

OPUNTIA

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GOLD IN THEM THAR SAFE-DEPOSIT BOXES

by Dale Speirs

Introduction And Digression.

My first major investment was my house, paid off in 1997. From then until my mother's death in 2002, I put my money into term deposits, a safe but low-yielding way to store cash. When she died, my brother and I inherited her mineral rights for the oil on the family's ancestral homestead. Suddenly I took up an interest in petroleum, began studying it seriously, discovered Peak Oil, and diversified my investments into private-equity conventional oil (ownership of oil wells, either leased or with mineral rights included). I have never invested in publicly-traded stocks, so finding good private equity was almost a full-time job. After the Panic of 2008, it became an impossible job, as no one in their right mind will sell mineral rights or producing wells in a world where Wall Street had turned paper investments into something for the Hazmat squad to clean up.

In March 2009, two of the worst culprits responsible for toxic paper were Goldman Sachs and Citigroup. They issued statements that they had returned to profitability, which proved to be creative accounting done by revaluing their debt at half-price while keeping their investments in toxic paper at face value. This didn't bother me as I would probably have done the same thing if

I were a Wall Street bankster. What did bother me was that in spite of this nonsense, stock markets began climbing back up. This wasn't just irrational, it was outright insanity. Until then, I had never seen the need to buy physical gold, but that convinced me the time was now to slowly move out of fiat currency. Since then, I have been steadily buying 1-ounce gold Maple Leaf coins as a store of value and putting them away in my safe-deposit box. It is peace of mind for twenty years from now when I am in my 70s. If I need the money then, I know I can get something for it. If I don't, then it will be a nice inheritance for the next generation.

I'm not the only one tiptoeing to the exit before the mad rush starts. Gold has, but for a brief dip in late 2008, held its value in the US\$900 (C\$1,100) range, at a time when stocks have cratered. Shortages of coin bullion are evident around the world as individuals go for gold despite the reassurances of their governments that the bottom has been reached and business is fundamentally sound. Central banks which had previously dismissed gold as a barbaric relic began buying it. Arabs and China concluded that their large holdings of dollars would be inflated away if the American government continued giving trillions to the Wall Street banks, and started buying gold by the tonne. (A tonne is a metric ton of 1,000 kg, not to be confused with the Imperial system ton, although both are very close to each other.)

Mooling For Gold.

There are a few good Websites about gold (goldseek.com is the best one) that are up to date and informative. Books on gold investing are harder to find, as anything published before 2009 is hopelessly out of date. **INVESTING IN GOLD** by Jonathan Spall (2009, hardcover) is a general survey of gold trading, investment, and how the international market works, written by a professional gold trader who has been in the business since 1983. He begins at the beginning, on how gold is mined. Underground mines have higher yields because they only dig out the ore but they are more expensive to operate because of the specialized equipment and personnel needed. The deepest mines in the world of any kind are the South African gold mines, down to 4 km depth. Open-pit mines are cheaper to operate and need fewer staff but have to move the overburden aside first, so their net yield is lower. The world's largest gold mining country is not South Africa, but surprisingly China.

The ore is initially refined on site because it takes tons of ore to recover one ounce of gold and it makes no economic sense to ship ore. The initial gold ingots are 99.5% pure, the rest being silver or other metals. The ingots, known as London Good Delivery bars, are then shipped closer to market where other refineries will bring them up to 99.99% pure, commonly written as 9999 pure. Gold is measured in troy ounces, slightly heavier than the regular



A stamp depicting a gold nugget, issued by Canada Post when postage was 42 cents and gold was in the \$200s.

ounce used by Americans, or just over 31 grammes. Good Delivery bars weigh 400 ounces, about 13 kg, and are the size of a brick. They have sloped sides to make it easier to pick them up because gold is not only heavy but slippery.

Trading Gold.

Spall then moves on to the business of trading gold. Starting off with the simplest form, he discusses hedging by the gold mines. Gold, like many commodities, is often sold as futures contracts, whether for delivery next month, a year from now, or several years from now. On each contract, the mine promises to deliver 1,000 ounces of gold at a certain date, FOB a certain city, usually New York or London. Gold is normally in contango, which means that the future price is higher than the current price on the spot market. The spot market is the current buying time and place. When you buy a gold Maple Leaf from a coin dealer, you are buying on the spot market; you hand him the money on the spot and he hands you the coin on the spot.

Mines sell a proportion of their gold on the futures market to secure a fixed price they can rely on for their budget planning. Speculators buy the futures contract because they are betting that by the time the contract is due for delivery, the price of gold will be even higher on the spot market of that day. Mines will buy back their contracts if they can when the price of gold suddenly soars, or else sit tight if gold slumps. During a long down market, mines hedge a high percentage of their expected output, while in a booming market they sell mostly or only into the spot market. Hedging is betting, and it has broken more than a few careers of mining company executives

who guessed the wrong way. Individuals such as myself who buy gold for long-term storage are also hedging in a different sort of way.

Central banks are of divided mind on gold. Through the 1990s and to the present date, they sold some of their gold to convert it to fiat currencies, garnering criticism from their citizens that they were selling off their patrimony. Now the central banks of some countries are trying to quietly unload their American dollars by buying gold and other commodities with them. No one wants to sell too many dollars at one time as that would trigger a run on the U.S. Federal Reserve, but neither does anyone want to be caught out if a dollar panic suddenly hits. Spall goes into the financial machinations of the International Monetary Fund and the central banks as they squabble over what is to be done, whether to sell gold and depress the market, or keep it in the vaults for posterity. The more extreme gold bugs claim there is a conspiracy to depress gold prices, but the steam has been taken out of them because gold has stayed steadily high in the \$800 to \$1,000 range when stock markets have lost up to half their value.

One side market that many are unaware of is gold lending. It is commonly said against gold that it does not pay interest, but in fact many gold mines borrow gold or central banks lend it. Repayment can be in either fiat currency or additional gold. Interest on the loan is paid as a lump sum at the end of the loan,

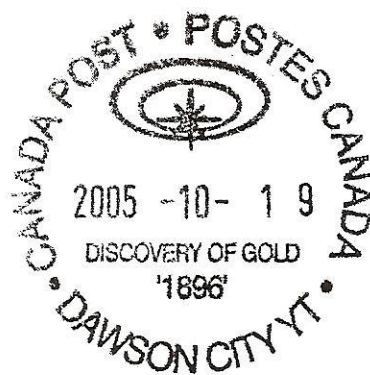
not during the life of the loan as is done with mortgages or personal loans. For example, 100,000 ounces of gold borrowed for 12 months at 0.2% interest requires that the borrower return 100,203 ounces. Gold leasing is seldom more than 1% interest because it holds its value and never becomes worthless as do paper investments. Gold is borrowed by short sellers who expect to buy the gold cheaper in the future to pay it back and thus make a profit on the difference. It is borrowed by mines wanting to stabilize their physical flow of gold instead of running their equipment on a boom-or-bust basis. Although Spall doesn't mention it, national mints will often borrow gold if there is a sudden surge in demand. The Royal Canadian Mint does this so customers of Maple Leaf coins don't have to wait, while the U.S. Mint puts them on a waiting list or prorates large orders from dealers for American Eagle gold coins. After the Panic of 2008, some troubled banks were borrowing gold at a higher rate of interest just to get some liquidity since there was none to be had in fiat currency markets.

The Business Of Gold.

Originally there were numerous bullion banks around the world specializing in gold and other precious metals, but over the decades the business has consolidated until the London market became the central marketplace. The gold market is surprisingly small, about the same volume as the Canadian dollar market.

In keeping with the time-honoured British tradition of strange ways to do things, even though gold contracts are traded in multiples of 1,000 ounces, the settlement uses London Good Delivery bars of 400 ounces each. However, 1 tonne of gold is 32,000 troy ounces, which is divisible, and many trades are for 4,000 or 10,000 (25 bars). Trades of 100,000 ounces are a lakh, the Indian term for that number. Traders will thus ask or bid on, for example, 2 lakhs of gold, which is 200,000 ounces. By common consent, the big gold traders generally do not deal in less than 5,000 ounces of gold in a transaction, as this is considered unprofessional. It is the coin dealers and retail brokers who look after the small trades. The London market fixes gold prices twice daily, at 10h30 and 15h00 their time, and the prices are instantly communicated around the world. When I walk into a Calgary coin shop to buy a gold coin, the dealer's price will be the most recent London fixing plus his service charge. Originally the London brokers met in a Rothschild office and negotiated buy/sell orders face to face. When Rothschild left the gold business in 2004 (they said profit margins were too small), the brokers switched to conference calls by telephone.

Spall goes into the details of how banks do their gold transactions, with a flurry of equations and jargon. Little of this is of interest to the individual investor but I suppose it adds to the completeness of the book. Gold options, a type of futures contract, were prevalent during the 1990s when gold prices were low, as mines



tried to hedge their production. By 2009, few options were on the market because the gold contango makes it unnecessary for mines to hedge very much production. It was circa 1999 during the transition between the two situations that some mines were caught out, having hedged more gold than they were actually producing. They then had to

rush to the market to buy the extra gold at a higher price than what they were selling their production for. In the early 2000s gold became a marginal investment because mortgage funds and derivatives were far more profitable. After warning signs began to appear in 2005, the international hedge funds began to take an interest in gold. It came back into favour as people remembered that gold is a tangible asset always worth something, as opposed to all that toxic paper now so much recycled scrap paper.

Institutional gold used for trading by the big banks is stored in only a few common vaults in London or New York. These are called unallocated vaults, where ownership of the gold bars changes daily but the bars just sit on the shelves

but are never moved about. If someone wants actual delivery, they get their x number of bars picked off the shelves at random.

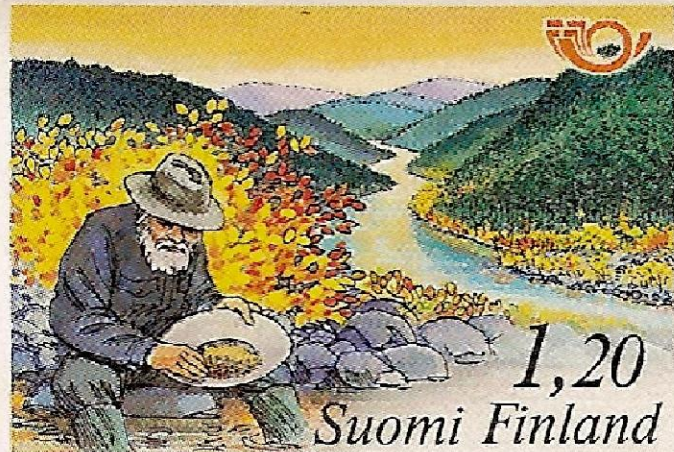
The obvious practical difficulties of moving gold around means that the vast majority of traded gold is in unallocated vaults and only the ownership papers are transferred, not the actual gold. The Bank of England uses allocated vaults, where bars are tagged and moved from one shelf to another at the end of each day's trading between central banks of the world. Segregated vaults are basically giant safe-deposit boxes where individual bars stay in one spot with one owner for long periods of time, as opposed to those of day traders.

Although the London gold market is the major exchange, there are other smaller ones throughout the world. Spall lists these and add some details about each one. The oldest precious metals bourse still in existence is the Chinese Gold and Silver Exchange Society of Hong Kong, founded in 1910. The youngest is the Dubai Gold and Commodities Exchange, established in 1995. Spall wryly notes that a trader who buys gold in Hong Kong dollars per tael (a tael is slightly heavier than a troy ounce) on a short futures contract and attempts to roll it over as US\$ per ounce on the London exchange on a long contract had better have a very good computer to calculate all the differentials.

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Investing In Gold.

The traditional method of investing in gold, and the safest, is to buy physical gold and put it in a safe-deposit box, which is what I do. But there are other methods, most of which are designed for short-term holders, day traders, and speculators. Exchange-traded funds (ETFs) are the newest form, having been invented in 2003 and now widespread and very popular. An ETF buys and holds allocated gold in a vault, and issues shares directly proportional to the amount of gold it owns, less the cost of renting the vault and administration. Share prices are often set at 1/10 ounce of gold minus a few pennies for expenses. Shares will therefore fluctuate in value in direct proportion to the current price of gold.



1983

In essence, an ETF is an index fund. They are popular with pension funds, which in many countries are prohibited from directly owning commodities, but which can own equity shares in a fund or company. Retail investors like them as well because smaller trades are allowed, whereas a broker dealing in physical gold won't consider anything under 5,000 ounces. One has to put some trust in the ETF that they actually own as much gold as they have shares outstanding. Commodity prices in the futures markets are volatile, so ETFs are also volatile.

Spall worked as a commodities trader in many parts of Asia and has a Chinese wife. Consequently he takes a chapter to explain to us occidentals the different viewpoints of buying physical gold. In North America, we buy coins and bars for investment. Throughout Asia, 90%-gold jewelry is the main form of investing. It is traditional in India and other places that the wife is given a dowry of gold jewelry as her personal property, for use as income in widowhood or to pass on to her daughters. The husband has no claim on her gold. North Americans and Europeans are reluctant for sentimental reasons to sell jewelry, but selling it for scrap is an accepted practice elsewhere in the world. Scrap jewelry is the second largest source of gold in the world after mining, with hundreds of tonnes being recycled. During the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, when currencies collapsed, there was a tremendous surge in gold selling as the locals cashed in their jewelry.

The Price And Value Of Gold.

Throughout history gold has been used as a hedge against inflation. Studies have shown that since the Roman Empire one ounce of gold will consistently buy a top-quality suit or at least 350 loaves of bread in every culture. The relationship is not precise and sometimes wanders afield but is close enough for most people. It tightens up in times of stress when people lose faith in their governments, or revolutions and wars destroy rule of law. Gold as real money is recognized in every society today.

Conspiracy theorists, when not obsessing over the Kennedy assassination or 9/11, claim that the price of gold has been suppressed over the past few decades by central banks and mining companies. American conspiracy nuts like to blame it on Bill Clinton because the price of gold was low during his administration, while Shrub escapes the blame, either because everyone agrees he was too dumb to run a conspiracy or because the price started going up in his time. The Gold Anti-Trust Action Committee, known as GATA, has unsuccessfully sued assorted banks on this. Spall stands on his decades of gold trading experience to write that he has never seen any proof of it in his business. He has, to the contrary, had discussions with central bankers on how they could maximize the price of their gold holdings, as they worry about angry citizens denouncing them for selling gold cheap.

During the 1990s, the price of gold slumped to the middle US\$200s, had a brief spike over \$300 just before Y2K, then slumped again. Circa 2003 it began to slowly rise, culminating in a \$1,000 spike in 2008. At the nadir of the Panic of 2008, when stocks fell by half, gold only declined to the middle \$700s, and since then has maintained itself in the \$850 to \$1,000 range. Spall considers the reasons why this should be so. The American economy was weak during the run-up to the price spike, and once the central bankers and regulators showed themselves to be incompetent at dealing with the Panic, sentiment shifted to commodities as tangible assets that couldn't be manufactured by the trillions by the government. It wasn't that the American dollar had weakened and it took more of them to buy an ounce, because gold has also gone up in relation to other currencies as well. Unlike other commodities, gold is not affected by supply-and-demand concerns since a price spike causes a flood of scrap jewelry to hit the retail dealers.

Gold In Hand.

Spall goes on to discuss the actual buying of gold and in what form you should look for. Physical gold is best, and secure in a safe-deposit box assuming the bank doesn't go under. Bankruptcy does not give anyone a claim on the contents of your box, but if you can't get inside the building to access it, then it might as well be at the bottom of the ocean. This is not a problem in Canada

where there have been no bank failures or bailouts, but Americans and Europeans might be nervous. Some people consider buying stocks in a gold mining company, but this is not gold buying, it is stock buying. Mining stocks track the stock market, not the price of gold. ETFs track the price of gold but they are extremely volatile. Futures contracts are for short-term trading only for the individual, and require minimum purchases of at least 1,000 ounces and more probably 5,000. There are other types of gold trades which get complicated very quickly and are not for the small trader or the faint of heart.

Spall wraps up with a series of rules for investing in gold, which can be summarized as having a plan and sticking to it, and studying the market. For example, my plan is to buy physical gold and keep it in a safe-deposit box for twenty years at least. This means I will not fret about what I am paying for a couple of gold Maple Leafs each week, whereas someone who wants to bet on the market will be a bundle of nerves as the price fluctuates. As with stocks, many people get too emotional and don't stick to their plan, letting fear or greed get the best of them.

The book finishes up with an FAQ about the gold trading system and a glossary. All told, the book explains its subject clearly and concisely, and is a good introduction to the subject.

THE GROVES OF ACADEMIA

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

I'm not particularly nostalgic for my time at university in Edmonton, earning a B.Sc. in Horticulture. It is with foreboding that I note it has been three decades since I graduated in 1978 from the University of Alberta. When I was a student, I had a summer job testing an experimental herbicide called Roundup, not yet on the market. The phrase "genetic engineering" made no sense; we bred plants with camel-hair brushes to transfer pollen from one strain to another. Windows were something that buildings had, not computers. Libraries had rooms full of card catalogues.

The one thing I do have nostalgia for is the university library. In grade school and in university, I always felt I learned more reading on my own in the library than in the classroom. After I graduated and moved to Calgary, I became and still am a regular at the University of Calgary Library, so the university life is an on-going process for me.

In glancing over my bookshelves at home, I see I have a number of novels and other books related to university life. This gives me an excuse for a thematic set of reviews. Universities, by their

nature, are self-contained communities as few other places in our society are. They have their own culture and way of life.



The Funny Side Of Academic Life.

Stephen Leacock is considered to be Canada's greatest humourist. His compilation COLLEGE DAYS (1923) is more an exercise in humorous nostalgia than in biography. He starts off with a humorous exaggeration of the good old days when he was a student and the inevitable decline in standards

since his days as an undergraduate. Leacock spent ten years as a school teacher in Ontario before going back to graduate school, and recounts how to deal with children, most of which is politically incorrect these days and probably now listed under criminal law. His greatest moment of triumph was when a parent asked him *"My boy, after six months of your teaching, is completely ignorant. How do you account for it?"* Leacock replied: *"I think it must be hereditary"*.

"Old College And New University" expresses the preference for small colleges where professors know their students versus the big industrial universities. I have mixed feelings on this myself. I attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton, which had 20,000 students. However, I was in the Faculty of Agriculture where the professors knew their students and we visited their homes for festive occasions. I suggest that if a large university seems impersonal, it is only because the student wasn't socializing or participating in extracurricular activities. Every large university has dozens or even hundreds of hobby and social clubs.

Several chapters scattered throughout this book are written in poetry but they may be safely ignored. In the prose chapters, Leacock picks a few easy targets, such as the poor teaching of English literature, a problem 80 years ago and still today. His predictions for the future include students spending most of their lives in university, sheltered from the outside world. Not entirely

a bad idea. In passing, I note that an Alberta SF fan, now Prof. Dr. Robert Runté at the University of Lethbridge, spent 22 years as a student at the University of Alberta. He was an undergraduate before I was, and was still studying for his Ph.D. long after I had gone. I believe I had paid off my mortgage by the time he finished his dissertation. The University of Alberta finally had to change their rules to force him out into the real world.

Leacock returns to the subject in his 1939 anthology TOO MUCH COLLEGE. He begins with a lament that modern education is too much a conveyor belt system, with not enough emphasis on life-long learning. This has changed in recent years as people realize that they need to keep up with new technology and procedures. Leacock remarks that education is like life, to be enjoyed during the voyage, and not fixated on the ultimate destination, be it graduation or retirement.

It does not help, as Leacock points out, that we waste so much time in school learning the illogical ways of the English language, which has sounds not represented by letters and letters that represent several sounds. Anglos think it amazing that Chinese have to learn 5,000 ideographs to reach minimum literacy, but overlook the trouble in pronouncing letter combinations such as "-ough", which can be "oo" as in "through" or "uff" as in "rough".

Having said that, Leacock then spends a chapter advocating that Latin be taught as a compulsory subject. It helps students to understand the connectedness of many European languages and cultures, in a way that learning Japanese never could. It also acts as ballast, to remind students that the past is not dried history but actual people. Surprisingly he dismisses one claim of classicists: "*For Greek I hold no brief. It is only for philologists and Apostiles.*" Leacock laments, and this was seventy years ago remember, that the younger generation lives in the present and ignores the past. It was ever thus.

In other chapters on the teaching of mathematics and French, Leacock condemns one as puzzle solving and the other as translation word-by-word instead of conversational comprehension. That remains so in today's teaching.

After demolishing some other subjects, such as economics and journalism, Leacock passes on to how a college should be run. He discusses the extracurricular activities and the countless clubs that every university has. He also pokes fun at one university he attended, mercifully unnamed, which prohibited the Debating Club from arguing religion, politics, or contemporary affairs. This left them, as he writes, with nothing but "Resolved that the execution of Charles the First was justified". Having attended both American and Canadian universities, he points out some peculiarities, such as Canadian universities having Maritime

Reunion Clubs, something western Canadians are very familiar with but which would probably puzzle Americans or Europeans.

Leacock writes that it is impossible for a professor ever to complete his research because there is always the nagging feeling that a few more facts remain to be discovered. A professor wouldn't know what to do if he finished off his subject.

WILT by Tom Sharpe (1976) later spawned sequels, but I only review the original novel here. Henry Wilt is a sad Englishman in a childless marriage with Eva, who sublimates her energy by constantly jumping from one fad to another, one extension course to another. He is an instructor with a decade at the Fenland College of Arts and Technology in the Dept. of Liberal Studies, and is charged with exposing trades apprentices to literary culture whether they want it or not. The College administrators have dreams of elevating themselves to a Polytechnic, and as part of that goal, a new Administration Building is under construction. Walking past the construction site one day, Henry notices the boreholes for the pilings, 10 metres deep and wide enough to accommodate a body the size of, as a hypothetical example, Eva.

Henry and Eva attend a party that leaves him drunk and stuck to an inflatable doll. Eva goes off in a huff with friends out of town. In her absence, Henry decides to make a practice run by dressing the doll as Eva and dumping her down a

borehole just before the contractors pour the concrete. The labourers spot it as 20 tonnes of concrete goes sloshing down the hole, and think they have seen a body. The concrete sets rapidly, so the police have no alternative but to dig an adjacent well. Eva's disappearance makes Henry the obvious suspect, and all else follows logically in the ensuing police investigation. Henry is brought in to assist police in their enquiries, but his years of experience in trying to teach literature to unruly apprentices makes the police interrogation a walk in the park.

The College mandarins are more upset about losing their upgrade to a Polytechnic than Eva's supposed death. It doesn't help that the accreditation committee coming to review the College can't help but notice the police vans and news reporters about campus. Fellow lecturers divide on ideological grounds. The New Left are for Henry because he has been taken into custody by the police, while the Old Guard are against Henry because he has been taken into custody by the police. Police interviews amongst the lecturers only add to the confusion.

All's well that ends well, and the case against Henry collapses when Eva finally returns to discover the astonishing circumstances. The novel is written by Sharpe in his usual politically incorrect style, with no bloody or scatological detail left undescribed. One will laugh in spite of one's self.

The Aggies.

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MOO by Jane Smiley (1995) is set at a state university affectionately known to its students and faculty as Moo U. It has more than passing similarity to Iowa State University, where Smiley teaches, and the University of Alberta, where I was taught. Moo U., Iowa State, and the U of A have strong emphasis on agriculture, as opposed to, for example, the universities of Calgary and Lethbridge, which do not teach the subject at all. The story of Moo U starts off with a guerilla horticulturist planting unauthorized fruit trees on campus.

There is a professor who wants to determine how fat a hog can grow if well fed for its entire natural lifespan. This is not as silly as it sounds, since meat livestock live only a few years at most before their trip to the slaughterhouse, and there is little knowledge about old cattle or hogs. Others in the cast of characters include a gaggle of dormitory coeds, a young professor on the prowl for women and tenure, not necessarily in that order, and assorted bureaucrats and union staff of the Moo U hierarchy. Hanging over all of them is the threat of budget cutting by the state legislature.

Smiley maintains several plot threads of the various characters, seldom intersecting but always interesting as we view Moo U from each of their eyes. Some are too wrapped up in their

research or empire-building to pay attention to the outside world, while others think of nothing else. All of the subplots reach their conclusions, with a few overlapping, but none particularly intertwined with others. There is one thread of pathos, the hog who has spent almost all of his life inside the university pen, save for one dimly remembered day back on the farm when the farmer let the piglets run loose outside in the pasture for a brief hour. The hog gets his freedom, and death, in the conclusion of the novel, when he roams free for a few minutes on the snow-covered campus before collapsing from a heart attack, unable to find the green spaces he remembered from that long-ago day.

The bureaucratic struggles ring true to life. Everyone has met the departmental secretary who has been there forever and runs the show in actuality, while allowing the Dean to delude himself that he is in charge. Based on my own experiences as an aggie who lived in student dormitories, I thought Smiley succeeded in catching the feeling of life on the campus of an agricultural university.

Robertson Davies.

Robertson Davies (1913-1995) is considered Canada's grand old man of letters, our equivalent of Samuel Johnson. He had three careers, first as an actor, then as a newspaper editor and publisher, and in his final decades he was a university professor. He

published thirty novels and plays. They were not the dense pretentious kinds that are churned out by many academics to be read by few and quickly forgotten but are enjoyable bestseller books still in print. Davies had a good sense of humour and never took himself or his novels seriously. I won't review every novel as that would take about three issues of this zine, but I include a representative sample herewith.

HIGH SPIRITS is an anthology of humorous ghost stories set at the University of Toronto, where Davies was Master of Massey College. The college held an annual Christmas party where the faculty and students showed off their talents in the performing arts. Davies being a literary man, he gave a recitation, which each year from 1963 to his retirement in 1981 was a ghost story written especially for the occasion. The stories are set at the university and poke fun at the academic environment. Davies was very good at working into his stories much subtle humour and inside jokes about academic life. There are too many stories to do a capsule review on all of them, but I mention a few stories as follow.

"Revelation From A Smoky Fire" starts in a college study, whose fireplace has always smoked badly, and the Bursar not inclined to spend money fixing the chimney. A ghost appears at Davies' desk but insists that Davies is the ghost and he is the tangible man. To add insult to injury, the ghost says he is Master of Massey College from a century hence, never heard of Davies,

and mistakes him for Robert Finch, who was a professor of French at the university during Davies' time. Davies ends up losing the argument, as the ghost departs unconvinced as to who is real and who isn't.

"The Ghost Who Vanished By Degrees" is about an encounter with the ghost of a student who many decades prior had failed his Ph.D. oral exam and shot himself in consequence. Now he haunts Massey College, waiting for someone willing to give him a second chance at the exam. The problem is that the ghost has forgotten what subject his dissertation was about. To compensate, he wrote a thesis on each subject that the college grants a degree in. Davies is trapped into being the examiner who has to listen to all the dissertations, hour after endless hour. At the end of it, Davies grants the ghost a Ph.D. in everything, giving the ghost his release from limbo.

"The Great Queen Is Amused" begins with an unfortunate university librarian who dabbled in the occult. She succeeds in raising the spirits of large numbers of dead Canadian authors. Worse still, they were not respectable authors but literary critics. They are not a quiet bunch, and it is left to our man Davies to sort out the mess. He decides to raise yet another spirit, that of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. She sends off all those pushy ill-bred colonials before departing herself, much amused.

"Refuge Of Insulted Saints" tells how

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Massey College was overrun by rejected saints back when the Vatican did a housecleaning and thinned out the number of accepted saints. They proposed to set up a Communion of Saints in Exile. Saint Catherine (of the wheel fame) proves annoying because she keeps shouting "Adeste fideles", but the others all fit in at useful jobs around the college. Saint Christopher is assigned to the university parking authority, as a result of which the College Fellows never have trouble finding a parking stall again. Saint Thomasius, who could turn water into wine, was very popular in the College bar. Saint Nicholas (not the Coca-Cola Santa Claus fake but the original) was a businessman in his real life, so he fit in beautifully over at the Bursar's Office.

THE LYRE OF ORPHEUS (1988) is the third volume of a trilogy of humorous novels by Davies but stands on its own. It is about the decision of the Cornish Foundation, a university endowment for the arts, to support the doctoral project of Hulda Schnakenburg to complete an unfinished opera by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The Foundation disbursement committee, determined to be eccentric, proposes that not only should Hulda finish it but that it be staged.

The novel starts with several threads, from a professor's young wife who carelessly throws away a manuscript that leads to a court case, to an alcoholic cleric at the university's College of St. John

and the Holy Ghost (commonly known as Spook College). The professor is sidelined at the beginning with the mumps, a very serious disease in adult men. The Dean is a business-like man who wants the same perks as executives, such as a glass-walled corner office. This, as he discovers too late, not only allows him a view of the campus but also vice versa.

Davies gets in some good shots at what I call pretentious driveltism, the idea that random splashes of paint are art, or cacophonies of noise can constitute music. He takes aim not at the pretentious driveltism itself, but at the faculty and students who fall over themselves trying to justify it as art. Dinner parties have a distinct academic tinge in the Davies milieu. Guests argue over the derivation of the word “lady” from the Anglo-Saxon “hlafdiga” meaning “dough kneader”. They dispute whether it came from the Mercian or the Northumbrian dialect with as much heat as they do politics or last night’s NHL game.

There is endless argument over the staging of the opera and writing of the libretto. Davies takes us behind the scenes of an opera and shows the labour and practical details that must be resolved. The opera and all the story threads are tied up neatly at the end. There is one annoying author’s caprice in ending each chapter with a commentary by the ghost of Hoffman, in italics yet. These can be safely skipped as they add nothing to the novel.

Academia Considered As A Series Of SF Conventions.

David Lodge has written a number of humorous novels about life in English universities, based on his experiences at University College London and the University of Birmingham. *SMALL WORLD* (1984) revolves around a network of literary conferences held around the world but with the same cast of attendees, much like the SF Worldcons. Like SF conventions, some seminars are mind-numbingly boring, but others are more interesting, such as the lecturer who compares the interpretation of Jane Austin novels to striptease dancers.

The politics of universities make federal politics look like a walk in the park, and the characters in this novel are constantly maneuvering for advantage. One of the myriad subplots in this novel is a new UNESCO chair in literary criticism that the perpetual conference attendees are competing for. The conferences are not for hearing papers, but for soliciting votes for the chair.

One storyline concentrates on the organizational hassles of planning a conference in Italy, the guest speakers and their personal troubles, and other details familiar to any SF convention committee member. As always, it is the smaller details that usually cause the greatest aggravation.

One professor is surprisingly prescient for 1984, and predicts that brick-and-mortar campuses aren't so important as they used to be. He remarks: *"There are three things which have revolutionized academic life in the last twenty years, though very few people have woken up to the fact: jet travel, direct-dialing telephones, and the Xerox machine. Scholars don't have to work in the same institution to interact, nowadays: they call each other up, or they meet at international conferences. And they don't have to grub about in library stacks for data: any book or article that sounds interesting they have Xeroxed and read it at home. Or on the plane going to the next conference."*

That got me to thinking. I can't remember the last time I photocopied an article at the University of Calgary Library, as I now use their subscription databases and read the articles on-line in pdf format. Jet travel isn't quite as convenient as it used to be, especially if your name is Dr. Mohammed Bin Laden. The direct-dialing telephones are now cellphones, and you are never out of touch.

One character is constantly searching for the woman he loves, who is always one step ahead of him in the trail of conferences. The numerous story threads are suddenly tied up at the end of the novel, perhaps a bit too abruptly, and one with a *deus ex machina*.

BOOK REVIEW

by Dale Speirs

THE SWEETNESS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PIE by Alan Bradley (2009, hardcover) is a murder mystery novel set in post-war England. The narrator is Flavia, the youngest of three tweeny-aged daughters living in a manor house. She is precocious, with her own chemistry lab in one wing of the manor, and has an unnatural interest in poisons. Her father is a widower who immerses himself in his stamp collection and neglects his daughters.

A dead man is found in the garden and no one knows who is his, so Flavia does her best Miss Marple imitation while the constabulary are sorting it out. Her investigation leads back to her father's schoolboy days and the theft of a Penny Black stamp printed in orange ink. Her father's school chums have been thought to have disappeared to the colonies, but they are back and looking for the orange Penny Black. Flavia finds not one but two of the orange stamps, and in her turn is found by the murderer. The story reads well but there are constant clangers where the stamps are wrapped in handkerchiefs or carried about in pockets in only a glassine envelope. By rights, at the end of the novel the stamps should have been reduced to pulp.