GRAFT
CORRUPTION
LEAK
ADVANCE INFORMATION
SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
AGRICULTURAL DEPT.
COTTON REPORTS

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OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 2E7. Available for $3 cash for a one-time sample copy, zine trade, or letter of comment on the previous issue.

ART CREDIT: W.A. Rogers did the cover art originally as the cover of the 1905-08-12 issue of HARPER'S WEEKLY. Commercial opuntia growing is not for the faint of heart. I was tempted to detourn this ...

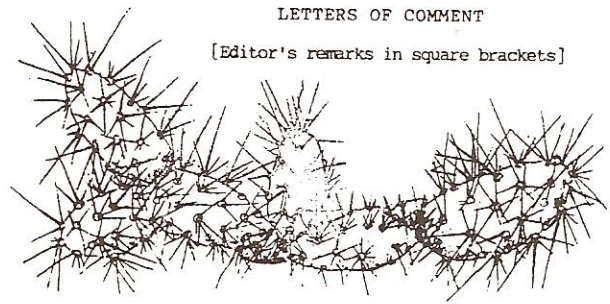
WORLD WIDE PARTY #5 will be celebrated on June 21st at 21h00 your time. Raise a glass and toast your friends around the world on the Papernet. Have a party, do a one-shot zine, or think up your own way to celebrate. Write up your WWP and publish it in your zine or send an account to me for OPUNTIA.

CON-VERSION 15, Calgary's general SF con, will this year be from July 17 to 19. Membership is $40 from Con-Version 15, 203 Lynnview Road SE #4, Calgary, Alberta, T2C 2C6. Guest of Honour is J. Michael Straczynski of BABYLON 5 fame.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Chester Cuthbert, John Held Jr, Russ Forster, Rusty Clark

LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Robert Lichtman 1998-03-10
Box 30
Glen Ellen, California 95442

I can vouch for the long-term brightness of hectograph prints as I have many examples thereof in my fanzine collection dating back into the 1940s. Some of them are considerably brighter than the copies I have of my own early publications (late 1950s to late 1960s) which were spirit duplicated on a decrepit old ditto machine I bought for $7 from Andy Main.

FROM: Buck Coulson 1998-03-12
2677 W 500 N
Hartford City, Indiana 47348-9575

Should a history of Star Trek fandom be a part of a general fan history? Admittedly, in the early days of the show, ST was taken up by fandom in general, but there were also ST clubs even in the early days that were totally separate from our written SF fandom. Today there seems to be very little overlap between the two.

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead 1998-03-13
23629 Woodfield Road
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

I read the information about the hecto with interest. I bought a little tiny kit from Heyer, only wanted to see how it worked and was not overly thrilled by what I could make the set-up do. I have seen some of the lovely stuff that Mae Strelkov prints out, so I know it is much more likely that it is me and not the technique. After tossing the gelatin that came with the kit I practiced with Knox gelatin but never got things quite right. But it is possible for a young kid to print out at least a few copies in the most rudimentary fashion. Admittedly most kids these days have computer access, but if someone does not, there is still a way to put out a little newspaper. I used ditto masters I bought at local education stores and could get quite a number of colours; blue, purple, red, yellow, black, green, brown.

The snail telegraph sounds remotely like planaria and the transmission of knowledge. That is, teach one little flatworm to do something, chop it up and feed it to others, and, well, you get the idea. Now if you could somehow get one to ingest a message and then, ah, but that would all be quite more difficult than directly transmitting the information.

FROM: Henry Welch 1998-03-11
1525 - 16 Avenue
Grafton, Wisconsin 53024

The snail telegraph sound both fascinating and completely fraudulent. Now all we need is an SF story where giant snails return to smite M. Benoit for his cruelty and discovering their big secret.

FROM: Ned Brooks 1998-03-11
713 Paul Street
Newport News, Virginia 23605

I am fairly sure the snail telegraph was a bizarre con game, though one of the operators might have been sincerely self-deluded. It hasn't been long though since it was reported that the quantum mechanics version of this sort of telegraph was reported to have been successfully implemented in Switzerland, and a bit of data transmitted (instantaneously, according to Bell's Theory) over a distance of some 17 miles.

I suppose SF fans are about the only ones left who remember the details of ditto and mimeo correctly. Today's paper had a comic strip in which two characters reminisce about the good old days "when an entire class could get high from the smell of a mimeograph". Of course this is nonsense. What the artist must of been thinking of was the methanol fumes from fresh spirit duplicator copies. There is a distinctive odour to fresh mimeo copies, but I don't think anyone but a neo got high off it, and that was purely artistic ecstasy!

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 1998-03-11
5911 West Pay Drive NW
Depauw, Indiana 47155

The snail telegraph is truly amazing. It's a big leap from observing snails to thinking of them as a means of communication, and however bizarre it seems now, that was a creative effort. Poor snails. Setting up the experiment must have taken tremendous work. Wouldn't it make a great film? An obsessed inventor, armies of snails, intricate contraptions, a public spectacle in Paris of the 1850s. I wonder what sort of person he was, sincerely convinced of his theory or a publicity-seeking charlatan?

WHY DIDN'T WE HAVE E-MAIL A CENTURY AGO?
by Dale Speirs

While browsing through an 1846 issue of PUNCH, I came across the following article (Anonymous 1846): "Since the electric telegraph is being extended everywhere, we think it might be laid down, like the water and the assessed taxes, to every house. By these means a merchant would be able to correspond with his factors at sea-towns, a lawyer would communicate with his agents in the country, and a doctor would be able to consult with his patients without leaving his fireside. What a revolution, too, it would create in the polite circles! Mrs. Smith, when she was giving an evening party, would "request the pleasure" of her hundred guests by pulling the electric telegraph, and the "regrets" and "much pleasures" would be sent to Mrs. Smith in the same way. This plan of correspondence would have one inestimable blessing; all ladies' letters would be limited to five lines, and no opening afterword for a postscript. If this plan of electric telegraphs for the million should be carried out, the Post Office will become a sinecure, as all letter-writing would be henceforth nothing more than a dead letter. In that case it might be turned into a central terminus for all the wires, and anyone found bagging a letter by means of false wires should be taken up for poaching."

In reading through the above, I marvelled at how well it described the idea of e-mail, with the Post Office as an Internet Service Provider. The technical problems would have been no worse than building the telephone network fifty years later. To establish the home telegraph network would have been no worse than stringing phone lines to every house. Some of the larger businesses did indeed have their own telegraph stations. Initially a home telegraph would have been expensive, just as with the telephone and computer, but the wealthier fraction of the population would have started off the industry, and as manufacturers reached economy of scale, prices would have fallen.

The reason why this was never so, I suspect, had to do with economic and political reasons. In most European countries, telegraphs were a monopoly of the Post Office who would certainly not be interested in letting all have it. The telephone, being voice and not print, was not perceived as such a threat, and in any event, again this too, was monopolized. In Canada and United States, where telegraphs were privately operated, usually by the express and railroad companies, those industries habitually thought in terms of reducing competition.

Home telegraphs, notwithstanding PUNCH's catty remark about ladies being limited to five lines, would have allowed much faster and lengthier communications than the mails. Mum and Dad could communicate regularly with the children gone off to the colonies in remote places like Ontario or New South Wales. Depending on the rate table of charges for telegraphic communications, such palaeo-e-mail would be brief and to the point if expensive, or trivial and lengthy if cheap. I suspect that the rates would be based on time used on-line, not by the word.

In 1846, letter mail was expensive. A week's wages to send a letter to the colonies was not unheard of, with no guarantee it would get there, shipwrecks being as frequent as they were. Many correspondents would send multiple copies of a letter in the hope that one might get through. Delivery time was measured in weeks or months. A telegraph network would put paid to this problem, although parcels would still be afflicted. The famous Pony Express, for example, lasted only a year and was ruined when the telegraph lines finally crossed the Rocky Mountains. Palaeo-e-mail would have also avoided diplomatic problems and ended a few wars sooner than they might have otherwise, due to the delay in telling combatants on the far side of the ocean that a peace treaty had been signed.

Reference.

Anonymous (1846) The complete letter-writer. PUNCH 11:238

PUBLIC LETTER WRITERS
by Dale Speirs

For all that literacy is considered a good thing, it is not essential to daily life for most people and through most cultures and history. A culture needs only a small percentage of literates to preserve its learning. Literacy means different things to different people, but in this article it means only the ability to read and write a language. Some people consider literacy to include regular novel reading or the ability to quote the great authors, but that is culture, not literacy. Mass literacy is now taken for granted in most parts of the world, but it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even today, 60% of all North American homes do not buy books, equipment training is done by example and verbal instruction, and the majority of people get their news from television. On the face of it, it may seem that illiterates would not use the mails, but this is not entirely so. There are those who manage to struggle through a few simple sentences or can sign their name. Even those completely illiterate can use the services of a public scribe and thereby send or receive mail.

Scribes are common through history. They mostly served in official capacities for governments or religious groups, but there have also been freelance scribes, or public letter writers. It is the latter who form the subject of this article.

Public letter writers had a trade without status and were not associated with any socio-economic condition (ref. 15). Any literate person could set up as a public scribe, and at little cost.

A first-person account of being a public letter writer, circa 1827, tells of how it was a desperate final step against total impoverishment (ref. 12). Skipping the tedious story of how he came to be in reduced circumstances, we go to the part where the anonymous author relates how he was wandering past a stationer's shop and saw a book for sale displayed in the window. It was "The Polite Letter Writer", and gave the author an idea for his economic salvation. He bought paper, quills, and ink, then rented a room and set a placard in the window. His customers invariably started off by demanding assurances of secrecy, and ranged from a concerned mother with a wayward daughter to a young woman sending a love letter to her boyfriend. His story goes:

"My calling prospered. I wrote letters of condolence and of congratulation; made out bills, and composed valentines; became the friend of every pretty girl and fine youth in the parish; and never breathed one of their mighty secrets in the wrong quarter."

Public letter writers were common in England until the early years of the 1800s. One writer (ref. 1) commented in 1833 as follows.

"Some years ago it was no uncommon thing, particularly in those parts of London near the river, as Wapping and Shadwell, to see stuck in the window of a shop or in front of a stall, such inscriptions as 'Letters written here', 'Letters written to all parts of the world', 'A large assortment of letters on all sorts of subjects to be found within', &c. &c."

Public scribes in France were common enough by 1570 that they formed a trade association, the Communaute des maitres ecrivains jures de Paris (ref. 14). Like scribes elsewhere, they tended to congregate in certain neighbourhoods, around post offices, and the like. In Paris, they were found not only in proletarian neighbourhoods where their customers might be expected, but also the St. Innocents cemetary (ref. 15).

Many of the references I have found refer to the scribes of Rome, but this is probably due to the popularity of that city as a tourist destination, where most authors writing for British and American periodicals were likely to come into contact with the public letter writers.

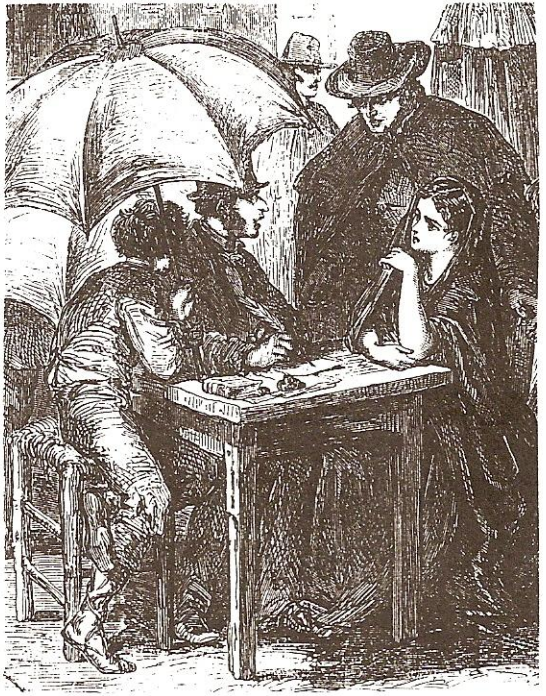
An account of 1833 (ref. 1 and Figure 1 at right) tells of Italian public letter writers:

" ... a body of men not inconsiderable in number, and who have no other occupation whatever, gain their bread by writing letters for the poor and uneducated classes. These humble yet important functionaries ... do not, generally speaking, occupy either shop or stall, but ply their labours in the open air. Their portable establishment, or stock in trade, consists of an old rickety table, with sometimes a desk upon it, two low stools (one for the writer, the other for the customer), a few sheets of paper, some pens, a penknife made like a razor and almost as big, a still more oddly-shaped inkhorn, and a pair of spectacles, either to aid their sight or to give a grave look. Thus furnished they sit through the day, generally near to the post office, either despatching business or waiting for it."

" ... public letter writers at Naples ... abound much more than in the 'eternal city'. In a vico, or lane, by the side of the post office of Naples, they generally plant the desk, as they are there at hand not only to write answers but to read the letters as they arrive ... There, close to the iron-grated windows of the post office through which the letters are delivered, the patient scrivani sit from eight o'clock in the morning til the dusk of evening."

"For a letter of ordinary interest their charge is about five Neapolitan grani, or twopence English; but this is proportionaly increased to ten or even to fifteen grani ... Yet with these trifling gains the scrivani contrive to live, and for the most part, to keep a family."

Three decades later, the public letter writers of Rome were still a subject of interest. The 1864 commentary on the scribe shown below in Figure 2 is as follows (ref. 2).



"In the streets adjoining the ruins of the Theatre of Marcellus, especially on Sundays after mass, motley groups station themselves near a dirty-looking man who is sheltered by a large and tolerably deteriorated umbrella. ... The public letter writer at Rome is ordinarily an old man, dressed as a gentleman. A ci-devant black coat, not too well fitting, covers his bent body; but his mind is mostly superior to his vestments and he is confidently relied upon to give his advice and the benefit of his long experience in the conversations and discussions that take place hurriedly between him and his plebian customers on the subjects of their various misfortunes, to be duly recited and turned to graphic account in the poorly-paid document resulting from the consultation."

Eight years on, little had changed in Rome. The engraving in Figure 3 on the next page was accompanied by the remarks of the artist Sidney Hall (ref. 3):

"He is one of the public letter-writers (scrivani publici). Don't you see his pen and his ink-pot, and his shells and bits of marble for paperweights? What a world of wisdom there is in his face! No wonder: he is surcharged with the affairs of tribes of contadini."

The tasks of public scribes changed with time. They often did other things besides letter writing. Since the letters were frequently petitions to government bureaucrats, the scribes would, for a suitable fee, search libraries or archives to copy legal documents. Scribes were most common around post offices but were associated also with other government buildings. An example was the public scribe by the Palais de Justice in Paris, France, who did searches for birth and death certificates in addition to their regular letter writing (ref. 11).

Although the spread of literacy reduced the numbers of public letter writers, there was still a demand for them not in the older capacity of someone who could read a letter to a client or write one for an illiterate, but

rather as a specialist who composed letters that required some thought. Romantic and poetic letters were in demand from people who could have written a letter of their own but did not have the technical skill to do more than a business letter.

The village postmaster was often prevailed upon to read and write letters for the illiterate poor (ref. 10) and for an extra consideration to embellish the language of the letter:

"It was no unusual circumstance for them to offer large premiums, as much as sixpence a verse, if we would put in 'a bit of poetry' ... "

Charles Dickens, in an 1854 issue of his magazine HOUSEHOLD WORDS (ref. 9), wrote about a part-time public letter writer in Ireland who represented a neighbour in a petition to a government board:

"Sometimes, in the remote country districts of the south of Ireland, the epistolary requirements of the people are supplied by the parish schoolmasters, who are usually most willing to act as amanuenses. Occasionally, too, a village will boast of a genius, and one who is neither mute nor inglorious. I knew a character of this description, who held a small farm in a wild district of the county Cork. His name was Con Quill, and his ceaseless endeavours after knowledge were really surprising. He usually carried a tattered English school dictionary under his arm, wherein he never failed to make diligent search for any unfamiliar word that was addressed to him, Irish being his vernacular tongue."

"During the height of the potato famine, the Relief Committee of the district where Con Quill resided, were forced, from the prevalence of petty theft, to make a rule that anyone found stealing should be excluded from receiving the daily dole of Indian meal. A poor woman, a neighbour of Con's, being caught in

the act of stealing a kid, came necessarily under the ban of the committee. On the next day of their meeting, the following petition, which I have copied verbatim et literatim, was laid before them:"

"We the undersigned beg to state that the sole crime committed by Nelly Reen of Illaninah consisted in depriving of existence a small cornuted animal. She is a superannuated old maid who never entered the bonds of Hymen, and on that account has no progeny to support her. We, under these circumstances, recommend her to the patronage of the Illaninah Relief Committee [signed] Cornelius Quill"

"The petition was, I believe, granted, but the beauty of the business was that not a single member of the committee, with the exception of the clergyman, had the most remote idea of the meaning of the word 'cornuted'."

Public letter writers were in a privileged position to learn the intimate details of many lives. One wonders if governments employed them as spies. It would certainly be a good opportunity to learn a few things although against that it is unlikely that illiterates had many secrets worth knowing. Revolutionaries would have been literate, and hardly the type to trust their secrets to a scribe. A public scribe would also lose his trade if the customers learned he was divulging their secrets.

One interesting example is the begging letter. Beggars have always been a nuisance and the early 1800s were even worse than today. In the absence of government relief or common public charity, the well-to-do were a bit more tolerant of beggars, realizing that there was nothing else for them. For every person who campaigned against beggars, there were hundreds who tossed a coin to them. Beggars only exist where they find it profitable, and the fastest and only method to be rid of them is for the populace to give nothing.

In this tradition, the begging letter developed. A literate beggar could send dozens of appeals per day to likely marks whose names were taken from directories. Prior to the postal reforms of 1840, which not only introduced the postage stamp but also cheap letter rates, begging letters, while not uncommon, did not have the circulation that they enjoyed in the late Victorian era.

The begging letter usually introduced the author as an elderly widow with no support, a crippled man trying to provide for a family, or any other story calculated to bring a tear to the eye of the recipient. The few who investigated the story generally found that there was little veracity in it. Most begging-letter specialists wrote their own material, but some public letter writers would do it for a fee. An 1839 account of public scribes specializing in begging letters reads (ref. 13):

"He can write a capital letter, enough to make any of the quality people cry. The begging-letter people give him a shilling for a letter. ... The writing of these letters is a regular profession, and there are houses of call where the Litterateurs are in attendance in order to receive their clients."

Begging letters are not that common anymore, but as late as 1928, university students opened a letter bureau that would, among other types of letters, send begging letters to dear old Dad hitting him up for more college expenses (ref. 22). The fee was 10% of the results.

In Europe, the decline of the public scribe began with the advent of better schooling and the spread of literacy in conjunction with printing and cheap paper. Public letter writers were obviously not required so often as before. In 1833, one observer remarked (ref. 1):

"[Public letter writers], however, have been gradually disappearing with the spread of education among the people. No doubt there are still many individuals in London who cannot write, and that much remains to be done in the important branch of popular instruction; but it is

equally certain that at the present day there are few families, even among the poorest, without some member of it, or without some friend or neighbour, that is qualified to carry on its limited correspondence; and thus the occupation of a general public letter-writer is going, and is almost gone, from among us in London."

By 1845, public scribes were extinct as a sole occupation in Britain (ref. 6):

"A few persons are occasionally occupied in copying petitions to Parliament and to the different boards of revenue, but there is not enough of such work to employ any single person wholly, and it is usually performed by lawyers or law-stationers' clerks during their over-hours."

There were still some who thought it might be a useful trade, as witness an 1856 Englishman (ref. 7):

"Artists have gratified us with their representations of the Italian letter-writer, the Spanish, the oriental, and others. Why should the profession be unknown in this country? In a market town or large village, if a worthy individual, backed by influential friends, would boldly display the inscription "Letters written here, charge one penny", a sufficient renumeration would probably be soon obtained."

The public scribes adapted as best they could. In Paris, the Communaute des maitres ecrivains jures de Paris, faced with a literate populace that no longer need that many public letter writers, changed into a calligraphers' association (ref. 14). But by 1930, a search for public scribes found only an elderly woman who copied legal documents (ref. 23). She lamented that while she had plenty of that kind of work:

" ... there is no romance to it, and my imagination is dead. In the old days a client, whose dialect I could hardly comprehend, would enter and mumble a few words, and from those few words I would compose such a letter, a veritable poem, for his mother or sweetheart at home. And after a week or so he would be certain to come again with a smiling face and tell me to write another. That was romance, and it took imagination. But this, this today, is sheer drudgery. It enables me to buy rentes, but I am not happy."

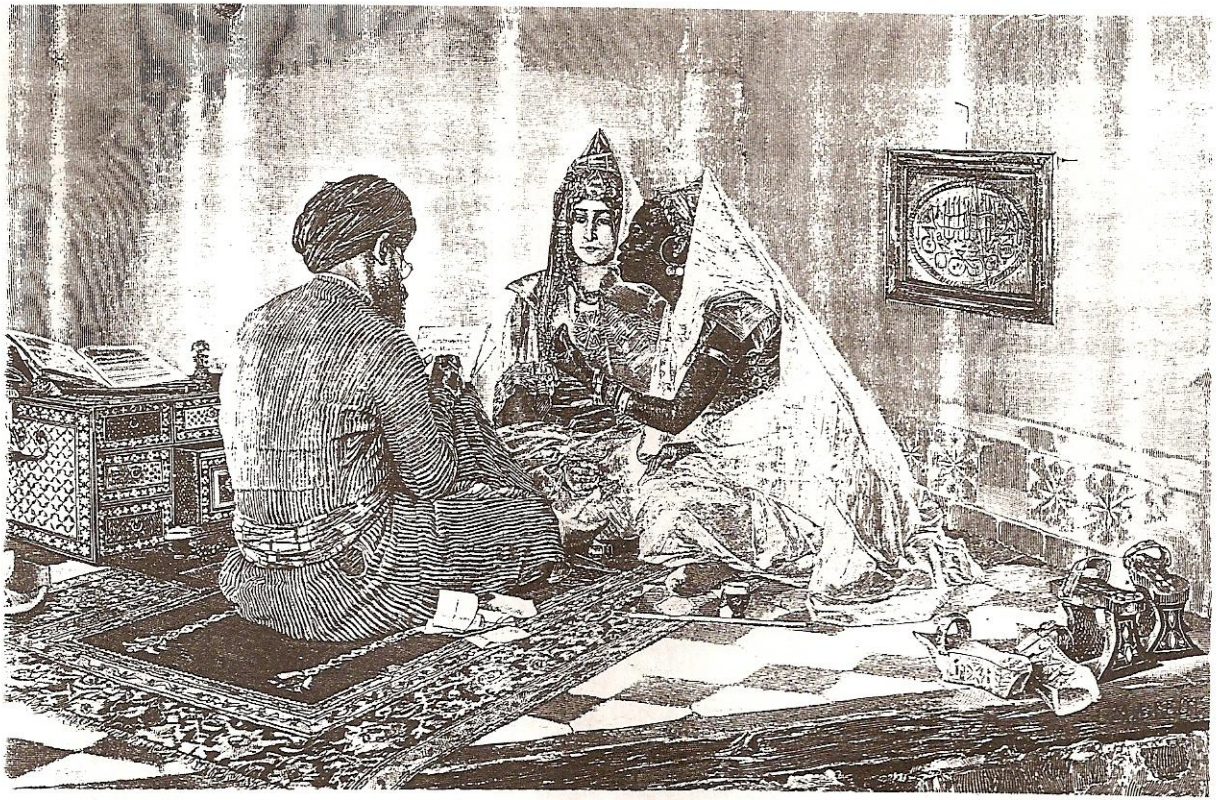
In Spain, public letter writers took a different tack, arguing that letter writing should be left to the specialists. Just as most people buy their clothes from a store instead of making their own, or pay a mechanic to fix a car, so it was that letters should be the province of professional scribes (ref. 16):

"The standards have grown slack, and all sorts of people are encouraged to believe they can write letters. People whose banality of style strikes even themselves, so that they always use envelopes to avoid the public shame of a postcard and the scorn of all cultured postman, are encouraged, as things stand today, because anything is allowed to count as a letter. In every other walk of life, people give up attempting what they are not good at."

Mexican public scribes, known as 'evangelistas', went from writing love letters to doing simple bookkeeping and legal documents such as wills and contracts. This, incidently, got them into trouble with lawyers, who resented scribes undercutting them in the marketplace, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to evict them. One such complaint was that evangelistas were writing letters of reconciliation between quarreling parties, thereby eliminating the need for lawyers to fight a court case.

Generally public scribes adapted to universal literacy by first emphasizing content, then going into related services such as legal documents, bookkeeping, or copying. Copying was an important service until the development of copying machines in the late 1800s/early 1900s.

Figure 4: A public letter writer in Tunis, circa 1891 (ref. 26).



There was persistence of the public scribe. Even after widespread literacy developed, there were always a few illiterates about who needed help.

The last full-time public letter writer in a developed country I have been able to trace is Thomas Young, a Scotsman by birth, who died at White Plains, New York, on October 20, 1930 (ref. 18). He plied his trade in front of the Motor Vehicle Bureau, and wore a cap that had the sign "Public Writer". He acted as a notary public in addition to his other duties. According to his obituary notice (ref. 19) there were 425,000 illiterates in New York State in 1920, so Young's trade was not as marginal as some might think.

On the island of Tristan da Cunha, Rev. David Neaum, who served there in the middle 1950s, would assist the postmaster. The two men not only despatched the mails but wrote letters for illiterate islanders (ref. 4).

More commonly in developed countries, the public letter writers who remained earned their keep from specialized letter writing, and usually if not always as a part-time occupation. Love letters were stock in trade. At the extreme end of that specialty was the Sakowitz department store in Dallas, Texas, which in 1984 offered the services of a public scribe to write "personal and meaningful love letters filled with poetry, secret references, and special celebrations" (ref. 20). At a price of $7,000 for 52 letters, this service was presumably aimed at the wealthy but inarticulate oilman. College girls at Northwestern University in Chicago helped pay their way through university in 1928 with a letter bureau. Love letters were $10 each (paid in advance) and routine thank-you letters were $2 (ref. 21).

Scribes have not vanished into the mists of history. They are still found in many Third World countries today. The typewriter is the preferred instrument now, and the client gets a carbon copy.

In Ghana, a 1958 report used as an example J.E. Kwofie, a public scribe whose business was doing well enough to allow him to support three wives (ref. 24). He estimated that three out of five letters he wrote were love letters, mostly from migrant workers to their wives back home. However, the Ghanaian scribes had a varied practice, such as inventing references for household servants, legal documents, petitions, and postal banking. The scribes were often consulted by politicians and journalists for the views of the man on the street, about which few could be better informed.

A 1976 report from Iran (ref. 8) mentioned that:

" ... near the post office, there is a street with the public letter writers and scribes. These men still squat in front of their packing-case desks, only now they use typewriters instead of the older pen and ink. These men are well patronised by the less literate ... "

Mexico City has them, as a 1996 visitor noted (ref. 5):

" ... we walk down to Plaza St. Domingo ... Men (mostly men) sitting outside, at electric typewriters, typing letters and documents to the dictation of their clients"

Even in New York City, public scribes exist. Elliot Essman, as one example (ref. 25), was reported in 1988 to be doing well writing love letters for housewives. He used a computer to generate a standard template, which would then be personalized to suit his customer. This was an outgrowth of his word-processing business, and it is here that we can see that secretarial and word-processing services are, in a sense, a descendent of an ancient and honourable trade going back millenia.

Figure 5: A Spanish scribe of 1854, in Seville. He is taking dictation from an illiterate peasant woman, while another waits to have her recently received letter read to her. The scribe's sign on the background wall is "Juan Morales, Memorialista y Escribano". (ref.27)

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19) Anonymous (1930-10-22) Professional letter writers. NEW YORK TIMES, page 26

20) Anonymous (1984-11-19) [untitled report] THE TIMES OF LONDON, page 13

21) Anonymous (1928-02-05) Write students' letters. NEW YORK TIMES, section 2, page 1

22) Anonymous (1928-02-07) A revival of letter-writing. NEW YORK TIMES, page 26

23) Anonymous (1930-10-12) Public letter writer finds romance gone. NEW YORK TIMES, section 3, page 3

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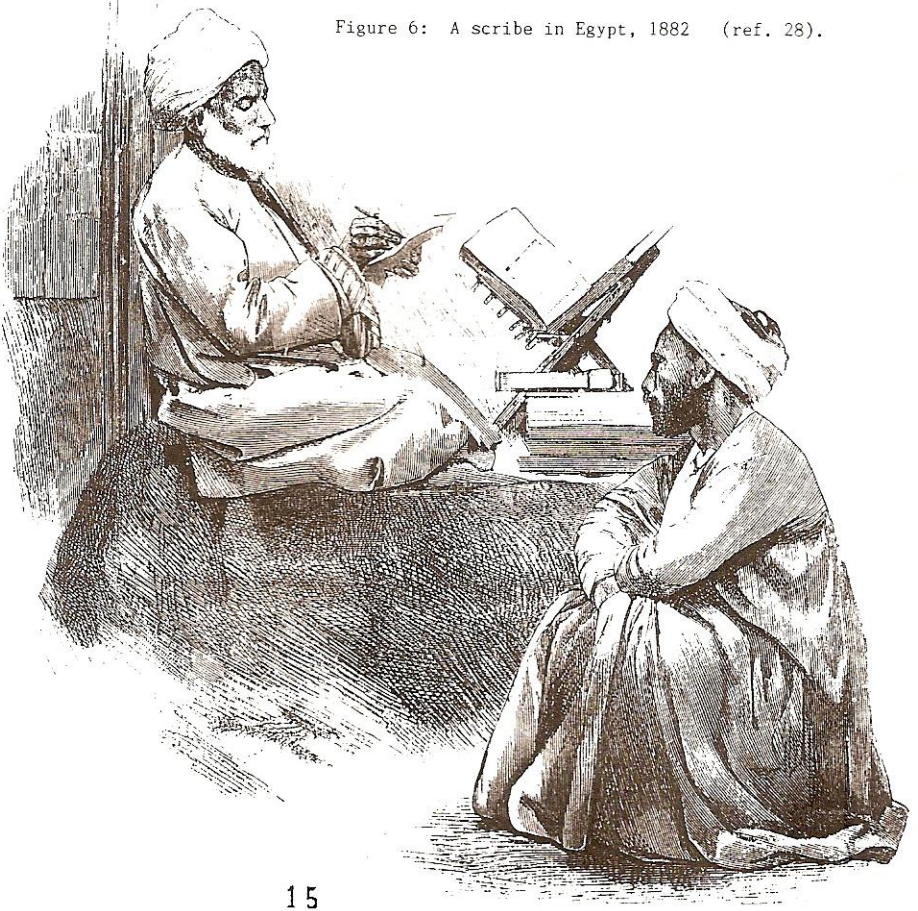


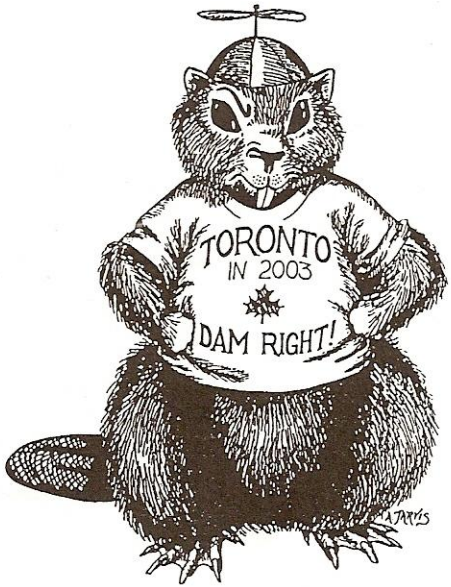
Figure 6: A scribe in Egypt, 1882 (ref. 28).

ON FIRST BIDDING FOR WORLDCON 2003

Much have I travelled in the realms of fandom,
And many goodly conventions seen.
Round many WorldCons have I been
Which fans in fealty to Hugo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That Toronto would win in 2003.

Yet did I never breathe it pure serene
Till I heard the bid speak out loud and bold.
Then felt I like some watcher of conventions
When a WorldCon swims into his ken.

Or like stout Hugo when with eagle eyes
He stared at science fiction
And all his readers
Looked at each other with a wild surmise
Silent, upon a peak in fandom.



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Toronto in '03
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