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A D D I C T ' S P R O G R E S S

Four Decades of Science Fiction

GEORGE TURNER

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I wish I had Sam Moskowitz's files. No, I'm damned if I do. Reminiscence should be just that, with all the errors and false memories thrown in. I won't consult even my own book case for this forage into the past, and anyone who wishes may play Spot The Mistakes.

Science fiction probably began, for me, on my father's knee when he read me a chapter of THE MAGIC PUDDING every night before bed. (That makes it nearer five decades than four, so there's the first mistake.) That book marks the beginning of the sense of wonder, together with ALICE IN WONDERLAND about the same time. I can still quote from both, and do so at the drop of an opportunity. Not sf, but pointers.

Hiatus. Memory stops again at about age nine, at an Australian boy's paper, Pals, long since defunct. It featured a number of stories by (I think) Jim Russell, which were definite sf, in that they were based on technological ideas. (Future surveyors of Australian sf, please note.) One of his stories involved a perpetual motion machine which eliminated friction by mounting the moving parts in a magnetic field, and my irritated mind couldn't see why it wouldn't work. He also did a little job called "The War Of The Frotheints" (derived from "from the interior") concerning an invasion by semi-human monsters from the caves under the earth. These were joys to the happy and hungry mind, and

be it known that many a boy's paper of the period published sf. The Nelson Lee, also defunct, ran a serial about adventure under the earth, the name of which I have forgotten, but it featured a villain in the true Rider Haggard tradition, called "He-whose-name-must-not-be-spoken". The spine crawled deliciously, and that early hint of the dreadful unknown has never been forgotten. One was being primed for Merritt and Mundy and Williamson.

But life really began in 1927, outside the old tin shed in Elizabeth Street where the McGill kiosk stood, and on a day there hung on the wire racks a gaudy, irresistibly attractive treasure trove - Amazing Stories no.1. Where I got the one-and-ninence I don't know - where I got it in succeeding months I hesitate to think - but in that joyous glance an addiction was born. It was a serious addiction, leading to crime, culminating in an attempt to steal THE CHESSMEN OF MARS from a book shop, detected of course and punished with a swift kick in the arse. There was adventure and peril in being ten years old and short of pocket money.

In those days Gernsback was living on reprints while a stable of new writers developed by ineffably painful degrees. Everybody knows the Wells and Verne novels, but who now remembers TREASURES OF TANTALUS, STATION X (first of the invaded-mind tales), THE RUNAWAY SKYSCRAPER (Leinster's first), A MODERN ATLANTIS, BEYOND THE POLE or THE REVOLT OF THE PEDESTRIANS? These were trail-blazers, for all their crudity and dullness (they didn't seem dull then), and their ideas are still in current use.

Long deep sigh... Whatever happened to Morrison Colladay, Aladra Septama, Miles J Breuer, Raymond Gallun, Ed Earl Repp, Clare Winger Harris, Leslie F Stone and a dozen more? Not that it matters much; they were all pretty bad, in retrospect, but they carried the torch when it was still a near-guttering spark, and were giants in their day. But something remains of this baroque period - the indestructible Leinster is still with us, glibly adapting himself to changing requirements, and Schuyler Miller pontificates with the doubtful authority of age and venerability.

There were adventures in scavenging then as now. One hunted old copies of Gernsback's Science and Invention, triumphantly completing one's collection of Cummings's TARRANO THE CONQUEROR, published in seventeen monthly parts, and Merritt's METAL EMPEROR, doled out in similar miserly instalments, or found an ancient copy of the English Strand serializing Rousseau's MESSIAH OF THE CYLINDER (one instalment only, dammit). In Hall's Book Store one found secondhand copies of most of Burroughs, with an exchange system whereby a fresh one could be had for sixpence (or was it fourpence?), and on the shelves of the Prahran Public Library were to be found scads of Rider Haggard, who belongs in the tradition, if not strictly in the genre, and an occasional bonus like London's BEFORE ADAM; plus, of course, a vast mine of Jules Verne - OFF ON A COMET, DOCTOR OX'S EXPERIMENT and CASTLE IN THE BALKANS spring to mind. Here one found also some relics of an older past - FRANKENSTEIN, naturally, but also Lytton's COMING RACE and Ainsworth's ELIXIR OF LIFE, and much more gone down in the dregs of recollection. There was a surprising amount of sf around if one was prepared to look for it. And were we prepared! It was a gnawing hunger.

They were great days, but there is no point in trying to recapture them now.

Re-reading is a destructive process; memory should be kept pristine. Only Wells stands the test of time, and he is the one I found dull and prosy then. You have to grow up to appreciate Wells.

Surfeit brought its inevitable revenge. At age eleven I was beginning to sicken of the sweets of sf. And then came THE SKYLARK OF SPACE and the appetite revived with a vengeance.

We can laugh at Smith, accuse him of snow-jobbing, deride his characterization and inflated style, and level a dozen complaints against him, all justified, but he remains a landmark in sf and one of the most important things that ever happened to it. It seems to me that the real nature of his contribution has not been properly understood. Schuyler Miller and others remind us that he opened up the boundaries of sf to include the whole universe (which he didn't - several others were before him in travelling the stars) and ignore the innovation which is his real monument. He revolutionized the technique of sf story telling. He threw away the laborious build-up of background which turned so many tales into essays, belted his plot along at breathless speed which even Burroughs could not match, and made the first horrible but effective attempts to use naturalistic dialogue; he pounded the reader with idea after idea, not discussed and developed but poured out from a bottomless well of invention, so that one was scarcely absorbed before another was beating at the mind.

The writers were swift to catch on, and the era of no-holds-barred was upon us. His most obvious descendants, in the direct line, are Van Vogt and Bester, who have stretched the technique to what must surely be its limit. He was a shot in the arm when sf sorely needed it. He was unique, and remained so despite imitators; and we don't want another one because he was also incredibly bad, but sf's debt to him is immense. Only Campbell has achieved so much and influenced the genre to such an extent.

And Campbell appeared approximately two years after Smith. Unable to use the story telling technique, for he has little true fictional ability, he took over the science-and-ideas angle and established the basis of a formidable reputation.

And while we reminisce, let us remember the "Discussions" column of Amazing, wherein Smith and Campbell fought bitterly over a matter of invisibility as propounded in Campbell's "Solarite", and an English lass, Miss Olive Robb, took Smith to task over his execrable freewheeling dialogue. She objected to such terms as "cuddlepup", whereat the Doctor retorted that he had called his wife "cuddlepup" for years and found it a perfectly good word. And another gentleman, whose name escapes me, so much resented criticism of his novelette called "The Superman" that he announced his intention never to write sf again. He didn't, either.

The "Discussions" column was livelier in those days. Or perhaps it only seemed so. I contributed my two-penn'orth (at age about fourteen) because Campbell was the acknowledged rival of my divine Smith and I therefore hated him with the venom only a teenager can generate. I wrote letters, which were published (God help me), destroying Campbell for ever. Nobody seemed to notice.

But - at the recent doings at Boronia I met a bloke who actually remembered the letters and my name attached to them. Such memory is unfair. I felt about three feet tall for the rest of the afternoon.

The only other memorable appearance of the period was the eruption of John Taine into pulp fiction. (You know he was mathematician Eric Temple Bell and not unimportant in his sphere; his MEN OF MATHEMATICS, published by Penguin, is worth reading for information and a simple introduction to many of the difficulties of mathematics.) Taine has been, in my opinion, seriously underestimated and unappreciated. In a day of slapdash writing and careless melodramatics, when nothing less than the approaching destruction of humanity could inspire a story, he stuck sanely to science and thoughtful construction. His writing was literate if uninspired, but his novels were true novels rather than great dollops of feverish activity, and signs of a present return to the method are very heartening. Also he took the trouble to be accurate in what he wrote. For instance, his adventure into cyclic history (THE TIME STREAM) showed a much deeper understanding of that battered theory than Asimov's later Foundation nonsense, and his musings over genetic interference (SEEDS OF LIFE) have profounder implications than more technically oriented writers have achieved since. He is still readable, despite archaisms of style and an unfortunate preoccupation with the evils of communism and the yellow menace. The house of Dover have kept him alive with re-publication, and a good thing it is.

There followed another period of surfeit and dullness, wherein this reader almost ceased to buy sf, being fed to the teeth with repetition.

Then came the renaissance, and there has been nothing like it since in sheer excitement of novelty and rediscovery. In a couple of years just before the war, a great blister of talent burst the skin. Heinlein, Van Vogt, Asimov, Sturgeon and de Camp surged to the front, each one established almost from his first word, and the blood-and-thunder Kuttner married C L Moore and with her became the fabulous Lewis Padgett.

Legend seems to credit Campbell, newly appointed editor of Astounding, with this outburst, but I have my doubts. Campbell certainly changed his style and approach at this time (the style was as bad as the approach was good) and produced a queer hotchpotch of original conceptions written in an appalling yearning prose by Merritt out of Bad Poetry, culminating in the excellent WHO GOES THERE?, wherein he discarded the literary trappings (which he had never understood) and wrote one of the all-time best thrillers. He did not produce much in the way of fresh ideas, but he did offer some fresh approaches to these ideas, which was necessary and for which we must remember him. Nevertheless, the movement was in operation before he took up the running. Previous Astounding editors had set it going. Harry Bates had given ALAS ALL THINKING and FAREWELL TO THE MASTER (later altered, rewritten, mashed and brutalized into a film - THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL); H L Gold has written some provocative tales. The new wave was already in motion when Campbell took over. But, under his riding, it certainly broke with a tremendous splash.

What has happened to these bright young men? Kuttner, who as Padgett was far and away the best writer of them all, is dead, more's the pity. Sturgeon has been virtually silent for years. Van Vogt, after a long and peculiar absence, has advanced not one inch from his start-line. De Camp writes little sf now. So, alas, does Asimov - and he, of all of them, has done most with the least literary equipment; he has done what few others in the field have bothered about; he has learned how to construct a story and by sheer technical ingenuity turned a pedestrian style into a source of constant interest. (Construction is

almost non-existent among American sf writers; they simply write until they run out, lacking all sense of climax and build-up. Maybe that's where the much lamented sense of wonder has gone - into a limbo of mere competence.) As for Heinlein, who would have imagined that such a strong talent could degenerate into petulant tub-thumping?

Meanwhile in England another revolution was building up without fanfare but with far reaching effect. LAST AND FIRST MEN appeared in 1930 and BRAVE NEW WORLD in 1932. Neither of these was conceived or written as genre sf, their authors having much more pressing themes in mind, but each has exerted great influence on the present. They showed, in the dog days of routine sf, that it could be done with flair and panache, and with close attention to style, literacy and urgency of theme; in fact they showed that the much maligned mainstream could belt hell out of the in-group writers. Moreover they were both best sellers. It is fashionable to decry the general public on such matters, on the ground that they were reading writers approved by the "establishment" when they would be ashamed to be caught reading sf. Well, one wouldn't blame them being ashamed to be caught with the sf of the period, and any bookseller will tell you that the supposedly sheeplike public will not read what the "establishment" tells it to, if it doesn't feel like it. Best sellers can be manufactured and are, but very few really bad books have ever achieved such status; many have been mediocre, but not outright incompetent. The sf of the thirties was incompetent; only the uncritical could put up with it. And that means you and me. SF in the modern style began about 1936, but be it remembered that the English had done it first. Ignore Huxley and Stapledon if you will, but they had shown the field a clean pair of heels.

As if encouraged, the English began a serious attack at about this time (the early thirties). John Beynon Harris, later John Wyndham (and Lucas Parkes &c), appeared regularly. J M Walsh (an Australian, by the way, though long expatriate) did VANDALS OF THE VOID and VANGUARD TO NEPTUNE. S Fowler Wright published THE WORLD BELOW (still one of the best of its kind) and THE ADVENTURE OF WYNDHAM SMITH. John Russell Fearn was also writing, but it might be kinder to forget that.

The important thing about these writers was not originality, though they had some of that, but their insistence on the English tradition of good writing. They never bowed to the pulp style. They were not geniuses, destined for literary halls of fame, but they were good craftsmen who adhered to the necessities of structure and language. English magazines were still in the future, but the groundwork of a smoother, more stylish sf was laid, and the scaffold is still rising with Aldiss and Clarke. James White and J T McIntosh are lesser men, but share the same tradition, which goes back unbroken to H G Wells, and owes surprisingly little to America.

Reminiscence may as well end with the war. So little has happened since. Kornbluth and Pohl made their exciting splash; then Kornbluth died and Pohl has begun to show a hairy heel. Frank Herbert gave us one fine novel, DRAGON IN THE SEA, and has gone on to the intellectual delusion in one direction and the unproductive sandhills of DUNE in another. Hal Clement continues to please with the hard science novel, but is not writer enough to found a school. Cordwainer Smith seemed a discovery, but there was an essential hollowness to his cosmos, and his allusive prose and private jokes helped to make his intention

The Australian Science Fiction Association is a man named Graham Stone, who lives in Canberra and whom I have never met, though we have corresponded. He is a librarian. He has been for many years for many people the voice of Australian science fiction.

Graham Stone has a fair claim to being considered as Australia's no.1 fan. But he hates fandom, despises conventions, loathes fanzines, detests fannish jargon.

Because I haven't met him I can't say much about him and hope to be accurate. But I have read a lot that he has written, and I have talked to many people who have met him or had dealings with him; and on the basis of this information I have reached the conclusion that he is an odd (but not too odd) mixture of Napoleon, Judge Rutherford and Lord Timothy Dexter. On a small scale of course. He acts like a dictator, believes that everyone is against him or his interests, and has the knack (odious in his case) of totally ignoring any person he wishes to.

With the July issue of his fanzine, "The Journal of the ASFA", he enclosed a questionnaire which among other (rather personal) things asked: "What services should the Association give priority in undertaking? What assistance can you give in these?"

I would like to answer these questions first, and point out that I am a member of the Association.

- 1 The Association should expand and consolidate its bibliographical activities, giving special attention to all original fiction and critical articles published by Australians anywhere, and to original fiction and critical articles by overseas writers published in Australia.
- 2 It should constitute itself on a proper and legal basis, appoint representatives in each state, and give its membership a larger part in the conduct of its affairs.
- 3 It should act as an information bureau, freely accessible to any person in Australia or overseas who requires information about any aspect of science fiction or the activities of science fiction enthusiasts.
- 4 It should act as a liaison body, keeping the clubs and individual enthusiasts in Australia in contact with each other and with their fellows overseas.
- 5 It should sponsor the conducting of annual conventions and, from time to time, more formal public meetings.
- 6 I am in a position to give the Association a great deal of assistance in all of these areas, and I will, if some expansion or re-organization takes place along these lines.

It is no secret that at the Melbourne SF Conference last Easter I moved for the formation of an Australian SF Society, which would have as its functions something like what I have outlined in my proposals here. My motion was defeated by a narrow margin. A committee was subsequently elected (if that's the word) to draft a recommendation to the Australian SF Convention, to be held in 1969, on the shape of such a Society.

Now it would seem a pity to have two national organizations in Australia, each no doubt ignoring or (worse) denigrating the other. But if the ASFA does not cater for the interest and enthusiasm which exists and is growing in this country, what alternative is there? For me there would be none; I would have to sever my connection with the Association (if I didn't, I'm sure Graham would) and devote all my work and interest to the body which took the larger view.

As a paid-up member of the ASFA it concerns me (frustrates and infuriates me, would be a more accurate way of putting it) that I have no say whatsoever in the running of the organization. I don't even get a vote on such matters as who should conduct the Association and what it should do. I doubt the legality of the whole business. There has been a provisional Constitution: Graham sent me a copy when I asked for it - a photo-copy of a typed sheet. Do I and my fellow members have a say in the shape of the permanent Constitution?

As an organization preoccupied with bibliography in general and Australian bibliography in particular, why has the Association ignored utterly AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW? This question is not prompted by motives of anguish at non-recognition. I simply want to know how 400,000 words (roughly) of writing about sf, including some original fiction, published in this country can be utterly ignored by anyone professing to be a bibliographer of Australian science fiction.

In the July issue of the Journal there is a review of the Berkley paperback, BEST SF: 1967. (Also issued by Sphere as THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION no.1, and this is the edition available in Australia, though you wouldn't know from the review.) Why does this review not mention the fact that the book includes a story by A Bertram Chandler - an honour for an Australian writer, no matter what you may think of the story - a story first published in ASFR? If the omission was deliberate, it is almost scandalous; if the excuse is that the review was a reprint from an American fanzine, it may merely be editorial incompetence.

In the November issue of the Journal, Graham has a wrongheaded and insulting review of THE PACIFIC BOOK OF AUSTRALIAN SF. And he doesn't even bother to mention all the contributors to the volume. (Lee Harding and Damien Broderick, two Melbourne authors, are among the three omitted; the third is Kit Denton. John Baxter's editorial is mentioned, but not his story.) Of course, it's not a terribly important book - it's only the first collection of Australian sf.

In the review of the Pacific Book, Graham grudgingly admits that Stephen (Graham spells it "Steven", but he's only a bibliographer) Cook's story has some merit. (In fact it's far and away the best story in the book.) The Journal has yet to report the death, eighteen months ago, of this highly talented young writer.

The Journal has also neglected to mention that Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton visited Sydney last year; that new science fiction groups have been launched in Sydney, Brisbane and Monash University; or that there was such a thing as a Science Fiction Conference held in Melbourne last Easter.

Is this neglect deliberate? Is it policy? Is the Association simply not interested in matters such as these? And if so, how does the ASFA justify its title? Is it perhaps that the source of much of this information is ASFR, and that this magazine is a fanzine and therefore unworthy of mention?

I wish I knew the answers to these questions. In a supplement to the November issue, Graham says: "SF is frequently abused and sneered at in the daily press, in fact any reference is usually slighting. Don't let them get away with it - whenever you sight something of this kind write a brief letter to the editor complaining..."

Well, Graham Stone, you are abusing Australian science fiction yourself - and your function as a bibliographer - by refusing to recognize the fan press and anything that pertains to it. This is my letter of complaint to you, and I want an answer.

You don't owe me anything, Graham, though I expect common decency. I couldn't care less about your persecution complex, though it occasionally makes me wonder how many other members have the same 1930-style ideas about the acceptance of sf by the general public. But as a spokesman for Australian sf, and as a bibliographer, you owe it to all the people who have written for AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW to explain why you have totally ignored their contributions to Australian sf.

Who are these people?

John Foyster, Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, Langdon Jones, John Baxter, Lee Harding, Burt Kaufman, KUF Widdershins, Jay Wallis, John Carnell, Alan Reynard, Mervyn Barrett, Ron Clarke, Bob Smith, Colin Bell, Peter Piker, A Bertram Chandler, John Blattman, Robert Gerrand, John Breden, Buck Coulson, Don Tuck, Ron Bennett, Norma Williams, Diana Martin, Anson McTaggart, Harry Warner Jr, Chris Priest, Sten Dahlskog, Dick Jønsen, James Blish, Alan France, Ted White, Paul Stevens, Stephen Cook, William F Temple, Walt Willis, Phil Muldowney, Graham Hall, Andrew Escot, Brian Richards, Pat Terry, John Brunner, Ian Godden, Ugo Malaguti, Jack Wodhams, Felice Rolfe, George Turner, Andy Porter, George Whitely, Judith Merrill, Charles Platt, Lin Carter, Al Andrews, P Collas, Stephen Morton, Gerald Page, David Piper, Rick Sneary, John Brosnan, Arthur Burns, William Atheling Jr, Robert Bloch, Ron Smith, Steven Murray-Smith, Harry Harrison, Damon Knight, Ethel Lindsay, Jack Knight, J G Maxwell, Ursula K LeGuin, Mauricio Kitaigorodzki, Jannick Storm, Franz Rottensteiner, Mike Montgomery, Carlos Buiza, M K Joseph, Frederik Pohl, Tony Thomas, Gianfranco de Turris, Sebastiano Fusco, Sven Eklund, Samuel R Delany, Tom Golding, Don Symons, Bruce Gillespie, John Hayden Howard, David Gray, Alex Eisenstein, Sam Moskowitz, Bob Toomey and Mungo MacCallum.

And you owe it to your members to make a statement on the propositions I have set out on the first page of these notes.

John Bangsund (23.11.68)

THE KOAXIAL CABAL

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LEE HARDING Off-hand I suppose I could think of a round dozen reasons
Olinda Road for ASFR to fold; I had thought that ASFR 17 was the best
The Basin reason yet. But now you've gone one better. The no.2
Victoria 3154 Harbinger is so good it makes one wonder why you persist in
 this pose of Guardian of SF. I enjoyed every word of this
delightful effort - and the material was so much more interesting than this
weary old sf kick. MORE MORE MORE. ::: Comments? Well... apart from the
unpleasant fact that George Turner's ranting is beginning to spoil his once
genial image, I really didn't dislike ANYTHING. Loved the cover: profound sym-
bolism, what? ::: And I share your doubts about humility. I know at least
three people - two of whom I count as friends - who avow spiritual humility and
yet practice intellectual arrogance. And that's a paradox of no mean order.

GEORGE TURNER No.2 was a surprise and a delight. No.1 left me with doubts
14 Tennyson St about the project, but none remain. ::: Please convey
St Kilda my compliments to R D Symons on his review of THE VELIKOVSKY
Victoria 3182 AFFAIR. It is far and away the best review I have yet seen
 in a fan magazine and in many ways superior to anything put
out by such old faithfuls as Blish, Knight and Aldiss. I only wish I had read
it before my own article on reviewing techniques went to press; I would have
made extensive reference to it as an example of how to do it. I was pretty
happy about my own work on YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS, but now feel that Symons
would have done it better. He has that happy attribute so sadly lacking in fan
writing - style. And the neat, lucid prose is a pleasure to read in an age of
slapdash writing and overstated high jinks. It is professional work, and of a
high standard at that. I will be looking for his signature in future. :::
Your own ungentle send-up of REPORT ON PROBABILITY A (which, however, you ap-
peared to like) was an amusing piece of parody-with-a-point. And how on earth
did you locate that Byron quote? I often search for weeks to find one to suit
a piece of work, and everything promising turns out to be maddeningly off the
point. Lucky you! ::: The Bob Toomey letter impressed me first as just
some more of standard protest. Then I came to the final paragraphs and it
really got to me. And the Norman Douglas quote was a more bitter comment than
showed at first reading. ::: Can you maintain this standard? I bite my
nails while I wait to find out.

JB: Lee first: One of the good reasons for ASFR not being what it used to be
is that the renowned Harding no longer appears there. I put it that way because
I can't think of any good reason for ASFR to fold, least of all no.17. The odd
thing is that if ASFR had been appearing more regularly, both Don's article and
my review would have been published there. I can't see any justification for
using the word "ranting", but I'm only the editor, you understand. ::: George:
No.1 gave me doubts, too. I doubted if I had enough unpublished work of my own
to keep the thing going, and doubted if I could write enough original stuff
either. That's why I changed the policy and started using other people's unpub-
lished stuff. Including your long-delayed piece in this issue. This cannibal-
izing of ASFR material can't go on, of course, and I look forward to pieces spec-
ially written for NMH. Don Symons is a shrinking violet, when it comes to writ-
ing. I've been at him to complete a piece called "Faith, Hope and Science Fic-
tion" which is really superb, and with luck we'll see that in ASFR early next
year. Re Byron: My lousy memory just functioned properly for once, is all.