This is just like a bit from *Last and First Men*, isn't it? Olaf Stapledon, move over!)... and their culture reached some degree of sophistication, with a well-developed caste system. The evidence suggests that the ruling caste of aristocrats were known as King Edwards, and there is even a legend that a young, high-born female Tater dashed up to her mother one day, her eyes shining... all of them... and said, "Mum, I'm engaged!"

Her mother said, "Who to? Remember you're a King Edward, and you can't just marry anybody who comes along."

And the girl Tater said, "It's Dickie Davies, of *The World of Sport*."

And her mother said, "You can't marry that common-tater!"

Anyway, sad to relate, enmity developed between the Cod people and the Taters. It was mainly on account of the Cod People's noisy booze-ups every Saturday night – and if you've ever been near a cod when it has got a bit high you'll have some sympathy with the Tater's point of view. They started attacking the Cod People, who responded by building a huge wire mesh fence running north-to-south along the western edge of their domain to shut out the Taters. This restored the status quo, and the two races might have eventually learned to co-exist in peace – but at this point Nature played a grim jest. (I don't know if it was as grim as some of my jests, but it was pretty nasty.)

At this crucial point in time – the Earth tipped on its axis!

It flopped over by 23½ degrees.

Those of you who have logical, trained, scientific minds will – as well as quietly vomiting into your convention booklet envelopes – have leaped ahead of me at this point, and realised the significance of the 23½ degree angle I marked on diagram A.

The effect was cataclysmic! Even bigger, would you believe, than the upheaval caused by the recent reorganisation of the BSFA!

All the water that had been covering Eastern England swilled away into the North Sea, leaving the poor Cod People flopping about in puddles dying horrible and protracted deaths. And, to add insult to injury, all the Taters

were thrown with great force against the wire mesh fence... were sliced up by it... and showered down on top of the dying Cod People in the form of long rectangular prisms.

The vision is almost too horrible to contemplate – two noble and once-proud races wiped out in the twinkling of an eye, their pitiful remains inextricably mixed up together.

At this stage, Nature – as though shamed by the mute reproaches of her own gory handiwork – drew a shroud of ice and snow over the scene of carnage. (What a pity that *Stirring Science Stories* had to cease publication – I could have sold this stuff to them for a fortune!) The workings of Nature's cover-up job are explained in Diagram C [*next to Diagram B above*]. The Earth had tilted by 23½ degrees, but it was done with such a jolt that the polar ice cap skidded on a bit further – rather like a fried egg in a new non-stick frying pan – and ended up with its bottom edge across the southern part of England. The line marking the lower limit of the ice cap – as can best be shown on Diagram B – passes, not without significance, exactly through Bermondsey. (Actually, it passes through the back room of a Chinese take-away in Peckham, but we've already decided not to go into that. I got into enough trouble through going into the back room of the Bangla-Desh in Newcastle.)

What, you must be asking, is the next startling revelation in this tale of Earth in the throes of cosmic upheaval?

Well, I'll tell you – otherwise there wouldn't be much point in me sitting up here like a berk when I could be in the bar enjoying myself. The next thing that happened was that a race of alien beings descended from the stars and, because they came from a very chilly planet, settled around the North Pole. Von Donegan has already dealt extensively with these invaders, whom he dubbed Icekimoos, in his book *The Skateboards of the Gods* – but that is a slightly misleading title, because the Icekimoos actually went around in huge salt-powered sleds.

These bizarre vehicles, which could only have been the product of an alien mind, operated on an ingenious principle. Each one had a large salt shaker mounted in front of it. The salt was shaken down on to the ice, which promptly melted, creating a small hill which the sled slid down – and the process was continuously repeated. Ah, I can see that the technically-minded people in the audience are objecting to this notion on sound engineering principles – and I know what your objection is. You're saying the sleds

would never be able to carry enough salt to go any distance. Well, the Icekimoos thought of that, naturally, and they positioned salt dumps, for refuelling, all over their territories which extended to the southern extremities of the ice cap.

However, the millennia rolled onwards inexorably, the ice cap retreated from England and reformed in its proper place, and the enigmatic Icekimoos withdrew from the stage of world history to be lost forever in the swirling Arctic snows. (You know, this stuff is too good for *Stirring Science Stories* – if I polished it up a bit I bet I could flog it to *Reader's Digest*. It would look well in there along with all those articles about how getting cancer is actually quite enjoyable. My favourite article from *Reader's Digest* was the one entitled *New Hope for the Dead*.)

As I was saying, the Icekimoos gradually disappeared, leaving no traces of their existence except for numerous mounds of salt all over the place – but then a new lot of alien invaders came up from the south. Little is known about this second wave of invaders, partly because Von Donegan hasn't had time to cook up much archaeological evidence about them, partly because their empire was confined to areas of the world where the top layer was comprised of limestone or chalk. The reason for this seemingly arbitrary limit to their movements is that they used vinegar – powered hovercraft!

Ancient hieroglyphs on the walls of caves near Dover – which Von Donegan is hoping to finish carving before he goes on his holidays next month – clearly show these beings sitting on their little hovercraft, which worked by spraying acetic acid on the chalky ground and floating on the clouds of carbon dioxide which were given off as a result. He gave them the name of Sarsons – not to be confused with Saracens – because their fuel was remarkably similar to a well-known brand of vinegar.

For a brief period the Sarsons ranged over that part of Britain which has a top stratum of chalk or limestone, an area whose eastern edge is a fairly straight line running downwards from Newcastle through... you've guessed it!... the back room of the Chinese take-away in Peckham High Street.

And there you have it! The Bermondsey triangle clearly defined, for all to see!

In case you haven't already worked it out, I should explain that the Sarsons stayed in Britain for only a short time, because a general Ice Age was coming and their technology wasn't sufficiently advanced to enable them to invent a satisfactory anti-freeze for their vinegar. They retreated to the south,

the Ice Age held sway for thousands of years, and when the glaciers finally retreated Homo Sapiens had at last appeared on the scene. Who said “Bloody near time!” down at the back there?

Anyway, life was very difficult at first for this puny hairless creature with his ineffectual teeth – this was long before the National Health Service provided him with wigs and stainless steel dentures for next to nothing. It was even before the Biblical scribes had started to write screenplays for Charlton Heston, and early man would have died away in short order had he not found the one place on Earth where survival was easy. Preserved in the permafrost of the Bermondsey triangle was a tectonic plate of fish and chips, read-sprinkled with salt and vinegar.

When conditions were too harsh for intelligent life throughout the rest of the world, the fish-and-chip mines of the Bermondsey triangle were supporting thriving communities of well-nourished human beings, who – once or twice a year – gathered at the largest diggings to replenish their supplies and give thanks to their deities.

Small wonder, then, that deep-rooted racial memories cause some of their descendants to flock to the same places and go through half-understood rituals. Large numbers of them cram themselves into small rooms at night and drink vast amounts of alcoholic liquor, much to the annoyance of those in neighbouring rooms – thus acting out the role of the Cod People getting tanked up on codswallop and enraging the Taters.

Many small blocks of duplicated paper are thrown around, an obvious re-enactment of the original showering of the area with sliced up Taters. And a tall, priestly, imposing figure, ceremonially robed, or sometimes ceremonially disrobed, passes among the pilgrims, distributing pork pies which are symbolic of – and nearly as old as – the primæval fish and chips.

Von Donegan believes that the large amounts of alcohol drunk during the day at these strange congresses represents that acetic acid which the Sarsons sprinkled over everything from their hovercraft – which reminds me that I have left a large vinegar-and-tonic out in the bar...

Up the Conjunction: An Investigation into Astrology

Skycon, Heathrow, Easter 1978

The science talks I've been giving at conventions in the last year or two have – as well as making Isaac Asimov start fretting about the competition – have been reprinted in a few magazines. This pleased me no end, except that some letters of comment accused me of occasionally wandering away from the point. I took the criticisms to heart, and included in my New Year resolutions a stern directive to myself: Always stick to the point during talks!

It's important to me that I keep this resolution because I had more of them than usual this year, and broke them sooner than usual. You know how it is... you start off the year full of high hopes and lofty ideals... 1978 was the year I was going to save some money, 1978 was the year I was going to get more exercise, 1978 was the year I was going to read *Dhalgren* right through to the end...

They've all gone by the board, except for this one about sticking to the point, so I'm not going to start off with one of my usual preambles about what I was doing at room parties last night. It was just the same old routine, anyway – about 200 people all crammed together, drinking, smoking, making a hell of a noise, falling down, being sick – and that was just in the lift on the way up!

Actually, when I did get into a party in one of the bedrooms it was so noisy that we got a lot of complaints – from the pilots of Concorde. This afternoon they're going to hold a protest march to stop science fiction fans landing at Heathrow... (They tried phoning the Noise Abatement Society, but the people at the other end of the line couldn't hear them because of the noise).

Anyway, I mustn't stray away from the subject of this talk, which is about astrology and all its underlying facts and fallacies, and a fascinating new scientific truth I have uncovered about the relationship between human affairs and the movements of the planets. My old sparring partner – the German/Irish writer and researcher, Von Donegan – is going to be sick with

jealousy when he hears what I've found out. Old Von Donegan (VD to his friends) is quite peeved with me, you know – over those jokes I made about him in my last talk.

He wrote to me from Germany and threatened to make me into sausage-meat, but I wasn't scared. I wrote back and said, "Do your wurst." I thought he would have enjoyed that little bilingual pun, but he told me he had seen it before – on a 20,000-year-old tablet he dug up in Africa.

However, that is beside the point and I promised that all my remarks would be relevant and pertinent. You'll note that I've given the talk a concise clear title – if there's one thing I detest it's this modern propaganda technique of the tricky euphemism which allows unscrupulous people to disguise their motives with fancy words. Like that society that was in the news lately, the one for people who like interfering with small children – Pædophile Information Exchange! It sounds so respectable it could be the governing body of the British Medical Association, or even the British Science Fiction Association.

And there's an even sneakier one on the go now!

The other night I was having a drink in a pub in Bermondsey when I was approached by this shifty-looking character who asked me if I was interested in necrophilia. I said to him, "Do you mean having sex with dead people?"

He looked a bit uneasy at that, glanced all around the place, lowered his voice and said, "Actually, old boy, we prefer to refer to it as posthumous caring."

Horrible and underhanded, isn't it? – but that's the technique they use. I'll bet that if you set up a Society for Posthumous Caring you could get it established as a registered charity and get a member of the Royal Family as your patron.

Dear me – have I wandered away from the point again? No more of it! Belief in astrology has been with us since ancient times, and it is deep-rooted in our thought and language. Men have always had the desire to know what the future held for them, and they have tried many different ways of getting this advance information. They used to, for example, poke around the insides of chickens, inspecting their entrails for signs. Or sometimes they used to sit and inspect the palms of their hands – which is what I'd do if I had mine stuck inside a chicken all day. It was a filthy habit, that, though no doubt its practitioners had a great fancy name for it, which made it sound respectable. Prediction and Prognostication by Poultry Manipulation, perhaps.

But of all the traditional ways of trying to know the future – cards, divining, consulting oracles, subscribing to the *Racing and Football Outlook* – the stars seemed to offer the best prospects. They were a mysterious and ever-changing spectacle, quite obviously connected with the gods in some way, and it was only logical to assume that they influenced men’s destinies. Thus the profession of astrologer sprang up, and it has been with us rather a long time – in spite of the fact that the stars have an infuriating habit of telling us things we don’t really want to know, and of presenting the information in language of such peculiar vagueness that any value it might have had is completely dissipated.

Imagine what it must have been like to be an ancient Roman general leading an army which was going to face another army in battle the following morning, a battle whose outcome could shape the future of the world. He goes to his astrologer and asks him for advice about how to run things the next day, and should he throw in his cavalry first and keep the archers till later, and will the barbarians overthrow the empire or will the guttering candle of civilisation be kept alight for another decade. The astrologer does a quick horoscope and gives him the following inside dope straight from the Horse’s Head Nebula: “Personal relationships at the office could be difficult this month, but an old friendship could lead to a new outlook on life. Don’t conceal anxieties from your steady boyfriend, and your lucky colour is blue.”

That’s the sort of thing they always say! Sometimes, in an effort to avoid a general air of vagueness, they particularise a bit, by saying things like, “If you were born on a Thursday and have red hair and blue eyes – don’t fall out of any tenth-storey windows. The outcome could be distressing.” Nobody’s going to argue with him on this one, especially anybody who has ever fallen out of a tenth-storey window. Or anybody he landed on. Or sometimes they say, “Wednesday is a day for being careful in business dealings.” Of course it is! Every day is a day for being careful in business dealings – although, strangely enough, astrologers themselves don’t always appreciate that simple truth.

One of my prized memories from my days as a full-time journalist is the one about one of the big Fleet Street publishing empires which, about fifteen years ago, decided to cash in on the general superstitious interest in astrology by starting a new weekly magazine devoted to nothing else but horoscopes and predictions. It was called, I think, *Your Stars*, and they got about a dozen of the very best astrologers in the country on the payroll so that they could

guarantee to tell all their readers exactly what the future held in store for them.

Unfortunately, the magazine only survived for about a month – because sales didn't come up to expectations! The irony in that is so beautiful, and it sums up all my views about astrology.

Astrology as we know it is all a load of bunk.

“That means it isn't a very good subject for a Serious Scientific Talk,” you might say. Others might say the whole talk is a bit of a farrago, anyway, and I'm inclined to agree with them, because I was born on a Thursday. You know the old rhyme – “Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has farrago.”

But please note that I qualified my condemnation by saying astrology as we know it is bunk. Other people could have an entirely different approach to astrology, and it is worth remembering that some of the thinkers of old were men of genius. Leonardo Da Vinci, for example, was ahead of his time in many ways. I have revealed elsewhere how he created the world's first blue movie. Also, he was famous for his anatomical studies, but not many people know of his connection with early diagnostic medicine...

It came about because he liked working in tempera, which is a type of paint which has eggs as one of its constituents. He also liked working al fresco – he had some funny habits, old Leonardo – and one, when he was living on a hill outside Florence he covered the entire outside of his house with a magnificent painting which all the townsfolk used to admire. Unfortunately, the land around his house was infested with a kind of insect which was attracted by the egg in the paint and kept climbing up the wall and eating Leonardo's painting away from the bottom upwards.

He used to counteract this by going out and repainting the picture day by day, but on the days when he wasn't feeling too good he couldn't do that, and the picture used to slowly disappear from the bottom. The townsfolk would look up at his house, shake their heads and say, “Leonardo mustn't be well today – his tempera chewer is rising.” And that's the true origin of that saying.

But that's beside the point – The discoveries I made about astrology came about because I'm an amateur scientist and therefore do not go in for narrow specialisation in one subject. The professional scientist often fails because he channels his mental energy into knowing more and more about one limited subject, whereas I go in for the interdisciplinary, broad spectrum

approach. In fact, it's got to the point where I know practically nothing about almost everything. In this case, I succeeded because I brought in my experience in the apparently unrelated fields of neurology and optics.

It started a few months ago, when I got a bit tired of writing SF and decided to have a break from it. Actually, I was advised to have a break from it – by my agent and publisher. Looking back on it, I don't see what my agent got so annoyed about. I had just outlined to him what I thought was a great plot, all about how Winnie the Pooh developed a third eye in the middle of his forehead, a third eye which, naturally gave him second sight, the way it always does in stories. In the plot he used this extra-sensory perception to spy on two meetings of the London SF Circle in the One Tun. My agent seemed a bit uncertain about the commercial value of the proposed story, and he seemed to blow his top all together when he heard I was going to call it "One Tun, One Tun, Middle-Eye Pooh."

Anyway, the upshot was that I turned my restless enquiring mind to other activities for a while. I didn't delve into astrology immediately, or even neurology or optics, because I had got involved with the mystery surrounding the legend of the Flying Dutchman. I have always felt sorry for that poor bloke, condemned to sail around the oceans and seas of the world forever, never able to take a minute's rest, like somebody working his way through college by selling subscriptions to *Science Fiction Monthly*.

Eventually I proved to my own satisfaction that he wasn't haunted or anything like that – he had simply lost control of his ship. The culprit was a wood-boring parasite (related to Da Vinci's insects) which originated in Holland and had a special liking for the hardwood used in the steering wheels of all ships built in Holland. It used to eat them away, leaving the captain with no means of steering. You may have heard the name I gave it – Dutch Helm Disease.

Having disposed of yet another famous mystery, I was looking around for something else to do when Joe, the owner of a local lawn mower factory up in Ulverston, telephoned and asked me to have lunch with him to discuss a problem. he sounded as though it was pretty urgent, which surprised me because one of the things I like about Ulverston is that nothing ever happens there in a hurry. The town's chief claim to fame is that Stan Laurel was born there. When I first went to Ulverston I used to think it was quite remarkable that Stan Laurel should have been born there, out of all the places in the world – then when I got to know the place I realised he couldn't have been

born anywhere else. It's a sleepy Stan Laurel sort of a town, where there's never any rush about anything. In fact, I said to one of the men in local pub, "The philosophy around here seems to be mañana." He said, "What does mañana mean?" I said, "You know – I'll do it tomorrow." And he said, "Oh, there's nothing as urgent as that around here."

But Joe was obviously in a hurry, so I arrange to meet him that day, quite pleased at the prospect of a slap-up business lunch. My wife didn't seem too pleased, though. She warned me that I had a habit on occasions like that of eating and drinking far too much.

"It's all right," I quipped, "I'll put it on my Excess card." (She believes in moderation, but I think moderation is only all right in moderation. Excess is better, provided you don't have too much of it.)

I then went out and jumped into my new car. I have to jump into it – there aren't any doors. That's because it's a souped-up job – a Morris Oxtail. The thing I like about it is that it has a very reliable Italian engine whose manufacturers didn't put it into production until no less than two thousand Italian engineers had checked the design and given their approval and consent. That means, of course, that it is a two thousand si-si engine.

All that aside, I went and met Joe for lunch and, to give him his due, I must say he really lashed out. He missed me though. Actually, it was a pub lunch and he bought me a Cumbrian pheasant, which is a sausage with a feather stuck in it. I had been recommended to him by a mutual friend, a fellow journalist who is the science correspondent for the *Beano*, but he seemed a bit doubtful about my qualifications, especially my connections with science fiction.

"Science fiction," he said, "isn't that those magazines with covers showing girls dressed in nothing but little bits of brass?"

"Yes," I leered, "but just think of the new dimension that gives to brass rubbing."

That seemed to reassure him, because he was a really lecherous looking character – the sort of person who could think impure thoughts about Margaret Thatcher. He said, "Doesn't James White write science fiction?"

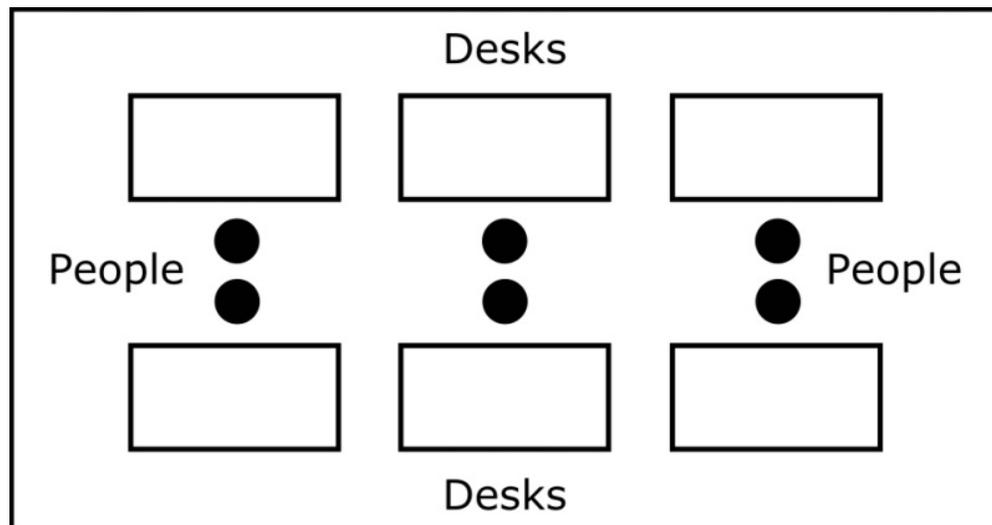
"Yes, but not only science fiction," I told him. "He's now working on an Irish political musical called *Don't Cry for Me, Ballymena*. It's a follow-up to his successful nude review, *Oh, Balbriggan*."

That seemed to allay all his fears, so he told me about his problem, which was that his firm had built a new office block, but when the staff had

moved into it their productivity had fallen away to almost zero.

“They don’t seem to think properly any more,” he said. “The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they’re in the lavatory.”

It was obvious from the look on his face that he thought the problem was insoluble, and when I asked him to sketch a typical layout for one of his offices he complied without much enthusiasm, and did a drawing like this:–



“Aha, I thought so,” I said triumphantly. You should have seen his little face light up – he looked like a NASA official being told that the Mars landers had dug up definite proof of the existence of Ray Bradbury.

“Do you mean,” he said, with a hopeful tremor in his voice, “you know what’s wrong?”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s a clear-cut case of encephalic field interference.”

It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that the look of joy on his face died out of his face a little when I said that. I went on and explained to him that the active human brain is surrounded by a faint electromagnetic field which extends several feet beyond the skull. (The only known exception to this is in the case of fans of the TV show *Space: 1999*. Their skulls are too thick to allow anything to pass through.)

When people are crammed too close together their brain fields interfere with each other and that causes a severe damping down of the powers of thought – as you will be able to prove for yourself if you go to any of the room parties tonight. I explained to Joe that all he had to do was move his staff round to the other side of their desks, thus separating them enough to allow their brain fields full play, without any unwanted reflection from walls

either, and everything would be all right.

“This is marvellous,” he said, finally convinced. “The firm has lost so much money lately that I can’t pay you in cash, but if you like I’ll give you a lawn mower out of my factory.”

I said, “No mower for me thanks – I’m driving.”

We parted and I returned to my study to embark on some more vital scientific research. On the face of it, it appeared that I had wound up yet another successful case – and yet something was troubling me. I had a feeling that I had been on the verge of a major scientific discovery, that something that had been said during our meeting had contained a small and apparently insignificant clue to something else, a clue that I had missed. And as anybody who watches *Horizon* and similar TV shows will tell you, small and apparently insignificant clues are the very best sorts for scientific researchers. Big significant clues are a complete waste of time – but when you get a small and apparently insignificant clue you know you’re really on to something good.

With the small voice clamouring at the back of my mind, I got down to work on another project of mine – the design for a spaceship engine powered by the heat from continental quilts. Continental quilts, or duvets, are marvellous thing, you know – even though they’re so expensive. When I was a kid, and this shows how times have changed, every bed in the country, even the poorest, had a duvet on it – only we didn’t know they were duvets. We called them eiderdowns.

And because we didn’t know how they worked – there were no Sunday colour supplements to explain it all to us – we used them wrongly. In the wintertime we put a sheet on the bed, followed by about twenty woollen blankets, and put the duvet, or eiderdown on top of all that – and we still froze every night. What was happening, you see, was that the duvet was heating the top ten layers of blankets, but that heat couldn’t filter all the way down to us.

I worked on the spaceship engine for a while, but my mind wasn’t able to grapple properly with the problem. I put it aside and dabbled a little with a paper I was writing on criminology which puts forward that, just as some people claim that sex education in schools can lead to juvenile rape, the teaching of economics can incite schoolboys to go out and rob banks. But my heart wasn’t in that project either, so I picked up a book on the science of optics and was idly glancing through it when, by purest chance, my gaze fell

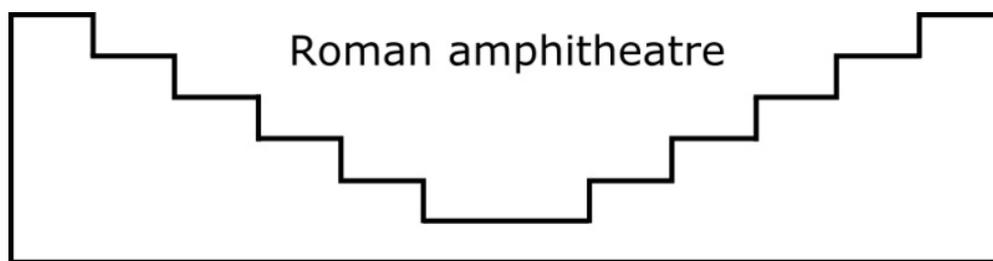
on a paragraph about Fresnel lenses. There was a diagram there showing what a Fresnel lens looked like, and as I looked at it I felt something strange and powerful begin to well up inside me. It was the sausage I had eaten in the pub at lunchtime. A couple of indigestion tablets calmed my stomach down a bit, and I began studying the diagram again with the beginnings of a heady intellectual excitement. I knew I was on the verge of a breakthrough. (So was the sausage, but I was too busy too care.)

An ordinary lens has a single continuous curve, which means that a big lens tends to be very thick and heavy, which is a drawback for most applications. A Fresnel lens follows the same curvature, but keeps stepping down at close intervals so that you get roughly the same focussing effect with far less volume of glass or plastic.



I stared at the cross-section of the Fresnel lens – with half-formed ideas heaving in my subconscious – and tried to identify what it reminded me of, something from another field of knowledge altogether. Suddenly I had it! It was all there in front of me! No, not the sausage – I don't believe in flogging a joke to death – but the answer to the questions that had been niggling me all afternoon.

The Fresnel lens resembled nothing more than a cross-section through an ancient Roman amphitheatre!



Like a man in a hypnotic trance, I heard Joe's voice once again saying, "The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they're in the lavatory." That was the small and apparently insignificant clue I had missed. People do tend to think well when they are in the toilet, but according to my theories of encephalic field interference that should have been impossible because of the

notorious smallness of office toilets. It dawned on me that I had made the mistake of thinking like a Flatlander – only considering the brain field in the two-dimensional terms of a plane. And the solution to this sub-problem lay in the fact that office toilets, although small in floor area, are usually high-ceiling affairs – and that allows the brain fields to extend upwards without hindrance. I had been making the mistake of forgetting all about the third dimension.

What has all this to do with Fresnel lenses, Roman amphitheatres, and astrology?

Well, just imagine thousands and thousands of people packed onto the terraces of the amphitheatre. It's just like a lens – or, more correctly, a mirror – focussing all their brain fields upwards into a psychic beam of unimaginable power. A concentrated torrent of human mind force which is being shot into space like an invisible searchlight beam!

The mind-shaking question was: What effect would such a beam have on any distant planet it happened to strike?

With trembling fingers I got out the calculator I had borrowed from Robert Silverberg – it's the one he uses to calculate how many novels he can write in a week – and did a few sums. A minute of high-speed computation showed me that at 3.15 on the afternoon of July 2nd in the year 80 AD... just as the newly-completed Colosseum in Rome was being used for its first gladiatorial combats... with the terraces filled with 100,000 blood-crazed spectators... the planet Mars was precisely at zenith.

We may never know what Mars looked like before that fateful moment.

It may have been a green and pleasant world... a place of tinkling streams and peaceful meadows, where colourful birds chattered among the gently nodding trees – but in an instant it was transformed, by the ravaging force of all those minds filled with images of blood-stained sand, into the Mars we know today. The planet of endless red deserts.

Venus got the treatment next. It strayed into the beam from the big amphitheatre in Tunisia, but it was during the interval and there was nothing going on in the arena – so it just got turned into a ball of hot white sand.

Jupiter was unlucky enough to be caught in the beam emanating from one of the very earliest Welsh poetry and song competitions, held in a natural amphitheatre in Glamorgan, and it got turned into a huge ball of hot gas.

My researches haven't yet revealed what happened to the other planets in the Solar System, but at least now we know that there is a direct link

between human beings and the planets and stars. The only trouble is that the astrologers, not being coldly logical thinkers like me, have got everything backwards. Astrologers on distant worlds must be important people because they can warn their customers about Earth being in the ascendancy. When they talk about Earth being in the seventh house, you'd better sit up and pay attention. We influence the heavenly bodies – and what a dreadful responsibility it is. Just think what the audience at a Linda Lovelace film could do to an unsuspecting little planet like Mercury. It hardly bears thinking about.

The only bright spot I can find in all this is that in August next year when the Worldcon is being held the Moon will be high in the sky above Brighton. If the convention hall is the right shape, and if we all work very hard at it and think the right kind of thoughts, we might be able to turn the Moon into a permanent science fiction convention. It seems to me that that's the sort of novel, yet practical, common cause which is just what the science fiction community needs to prove to the rest of the world that we aren't merely impractical visionaries.

See you up there!

Eau de Clone

Seacon '79 (Worldcon), Brighton, August 1979

Welcome to yet another of my Serious Scientific Talks – all part of the United Nations “Education Through Suffering” programme – in which this year, for a change, I’m going to forget about the hard sciences – like astronomy, astronautics and computation of the bar bills in this hotel – and concentrate on the life sciences. I’m doing this partly to show off my versatility, partly because I’ve made some astonishing new discoveries in the field of biology, but mainly because I can’t think up any more good *Star Trek* jokes.

It’s on the TV *again*, you know. “Space, the final frontier...” What’s final about it? – that’s what I’d like to know. It keeps coming back again and again – like a Brian Burgess pork pie – each time looking a little more plastic than the time before. Perhaps I’ve been mishearing that opening voice-over. Perhaps it says, “Space, the vinyl frontier...” My kids have watched some episodes so many times that they’re getting Spocks before their eyes. As I have said, as I have just *demonstrated*, I can’t think up any more good jokes about *Star Trek*, and I don’t want to descend to things like mentioning my favourite episode – the one in which Kirk loses his ship and is sacked for his lack of Enterprise. Anybody who would make a joke like that deserves to go to the chair, and the governor of my local prison is so sadistic that he puts whoopee cushions on the electric chair...

What on earth, some of you must be saying, has all this got to do with clones?

Good question! This year I’m determined not to wander away from the point. Last year a woman in the audience got so angry with my vacillations that she stabbed me in the arm with her umbrella and left a permanent scar. That’s it there – my vacillation mark – so I’m not going to start nattering about the room party I was at last night. It was a weird sort of a party anyway. I thought they were only kidding when they told me that all the guests had to give a pint of blood, and I was amazed that anybody should even consider pumping some of my blood into a defenceless sick person. On Thursday there was so much alcohol in it that the hotel charged me corkage

just to check in. Six of my corpuscles are appearing in court next week for being drunk and disorderly. On a more serious note about alcohol, let me acknowledge that it is possible to take too much of the stuff. A film I saw on TV last week has prompted me to change my drinking habits. It was *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and when I saw him swinging around on the end of that rope chanting, “The Bells made me deaf,” I decided to switch over to Johnny Walker. I’m told they’re already doing that in the schools – because of the shortage of Teachers...

Clones? I’m coming to those, madam – just be patient. I wouldn’t want to fool around too much in front of such a large and distinguished audience... which reminds me that some of you may have missed the introduction of notables at the beginning of the convention. For those of you who are feeling a bit lost and are wondering who everybody is I’ll point out some of the more interesting science fiction personalities for your benefit. There’s one! And there’s another one! And there’s another one over there...

Okay, *okay* – clones. Clones – as some of you may already know – is a small town on the border between Northern Ireland and Eire, It’s absolutely true – check it out on any map if you don’t believe me. Well, not *any* map – a map of Ireland would be best. I visited Clones quite a number of times when I was a child, and was impressed by its peacefulness, stillness and utter tranquillity – which is another way of saying it’s a bloody boring place to be in. Most Irish towns and villages are like that, but Clones is a particularly bad case – the most exciting event of the year is the annual sweepstake in which they try to guess whether or not Easter is going to fall at a week-end. I entered it myself one time, but it was only because – being a country music fan – I rather fancied the first prize, which was a life-sized rubber statue of Dolly Parton filled with Irish whisky.

All this explains why, some years ago, I got quite a surprise when I was accosted by James White. It was in Belfast and I was out walking, strolling, just putting one foot in front of the other – nothing too fancy – when Jim came dashing up to me. “Bob,” he said, “you’ll never guess what all the *Astounding* authors are writing about now.”

“Surprise me,” I said.

“Clones,” he said.

I was surprised, all right. My god, I thought, Campbell must be desperate. The Dean Drive, Dianetics, and now Clones.

“Jim,” I said patiently, “there isn’t a science fiction writer in the world –

not even Captain S.P. Meek – who could produce a good story about Clones. I mean, what would you write about the place?”

He blinked at me. “It isn’t the place – it’s a term in biology.”

I blinked back at him, wondering if this was some devious way of getting revenge on me over a little literary mishap which had occurred previously. In the early part of his career Jim spent a number of years working in the tailoring department of a large store. When he first started there it had old-fashioned mahogany counters, then they changed them to Formica counters, and finally switched to very trendy glass counters. Jim was very intrigued by the last sort and he formulated great plans to write a story about them – called Clothes Counters of the Third Kind. I put him off it by explaining that a story with a silly title like that was doomed to abject failure, so he gave up the idea. And ever since the runaway success of a certain notorious film, which I have dubbed *The Incredible Shrinking Saucer...* (Did you notice how when the ship came up behind the mountain it was about two miles wide, and when it reached the runway it was down to about the size of a football field? Perhaps it was the damp that did it.) ...I have sensed a certain coldness in Jim’s manner. It’s nothing I can put my finger on – just something about the way he keeps wrenching the elevator doors open for me when the elevator isn’t there.

“You can’t write SF stories about soppy things like biology,” I said stoutly. “What would George O. Smith think?”

“It’s the latest craze,” he said. “Bob, what do you think the world’s going to be like in the 21st Century? Try to visualise how different it will be, all the fantastic changes that will have taken place.”

“Well,” I said, putting my superb creative imagination to work, “Petrocelli might have finished building his house.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Jim said,

I thought again. “I’ve got it! *Last Dangerous Visions* will be out!”

“Don’t be stupid,” he said severely.

“I know,” I said. “Isaac Asimov has had his hundredth birthday and he’s sent a telegram to the Queen.”

Jim shook his head. “What’s going to happen – according to all these stories – is that everybody will be going around cloning. Everybody will be producing copies of themselves.”

“So what’s new?” I replied, giving him my best evil leer. “A couple of the guys I used to work with...”

“It will be done asexually,” he cut in, “By cell manipulation. Just think of it! Instead of only one Ted Tubb there could be a dozen of them – all churning out Dumarest stories.”

“I thought there already was,” I said weakly, wrestling with this new concept. It had become obvious to me that Jim had done something which is quite unforgivable in a rival science fiction writer – he had actually learned some science. Once that sort of thing creeps into the profession there’s no telling where it could end. However, I decided that if he could cheat, I could cheat, so I went off and got a job working for a doctor so that I could learn all about cells and DNA and stuff like that.

I didn’t hold the job long, though – it was too embarrassing every time I tried to take a day off on the sick. Have you ever thought how awkward it is for anybody who works for a doctor, wants the day off and telephones the office to say he’s sick? Instead of saying something like, “Get better soon,” your boss says, “Oh? What symptoms have you got?” Or, worse still, he says, “You’d better come round to the surgery” – which defeats the whole idea!

Anyway, I decided to fall back on my own resources, which meant consulting my extensive reference library. I went through some of the books – *Teach Yourself Embalming*; *The Origin of Charles Darwin* – by Galen; *Sex Changes in Poultry* – by Willy Ley; *Painless Childbirth* – by Pangborn; *Against the Fall of Knight* – by Mrs Knight; *Mating in Small Birds* – by J.J. Coupling; *The Dysentery Plague* (known in this country as *Logan’s Run*) – by Kurt Funnygut. You can tell a lot about a person by the books he has on his shelves, can’t you?

To tell you the truth, I didn’t glean much from my studies. Some of the things written by ordinary scientists are totally unbelievable. One of the worst culprits is that Albert Einstein – you know, the man who tried to convince people that E equals Marylebone Cricket Club. I rang the MCC and they denied the whole thing. I first saw through Einstein when he got into that dreadful muddle over the twins paradox. You know the set-up, one twin goes away for a while on a high-speed flight and when he returns he’s younger than the twin who stayed at home. Einstein said that was because time passed more slowly for the traveller. How stupid! He was completely misinterpreting the evidence! Just look at the real facts. One twin goes gallivanting off on a kind of Super-Concorde, relaxing, enjoying himself, and while he’s off having a good time who’s doing all the work, looking after the house, struggling to pay the bills? His brother is – that’s who! – and the strain of it

puts *years* on him. It's no wonder the other lazy so-and-so looks younger when he gets back. Instead of covering up for him by inventing ridiculous theories, Einstein should have given him a good ticking-off and told him to show more consideration.

But if you think that's bad you should read some of the stuff they put in biology books. My left ear is slightly bigger than the right, and my brother's left ear is slightly bigger than his right. According to the biology books it's all to do with things called genes and chromosomes which spend all their time dropping acid and sending messages to each other – whereas the real reason is that at school we both had the same sadistic teacher who kept dragging us up to the blackboard by our left ears.

It wasn't long before I decided that biologists were no better informed than physicists, and that it was time for us to do some original research. My main concern was to find out if work on cloning was actually going on in secret somewhere so how would I start? Did I know some place where everybody looked alike? Apart from the BSFA committee room, that is. Did I know any apparently normal twins with give-away names like Pete and Repete? Kate and Duplikate? No, I didn't, but the idea of following clues in names appealed to me, partly because it didn't involve any real work, partly because it gave me the chance to make more dreadful puns. (I tried some of them on Jim Blish once, and he ran away screaming; then I tried some on my agent, Les Flood, and he ran away screaming – which shows that some of my puns are more than Blish and Flood can stand.)

Intrigued by this new line of research I mulled it over and found my thoughts coming back to their original starting point – the town of Clones. Perhaps the name was no coincidence. Could it be that, as in so many other fields, Ireland had been way ahead of the rest of the world? Was it possible that cloning had been worked on for so long over there that it was reflected in the very place names?

My tongue went dry with excitement, so I bathed it in a mild solution of alcohol and started thinking of all the other Irish place names which supported my theory. There was Cloneen – an obvious corruption of cloning; Clonard – clone hard; Clonmel – where they must have tried to clone somebody called Mel; and Clonakilty – where, quite obviously, they must have tried to clone a Scotsman. And, finally, there was the name of Ireland's capital city – Dublin!

Convinced I had stumbled on to something important, I decided to go to

Dublin to investigate. I jumped on a boat and very soon was steaming up the harbour into Leningrad. The Russians objected to me steaming up their harbour – they have awful problems with condensation over there – so they threw me out. This time I made sure I got on an Irish boat, and very soon was steaming up the River Liffey into Dublin. (I always think Liffey is a terrible name for a river – it sounds too much like one of those euphemisms for toilet.) But when I got off the boat I suddenly realised I had little idea what to do next. The only other lead I had was my realisation that cloning would cost a great deal of money, so I decided to make a bold frontal attack by selecting the most expensive-looking office block I could find and just barging in.

I picked out a real plushy place – it was the European office of the Ultimate Publishing Company – and sauntered up to the receptionist, who looked like a film star. It wasn't that she was pretty, or anything like that – it was just that her face was black with dirt, except for a little round patch on each cheek and the centre of her forehead. Movie stars don't know how to wash their faces, you know. I see them on TV all the time, trying out new soaps, and all they do is rub a few suds on their cheeks and foreheads. It's no wonder the whole industry has been declining since The Three Stooges retired.

Anyway, I gave this girl a piercing stare and, just to throw her off her guard, crooned a bit of a song – Bring On The Clones. The ploy seemed to be effective, because she gave me a look in which I detected some degree of consternation. I decided to press home my advantage.

I gave her a confident smile and said, "I want to arrange to have myself cloned."

Her powers of recovery must have been phenomenal, because she smiled back and said, "The clone arranger isn't in – you'll have to speak to Tonto."

I backed away from her – it isn't every day I meet somebody whose puns are worse than mine – and hurried out of the building. Depressed and defeated, I went into the nearest bar and ordered myself a Poteen Sunrise. That's a bit like a Tequila Sunrise, except that the sun doesn't come up – you go down. After a couple of these I began to see there was only one way I could progress further, and that was by consulting my old adversary – the famous German-Irish writer, researcher, explorer and wheelbarrow mechanic – Von Donegan.

The only address I had for him was that of his club, a modest and

unpretentious little outfit known as the Illustrious Glorious Exalted Shining Ones, which had its headquarters above a used coffin shop in Abattoir Lane. It was evening by the time I got there and the doorman gave me a cold stare when I told him I wanted to talk to Von.

“Von?” he said haughtily. “Show more respect, you oaf. The boss’s full title is Master of the Galaxy and Ultimate Controller and Supreme Dictator of all of Space, Time and Infinity.”

“Sorry,” I said, “can I speak to the Master of the Galaxy and Ultimate Controller and Supreme Dictator of all of Space, Time and Infinity?”

“He isn’t here tonight,” he said. “His wife made him stay home and wash the dishes.”

“Can you tell me his home address?”

“Sorry. It would be more than my job is worth.”

“I’ll give you this first edition of *Bill, the Galactic Hero* – it’s one of the very rare unautographed copies.”

“That’s more than my job’s worth, as well,” he said, snatching the book. He gave me an address near the Guinness brewery and I hurried away with a mounting sense of excitement. You’ve got to do that in these scientific quest stories, haven’t you? If you can’t do a decent mounting sense of excitement – or, at the very least, a sudden quickening of interest – you’d be better off in some other line of business. I can recommend thermometer filling as a steady job, and it’s nice because in the summertime, when the heat slows you down, nobody notices you’re not working as hard because the mercury has got bigger and you can get away with putting less of it in. Another job I would like is working on the escalators on the London Underground. I’d like to be the man who makes sure the handrail always goes a little slower or a little faster than the actual stairway. My wife is very nervous on the escalator and she clutches that handrail like crazy, which makes it very difficult to hold a long conversation with her. By the time we get to the end she’s either staring up at the ceiling or her nose is almost touching the floor. I’m saying, “It’s time to get off now, dear. Dear? Dear? Where has she gone to...?” Another thing I like about the London escalators are those signs that say: DOGS MUST BE CARRIED. I just ignore them and jump on the escalator whether I’ve got a dog or not, and I get away with it every time.

But I mustn’t stray away from the subject...

I now had to take a bus to Von Donegan’s place on the other side of the city, but I was desperately short of ready cash, so I decided just to run along

behind the bus and save tenpence. Then I got a better idea – I ran along behind a taxi and saved two quid. Finally I reached Von’s house, a rather sinister-looking place called “Sweet Chariot”. (The name reminded me of my Uncle Fred, the boxer, who was known as Sweet Chariot because he was always swinging low.) As I said, the house was an eerie sort of a place right in the shadow of the Guinness brewery, and I felt quite nervous as I approached it in the growing darkness. My mood wasn’t helped by the thick, dank fog that was pressing against the windows – especially as it was a perfectly clear night outside the house.

I sneaked up to a lighted window and looked in, and saw something so dreadful, so *obscene*, that I had to repress a moan of dismay. Von Donegan was in there, and he had hundreds of pints of Guinness sitting on a huge table, and he was busily pouring them down a sink! Gallons of it were disappearing down the plug hole every minute. I hadn’t seen booze disappear so fast since I attended the Noreascon In ’81 bidding party. At last I could stand the hideous spectacle no longer, so I smashed the window in with a rolled-up copy of *Literary Highlights from Perry Rhodan*, and shouted, “Stop that, you swine! Is nothing sacred?”

He turned, saw me at the window and reeled back, his face contorted with shock – thus proving he had a guilty conscience, “Shaw,” he gasped. “What are you doing here? I thought you were back in Stan Laurel’s home in Ulverston organising a new branch of the Sons of the Desert.”

“I decided to give them the Gobi,” I said wittily. “More to the point – what are you doing?”

His eyes shuttled briefly – and anybody who has read any of my books will tell you that’s a sign somebody is under stress – and he said, “It’s a scientific experiment, Bob. One you would approve of. You know that when water swirls down a plug hole in the northern hemisphere it always goes in a clockwise direction – well, I wanted to see if the same thing would apply to Guinness.”

I sniffed disbelievingly. “And does it go clockwise?”

“Definitely not,” he said. “The clock is up there on the wall and the Guinness is going the other way.”

“You’re not fooling me for a minute,” I said. “What you’re talking about is the Coriolis force and nobody is interested in that since I proved it’s that that makes supermarket trolleys try to go in circles when you push them.” I clambered in through the window and, following up a hunch, said, “What do

you know about clones?”

“It’s a nice place to live,” he said, “but I wouldn’t like to go there for a holiday.”

“I’ll do the jokes,” I snarled, grabbing him by the throat, “You know I meant artificially produced human beings.”

He cringed. “I’ve never even met any officers of the Science Fiction Writers of America.”

“Cut it out,” I said. “I’m talking about biological clones.”

“Oh, *those!* Well, I’ve heard they’re very anaemic.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You know the old saying – you can’t get blood out of a clone.”

“Okay,” I gritted. “You asked for this.” I whipped out my copy of the Sam Moskowitz Joke Book and began to read aloud from it. Von Donegan endured it for as long as was humanly possible – about twelve nanoseconds – then broke down.

“Why are you doing this to me? What do you want?”

“The truth about cloning in Ireland,” I said. “There’s something going on and I want to know what it is.”

His shoulders slumped. “All right, all right. If you know anything about Irish history you’ll have heard of the Great Potato Famine.”

I was unimpressed. “So a few potatoes went hungry.”

He winced. “The point is that for years now the population of Ireland has been very depressed.”

“You mean,” I said, “even before Harry Harrison and Anne McCaffrey moved in?”

He winced again. “The Irish Government asked me if I could do anything about the low population, and – as I’m a happily married man...”

“I’d forgotten you got married,” I interrupted. “Has the union been blessed?”

“Yes,” he said, “We haven’t got any children. Anyway, I decided the only thing I could do to increase the population would be to clone as many people as I could, so I started working on biology.”

“It’s a really weird subject, isn’t it?” I said. “When I tried it I had to cut up so many frogs I came down with a skin disease called Kermititis. And all those words beginning with z...”

“Oh, I never bother with actually *studying* a subject,” Von Donegan said airily. “I’ve found I can write my books better by making the stuff up as I go

along – I call it original research – and I did the same thing with cloning.”

“And did you solve the problem?” I prompted, sensing that the end of my quest was near.

“Nothing to it,” he replied. “The key to the whole business is that we are a carbon-based life form – so if we are to produce a copy of a human being it will be a *carbon copy*.”

“That makes sense,” I said, a great light dawning in my mind. This was the sort of biology I could understand.

“I realised that all I had to do was keep pumping carbon into people and eventually all the molecules in their bodies will acquire duplicates and they’ll divide up into carbon copies of themselves.”

“That’s brilliant,” I breathed. “You should write the whole thing up for *Omni*, or perhaps *Weekend Reveille*. But wait! Where can you get all the carbon from? And how could you get people to swallow it?”

“That’s the beauty of my system,” he said fervently. “I’ve got this deal with Mike Moorcock whereby he sends me all his used carbons and typewriter ribbons – a container-load of them comes over every week on the ferry – and all I do is put them in the blender with some water. That’s the way they come out.” He pointed at the glasses of what I had mistaken for Guinness.

I nodded, almost speechless with admiration. “But what’s that whitish froth on top?”

“I think sometimes Mike accidentally leaves a novel or two in among the carbons.” An anxious note crept into Von Donegan’s voice. “Do you think they could be injurious to the health?”

“Not in that form,” I said reassuringly, my gaze drifting towards the sink. “I take it that the waste pipe from your sink is connected up to the vats in the brewery.”

He nodded, “Quite right! You know, you’re almost as smart as I am.”

I blushed prettily. “Tell me, Von, have you any actual evidence that your cloning system is working?”

“Well,” he said, “there’s the Nolan Sisters, and I’ve noticed that people who drink a lot of Guinness are getting bulkier and bulkier. It’s only a matter of time before I get word they’ve gone fission.”

Sensing he was about to start making puns, I took my leave of him and came straight to Brighton to make my findings known to the world at large. The thing Von Donegan has overlooked, you see, is that Guinness is exported

to many countries, and his special brew – Eau de Clone, as I call it – may be on the point of triggering a general population explosion. Not all bottles of Guinness are carbonated, of course, and most of the ones that are have the code words “Double X” on the label. What I’ve done, in order to save the world, is to set up a small team of volunteers – all of them, from Peter Roberts on down, connoisseurs of stout – who are prepared to check out the world’s entire supply of Double X Guinness.

It’s a mission of extreme urgency, so – if you will excuse me – I think I’d better get back to it...

The Mysterious World of Bob C. Shaw

Yorcon 2, Leeds, Easter 1981

Well, it's nice to be back in Leeds again, and I think it's very good of you to risk coming to hear me before you eat lunch – even though the eating facilities in Leeds are not what they used to be, not since my favourite restaurant – the Rock-All – passed under new management. The Rock-All used to be a smashing place – I can still taste the Jerry Lee Lewis Burgers and the Carl Perkins Supreme. You might think I'm joking about that place, but if any one ever asks you what contribution Leeds has made to the culinary arts, you just have to say "Rock-All", and they'll know exactly what you mean. You'll notice that I didn't start off with my usual joke about last night's room parties. I like to be unpredictable – that's what enabled Hitler to survive so many assassination attempts – besides room parties aren't what they used to be. Convention committees have started putting all the fans known to throw noisy all-night parties in rooms far away from the ordinary hotel guests who want to get a good night's sleep – which spoils the whole point of the thing. What pleasure is there in sitting up all night – shouting and yelling, smoking and drinking, wrecking your health – when you know you're not making the night hell for some poor sod in the next room?

When I look back over all the shindigs I've attended through the years of convention-going, the great moments, the treasured memories, are all of that abrupt, pleasurable guilty silence that follows the telephone's ringing or the authoritative pounding on the room door. Dead silence! Everybody stares at everybody else with looks of wild surmise – all except the host. He's looking a bit green as he goes to the door because he knows he has to face the hotel manager and maybe the SWAT squad from the local Rent-A-Fuzz.

Or, if it's the telephone, it always turns out that in the very next room there's a family composed, by some biological freak, of sickly one-week-old infants who'll die if they don't have utter quiet, and 103-year-old grannies who have come to the hotel specifically to expire in peace. The latter have been told by their relatives that the hotel is renowned for its tomb-like

silence; they've come from all over the world in their bath chairs to savour that tomb-like silence – but they've come at Easter, and the management has installed them in between Greg Pickersgill and Ramblin' Jake!

The bit I always liked best was the way the host would return from the door or the phone making damping movements with his hands – like Claude Rains playing the organ in *The Phantom of the Opera* – and plead with everybody to be quiet. We would all nod agreement and give each other solemn warning glances, and the silence would last maybe another three seconds, then... *blam!* All hell broke loose! The strain of having been quiet and orderly for a minute or so in mid-convention had been too much for some people's nerves, and they were freaking out all over the place... screaming... using the beds as trampolines... demolishing the wardrobes... It was beautiful.

(It amuses me even more to think that I always told the Inland Revenue that attending such events was a necessary expense against my income. "Discussions with editors and publishers about the latest trends in scientific fiction...")

There's one thing that still puzzles me. How did Claude Rains manage to get that organ down into the cave below the opera house without anybody noticing?

Enough of the preamble. You came along to hear me talk about the Mysterious World of Bob C. Shaw, not about mismanagement in convention hotels – although there's one other point I can't resist mentioning on that topic. When I'm staying in a hotel I always try to be as helpful as I can to the management, giving them little tips and suggestions and so forth, but for some reason they are not always properly appreciative. At last year's Novacon, for instance, I noticed that on the back of the plastic tab on my room key it said, "Please post this key to Royal Angus Hotel, etc." I went to the manager and said, "I've got a better idea – why don't you put a box at the porter's desk and get the guests to drop their keys in it as they check out?" That would obviously save a lot of time and postage, but was the manager grateful? Some hope! He looked at me as if I was stupid!

But let's get on with the talk, A couple of years ago I was driving quietly along a country road near Ulverston when there was a sudden knocking from my engine. I opened it and up popped my old friend Von Donegan, the German-Irish writer, researcher and inventor of mathematics by numbers.

"What are you doing in there?" I asked. Naturally enough I was

surprised – I’d had the engine tuned only that morning.

“I was trying to hide in your boot,” he said, “but I’d forgotten about the way British cars have the engine in the wrong end.”

“Never mind that,” I said. “What do you want with me?”

“Sssshh!” he said furtively. “I want to see you in secret because I’ve got this great idea for a television series, and I’d like your help with it, and I don’t want any other SF writers to see us together in case they muscle in on it. You know what they’re like.”

I nodded. When I first joined the SF-writing fraternity I felt I was a member of one big happy family – but then so was Lizzie Borden. “What sort of TV series?” I said, my interest quickening at the thought of money.

“One about all the wonderful unexplained mysteries around the world,” he said. “I was thinking,” he added coyly, “of calling it *The Mysterious World of Von C. Donegan*. How’s that for a title?”

“Not bad,” I conceded, “but not as good as *The Mysterious World of Bob C. Shaw*.”

“No you don’t, Shaw – I thought of it first,” he yelped, climbing out of my engine compartment and painfully removing the dipstick from the unfortunate place where it had lodged. “I’m going to track down all kinds of famous mysteries and find the exotic explanations for them.”

I blinked at him. “You mean mysteries like *why Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* never gets sued under the Trade Descriptions Act?”

“Don’t try to be funny,” he gritted. (Every time I see a verb like gritted I try to couple it to one of those Swifties that were in vogue some years ago, but I can’t seem to do it any more. I think I burned out some vital brain cells with my last and most fiendish one. It was supposed to be spoken by a woman – “He squeezed me so hard that every one of his fingers left a mark,” she said tendentiously.)

“Well,” I said to Von Donegan, “do you mean..?” (No, I won’t do it. I was going to put in my annual joke about *The Last Dangerous Visions*, but now I really do think it’s coming out soon. You know, I sold a story to Harlan for LDV in 1974. Last year I decided to enquire about it, so I wrote him a letter which began, “Dear Harlan, I’m not an impatient person by nature, but I do think six years is rather a long time to await publication...” I sat back and waited for his reply, wondering what sort of apology he would make. He wrote to me and said, “Dear Bob, Think yourself lucky – some of the writers who sold me stories for LDV have *died* in the meantime and will

never see their stories in print...” The point was so neatly made that I felt quite euphoric for days afterwards.)

“I mean *proper* mysteries,” Von Donegan went on. “Mysteries like the origin of the famous crystal skull – the Skull of Doom, they call it. If you search around the site of a famous mysterious discovery for long enough you can usually find ancient inscriptions or parchments, and I’m good at deciphering ancient writings, and I’ll unlock the exotic secrets and link the mysteries with prehistoric visitors from other worlds and things like that, and I’ll write more books about them and make a fortune... *We’ll* make a fortune, that is – I’ll pay you twice your usual rate.”

“Twice my rate,” I breathed. “That’s great! I felt such a fool when I got the money for my last book – going around trying to buy one new sock. What made you choose me for this project?”

“Because, my boy,” he said, turning on the charm, “you are the only SF writer around whose intellect compares with mine.” That’s Von Donegan for you – he has the sort of personality which causes a room to light up when he leaves it.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go for a drink and work out a plan of campaign.”

He glanced around suspiciously. “I’m not sure about that – there might be other SF writers there who would spy on us. We’ve got to keep this idea secret.”

I said, “Relax – the last SF writer to visit Ulverston was the incomparable Captain S.P. Meek, and that was in 1935.”

“But there might be some that you wouldn’t recognise. There are a lot of closet SF writers, you know.”

“Closet SF writers,” I chortled. “Are you by any chance referring to the great L. Ron Cupboard?”

“I think I’d better have a drink, after all,” Von Donegan mumbled.

We went off to my local and I ordered two pints of traditional British real ale. When the real ale arrived it was absolutely flat, had no head whatsoever, was slightly sour and a bit cloudy, and into the bargain it was lukewarm... *Perfect!* Von Donegan didn’t seem to appreciate it, however, so I took his pint off him and got him a Slimline Guinness instead, and we settled down to make our plans.

“We’ll do all the British Mysteries first,” Von Donegan said. “Then when I’ve deciphered all the ancient texts and worked out all the exotic answers, we’ll spread abroad to places like Costa Rica – that’s going to be the

toughest one.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, Costa Rica is absolutely covered with these mysterious giant stone balls, all of them perfectly round, but as far as I know it’s one case where there are absolutely no ancient scripts or parchments to help me.”

“Oh, I know why that is,” I said airily.

Von Donegan looked interested. “You know why there are not old parchments?”

“Yes – it’s because the stones are perfectly round,” I said. “Several books I’ve read stated quite clearly that rolling stones gather no MSS.”

A thoughtful expression appeared on Von Donegan’s face. “I wonder,” he said, “if Jerry Pournelle would be available for this project.”

(It’s against my policy to start explaining jokes, but that pun about no manuscripts – MSS, moss, get it? – is in a very interesting category, the purely typographical pun, which as far as I know was thought up by Walt Willis. An early example of his was, “A Miss is as good as a Mlle.” M-L-L-E in print looks very like “mile”, you see. I’ve been trying for years to think up a similar one – now I’m not sure if it was worth all the effort.)

This weakness I have for word plays was always getting me into trouble back in the days when I was a columnist with the *Belfast Telegraph*. In Belfast the local aircraft factory is called Shorts, and I remember once I tried to get away with a spoof Diary item which said, “I can deny the rumour that Shorts’ proposed take over of the Belfast tailoring firm of Francis Curley has been abandoned because of disagreements over a joint trading name.” My editor stopped the item appearing and told me it was obscene. Huh! If he thought that one was obscene he should have seen the follow-up I had in mind about an amalgamation of Cunard and Aer Lingus.

Anyway, Von Donegan and I set off on our travels that very afternoon to look at ancient figures carved in hillsides. “I think we’ll go down to the West Country first,” Von said. “There’s the famous Rude Man down there that I want to see.”

“But Peter Roberts mightn’t be at home,” I replied. “He might be working in his godfather’s tin mine.”

“I’m talking about the Rude Man of Cerne, you oaf,” Von Donegan shouted. “Why don’t you stick to your nasty cracks about *Star Trek*?”

Nasty cracks, I thought. About *Star Trek*. *Me*? Now, I’ll admit that I used to make the odd snide little joke about some things in the *Star Trek* TV

series, but seeing the *Star Trek* movie has completely changed my mind about the whole concept. I mean, there are things in that film that an ordinary SF writer would never have even thought of.

For instance, at the beginning of the movie the Enterprise is having a major overhaul – the equivalent of a present-day warship being in dry dock. A dry dock, of course, is literally a big box that they put a ship into so that they can separate it from the sea for the convenience of workers. With my lack of vision, if I had been in charge of that movie I would have thought: Let's see, now – there isn't any water in space, therefore we can dispense with the big box. I admit it! I'm afraid I would simply have had the Enterprise floating free in orbit, with work crews and machines moving around on the hull at will. But Gene Roddenberry, scorning such mundane considerations, actually put the Enterprise in an orbiting dry dock! That notion alone deserves some kind of sci-fi award. Then, of course, there were the usual incredible special effects. I thought it was great the way the alien invader was concealed at the heart of a giant Slumberland mattress spring.

On our drive south Von Donegan and I stopped at Minehead in Somerset for a rest and a chat about our plans. The name of the place rang a faint bell in my memory, producing a slight feeling of uneasiness, but I dismissed it as natural nerviness at being in on the ground floor of such a big TV project. That, of course, was a serious mistake. Anybody who knows anything about *anything* will tell you that when an innocent-looking word or place-name triggers faint bells or uneasy stirrings in the subconscious, you have reached a crucial point in the plot and that the author is trying, in his ham-fisted way, to put one over on you. The rules of that most ancient of wargames – author versus reader – demand that he has to play fair and plant a legitimate clue at a certain point in his narrative, but he's wetting himself with apprehension because he suspects that his intriguing central mystery is really pretty tame and obvious stuff, so he resorts to the famous uneasy stirring in the subconscious. It's all a bit pathetic, really.

No, I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't even be making digs at *Star Trek*, because although a lot of SF is undoubtedly bad, the great thing about it is its ability to be different things to different people. I have friends in the SF microcosm, keen SF readers that I've been close to for decades, but I never read the books they read, and they never read the books I read. Science fiction isn't a solid lump, or if it is it's a conglomerate. I like to think of it as being like an opal... with lots of little coloured sparkly bits inside... and when

you shift your viewpoint slightly you see a different set of sparkly bits, shining with different colours...

That's why we've all got to stick together... New Wavers and Old Wavers... Trekkies and academics... loving and helping each other... going into the future arm-in-arm...

Oh God, I can't go on...

But it *is* precisely this capacity which SF has to be different things to different people which leads to the great diversity of views about it. I was interested some time ago to read two extreme opinions encapsulated within a few pages of one book. The American writer, Reginald Bretnor, is a high crusader on behalf of science fiction, and a few years ago he edited a book about it, called *Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*. The book was generally well received, but to Reginald Bretnor's probably justifiable horror a scathing attack was made on it – by a low-grade porn magazine! In a later book Bretnor quotes part of this unfavourable notice, and I think that both what the porn magazine said and his reaction to it are interesting. The magazine said:

“We can take SF too seriously. This is not Tolstoy. SF is written by people who want to *entertain* and *make money*. It's pulp writers, balding guys with bad teeth and three children, lost among the pod creatures of the planet Xenon. SF is forgettable, like toothpaste, like Johnny Nash. Quality seems to be random, nurtured almost solely by novelty. One good twist is all you need. Eternity is gravy... Can anybody read Olaf Stapledon without laughing? Doesn't Heinlein strike you (seriously now) as a writer for boys? Frank W. Dixon lives again. This ain't exactly the Renaissance, space freaks.”

You'll note that the writer's ability to construct sentences was waning by the time he got near the end of this piece of literary criticism. And what is so forgettable about Johnny... ah... whatshisname?

Quite naturally, Reginald Bretnor was peeved by this review – he said it was the sort of drivel which might cause SF's future Tolstoys to go into ordinary literature, which he describes as “now-sterile fields of writing”. A thing which intrigued me was that he took particular exception to the specification quoted for SF writers. He was annoyed by the suggestion that SF authors are pulp writers, losing hair and teeth, who have three children – but he seemed even more annoyed by the notion that SF writers want to entertain and make money.

Now I'd be the last one to side with a porn magazine – but I write for the

pulps; my forehead is a little higher than it used to be; I'm acquiring more fillings around my back teeth; I've got three children (I'm not sure what pornographers find reprehensible in that number of offspring, but I've got them); I want to entertain my readers; and I certainly want to make money. Admittedly, I've never been lost among the pod creatures on the planet Xenon – but six out of seven isn't bad, you know.

Obviously the truth about SF lies somewhere between the two extremes. It has lots of good qualities, but it isn't the unique super-literature that Reginald Bretnor claims, and all this is getting away from the subject of the talk...

Von Donegan was still worried about some other SF writer latching on to his great idea, so – for the sake of privacy – we went down to the beach and strolled along the water's edge as we talked. Several times I thought I heard a faint sound like the whirring of a tape recorder, and once when I glanced towards the water I thought I saw a submerged swimming figure clad in horn-rimmed spectacles, a brightly-flowered sarong and a wet suit emblazoned with the words "2001 RULES O.K." This gave me an uneasy stirring in my subconscious, but I dismissed it as a trick of reflected light. (That's another dead give-away – I've read stories in which a herd of charging dinosaurs could get dismissed as a trick of reflected light.)

Finally we got down to Cerne in the late evening and trudged off through a steady drizzle to have a look at the famous giant carved into the hillside. "My God," Von Donegan said enviously, "it's easy to see why he's called the Rude Man."

I nodded. "Yes. Just look at that cheeky expression on his face and the way he's waving his arms about all over the place."

Von Donegan gave me a queer look, produced a folding spade from his raincoat pocket and began to dig for ancient inscriptions. This operation was a notable failure – mainly because we were promptly arrested by a local bobby and run out of the county for defacing an historic monument.

"This is disgraceful," Von Donegan said. "What a way to treat scientific pioneers!"

"Yes," I said. "If John W. Campbell was alive today he'd be turning in his grave."

Von Donegan gave me a contemptuous stare. "That's the sort of remark that makes us Irish look stupid. Don't you see anything wrong with what you've just said?"

“Of course!” I said, slapping my forehead. “How stupid of me! I’d forgotten JWC was cremated.”

Old Von Donegan was obviously disappointed at not getting his hands on any ancient inscriptions, but he pressed on bravely with the search for exotic answers to his mysteries. We were quite near Avebury and its stone circle, so we went there next and stood looking at it in the steady drizzle.

“I’ve been to dozens of stone circles,” Von Donegan told me, “but I’m beginning to have doubts about their value to me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, there’s always a principal stone, or key stone – in this case it’s over there in that small wood.”

“That must be the key stone copse,” I murmured.

Von Donegan, pausing only to vomit, went on speaking. “Some researchers have lined these stones up with the rising sun on midsummer’s day, so they think they have astronomical or religious significance, but I found they were using the wrong approach altogether. If you line the stones up with the *setting* sun at the beginning of November – just at the time of the Novacon – you’ll find they all point directly at the Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham. Do you think Rog Peyton would have been unscrupulous enough to have set up all those circles just for the publicity?”

“Rog Peyton?” I said. “Unscrupulous? Seeking publicity? *Never!*”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Von Donegan replied. He produced his spade and began to dig for exotic inscriptions, but he had hardly got started when a local bobby came along and ran us out of the county for defacing an historic monument. Somewhat shaken by this, Von Donegan and I proceeded up to Scotland to have a look for the Loch Ness monster. Some serious researchers think they have disproved the existence of Nessie, by counting the number of fish in Loch Ness and pointing out that there aren’t enough fish to provide food for a colony of monsters. The flaw in their argument is obvious – they’re counting the number of fish that are left *after* the monsters have eaten their fill.

Von Donegan studied the Loch for a while in the steady drizzle, and then – apparently giving up the idea of digging for inscriptions – turned to an elderly haggis engraver who was standing nearby and said to him, “Have you seen any weird-looking creatures around here?”

“Certainly have,” the old man said. “Only last week we had a visit from the Glasgow SF group.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Von Donegan said dispiritedly. I was feeling quite sorry for him as we drove back down towards our next destination, Sutton Coldfield, where there had been reports of falls of frogs and small fish from the skies. There was a steady drizzle when we got there and this time Von Donegan didn’t even want to get out of the car. He rolled down the window, bounced off the bottom edge of it and rolled down the rest of the door, then approached an elderly man who had been watching his performance with some amusement.

“I’d like your help, please,” Von Donegan said.

“Did Rog Peyton send you?” the man said anxiously, backing away. “I’m not dragging any more of those big stones around the countryside.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Von Donegan said. “I just want to know if you’ve seen any strange showers around here.”

“Certainly have,” the old man said. “Only last week we had a visit from the Glasgow SF group,”

“This is getting pretty hopeless,” Von Donegan said when he returned to the car. “There’s only one thing that might save the programme as regards this country – UFO.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“Unidentified flying objects, you oaf. Last month I set a trap for them, and I’ve just got word that my plan has worked.”

I looked at Von Donegan with new concern for his mental health. “You set out to trap a flying saucer! How?”

“First of all,” he said proudly, “I advertised for a middle-aged couple, countryfolk, with a combined IQ of not more than 83. That’s the only sort of humans that alien astronauts will have any dealings with, you know.”

“Have you,” I said scathingly, “tried putting them in touch with the *Space: 1999* fan club?”

“Then I put the couple in a 1957 Morris Minor and got them to drive up and down remote country roads every night. That’s the only sort of place that alien spaceships will land on, you know.”

“Perhaps their road tax disks are out of date,” I said sarcastically.

“I’ve just heard from Mr and Mrs Plinge down at Warminster. They’ve made contact, so I’m going down there to interview them, and I want you to take notes.”

I shrugged and went along with him to the Plinges’ cottage at Warminster, where we conducted the interview. The woman – as is usual in

these cases – did all the talking.

“We was driving along the road when, all of a sudden, we was blinded by these terrible burning’, searin’ lights that shone right in our eyes,” Mrs Plinge said. Von Donegan gestured imperiously at my notebook, so I wrote down: *Couple unlucky enough to encounter Ken Slater’s van at night.*

“Suddenly,” Mrs Plinge went on, “a mysterious force gripped our car and transported it into a nearby field.” I wrote down: *Poor old sticks skidded off road – that man Slater ought to be arrested.*

“I was frightened near to death so I tried to drive away like fury, but a mysterious force field seemed to stop my engine,” Mrs Plinge said. I wrote down: *Silly old moo stalled the car.*

Just to check out my theory, I said to her, “What gear were you in?”

She said, “Oh, just my cord jeans and that nice little sweater I got in...”

“Stay out of this, Shaw,” Von Donegan snapped. “Go on, Mrs Plinge.”

“Then I saw this tall unearthly figure coming towards me in the dark and it tried to force a strange looking book through the window,” she said. I wrote down: *Dave Langford STILL trying to flog War in 2080!*

“I managed to get the engine going again,” she said, “but when I tried to drive off the car just sat there, all a-shudderin’ and a-strainin’.” I wrote down: *Silly old moo spun back wheels in grass.*

“Then the tall figure gave an unearthly cry and all of a sudden the car shot forward.” I wrote down: *Good! She ran over Langford’s foot – serves the silly sod right!*

Von Donegan and I retired to the nearest pub and I could see he was losing heart. “That wasn’t too good,” he commented miserably. “I’m never going to get any ancient inscriptions which unlock exotic mysteries this way. That settles it! We’re going to the Himalayas to look for the Abominable Snowman.”

A few days later there we were, leading a column of porters through the blinding snow of the Hindu Kush, with Von Donegan shouting orders in the local language. He turned to me and said, “What do you think of my Urdu?”

“It suits you,” I replied. “I think you should keep it that way.”

He shook his head impatiently. “I meant, what do you think of the way I’m handling these porters?”

“It’s very good,” I conceded grudgingly, “considering that, when we started off, they thought they only had to carry our bags out of King’s Cross station.”

“Quiet!” Von Donegan hissed. I was still trying to figure out how one hisses a word like “quiet” when we glimpsed this huge lumbering figure looming up through the curtains of snow. “It’s a Yeti,” Von Donegan whispered, his voice quavering with excitement. “And it’s making some kind of sound. Just think of it – we’re going to be the first people to hear the strange speech of the Abominable Snowman.”

We held our breath and strained our ears as the giant figure lumbered past, and through the swirling snow we heard its faint unearthly cry, “Pork pies! Milk! Pork pies –”

“Good old Brian,” I said admiringly. “He told me he was going to work his way to the Aussiecon, but this is doing it the hard way.”

“Shut up, you fool,” Von Donegan whimpered, and I could see he was near the end of his tether. “There’s only one other way I can hope to get hold of an ancient inscription – and that’s by finding another crystal skull, a Skull of Doom, in the Central American jungles. Let’s go.”

By the time our ship got near Central America he had recovered most of his former optimism about the proposed TV series, and was cheerfully planning his jungle expedition. “We’ll need some of those big knives – kukris, you call them – for hacking our way through the jungle, I wonder where you get them.”

“I’ve seen a catalogue of big knives,” I said.

“I think it was called a kukri book.”

“Shaw,” he snarled, “if you don’t cut that out I won’t let you share in the excitement of finding a crystal Skull of Doom and unravelling its ancient inscription.”

I apologised and in no time at all we were slashing our way through the Central American jungle. “This continuous hacking is wearing me down,” Von Donegan complained.

“It never bothered you before,” I commented, but before he could reply we came to a small clearing at the edge of a river and he came to a standstill, his sensitive nostrils twitching.

“My unerring instinct tells me this is the place,” he said. “We’ll dig here.” He set to work with his spade, and I’ve never seen anybody digging in so fast since I sat beside James White at the last Novacon banquet. Within a few minutes – much to my surprise – he came out of the excavation, brushing bits of earth off a crystal skull!

“This is it,” he said in a trembling voice. “The biggest and most exotic

mystery of them all. This Skull of Doom was probably brought here by ancient astronauts, or at the very least by voyagers from Atlantis. And I'm going to be the first to unlock its age-old secrets." His probing fingers encountered a little glass button at the back of the skull. Giving me a look of triumph he pressed the button.

As soon as he had done so, little illuminated arrows appeared inside the Skull of Doom and a recorded voice said, "Do you suffer from tense, nervous headaches? If so – take Anadin."

"Aaarrggh!" cried Von Donegan, his face a mask of disbelief.

At that instant we heard a splashing noise from the nearby stream and out crawled a tall figure wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a brightly-flowered sarong and a wet suit emblazoned with the words, "2001 RULES O.K."

He strode across the clearing, snatched the skull from Von Donegan's nerveless fingers, and said, "I *wondered* where I'd left that. I lost it during the commercials in my new TV series about all the unexplained mysteries of the world." Before we could speak, he had dived back into the water and was swimming away in the direction of Sri Lanka.

"Who was that?" Von Donegan quavered.

"I'm not sure," I said. "But I've just remembered that Arthur C. Clarke was born in Minehead. Do you think he goes back there for his holidays?"

"I don't give a damn," Von Donegan said brokenly. "I'm quitting this TV lark and going back to writing my books." He too dived into the river and swam off in the direction of Dublin.

I was standing there, alone, in the jungle, wondering what to do, when there was a rustling in the undergrowth and out came David Attenborough carrying a TV camera.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," I said, falling into step beside him. "You know, this new series of yours about life on Earth is easily the best thing you've done since *Brighton Rock*."

For some reason he was unmoved by this flattery. Well, when I say he was unmoved – I mean he ran away through the jungle at top speed and left me standing there alone. There was only one thing for it – I dived into the river and swam off in the direction of Leeds.

And now I'm going out to the bar to shake the piranha fish out of my liberty bodice.

Beyond Cosmos

Channelcon, Brighton, Easter 1982

Anybody who has attended my previous Serious Scientific Talks will have, as well as suffering brain damage, noticed that I'm using a slightly different approach this time. In the past I have usually taken one specific topic and subjected it to rigorous scientific analysis, but lately I have fallen under the spell of Carl Sagan and am trying to emulate his methods. (For instance, I announced to the publishing world that I was about to write a science fiction novel and would consider offers of \$2m or more. That was nearly a year ago, but the publishing world was so stunned by the announcement that it hasn't yet recovered its wits sufficiently to contact me. I phoned my agent and learned he was conducting an auction on my behalf, and had just been offered £2.50 for my most prized family heirloom – the original liquid oxygen cooling system from Isaac Asimov's typewriter.)

What Sagan did in his recent TV series was to deal with the subject of *everything*. Well, I've decided to use the cosmos as my starting point and go on from there. No more petty restrictions for me. Actually, I got the idea while I was hospitalised after a disastrous experiment in animal husbandry. I'd heard Barbara Woodhouse on radio saying that a good way to pacify a horse was to blow up its nose. I tried to blow up a horse's nose, but the stupid animal sneezed the dynamite out again and blew *me* up! It was no fun in that hospital, I can tell you, being bossed around all the time and even told what way to sleep. I like to curl up in a ball in bed, but the matron said, "Don't pull your knees up to your chin – that position is foetal." After a few days I got bored and asked her what I could do to pass the time. She said, "Haven't you ever heard of occupational therapy? Lots of our patients go in for matchstick models." That seemed a good idea, so I got to work immediately and in a few days had built a giant model of a burnt match out of bricks and cement. For some reason the matron didn't like it, and I was set free to work on my project, so I set off quick as a flash.

For a while I thought about tackling the job on my own, then I realised I would once again have to call in Von Donegan, the German-Irish scholar, author, scientific researcher, and inventor of the self-wringing chamois

leather for one-armed window cleaners. In spite of all his failings, old Von Donegan is a genuine expert on TV and movies. He knows so much about film that he even recognises the names of the special guest stars on American TV dramas. There was a time when publishers started cutting huge chunks out of his books, and he even made a protest movie about this practice – it was called *Abridge Too Far*.

On previous occasions I'd had trouble contacting Von Donegan, but after the success of our last collaboration – *Bob C. Shaw's Mysterious World* – he had made special arrangements for me. He had left me a homing pigeon, with instructions to tie any urgent messages to its leg. I did this and sent it off to him – you should have seen the way that bird struggled when I was cramming it into the envelope – and awaited results. Von Donegan showed up on my doorstep a few days later, looking more furtive than ever. It turned out he was on the run from a group of Aztecs who were writing a book which proved that the Cape Canaveral shuttle landing site was an accidental volcanic mark on the ground. I brought him in and gave him his favourite drink – a Guinness colada – to calm his nerves. He drank it gratefully and sat nibbling the garnish, a potato and a turnip on a cocktail stick, while I checked if he had seen this wonderful TV series featuring a fuzzy spaceship, which resembled a faster-than-light Wurlitzer, and which was all about everything.

“Loved it,” he said. “I wonder how they got all those superb shots of a black hole and the strange distortions of the continuum all around it?”

“That was Carl Sagan's left nostril.” I chided, belatedly remembering Von Donegan's reputation as the Lord Carrington of the science advisory world.

He looked astonished. “You mean it wasn't Kermit? I *thought* his skin looked too green.”

I told him to get a grip on himself and went on to outline my idea for a TV series called *Beyond Cosmos*, which would take up the story of everything where Sagan had left off. He asked me what sort of things I would include, so as a titillating example I mentioned the curious fact that, near Basingstoke, there is a pond full of newts which bear an uncanny resemblance to Dave Langford. This is an example of man's influence on the forces of natural selection. In the beginning there were a few newts which accidentally looked like Dave Langford. Anybody who caught one of these promptly returned it to the water – who in his right mind would want a newt which looked like Dave Langford? – thus giving that kind of newt a breeding

advantage. As Dave steadily grew more famous in the area (he is consultant editor to everything) the practice of actively preserving the newt species developed into a local custom. Even today if you mention Dave Langford's name to anybody in that area you will hear them murmur, "Persist as a newt." Or something *like* that...

"This is wonderful," Von Donegan breathed. "I love it! At last I'll be able to promote my new theory of cosmogeny."

"What's that?" I said uneasily.

"Well," he said, "you know how Sagan is always going on about everything having developed out of a primeval soup? He's got this blind fixation about primeval soup, hasn't he?"

"That's why we call him Mister Ragout," I commented.

It was Von Donegan's turn to look uneasy. "Shaw, you're not going to start making soup puns, are you?"

"Bouillons and bouillons of years ago..."

"Cut it out," Von Donegan warned anxiously. "I'm trying to tell you that all this stuff about soup is nonsense. In the beginning all the matter in the universe was gathered together in a lump in the shape of a giant *sausage*."

"There's nothing new in that idea," I accused. "Everybody has heard of the Big Banger theory."

Von Donegan gave a piteous whimper. "Now he's started on all his old sausage puns – the *wurst* is yet to come – I'm getting out of here."

Promising to go ahead with the practical arrangements for our series, he hurried away and left me to think about the serious scientific content of the project, which of course was my special responsibility. For a start, I decided not to make any mention of astrology, partly because I'd used up all my astrology jokes in my talk, *Up the Conjunction*, at Skycon in '78, partly because I'm a bit annoyed at astrologers for refusing to admit the existence of the thirteenth constellation of the zodiac, Ophiuchus.

One of the things I decided to do in the series was to correct a few of the mistakes made by Carl Sagan. I like this part, mainly because I was beginning to feel a bit guilty about always picking on poor old Albert Einstein. It wasn't his fault that his brain and mine simply weren't in the same class. One of the mistakes which Sagan perpetuated was the story that in the 3rd century BC an Egyptian called Eratosthenes had correctly calculated the size of the Earth after measuring the lengths of shadows of two sticks placed far apart. This classic experiment was actually carried out right

here in England by my great-uncle, Eric T. Hoskies, in June 1898.

He stuck a stick in the ground in his back garden in Budleigh Salterton and sent my great-aunt Edith up north with a similar stick. Her instructions were to proceed ten miles due west from Newcastle, plant the stick in the ground and measure its shadow at noon on June 21st. He was quite excited that day when he telephoned her – the weather had been perfect for the experiment – but he got a shock when he asked her the length of the shadow.

“I couldn’t measure it,” she said. “Some idiot has built a wall right across the country and it’s blocking off the sun.”

“Move away from the wall, dear heart,” he said, “and try again tomorrow.”

Great-aunt Edith did as suggested, but the weather can be a bit uncertain in that part of the country – that’s why the Gannets have mostly flown south – and it was two months before there was another sunny day. By that time great-aunt Edith’s stick had taken root and grown by over two feet. Using the data he obtained in the experiment great-uncle Eric calculated that the Earth was just under four miles in diameter, a result he jealously defended until his dying day. His dying day came quite soon, in fact, when he set out to run the twelve miles round the equator and collapsed in a heap in Newton Poppleford. (Other people have fallen into that same heap, and I think it’s time the Newton Poppleford sanitary workers removed it.)

Among other things I decided to put right in the series was the story of the loss by fire of the greatest store of ancient manuscripts ever brought together under one roof. I refer, of course, to the burning of the BSFA chain library at Alexandra Palace. And then there’s always those silly yarns about how Isaac Newton thought up the laws of gravity. What really happened was that he fell out of a tree and landed on an apple, on his backside. I don’t want to dwell too much on where the apple went, but one can understand why the poet referred to the apple in the Garden of Eden as that “suppository of knowledge of good and evil.” This unfortunate incident prompted Newton to utter his classic aphorism, “What goes up must come down – I hope,” which later became his First Law of Motion.

True to his word, Von Donegan came back in a day or two with news that he had obtained a TV studio complete with an appropriate set. For once I was quite glad to see him, because I was doing some extra-curricular work on my new method of psychological analysis and it wasn’t going to well. Everybody knows about the old Rorschach blot test, but I had decided that it

was too limited, too passive, not giving the subject enough opportunity to discover himself. My radical new technique was to make the subject sit down on a fried egg, and then interpret the patterns he created. I had achieved some good preliminary results. If the egg was squished into a long, narrow shape that meant the patient was nervous and tense; up tight, as they say. If it flattened into a wide circle the patient was relaxed and contented, and a bit fat; and if the design was markedly asymmetrical it meant he was dangerously unbalanced.

The whole project foundered, though, because I ran out of genuine nutcases, and the only other volunteers I could afford to hire were a bunch of Glasgow science fiction fans. These people sabotaged my work by persistently eating the fried eggs – including some that other people had already sat on. I lost two years' experimental evidence that way, but was stoutly refusing suggestions from another fan that I should switch over to having people sit down on pork pies, which he would supply cheap. I rejected that idea on the grounds that my subjects could be psychologically scarred for life.

Eventually Von Donegan and I took a taxi to the TV studio and he showed me on to the set. I'd been expecting a long fuzzy spaceship, with music which sounded like destruction testing on an iron lung, but instead I found this rather garish place which resembled the coffee shop of the Heathrow Hotel.

"I recognise this set-up," I said. "This is the bridge of the Starship Enterprise!"

"I know," Von Donegan said, "but studio expenses are so high these days they've started time sharing on the sets. *Crossroads* is moving in here soon. In fact, I think they got in before the last *Star Trek* series ended."

"I noticed," I said. "Let's concentrate on *our* series. What will we elucidate on first?"

Von Donegan took a metal plaque from his pocket. "Well, there's this plaque I personally designed to go off on the first interstellar probe. See it's got all this information, carefully laid out in symbols that any intelligent being in the galaxy could understand, telling them how to find us on Earth. No matter how alien the beings are, no matter how many thousands of light years away they are, they've only to glance at this plaque and they'll be able to come straight to us across the beaconless wastes of interstellar space."

"I like it," I said, "but if it was made for an interstellar probe, what's it

doing here?”

“The engraver’s delivery van took it to the wrong place, and it missed the flight,” Von Donegan said. “Perhaps we should stick to the history of science. How about Kepler working out that a planet sweeps equal areas of its orbit in equal times?”

“Sweeps it?” I said. “Is that why the Americans keep sending up a space scuttle?”

Von Donegan’s face developed a curiously wan expression, but before I could go on to make a joke about vacuum cleaners a solidly-built man wearing a Marks & Spencers jumper and an unmistakable air of command came onto the set.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” I said to him. “It’s you! You must be...”

“That’s right,” he replied, looking gratified. “I’m Captain Smirk.”

“But I thought your name was Kirk.”

The pleased expression faded from his face. “Don’t mention that character to me.”

“But isn’t he the Captain of the Starship Enterprise?”

“He’s the *dayshift* captain,” Smirk said. “The one who gets all the action. I’m the one who’s on at nights and nothing ever happens when *I’m* on the bridge. The sheer boredom is driving me mad.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

“I can’t talk to you now,” he replied, “I’ve got to go and deal with a few Klingons.”

“You mean warlike aliens?”

“No – *Star Trek* fans. That’s what we call them, you know. I’m in a Trekkie situation here.”

There was a quiet sound of Von Donegan retching in the background, and I can’t say I blamed him – Smirk’s puns were worse than mine. Smirk hurried away and in came another tall figure also wearing a Marks & Spencers jumper and an unmistakable air of command. His appearance was somewhat spoiled, however, by the copious amounts of fluff and feathers clinging to his uniform.

“Hi,” he said, “I’m First Officer Schlock from the nightshift. I’m sorry about the mess my uniform’s in, but I have to use the same bed as the dayshift First Officer, and somehow he always manages to cut our pillow to ribbons and let the feathers out. It’s almost as if he had great points on his ears, but I don’t suppose that’s possible.”

Just then a smaller man in a Marks & Spencer jumper appeared, looking very worried.

“Hello there,” he said. “I’m the nightshift Chief Engineer – Spotty. I’m trying to find the main drive. That’s the sixth one the dayshift Chief Engineer has taken away and sold this year. I think he’s got a contact on *Battlestar Galactica*.”

“Have you looked in the usual place?” I said helpfully. “Under that trapdoor just outside the canteen.”

Spotty shook his head. “There’s nothing but coloured Lego blocks down there. Scotty crawls in there and plays with them when he’s supposed to be fixing the main drive. He hasn’t a clue about engineering, you know – he only got the job because he took out a subscription to *Interzone*. Not like me,” he added proudly. “I won a Larry Niven scholarship.”

At that point a rather decrepit figure in an M&S jumper came along.

“Greetings,” he said. “I’m the nightshift Medical Officer – Decoy. Sorry I can’t stop to talk to you.”

“They’re keeping you busy then,” I said.

He rolled his eyes at me, but I flicked them back to him. “It’s all the fault of that Captain Kirk on the dayshift,” he grumbled. “At least once a week he runs the ship full speed into a vast invisible force field. I spend the next five or six days mending ruptures and slipped disks among the crew.”

“Can’t McCoy do that himself?” I said.

Decoy threw up his hands. (Until that point I hadn’t even realised he’d eaten them.) “McCoy hasn’t a clue about medicine, you know – he only got the job because he refused to take out a subscription to the *OMNI Book of the Future*. Not like me,” he added proudly. “I won a James White Scholarship.”

I was about to ask him if he wasn’t getting ideas above his hospital station, when we were brushed aside by this small mechanical dog which came whizzing along chanting, “K9 Rules, Affirmative.”

Close behind it came several people in rather different space uniforms – they were wearing British Home Stores jumpers – who were arguing.

“You’ve got to start calling it Moonbase *Alpha*,” one was saying. “Moonbase *Alfie* just sounds stupid.”

Then came some people in *Blake’s Seven* uniforms – C&A jumpers. “That Terry Nation had some nerve telling me I was a fraud as an actor,” one of them was saying. “I mean, I don’t object to him going around pretending to be a science fiction writer.”

Then came some characters out of *Thunderbirds*. One of them was saying, “Did you hear this rumour about Brains being the illegitimate son of Elton John?”

“Yes,” another one said, “but I think somebody is stringing us along.”

Von Donegan tugged my sleeve. “We can’t work in this madhouse,” he whispered. “The place is starting to feel like a convention.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Our programme is late even before it’s started.”

We were wondering what to do next when who came in but David Bellamy, David Attenborough and Carl Sagan, all of them looking highly excited. Von Donegan asked them what was going on.

“The scientific find of the century,” Sagan intoned. “We’ve just heard a report that in the Reading area there’s a bunch of science fiction writers who all look like newts. It’s a clear example of man’s influence on the forces of natural selection. We’re going down there right now to make a TV series about them.”

“I’ll go with you,” Von Donegan said, rushing after them and leaving me on my own.

I didn’t try to stop them leaving, because I knew something they didn’t – namely that every important science fiction writer in the country would be *here* this weekend. That’s why I came to Brighton, so if there are any Reading-based authors here who look like newts – or in any way behave like newts – will they please meet me in the bar afterwards? I want to check out their credentials.

Conning Your Way

Albacon II, Glasgow, Easter 1983

It's nice to be back in Glasgow again, at one of my favourite convention sites. Back in '78 I was at a really nice convention in Denmark to which – because it was in Denmark – the organisers gave the name Bacon. Here we go one better – this one is called AL-BACON! Just think of the witty satirical comments that name lends itself to. The banquet where you can really get pigged in. Ample porking space. The convention with the gammon look...

I will now take puns from the floor of the house – in fact, I'll take puns from *anywhere*. At present I'm engaged in a postal pun duel with John Brunner. It started when I mentioned to John that during all the time I was associating with Irish fan Walt Willis, I never once heard him do dog impressions, which was a pity, because then I could have said, "Willis is barking." John's latest reply was all about Edward VIII, after his abdication and marriage to the American lady, reporting to George VI that his bride was frigid. He said, "Wallis is brrr, King." (I tell you, if James Thurber was alive today he'd be turning in his grave.)

My own latest salvo in this exchange was rather neat and topical, I thought. It was about the famous Argentinean short story writer who complained so much against the Falklands venture that one of the generals remarked, "Borges is wailing."

But I was talking about the good points of this convention. What other con ever sent out its Progress reports in stereo? There was perfect stereo separation, too – a completely different voice coming in each ear. Most of the time, anyway – the Post Office seems to lose a lot of stuff these days. I'm not sure why the service had deteriorated so much lately. Possibly, with all the Government cuts, the postmen weren't getting time to graduate from Postal Academy, where they learn all the fine points of their profession. My last postman had got to the stage of being able to bring a bundle of letters to the right street, but he fell down on the tricky technical point of matching the numbers on the letters to the numbers on the houses. Within a few minutes of his going round all you could see in our street was people scurrying up and down exchanging letters with each other.

And the man I have now is even worse! This poor guy has no vocation at all. He'll never win his Master Postman's Shield – knockers rampant on a field of pillar box red – let alone hope to be in a class with the legendary all-time postman, Larry Strickland. The other day, and this is absolutely true, he brought a manuscript to my house in an 8" x 11" envelope. I should mention at this point that my letterbox is 9" wide. This postman, apparently having missed all the lectures in Basic Delivery Theory, was quite unsure of the technique of offering up the narrow side of an envelope to a letterbox. He pushed the manuscript in the wrong way round, refused to give up when he saw the envelope was tearing and in a sort of Procrustean rage sheared two inches off the end of both it and its contents. I'll say this for him, though – he gathered up the left-over bits and pushed them in afterwards. Decent sort!

Anyway, that's not what I came here to talk about. This year, as a change from high technology, I decided to venture into the social sciences – though I'm not sure if "social" is the right word for them. It's a word that always makes me feel vaguely uneasy, perhaps because of the term "social disease." I think that's a *ghastly* expression, don't you? The whole idea of being struck down with some awful malaise just for attending a social...

Then there's this latest social disease which appears to have afflicted nearly everybody in America, with the possible exception of Isaac Asimov – hairpiece. I'm a bit vague about the details, but apparently if you have sexual intercourse with somebody you end up with a hairpiece, or – in severe cases – a full-blown toupee. What *happens*? Have they been guilty of going at it bald-headed? Does the local Watch Committee give them a good wiggling? Is something wrong with their follicles?

But that's straying away from the subject... Some of you may not be aware of this, but many years ago I pioneered the science of Fansmanship – which, of course, is a branch of Stephen Potter's Lifemanship. I did so because there was far too much goodwill in science fiction fandom. Far too many people were going around having a nice time and being friendly to each other. Fansmanship flourished very well and very quickly produced the sub-discipline of Conventionmanship, which has accounted for more sheer misery at British conventions than the after-effects of Brian Burgess meat pies. After a promising start, however, the science fell into disuse.

An impartial observer at British conventions in recent years will have noticed a disturbing fact, namely that the standard of Fansmanship has dropped to a shamefully low level. Indeed, sad to relate, the noble art has to

all intents and purposes been abandoned! In those selfsame con halls where gifted and trained Fansmen could once be seen in all their glory – causing envy on a grand scale, producing instantaneous inferiority complexes in all who ventured near them – we are faced with the grim spectacle of pro authors, neofen, publishers, scientists, BNFs, artists, booksellers, editors and readers mixing together on terms of equality, and actually *enjoying* themselves.

This shocking state of affairs is almost to be expected – we all know the country is going through a bad patch – but with more and more overseas fans now attending British conventions we must beware of letting visitors see the depths of conviviality to which we have sunk. This, therefore, was why I decided to remind fans of the high principles of Fansmanship in general, and its subdivision of Conventionmanship. The aim of the Fansman is, of course, to make himself appear a bigger BNF or pro than anyone else at a convention *while at the same time convincing them he has no other ambition than to be a nice guy.*

The importance of that last bit can't be over-emphasised – if it is seen that you are *trying* to impress other fans the whole point of the exercise disappears. You've got to be able to concentrate all your art and skill on another fan while at the same time appearing to be totally unaware of his existence. And this applies from the first second of any convention, because the style of your arrival is all-important.

It used to be enough, back in the days when everybody was flat broke, to be seen arriving in a taxi. Fansman H. Briggs of Glossop developed an excellent method of always arriving by taxi, even though he hadn't a penny to his name. He would walk from the bus station to the nearest corner to the hotel, hide in a doorway and watch out for the arrival of the taxi which had been sent to pick up the guest of honour. When it slowed down at his corner he would leap on to the offside running board and crouch down there, holding himself in place by means of suction cups. Then when the taxi stopped he would open the door, go through the taxi and emerge from it apparently in the company of the guest of honour.

These days, though, taxis have no cachet and it is better to give the impression you have flown yourself to the convention in your own private aircraft. One method is to saunter into the reception loudly spouting aeronautical terms, but a difficulty is that at SF conventions it can be it can be hard to find anybody who *understands* aeronautical terms. Or any other sort.

A couple of years ago I went into the Novacon hotel lobby and was a little disappointed to find there was only one other fan present. It was Rog Peyton doing a quiet bit of fund raising – using a crow-bar on the cigarette machine – and I said, “Sorry I’m late – I had a little trouble with an aileron.” When he said, “Was that L. Ron Hubbard?” I threw up my hands in disgust, which surprised me because I didn’t even realise I’d swallowed them.

One of the best imposing arrival techniques is the Just Passing Through ploy, developed by Fansman C. Warren of Middle Wallop. The essence of the method is to make people believe you had absolutely no intention of attending the convention, but – by pure coincidence – happened to be in the same area during the relevant weekend and decided to fill in an unexpected hiatus in your business programme.

Warren recommends hurrying into the reception area, looking rather breathless and distraught, ignoring everybody who knows you, grabbing a committee member by the arm and saying in a very loud voice, “Has Professor Kowalski been trying to contact me?”

When the committee member replies in the negative – as is bound to happen, unless you are fantastically unlucky – you say, “Thank God! He was worried in case he would have to fly on to Tokyo without seeing me.”

This sort of thing is guaranteed to have an overawing and depressing effect on all those within earshot. The actual name you quote can, of course, be varied to suit the individual Fansman’s needs. You can say Carl Sagan, Stanley Kubrick, Ray Bradbury, etc. The place names can be varied too – Moscow, Hollywood, Carnoustie, etc.

And there is no need to worry about the mythical academic ever actually putting in an appearance. The experienced Fansman will use the cover story to explain his own absence at any crucial events he may happen to miss at the convention. “I’d like to have been there, of course – to join in the fun and everything – but I’d promised to help old Kowalski with his paper...”

Explanations of that sort are best delivered with a wry half-smile which suggests you never really stop work and, if properly done, will make the listener feel he is a useless, hedonistic parasite on society. Warren was a master of this type of smile, and to perfect it actually invented a special set of exercises which strengthened the muscles on the right side of his face, the ones which produce a rueful quirk at the corner of the mouth. I haven’t got time now to detail his exercises, but a useful one which can be performed almost anywhere you go is always to turn on your bath taps with your teeth.

You'll notice that I'm talking as much about impressing scientific people as about impressing science fiction people. This is because qualified scientists often do show up at conventions. In fact I was hoping that my old friend and co-worker Von Donegan would get here this week-end, but he's too busy working on his latest project. He's trying to invent a typewriter whose line spacing matches the lines on the back of a Post Office air letter form.

Last week I flew over to Dublin to give him a hand in his work and he met me at the airport in a van which had a picture of Captain Ahab sitting on top of *Moby Dick* on one side, and a picture of Jonah on top of his whale on the other.

"That's the symbol of an Irish charity I work for," he said gloomily, "Males on Whales."

"It looks like you've earned a cetacean," I quipped, trying to cheer him up, but, inexplicably, he only looked more depressed than ever.

"These are hard times," he complained, "I'm reduced to writing for a magazine called *Fate*."

"Ah yes," I said. "The journal of the Irish Chiropodists Society."

Von Donegan remained strangely silent for the rest of the journey to his lab, refusing to cheer up even when I told him my joke about Ray Bradbury writing a new book on lung diseases of the Red Planet – *The Martian Bronchials*. When we went into his lab I was impressed by the variety and ingenuity of his various current projects, ranging from a solar powered sun bed to a device for digging horses' hooves out of Boy Scouts. He sat down at his bench and gestured for me to join him. I brought up a chair – which surprised me a little because I didn't even know I'd swallowed one – and he poured us a couple of Guinness coladas.

"I'm mainly working on alternative energy sources," he said. "Coal isn't going to last long, you see – although the other day I got 2,000 foot-pounds out of one lump."

"Did you pulverise it?" I said.

"No, I let it fall on my toe," he replied. "My foot is still pounding."

"Well," I said, "how about nuclear energy?"

"People are too worried about radiation effects," he said, picking up a strangely deformed flower. "This is a mutated species that was found growing near Windscale – it's a geranium 235. I need an energy source that nobody else has even thought of," he went on. "Can you help me, Bob?"

I thought for a moment and said, “Have you considered books?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to burn a book,” he said. “Not even one by ET.”

“ET?” I said. “Do you mean that alien-looking creature with the spindly neck and the gormless face?”

“Yes,” he said. “Ed Tubb. I’ve got all his Dumarest novels. Have you read the first one in the series?”

“I’m not much good at deciphering Hittite script,” I said. “No, what I mean is the power that’s actually *in* books. Have you never noticed how, when you try to stand books upright on a shelf, they always hurl themselves onto their sides? It’s all the pent-up energy that’s been poured into them by people turning the pages. I reckon there’s enough energy stored up in the complete works of Ian Watson to drive a minicab round the world.”

“They’ve already driven me round the bend,” Von Donegan grumbled. “No, I don’t like it. Besides – my library tickets have expired.”

“But you can *increase* the energy output,” I went on. “If you divide a book in two, down the centre of the spine, it will fall in both directions. I tried it recently with the first volume of my encyclopedia. This new source of power is called splitting the A-tome.”

Von Donegan went pale and shook his head. “The price of books these days rules all that out. What I need,” he said in his quaint German-Irish accent, “is a really *sheep* source of energy.”

Inspiration struck me! “Say that again,” I said excitedly.

He looked puzzled. “The price of books these days...”

“No, no,” I cut in. “*After* that.”

(I just love it when they get to this bit in old third-rate movies, don’t you? The hero of the film is always faced with some really tough problem, one that has consistently baffled him since the ice cream lady came round. It could be, if the film is set some time ago, the problem of how to coax more speed out of the racing car his fortunes depend on. And then, just as all appears to be lost, his dumb sidekick – in what is supposed to be a naturalistic dialogue – says something like, “I gotta go home before my old lady runs up any more debts on our charge account. That wife of mine – she’s a real super charger.” Then the hero’s face lights up, and he says, “Say that again!” And the sidekick *always* picks the wrong bit, and repeats, “I gotta go home...” And the hero *always* says, “No, no! *After* that.” Then the sidekick says the right bit, and the hero seizes him in his arms, waltzes with him for a few seconds, and shouts, “Curly you’re a genius! Why didn’t I see the answer

all along? All we've gotta do is force air into the carburettor under pressure etc, etc..." Nobody makes pictures like that anymore... well, nobody except George Lucas.)

Anyway, so that the prophecy might be fulfilled, I got Von Donegan to repeat "*sheep* source of energy", then I dashed off and found a ball of knitting wool... Do you get the subtlety of this? Sheep... wool... and a heavy piece of metal, and I did this. I tied the wool around the metal, like so, and I suspended it, like so... and there's what happened. The heavy metal bar rotated for ages!

Free energy! John W. Campbell should have been around to see this – it would have kept him going in editorials till the end of the century. Or perhaps even till *Last Dangerous Visions* comes out. This is an absolutely untapped source of energy that's available just for the asking. Why, I reckon there's enough power locked up in one of Andrew Stephenson's sweaters to propel Gerry Webb to the nearest star...

I'm sorry, folks, I seem to have strayed away from the subject of the talk. Where was I? Oh yes.

Before putting on a show of scientific authority or any other kind of importance, make certain – and judging this sort of thing accurately is a vital part of Fansmanship – that your listeners are of a type which will be suitably impressed. If they are, it is worthwhile remembering the well-proven Fansmanship principle – *never react in a predictable manner*. Should it happen that you really are well versed in some branch of science (or other field), and this fact is known to the people present, do not make the elementary mistake of holding forth at length on your specialist subject. This is almost certain to bore the audience – which is not in itself an undesirable objective – but it is bad Fansmanship that you will be *seen* to be trying to impress.

The preferred technique is one which was developed by Fansman R. Hodges of Portsmouth, who happened to be a fairly eminent cosmologist. At a convention, he would allow all the SF authors in his presence to expound what little knowledge they had, but when eventually somebody turned to him, as a genuine expert in the field, for clarification of a point, he would shake his head, make his eyes twinkle, and say, "I'm afraid all this is much too advanced for me."

Hodges reports that this ploy never fails to make even the most intelligent and well-informed layman feel that he has been talking arrant

nonsense, thus making him lapse into an embarrassed silence. The amused, indulgent twinkle in the eye is a vital part of the technique, and Hodges has even been known to carry a phial of glycerine with which to anoint his corneas at the right moment – but here we are straying into the realms of Advanced Fansmanship. The ordinary Fansman, whose purpose is simply to make his friends feel inferior, has no need to trouble himself with such perfectionism, though it is always worth remembering the heights to which one can aspire.

In most cases, however, you are likely to know very little, perhaps nothing, about the subject under discussion. In these circumstances a technique recommended by Fansman J. Holmes of Derby is – instead of appearing impressed or even bored – become increasingly agitated and angry-looking during the discussion, which might be about, say, proton transplants. At a suitable moment, when everybody has begun to look questioningly in your direction, burst out with, “I’ve given up on the so-called proton transplant experts after all the nonsense that was talked at the Stockholm conference last week,” and storm out of the room.

It is extremely important to the Fansman to appear to be much more *international* than anybody else, ideally creating the impression that there are multitudinous levels of international fandom/publishing/writing, and that the British/American/Canadian scene is only one of many in which you are equally at home. Perhaps the boldest and surest way of doing this, although it takes some verve to carry it off properly, was perfected by Fansman H. Bisley of Maidstone.

He would position himself near the platform during the introductory session of a convention, and at the first suitable lull in the proceedings would go on stage, unfolding a telegram, and say something like, “Sorry to interrupt, Mr Chairman, but I have here a message of goodwill from the combined fan clubs of El Paso and Acapulco, Mexico. They addressed it to me personally because I was the only person they knew who would be here today, and with your permission, I’ll read it out.”

He then proceeded to read out a fake message, making sure to include his own name, thus establishing himself in the eyes of all present as a jet-set Secret Master of Fandom. It was Bisley, too, who invented the simple but effective Unique Badge Ploy. He always carried in his case a selection of aerosol transparent paints of the sort used by commercial artists, and as soon as possible after registering would spray his convention badge with a colour

which made it look as though it had been deliberately manufactured to distinguish it from those worn by everybody else. This was Fansmanship of a high order, because, without having to utter a single word, he made people think he was a member of some powerful inner hierarchy recognised by the convention committee.

It is a proud and lonely thing to be a top grade Fansman, and practitioners of the art, always realists, will be the first to admit that it has one rather irritating drawback – namely that the successful Fansman, having sown the seeds of envy and ill will on all sides, rarely gets invited to room parties. This could be serious, because it is important for the Fansman to be seen at all the right social functions. Graduates of the Fansmanship College have various ways of dealing with this situation, but the last thing they will do is allow themselves to be seen going around trying to cadge invitations. One of the most inspired methods – known as Trimble’s Gambit – was developed by Fansman D. Trimble of Basingstoke.

Instead of straining his ears to hear room numbers being whispered around, he would circulate widely among BNFs at the convention *passing out his own room number!* That done, he then positioned himself at a good vantage point at the stated hour, watched the crowd trying to get into his locked room, then cleverly mingled with them as they moved on to the next number on their list. One can only stand in awe of a man like that.

It was my privilege to witness the artistry of people like Hodges, Bisley and Trimble in its fullest flower, and – much though I hate to say it – I doubt if we shall ever see the likes of them in this country again. Regrettably, I have to predict that the next British Worldcon is likely to be marred by scenes of unbridled enjoyment by all those who attend.

Fansmen of yesteryear, one can only cry, where are you now?

Ten Years, but Not Decayed

Seacon '84/Eurocon, Brighton, Easter 1984

Well, here we are – back in the good old Metropole – the only hotel in England that's big enough to house a modern-day SF convention. And it is *big*, isn't it? I was watching an SF movie last night and I was almost going to complain about the quality of the colour. All the actors' faces were very pink – and it wasn't only because the script was by George Lucas. Then it dawned on me it was due to the size of the auditorium. I was so far from the screen that the light from it was red-shifted!

And then there are all the corridors. You have to go through corridors to get to the corridors. I don't know why it is, but all convention hotels are exceptionally well-endowed with corridors. Even the ones that look quite small on the outside have these miles and miles of featureless corridors and passages which take you round and round the building, and sometimes deposit you in the car park. The Station Hotel in Glasgow is a particularly large case. Fans have checked in at conventions there and have never been heard of again. I would have got lost many times in the last few years if it wasn't for the fact that I have discovered a good landmark in the Station Hotel. It's that half-eaten pork pie which sits on the window sill on the south side of the fourth floor. When I'm filling in my hotel booking form, I always put in a special request for a room near the pork pie.

And did you ever notice that your room in these big sprawling hotels is always as far away from the lift as it can get? I have worked out a mathematical expression for this (Terry Hill published it recently in *Microwave*). If the sign opposite the lift says "Room X to Room Y," then your room number will be $(X+Y)/2$.

I'm rambling on a bit about corridors, but I feel it's an important subject for convention-goers, because all this space devoted to corridors has an unfortunate side-effect. There's hardly any room left for rooms! The Metropole is OK, but I've been in convention hotels which were designed by the same chap who did the Black Hole of Calcutta. At my last con the toilet in the room was so small that you had to make up your mind what you were going to do before you went in. The fridge in the room was so small that

when you made ice cubes the expansion of the water forced the door open.

And what makes the room problem even worse is that every hotel has two sets of corridors. There are the ordinary corridors that we use – and then there are the special secret corridors that the staff use. Did you ever open one of those doors marked “STAFF ONLY”? Everything is made of concrete in there. It’s a sort of alternate universe. The entire hotel is duplicated in concrete behind those doors for the benefit of the staff only. I find it all a bit alarming. Why do they need it? There’s never anybody in there. The cleaners are always to be found in the ordinary corridors, transferring each room’s set of damp towels to the next room. Perhaps one of these years I’ll do a proper scientific investigation of this thing and let you know the results.

I should repeat that I’m not criticising the Metropole. They treat SF fans with respect here. I think it’s humiliating in the Royal Angus in Birmingham, the way the fans can hardly get saying goodbye to each other at the end of the convention because of the staff carrying the furniture back in. When you check in at the Metropole, there’s none of this business of, “Good Morning, sir, are you with the SF convention – or are you having a room with carpets?”

Anyway – on to the talk! I gave my first Serious Scientific Talk at the Newcastle Eastercon in 1974, which means that this is my tenth anniversary. Ten years on the frontiers of knowledge, going far beyond the boundaries of science and good taste alike, inspiring scientists and laymen, and fans of *Space 1999* with respect and laughter and hatred – though not necessarily in that order.

This year, instead of taking one topic and subjecting it to my usual rigorous scientific analysis, I have decided to review the advances that have been made in the last decade in the fields of science and science fiction. And what a decade of progress and achievement it has been! Isaac Asimov came out with *Foundation’s Edge*, which proved that he has lost none of the literary attributes which made him famous back in the Forties. Scientists have launched into space an infra-red telescope which is so sensitive, they claim, that it can detect the heat from a cricket ball at a range of 200,000 miles.

I have to admit, though, that I am a bit worried about that one. I mean, who the hell *put* that warm cricket ball up there? Scientists have a thing about cricket, you know. It all dates back to the time when Einstein made that ridiculous statement, which I have mentioned before, that $E=MCC$. The Marylebone Cricket Club issued an immediate denial, of course, but the rumour still persists. And when I was a reporter with the *Belfast Telegraph*

many years ago, I had to write a piece about a local research institute having put in a new electron microscope. The scientists in charge issued a press release which boasted how powerful the instrument was – and guess what they gave for an example! Did they tell us how large it would make a human hair look? Did they say how large it would make a blood cell look? Nope! They told what the effect would be if you looked through it at a *cricket pitch!* At the time I dismissed it as inept popular science writing on their part, but now this mysterious warm cricket ball has shown up 200,000 miles out in space, something else I'll have to look into...

Another big technological advance of the last decade has been the advent of the quartz-powered watch. Practically all the watches and clocks these days are powered by quartz, but I'm happy to report that my German-Irish colleague, Von Donegan, has gone one step further. He has invented a watch which is powered by pints! It is, of course, only half the size of a quartz watch, and runs off a little Guinness reservoir which the wearer straps to his back. It gives you all kinds of useful data – British Double Summer Time – Irish Double Whiskey Time, etc – but, not content with that, Von Donegan is working on an advanced model. In the MkII watch, the Guinness flows into *him* and the watch operates off his breath. The main difficulty is in maintaining a steady flow of gaseous alcohol into the watch, but Von Donegan tells me he has it almost licked. Just a few hiccups to eliminate...

Von Donegan is also reported to be working on a supermarket trolley which will travel in a straight line, and I wish him every success with it. When I go into a supermarket to buy just one or two small items, I refuse to struggle with one of those lumbering great trolleys. I would feel stupid wheeling a huge trolley around with only a toothbrush in it, fighting to keep it going straight, but on the other hand I feel equally stupid doing the funny walk. You know the one you have to do when you've picked up a small item... you can feel the security cameras on you... and the eyes of the store detective... and you have to carry it around in a way which proclaims to all and sundry that you're not going to steal it. The Honest Man's Mince, I call it. You're trying to broadcast a signal that says, "Look! It's obvious I'm going to pay for this at the check-out." But the trouble is you tend to look more like John Inman broadcasting a different kind of a signal, and you risk getting touched up between the gondolas.

I have nothing against homosexuality, I hasten to add. In fact, I think it's a very good idea – for women. Suppose some kind of a miracle took place

and I got transformed into a woman... If I were dozing in an armchair at home and a fairy appeared and turned me into a woman... I can see myself waking up with a start and saying, “My goodness – I must have dropped off!” If that happened, I would immediately become a homosexual, because homosexual women get to go to bed with other women, and it’s very nice. But you just try being a homosexual when you’re a *man*. You’ve to go to bed with other men and have awful things done to you.

Where was I? I seem to have deviated. I had just dealt with all the scientific advances of the last ten years and was about to turn my attention to science fiction and fantasy. I’m not going to make the mistake of trying to predict what science will do in the next ten years. The only safe prediction one can make is that all predictions will be proved wrong. That’s why I get a bit annoyed every time a popular journal decides to start plugging old Nostradamus.

A Nostradamus freak was trying to convert me recently, and he showed me some of the quatrains and said, “Look at the incredible way he predicted Hitler.” Reluctantly impressed, I read the relevant page, then said “Wait a minute! This is about somebody called *Hister*. There’s no mention of Hitler in here.” The freak looked impatient and said, “It obviously *means* Hitler. He just got one letter wrong – an S instead of an L.” I said, “but that would make it Hilter. Who the hell was Hilter? I never heard of anybody called Hilter.” The Nostradamus fan snatched the book away and muttered something about sour grapes, and me having the nerves to call myself a science fiction writer when I wasn’t fit to kiss Perry Rhodan’s boots.

But it just shows the way reputations become inflated. Nostradamus’s chief claim to fame is that he got somebody’s name wrong! And if you cut Hister out of the predictions – give them a Histerectomy, so to speak – there is *nothing* left, so I content myself with trying to understand what has already happened. Something which is oddly difficult to do...

On to science fiction and fantasy! I can start off by revealing that Harlan Ellison and Gene Wolfe have abandoned their plans to collaborate on a novel. I think they decided that nobody would want to buy a book that had been produced by Harlan & Wolfe.

That concludes my survey of the advances in written SF in the last ten years. I can’t say anything about *Battlefield Earth*, because I ordered my copy by mail from Ken Slater and it hasn’t been delivered yet because Pickfords are on strike. Besides I think it has already been reviewed in

Private Eye by Richard Ingrams.

Another reason for my silence on this subject is that SF writers don't have funny names any more. The names are so *ordinary* these days. You can't make jokes out of them. It's not like in the old days, when most of the SF was being produced by people with splendid, resounding names like Stanton A. Coblentz and Garrett Putnam Serviss and Delos W. Lovelace. One of my favourites was the Russian writer called Nikolai Mikhailovitch Amosov, but he only wrote one novel. He probably figured nobody could become a popular science fiction writer with a name like Amosov. Mind you, I had high hopes of doing a series of puns about the analgesic school of SF writers when Robert Asprin appeared on the scene, but I haven't discovered any other writers whose names sound like cold cures – with the honourable exception of the great Stanislaw Lemsip.

One of the interesting developments in the last ten years has been the upsurge of science fiction and fantasy on the screen. And horror, too. I have to say that I enjoy horror films and occult thriller type films more than SF films, because the stories seem to translate better on to the screen. It's possibly because the essence of a good science fiction story is an abstract idea, which is naturally difficult to convey as images; whereas the essence of a good horror story is a mood or a feeling, and the cinema is good at evoking moods and feelings. The great advances in special effects techniques must also have something to do with it. Some of my favourite early movies succeeded *in spite of* their special effects, though I seem to remember they were quite good in *Night of the Demon*. Do you remember *Night of the Demon*? That's the movie where Dana Andrews gets a bad attack of the runes. It was quite scary on the large screen, though I think it loses something on video.

That was the other big development of the last decade – the video revolution. Have you noticed the way nearly everything is a video club these days? I saw loads of signs when I was coming through London: "Funeral Parlour & Video Club"; "Mormon Tabernacle & Video Club"; "Chinese Embassy & Video Club".

One of the things I love about the new wave of glossy movies that began with *Star Wars* is that, *already*, they have developed a brand new set of visual clichés. I still have a fondness for the old clichés that no movie-maker could live without, but they are becoming a bit stale.

For example, how is it that in movieland *everybody* knows what heroin

and cocaine taste like? I've seen that bit thousands of times. The story might be set in some sleepy little hamlet in the middle of Dorset. They find the stuff, usually in a plastic bag about the size of a hot water bottle. Nobody stops to reflect that it's worth maybe ten thousand quid. There's always some character who has a huge hunting knife handy, and he whips it out and saws a big hole in the middle of this ten thousand pound bag of dope. Then the vicar and the village postmistress grab a handful and cram it into their mouths, and nod, and say, "Yes, that's heroin." How do they *know*?

This astonishing perception on their part is, however, counterbalanced by a strange but universal inability to recognise blood without touching it. I'm happy to say that I very rarely find pools of blood – I never go to the AGMs of the Science Fiction Foundation – but I always know what it is instantly. But in movieland, even the most experienced detective *always* dips his finger in it before venturing an opinion.

Then there's the way nobody in a film will ever impart serious news to another person without first ordering him or her to sit down. I think they have to take that precaution because, for some reason, the police who volunteer to break bad news gently are no good at it. If Police Officer Jones gets killed by bank robbers, they'll telephone his wife, and say, "Hello, is that Widow Jones?"

Well, perhaps they're not *that* bad, but after coaxing a nervous and highly-strung woman to sit down they'll stare at her for a few seconds then yell out, "Your mother has just been murdered by a maniac and chopped into little bits and boiled up in a cauldron!"

I mean, they don't even *try* to lead up to the thing in a nice way – though I suppose it would be quite hard to ease your way in to a subject like that. It would hardly do to start off by saying "You remember how your mother always wanted to make good stew...?"

And there's the way when a phone connection gets suddenly broken, the person *always* jiggles the rest up and down – which, as everybody knows, only makes the disconnection more final.

The new SF and horror clichés are just as good. The dividing line between the two genres has become a bit blurred, with movies like *Alien* and the new version of *The Thing*, which have started a fashion for people suddenly bursting open, and imparted a new meaning to the term "Hurt Expression". The movie makers have also latched on to the shock value of *secretions*. Yugh! I prefer secretions to remain secret. And now there's

vomit! Anthony Andrews is building a whole career on his ability to throw up, firstly in *Brideshead*, and then in that post-holocaust play on TV a couple of months ago. I reckon Anthony Andrews has thrown up more times than he has had hot dinners.

But one of my all-time favourite characters in horror was the priest in *The Amityville Horror*. I don't know how he was portrayed in the movie, but in the book he was *great*. I've become used to the truly heroic type of priest, like the one in *The Exorcist*, who is prepared to die in combat with the Devil – so I was delighted with the priest in Amityville. He was summoned to the house where all the nasty things were supposed to happen, and when he was walking up the front path, he *thought* he heard a voice telling him to go away. So he went away!

The book dwells on all the terrifying devilish things that happened to him. When he was driving back home, the silencer fell off his car! And even when he was in his own house, there were more terrifying manifestations – he got a rash on his hand, and he took a head cold. That sort of thing is enough to break the nerve of even the bravest man, so no matter how many times the owner of the afflicted house phoned and pleaded for him to pop over on his exorcise bike, he flatly refused to go. Beautiful!

In science fiction films, the new clichés are just as good.

There's usually one major actor who has been brought in because he has no known previous connection with science fiction, which is supposed to lend the whole production stature and respectability. He stumbles through his part looking depressed, baffled and lost – like Forlorn Green – wondering why he has to wear a severe white wig when all the other male actors have beautiful Farrah Fawcett hair styles, or get to dress up in splendid suits of armour made from Austin Seven body panels that have been done up with Zebra grate polish.

And there is always a full complement of those huge rumbling spaceships which slowly glide past the camera, looking rather like an aerial view of Barrow-in-Furness. And there's the obligatory daft computer, built out of old Wurlitzer components, which is only there to give an air of authority to stupid decisions. *Star Wars* really set the trend in this respect. The Death Star was designed and run largely by computers, but – following a long-established tradition in space opera – it had a weak spot in its defences. This always takes the form of a little round hole, possibly the overflow from the captain's lavatory, which is just big enough to accommodate a torpedo.

On the Death Star it was cleverly positioned at the end of a sort of metallic canyon about a hundred miles long. The canyon was heavily defended by multi-barrelled ray-guns all along its length – I think Darth Vader felt he looked good in pompoms – nobody having thought of the more cost-effective idea of putting a metal grille over the little hole.

At the end of the film, when the good guys launched their final attack, somebody in the Death Star's control room said, "The computer has analysed their plan of attack, and it has some merit." We all remember what this meritorious and masterly plan was. It was to enter the hundred-mile canyon – which led to nowhere except the little round hole – at the *wrong* end and fly along it in a straight line, all the while being massacred by pompoms and enemy fighters.

Perhaps I have a naturally devious and sneaky turn of mind, but it seems to me that a better attack plan would have been to tootle around all over the Death Star's surface, pretending you didn't even know about the little round hole, then do a crafty sidestep into the canyon at the *right* end and pop your torpedoes into the hole. They managed it in the end, though. I love to think of that torpedo bouncing and rattling along that drain pipe into the bowels of the Death Star, round all the S-bends, and finally emerging from the captain's lavatory at a thousand miles an hour – one can only hope the poor guy wasn't sitting on it at the time – then causing that beautiful pyrotechnic explosion..... with Harpic and shredded toilet tissue flying all over the place...

For me that is one of the great images of the modern screen, and I think it's an appropriate one with which to end this talk.

My Life and Space/Times

Worldcon After Dinner Speech: Aussiecon II, Melbourne, August 1985

[*There's no place to stand the drinks.*] This is the bit I've been dreading since January 1983. This convention started off for me in a tremendous way with the opening talk by Race Matthews. All the things he described in his talk, about what he went through as a youth, learning all about science fiction and producing his fanzine – and discovering how difficult it was to get science fiction to read in World War II. I went through exactly the same thing myself except I was in Northern Ireland at the time. And it was really a time-binding experience for me to come here and find that a Cabinet minister who had done exactly the same things as I had done (my God, I wish we had politicians in Britain that produced fanzines; I don't know what Margaret Thatcher's would have been like – a sort of heavily censored version of the *Financial Times*; and I hate to think what sort of convention she would have run as well).

But it was really – I really couldn't get over it, because I went through it all – everything. In fact he should be here tonight, then he could just do the whole thing over again and I could sit down there. I went through all this business: I discovered science fiction at a very early age of about ten or eleven. I was reading the boys' papers every day: *Wizard*, *Hotspur*, *Rover*, *Adventure*, *Champion*, *Skipper*; and they weren't comics in the sense we use today. They weren't picture books, they were boys' papers or children's papers: with a lot of type and only one little illustration every page. They were a tremendous introduction to literacy, and I very soon realised that in every issue there was always a science fiction serial. I didn't know what science fiction was in those days, but I suddenly realised that these special stories were nothing to do with the Wild West or with football teams. These special stories where people went out to other planets, that was what I wanted to read about.

I can still – even after a gap of forty years, I can remember some of those stories better than novels I read last week. In *Wizard* in particular, there was one serial called *Full Speed Ahead Through the Worlds of Fear*. There's

more plot in that title than today you sometimes get in an entire trilogy. Even after a gap of forty years I can still remember the plot. The Earth was being menaced by a giant comet. (Somebody else has written a story about that quite recently; it does happen quite a lot in science fiction.) This chap decided he must get away from the Earth before the giant comet struck, which is good thinking; and he had just discovered this peculiar metal which was impervious to gravity. Not having read H.G. Wells, he didn't call it cavorite, he called it something else. He built himself this sort of spherical spaceship which was operated by the fact that you could pull up these little panels, and gravity would draw you off in the direction of where the panel was. He neglected the fact that the take-off speed would have been something like one inch per century – that was just a detail. He got away before the comet struck, and he travelled all round the galaxy for four years having tremendous adventures on every planet he came to. And after four years everybody on this ship got a bit homesick and said let's go back and see how things are on the Earth after the destruction. And they went back, and sure enough the comet had struck the Earth, but it had split it neatly down the centre, down the Atlantic and the Pacific, and the two halves about three miles apart. I think about five people had been injured. So they returned to Earth, and that was the end of the series.

Actually, all these series lasted four years because that was the limit that the writers could take.

Another one really sticks in my mind was *The Purple Planet Needs Air* (again more plot than you get in a book these days). In this series there was a purple planet, as the title suggests, which needed air, as the title suggests, and it was also in the Solar System. It was never disclosed which planet it was, because most of the planets in the Solar System are not purple. Now these people, realising they were running out of air did a very sneaky thing: they built themselves huge vacuum cleaners, and they pointed them at us and then they switched them on. I'm almost certain there's a flaw in the science in this story. They started stealing our air drawing it away across space. This was discovered by a test pilot flying a very high altitude aircraft. He found he was having trouble getting back down again. So he loaded up with baked beans and so on, and he went off to this purple planet and had great adventures there for four years until the writer died.

Well, these stories satisfied me for a while, and then I grew up to the age of about twelve or thirteen, and then I discovered my first copy of *Astounding*

Science Fiction, which these days is known as *Analog*. That was a genuine turning point in my life. The first issue I got had an A.E. van Vogt story that was called *Storm*. It was part of a series called *The Mixed Men*. It's impossible today, in a world where science fiction is so plentiful and commonplace – there's just more than you can ever read – for somebody like me living in Belfast. Well, Belfast is never going to be the fun capital of the galaxy. And in those days – you just can't describe it – this thing dropped into my hands, a copy of *Astounding Science Fiction*. This story by A.E. van Vogt, dealing with the adventures of this spaceship commanded by a woman called Grand Captain Gloria Lurr, was out hunting down this race of robots who had escaped from the Earth three thousand years earlier and settled one of the Lesser Magellanic Clouds, and she found them. I can still remember the opening sentence of that story, my first adult science fiction story. I can't remember exactly, but it said something like: THE WARSHIP FROM IMPERIAL EARTH CAME AROUND THE SUN SO QUICKLY THAT THE OBSERVER HAD NO TIME TO COMMIT SUICIDE. That was it! I was gone! It was worse than LSD. I've never had LSD, but I understand it wears off after two or three days. This didn't: forty years later it has still got me.

I freely admit that my work as a science fiction writer has been influenced by A.E. van Vogt because he was the one who realised that the science was important but the imagination was more important. He had this feeling for the future that other people didn't seem to have. He used to throw away lines like – in one story he had a production line for spaceships. A big story. It was explained that it took four hundred years for the first spaceship to come off the production line, but after that there was one every two minutes. That was super-science. In an early series *The Weapon Shops of Isher* he had a scene in which a reporter trying to investigate these strange – this strange organisation, tried to go into one of their shops and he tried to turn the handle on the door, but it was connected to a computer, and the computer identified him and locked the door and wouldn't let him in. Well, today that's nothing – you could do it, but in those days that was a vision of the future which many other science fiction writers could not have achieved.

I still remember the first computers coming out. They all had names ending “iac” and they had – they were almost as big as this room – but good Science Fiction writers knew instinctively that wasn't the way it was going to be. I've discovered there's nothing dates so quickly in science fiction as a

story in which the author is particularly proud of his scientific accuracy at the time of publication.

I think my favourite example of all this kind of thing is: I used to go on Saturday mornings and watch the Flash Gordon series, the old Chaplin movies. There was one, *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, and again I've forgotten the details but Flash Gordon is whizzing along in this little spaceship, with smoke going straight up from the back end and little bits of gunpowder falling straight down from the back end, and they get hit by a ray-gun from Ming the Merciless, who some people say I resemble. The ship was crippled and they were being forced to land, so they were organising an escape, and Flash Gordon got up and said, "Right, everybody check your anti-gravity belts." And they all looked down, and they were wearing little silvery belts which, if we ever do have anti-gravity belts, well this is quite possibly the way they'll look. The prop designer was using his imagination. Then Flash said, "Check your ray-guns" And they all looked and they had little guns which, if we ever have, well we *do* have ray-guns – again the prop designer was using his imagination. They were just about to jump off the ship, the three of them, Flash and a big bulky chap (I've forgotten his name; he had a very well-developed breastplate; we used to call him Big Chief Iron Titties) and Dale, the girlfriend. And Flash said to Dale, "And don't forget the portable radio." And she said, "Right," and she disappeared and came back – you see, up until then the prop designer had been using his imagination pretty well, but this movie had been made in the thirties and this bloke knew that a radio was a thing about the size of a writing-desk, and no matter how much he tried he could not visualise it being shrunk much more than half a writing-desk. So she had to jump out with this great thing.

I've wandered off the subject of the talk. I'd no intention of talking about Flash Gordon. What I meant to talk about was the effect that this mind-blowing discovery of science fiction had upon me personally. In some ways it was good, in some ways it was bad. One of the bad ways was that it destroyed my education. During the time when I was supposed to be working up to university entrance I was doing nothing of the sort. I was sitting at the back of the class either reading *Astounding* or publishing my own carbon-copy fanzine which had a circulation of three. The carbon paper in World War II was pretty bad. When it came time for me to sit Matriculation examinations I ducked out. I knew I was going to have the worst flop ever.

Somehow I managed to get a job as apprentice structural engineering

draughtsman, where I was supposed to design buildings which people would sit in and the roof would not fall on them and kill them. A big responsibility for somebody whose total education had come from *Planet Stories*, and *Thrilling Wonder Quarterly*, and things like that. And even when faced with the responsibility of earning a living, I still didn't sober up. I had my little collection of *British Reprint Astounding* which we got during the War. One came out every second month. For me it was like a form of drip torture. There was one came out at the beginning of December; but I wouldn't read it; I kept it till Christmas morning and read it on Christmas day; that was my Christmas present. I had my little collection hidden in an old gas fire in the office. And when nobody's about, which is quite often because it's a small firm, I used to sit and read the stories, and I knew them all off by heart. Well I just read them over again and had "diversions".

One of my duties as a structural engineer was to make tea four times a day on a little gas ring connected by one of those flexible pipes to the mains. And for a diversion, I managed to obtain a very fine gas welding nozzle from a shop which I fitted into this tube, and when I switched the gas on I could get a little flame about half an inch long; but when I turned this nozzle suddenly, the flame would shoot out about three feet. And using this thing, which I called the Betatron Ray, I hunted down every bluebottle, every daddylonglegs, every butterfly that ever came into my office. I'd go about shouting "Die, you Venusian swine!". This was one of these old-fashioned offices where you had huge sheaves of paper hanging up on the wall, invoices and things, and they're all brown round the edges as a result of near misses. And the smell from a burning bluebottle in a small office is terrible. *[It isn't funny]*.

But in between these episodes I'd try to improve myself. No, it wasn't a hopeless task! Astronomy is one of my real loves, and I think it's an interesting fact that very many science fiction fans start off with an underlying interest in astronomy. It seems to be a sort of common thing. But I had a big problem in astronomy in that I could not afford a telescope. Now telescopes are sort of slightly de rigueur for astronomers. I tried to build one using bits of an old pair of spectacles and the only tube I could get was a piece of lead pipe. I remember watching the transit of Jupiter, or one of the moons of Jupiter, one night, and I fell asleep and the lead pipe fell out of my hands through the window and landed on the dog's kennel about three in the morning. Poor old dog thought it had been nuked, and it had a sort of fit and

ran round the district, and in every house the windows lit up. I had to hide out.

I was so short of money, but I kept trying to have a telescope and I couldn't get one. I remember once I'd saved up seven-and-sixpence, and one day in a market stall in Belfast I noticed an eye-piece of a telescope which was about that length and had obviously come off a big telescope which was maybe six feet long. It was the first thing in the astronomical equipment range I could afford. I decided I was going to have it whatever it cost. I went in to buy it, and the old lady running the shop said, "Seven-and-six," and that's what I had. I was so delighted I said, "Give it to me." And she handed it over, and she must have had a pang of conscience. I knew perfectly well that this was only a bit of an instrument that should have been six feet long. But I was going out through the door, and a sort of strangled noise came out of her throat, and I realised she was trying to speak, and I turned round and looked at her, and she said, "Do you realise there's a bit missing?" I've never seen such a battle as on that woman's face between avarice and truth, all mirrored on the human countenance in that one second, "Do you realise there's a bit missing?"

So I kept on working as a structural engineer feeling that I hadn't really achieved my real potential in life. I did various things, I worked on the job and went out to Canada for three years. I had a nice little experience when we arrived in Canada. I decided to stay in Calgary, Alberta, and the first week I was there I went along to the local meeting of the Literary Club and I sat in on it. And different people read their little bits of work, and everybody commented. Then one little woman got up (she had a really strong resemblance to Bugs Bunny, but she was a science fiction writer), and she read this very, very long story which was full of women with green-tipped breasts (I don't know why they had to be green) and she went through tremendous detail about this spaceship going to Venus where all the women with green-tipped breasts were. It was coming back into the atmosphere. It slowed down to five hundred miles an hour, then speeded up to a thousand miles an hour, then slowed down and landed. And she put great emphasis on this thing, so when I had to do my little criticism I said, "Look, what is this bit about coming down into the atmosphere and slowing down to five hundred miles an hour and then speeding up to a thousand and then landing?" And she said, "Well, this is aeronautics," and she said, "and in the leading works on space propulsion and so forth, you are informed that when you are

slowing down you also have to pass through the sound barrier. You don't just go through it in the way when you're speeding up. You have to go through it on the way down." So she had heard that passing through the sound barrier meant speeding up to a thousand miles an hour. So she knew it had to go through the sound barrier: so it speeded up to a thousand miles an hour, then slowed down and landed. So I said to her, "I'm *almost* sure there's a flaw in the science somewhere!" And she jumped up, really upset. She had really bad luck, as her big squash for me was, "Listen, buster," she said, "you have obviously never read *The Challenge of Space* by Arthur C. Clarke." Out of the fourteen million people in Canada at that time she had to pick on me. I said, "Not only have I read *The Challenge of Space* by Arthur C. Clarke, but last month in London I discussed some of the problems in it with Arthur himself." I never heard of her again, but with her kind of luck she wasn't going to make it anyway.

After struggling along for years in this kind of engineering business, I realised I wasn't going to make it, but I did want to be a writer, so I managed to wangle my way into a public relations job in the aircraft firm where I worked publishing press releases and house magazines and so forth. The interview was a bit difficult as the bloke running the PR department was a tough ex-Fleet St editor and he wanted somebody good and he wasn't too happy about taking on somebody from the drawing office. And he said to me, "What writing experience have you got?" At that time I had published about two hundred articles in fanzines; but I thought that wouldn't sound so good, so I said, "I've published two hundred articles in science-related journals." He was deeply impressed, and I got the job on the spot – it's the absolute truth – and for months afterwards he kept saying to me, "Bob, how about showing me some of these science-related journals," and I said, "Yes, I'll bring some in tomorrow." Imagine showing up with a big pile of *Hyphen*. Eventually he forgot about the science-related journals.

[I almost spilled the drink. Every time you spill a drink a fairy dies. I've never killed a fairy yet.]

So I decided to try to settle down in this business of being a public relations man, writing about industry and so forth. It was a bit better and a bit closer to writing science fiction, but there were all kinds of dissatisfactions with it. I was working for an aircraft company in Belfast, and one day there was a party of Commonwealth journalists arrived. This was about 1972, when all the madness over there was at its height. But the aircraft company I

worked for, Shorts, their policy was that “it didn’t matter”. We could deliver orders on time. You could order an aeroplane from Shorts and still get it. Nothing was bothering us. These people, about twelve of them, we showed them round the factory, and I had to take them on a little aeroplane flight in one of our aircraft, down around the Mountains of Mourne at the bottom of County Down, and show them how beautiful Northern Ireland is, and how nothing ever happens there. We set off in the plane, and we flew down Belfast Loch a bit, and I was telling them, “This is going to be the experience of your life. You’re going to see the beautiful Mountains of Mourne for the first time ever, the most beautiful mountains in the world.” Actually, they aren’t even mountains, it’s a rotten little hill, a boring little hill. All these songs about how beautiful Ireland is are written by people who have never been anywhere else. It’s really a quite dismal place, and the Mountains of Mourne are worst – they’re the pits – but I’d built the people up. We were flying on towards them, when suddenly, you know what the aircraft did? A 180-degree turn, which was *not* in the programme. So I went up to the pilot and said, “What’s happening?” And he pointed to the earphones, and he put them on and said, “We’ve just had word from the control tower that there’s a bomb on the aircraft.” I said, “Christ! What am I going to tell these people?” And he said – it was helpful – he said, “You are the bullshit artist. That’s what you’re paid for. You tell them something.” So I went back, and found all these people looking at me; they *knew* something had happened. And I said, “Folks, we’re going back because there’s been a strike in the canteen and if we don’t get back soon your tea will be cold.” And it worked! Those people, they had the story of their lifetime right in their hands, and they left that factory not knowing, and there wasn’t a word appeared in print. I’d achieved my function, I’d concealed the truth from the world press. There wasn’t a bomb on the aircraft anyway, but that wasn’t the point.

It was the dishonesty of public relations that got to me in the end. The aircraft I’m talking about, the Skyvan, was a two-engined aeroplane. The whole point of having two engines on an aeroplane is that if one of them stops you can keep the other one going and still fly along. But this aeroplane had a defect: when one of the engines stopped the aeroplane fell down on to the ground. But in my public relations things I wasn’t allowed to say that. People would say, “What is the performance of this aircraft on one engine?” And the most I was allowed to say was that it had a negative rate of climb.

It was even worse when I got fed up with Belfast and went over to

England. I was working as publicity officer for Vickers Shipbuilding Group in the north of England building nuclear submarines and the like. It was a big firm and I was their PR man. The same thing: you weren't allowed to say things. They never spoke about the surface of the sea, they called it the Air Sea Interface. If Vickers submarines had faults sometimes they sank, but we weren't allowed to say that either. The most you were allowed to say was that sometimes the ship would undergo "a Depth Excursion". It sounded great: you could almost hear people on Brighton pier saying "Book your seats for the Depth Excursion!"

I had another spell in newspapers. They tried to make me into a sports reporter. On my first day in the *Belfast Telegraph* – no, the first week; I managed to get through a few days alive – and it came to Friday, and the sports editor came up to me. I didn't know how to report sport, I knew nothing about it, and he handed me a little slip. It was a fixture for a hockey match. And he came and said, "Report that, 300 words." And I said, "Wait a minute. I've never seen a hockey match." And he said, "It's alright, the rules are the same as in football." And he got away before I could explain that I'd never seen a football match either.

I had to go along the next day, Saturday, Belfast, wet, cold, a little patch of cinders, two very dispirited teams of hockey players knocking this thing around a pitch, and about ten people standing there with umbrellas. This was my start on a career which I hoped would end in a Pulitzer Prize. I knew it was going to be a disaster. I was standing there, no idea what was happening, and suddenly I heard somebody under one of the umbrellas saying "Ballymena aren't using the left side of the field enough." I thought that sounds good, so I got out my notebook and wrote that down. And I moved closer to the umbrella, and during the course of the match he made about five statements like that, which I noted down. And I went and got the names of the people who had scored goals, and retired to the local pub and had four hot whiskies, and I phoned it into the newspaper and went along on Monday morning expecting to be sacked. And the sports editor came up and congratulated me on this brilliant piece I had written, this insight I had into hockey.

Over the next four years I built up a reputation as a hockey reporter, and I never learnt the rules of the game. I think my reputation was founded on the fact that all over the country people were reading my stories and saying, "That's just what I said at the match today. This man really knows his stuff."

The thing that finally made me give it up – after four years I quit the paper, but they kept me on because I was so good. And on Saturdays I was reporting for five newspapers, my own paper plus the *Sunday Times*, one of the most prestigious papers in the world, the *Observer* and two papers in Dublin, getting paid five times for the one story.

I still didn't know the rules of hockey, and I was getting embarrassed at having to go up to people and say, "Who was playing who?". They'd told me on this bit of paper, but they hadn't told me which colours the teams wore. Then one day I got embarrassed and said I must know it by this time, and I wouldn't ask anybody anything. I watched the match and I did this glowing report. One team had won 4-0. I had it all down there – I thought I'd keep on at this business for life. I was walking off to the telephone, and one of the men from the team that got beaten was coming up by me, and one of the team that beat him said, "Hard luck!". No, it's the other way round: the man that got beaten said to the man that hadn't been, "Hard luck!" I thought that's funny, why is he saying that when his team got beaten, and I went back and checked up, and I found that I got the story backwards. The team I had down as the winner was the loser. So I did the story, and then I gave up. That was the end of my sports reporting career.

So it was time to become a full-time science fiction writer. There was nothing else left. So that's what I've been doing for the last ten years, plus a bit of work in fanzines. One of the big things about science fiction writing is that to write SF you need to know far more than you do when you write any other kind of fiction. So this had involved me in being a scientific researcher as well as an SF writer. I explained it all in my talks in England at different conventions. People have complained in England about the way I keep picking on poor old Einstein because of all the mistakes he makes. It's not his fault – it's not Einstein's fault that his brain and mine aren't in the same class. I read somewhere that it wasn't a tremendous IQ which made Einstein a great scientist; it was his simple, childlike approach to problems. And for all I know my mind is more simple and childlike than Einstein's.

I was able to see through a lot of the flaws in his work: this silly business about trying to disprove simultaneous events. He always used this idea of two people, one on a bank, and one on a railway train passing by, and the two people are flashing lights at each other as they passed. Well, everybody knows this is stupid. You can't do that. The ticket collector would throw you off. And the other thing he built his name on was this thing about

the twins paradox. You take two identical twins: one goes off on a space flight way up into the galaxy and back, and when he comes back he's younger than the one who stayed on Earth. That's where Einstein made his mistake. He was misinterpreting the evidence. As Sherlock Holmes said to Dr Watson, when you have eliminated every other theory, the one which remains, however unlikely, is the best that Conan Doyle could think up on the spur of the moment. The real truth of the twins paradox is: these two twin brothers; one goes off swanning around the galaxy having a lovely time, enjoying himself; in the meantime his brother's at home doing all the washing, paying all the bills, mowing the grass. When his brother gets back, he's exhausted. No wonder he looks older than the one who's was away off on a holiday. After innumerable brilliant observations like that I decided to become a full-time science fiction writer and researcher, and so I began getting the perks, guest of honour trips and so forth.

I've had some funny guest of honour trips. This one's marvellous, but I've been to Poland on a guest of honour trip. Poland; I call it the land of the 40-watt bulb. If this was Poland there'd only be one bulb hanging up there now. One of the funniest things I got in the guest of honour line was to be guest of honour for a *Star Trek* convention. I'd never been a *Star Trek* fan. I'd sort of watched it, but I'd never really cared for it all that much and during my talks I started to – I built up a little routine called *The Night Shift*. If you've watched *Star Trek* you'd have realised that it travels for a long time and so there must be more than one crew and they've got these shifts. But when anything happens there's only the same crew on the deck. And every week they're getting thrown out of their seats when they run into a vast immovable force field. They've forgotten about seat-belts. These people up there, they're having all the fun, and there's another crew to which nothing ever happens. They're in their bunks and they miss all the action.

I built this up into a talk called *The Night Shift*. Some SF *Star Trek* fans invited me along to a *Star Trek* convention in Birmingham – not Birmingham which is in Alabama, but *Birmingham* which is in England. So I thought great, free booze for the weekend. But unknown to me they had acquired two stars of *Star Trek* to be there.

One of their guests was Scotty, who I'd run down quite a lot in my talks. He calls himself an engineer, but when he's supposed to be fixing the main drive, all he does is open a trap-door outside the canteen and jump down and move a lot of little Lego blocks around. I *knew* he wasn't an engineer. This is

the silliest bit of the whole thing, James Doohan (that's the actor's name), when he appeared on the walk way at the convention, everybody went nuts. He got about ten minutes applause and explained that being on *Star Trek*, and learning science and technology had taught him so much that one day when he was on a visit to one of the big space ship producers, McDonnell Douglas I think it was in the United States, and they were showing him around the design areas, some of the engineers came up to him and said "Look, we've been stuck in this problem for two or three years." And he looked at it and said, "Have you tried doing this?" And they went "Gosh, why didn't we think of that!" So he'd fixed it for them, because he'd been on *Star Trek*, and the audience clapped – they believed the lot! He kept sending for bottles of whisky at three in the morning, when we couldn't even get a bottle of coke.

The other character was Chekov, played by Walter Koenig. He came up to me and said, "I understand you're making a lot of money through making jokes about me." And I didn't like to tell him I'd never included him in any of the routines because he was too unimportant in the story. So that night when I had to do *The Night Shift* routine I put him in it specially. Terrible business!

So this is the sort of thing you get involved with when you take up science fiction writing for a living. So take my advice: DO NOT DO IT!.

In conclusion I'd like to say that all I've talked about tonight is professional science fiction writing. My presence here was not achieved through any of my professional work, but because I've been a science fiction fan since I was a kid and have written an awful lot in fanzines for more than thirty years, and the money which brought me here was provided by ordinary readers, the ordinary fans, and there's no way in which I can thank them enough for the pleasure.

Thank you.

What I Learned from Watching *Star Trek*

**Rivercon XII, Louisville, Kentucky, July-August
1987**

I was very interested just now to get the recipe for that great southern fan drink “swill”. It sounded pretty good, and it’s prompted me to give you a recipe of my own. One of the most famous drinks in the world is Irish Coffee. It’s a good drink, but unfortunately everywhere I’ve travelled I find that people make it all wrong. They get the proportions a bit out of balance. To get the proportions right, what you do is take a large glass and fill it with Irish Whiskey, and you get a coffee bean... You tie it on a piece of thread and you dip it in there three times; any more spoils it... Then you throw that bean away because it’s finished...

This is one of the craziest conventions I’ve ever been to. I’ve been to lots of crazy conventions, but for different crazy reasons. One of my weirdest experiences ever was when I was invited to be Guest of Honour at a *Star Trek* convention. The only reason this strange event came about was because in the talks I do at media conventions, where people with brains go, I used to do a talk about *Star Trek*. The whole idea of it was that while we’re watching *Star Trek* every week, something awful always happens. They run into a vast invisible force field and everybody gets thrown out of their seats. And even though it’s three or four centuries in the future, they’ve forgotten about seat belts.

It’s occurred to me that this is happening once a week without fail, and it’s always with the same people on the bridge. And assuming that the ship works three eight-hour shifts, it means there are two other crews on that ship that nothing ever happens to. They’re just as well off, really, because of some of the things that *do* happen. Take Scotty, for instance; he was at the *Star Trek* convention where I was a guest. He was a more important guest than I was – I know that because they gave him more whiskey than they gave me. And he drank it faster than I did! I never really thought much of him as an engineer. I was in aircraft design myself, and aircraft aren’t as far advanced

as space craft, of course, but I never liked the way Scotty went about his job. Every now and again he had to fix the main drive, and he wouldn't delegate it to one of the two or three thousand assistants; he always did it himself. Which involved lifting up that hatch, just outside the canteen, and getting down in there and moving the different colored Lego blocks. I was always amazed he did it right...

But Scotty was at this convention and I was very pleased to meet him in the flesh. He allowed me to buy him a drink, and then he allowed me to buy him another drink. And then he allowed me to buy him another drink... So at that point I sort of lost interest in the whole thing. When he came out to do his talk the audience went mad. He walked up and down a bit, then he explained that being in *Star Trek* for so many years had given him an insight into how space ships worked... He said that McDonnell-Douglas had invited him to go to see how they were getting along with making some part of *Challenger* or something. He said they took him in this design office and these engineers were all sitting there looking sick, because they had been working on this problem for about four years and they hadn't been able to get anywhere with it; they were stuck. And Scotty looked at it and summoned up all his space ship expertise which he'd acquired from *Star Trek*, and he looked at them and said, "Have you tried putting that there, and that there, and that there?"

So they looked at him and went [*smacking palm on forehead*], "Why didn't *we* think of that!" And the audience went mad, in that they believed every word of it... I was in aircraft design and I knew it was all lies. They were *good* lies, but they were lies...

Also at that convention there was Chekov, Walter Koenig. He was a nice guy, but he came up to me and he said, "I understand that you go on making a lot of money making jokes about me." I didn't try to explain to him that I go to conventions as a fan. It costs me *money* to make jokes about *Star Trek*! And also, even more, I didn't like to explain, but I haven't made any jokes about him because he's too unimportant... So that night, when I was doing my speech, I put him in especially, just so his feelings wouldn't be hurt.

I find from many years of reading and also writing science fiction that I too have picked up this mistaken knowledge about the way things work. I'm not very good with motor cars, but I know how space ships work, and time machines and things like that... Time machines were a favourite of mine; my

favourite design of a time machine came out in a mystery story in *Analog*. Time machines all sponsored the same description; there was a cage made up of shimmering rods, and if you remember, they always went together at certain angles that were very hard to comprehend. When you tried to study the shape of one of these cages, you got a curious wrenching sensation behind your eyes...

I loved those time machines. I put one of them into my science fiction novel called *Who Goes Here*; it's ten times as funny as *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but nobody seems to realize it except me... But in there I have one of these time machines with a cage made of shimmering rods. And this one was used in a restaurant where, if you wanted a vintage wine you just ordered a new wine and shoved it in there, switched it on, and waited a while. You could have it thirty years old if you wanted, forty even. You took it out, and *lived* it.

I don't plug my own books, of course... In that same book I had some wonderfully funny ideas. For instance, I had a species of insect that was so ugly, so awful looking that it reproduced through being stomped upon. Its body was full of acid and also eggs, so when you stomped on it the acid ate through the sole of your shoe and before you could get your shoe off you had a foot full of little bugs. They went right through you and it was too late. Mmm; that's nice stuff to hear right after a banquet...

But we're drifting away from the subject of time machines, which as I mentioned is a favourite subject of mine. I remember many years ago back in Ireland in the 1950s, for the cover of a magazine I had to do this picture of a time machine. The only material I had to work with was a wax stencil and a dried-up Bic ballpoint pen. And so I decided not to attempt the shimmering rods and the curious eye-wrenching effect, on the wax stencil with the dried-up Bic ballpoint... Even Da Vinci couldn't have done it... So I went in for a time machine which looked a bit like a telephone booth, and it was for sale in a shop window. It was obviously a time machine; there was a notice on it – the thing was called “Chrono Clipper Mark IV”, price \$10,000. And there was a note under it which said, “four years to pay”... That's a very subtle joke... The idea was that a person could go into that shop, give the owner a hundred dollar deposit, jump into the time machine, come out four years later, and you'd own it! But I never figured out who was making the payments...

All this goes to show you what a complicated thing time actually is. We

tend to visualize it as a straight line, where the present is a dot. It isn't like that; time is more complicated than that. People often get precognizant dreams, and sometimes *know* something is about to happen before it actually happens. For instance, just last week I dreamt that I needed a haircut... And I woke up in the morning and I *did* need a haircut! It's incredible...

I've come across only one serious attempt to travel into the future. This was an idea invented by an Irish science fiction fan named Walt Willis, who's one of the best writers I've ever met. He invented something called "subjective induced temporal acceleration". The system is that you put a person in a very cold, miserable, damp room, and you keep him there for two or three days. He's not even allowed to drink anything except alcohol-free lager, and he's forced to listen to Barry Manilow records. After he's been there for about four days, you pull a handle and the poor bloke falls through a trap door, and he lands in a room where there's beautiful nude young women plus champagne and cigars and everything like that. You know how it is when you're not enjoying yourself, time slows down? Well, when you're enjoying yourself time speeds up. So while he's been in this awful business time has been dragging on; then suddenly he's dropped in this other situation so he goes into temporal overdrive... And disappears into the future... I don't know how far he got into the future, but I volunteered for experimentation...

Science fiction writers do not deal very much with time travel. It's a difficult subject. Take traveling into the past, for instance. One of the best ways to travel into the past is to be struck by lightning. For ordinary people in real life, if you get struck by lightning you just die. But in science fiction if you get struck by lightning you get thrown into the past. And the distance you get thrown into the past is governed by certain variables – your body weight, the exact number of billions of volts in the lightning stroke, and also the period of history that the author wants to write about... I've never read a time travel story yet where somebody has got thrown into the past where he couldn't speak the language...

That's possibly enough about time machines. I'll tell you what I've learned about space travel through watching *Star Trek*. I can tell you one thing; the old idea of firing people into space by a gun doesn't work ... That's no good. The old Jules Verne idea of a gun a mile high is a total impossibility. When you think about a gun a mile high, how could you ever get enough leather to make a holster for it... And who could wear it? You can't even think about wearing it underground because it's illegal to have a

concealed weapon...

Then there's the modern communications revolution. There's so much happening these days with computers! I'm not quite caught up in that yet; I'm still stuck at the Alexander Graham Bell stage. I feel sorry for that guy; he built himself a telephone and it was no good, because there was nobody to ring up. He finally realized what was wrong, so he invented another telephone and he gave it to somebody so he could ring him up... Then after a while he invented a third telephone and he gave it to somebody else, and when he rang up the second telephone it was engaged...

Well, that covers the field of telecommunications. I think that science fiction is becoming part of education. I remember a good four years ago in Britain we'd been having a series of very bad summers. We haven't had one this year; it's been awfully good, but four years ago it was a typical summer – raining, cold, and miserable. One day when I was sitting chatting with the landlord, he said, "You might not quite buy this, but we don't get good summers anymore." I was interested, so I said, "Why? What is the reason?"

He said, "It's this business they've brought in about leap years. Every fourth year they put in an extra day. These days are all adding up, and the calendar is getting out of step with the seasons." There followed three hours of innocent conversation, where I tried to persuade him that he had a nut loose, and that the extra days were there to were there to keep the thing in step. But he won in the end when he told me, "Just look right through the door. Is it summertime, Sir?"

There's also the greenhouse effect. Everybody's worried about the ozone layer disappearing. In Britain, energy costs are a bit more expensive than they are here, so people get double glazing on their windows put in to save on their heating bills. And it's a funny thing about this. If you know the greenhouse effect, you have a little glass house; it keeps the heat in and plants grow better. That's what greenhouse means. So, what they're saying is, if you have a greenhouse, the heat comes in and stays in and keeps the place warm. But when you have an ordinary house with windows in it, the heat goes out through the glass and makes the house colder. So after many years of study I realize that house builders in Britain are putting the glass in the window in backwards... You've just got to turn it around, and all the house will start being warm. Of course a few people made a mistake with greenhouses and they end up with little icehouses instead...

Well, I presume everybody has heard about the Bermuda Triangle

mystery. That's another one I solved through my intuitive knowledge of science gained by watching *Star Trek*. The big thing about the Bermuda Triangle is that ships and things keep disappearing. Now, there have been millions of books written about the Bermuda Triangle, paperbacks made of very absorbent paper. And since there have been shiploads of books written about it, people who live in the Bermuda Triangle want to read them, naturally enough. So all these ships full of very absorbent paper are fishing around inside the Bermuda Triangle. And when all the absorbent paper gets wet and heavy, all the ships disappear by sinking... And this leads more people to write books about the Bermuda Triangle mystery, and the whole thing keeps going on and on...

The great thing about science is that to make great scientific discoveries, you don't have to be a genius. I found this out through watching *Star Trek*... Take the case of old Albert Einstein himself. He made his mark in science, but it wasn't his great IQ that made Einstein famous and successful as a scientist; it was the fact that he had a simple child-like approach. For all I know, I might be even more simple and child-like, so I may be making even better discoveries than he did. But the one about the twins paradox I'm afraid was his greatest slip-up.

Two twins – one of them gets on a spaceship and flies way around the galaxy, on a holiday cruise... Just like in *Star Trek*... This character, he swarms around the galaxy for two or three years, having a lovely time, having drinks, watching comets go by and watching *Star Trek*. Then he comes home and lands and he gets out of the spaceship and he's younger looking than the twin that stayed behind. Well, of course he is! The other one was looking after the house; he was paying the bills. He was doing all the work. That poor twin brother was worn to a shred! He seemed much younger so Einstein misinterpreted that time had passed more slowly for the one on the spaceship. He got it all wrong...

I was promised I'd be heckled... As well as practical science that I've been talking about, I hope I'll say a little bit about pure mathematics, another field of mine that I learned from watching *Star Trek*... Probability mathematics is a great favourite of mine. It's difficult in that you cannot predict the future as any student of horse racing will tell you... One of the themes of probability mathematics is that if two people lose each other in a very large department store, there's no guarantee that they'll ever meet up again unless one of them stands still. On the face of it, that seems a useful

piece of information except that if it happens to you, how do you know which one moves and which one stands around... So it's a big decision to make. You could stand there and the store could close, and one of the assistants could come up and start taking your clothes off... And that would be all right except they would start by unscrewing your arms... So I've given up on probability mathematics altogether.

Anyway, in closing, I just want to say how pleased I am to be here tonight. And I'm just about as happy as a NASA scientist if a Mars lander had dug up definite proof of the existence of Ray Bradbury. Thank you for listening for so long. Now if anybody wants to heckle, I'll heckle back...

Campus Fugit

Conspiracy '87 (Worldcon), Brighton, August-September 1987

I was sitting in my office one day, writing a science fiction novel and at the same time solving some scientific problems which have baffled the world's greatest thinkers for centuries. Suddenly there was a tap on the door. I stared at it a moment, thinking, *That's funny – that wasn't there a moment ago.* Then the door opened and who should enter but my old friend Von Donegan, the noted German-Irish writer and researcher!

He was wearing an expression of mingled triumph and pleasure, with just a hint of barely controlled manic excitement.

"Why," I said to him nervously, "are you wearing that expression of mingled triumph and pleasure, with just a hint of barely controlled manic excitement, on your face?"

"Where else could I wear it?" he said, showing that incredible sharpness of brain which had once – during a near-suicidal attempt to understand an Ian Watson book – led to him accidentally trepanning himself from the inside.

"I'm really glad to see you, Bob," he went on, "because I need to talk to you." He approached my desk and brought up a chair, which surprised me because I hadn't even noticed him swallowing one. As he was sitting down I noticed for the first time that there were several old scars on his face.

"Von," I said, "how did your face get that way?"

"You mean the scars?" he said proudly. "I got those when I was at Heidelberg."

"My God," I breathed, "I heard that was a pretty hectic con, but I had no idea they did things like that to you. Did you get mixed up with the Society for Creative Anachronism?"

"No, you fool," he gritted. "I attended Heidelberg University. Getting scars is all part of the learning system there."

"So *that's* where Mrs Thatcher got the idea," I said. "And I thought we were the only ones to suffer education cuts."

Some of the pleasure faded from Von Donegan's face.

"It's funny you should mention education," he said. "Well, *almost*

funny. You see, I've made millions from my latest book, and I want to spend the money on a great educational project, and I need your help because I know that the ideal of promoting knowledge is a passion of yours which far outweighs any thought of vulgar fame or commercial success."

"Quite right," I said, seizing my note-pad. "What was the name of the book, what was it about, and who is your agent?"

"Don't give me that," he said. "Your agent is a genius – he *must* be if he sells the sort of stuff you write. Doesn't he keep in touch with you?"

"Not since I sat on the ouija board and broke it," I said. "Now, about this book..."

"It's my best yet," Von Donegan said. "A new way of teaching mathematics. The book is filled with faint outlines of numbers, and with it comes a paint box which the students use to fill in the outlines with colours, and thus they soon become numerate. I called it *Numbers by Painting*."

"That's brilliant," I breathed.

"Yes," Von Donegan agreed modestly. "It's a sort of follow-up to my last success – *Writing by Numbers*. You know the one, where you take a dictionary and lists of numbers, and you can sit at home and write *War and Peace* or *Vanity Fair* or *Mission Earth* – any literary classic you care to name..."

"You have totally won me over," I said. "What is this great educational project you have in mind?"

"Well," he said, "it's a well-known fact that the best way to learn science is by reading science fiction. You are the perfect example I'll give you a little test to prove it. Tell me, what is *Fahrenheit 451*?"

I thought for a moment, baffled. "Could it be the temperature that Ray Bradbury reached when he saw the TV version of *The Martian Chronicles*?"

"Don't try to be funny," Von Donegan snapped. "What I'm going to do is to found a new university of science – I think I'll name it after Hugo Gernsback – where the students learn all their science by reading SF. Naturally, I want you to be the chief administrator, because I've read your work and as far as I can see you learned all you know about science from *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder*."

I nodded, deeply flattered. "Don't forget *Captain Future* and *The Mysterious Traveller Magazine*."

He frowned. "Perhaps you're over-qualified for the post."

"No, no," I said hastily. "I also lost some scientific knowledge – and

some brain cells – through reading *Perry Rhodan*.”

“That’s understandable,” Von Donegan said. “So you’ll accept the post?”

“I have to! It’s my duty to pass on everything I know about science and technology to the young of this country. For instance, did you know that the inertial guidance system for inter-continental missiles was invented by a man whose children kept leaving empty pop bottles on the floor of the family car?”

“My car has been having engine trouble recently,” Von Donegan said pensively. “I’m a bit surprised, because it’s Italian and before the manufacturers put the engine into production they got 2,000 expert designers to check it over and give their assent.”

“Does that mean it’s a 2,000 si-si engine?” I quipped.

“Don’t start the car puns,” Von Donegan snarled, growing a trifle paler. “I want to concentrate on my project. At last I can put all my advanced ideas into practice. You know, I intend to pay my students, so that while they are studying at the university they’ll be able to put themselves through the training for business careers – like selling magazine subscriptions.”

“That’s marvellous,” I said. I immediately shelved all my other projects and threw all my energies into helping Von Donegan set up the Gernsback University for Scientific Studies, or GUSS for short. It was an instant success!

All the old tedious methods of teaching were thrown out and were replaced by classes in which the tutors worked from SF books and magazines. The Government became a bit upset when they found we had placed major contracts for textbooks and visual aids with Ken Slater, Rog Peyton and Forbidden Planet.

At one point Mrs Thatcher became involved, but I quickly slipped her a copy of a Doc Smith book and when she saw all those descriptions of planet-smashers she was quickly won over to our side. (In fact, she became inflamed with the idea of appointing Kimball Kinnison as Minister of Defence, but when she heard the probable cost of an inter-dimensional vortex blaster she quickly lost interest and switched back to Trident, which is about 5% cheaper.)

The university flourished for a year or so, banishing mistaken notions about science and supplanting them with the stuff that *we* all know to be true. For instance, we dealt with the effects of lightning on the human body. The

traditional view is that being struck by lightning kills a person, but anyone who reads SF knows better. A much more likely effect is that the person on the receiving end, the strikee, will be hurled back into the remote past.

The exact distance he will be bounced back in time depends on three factors – his body weight measured in grammes, the number of volts in the electrical discharge, and the period of history the author has been boning up on.

If that sounds alarming, don't worry too much, because I have devised a foolproof method of avoiding being struck by lightning. It is based on the fact that in all the billions of words of printed SF there is not one example of a person being hurled back into some ancient culture without having university degrees in that culture's history and language.

So, all you have to do is avoid classical studies and you'll be as safe as houses. Houses with lightning conductors, that is. Latin is the most dangerous subject of all. One of my students at GUSS came to me one day with a pile of books under his arm and said, "I'm an avid reader."

I said to him, "You're taking a hell of a risk with any of those Roman poets." He went away with a puzzled expression which indicated there might have been a communications failure.

I won't go into too much detail about the university's curriculum at this stage, because – sad to relate – Von Donegan and I were about to be overtaken by dramatic events. (If you can't make it funny, make it dramatic.) The university was doing *too* well, you see. Other organisations were becoming jealous and resentful because we were attracting all the best students, in spite of our rigorous entrance standards. To obtain a place at GUSS a student had to have three A-levels (*Analog* levels) and at least ten O-levels (*Omni* levels).

In particular, we got into trouble with the teachers' union, most of which had trouble coming to terms with the idea that – in our university – a person with four years at teacher training college was less qualified than somebody who had done three months behind the counter at *Dark They Were* and *Golden Eyed*.

To cut a long story short, our enemies managed to get an official enquiry going, and Von Donegan and I were suspended from our jobs at our own university on the grounds that – this will make you laugh – that we weren't properly qualified to head a place of learning! Did you ever hear of anything more ridiculous?

We appealed, of course, and produced all our official diplomas – but even the sight of my 50-yards Breast-stroke Certificate failed to sway the committee. My hopes were raised for a moment when Von Donegan brought out a letter from the Pasteur Institute, but it only turned out to be a note warning to stop lurking around the back of their premises trying to steal the milk.

The upshot of it all was that we were given a year to acquire some proper mundane credentials. Such ignominy! Von and I had to enrol at a special school for disadvantaged adults, and it was *terrible*. There we were – stuck in among all those Stephen Donaldson fans – trying to cram ten years of accepted establishment-type learning into a single school year.

To make matters worse, our tutor – a sarcastic monster named Higgins – took a dislike to us and kept loading us down with homework. We had so much of it that we had to sit up until the small hours every night, then we would be late for school in the morning and would get a fresh barrage of sarcasm and abuse from Higgins.

The three subjects which gave us the most trouble and took up most of our time were Shakespeare, geography and geometry. There was just too much of them, even for brains like ours, and it began to look as though Von Donegan and I would emerge from the course as abject failures and would never get our jobs back.

One night we were sitting in our apartment, toying with a couple of Pink Ladies – and wishing we had a drink instead – when I realised I had no hope of getting through that night’s work. “Something will have to be done,” I said to Von Donegan. “Can’t you come up with a solution to this homework problem?”

Von Donegan’s brows knitted so furiously that a little pullover appeared on the bridge of his nose. “I’ve got it!” he said. “Where we went wrong was to begin thinking conventionally, instead of like the SF geniuses that we are. There is too much knowledge for us to cope with – and we reacted like mundanes by vainly trying to take it all in, just the same. But a true SF genius, equipped with his van Vogtian double mind and William Gibson phrase book, would have... would have...”

“Yes, yes,” I said eagerly, privileged to watch raw genius at work.

“...would have reduced the amount of knowledge!”

“How could you do that?” I said, suddenly feeling sorry for Von Donegan. It was obvious that the recent strain had unhinged his brain.

“Easy!” he said, a visionary gleam appearing in his eyes. “We start off by travelling back into the past. First of all, we visit Euclid and explain to him how much heartache all his theorems are going to cause – not only for us, but to untold millions of schoolchildren. We persuade him to take up some other occupation – and that gets rid of most of the field of geometry in one go.

“Then we visit Columbus and persuade him to turn back before he discovers America – and without the New World to consider, future geographical studies are reduced by a very large percentage. Then we visit Shakespeare and persuade him to lay off the plays and sonnets, thus wiping out about half our English studies.

“It’s all so simple and obvious,” Von Donegan enthused. “Why didn’t I think of it before?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Especially as the whole plan is so eminently practicable. How are we going to get back into the past? By being struck by lightning?”

“Lightning is too unreliable,” Von Donegan said. “Besides, I’m afraid of thunder. No, I’ll design and build a time machine, and we’ll use that.”

I gaped at him in astonishment, “But you’re the one who only yesterday couldn’t change a fuse.”

“That’s mundane technology,” Von Donegan said. “We’re talking SF technology now, and that I can handle. You go out and have a couple of pints, and when you get back the machine will be ready.”

I did as I was told and, incredibly, when I got back to the apartment the time machine was completed and ready to go. It was a typical 1940s *Astounding* model, consisting of a cage made of shimmering rods which met at peculiar angles which produced a strange wrenching sensation in my eyes when I tried to follow the geometries.

“You’ve done it!” I cried. “I can tell this is a time machine because of the way the shimmering rods meet at peculiar angles which produce a strange wrenching sensation in my eyes when I try to follow the geometries.”

“Sorry about that,” Von Donegan muttered. “I fell up against it a while ago and it got out of shape.” He grabbed the cage and pulled it into a normal rectangular configuration. It kept right on shimmering, ready to take us into the past as far as we wanted to go.

“There is one major problem,” Von Donegan said. “When I switch on the power drain will be so great that we’ll only have a minute or so each with

Euclid, Columbus and Shakespeare.”

I nodded knowingly. “That’s because of the billions of electron volts needed to overcome the resistance of the temporal matrix.”

“No,” Von Donegan said. “It’s because I only have one fifty pence piece for the electricity meter. I don’t suppose you could...?”

“Sorry,” I said hastily. “I’ve just given my last change to the Captain James T. Kirk Hostel for Redundant Television Actors.”

“Oh well, we’d better go then,” Von Donegan said. “Let’s see now – how long ago did Euclid live?”

“Around 300BC,” I said, stepping into the shimmering cage beside him.

He took out his calculator, pressed the keys and said, “That means we have to go back exactly 2287 years.” He turned to the hastily-assembled control console and tapped in some figures on the buttons, buttons which looked oddly familiar to me.

“Hey,” I said, “that looks like part of my video recorder!”

He nodded. “I had to borrow the timer unit.”

“I hope it works better for you than it did for me,” I grumbled. “I never once managed to record a programme while I was out. The damned instruction manual is written in cyberpunk, and...”

At that moment Von Donegan threw a massive lever. I ducked and the lever flew harmlessly over my head. He then threw a couple of switches, the cage began to hum, and the scene beyond the bars dissolved into a hazy, formless, flickering blur. It was just like a film being projected by Gerbish at an Eastercon. Suddenly the humming and flickering stopped, bright sunshine washed over us – and there we were in ancient Egypt.

I recognised it at once because there was a lot of sand around, and in the middle distance some people were building a pyramid. The pyramid had a sign on it. Von Donegan, who speaks fluent hieroglyphic, translated the sign for me. It read: CONDOS FOR SALE.

“That’s funny,” I murmured. “Most countries have banned pyramid selling.”

Von Donegan looked ill, “Shaw,” he gritted, “don’t start the ancient Egypt puns.”

I gaped at him. “Can’t I even do the one about the explorer who fell out of his aeroplane and hit the Nile on the head?”

An argument might have ensued, but at that moment we noticed near us a gloomy-looking man who was staring in bafflement at some diagrams he

had scratched in the sand. He looked amazingly like Omar Sharif, but I sensed at once that he was Euclid.

I said to him, "Are you Euclid?"

"Who do you *think* I am?" he replied sarcastically. "Omar Sharif?"

"What way is that to greet visitors from the future?" Von Donegan cut in. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry," Euclid said. "Life has been pretty grim for me recently. You see I lost my job when the Great Library at Alexandria went bust."

"What happened?"

"Poor financial management," Euclid explained. "The library was supposed to exist on the fines it charged when members kept scrolls out too long."

"That seems reasonable," I said.

Euclid nodded. "Yes, but the big problem is that we're living in BC. We count time backwards here, and no matter how long a member kept a scroll at home when he brought it back it was always earlier than when he had taken it out! It was enough to break a librarian's heart."

"You have my sympathy," Von Donegan said.

"I did my best," Euclid went on. "I spent a couple of years trying to design a date stamping machine which would run backwards, but the money dried up. I got fired, and then I decided to become a mathematician, but I'm not making much headway with these problems." He raised his doleful gaze from the diagrams in the sand, and suddenly noticed the calculator which Von Donegan was still holding in his hand.

"What's that?" Euclid cried, snatching the machine from Von Donegan's grasp. He pressed a few buttons, and his eyes widened as his unique genius for mathematics supplied the answer to his own question.

"With this marvellous instrument," Euclid breathed, "I will be able to produce ten times as many theorems as before. My name will live for ever!"

"Not so fast." Von Donegan said indignantly, trying to grab the calculator back. "I paid £3.99 for that at Dixon's, and I demand..."

But he was too late. Suddenly there was a loud whooshing noise, and Von Donegan and I were back in the time machine and surrounded by the flickering blurs of the Gerbish Effect.

"You made a right mess of that," I said accusingly to Von Donegan. "Things are going to be worse than ever in the future now that you've handed your calculator over to Euclid."

Von Donegan threw up his hands which surprised me because I hadn't even noticed him swallowing them. "Why didn't *you* say something to him?" he said. "You're supposed to be the great talker."

Before I could reply the flickering ceased and we dropped on to the deck of a small sailing ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We were close to a worried-looking man, who was sitting at a bench covered with clocks which he was obviously trying to repair or adjust.

"Are you Christopher Columbus?" I said.

He nodded.

"And," I said, "did you set sail in 1492?"

"I had to," he replied. "I wanted to leave a year earlier, but it was forbidden because nobody could think of an ocean colour which rhymed with 1491. What do you want, anyway?"

"We have come to make a plea on behalf of future generations of geography students," I said to Columbus. "If you would only agree to turn back..."

"Wait a min," he interrupted, turning to speak to a passing sailor. "Manuel," he said, "take over the steering of the ship." Columbus turned back to me. "Sorry about that – I was putting the ship under Manuel control."

I reeled back, wondering if I had at last met someone whose puns were worse than mine.

"I'd better deal with this, we're running short of time," Von Donegan cut in, glancing at his wrist watch.

"What's that?" Columbus cried, snatching the watch off Von Donegan's wrist. He pressed a few of its buttons, and his eyes widened as his unique genius for navigation supplied the answer to his own question.

"I was about to turn back because, without an accurate timepiece, I couldn't work out the latitude," he breathed, "But with this marvellous instrument I'll be able to navigate with complete confidence and discover lots and lots of new lands."

"Not so fast," Von Donegan said indignantly, trying to grab the watch back. "I paid £3.99 for that at Dixon's, and I demand..."

Suddenly there was another loud whooshing noise, and Von Donegan and I were back in the time machine again, surrounded by the flickering blur. "You made a right mess of that," I said to him. "Things are going to be even worse in the future now that you've handed your watch over to Columbus."

Von Donegan rolled his eyes at me – which surprised me because I

hadn't even noticed him taking them out. "Things are going badly for us," he admitted. "In the next part of the time voyage we'll just have to put our trust in God."

"Does that mean you're putting the time machine under Emmanuel control?" I chortled.

Von Donegan gritted his teeth so hard that little bits of gravel rolled down his chin. "Shaw," he said, "don't start on the Biblical puns."

"I wouldn't dream of being irreligious," I said. "I know that many people still think that everything in the Bible is gospel."

Before Von Donegan could reply the flickering ceased. We found ourselves standing on the doorstep of a lovely cottage close to a pretty English river. I rang the doorbell and was about to say, "Avon calling," when I noticed Von Donegan glaring at me with clenched fists. How he managed to glare at me with his fists I'll never know, unless he picked up his eyes after rolling them at me.

A voice told us to enter the cottage, and when we went in we saw a frustrated-looking man sitting at a desk which was surrounded by heaps of broken quill pens and terribly blotted pages of manuscript.

"We have come from the future," Von Donegan began hurriedly, "with an urgent and vitally important piece of news for you..."

"Not again!" Shakespeare said irritably. "Don't tell me I've been awarded another six numbers in the *Readers Digest* prize draw."

"That isn't it," Von Donegan said.

"What is it then?" Shakespeare said. "Can't you see I'm busy. I'm working on a sequel to *The Tempest*. It's all about this spaceship which lands on a planet where it gets attacked by an invisible monster. Trouble is, I can't think of a good title for it."

Von Donegan's eyes lit up – possibly scorching his fingers – as he saw his chance to influence the history of literature. "Will, baby," he said, "perhaps I could help you with a title. Here's a hint – just think of a big bookshop... in London... Tottenham Court Road area..."

"I've got it!" Shakespeare cried. "Foyles! That's a great title for my play!"

Von Donegan looked so comically upset that I decided to write up the whole incident for either the *Times Literary Supplement* or *Ansible*. I took out my new six-colour ballpoint pen to make a note.

"What's that?" Shakespeare cried, snatching the pen from my grasp. He

flipped the point in and out a few times, and his eyes widened as his unique genius for anything connected with writing answered his own question.

“With this wonderful instrument which glides so easily over paper I will be able to write all the plays and sonnets which clamour in my mind, but which I have not been able to commit to paper because of the stupid quills I have been forced to use.”

“Not so fast,” I said indignantly, trying to snatch the pen back, but at that moment there was another loud whoosh and suddenly Von Donegan and I found ourselves back in our apartment. The time machine crumpled up and fell apart – just like the Warrington group’s bid for the 1988 Eastercon.

“You made a right mess of things, bringing out that damned pen,” Von Donegan said bitterly. “Now there’ll be even more Shakespeare plays than ever!”

“And if there’s one called *Foyles* it’s all your fault,” I retorted angrily.

We spent the rest of the evening blaming each other for all the things that had gone wrong, arguing so much that we completely forgot to do our homework. Next morning Higgins flew into a rage when we told him we hadn’t even touched our assignments, especially as the only excuse we could offer was that we simply could not cope with the work.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves,” Higgins snarled. “Just look at how much work was achieved in the past by great men like... Euclid... and Columbus... and Shakespeare – and *they* didn’t have all your fancy, labour-saving, modern gadgets to help them!”

Needless to say, that was more than enough for Von Donegan and myself. We stormed straight out of that classroom and headed for the nearest bar – which sounds like a good idea for all of us....

The Importance of Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies

Follycon, Liverpool, Easter 1988

Well, as you know, I always like to do a serious scientific talk each Easter to remind us that we are not here to enjoy ourselves all weekend, and this week in particular – this year in particular I’ve chosen what I regard to be a very important subject indeed.

[Are these microphones working all right? Up a bit? The microphone or me? I was getting that strange humming noise that tells you something’s up the creek.]

So this year I thought I’d speak on a very important subject indeed: the benefits of fluoridisation of public water supplies.

But first of all I’d like to begin by welcoming everybody here who doesn’t come from Liverpool to Liverpool, the Venice of the North, and especially to this hotel, which is a favourite of mine. The Adelphi, as you must have been told a dozen times already, is where quite a few of the scenes in *Brideshead Revisited* were filmed. But not many people seem to know that there’s a Science Fiction fan in that marvellous TV series *Brideshead*. It so happened that a few years ago I was sitting outside in the lobby of this very hotel having a cup of tea with the publisher of my latest non-fiction book, *How to Conquer Anorexia* – a best-seller, that one was – when we were joined by the director of *Brideshead*, and we learned that he needed an experienced stuntman to stand in for Anthony Andrews in a very demanding scene in *Brideshead*.

“I’m not talking about the dangerous wheelchair sequences. I am, of course, talking about the bit where Anthony Andrews vomits beer through the window of Jeremy Irons’s study. We need a real expert,” the director told me, “somebody who has range and accuracy and good microphone technique. And also he must be able to do multiple repeats for the camera. Frankly,” he said, “I doubt if such a man exists anywhere in the western hemisphere.”

“Your worries are over,” I told him, “I could direct you to at least ten people who will excel in that very job.” I proceeded to give him the names

and addresses of the entire Newcastle Science Fiction group, who over the years had come to dominate the field of beer regurgitation. Mind you, they were helped somewhat by the kind of beer you get around Newcastle. I won't reveal who it was in Newcastle who finally got the job, in case the Inland Revenue comes down on them. But suffice it to say he was a founder member of the Puke of the Month club and was able to move to the South-East of England on the proceeds.

But this is straying away from the subject of my talk. Now, I got to know about the benefits of fluoridisation of water supplies in a rather indirect manner. It all started one day last February. I was sitting there in my office simultaneously sipping a turnip daiquiri and solving some of the problems which have baffled our greatest scientific minds for centuries: problems like "How did the Christmas flowering cactus switch over from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar?"

You should always pour from the old drink into the new one if you're using mixers as, no matter how carefully you pour out a drink, a drop will always be left behind and it's better that what's left behind should be half mixer and half whisky than all whisky. This is deep scientific theory of drinking.

I told you about all these deep problems of "How can the human stomach digest tripe?". That's a thing that's always worried me, because I really used to like tripe and onions, and I never figured out how the onions were still on the plate by the time I got it; why hadn't the tripe eaten the onions. I was sitting [*Oh dear, this is worse than I thought*] I was sitting in there in my office, and suddenly I heard somebody knocking the door.

"What a lousy door," he was saying, "I think that's a really rotten door."

"Stop knocking my door and come in!" I shouted, for I recognised the voice of my old colleague von Donegan, inventor of the solar-powered sunbed and also author of that marvellous book *Mathematics by Numbers*. I should say here that von Donegan is not to be confused with von Däniken, which has happened in two or three fanzines, and I don't want the two of them confused, partly because they work in different fields, partly because they look nothing like each other, but merely because I don't want von Däniken to come round here and beat me up. Von Donegan came into my office, and his face was so drawn that he looked like a D. West cartoon.

That's not much of an insult; D. West is one of my favourite cartoonists. He did one years ago which I thought was the best cartoon I'd ever seen

anywhere – *New Yorker*, *Punch*, the lot. It showed these two Victorian gents with their top hats on and so forth and opera cloaks. One of them was looking a bit rough, and the other one was saying to him, “You don’t look so good this morning, Dorian.” And the other one said, “You should see my picture.” I thought that cartoon was so funny I entered it for a competition once under my own name. I spent months sweating it out in case I would win and have to explain to D. West what had happened.

But as I said, von Donegan came in the office, and he wasn’t looking very good, so I said, “You look terrible.” “Take that up with D. West,” he said, “I’m too exhausted to do anything about it myself.”

I sympathised with him over this business of exhaustion, because I don’t know if anybody here has ever noticed this: exhaustion is a rich person’s complaint. You read in the papers and you hear on the television about people like Michael Crawford and Rick Astley and so forth have been taken into hospital suffering from exhaustion. I hate to imagine what would happen if I staggered up to Warrington General to the front desk and said, “Give me a bed, please. I’m exhausted.” Of course, in Warrington General there’s a reason for throwing me out, and there’s a reason for it: Warrington Hospital Burns Unit takes up most of their time. And the main reason is that there’s a delicacy in Warrington called – the locals refer to it as a steak pie; I refer to it as soup in a pie. It comes as a nice little crusty-looking pie, and it is supposed to be a meat pie, but when you bite into it a stream of brown Windsor soup heated up to about seven hundred degrees centigrade runs down your chin inflicting second degree burns the whole way.

Anyway, as I was saying, von Donegan came into the office, and he brought up a chair, which surprised me – no, I’m not going to do the chair jokes again; nobody can accuse me of milking a gag too much. Von Donegan collapsed into my chair in a heap, which annoyed me a little because I’d told the office cleaner to get rid of that heap years ago.

“Bob,” he said, extricating himself from the heap, “what you and I need is a good holiday. I have a nice double room in a Brighton boarding-house available to me next week. How about it?”

“Middle of February,” I said frowning, “that’s an odd time to plan for a holiday.”

“I didn’t plan it that way,” he snapped, “it was meant to be for last year’s Worldcon, but the booking’s only just come through from the Brighton Tourist Office.”

Well, the upshot of it all was that I agreed to go on holiday with old von Donegan, and he was so pleased with himself that he tried to light up a cigarette, but I stopped him. He was not going to turn me into a passive smoker; I'm going to remain an active smoker – it's safer.

Now, this is actually no joke. Insurance company life tables show that up to a consumption of ten cigarettes a day there's no difference at all in the smoker's health prospects: lung cancer, heart disease, bronchitis; there's no difference – it doesn't show up in the figures it's so slight. The figures remain exactly the same as for a non-smoker. Therefore, these passive smokers we hear about today whose chances of lung cancer and so on have gone up thirty percent because they work near a smoker must be inhaling the equivalent of more than ten cigarettes every day, so it must be, say, twenty.

And this leads me to this wonderful vision of a huge office or workshop with maybe a hundred people in it. They're all non-smokers except for one person. Now this poor wretch, this addict, he's shoved away in a corner on his own quietly puffing ten cigarettes a day. He's drawing the smoke down into his lungs and holding it and savouring it, trying to keep it all to himself. But some of it gets away, of course, mostly to be drawn into the air-conditioner or wafted out through the windows. But a few vagrant wisps, nevertheless, manage to circulate round to the other office workers from this poor wretch who's smoking ten a day. And this smoke produces in a whole ninety-nine other people the effect of smoking twenty cigarettes a day. What it boils down to is: if you really want to get high on tobacco, don't smoke. I don't know how non-smokers survived in the old days when they were in a small minority. They must have been as tough as old boots.

There's a parallel in the radio field. This business of whatever it is you want to send to somebody, somebody else gets it. I notice in my car radio when I'm driving along at night all I can pick up is Continental stations – that's all you can get, and I'm quite certain that all the Continental people can pick up is British stations. So I sent a letter to the BBC suggesting that all the countries in Europe could solve this problem by only broadcasting each other's programmes. I never heard a word back from them.

But perhaps this smoke business is more akin to homeopathy: you know, the doctrine of the least dose. Non-smokers, who in fact are real tobacco addicts, want to reduce active smoking so much that there will be less and less tobacco smoke in the air, which means that it will produce a greater and greater effect. I like jokes about tobacco. In my famous comic novel *Who*

Goes Here, which is ten times funnier than *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, there's one favourite scene of mine where the hero lands on this planet which is covered with – completely covered with tobacco plants, and also it has every few hundred yards a small volcano which is spewing lava down the side; so that the atmosphere on this planet is made up of pure cigarette or tobacco smoke. That's what people live on, but some people want to get a bit of a high every now and again. They get a big long filter to suck up the tobacco smoke, which filters out all the tobacco smoke and just lets him breathe pure air, and that gives him a high. The sissies can't take it: they've got to have a thing which is mostly filter but has a little bit of tobacco at the end, which they can suck through.

Where was I – yes, homeopathy and tobacco. I have a good friend who, in spite of all my scientific counselling, is dedicated to the theory and practice of homeopathy, and recently she talked me into trying a homeopathic remedy for a cough. As I was saying when I was so rudely interrupted, for a cough which had been irritating me for ages. I got some homeopathic pills from the local chemist, and it said on the box that they are the sixth centesimal of homeopathy potency, which means they are very diluted indeed, which means in homeopathic theory that they are very powerful. The label advised taking a certain number of pills on the first day, so many on subsequent days and so forth. Then it finished up with this rather worrying instruction: CHILDREN HALF ADULT DOSE. Does this mean that you have to give to your kids twice as many pills as you take yourself? I love this theory, I wish it really was true, because if you got a epidemic in any city of plague all you've got to do is nip up to the local reservoir and throw in one pill and that will fix everybody.

But this is all straying away from the subject of the talk, but I don't suppose anybody's very worried about that fact. Von Donegan and I went down to Brighton, and we checked into this boarding-house he had booked. We were greeted at the front door by the owner, Mr Cobble, whose first words to us were: "I want to warn you about drunkenness, swearing, rowdy behaviour and staying up late." We assured him we would not dream of going on like that. "Not you," he said, "it's my wife. She strayed into some kind of Science Fiction meeting that was held in the town last August and she hasn't been the same since. It's all very worrying for me," he went on, "sometimes in her sleep she shouts strange things like 'Wood for Taff' and 'Pickersgill for President' and 'Scientology Sucks'. The worst of it all," he

said, “is that she’s supposed to do all the cooking for the boarding-house, but she drinks so much these days and has awful hangovers and quite often she can’t get up in the morning in time to make the guests’ lunch, never mind the breakfast.”

I want you to remember that passage; that’s important; this comes up later; remember that bit.

Von Donegan looked a bit alarmed at the news that we might be short of food, because he has a tremendous appetite: he eats as though he was brought up on a diet of thin gruel, stray scraps of food, Worldcon banquets and stuff like that. But we were determined to have a good holiday, so we put all the worries out of our minds and decided to get on with enjoying ourselves for the week. I had planned to spend a quiet week rereading the science fiction works of Captain S.P. Meek, but things didn’t quite work out that way. Von Donegan is more active than I am – everybody’s more active than I am – and he had brought along with him one of those inflatable mattresses, and he insisted on blowing it up every day and making us both go out on it on the Channel even though the water was very cold in February. And in between times, more or less to amuse himself, he had terrible battles with Mrs Cobble over the lateness of the lunches. See, here it’s come up again, with the lunches being late. This is the way a master novelist puts together a story. [*Oh dear, I wrote this?*] Von Donegan and Mrs Cobble clashed like the gears on a Japanese car – like Datsun cogs! – they fought like Datsun cogs. Von Donegan was always screaming his head off and Mrs Cobble was gamely trying to calm him down, and we couldn’t even buy snacks because we’d forgotten our cash cards.

I don’t know how many people here share my love/hate relationship with the old cash card. I find that I’ve never yet been first at a cash card machine. I’ve seen one empty and said, “Right, I need some money.” And then a bus comes along, blocks out my view of the machine for one and a half seconds, and when I see it again there are twenty people lined up. I don’t mind getting behind someone who’s just drawing out a bit of money to spend, but I always get behind people – scruffy-looking types – who stand there and interrogate the machine. Some of them seem to be trying to acquire the entire decade’s accounts for Rio Tinto Zinc, something that takes up a long, long time. I think my worst experience ever was one day in Warrington I really needed money for something. I think *Interzone* had only just come out, and I wanted to get a copy, and I went to a cash machine, and I was just

about four paces away from it on the footpath, and there was a woman walking towards me, and she did the fastest reaction I've ever seen in my whole life. She looked at me – at my cash card, did a spot turn, got to the machine first, beat me to it. She drew out twenty quid and a little notice came up saying SORRY THIS MACHINE IS OUT OF ACTION, and I never got that copy of *Interzone*. God knows what I missed.

Well, this holiday in Brighton went on and on. Then one morning towards the end of the week a very strange thing happened. As usual we were out on our air mattress on a really choppy sea. I was lying back on the mattress holding a Guinness colada in one hand. (It's a good drink, Guinness colada; they've got to make it with new potatoes – that's the secret. Don't put old ones in there – they ruin it.) [*I've lost my place*] – yes, holding a Guinness colada in one hand and a copy of Captain S.P. Meek's *The Drums of Tapajos* in the other. and I was just coming to the exciting bit where you try to stop the potato rolling down the Guinness glass and going into your mouth – if you thought I meant the exciting bit in the book, there aren't any exciting bits in the Science Fiction works of Captain S.P. Meek – when all at once I got this feeling of being at the focus of fast, powerful, mysterious, bewildering, unknown forces all concentrated on me. It was just like being a convention which is being taken over by New Era Publications. Suddenly the sky went dark and I felt a strange wench. If you think that word should have been wrench, you feel what turns you on and I'll feel what turns me on. [*For a minute there I thought it was a mistake myself.*]

I recently switched over – after years of fighting them off – to using a word processor. I know a few people here have heard this story before, but I've got to repeat it because not only is it good but it's true. After a few weeks of using the processor I discovered this marvellous facility whereby that you come to – you've got a big, long phrase that is awkward and inconvenient. I found I didn't have to type in the whole phrase; I could give it a label – a single letter, and just had to type in the letter and the phrase would appear on the screen just by itself. Marvellous thing: saves me hours and hours of work. So I was writing this science fantasy novel, and I got to people with big, long names and titles, so I gave each one of them just an initial letter as a label; and I came to this scene and there was this woman, Princess van T'ara, and in the story she burst into a room in the castle and found a servant looking through some papers that he wasn't meant to look at, and he was caught in the act, and as he jumped up – and the line was:

THE SERVANT JUMPED TO HIS FEET. “PRINCESS VAN T’ARA!” HE EXCLAIMED.

And so when it came to that bit of course I didn’t have to write that; I just put:

THE SERVANT JUMPED TO HIS FEET. “P!” HE EXCLAIMED.

I thought, this is marvellous, I’m a *real* writer, I’m using a word processor. And I went on a bit, and decided to look up at the screen and see how it got on. What I forgot to say – what I hadn’t realised – was, when you made all these phrases to give them a label, you had to store them in the memory; otherwise when you switched off the computer at night it forgot them and went back to its old set of phrases which the makers in their wisdom had deemed would be more useful to you. So when I came to the bit:

THE SERVANT JUMPED TO HIS FEET. “P!” HE EXCLAIMED.

It didn’t say what I thought it was going to say. So I had another look at it, and it said

THE SERVANT JUMPED TO HIS FEET. “PAY BY BARCLAYCARD!” HE EXCLAIMED.

Coming in the middle of an epic science fantasy novel, it sort of ruins your illusions.

[Oh Christ, I’ve forgotten where I am, altogether.] Oh yes, we were out – von Donegan and I were out on our air mattress, and we felt this strange force focusing on us out in the sea. There was a moment of utter blackness, and then von Donegan and I found ourselves floating on a lake whose shores were lined with red brick buildings. Behind them other red brick buildings like a vast, modern housing estate stretched to the horizon. The air was very thin and cold, the sun was shrunken and creating a feeble light and two very small moons could also be seen racing overhead. Von Donegan looked about him and said, “I think we’re on Mars.” He’s quick about these things. At his words my heart leapt into my mouth, which surprised me a little because I thought it was fairly well anchored down in my chest. And it was such a nauseating sensation having your heart in your mouth, flopping about in a pool of saliva and Guinness that I swallowed it immediately.

“Yes,” von Donegan went on, “this is definitely Mars.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said, surveying the crowded buildings, “I know Mars is 10% bigger these days – but all these houses and stuff.”

“We’ll soon get the truth,” von Donegan said, beginning to paddle for the shore. As we drew closer, we saw that the shore was lined with hundreds and hundreds of quite normal-looking people. They seemed in such a cheerful, friendly mood, exuberant in fact, that I had no fears for our safety, although I knew that something was terribly wrong. I knew because I had read in David Hardy’s *Atlas of the Solar System* that Mars was an arid desert of a world – nothing at all like this.

One of the people who was waiting on the shore was wearing a gold chain around his neck. He stepped forward when we reached the beach and said in pretty good English, “Welcome to Bradburyville, the principal city of Mars. My name is Edgar and I am mayor of Bradburyville.”

“Wait a minute,” I protested, “this isn’t right. I’ve seen the pictures taken by the Viking lander, and they show that Mars is barren and uninhabited.”

“Forget about those pictures,” Edgar said, “the last thing we need on Mars is extra people to be housed and watered, so when Viking landed we surrounded it with a Chesley Bonestell panorama held up by a circular screen. That’s all your camera saw. Didn’t you notice the resemblance to the old *Astounding* covers?”

“How do you know about Chesley Bonestell?” I demanded suspiciously.

“From Earth’s television programmes,” Edgar replied, “that’s how all Martians learn English, and other Earth languages as well.”

My mind was becoming so overcrowded with new information that I hardly knew what to say; “But,” I said, “I thought Mars was covered with red deserts and that’s what gave it its characteristic colour when seen through a telescope.”

“The characteristic colour comes from the housing estates,” Edgar said patiently. The place is full of them. We paint pictures of deserts with meteor craters on the roofs to fool passing deep space probes.”

“But I still don’t understand all this,” I said. “How did von Donegan and I get here? One second we were floating on the sea off Brighton, and the next we were in the middle of your lake.”

Diverting from the subject only slightly: somewhere in this convention, walking round the middle of us passing himself off as normal, looking just

like everybody else, there's a person who drinks pernod. Not only does he drink pernod, but the washing facilities in the bars are not quite up to removing pernod traces from a glass. Twice this week I've had a pernodised whisky, and it's not a good drink, I can tell you. *[No, that one's all right – that's absinthe.]*

Meanwhile, back at the story. We were asking how we got here – there – Mars. "The common factor," Edgar, the mayor, explained, "is water. You see, this lake has been formed round a great matter transmitter. We have just tested it out for a few minutes, and it has worked perfectly. That's why everybody here is so jubilant. Soon we're going to switch the machine on at full power and steal most of the Earth's seas and oceans."

"But," I said, "that would wreck our planetary ecology. Everybody on Earth would die."

"Tough titty," Edgar replied, "we need the water. Besides, it serves you right for transmitting that so-called TV comedy *Red Planet* into space. I've never been so insulted in all my life."

Von Donegan, who had been listening intently, joined in the discussion at that point. "Why do you need all the water?" he said, "What happened to your own water?"

"Most of it has been stolen," Edgar said simply, "the Venusians took it."

"Now that's just plain ridiculous," I cut in. You see, I was the cool, scientific, informed brain present. I said, "This is ridiculous. Nobody can live on Venus." I said, "I've seen results from the Venus landers and – and –" My voice faded away as I saw that Edgar was smugly shaking his head. "But what about the hundred-mile-an-hour winds?" I said.

"Giant fans."

"And what about the five-hundred-degree temperatures?"

"They cooked all your landers in a giant oven – regulo 6 I think they gave them, though I said regulo 5 would have been enough if they preheated the oven properly." *[So some people here do a bit of cooking as well. That's nice to know.]*

"You see, Venus is crowded as well as Mars, and they don't want an influx from Earth any more than we do."

Von Donegan scowled at this: "I suppose you're going to tell me that the reason Venus has no water is that Mercury stole it."

"No," Edgar said, "the water on Venus is mostly in the cloud cover. They need it there to shut out all the fierce sunlight, and that's why they're

stealing water from Mars.”

“What?” von Donegan said, his fine mind obviously hard at work, “Earth is usually closer to Venus than Mars is. Why don’t they steal our water?”

“Fluoridisation,” Edgar said, “a lot of Earth’s water is fluoridised, and the Venusians don’t like that. They say an individual should have the right to choose in these matters.” [*I’d forgotten some of this stuff, and it’s worse than I thought.*] “Anyway,” Edgar went on, “now that you two Earthlings have accidentally been sucked up with our first dollop of Earth water, you’ll have to stay here forever, or until the end of your lives, whichever comes first. You will be decently treated, of course. You’ll be given food and shelter, and we may even take out a subscription to *Interzone* for you.”

“This is terrible,” I quavered, “forced to spend the rest of my life on Mars! I’ll never see my wife and family again. And, even worse, I’ll be forced to miss Forry Ackerman’s seventieth birthday party.”

“Wait a minute,” von Donegan cut in, “I’ve got an idea which will cut out all this stealing of other people’s water. The asteroid belt,” he said, “there’s lots of unused water out there drifting around in the form of asteroids made of ice. All you’ve got to do is deflect the Venusian matter transmitter focus on to ice asteroids. The Venusians will then get iced water, which will help cool their planet down, and Mars and Earth will be left alone to pursue their glorious destinies, and we’d all live happily ever after.”

“That’s brilliant,” Edgar breathed, “it’s just like the ending of a Jerry Pournelle story.” Von Donegan simpered at the extravagant compliment.

“But how does all that help us?” I said, for once being a bit slow on the uptake, “We’re still stuck in this planetary housing estate, this global Stockport.”

“Not for long,” von Donegan said, “in return for my idea, the Martians can put their matter transmitter into reverse and send us back to Brighton. Isn’t that so, Edgar?”

“You bet,” Edgar said. “it will take us a couple of hours to sort out the computer problems, even with the help of the Ansible information service. But we can soon transmit you both back to Earth.”

After more congratulations all round, the Martians put von Donegan and me back on our air mattress. We paddled out to the centre of the lake, waited there for an hour or so, and suddenly we were whooshed through space to arrive in the sea just off Brighton, back where we’d started. Von Donegan

glanced at his watch, and the look of triumphant pleasure on his face abruptly vanished. “My God,” he said, “look at the time. We’ve probably missed our lunch, and I’m starving.” He paddled furiously for the shore, hit the beach at a run, and we both sprinted the rest of the way up to the boarding-house only to meet Mrs Cobble on her way out to the pub.

“There you are,” she said, giving von Donegan a drunken leer, “you missed your lunch for once, and the world *didn’t* come to an end, did it?”

On that ironic note we will end this talk and, unless anybody’s got any serious scientific questions that they want to ask to fill in the last five minutes. I will now take questions from the floor of the house, or even the walls or the ceiling.

No questions? Thank you. *Back to the bar!*

Corn Is the Lowest Form of Wheat

ConFiction (Worldcon), The Hague, August 1990

The following pages contain the official text of one of my Serious Scientific Talks – “Corn Is the Lowest Form of Wheat” – which was delivered at the Worldcon in The Hague and reprised at the following Novacon. The reason for this foreword is that I would like to make it clear that I use one style for written humour, and another – which is vastly different – for spoken humour. When I’m on the platform in a con hall I hardly ever do anything which could be dignified by the word “talk”.

We have a lot of kindred spirits together enjoying the fraternal atmosphere of the occasion... it may be that “strong drink has been taken”... we’re having a good time... most of us are in the mood for a bit of nonsensical fun... so I don’t hesitate to use jokes such as the one about “a tap on the door”. Practically every member of the audience sees each joke coming, but that is just what is required in the interactive nature of a good programme item.

In the “Corn” talk I tried to put a joke inside a joke. I began by swearing that I wouldn’t repeat any of my old jokes – then I proceeded to cram in as many old jokes as possible. It just goes to show the depths to which a humorist can be reduced...

Hello, ladies and gentlemen! I am deeply gratified at having such a large audience for my latest Serious Scientific Talk. [Pardon me for fiddling with my glasses. I’m trying to focus properly on the page. This is odd. I didn’t expect to have any trouble with these lenses, because I paid a lot of money for them... to a highly respected man in the optics field. I only went to him because he said he had done a lot of work on something called the Hubble telescope.]

You should know that I do not delude myself about why my Serious Scientific Talks have become so popular. Even though I have extended the

frontiers of scientific knowledge in many directions... some of these directions quite unexpected... some of them *very* unexpected...

There was, for example, my defence of the idea that the Loch Ness monster really exists. Loch Ness is very long, but it is also very narrow, which means that it does not contain a huge amount of water and biological resources. Some so-called experts, intent on proving there can be no monsters, have done field surveys in the Loch, have estimated the number of fish present... and have announced that no monsters can exist... because there aren't enough fish in the Loch for them to feed on.

The fools! The incompetent bumbler! What they failed to realize was that they were counting the number of fish left *after* the monsters had eaten their fill!

This shows you the dangers of trying to apply scientific methods when one has not had the necessary rigorous training in logic. I have had that kind of training, which is what enabled me to invent – among many other ingenious gadgets – a device which I have called the truth machine.

You have all heard of the ordinary lie detector. Its operating principle is that when a person tells a lie he begins to perspire... thus increasing the electrical conductivity of his skin... and the effect can be measured. My invention, like most great scientific advances, was devastatingly simple. As I have said before, it was not a huge IQ which made Einstein a great scientist... it was his simple and childlike approach to problems... and, for all I know, my mind might be even more simple and childlike than Einstein's!

Anyway, to create my truth machine, all I did was stand the principle of the lie detector on its head. If it is impossible to tell a lie without sweating, it stands to reason that if one cannot sweat *it is impossible to tell a lie!* My truth machine simply squirts a highly effective anti-perspirant all over the subject... thus depriving him of the ability to be untruthful!

All that apart, as I was saying, I am fully aware that – as well as seeking scientific enlightenment – people come to my talks because I throw in the occasional little joke. Actually, there has been some dispute over that point. A few years ago I did one of the talks at a convention in upstate New York. It was very well received... people laughing all the way through... most gratifying... But a man came to me as soon as it was over, looking highly annoyed, and said, “I was listening to your talk very carefully and realized you were cheating. Most of the things you said up there weren't funny at all – you only made people *think* they were funny!”

I think there's a neat philosophical point there. He either insulted me, or paid me a great compliment – but I have never figured out which.

Anyway, I was talking about the jokes. This may come as a big surprise to everybody here. It may come as a terrible shock. In fact, most of you may be outraged on my behalf – but the sad fact is that there are some people in the science fiction world who are going around saying that I use the same jokes over and over again!

Honestly!

The injustice of that lie is made all the more poignant because I am constitutionally incapable of repeating my own jokes. For example: when I go on a trip and am sending postcards back to a dozen or so friends – yes, I do have that many – I always like to put one of my little witticisms on each card. Now, these people aren't going to compare notes. There is no reason at all why I shouldn't put the same joke on each card – but somehow I just can't bring myself to do that. Each one has to have a different joke, and that can lead to problems, because the brain is not always functioning at its best after a breakfast of half-a-dozen Guinness Sunrises. Once, many years ago, I had written practically my whole batch of cards when I remembered I hadn't sent one to my long-time and very dear friends – Walt and Madeleine Willis.

I had just about exhausted the joke-making centres of my brain, but – after a moment's thought – I wrote on the card: "The crisis is over – please ignore my telegram." And I mailed it off. Well, *I* thought it was funny. Looking back, I can't quite say *why* I thought it was funny. When I got back home to Belfast I discovered that Walt and Madeleine also hadn't appreciated the subtle undertones of wry satire, the Kafkaesque surrealism, the Brechtian irony, and the Leacockian sense of the ridiculous.

Perhaps I was being over optimistic in trying to cram that much into eight words. Anyway, Walt and Madeleine had wasted some of their time – and a lot of other people's time – giving the Post Office hell over the non-delivery of my nonexistent telegram. When I explained the joke to Walt, he – in spite of his superb sense of humour – did not seem quite as much amused as he might have been.

One aspect of humour on which we were always in harmony, though, was our appreciation of the Canadian humorist I mentioned a moment ago, Stephen Leacock, who sadly is now almost forgotten. Leacock is probably more famous for the immortal line in a satire on Victorian melodramas: "Lord Ronald flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all

directions.” But my favourite was a piece he did about the world’s greatest international smuggler – who owed most of his success to the fact that he only smuggled stuff *upon which there was no duty!*

“The authorities,” Leacock wrote, “are helpless against a criminal mastermind like that!”

What was I talking about? Oh, yes! Some malicious people are going around saying that I keep repeating my old jokes. Do not believe them! Only if somebody put me in a torture chamber and threatened to apply red hot irons to my feet would I agree to go back over some of my material. I might, for instance, hark back to a couple of favourite puns that I used on my fellow scientist – Von Donegan.

There was the time he and I were climbing a mountain in Pakistan, and he was proud of being able to address the bearers in their native language, and he said to me, “What do you think of my Urdu?” and I replied, “Very nice – I think that style suits you.” Or the time he was wondering how he could obtain a couple of those big knives for slashing through jungle, and I said, “I’ve got a catalogue of them – I keep it on a shelf in the kitchen beside all my other kukri books.”

But, as I said, I’m not going to repeat any jokes. What I’m going to do instead is to tackle one of the major economic problems facing the world today – i.e., the great cost of travelling to science fiction conventions.

A couple of months ago I was sitting quietly in my office-cum-laboratory, writing an article for the *Scientific American* about my new navigational system for the ordinary motorist, which enables him to find out where he is with pinpoint accuracy, day or night. In fact, it seems to work better at night. I think all motorists have been in the same terrible situation... you are heading for some destination out in the country... you make a wrong turn... suddenly it is past midnight... perhaps two or three in the morning... you have no idea where you are... the narrow road stretches ahead into infinite darkness... there is no glimmer of light to indicate a dwelling where you might obtain information... ghouls might be abroad... werewolves might be abroad... little men from flying saucers might be abroad... and – worse still! – Whitley Streiber might be abroad!

One wrong move and you could be sued!

I know what you are thinking at this stage! You are thinking that with Shaw’s new system you simply call up a satellite in the Clarke orbit and it indicates your position on an electronic map. That is a very good system, but

it has a major drawback in that it costs a lot of money. By contrast, my system costs nothing at all!

All you have to do in this situation... where you are stuck out in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night... and you desperately need guidance... and there is nobody within a hundred miles to help... well, nobody but Whitley Streiber, that is... and he isn't going to be much help... and you think you may never make contact with humanity again...

All you have to do is say to yourself, "Okay, it looks like I'm going in the wrong direction – SO I WILL DO A THREE-POINT TURN!"

As soon as you swing your car into a position... in the middle of the night... in which it blocks this minor country road... which was last travelled by Joseph of Arimathea... and you are in the act of performing a perfectly legitimate three-point turn... the whole place will fill up with angry, impatient, local motorists who hate you for increasing their journey time by three seconds...

And all you have to do is ask them for directions!

I have high hopes that this new invention of mine will make my name a household word. One of the things which inspires that ambition is that I had an uncle whose name became a household word. His name was Jimmy Dishwasher.

Anyway, there I was sitting quietly in my office, when suddenly there was a tap at my door. I stared at it for a moment, and thought "That's funny – there was no tap there a minute ago." There came the sound of somebody pushing forcibly at the door, and it swung open to reveal none other than Von Donegan!

"There's a tap on your door," he said, breathing heavily. "If it hadn't been there I mightn't have been able to get a good enough grip to open the door."

"Do you mean," I said, "that you had to faucet open?"

A stricken look appeared on Von Donegan's face. "Not the plumbing puns," he pleaded. He immediately brought up a chair... which surprised me a little... because I hadn't even realized he had swallowed one. "I'm here on serious business, Shaw. It has recently come to my attention that crossing from Britain to continental Europe is one of the shortest but most expensive journeys in the world. The Worldcon in The Hague will be coming up soon, and I regard it as my sacred duty to support the con by finding a way to enable fans from this country to cross the Channel with the least possible

expense.”

“A noble sentiment,” I said. “You know, of course, that a man called Webb once crossed the Channel for absolutely nothing?”

Von Donegan nodded. “You’re talking about the first Channel swimmer – Captain Webb.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m talking about *Gerry Webb*, the well-known British SF fan and expert on astronautics. He got himself fired across to Europe on a rocket which went right outside the Earth’s atmosphere.”

Von Donegan looked impressed. “Did he have any reentry problems?”

“Yes,” I said. “The authorities won’t let him back into England.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Von Donegan snapped. “It’s obvious to me that you don’t know the first thing about the exploration of space.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said huffily. “Only this morning I received a telegram direct from NASA headquarters – saying that the latest Mars lander has found definite proof of the existence of Ray Bradbury.”

Von Donegan threw up his hands... which surprised me a little... because I hadn’t even realized that he had swallowed them. Somebody in the audience has just accused me of using one of my old jokes! All right, it may *seem* that I used one of my old jokes, but the difference is that, this time, it wasn’t a joke. Von Donegan has a habit of gnawing at his fingernails when he is agitated. On this occasion he gnawed and sucked so hard that he actually did swallow his hands!

There he was...sitting there...with both forearms terminating at his mouth.. not a pretty sight... and only his violent reaction to my words enabled him to puke his hands back up again. That wasn’t a pretty sight either. He had had spaghetti hoops for lunch... and there they were... neatly fitted onto his fingers!

“Thank you, Bob,” Von Donegan said. He nibbled experimentally at a couple of the spaghetti hoops, and said, “Hey! These are even better second time around! Do you want to try a few?”

“Thank you – but no,” I said. “I don’t like tomato sauce.”

How, you must be wondering, does a sensitive and subtle SF writer, such as me, survive such experiences without his thought processes becoming coarsened and degraded? It’s a mystery to me, as well. I guess my mind must be essentially pure and ethereal...

“Let’s get down to serious business,” Von Donegan said. “I have invented no less than three completely separate ways of getting British fans

across to Europe without them having to pay exorbitant prices. And each will be a lot safer than that outfit I used to fly with – Celebrity Airlines.”

“Why were they called Celebrity Airlines?” I said.

“Because of all the celebrities they had flown.”

“Name a few.”

“Well,” Von Donegan said, “there was Glenn Miller... Buddy Holly... Jim Reeves...”

Actually, you shouldn’t make jokes about disasters, though I must say I was recently forced to do it in self defence. Earlier in the year I was on a convention panel with Larry Niven... and we were asked about the state of modern SF... and Larry said, “Modern SF must be doing very well – because I’m making *shiploads* of money.”

Not to be outdone, I said, “I also am making shiploads of money. And I will tell you the names of some of the ships! The *Titanic*... the *Lusitania*... the *Amoco Cadiz*... the *Mary Celeste*...”

Anyway, seeing that Von Donegan was serious, I invited him to sit down and talk. He nodded and brought up a chair... which surprised me a little... because I hadn’t even realized he’d swallowed one.

No! That isn’t one of my old jokes, either. As it transpired, Von Donegan actually had eaten a chair! It turned out that he had been having intestinal problems, and his doctor had advised him... each time he went to the toilet... to examine his stools.

“Stools?” Von Donegan said. (His grip of English is not as good as mine.)

“Yes,” the doctor said, “the remnants of what you ate on the previous day. Stools!”

Von Donegan wasn’t able to find any stools, so he had eaten a chair. It’s all perfectly logical, you see. I confess that I had hoped, at this stage, to concoct a few puns about the best kinds of chair to eat... but I had very little success... “Dining chairs” is too obvious and easy. I invite all here to make suggestions which I can use in future presentations of this talk, and the winner will receive a free seat on the first commercial flight to Mars... or a copy of *Last Dangerous Visions*... whichever comes first...

“Okay,” I said to Von Donegan, “tell me all your ways of getting fans across to Europe with minimum expense.”

“Better than that,” he replied, “I’ll demonstrate them for you. Come to my secret laboratory in Eton this evening at eight.” With those words he

sprang to his feet... which surprised me a little... because I hadn't noticed his feet sneaking away by themselves. He expertly reattached his feet to his shin bones... he's a man of many parts... and left my office.

That evening I drove to Eton. I was quickly able to locate Von Donegan's secret laboratory because it has a huge neon sign which said: VON DONEGAN'S SECRET LABORATORY. As I walked up to the sinister-looking edifice there was a thick greasy fog pressing against the windows. That made me feel rather uneasy – because it was a fine and clear evening outside the building. I knocked on the door, gently at first, but when there was no reply I gave the door several pounds. It slipped the pounds into its wallet and obligingly swung open.

I went inside, into a large workshop, and found Von Donegan working on a car.

"I've been modifying this car," he said. "And now it's just like the one in *Back to the Future*."

"But the one in the movie was a DeLorean," I said. "This is a Reliant Robin."

"It was all I could afford," he muttered. "I still haven't received my cheque for coming in third in the *Interzone* prize crossword. The point is that in this vehicle we are free to roam in time and space... and anywhere else we want to go... Hop in and I'll show you!"

I got into the car with Von Donegan and saw at once that he had an extra panel on the dashboard, a panel made of the timer controls he had stolen from my video recorder a couple of years earlier. On that occasion he had used them in a time machine, which had behaved very erratically. I felt uneasy, and said so.

"Relax," he said. "Just sit back and enjoy the sensations." Automatic doors slid open ahead of us, the car's engine roared, we moved forward and in a few minutes had built up to a speed of about 20mph.

"This is all very exciting," I said, "but what is it all about?"

"Haven't you noticed we're headed due east, toward the Essex coast?" Von Donegan replied. "I'm going to drive you straight to Holland!"

"Unless this car is amphibious," I smirked, "you're going to have trouble with the North Sea."

Von Donegan chortled and shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. Just before we reach the Essex coast I will operate the Temporal Displacement Unit in this car – the time machine, in other words. We will be

transported a million or so years back into the past... to a time when Britain was still connected to continental Europe. All we will have to do then is keep driving for an hour or so... switch off the Temporal Displacement Unit... and – bingo! – we’ll be in present-day Holland!”

I have to admit I was impressed. I knew that in the past old Von Donegan had put up a few schemes which were quite impracticable. There was, for instance, his plan to surface all the roads in the country with a compound of Alka-Seltzers and Andrew’s Liver Salts... so that we could all travel about in little hovercraft powered by nothing more than internal water sprays.

There was also his plan for the salt-powered sled. It involved using massive refrigeration plants to freeze solid all the canals in the country. Von Donegan’s idea was that each sled should have a big salt shaker mounted on the front end... when the driver pressed the accelerator some salt would be sprinkled on the ice directly in front of the sled... some of the ice would then melt... the sled would slide forwards into it and the whole process would be repeated over and over again.

It took a cool analytical mind such as mine to point out the basic flaw in the scheme – that a sled wouldn’t be able to carry enough salt to travel any distance.

But this new idea of Von Donegan’s was eminently sensible! I looked forward to seeing it in action. It was getting dark by the time we neared the coast. The lower reaches of the North Sea glimmered ahead of us... Von Donegan fingered the time machine controls... and suddenly it was broad daylight!

We had shot back a million years... give or take a few hours... and ahead of us lay a verdant plain stretching all the way to the Continent. Using this system, science fiction fans from all over Britain would be able to drive, cycle or even walk to The Hague... with virtually no expense!

The only problem, however, was that the flat land ahead of us was swarming with dinosaurs! There were millions of them – presenting a completely impassable barrier. There they were... the Stegosaurus... the Triceratops... the Tyrannosaurus Rex... every prehistoric name I could have dug out of the *Children’s Britannica* if I had had more time to prepare this talk...

“This is terrible,” Von Donegan quavered, slamming on the brakes. “There are types here I’ve never even heard of. What is *that* monster called?”

he said as a huge beast with only one rather myopic-looking eye reared up ahead.

“It’s a Do-you-think-he-saurus,” I quipped maliciously, realising that yet another of Von Donegan’s schemes had come to naught.

“You’re enjoying this,” he accused. “Next thing you’ll be coming out with the old Jim White pun about the Yorkshire dinosaur – the Emily Brontosaurus.”

“I’d never sink so low,” I assured him, “but I *will* say that you should have expected all these prehistoric monsters when you set out from Eton and travelled directly towards the Continent.”

“What do you mean?”

“You must have read the Harry Harrison book – *East of Eton*.”

Von Donegan gave a cry of anguish, turned the car around and drove back to safety, meanwhile operating the controls which brought us back into our own time, It will give you some idea of how much peril we had felt ourselves to be in when I tell you that we were relieved to find ourselves on the M25!

When we eventually got back to Von Donegan’s secret laboratory we were in need of a drink. He set out a couple of glasses, produced a large whisky bottle and poured me out two fingers. I complained about them... sticking out of the glass like that... with the nails not even properly manicured... so he fished them out and dropped them into a bowl he kept nearby... I’m not even going to say that one.)

“I guess I’ll have to forget about the land bridge method of getting to Holland,” Von Donegan said. “While we’re sitting here I’ll check up on the progress of my second method – the one I’m handling by remote control because it’s slightly dangerous.”

“What method is that?”

“The black hole method,” Von Donegan said. “You know... like in *2001*... where you dive into a black hole and emerge somewhere else in the universe. I created a very small black hole by compressing some material which was already very dense...”

“You mean,” I interrupted, “something like lead?”

“No, I mean Ken Slater’s and Rog Peyton’s catalogues. There are so many words squeezed on to each page that, because of the mass of the ink, each one is like a little neutron star. It didn’t take too many of them to make a black hole, so I produced one on the cliffs of Dover. If everything has gone

well, fans heading for the convention in The Hague will only have to drive straight at it. They will disappear and rematerialise in normal space just outside the Bel Air Hotel... if that can be considered as normal space..."

Von Donegan went to a computer terminal, did a lot of key tapping, then looked at me in utter panic.

"Bob," he said, "I'm in deep trouble! My black hole has rolled over the edge of the cliffs of Dover and has come to rest a few miles out in the English channel!"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Nobody will notice."

"They're bound to," he replied. "It has stopped right beside the Channel Tunnel diggings... the British and French halves are warped into a circle around it... the whole project is now locked on the event horizon... which means that no progress will ever be made with the tunnel... it will never be finished..."

"Is that supposed to be news?" I quipped.

"I'll just have to fall back on my third method," Von Donegan said gloomily. He did some more key tapping, then went to a cupboard and brought out some cans of beer and glasses, to complement our whisky. We drank in silence for a while, then I became impatient and asked him what his third method for crossing to Holland actually was.

"I have to admit, I borrowed the idea from one of your books," he said. "Do you remember the bit in *Ship of Strangers* where the ship is translated into a different dimension? The ship itself becomes as big as the universe and when the crew are sitting in the control room they can see galaxies all around them in the room, little drifting motes of light..."

"Of course I remember that bit," I said. "It has been described by perceptive reviewers as one of the truly great scenes in modern SF. One of them quoted part of it: 'A continuous rain of galaxies was spraying up through the floor, passing through the table and chairs and human beings, and out through the ceiling into the vessel's upper levels. The galaxies looked like slightly fuzzy stars to the naked eye, but when examined with a magnifying glass they were seen to be perfect little lens-shapes or spirals, miniature jewels being squandered into space by an inane creator.'"

"That's great stuff," I went on. "And the book – *Ship of Strangers* – available from all leading book sellers..."

"Never mind the commercial," Von Donegan snarled. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I borrowed the idea and used it as a means of getting

science fiction fans across the sea to The Hague. I built a dimensional diffuser... which can expand the fans to thousands of times their natural size..."

"Some of them have learned to do that already – by consuming great quantities of beer and beefburgers."

"Stop trying to be funny," Von Donegan said, his eyebrows knitting so furiously that a little pullover fell down over his nose. "This is very *serious*. My plan is to use the dimensional diffuser to turn worldcon attendees into giants who will be able to cross the channel in just a few strides. As soon as they are over there I will switch the machine off and they will return to their original size. Ingenious, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "I can't believe such a system could ever come into existence."

"That's where you're wrong," he exclaimed, "because I have already switched the machine on! At this very moment you and I are vast diffused beings. Just look at you!"

I looked around me and, sure enough, I was able to see – mingled with the squalid furnishings of Von Donegan's room – a ghostly representation of the whole of the south of England. The surface of his table roughly corresponded to the general lie of the country.

"This is terrible," I said. "Because of what you are doing, great forces are being brought to bear on our countryside! Even our whisky glasses and beer glasses – which to us merely seem to be sitting on this table – will make their impression on the landscape."

"There is no need to worry about that," Von Donegan said. "I only set them down in rural areas – where nobody will ever notice the appearance of a few large circles flattened into the cornfields."

"You fool," I said. "What do you mean nobody will notice? Those corn circles are the talk of the land, of the world! Every science journal and newspaper you pick up has articles about them. Some journalists are making a fortune out of this thing!"

"What?" Von Donegan croaked. "You mean people are making money out of my invention! And I'm not in on it! Get out of here, Shaw – I've got some writing to do."

"But what about your mission to get fans to the Worldcon cheaply?"

"Stuff the fans," he snarled. "Science is more important." He went to his word processor and hunched over it. "I've got a floppy disk somewhere."

“I can tell that by the way you’re hunched over your word processor,” I said. “I’ve had back trouble myself.”

He screamed for me to get out of his laboratory, so I left without further ado and came straight here to The Hague – even though it was an expensive trip. Now, I’m wondering if I could invent a cheap way of getting here. Some method that involves drinking a lot of beer. A belch powered sailing ship, perhaps... No, that sounds too much like something I’ve already done – my beer-powered space ship. I can’t allow beer to make me repeat...

Appendix

Past Collections

The following sections reproduce the copyright information and acknowledgements from the three previous collections of Serious Scientific Talks: *The Eastercon Speeches* (1979), *Serious Science* (1984) and *A Load of Old BoSh* (1995). A final list of [Original Appearances](#) gives the first fanzine appearance of each talk and indicates whether it was included in one or more of the above collections.

The Eastercon Speeches (1979)

Bob Shaw
Illustrated by Jim Barker

A **Paranoid/Inca Press** publication. Contents copyright © 1979 Robert Jackson. All rights returned to the creators upon publication.

The Introduction is first published here. The five speeches were first printed in *Goblin's Grotto* 1, *Triode* 21, *Maya* 11, *Maya* 14, and *Drilkjis* 3 respectively.

Price 90p or \$1.80. By post: £1.00 or \$2.00 including postage from: Robert Jackson, 8 Lavender Rd., West Ewell, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9EB, U.K.

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Jim Barker	Malcolm Edwards	Graham England
Faircon	Rob Jackson	Coral Jackson
Roy Kettle	Paul Kincaid	Dave Langford
Ian Maule	Janice Maule	Kevin Smith

Thanks are also owed to Jim Barker and Mike Glicksohn for prompt creativity, and to Bruce Healey and Coral Jackson for willing technical help.

Serious Science (1984)

Bob Shaw's Serious Scientific Talks 1982-1984

Artwork: Jim Barker

All the money collected by the sale of this booklet will go to THE SHAW FUND – a special fund aiming to raise enough money to send Bob Shaw (the one and only real one) to the 1985 Worldcon, Aussiecon II, to be held in Melbourne, Australia.

All your contributions will be gratefully received – after all, we must make sure enough is raised for his return flight!

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Note

Followers of Bob will no doubt have noticed that his talks given between 1979-1981 have never been collected. Fear not, even now attempts to gather these missing gems are being made. Watch this space.....

A Load of Old BoSh (1995)

serious scientific talks by Bob Shaw

Produced for Confabulation
the 1995 British Eastercon

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Copyright reverts to
contributors on publication

ISBN 1-870824-34-2

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Produced for Confabulation by
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Essex RM3 0RG

Techno-Babble

As the original booklets were produced in the dark ages B.C. (Before Computers) the text of eight of the talks had to be retyped. This was done on a variety of computers, both desk- and lap-top, under three different word-processing packages. The remaining talks were transcribed from the original tapes. The disks were then loaded onto a Macintosh IIvi, and converted into a single format using Claris Works. The text was then laid out and edited using the same package. The camera-ready copy was printed in Palatino font on a 300 dpi Apple LaserWriter, onto which the artwork was cut and pasted.

Printing was done, on a very tight schedule, by M & T Kelleher, 8 Winchelsea Rd, Forest Gate, London E7.

Thanks

Many people were involved in this project. The following list hopes to give everyone due credit, but we apologise in advance for any omissions.

- Original booklets produced by **John & Eve Harvey** and **Rob Jackson**
- Original art work by **Jim Barker**
- Cover illustration by **Sue Mason**
- Tapes for transcription from **John & Eve Harvey** and **Gytha North**
- Typing by **Alison Scott**, **Bridget Hardcastle** and **Stephanie Bellière**
- Tape duplication & financial planning by **Mike Scott**
- Proof reading by *Andrew* & **Elizabeth Robinson** and **Steven Cain**
- Type-setting by **Roger Robinson**
- Typing arrangements by **Tim Illingworth**
- Initial design & contents ideas by **Steve Davies**
- Catering by **Guilia de Cesare**
- and not forgetting **BOB SHAW**, whose fault it all is.

Previous Publications

Several of these talks have been previously published as follows:

- The talks given at Eastercon in 1974-1978 inclusive were collected in *The Eastercon Speeches*, a Paranoid/Inca Press booklet, edited in 1979 by Rob Jackson.
- The talks from Eastercons in 1982-1984 inclusive were collected in *Serious Science*, which was produced by The Shaw Fund in order to raise money to send Bob to Aussiecon II, the 1985 Worldcon in Melbourne (and to bring him back again). The fund was administered in the UK by Eve Harvey and in Australia by Marc Ortlieb.
- As far as we know the other two talks, from 1985 and 1988, have had no publication other than in fanzines.

Back Cover

This booklet has been produced by Becon Publications for Confabulation, the 1995 British National SF Convention.

All profits from the sale of this booklet after the convention will be donated to the RNIB Talking Book Fund.

Becon Publications, 75 Rosslyn Ave,
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Original Appearances

- Cover cartoon by Jim Barker – *The Eastercon Speeches*, 1979.
- “Introduction, 1979” by Mike Glicksohn – *The Eastercon Speeches*, 1979.
- “Introduction, 1995” by Alison Scott – *A Load of Old BoSh*, 1995.
- “A Note from the Author” by Bob Shaw – *The Eastercon Speeches*, 1979.
- “The Need for BAD Science Fiction” – *Goblin’s Grotto* 1, June 1975, edited by Ian Williams. † ¶
- “Time-Travellers Among Us” – as “Time Travel Talk” in *Triode* 21, June 1975, edited by Eric Bentcliffe, Terry Jeeves and Eric Jones. † ¶
- “The Return of the Backyard Spaceship” – *Maya* 11, August 1976, edited by Rob Jackson. † ¶
- “The Bermondsey Triangle Mystery” – *Maya* 14, June 1977, edited by Rob Jackson. † ¶
- “Up the Conjunction: An Investigation into Astrology” – *Drilkjis* 3, August 1978, edited by Dave Langford and Kevin Smith. † ¶
- “Eau de Clone” – *Matrix* 30, June 1980, edited by Eve and John Harvey for the British Science Fiction Association. This may have been preceded by the same talk’s appearance in *Ben’Zine* 3, undated (but with a Phil Foglio cartoon dated 1979), edited by Ben Zuhl.
- “The Mysterious World of Bob C. Shaw” – *Matrix* 37, August 1981, edited by Graham James for the British Science Fiction Association.
- “Beyond Cosmos” – *Serious Science*, 1984. ‡ ¶
- “Conning Your Way” – *Serious Science*, 1984. ‡ ¶
- “Ten Years, but Not Decayed” – *Serious Science*, 1984. ‡ ¶
- “My Life and Space/Times” (aka “Worldcon After Dinner Speech”) – *Matrix* 61, October 1985, edited by Eve and John Harvey for the British Science Fiction Association. ¶
- “What I Learned from Watching *Star Trek*” – *Mimosa* 3, September 1987, edited by Nicki and Richard Lynch.
- “Campus Fugit” – *Xyster* 13, November 1987, edited by Dave Wood.
- “The Importance of Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies” (aka “A Serious Scientific Talk” – *Nowhere Fast* 4, August 1988, edited by

Harry Bond. ¶

- “Corn Is the Lowest Form of Wheat” – *Mimosa* 9, December 1990, edited by Nicki and Richard Lynch; foreword added in *Pulp* 18, January 1991, edited by John Harvey.

† Speech collected as one of five in *The Eastercon Speeches* (1979).

‡ Speech collected as one of three in *Serious Science* (1984).

¶ Speech collected as one of ten in *A Load of Old BoSh* (1995).

“Eau de Clone”, “The Mysterious World of Bob C. Shaw”, “What I Learned from Watching *Star Trek*”, “Campus Fugit” and “Corn Is the Lowest Form of Wheat” have not previously been collected.

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- To Rob Jackson as prime mover – and first publisher of the five early talks as *The Eastercon Speeches* – for inspiration, encouragement and scanning.
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- To Joe D. Siclari for finding and scanning the *Ben’Zine* 3 text of “Eau de Clone”.

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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