

# THE THOMSON SAGA



BY

JOHN  
BERRY

# THE THOMSON SAGA

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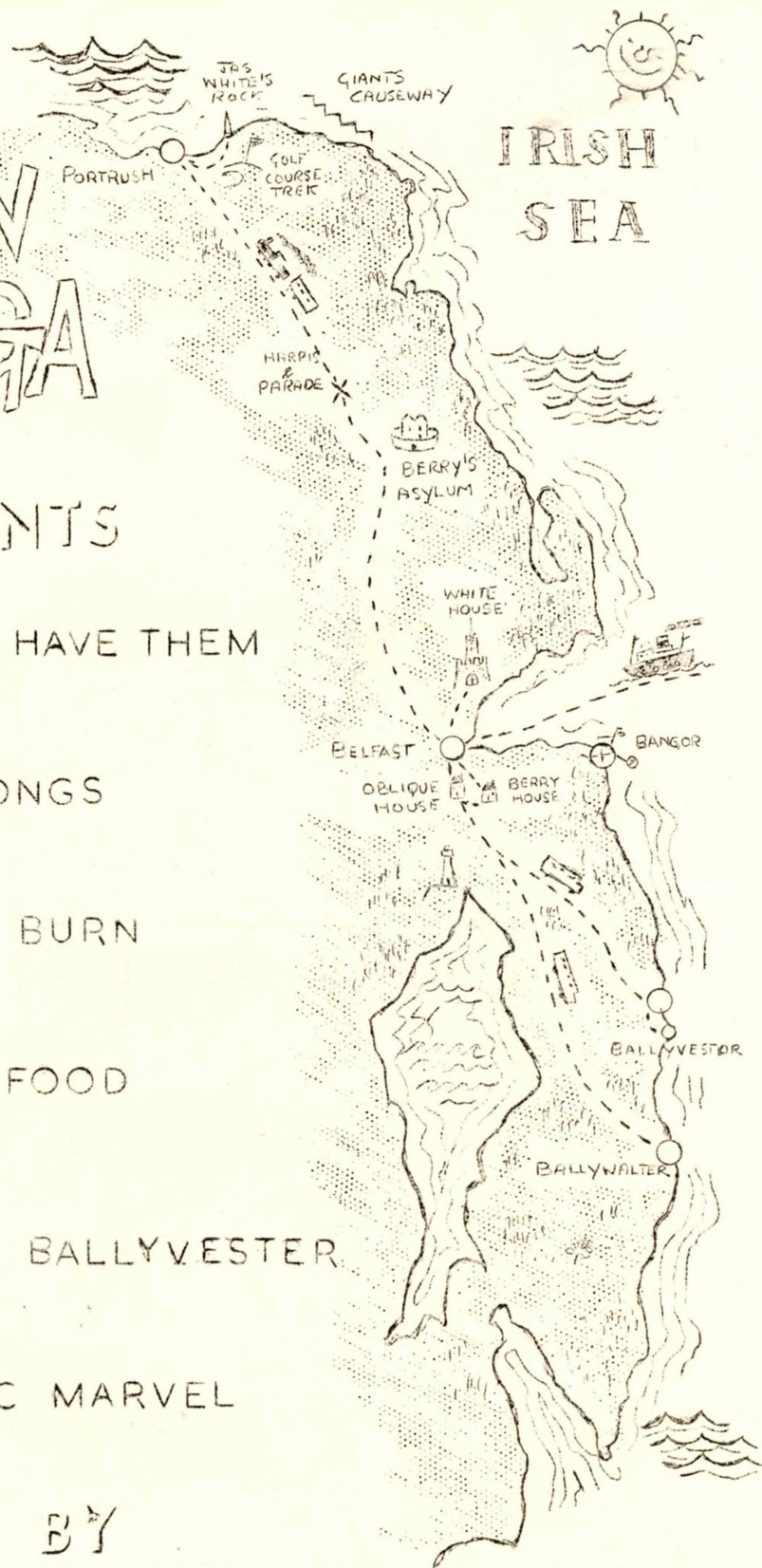
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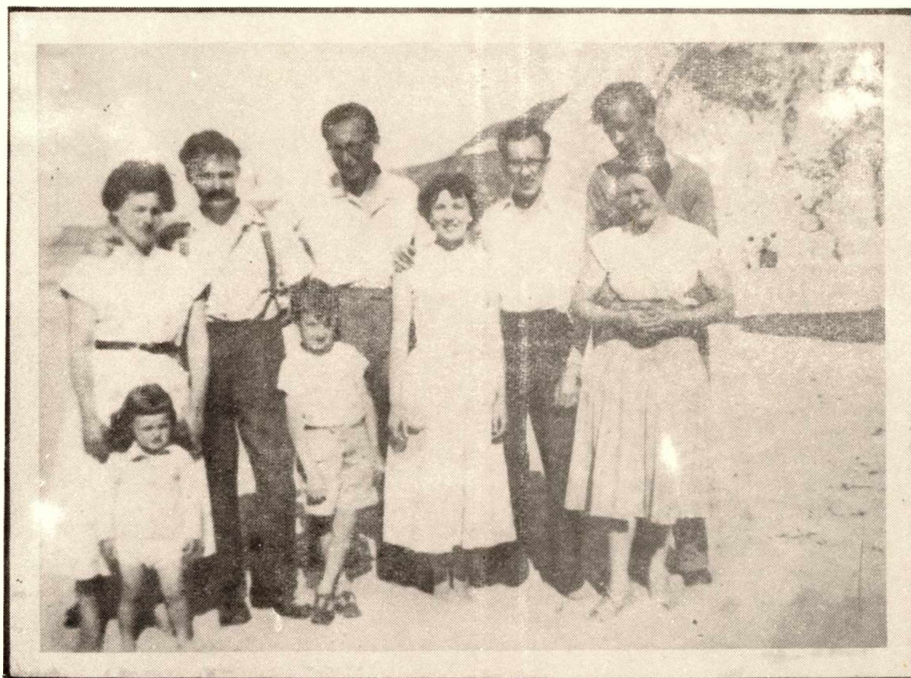
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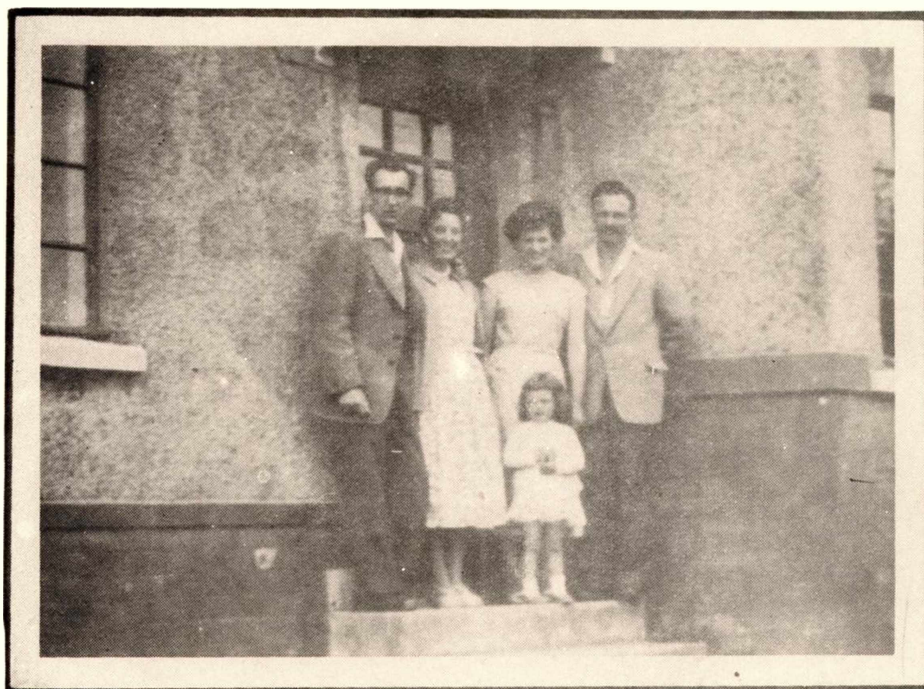
BY

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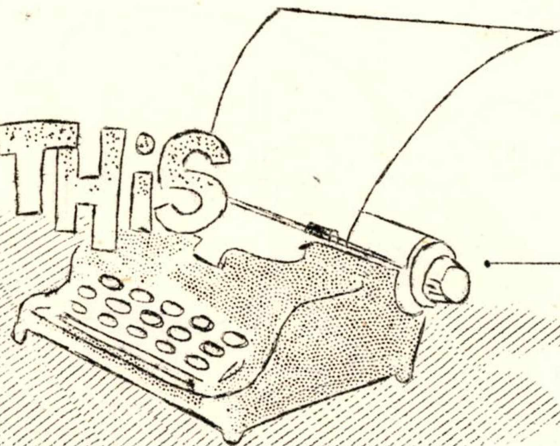
WHITE ROCKS, PORTRUSH, Co. ANTRIM - June '57  
Back Row, L to R :- Diane and John Berry, C.R. Harris,  
Arthur Thomson and Walt Willis. Front Row, L to R :-  
Kathleen & Colin Berry, Olive Thomson and Madeleine Willis.



31, CAMPBELL PK. AVE, BELFAST - June '57.  
L to R :- Arthur and Olive Thomson, Diane and John Berry.  
Kathleen Berry in front.

# IT'S LIKE

# THIS



It gives me great pride to publish THE THOMSON SAGA - particularly so because the Thomson's visit to Northern Ireland in June 1957 represents one of the most delightful episodes in my fannish career.

One or two details I must explain - the story BURN SNITCH BURN is a reprint from VERITAS 5, from the OMPA mailing of August 1957. In fact, this story gave me the inspiration to write the rest of the SAGA, and so I felt it important to include SNITCH. Apologies to those who've so recently read it.

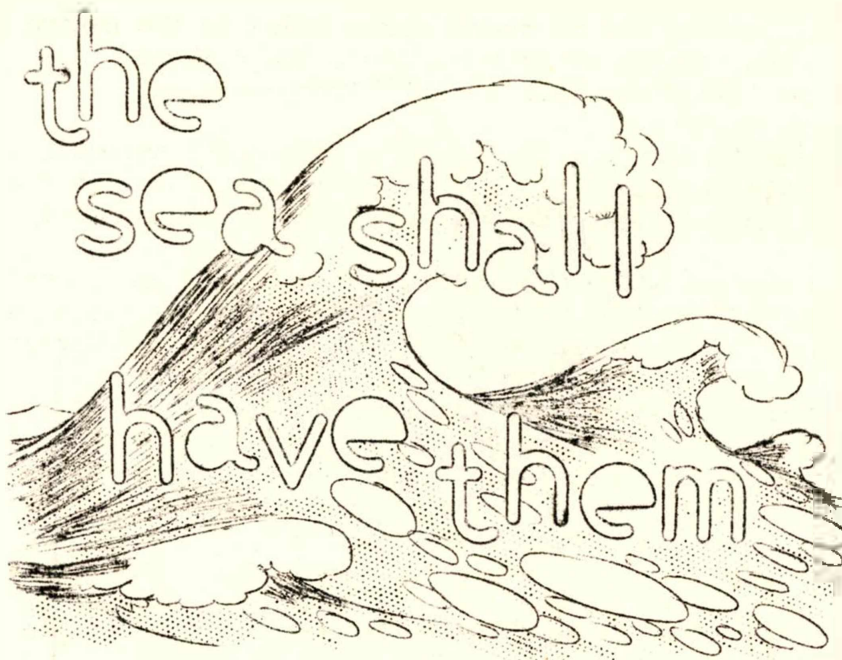
More important, however, is the truthfulness of these narratives. Arthur put it rather well in one of his letters to me. He explained that in retrospect, he thought at the time that his holiday in Northern Ireland was reasonably natural and ordinary. But, he explained, reading through the SAGA made him realise that all the incidents I have described really did happen, and it mystifies Arthur that they didn't appear fantastic at the time.

This means a great deal to me ... I have often been criticised for undue exaggeration and it may seem that I have done so in these stories. But I give you my word that Arthur Thomson, about whom all these stories are written, admits that they are true.

I must give my profound thanks to Arthur for his delightful illustrations. His genius is even more significant because he has depicted things he has actually seen and done.

This publication ( Vol.4. of the G.D.A. Library ) should really be considered the second episode of the Thomson-Berry contacts. My LONDON PRIED in VERITAS 1 ( No copies left ) provided the story of our first meeting, and provisionally, I and my family are going to Brockham House for a holiday in 1958. You'll be hearing about it .....

John Berry.



One aspect of the True Thomson I must mention is the inborn determination of the Scot. ( Although Arthur has lived for many years in London, he originally came with his family from Glasgow.) This particular affinity for relentlessness is an accepted part of the Scottish tradition.....grim...efficient...never harbouring the thought of surrender.

An example of this occurred the day after Olive and Arthur arrived at Belfast. We had arranged to go to

Portrush, on the Atlantic Coast, as it was the traditional site of Irish Fandoms Annual Excursion. The train left the station on the far side of Belfast at 10.am, and we had planned to meet Walter Willis and Madeleine, James White and Chuck Harris at platform 2 a few moments before the train steamed out.

Before we had retired for the night the evening before, we had planned our schedule for the morning...up early, get all the sandwiches ready, children washed, bathing costumes packed and at the 'bus stop ( to travel to the centre of Belfast to connect with another 'bus that was to take us to the railway station ) in time to allow for the fluctuations of the Sunday 'bus service.

I awoke on Sunday morning and saw that it was 8.15.am...which meant immediately that our schedule was 45 minutes behind. I gave a loud clarion call of distress, and in a flash, we had all dressed and were down in the living room, Arthur with one of my children under each arm.

The females, Olive ( Arthur's wife ) and Diane ( mine ) started to rush in with plates and rush back again with empty milk bottles, and the throaty rasp of burnt toast being scraped echoed from the kitchen as Olive and Diane, in a determined attempt to catch the deadline, did everything at the same time, with the expectant chaos.

Arthur, deep in thought for a moment, stepped forward and shouted 'STOP'. Everyone did so. Then Arthur, like some great military commander, gave a series of rapid but sensible orders, and although everyone commenced to rush about again at top speed, there was system where there had originally been disorder. We all knew what we were supposed to do, and Arthur, lying on the settee with his feet curled up so as not to be in the way, gave us an encouraging word here, a nod of approval there, and speedily the table was set for breakfast and the sandwiches had been cut .

We devoured breakfast quickly, and sorted out the parcels and bags and children. Arthur lined us up with military precision in the front garden, and distributed bags and packages amongst us according to our capacity.

We started off on the trek to the 'bus stop, two or three hundred yards, and Arthur, with great foresight, brought up the rear. He explained that he wasn't carrying anything, because he was there to pick up stuff that might possibly get dropped, although I'm glad to say his services were not required.

On arrival at the 'bus stop, Diane looked at her watch and announced it was 9.30.am....and we had to travel three miles to the centre of Belfast, catch another bus, travel a further mile to the railway station, and even then find Willis and Co..

Came 9.35 am, and no 'bus.

Arthur, I was glad to see, was giving the matter great attention. He hinted to me in his subtle manner that I should maybe have found out the 'bus schedule. Anyway, he promised to re-sew the lapels back onto my coat when he got the chance.

Exactly at 9.37.am, the 'bus came. Arthur stood behind and pushed and we found ourselves, in nail-biting agitation, near the exit, so that as soon as the 'bus reached the terminus, we could evacuate quickly and sprint to the other 'bus stop.

It seemed an eternity...those slow dragging miles, but finally, at 9.50.am, we reached the centre of the city. We got off quickly, and started in the direction of the other 'bus stop. It was about two hundred yards away, and I saw a 'bus standing there, the driver with one foot on the cab footrail, obviously preparing to get in and drive away.

"That's our 'bus" I yelled to Arthur, who was dragging the two children behind, and we sprinted at top speed to the 'bus, and arrived in a panting heap to see the driver get out on to the road, slam the door behind him, and light a cigarette.

"No harm done, anyway, Arthur," I said. " It wasn't our 'bus, anyway."

Arthur failed to see the logic in this, I got the impression he wasn't too thrilled with the situation. The little things told me, like the way he screamed in a shrill falsetto voice, and ran round and round the 'bus, gibbering in an inane manner

Then he seemed to take a grip of himself. He came back to us, his strong hands clutching at his sides.

"What time is it now?" he said through gritted teeth.

"Seven minutes to ten," said Diane.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," said Arthur, " but the railway station is a mile away, this 'bus wont move for some time, and anyway, as John says, it's the wrong 'bus.....and we have to be on the train in six and a half minutes."

"Well," I agreed, " except for the fact that it's only five and a half minutes to ten , I'd say you summed up the situation fairly well, considering."

Arthur stood still, and I'll never forget the look on his face. His teeth stood out like the front grill of a Chrysler...his face was set, grim, determined, and I could sense the traditional determination of his Scottish forebears gaining the upper hand.

"There seems only one thing to do," said Arthur, and with four minutes to go, he did it.

He stepped into the middle of the road, and put up his hand, palm to the front. There was a screech of brakes, and leaving a trail of blue smoking rubber behind it, a taxi screeched to a halt, the front bumper kissing Art's ankles.

I swear this happened. I'll never know how Arthur knew a taxi was passing just at that moment....my own theory is that it was just fate it happened to be a taxi. As far as Arthur was concerned, it was a car. Any car.

Arthur showed his gums to the driver, opened the door and squeezed us all in. He jumped in after, and accidently trod on the side of my face. He apologized, though.

Then he tapped the bewildered taxi-driver on the shoulder.

"A train leaves York Road Station in three minutes," hissed Arthur, "and we want to be on it."

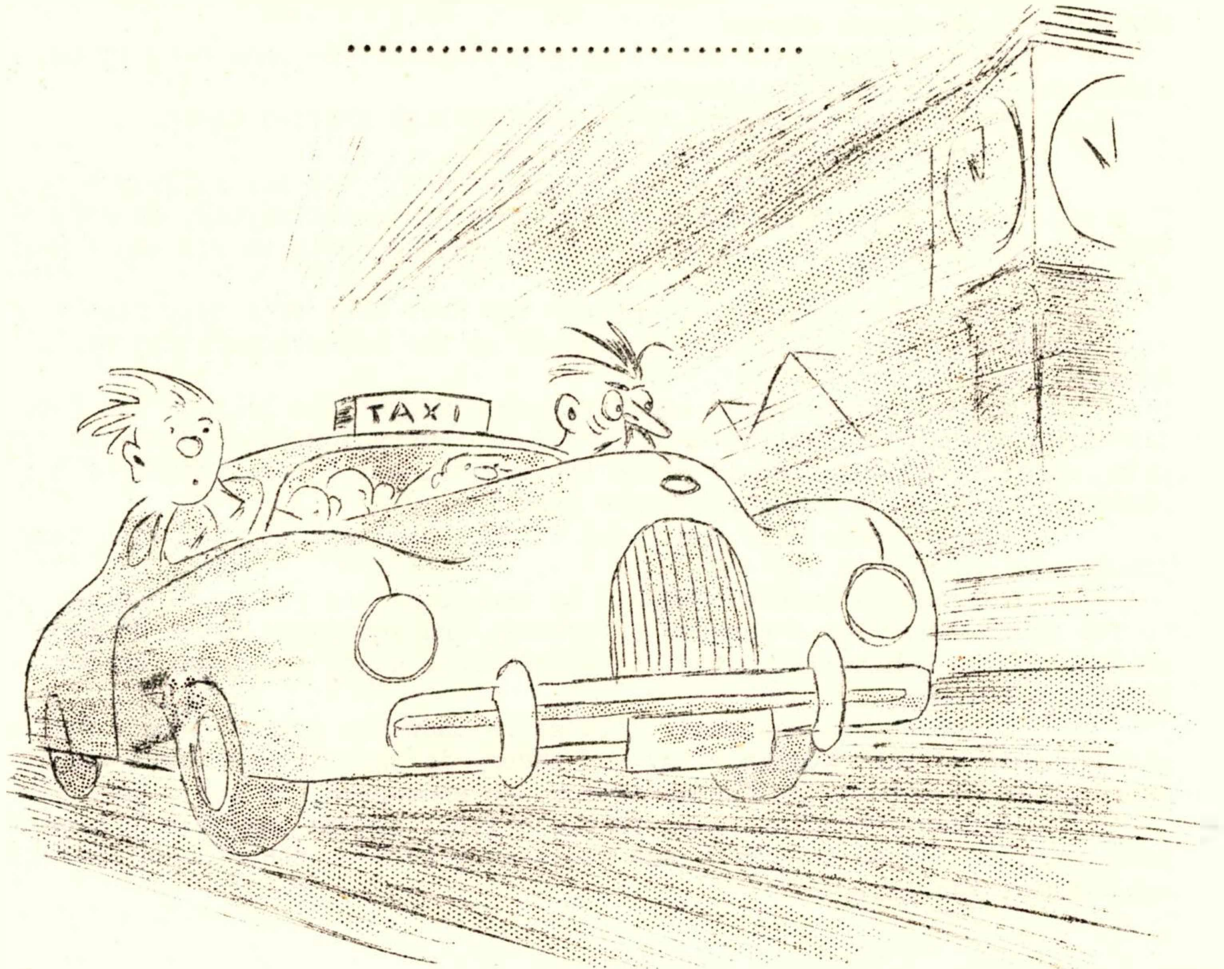
With a grinding of gears, the taxi shot forward, and with Arthur's hot breath caressing his ear lobes, the driver trod hard on the accelerator and broke the speed limit within three seconds flat.

With the clock showing one minute to ten, we jerked to a rubber - searing halt, and mentally lashing us, Arthur paid the taxi-driver and rushed for the tickets, whilst I shepherded the rest of them, bewildered as they were, past the ticket barrier, which was slowly clanging to a close.

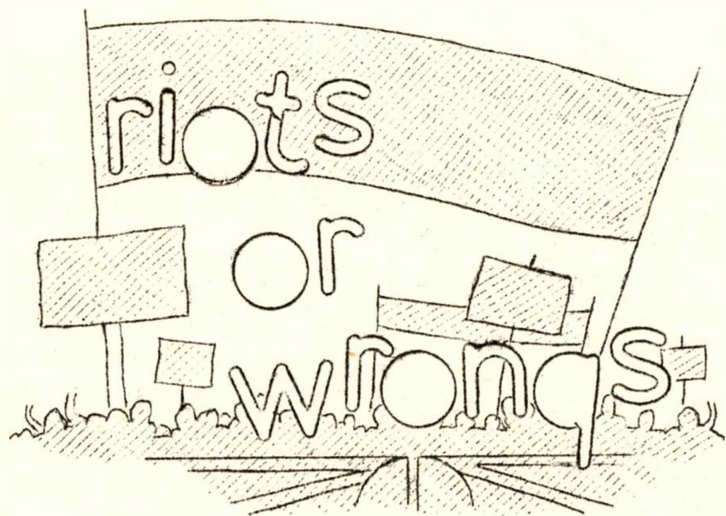
The guard started to wave his green flag, and put his whistle to his mouth, when Arthur vaulted the barrier, and offered the guard a sticky toffee. By the time he had unwrapped it, and prised it off his gums, we had found the Willis Carriage, and burst inside on top of a lot of startled fens who had given us up for lost.

Some of you, upon reading this, will think I have exaggerated. As Arthur or Olive or Diane will tell you, it's the truth, so help me. Whereas I was prepared to give up in unconditional surrender when we arrived late at the first 'bus stop, Arthur, and his solid grit, refused to give in, and we have much to thank him for, because the day at Portrush was brilliant. In fact, the sun was so strong that I got sunstroke, and became delirious for twenty four hours, and if it hadn't been for the fact that I needed a hair-cut, and my hair was hanging over my shoulders, I might have expired.

That's another story, though.



The journey by train from Portrush, on the north Antrim coast, to Belfast, takes two hours. The scenic beauty en route is delightful, but the Willis Party had admired it going to Portrush in the morning, and after a magnificent day on the beach at Portrush, felt less inclined to gaze at the green hills of Antrim, and more inclined to take stock of their contemporaries.



Walt Willis had booked a compartment for us all, because, from bitter experience, we knew that there would be great difficulty in keeping together otherwise. The party, under the command of Mr. Willis, consisted of Madeleine, Chuck Harris, Olive and Arthur, Diane and my two children, James White and myself.

We reached platform three, and found our compartment. We trooped inside. The train was really crowded, and some holiday-makers began to look grim, and make sporadic sorties into seemingly crowded compartments. Walt instructed us to spread ourselves out, and he installed Harris at the window. This gibbering visage served as a sort of human scarecrow, and we were untroubled, that is, except for when the party of Girl Guides passed by, but somehow we managed to hold on to Harris until the train steamed out.

It was at this stage that I discovered I couldn't move. Contrary to advice from the rest, I had pranced about the beach all day in my trunks, letting Sol get a good lingering glimpse of the pale Berry Torso, after all, it was three years since we had had such a good day in Northern Ireland. I'm not decrying the climate. It's just true.

And not only was I incapable of movement, I couldn't keep still. This may seem an abstract sort of phrase, but look at it this way. I couldn't move because the blistered flesh on my back was grating against my shirt, and I couldn't keep still, because, foolishly, I had not visited the 'Gentlemen' before entraining. I was afraid to get up and search in the corridor, because an appealing bunch of faces were longingly pressed against our window, and I knew that if I left my seat, not only would I lose it for ever, but the surge would probably get out of control, and there were the women and children to think of. I tell you, it was rough.

So, for some time, the train puffed slowly along, and we were strangely quiet. Then we came to the level crossing.

Now, this episode I am about to relate must be read with bated breath. Harris nearly caused a furore of fantastic proportions. Seriously, this incident is about the most tense I have ever experienced. Let me detail it in all its sordid pattern .....

The level crossing, thank goodness, was in our favour. Otherwise, I don't pretend to know if I would ever be able to write this for posterity. For on the road leading to the crossing, and stretching as far as they eye could see, were rank upon rank of Orangemen....the loyalists of Northern Ireland ....who hold as their pinnacle of faith the legend of King William of Orange, or, as he is affectionately known, King Billy. Harris, of course, was aware

of the political significance of this, as is obvious from a scrutiny of his semi-documentary one-shot of early 1955, THRU DARKEST IRELAND WITH KNIFE, FORK, AND SPOON. And as the train slowed down at the crossing, presumably to let the passengers see this stirring sight, Harris, before anyone could stop him, rushed to the window, and gave a racious shout of 'Down with King Billy'.

For some seconds, a horrible silence seemed to shout out loud. The procession stopped, and the incredulous Orangemen staggered backwards...they knew only two kinds of people would have perpetrated such a blasphemy...an ardent political opponent who had just made his will, or a certified mental defective. As good fortune would have it, the engine driver didn't belong to any of these two categories, and the train shot forward and rapidly gained maximum speed. We pulled Harris off the luggage rack, and sorted ourselves out, and then beheld the ardent loyalist at the door, pulling the door open to get hold of Harris.....

Willis, his mind in full slashing control of the situation, tapped his forehead meaningly, pointed to Harris, and gave a confidential aside, "he's English, you know." The intruder smiled at this, as though it explained everything, withdrew satisfied.

Harris seemed genuinely surprised at the trouble he had caused, and asked if he had indeed blundered, and Willis pointed suggestively through the window at the mass of Orangemen vaulting ditches like racehorses, gradually falling back as the train gained speed.

At this, Harris lapsed into a meditative silence, and settled in the corner of the compartment, staring moodily through the corridor window.

And, a few moments later, Arthur Thomson crawled from under the seat, ruminated for some time, and allowed a sly sneer of triumph to spread across his face.

He pointed out of the window at a large, sombre building.

"What's that, Walt?" he asked silkily.

"Ah, that is a lunatic asylum," answered Walt gravely.

Arthur turned to me.

"Where you ever in there?" he asked.

Hmmm. I hoped he was jesting. Maybe Harris, but not me .....

I shook my head.

Arthur paused for a few seconds, to prepare for the full effect of his punch line.

He coughed loudly, to draw attention, and said in great jubilation, "John was frightened to commit himself."

Willis, White and Harris leapt across to Arthur and shook his hand warmly, and patted him on the back.

Right enough, I had to admit it was a good pun. I hoped it was spontaneous...although deep in the cavernous recesses of my mind, I had a sneaking suspicion that on the journey to Portrush that morning, Walt and Arthur had been conversing in whispers at just that point. Probably coincidence...far be it from me to detract any egoboo from Arthur for a clever quip.

The train arrived in Belfast shortly afterwards, and as soon as it had almost stopped, Irish Fandom en bloc, and all Honorary Members except Harris, leapt from the train and scurried like rabbits down the platform.

At first, I thought their motives were similar to my own, and I wanted to get there first, but I heard Willis whispering feverishly, "Suppose the Orangemen contacted the police...".....

Harris soon appeared rushing down the platform, and we broke cover like a flock of startled Roebuck, dispersing wildly over the railway station.

As Walt pointed out as we clustered round him in the dark recess of the station waiting room later, if the worst came to the worst, we could always say that Harris had caught sunstroke, or he was out on parole and had momentarily gone beserk. Arthur thoughtfully suggested we completely disclaim any knowledge of Harris, but I'm glad to say there wasn't complete unanimity about this, Walt pointing out that Harris owed him 3/7d.

When we thought it expedient, we trooped surreptitiously out of the station, and went home by taxi. Harris arrived home soon afterwards, furtively looking over his shoulder, much chastened.

Me.....weeeeee, I just burst out laughing.

Guess that was a good pun about my not wanting to commit myself....



During his triumphant visit to Northern Ireland, Arthur Thomson gave many glimpses of his own particular brand of genius, for which he is so rightly famed the fannish world over. One instance I have in mind really spawned itself into the primary experimental stage during an emergency meeting of Irish Fandom at a place called Ballywalter, in County Down, on the coast of the Irish Sea.

James White, who, during the celebrated BeaCon, revealed his uncanny control over the sun, was specially ordered to provide the maximum amount of sunshine during the period when Chuck Harris and the Thomson's holiday

coincided. (Harris was staying at Walt's house at the time, whilst the Thomsons stopped at 'Mon Debris', my house.) There is no doubt that White succeeded with his sun control yet again, and I've the remains of three layers of skin on my back to prove it. The ATOM face, however, nurtured under the hot tropical sun during his active service days in the R.A.F.(plug), remained completely unaffected by this brutal and prolonged assault by a White-inspired Sol, except..... yes.....except for his nose.

HIS NOSE.

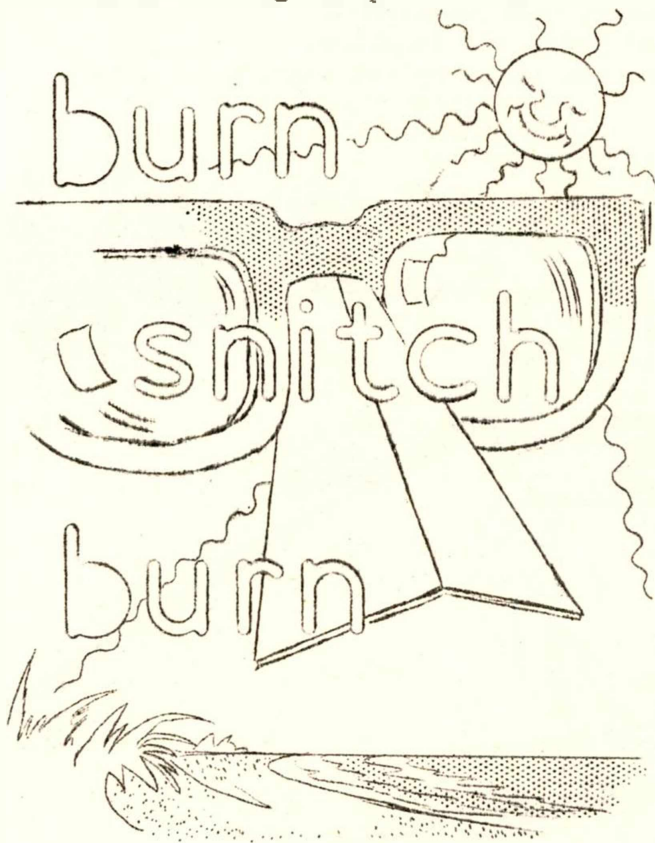
The Thomson Snoot, as Arthur confessed to me one night in a fit of cruel remorse, bears the hereditary stigma of being exceedingly blister prone. Looking at him in the dim confines of my den, his nose resembled a warning beacon similar to the type

installed on the hills round Belfast airport ( Nutt's Corner, so named after Bentcliffe landed there in '55.)

I snapped my fingers. Deep in the recess of a cupboard in a bedroom there reclined a bottle of Calamine Lotion. I found it, and suggested to Arthur that as the following day promised to be even hotter, he could still sunbathe if he took the simple precaution of dabbing his snatch with the lotion.

Next morning he did so. He lay on his back on my garden lawn. The luxuriant brown glow of sheer sunburn on his face was spoiled only by the blatant splotch of snow-white Calamine on his beak. Arthur dozed off on the lawn, and awoke twenty minutes later to find himself surrounded by all the youngsters of the neighbourhood, who sat round in a respectful semi-circle, mouths open with awe, eyes protruding with delight. Arthur sat up, yawned loudly, and ran a hand through his hair. A titter burst forth, followed by a sporadic burst of applause.

"CoCo the Clown is about to commence his act," announced Colin, my offspring, jingling a pocket full of coins, and standing near the open gateway. Maybe 'standing' isn't quite the right word to describe his posture ..... all he needed was a set of starting blocks to emulate Jesse Owen waiting



for the crack of the pistol.

.....

"I'm not going through that again," said Arthur later, as we split the 4/9<sup>11</sup> three ways. "We're supposed to be going to your wife's mother at Ballyvester tomorrow. I can't go in the sun with my virgin nose, and I can't put Calamine on it...I mean..."

Much perplexed, Arthur shook his head in frustration, and wandered off to bed.

.....

The sun, a white-hot disc in the clear blue sky, blasted down with monotonous fury on the frizzled populace below. Ballyvester, a few miles north of Ballywalter, consists of a fairly small sandy beach, gradually leading on to a grassy bank. Whilst the rest of us cavorted merrily on the sand, playing cricket, Arthur slunk away into the undergrowth, one hand clasped firmly over his bonker.

I felt sorry for him. During our frequent trips to the seaside, Arthur had shown himself to be an enthusiastic follower of King Willow, and the thought of him being unable to play, and having to rest his kisser under the shade of a large bush, adjacent to where some High School girls were changing for a swim, moved me sorely. I felt I should have been there with him.

But after an hours lapse, Arthur emerged from the bushes, revealing his presence with a racous yell of something that sounded like "It's my turn to bat."

I turned to hand him the cricket bat, and suddenly caught sight of his face.

HIS FACE ?????

A chant of amazement started amongst the rank and file of sun-bathers as Arthur approached us, stepping proudly over the prostrate figures. In the distance I heard Colin shouting something about "Roll up and see the only human Spoonbill in captivity," but I ignored the inference, factual thought it undoubtedly was.

For Arthur's famous prowess, his flare for spontaneous inventive genius had asserted itself in a magnificent crescendo of glory.

Attached under his spectacles by devious means was a large oblong of cardboard, which rested on his proboscis like a glacier on an Alpine Peak. It completely obscured the lower part of his face, and when he spoke, the frustrated decibels, caught in a paroxysm of indecision after playing a metaphorical game of 'ping pong' with the cardboard and his epiglottis, sneaked down the front of his shirt in abject surrender, giving a last despairing muffle en route.

Arthur took his stance at the wicket, and I ran up to bowl. All I could see was his beezee-shield. The sun reflected off it like a shaft of sheet-lightening, and someone swam out to sea to get the ball back.

Arthur was quietly magnificent in his hour of glory. Although people laughed at his ostentatious conk-protector, two or three people appeared later that afternoon similarly equipped. Within 24 hours, being without a Thomson Anti-Sol Nose Shield (as the patented production model was so named) was to be relegated as being socially inferior. It was a sign of prestige to stroll along the beach with ones family, all nodding sagely to each other, mumbling away behind oblongs of cardboard. It showed that you were on holiday, were extremely sunburned, and concerned about your ultimate appearance.

Of course, Arthur Thomson is back in London now, and as I was initially seen with him, I'm getting all the blame.

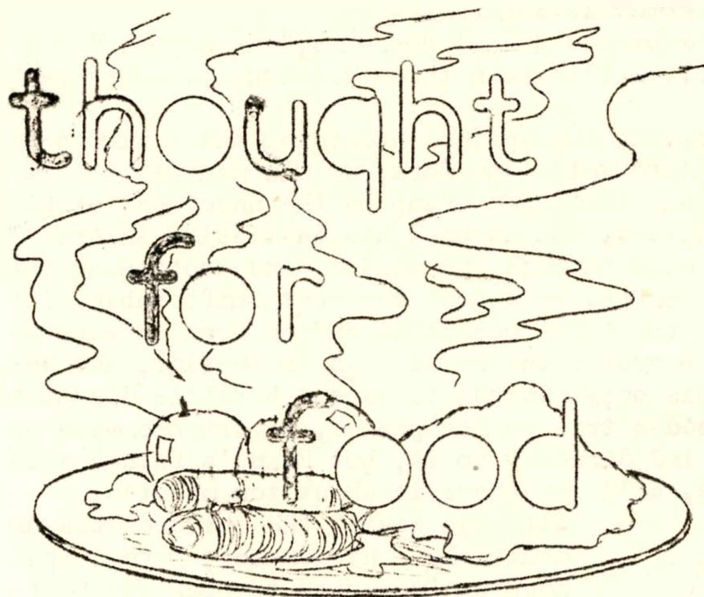
You see, the majority of people living in the north eastern part of County Down have all got beautifully sunburned faces, and horrible white noses.

My answer to this was the Berry Visage Shield For Sunburned Faces With Adjustable Recess For White Nose.

I must confess that sales didn't go too well.

.....





In a previous saga, I mentioned the quaint little seaside resort on the County Down coast. We stayed there a couple of days, 'we' consisting of Arthur and his wife Olive, Diane, myself and our two children, Colin and Kathleen. The visit was prominent for a variety of reasons, which I intend to describe in great detail. But first I must tell you all about the place we stayed in.

There is a widespread racket in Northern Ireland at all the seaside resorts. Rich landlords built small caravans, or minute shacks, and charge people an extortionate rate to

stay there for a month. Some folk have the notion that to be huddled for a month in an area a few feet square, exposed to the full blast of the sea wind, and living in the most primitive conditions imaginable, is a holiday.

It so happened that during the Thomson's stay, Diane suddenly hit on the superb idea of us all going down to Ballyvester and staying with her mother and father and an aged aunt who were on holiday there.

Diane presumed that her parents were staying at a boarding house or at a hotel...and Arthur and Olive especially liked the idea of a couple of days down by the sea, so we went.

Diane had been to Ballyvester before, and using her strongly developed sense of direction, eventually led the frustrated procession to a large house. Olive put the two children down, and Arthur put Olive down and I pulled the handle of the suitcase he was carrying out of his mouth and propped him against a wall. Diane disappeared inside and came out a few moments later, bubbling over with delight.

"This is the right place," she smiled. "The landlord says we can go round to the back entrance."

We trekked down the side of the house, and turned left into a small ante-chamber. Very small.

Arthur and I took our jackets off, hung them on the wall, and stacked our suitcases underneath.

"What a big house this is," smiled Diane, and we nodded in anticipation.

She went to find her parents, but they'd gone down to the sea. Later, they came back, and we introduced them to the Thomson's.

We talked for a while, and Diane asked if we could go to the dining room and have lunch, and he father gave an inscrutable smile, and pressed a button on the wall.

"Ah, the valet," murmured Arthur a split-second before a large rectangular hunk of polished wood hinged to the wall dropped on his cranium.

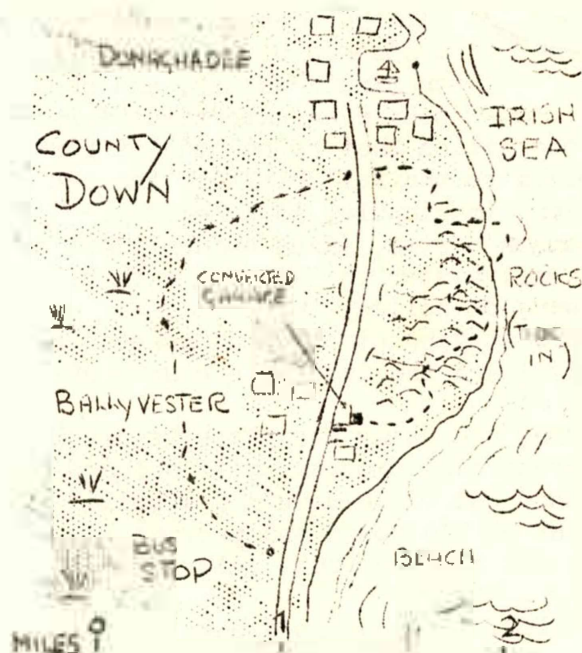
"This is the dining hall," said her father. "In fact, we all have to live and eat and sleep in this one room. If you can call it a room. It's actually a converted garage, and it was the only accommodation available with the short notice we gave. And that thing balanced on Arthur's head is the table. If you'll all go out and give us a bit of room, Diane and her mother will lay the table."

Outside, Arthur seemed somewhat baffled.

"I thought that...that room was a hall cupboard," he moaned, "and there's nine of us altogether...that'll mean three sittings...unless we have lunch out here."

But by some method involving disciplined breathing and a firm promise to use only one hand to manipulate knife and fork, we all managed to sit down to lunch at the same time. Arthur developed cramp on the underside of his chin, where his knees had been in contact, and he used his initiative in true Thomson style by going outside and leaning through the window, and continuing eating his lunch standing up. I must confess he seemed the most comfortable. I felt sort of inferior sitting under the table accepting scraps from my wife as they became available, but I said to myself the seaside is the seaside, and weeeell, it's only once a year, and it is only natural to expect a little discomfort.

After lunch, we organised a trip to Donaghadee, a port one mile north of Ballyvester. The main road led directly to it, but Diane's father said that if we went along the sea shore, we'd get there in about ten minutes.



Although having the children was undoubtedly a hindrance, I felt that hopping from rock to rock for half a mile was in a sense an unwelcome hazard. True, it was only seven hundred yards by way of the shore to Donaghadee, and a mile by road, but after we'd waded the third sewage stream, Arthur suggested we try the road anyway.....and we went on a cross-country route that seemed needlessly complicated, and we eventually reached the main road two miles south of Donaghadee. We caught a 'bus, however, and had quite a chat with Dianas parents, who got on the 'bus at Ballyvester, and seemed genuinely surprised to see us. Arthur mentioned the rock-hopping and chasm-wading, and Dianas father said that of course, the beach route was only used during low tide.

I gave Arthur one of the children to carry, as I didn't like the way he was fondling his bucket and spade.

During the afternoon, we toured Donaghadee, the highlight of which, to me, was what can only be termed as a 'bloody provincial' haircut. Previously, I had always thought the bowl on the head routine was a music hall joke. It's quite true, though....and cheap.

The 'bus service didn't seem to be too well organised, and we walked back.

And we were tired.

Very tired.

But also hungry.

VERY HUNGRY.

We sat down in the pseudo room, and Arthur ran a tongue round his lips, and muttered something about 'liking a cup of tea.'

The women were talking animatedly amongst themselves, and didn't appear to hear, so Arthur gave a horrible groan of anguish and in a semi-jocular mood started to eat the table-cloth. Someone passed Arthur the salt. That did it.

Arthur, in case you don't know, is a patient man. But I could see he was annoyed....and his anger was fostered by his hunger. He bared his teeth and

looked round the room. He spotted the wall-switch which controlled the hinged wall-table, and discovered he was sitting exactly where the table was scheduled to drop. Being intelligent, Arthur got out of the way, and rammed the switch with a vibrating fore finger.

We helped him from under the wall-bed.

But I was hungry too.

And said so in no mean manner.

Eventually, when we discovered that Colin and Kathleen were also hungry, Arthur organised a permanent chant which was terrible to hear, and eventually the women took the subtle hint.

And now I come to the climax of this story, revealing to you all the utter genius of Arthur...even more magnificent because of the wonderful spontaneity of it.

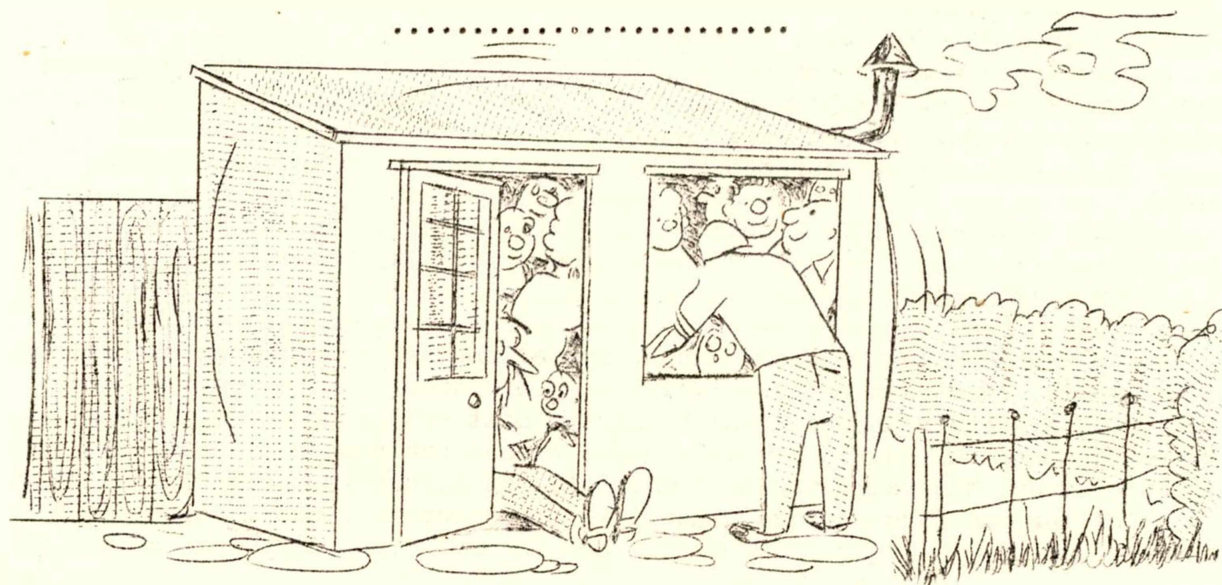
The wall-table was lowered, a flowered table cloth was thrown over it, and the women commenced to squeeze past each other, bearing plates of delectables. Arthur, the two children and myself tried to restrain ourselves from leaping headlong on to the table, and clearing it in one fell swoop, but culture and protocol dictated a different technique. As soon as one back was turned, Arthur would whip a cake off a plate and pass it round. Sometimes, if backs were turned for several seconds, his hands would be a blur as he passed the eatables along the waiting queue. It was fantastic to see four faces, innocent and immobile, awaiting just slight inattention on the part of the table layers, and as soon as this occurred, four pairs of jaws went up and down so fast the Adam's Apples looked like yoyo's at a contest. Of course, to allay suspicion, Arthur saw it was necessary to remove the plates from whence they came, and as Kathleen was the smallest, we had her crawling on her hands and knees, putting the plates back.

Several times, Diane or Olive or someone else mentioned the long time it was taking to lay the table, and eventually, out of deference to the others, we sank in a corner and by a few murmured monosyllables, let them know we were still hungry.

Which we were.

Diane's mother remarked somewhat meaningfully that the sea air had certainly given us an appetite. It was pleasant to be reminded of Bob Shaw again, and if he ever reads this, I would like him to know that there is a good chance his table-clearing record will be broken.

If it does ever come to a contest, we shall know where to hold it.



Arthur Thomson has rightly gained fame in the fannish field as probably the most gifted artist fandom has ever known.

Particularly so in the field of true cartoons. Several fen are adept stylo virtuoso's, and although their semi-sercon illo's are executed with originality, the basic artistic format remains static. ATOM alone has the ability to inject authenticity


into his cartoons....most especially in his character studies of James White, Ken Bulmer, Steve Schultheis, Chuck Harris, Eric Bentcliffe, George Charters, to name only a few. This is the ATOM famed everywhere, the artist with the cultured and prolific stylo and the unbounded imagination.

But those of us who know him well....really well...realise that there is something much deeper to his personality. Those of us who have had the fortunate experience to listen to <sup>A</sup>rthur making most perceptive remarks during a taper session fully understand the machinations of this brilliant mind. I recall a taper session at Walts, we were making a tape for Jean and Andy Young...it was one of those taper sessions when everything went right...conversation flowed merrily along like a rippling mountain stream. Merry quip followed closely on the heel of merry quip. Then Arthur, who had been strangely quiet, raised a hand, and with a refined accent, composed of a mixture of broad Glaswegian and subtle Cockney, made a most revealing remark, and we all sank back in our chairs, struggling to get the full significance of the profound observation. Even Willis, with his great mind, found it necessary to reflect on the astute Thomson comment. I am sure that Jean and Andy derived some considerable benefit from the sage remarks.

Arthur also has the rare ability to repeat incidents with a superlative zest...the necessary qualifications for a gifted raconteur, which ATOM undoubtedly is. You haven't lived until you've heard him give the full story of the time he was approached in Picadilly by a woman of uncertain virtue." Of course," said Arthur philosophically puffing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, "it's not so bad a woman coming up to you and saying 'Hello, dearie,' but when a male comes up and says it, weeeell...." With righteous indignation, Arthur vigorously tapped the end of his cigarette, and ground the ash into the carpet. It's the proud significance of his guesstures that combines to make his story-telling so wonderful an experience.

However, it wasn't until we visited Ballyvester, on the County Down coast, facing the Irish Sea, that I had the distinction of seeing Arthur make with a superb example of his genius. It has never been my privilege to witness better. Others, since that memorable date, have had occasion to hear a replica of the first spontaneous flash of consummate skill. It has even

seagull  
over  
ballyvester



been set to tape, but those who hear it will only shrug and say it's a hoax, or a recording of the real thing, and assert that no human being could possibly have done it. If I had not been a witness, I would have agreed with them, but I stake everything I possess that Arthur did it. Alone and unaided, he did it. And quite magnificent it was, too.

Of course, environment had a great deal to do with it. One can't expect to work up much enthusiasm, for example, if one was sitting on top of an iceberg in the Antarctic with Jayne Mansfield. I probably could, but as I said, one can't expect it. So in this case, it was the atmosphere of the surroundings that constituted the back-cloth, as it were, for the fantastic incident.

I can see the vista as if it were happening now.

It was almost ten o'clock at night. Four of us were walking along the sandy beach at Ballyvester. The sky was overcast, although it was quite warm. Just the four of us on the whole deserted beach .... Olive, Diane, Arthur and myself. Conversation wafted along as conversation usually does. Stories, jokes, anecdotes, mostly all tinged with a fannish reference, but, for the sake of the two non-fen, set up in such a manner that they couldn't really object to what we were saying as being too esoteric.

Then the great moment arrived.

Arthur stopped, a look of celestial bliss on his face. He was obviously in a trance....completely on a different plane altogether.....

His eyes flickered once or twice, and a coy grin interrupted the thin line of his lips. The rest of us stepped backwards, awed by this strange behaviour, yet somehow exulted with what we sensed, we knew, was to be something utterly out of this world.

Then Arthur did it.

He ran a couple of fingers through his hair, knocking it over his face, as any well-bred Irish faaan would normally do. Slowly, oh so slowly, a transition took place...his kind features assumed an awful transfixion, as if he was reading a Reaney mss for the first time. His arms rose slowly to shoulder height, and stayed at the accepted scarecrow angle. His fingers spread out like an open Mizere. Then, with a measured movement, he slowly tilted his head to one side.

For some seconds he stayed like that, and Diane put a comforting hand round Olive, his wife, as she appeared to be taking the thing far too literally.....I peered between their two heads, gauging the distance to the nearest cover. I knew Arthur was fooling, but, well, frankly, I've learned never to take a chance.

And so occurred the climax to the whole uncanny performance.

I don't profess to know how he did it. My mind can only accept so much, and even though he did it before my very eyes, and I know it happened, I'm still a little befuddled. Wouldn't you be ?

With his eyes half closed, he opened his mouth slightly.

"Squarrrrrk.....quarrrrrk."

He gave a superb rendering of a seagull. It was the last word. The performers on the B.B.C. who make a living by giving bird impressions have never reached the peak of perfection which Arthur displayed. It wasn't so much the noise, although that was authentic seagull. No. The realistic part of the performance was the way he almost willed us to see a seagull. At each squark, he raised himself on tiptoe, and the way I was rooted to the spot in bewilderment, I quite expected to see him taxi forward, flap gloriously towards the horizon, and disappear into the infinit.

I've often thought about that incident since.

I feel that in his own way, Arthur, for one brief moment, had reached the elemental truth...had plumbed the mysteries of the Universe....had shown us a fleeting glimpse of something ethereal and wonderful, which the human mind is only capable of comprehending on very rare occasions.

When we finally walked back, we were silent in the presence of this strange media. Arthur was ashen of face., like a soul that has touched the unknown. Once or twice, as if in silent experimentation, he did a sporadic flap of the hands, and emitted a tentative squark, but it was nothing in comparison with his climax a few moments previously.

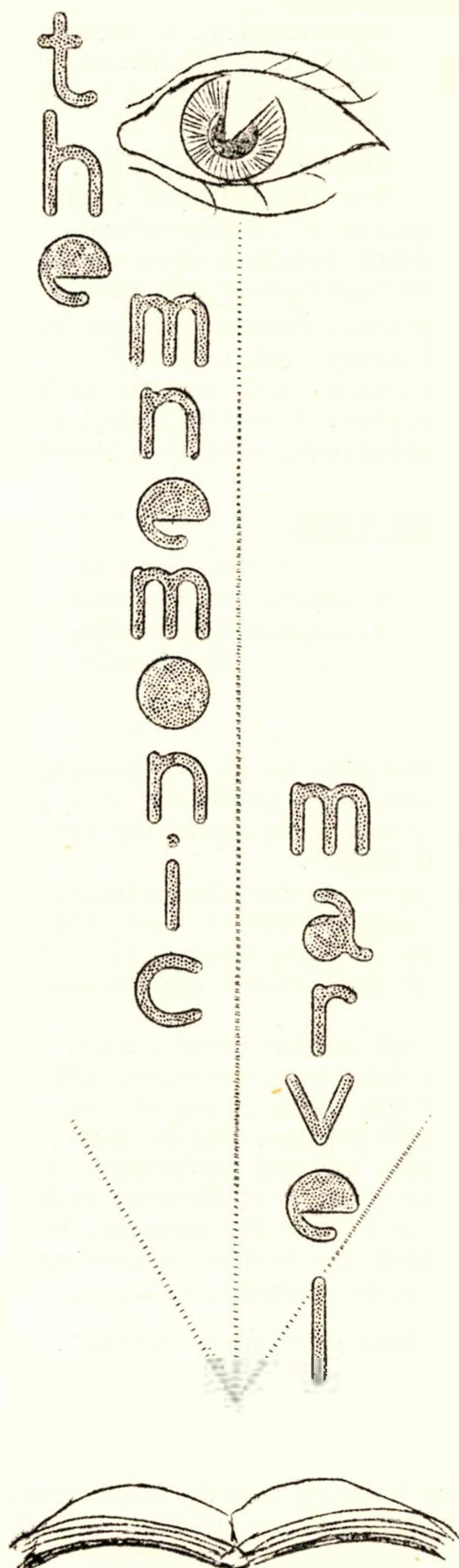
As I say, a poor facsimile of the original noise has been recorded for posterity on tape, but us three who heard the real Thomson-inspired seagull, will always remember it as one of those unexplained phenomena that can only be discussed in whispers.

Some readers may think it a waste of time to spend so much space on the description of a mere vocal impersonation...but I am satisfied in my own mind that I couldn't do justice to the subject by taking less words.

Of course, there is one other explanation,

In his own subtle philosophical way, Arthur could have been giving us the bird.





There are some aspects of the diverse Thomson personality which are not appreciated by the great majority of fen with whom he has been in contact. I myself only began to notice them on the second week of his stay at my abode in June '57. I can write with great accuracy about these facets of the True Thomson, because, with the typical authentic outlook for which I am famed, I took great care to close the door after the Thomson's when they retired at night, and spent some considerable time in tabulating all the things I had noticed in a small black notebook I keep for my amateur psychological studies.

Did you know that Mr. Thomson has a new and deadly way of reading prozines ( and for all I know, of reading fanzines?) I gave him carte blanche permission to examine the whole of my library ( weeell, both shelves of it ) and, to my certain knowledge, he completely refrained from touching the volumes of The Decameron Of Boccaccio and other quantities of pornographic literature of some significance to fandom. The bhoy turned out to be an avaricious sf reader ....can you imagine that, actually reading science fiction ?

I recall his strange demeanour. He would glance at his watch and say, " Ah, I've fifteen minutes to spare, I'll read some science fiction until the dinner is ready.", and with that, he'd nip upstairs to my den, and return in two minutes with several American soft-cover sf books.

SEVERAL.

And then he.....but allow me to quote verbatim from the notes I took immediately after witnessing this strange and uncanny Thomson Phenomena.....

' so I carefully watched whilst he picked up an IMAGINATION, dated, I think, April '57. He looked at the cover painting for some seconds with a distinct curl of the upper lip, and then he turned to the contents page. With a rythmic flick of the right thumb and forefinger, he then methodically turned over page after page, presumably, I thought, looking at or for the illos. In exactly two minutes and fifteen seconds he breathed a sigh, and placed the book face down on the arm of the settee. He licked his lips, wiped his eyes, and did the same with a December '56 AMAZING, and a few moments later with two more IMAGINATION'S and a SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE. " I say, Arthur," I said with commendable host-like enthusiasm," which one have you decided to

read ?" Arthur looked at me with a bemused expression. "I've just read the five of them," he explained matter-of-factly. I looked at him with disbelief. "Surely you are jesting ?" I explained. Arthur wiped a hand across his forehead, and did something with a bottle of OPTREX (+) Then dinner was served.'

This most revealing page of notes gives a true picture of what happened. As I explained before, this was written fairly soon after the incident occurred, so I can safely say I have eliminated all possibility of exaggeration.

However, the following day I was prepared for further detailed observations, and I'll print below the pertinent notes enscribed immediately afterwards :-

'announcing that he was going to do one hours reading, Arthur asked my young son to accompany him to the library, and they both returned shortly afterwards, staggering along with armfuls of books, quite possibly the rest of my sf collection. This time, with stopwatch in hand, I made some expert observations, with the following result.:-

S.F. MAG.

TIME TAKEN.

Other Worlds	10 seconds.
IMAGINATION Vol 8 No 4	1 minute 16 seconds.
IMAGINATION Vol 5 No 3	2 minutes 23 seconds.
AMAZING Vol 30 No 6	59 seconds.
etc	
etc	

With grim determination, I looked at his eyes as he was reading, and I discovered a most significant fact. When he looked at a page, his eyes didn't go from left to right, then back again for the next line. THEY WENT DOWN THE CENTRE OF THE PAGE.

This was completely revolutionary to me, a new dimension, if factual. I secretly suspected a hoax, people seem to have the impression that I am hoax-prone, a sort of experimental field for new hoaxes to be tried for some sort of provisional expectation as to the probable result.

I made myself clear on this point, and Arthur slung a hand in careless abandon, and challenged me to ask him a question..ANY question, about the contents of any of the books lying at his feet....and I did.... I picked a story at random, and he gave me a consise and accurate resume of the plot and the activities of the central characters. I was forced to admit that Thomson could indeed peruse and digest a small book in a very few moments. He seemed concerned that I had not witnessed the technique previously, and explained that it was employed by proof readers, etc.....

That's all I have written down in my notes about this particular mystic ability.....just one of Arthur's remarkable gifts. It is a fact that during his service with the R.A.F, he did a tour of duty in the Middle East, and I recall that when I stayed at his house in May '56, he showed me some snaps in the Family Photograph Album, and one of them depicted Arthur in close conversation with a strange Indian-like personage wearing a white turban and a loin-cloth. I recall also that Arthur turned the page over quickly. Was it possible, I wondered later, that for the gift of an ATOM illo depicting a fakir lying on a bed of nails, the mystic gave Arthur one or two of the

(+) OPTREX is a brand of eye lotion sold in the British Isles.

secrets these Easterners possess, the mental force necessary to let the mind control the body ?

As I say, I wondered.

But on reflection, another point impinges on my befuddled mind. I remember now that on the day before he returned to England, Arthur purchased a large trunk....and seemed rather secretive about its purpose. Then, with scant minutes left before his taxi departed for the trip to the Liverpool boat, he suddenly shouted from upstairs ..

"John, can I help myself to something to read on the journey back to London ?"

I shouted out confirmation.

.....

.....

.....

.....

I've since worked out that the boat left Belfast at eight pm..it arrived in Liverpool at seven am.the next morning..the London Express left Liverpool at nine am.and got into London just after two pm.

Hmmmm.

That makes about nineteen hours of solid reading.

Hmmmm.

Guess one of these days he'll let me have back my Decameron of Boccaccio, and my other vast quantities of pornographic literature of some significance to fandom.

.....

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