

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

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Science Fiction News originally commenced in January 1953 and lapsed after its 24th issue of May 1959.

The present series commenced in January 1969 and was at first a regular monthly -- later going on an irregular schedule so that we only now reach our hundredth issue.

Coincidentally the Sydney group's November meeting as usual commemorates the anniversary of the first meeting of the Futurian Society of Sydney on 5 Nov 1939.

This issue recalls early times in SF activity in Australia.

BEGINNINGS

In Australia of the 1930's, science fiction was decidedly an idea whose time had not come yet. We have all come a long way since then, and it is hard to remember, harder for those too young for that to imagine, what life was like then. It was a milieu remote and alien to the modern view.

Think then of a nation that did not yet admit it was one, without belief or confidence in itself; its earlier spurious pose of pioneer freedom and self-reliance discredited and forgotten, and unwilling to accept and make something of the independence thrust on it.

A country where nationalism had withered on the vine and instead there were the attitudes of a two generations dead colonial era, a servile pretence of being another England; where the political arena was afflicted not only with parochialism, graft and hypocrisy but with a crude flag-waving jingoism, that mouthed bilge about a sentimentalised homeland with an obsolete imperialism and grovelled to its hereditary popinjays.

A country whose leadership was blind and deaf to the vast social changes and scientific revolutions of the previous century that had already changed the world profoundly and made a different kind of civilisation urgently necessary.

A country debilitated by a vast and senseless war between irresponsible great powers which had resolved nothing and made another conflict inevitable, waiting listlessly for that to happen.

A country with its economy under the control of foreign interests and ruined by their troubles.

A country that was culturally imitative, gutless and censor-ridden, smothered with a grey blanket of mediocrity.

Anyone who was half awake observing this scene should have seen that it was out of tune with the real world. Such is the force of custom and tradition that few did.

Yet this was not the full picture, for there were forces for change at work. For one thing, modern communications had opened up Australia to influence from

America: popular culture was rapidly being made over by the influence of Hollywood, with American radio adding its influence, and American popular literature gaining ground.

How far back the popularity of American popular fiction was significant is hard to say. Books were always available and well known. But whether the dime novels had much circulation in Australia I have not been able to ascertain: from negative evidence I think not. But American magazines were on sale in quantity by the 1920's, and the rising torrent of cheap all-fiction magazines, the pulps, were included. By the depression years the eastern states were inundated with Argosy, Blue Book, Adventure, Black Mask, Flying Aces, Western Story...and so on. Their popularity was enormous: whatever their worth they were excellent entertainment value in lean times, but also they filled a void for Australia never developed anything comparable, and neither did England. There were many good general magazines from England, but few specialising in fiction and these by comparison rather tame and decorous. True, at a lower level England offered the boys' and girls' weeklies for which it is hard to find American competition: but as they got older it was the pulps that gave the kind of reading they wanted.

And amidst the hundreds of titles could be found a radical new element, the science fiction magazines, from their inception. Letters in their correspondence pages showed that there were the Australian readers in some numbers from 1928 onward. It was obvious that eventually, just as groups formed in support of the new literature and secondary publishing commenced among its followers in the USA and then in England, there would be similar attempts in the unpromising climate of Australia.

Wonder Stories sponsored the Science Fiction League from 1934, providing a central contact point and information bureau of sorts and the impetus for local clubs to start. The independent movement was already there at a low level but the League gave it a considerable push for a while. After the magazine changed hands the somewhat different Thrilling Wonder Stories kept the feature but lost interest in it, and

no other body emerged to coordinate the interest to anything like the same extent, then or later. But that's by the way. Our interest is the response to the League in Australia.

At least three local League groups were proposed in Australia and got as far as Writing to League headquarters to announce themselves. Those in Brisbane and Toowoomba were not heard from again, but the Sydney Science Fiction League was formally organised on 15 Aug 1935 following several unstructured meetings, and continued functioning till about the end of 1936. No records survived and with two exceptions its members had no contact with later activities. But it is known regular fortnightly meetings were held, and publicity attempted by placing dodgers in magazines at the exchanges. This idea does not seem to have led to printing something for members to express their ideas.

Unconnected with this abortive start, a group of high school students in Sydney began talking about the idea of a science fiction club in 1938, and tentatively agreed on starting a Junior Australian Science Fiction Correspondence Club in the following year. The name was clearly meant for a nationwide network of science-fictionists and some effort was made to contact interested readers outside Sydney: a few were brought into communication, but when the JASFCC commenced meeting monthly on 26 Feb 1939 it soon became clear that a local group was more suitable. Membership in Sydney amounted to five. Yes. Five.

Before that time however, the first attempt at an amateur publication related to SF appeared from Adelaide. Science Fiction Review was produced by "John Devern" with John Gregor also writing for it. It was an octavo hektographed affair of twelve pages in a plain brown wrapper. Its editor evidently not being able to use a typewriter adequately hand-lettered the issue; aside from a short piece praising Ray Palmer's recently transformed Amazing Stories it mostly reprinted from overseas sources, we are told. Unfortunately no copy can now be located. In response to my query on 1980 John Dauvergne Gregor wrote as follows:
"I haven't seen a copy of Science Fiction Review

since 1939 when I took off for the war...Your recollection of its appearance is far better than mine. All I can remember about it is the trouble I had finding hektograph material...I finally came across a description of the process in a book and made it up myself." So there.

The JASFCC lapsed by June 1939, producing a one-shot titled Australian Fan News, twelve foolscap mimeographed pages with a miscellany of content first. Although it was much the same few faces that gathered for the next attempt, since this was to continue it has been taken as the true beginning of science fiction activity in Australia.

The Futurian Society of Sydney, then, had its first meeting on 5 November 1939.

Why the Futurian Society? The first intention was in fact to re-establish the Sydney Science Fiction League, or at least to use that name. After all, the loose association of many groups through the SFL still existed, with some free publicity through the magazine, it seemed worth while affiliating with it. But the group, or its JASFCC Secretary Bill Veney, had been in correspondence with two noted amateurs as they were then in New York: Don Wollheim and Fred Pohl. Dissidents from the original League community there who had for some time been prominent in the live-wire clique that had adopted the name Futurians. Wollheim's suggestion of the name (which then had some favor as better expressing to some people what the basic idea was) led to the Sydney group's choice.

So the Futurian Society of Sydney it was -- and still is: it hasn't been active for a long time in the obvious sense but it has a role, it survives as the committee of the present ASFA which it sponsored -- it's a long and involved story but let it go at that for now -- and besides it owns a substantial library of SF assembled when it was important to help readers find enough SF to keep them going.

1939 was not the time to start a science fiction club in Australia. Before the first year was halfway through wartime import curbs stopped SF coming into the country legally: oh, it wasn't technically banned, only prohibited, a fine distinction that the group

did not find any consolation. It proved possible to get limited supplies from contacts in the USA, but it made life difficult and though it eased a little eventually the embargo stayed on from inertia till late 1959.

Before its first birthday also the FSS had internal problems, and the 18th meeting on 22 September broke up without fixing a date for the next and with a vague agreement to suspend activity for some period. The secretary's position being vacant, nothing happened immediately though one group talked about starting up again without the rest. Instead a meeting was called to reform the FSS, called a conference and later called the "first Conference", early in December -- I can't seem to find the exact date. Charles LaCoste, a rediscovered member of the previous Sydney SFL, took the chair, and two other new faces were Alan Cordner who didn't last long but caused a long standing rift, and Graham Stone,

The FSS did suspend due to worsening wartime conditions in late 1943 and revived only in 1947. If it accomplished little in those first years it must be said that there was very little it could have accomplished. That it kept going at all was a marvel.

This early period featured a flurry of minor publishing. About 35 persons at the most attended meetings, at least ten amateur productions emerged. To be sure, several did not extend to more than one issue, but some ran for two years or more and presented substantial amounts of material. Futurian Observer, usually a single duplicated sheet, had over 50 fortnightly issues tersely reporting what news there was and commenting on the scene. Science & Fantasy Fan Reporter was begun as a weekly single sheet aiming for more facts and less interpretation and ran for 34 weeks. Ultra began as a carbon-copied affair -- this was truly amateurism for you -- but after two issues made the comparative big time in a mimeographed format. By its second anniversary issue, the thirteenth, it had grown to fifty pages with some interesting and valuable content. It had the classic SF fan magazine scope of original short fiction, factual articles on the field,

rather esoteric humor and correspondence debating the merits of the material. Luna was similar but lasted but three issues, resumed after a break retitled Cosmos: every issue was different in concept from what had gone before or so it seemed. There really must have been three or four radical changes in ten issues. Zeus began with too many people involved, so one dropped out and published his own rival second and third issues.

Naturally with such a small number in the community and only a minority of them actually contributing, the standard could have been better. Considering that most of the writers were under twenty and had suffered an abysmally poor education by modern criteria, that there was not a background of comparable group publishing where they might have gained experience and technique and that the facilities they had were very primitive, they were not too bad. Having said that, it must be remarked that the appearance was mostly very bad, the art work unbelievably so.

Most of these effusions were mimeographed. Offset had not yet arrived in Australia then, and of course photocopiers were many years away. In a few cases there was some interesting use of halftone engravings souvenired from a newspaper printery: some with a small number of impressions done on a proof press, some manually transferred to a stencil. I have mentioned the hektograph above: this ancestor of the spirit duplicator involved a trayful of gelatine that took a drawn or typed image, usually in the same vomit-purple dye used today, from an original sheet and transferred it with decreasing clarity to your copies.

I think I'll leave discussion of the revival after the war and the various developments of the 50's and later for some other occasion in the interest of keeping these remarks down to managable length. Out of the endeavours in Sydney and later in other places emerged less voluminous and a little more purposeful amateur journalism, and at a time when a lot was happening and the outlook seemed improving the original Science Fiction News was started in January 1953. How

it succeeded in providing a useful source of information on SF and at the same time promoting a better image of the field can be stated simply: it didn't. It was generally a four or eight page offset publication, with some letterpress issues. The basic concept was that before anything else it had to look good. It was intended to show at a glance that whatever SF was all about its followers were intelligent adults worth treating as such. I think on the whole it did that with fair success, but otherwise it obviously took on too much.

Much later the name was revived in January 1969, and Science Fiction News has continued in its present format until here we have its 100th issue. The name was chosen as one suitable for a wide variety of material as seemed appropriate from time to time, but it has to be admitted that there is now very little attention to current events. It would be foolish to try to compete with the excellent comprehensive reportage of the SF world by Locus and Science Fiction Chronicle, after all.

Science Fiction News has been continued for the sake of continuity. In a field of interest characterised by ephemeral projects we keep it running, admittedly not as regularly as a periodical ought to be issued, under the same title. Beyond this, we keep members in touch. It is no longer hazardous to be known as one seriously interested in science fiction, but it is still to be one of a rare species. In the old days every new recruit would say in all seriousness "I thought I was the only one." No one would think that now, but there is still a certain isolation. Science Fiction News reduces that feeling, I hope. At times book reviews have been a feature, one worth resuming should we get back to more consistent schedule. In recent years your secretary has used these pages as a vehicle for information turning up in the course of his continuing research for a full bibliography of Australian science fiction. This issue is interpolated as an aside in a series on the history of Amazing Stories which started the movement sixty years ago.

Yes, Australian science fiction. It does not have a distinct character of its own to make it clearly identifiable, but some exists.

When the FSS emerged in 1939 its members can hardly have looked forward to a time when there would be an Australian science fiction writing and publishing industry, a time which is still not to be predicted. They probably did not envisage magazines originating in this country, but such have been attempted several times. Whether such a project would be viable if more intelligently planned is an open question; whether it could, once established, develop a reasonable standard is another. Let us not pursue this line of speculation further.

But some Australians have successfully written science fiction. Even in 1939 it was easy to name several who had appeared in the existing magazines. J.M. Walsh was most prominent with seven appearances -- and, a rare achievement, of these Vandals of the Void had also made publication as a book in England. All thoroughly uncompromising stuff in the spirit of their setting. True, he had emigrated to England and written dozens of thrillers but he had a place in SF all right. Then there was Alan Connell with four shorts (one more to come in 1941) and two of them at least noteworthy. Two more Australians had written for Amazing, Phil Colas with one story, H.M. Crimp with two. Coutts Brisbane was another living in England who had written at least a few stories.

As for early examples, there was one book that was known, Erle Cox's *Out of the Silence*. And that had had considerable success with the general public, running to several editions and being heard on radio in 1940.

Well, now we can point to somewhat more than that. It can be said that not less than 250 science fiction books by Australians have been published (of course, this counts a lot of ephemeral items as books and also interprets science fiction generously) as well as some hundreds of short stories in many places.

But of course the bulk of that output belongs to times since 1940, and the earlier work made no impression in its day. The early Sydney group hoped that while there hadn't been much till then something might develop. For instance, with American SF not being available for the duration of the war it was wide open for someone to start producing in Australia. Well of course, what someone really could and should have done was get the rights to one or more of the magazines and print a local edition! No one thought of it. Instead what happened that there were a few locally written paperbacks.

As soon as the shortage started, locally written westerns and whodunits started appearing. I would say that they probably weren't much good of their kind, but they were established forms that any number of writers were willing to attempt. But writers who knew **what** SF was, for a start, and had any concept of what it was like, were not visible. The first attempts beginning late in 1941 were not up to much. J. W. Heming was an immensely productive hack writer who produced immense volumes of fiction, and it hadn't left him any time to read any science fiction first. The Living Dead and Subterranean City have interest only as the first two of a number of wartime paperbacks aimed in the right general direction. The third, Time Marches Off, was not at all bad, quite a funny satire. Heming wrote a few more and also joined the club, but though most of the members were somewhat interested in writing and several broke into print then or later, the only one to have SF paperbacks published in this period was Vol Molesworth with Ape of God, Monster at Large, Stratosphere Patrol, Spaceward Ho and The Three Rocketeers. Alan Connell reappeared here with the trilogy Prisoners in Serpent Land, Warriors and Lords ditto, actually a full length novel in the Burroughs manner broken into three parts, a manuscript written some years earlier and only now accepted. There were others but these were the highlights, and unfortunately they didn't lead to anything more advanced, or a high volume output of books or a magazine. Then came a dry spell till the late 1940's.

Scientific Thriller. An ominous name for a locally written series that started in 1948. Credited, if that's the right word, to such names as Belli Luigi and Paul Valdez, they were generally pseudo-scientific detective stories, something that usually doesn't come off. Later the same publisher gave us a magazine, Thrills Incorporated, which was a bit better. Not much. Late issues did introduce one quite promising writer, Norma Hemming, but what is usually remembered about Thrills Incorporated is the several stories plagiarised from Simak, van Vogt, Bradbury and others which a sharp operator passed off as his own on a naive editor.

There were six booklets with stories from prewar Thrilling Wonder mostly, appearing now and then from 1949 to 51, which were better than nothing. There was the American Science Fiction series -- later they put "magazine" on the cover inconspicuously but they didn't mean it -- 41 of them in 1952 to 55 with a good selection of shorts and quite good local art work, something we haven't often seen. A parallel series called Selected Science Fiction also started which might have led somewhere but folded after five issues.

Future Science Fiction and Popular Science Fiction each managed six irregular issues in 1953 to 55. They started with some US magazine stories chosen at random, but after the first issues Vol Molesworth and then Graham Stone recommended choices from what was available -- otherwise their advice was generally not followed -- and a few original stories were accepted. It was a promising idea but it just didn't last long enough to get anywhere.

Finally Science-Fiction Monthly, which was organised by a Melbourne firm, a first, ran for eighteen issues in 1955 to 57. It had I think one original story but was based on reprinting most of the content of a single issue of some American magazine each time. Science Fiction Plus, Planet Stories, Imagination... No discrimination. It was just the simplest way to do it with the least effort. Graham Stone was invited to run a review and commentary section in the last seven issues -- carte blanche to fill sixteen pages with

anything about SF, and there was a good variety there by a few other contributors -- but really they would have done better to think about their selection of material and try to upgrade it and produce a magazine with some sort of consistency instead of a little of everything.

All of these were half-hearted or cheapo publications. They wanted something for nothing, or the nearest they could get away with, and proved for all to see that you can't do it that way.

Well, these were some of the things that happened.

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