My Back Pages #18

Rich Lynch

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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Welcome back to my world! This is an unusual year for Nicki and me – we're not attending the World Science Fiction Convention or the North American Science Fiction Convention. The last time we didn't go to either a Worldcon or a NASFiC was back in 2007 and the time before that was way back in 1987. So instead, we're attending some other conventions we don't often get to. At the end of May we spent a very enjoyable Memorial Day weekend at the Inner Harbor of Baltimore for the 51st Balticon science fiction convention. Many of our friends were there, including the Fan Guest of Honor, and it was such a pleasant experience that we'll be going back next year. As well as spending a short mini-vacation in Baltimore later this year to take in some of the cultural and historical aspects of the city.

And in just a few days, as I write this, we'll be heading off to North Carolina for the 55th annual Deep South Science Fiction Convention. After we moved back in 1988 from Tennessee to Maryland, DeepSouthCons have usually been too far off the beaten path for us to attend but this one is just a few hours drive from here. That was not the case last year, when it took us the better part of two days on the road to get there. And as you will read, it was an epic trip.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
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Thanks to Frank Olynyk for use of his photo of Bob Shaw.

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Southern Swing

Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry on stage in Colonial Williamsburg

Prolog: A Question for TJ

It had been an interesting, enlightening, and yes, very entertaining debate. The topic had been "Freedom *for* Religion" and the participants were two of the Founding Fathers of the United States: Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry. But now it was time for audience questions and I was the first person called on.

"Mr. Jefferson," I called out, "Yesterday I had the honor and privilege of visiting your splendid estate near Charlottesville. And it is truly an unexpected pleasure to cross paths with you here today. My question only somewhat relates to today's discussion. Do you believe that the United States is best served by continuing under the existing Articles of Confederation? Or would a Constitution be a more appropriate way of addressing the governance of this country?"

It really *had* been an unexpected pleasure to witness this debate. Nicki and I were at the Decorative Arts and Folk Art Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, one day before the start of this year's RavenCon science fiction convention. And somewhat appropriate to the upcoming science fiction weekend, we had been transported in time to the year 1784, back when the newly-independent United States of America was operating under a system of government which did not include a President, any executive agencies, or a federal judiciary.

The two Founding Fathers were being portrayed by local actors, and the word 'portrayed' really doesn't do justice to their performances. They stayed in character throughout the event, even into the audience questions session. Patrick Henry at that time was Governor of Virginia and had come to believe that there was an impending decay of "civility, morality and piety" across the state. In 1784 he had proposed a bill to the Virginia General Assembly that would have levied a small tax in support of religion and religious education, allowing each taxpayer to choose which church should receive his share of the levies collected. Thomas Jefferson back then had been chairman of a committee to establish a viable system of government, which eventually led to the establishment of the United States Constitution five years later. Whereas Henry was a somewhat extreme states rights proponent, Jefferson was much more moderate. And also a deist – he believed that organized religion could get along just fine by itself without any government help, something that was later codified into the Constitution's Bill of Rights.

My question had been meant to see how much in character the two actors would stay when unscripted, but it turned out that it was *me* who had strayed out of character. After responding that yes, a Constitution was needed, Jefferson looked at me with a bit of wonderment and said, "You mentioned that you had visited my estate atop Monticello Mountain yesterday. That's 120 miles away!" Practically light years in colonial times. Back then, the only way I could have covered that much distance in a single day would have been to hitch a ride with Phileas Fogg.

DSC 54, Mark II

It had been a very long time since Nicki and I had taken the car out on a two-convention road trip. The previous one was, my gosh, way back in 1992 which took us all the way to Florida for that year's Worldcon. This trip was another southern swing, down through the Carolinas to Atlanta for the DeepSouthCon, and then back north through Tennessee and Virginia, eventually ending up in Williamsburg for RavenCon. RavenCon in particular was a priority because it was also a FanHistoricon, with a separate track of programming that featured panels and workshops on the theme of exploring fandom's past decades and taking steps to preserve what knowledge and artifacts as was possible. But we had also wanted to attend the DeepSouthCon, especially since it was being held in Atlanta, one of our favorite cities. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when we lived in southeastern Tennessee, Atlanta was an easy two-hour drive and we went there often. But after we moved to Maryland in 1988, Atlanta became so far off the beaten track for us that it might as well have been on the far side of the moon.

It just so happened that DeepSouthCon and RavenCon were held on consecutive weekends. Originally that wasn't the case – this year's DeepSouthCon was subsumed into the annual JordanCon convention when a previously scheduled DSC for 2016 (which would have been held on a different weekend) was cancelled due to financial reasons. JordanCon is a themed event, held annually in Atlanta as a continuing tribute to the late fantasy author Robert Jordan. It's relatively new, having been started in 2009. The DSC, on the other hand, is a much older convention, dating back to the early 1960s, and over the years has annually been staged in many different cities throughout the southeastern states. This year was the 54th DSC, and it was the first time one had needed to be rescued.

Gilbert Head describes the Ned Brooks Fanzine Archive at the University of Georgia

It was plain to see that JordanCon has its own fan community which seems to have only minimal overlap to those who attend DeepSouthCons. Combining the two did not result in a very good fit. Instead of integrating the DSC into the overall multi-track JordanCon program, it was provided just a single room, down at the far end of the hotel's function space. And there didn't seem to have been a lot of thought that had gone into the DSC program. There were generic titles for what turned out to be unmemorable panels, with the result that none of the DSC programming items had more than a handful of people in attendance. And none added much of any real value about the unique entity that is Southern Fandom. The most interesting DSC program item, to me at least, was a description of the science fiction and fantasy archives at the University of Georgia, including the extensive and historically valuable fanzine collection of the late Ned Brooks. The curator, Gilbert Head, is an active science fiction fan, which will make it easier to gain access to some of these publications. I hope.

Oh, Atlanta, I Hear You Calling…

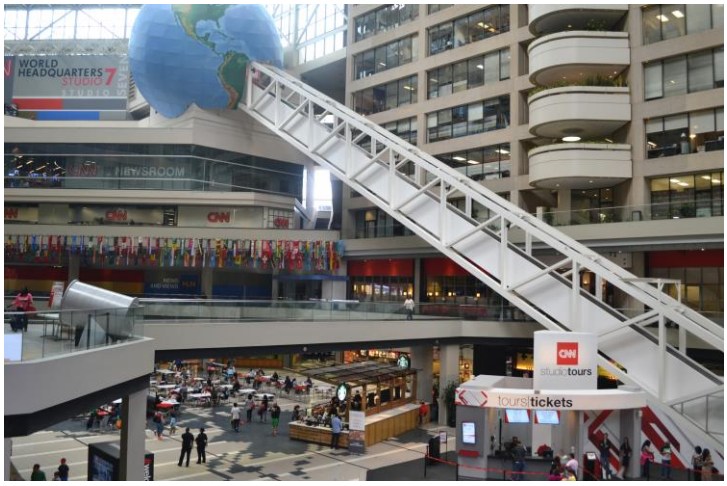
JordanCon isn't staged in downtown Atlanta, it's out in the northern suburb of Dunwoody. There is a MARTA subway stop just a short distance from the convention hotel, so Nicki and I took time out from the Friday of JordanCon to travel into the city. Atlanta had changed a lot in the nearly three decades since the last time I was there, but there were still some places that looked exactly the same.

the Georgia State Capitol

One of them was the Georgia State Capitol with its iconic dome, gilded with some of the gold discovered in America's first gold rush back in the 1830s at nearby Dahlonega. There are guided tours of the place, but Nicki and I opted to do our own walk-through. The central rotunda and atrium is bordered by two grand stone staircases that eventually take you up to where a small natural history and cultural museum resides. There was everything from a painted portrait of every Governor, to samples of rocks and minerals found in Georgia, to depictions of the various flora and fauna of the state. And inevitably, there were artifacts from the Civil War. Atlanta was burned to the ground during General Sherman's March to the Sea in 1864, and it's been continuously reconstructing itself ever since then. Or so it seems.

under the dome

We had been wanting to explore Centennial Park, built for the 1996 Summer Olympics. There are many fountains, pavilions, and large green spaces, which made it an iconic gathering place back when it opened. Nowadays it's used for public events such as open air concerts, and we were disappointed to discover that the entire park had been closed off to prepare for one. There was better luck nearby at the CNN Center. It was once, briefly, home to the first-ever indoor theme park, the late and unlamented World of Sid and Marty Krofft, but nowadays

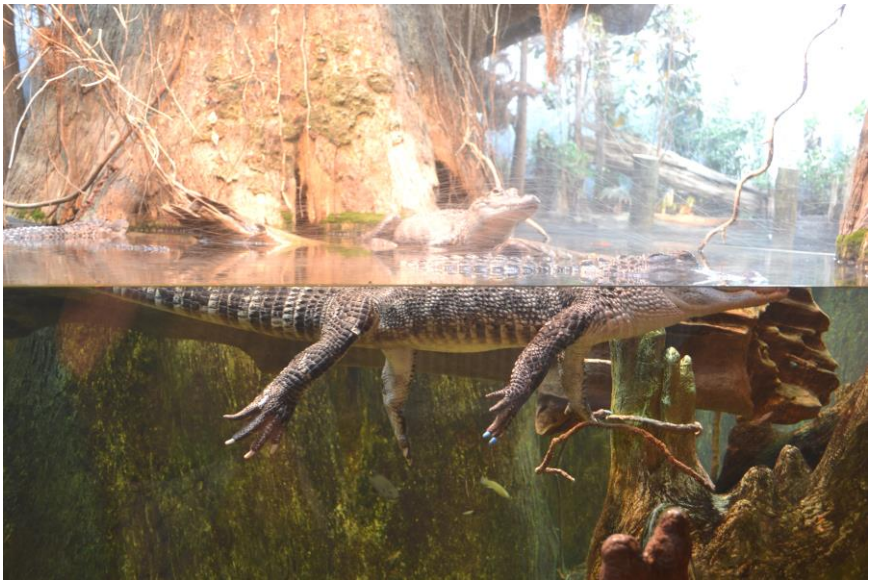


inside the CNN Center

it's the world headquarters of CNN, including all of its main newsrooms and studios. There's an interesting studio tour which began with a ride up the only remaining remnant of the Krofft amusement park – a freestanding eight-story escalator, the longest such one in the world. It was all way better than the NBC Studio Tour we had taken up in New York several years ago, mostly because of the tour guide, a pert and knowledgeable young lady named Michelle. We chatted with her briefly after the tour had concluded and found out that she had aspirations in the broadcast news field. And she was quick to correct us when Nicki asked if she wanted to be a news anchor: "No, I want to direct!"

We had our own aspirations, that day, of seeing more of downtown Atlanta than we actually ended up doing. There is a Coca Cola Museum, but it just didn't appear to be worth what seemed an exorbitant entry fee. Right next to that is the Georgia Aquarium, the largest aquarium in the Western Hemisphere and at one time the largest aquarium in the world. On a different day we would have taken that in but the afternoon had become exceedingly warm, which had started to affect our stamina. Besides, only about 120 miles to the northwest there was another splendid aquarium that we were going to see just a few days later.

Take Me to the River



some of the inhabitants of the Mississippi Delta exhibit at the Tennessee Aquarium

The Tennessee Aquarium predates the Georgia Aquarium by several years. It's located on the south bank of the Tennessee River in downtown Chattanooga, and it did not yet exist, back in 1988, at the time Nicki and I moved from Chattanooga to Maryland. It's actually two aquariums in one – there are two different buildings, the newer one taking visitors on an "Ocean Journey" while the original and larger facility is themed on a "River Journey". That's the one we enjoyed the most, with exhibits highlighting such diverse areas as an Appalachian cove forest, the Mississippi River delta, and, of course, the Tennessee River basin. We got up close and personal with languishing alligators, cavorting river otters, dozens of varieties of fish, and even a couple of bad-ass alligator snapping turtles. All in all, a pleasant way to spend a morning.

For this trip, Nicki and I were only passing through Chattanooga, spending two evenings and a day there. Not really enough to reacquaint us with the city. We had lived there for 15 years, back in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was there that we made the transition from science fiction readers to science fiction fans. We still have close friends there, some of whom we hadn't seen in many years. And so it was a pleasure to meet up with them again. Over a meal, of course!

Chattanooga was not really a culinary wasteland back when I lived there, but I don't recall that there were very many places where Nicki and I went out to eat. Things had gotten a lot better in the intervening quarter of a century. There's a very nice Irish Pub, for instance, that's situated just off the main street of the city in the middle of downtown. Our friend Toni Weisskopf, who now lives in a Chattanooga suburb, recommended it as she often spends Sunday evenings there listening to live music. We joined her there for dinner, along with Ken & Julie Scott, Mike Rogers, and Janis Johnson – along with us, some of the founders of Chattanooga fandom from 40 years ago.

my lousy cell phone photo of Janis, Toni, Mike, and Nicki at the Irish pub

The conversation was very pleasant and it went on and on, as expected. And it touched on many areas of interest: what had become of some of the people we knew, what had happened to the city itself in the time we had been gone, and what had happened to the neighborhood where we used to live. I had thought about driving by our old one-story house on Davis Lane on the way out of the city, but both Mike and Janis told us that part of Chattanooga had now become a rough neighborhood with occasional violence. Not a place to casually cruise through. I guess the old saying is right: you really *can't* go home again.

Atop Mr. Jefferson's Mountain

If we couldn't visit our own past residence, at least we could visit someone else's. Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate is located just to the south of Charlottesville, Virginia, about a day's drive from Chattanooga. It takes about a half day to see the place properly and the best time to do it is in the early morning, before all the tour buses arrive.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello

The estate building itself was a bit smaller in size than I had imagined. The guided tour only lasted about 45 minutes and took us through all the downstairs rooms. I found the entrance hall the most impressive. It's actually a mini-museum in its own right, with paintings and sculptures, early 1800s-era maps, engravings, a gravity-driven wall clock, and many Native American artifacts, including a large buffalo pelt that depicted a battle scene of some kind. We saw studies and bedchambers, a book room, a parlor, and a tea room. It was a step backward to a time when all of our modern

conveniences did not exist. And yet Jefferson coped. In the room that was his study and bedchamber there is a polygraph which he used very frequently. It's not a lie detector – forensic polygraph technology didn't exist back then. This kind of polygraph was actually a duplicating machine, with two linked pens – when he wrote with one pen, the other made an exact reproduction. Jefferson used the device to make copies of all his correspondence. And there was a lot of it – we were told that in his lifetime, Jefferson wrote about 19,000 letters.

Jefferson's polygraph

the gardens of Monticello

There was a lot more to Monticello than just the residence. The entire estate encompasses 2,500 acres. Back in the late 1700s it was a plantation, producing many different types of crops for sale and consumption by Jefferson's family and the slaves who worked the fields. Even today there are extensive gardens at Monticello, and we thought it worthwhile to take a guided tour of them. Besides providing sustenance for Monticello residents, Jefferson also used the gardens of his estate as a real-world horticultural laboratory, cultivating more than 300 varieties of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Much of the current-day plantings are preservationist, acting as a seed bank for vegetable varieties that date back to the end of the 1700s.

Nicki and I came away from our morning at Monticello with a greater understanding of the life and times of Thomas Jefferson. He was a larger-than-life figure who had personal foibles, but he was very much a forward thinker who thirsted for knowledge. This is exemplified by what he wrote, while President, in an 1807 letter to his Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn: *"the field of knolege is the common property of all mankind"*. I found that very apt in light of the upcoming FanHistoricon.

I agree with Mr. Jefferson

FHC# first-in-a-while

It came as a surprise to me when I read, back in January, that the 2016 RavenCon science fiction convention would also be a FanHistoricon – not so much that this would be the first FanHistoricon in 14 years, but that it was taking place only a few hours drive from home. There had been some informal discussion, last June at Midwestcon, that maybe it was time to re-start this fan history preservation event. But I had expected that it would happen in the Chicago area, not Williamsburg, Virginia.

RavenCon turned out to be a slightly better fit for FanHistoricon than JordanCon had been for the DeepSouthCon. There's no overt theme to RavenCon, and the fans who attend are more open to discovering other aspects of science fiction fandom. On the other hand, there were still only a handful of attendees for any of the FHC programming items so it's obvious that there's an outreach problem that really needs to be addressed.

The brains behind the FHC revival was North Carolina fan Warren Buff, the latest in a long string of convention-running projects he's been involved with. He was the Chair of the 2010 North America Science Fiction Convention, held in Raleigh, and was one of the movers and shakers behind the failed 2017 Worldcon bid for Washington, DC. And more to come, he tells me!

For this FanHistoricon, Warren had arranged for Ted White, one most notable fans of the 1960s, to be RavenCon's Special Guest. And he was a good one. Ted participated in many panels, including one that morphed into a workshop for developing ideas on how to proceed with various fan history preservation projects. He was both very knowledgeable and opinionated, which not only helped make the panels of great historical interest, they were also very entertaining.

me, Ted White, and Ed Meskys at FanHistoricon 13

Mark Olson at FanHistoricon 13

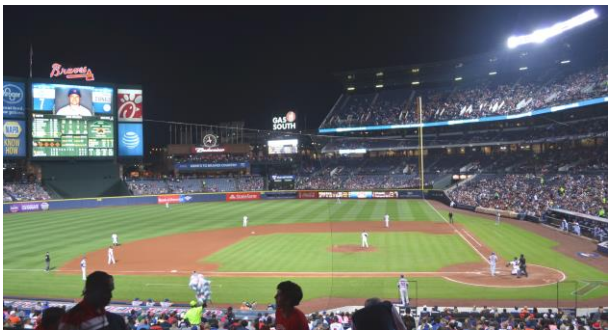
There were other fan historians at the convention besides Ted, Nicki, and me. Mark Olson, Chair of the 1989 Worldcon, had made the trip down to Virginia from the Boston area, and he in many ways was the uniting force that kept us all focused. Other notables included Ed Meskys and Don Lundry, the former a founder of Tolkien fandom and the latter the Chair of the 1975 Worldcon. We did make some progress, at least in identifying critical areas where action of some kind is needed to prevent information from being lost. And now the *real* work will begin.

Epilog: Mr. Aaron's Ballpark

The second major league baseball game I ever attended was in Atlanta back in the summer of 1974. It was at the now-demolished Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, and it was a very special event – 'Hank Aaron Night', honoring the famed Atlanta Braves outfielder who had just a few

months earlier had hit his 715th career regular season home run, surpassing the great Babe Ruth as the leading all-time home run slugger. Prior to the game there was an extended ceremony where notables within and outside the sports world gave short speeches and made presentations to Mr. Aaron. One of them was Georgia's Governor, an aspiring politician named Jimmy Carter. I remember that the crowd booed him.

Much has happened in the 40+ years since then. Hank Aaron retired following the 1976 season, after hitting 755 home runs in his illustrious career. That record would stand a third of a century until it was surpassed in 2007 by Barry Bonds. As for Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, Nicki and I attended many Braves games there in the years when we lived in Chattanooga. But it turned out that its lifetime lasted about a decade less than Hank Aaron's home run record. It was torn down after the 1996 baseball season and replaced with a nearby more modern stadium, Turner Field, which had been the track and field site of the 1996 Olympic Games.



at the Braves-Mets game

One of the reasons I had been looking forward to coming to Atlanta was to take in a Braves game at Turner Field. After only 19 seasons, it, too, was being abandoned as a major league stadium – starting next year the Braves will play in a new ballpark being constructed out in Atlanta's northern suburbs, not all that far, actually, from where JordanCon is held. The game itself was relatively unmemorable – the Braves, in the midst of a terrible season, lost to the New York Mets – but prior to the game I visited the site of Hank Aaron's historic 715th home run.

at the place where a sports record happened

What used to be Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium is now a parking lot, but the place where Hank Aaron's record-breaking home run came down has been preserved. I had thought that throngs of people attending the game would be there paying their respects, but almost nobody did – I waited for several minutes for someone else to happen by so that I could get my photo taken there.

It will probably be a few years before Nicki and I return to Atlanta. And Chattanooga, too, for that matter. There's more to see and do in both places than we had time for, and we lived there long enough that whether we admit it or not, we have roots there. So yes, we will definitely be back. And I hope it doesn't take hitching a ride with Phileas Fogg to do it! ☼

Afterword:

As I mentioned, I transitioned from 'science fiction reader' to 'science fiction fan' in the mid-1970s. It was only a few years after that when I further transitioned into 'science fiction fan historian', and one of reasons that happened was a chance encounter with Dave Kyle, who had been a science fiction fan for much longer than I had been alive. This past September I was saddened by the news of his passing. He was a good friend, and I am missing him.

Dave

Dave Kyle (1919-2016), long-time (since 1933) fan, writer, illustrator and publisher who was a member of the Futurian group, co-founded Gnome Press in 1948, chaired the 1956 Worldcon, was fan guest of honour at the 1983 Worldcon and entered the First Fandom Hall of Fame in 1988, died on 18 September 2016; he was 97. [from ***Ansible*** 351]

with Dave at the 2013 Worldcon in San Antonio

It was my late friend Bob Tucker who introduced me to Dave Kyle. That was back in 1979, at the NorthAmericon in Louisville. I had been trying to find a convenient time for Bob to sit for an interview about his recollections of 1930s and 1940s fandom when he motioned over a red-jacketed man about his age and told me emphatically, "Now *this* guy has a lot of memories about old-time fandom!"

Back then, my wife Nicki and I were living in Tennessee and publishing the Chattanooga clubzine *Chat*. Besides local club news, we had also been including transcripts of interviews of authors done at various conventions we had attended. About a year earlier, there had been a particularly memorable one, a dialog between Tucker and his long-time friend Robert Bloch, which had been mostly about some of their memories of the 1946 and 1948 Worldcons. When Dave learned of this from Bob, he turned to me and said, "You know, I don't think there's enough fan history being preserved in fanzines."

That comment planted a seed which a few years later resulted in the fanzine *Mimosa*, of which Nicki and I published 30 issues over a 22 year span. Its focus was to preserve bits of fan history, especially from the First Fandom "dinosaur" era, that were then only fragilely kept in the memories of some of the older fans. Like Dave Kyle, for instance.

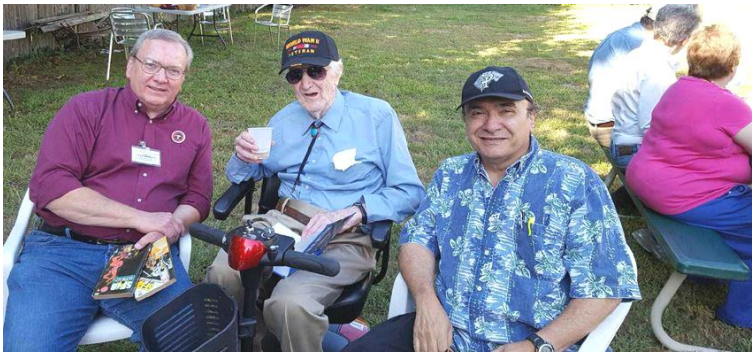
We are pleased to have published 23 articles by Dave in *Mimosa* which fill in a lot of detail about what science fiction fandom was like in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The first one was probably the most contentious – it was titled "The Great Exclusion Act of 1939" and described some of the events leading up to the very first Worldcon and the barring of six prominent members of the Futurians fan club from attending the event. What made it controversial was not so much the article itself but the reaction to it by Sam Moskowitz, who was one of the convention's co-chairs. Sam wrote us a ten-page letter of comment to dispute of some of the things in Dave's article, and our take-away was that there were topics that even fifty years later were still more than a bit sensitive.

One other thing that I learned about Dave from that very first encounter, back in 1979, was that Nicki and I had gone to college in the same town where he had lived! It was in far northern New York State, in the community of Potsdam. Dave had owned, for a time, the radio station WPDM, and he and his wife Ruth lived in a big sprawling house they had named "Skylee" which was located on a back road a few miles from one of the colleges. Nicki and I spent a very pleasant day there in the early summer of 1991, and the bedroom where we slept was a library of science fiction books, hundreds and hundreds of them on shelves that encircled the bed. Earlier

in the evening we had spent several enjoyable hours talking to Dave and Ruth about their memories about past science fiction conventions and encounters with some of the authors who were luminaries back then, and leafed through Dave's collection of photographs from those past decades, often trying to figure out the identities some of the people in those old photos.

Over the years, Dave and I crossed paths many times, usually at science fiction conventions. The final time I saw him was at the 2013 Worldcon, in San Antonio. He was in his mid-90s, then the world's second-oldest living science fiction fan, but that had not stopped him from taking part in the convention. The very first Worldcon had included a softball game of "fans vs. pros", and 74 years later, at LoneStarCon 3, a recreation (of sorts) of that game was staged. Dave, who participated in the 1939 ballgame, had been given the honor of tossing the ceremonial first pitch.

Dave tosses the ceremonial first pitch at LSC 3 softball game recreation



Curt Phillips, Dave Kyle, and Joe Siclari at the September 17th party

Dave remained active right up until his death. The day before he died he was the unofficial guest of honor at a party in the New York City suburbs. My friend Curt Phillips, who attended the event, described Dave as "enjoying himself immensely. Everyone came over and talked and joked with him. He flirted with every woman there. Joe Siclari and I sat on either side of him and talked about science fiction and fandom and everything under the sun. He had a good last day at the party. Not everyone gets a good last day but Dave Kyle did. Fandom can be proud of itself for that."

I re-read all of Dave's contributions to *Mimosa* before I wrote this remembrance and they are a treasure trove on what early science fiction fandom was like – moments frozen in time for us to ponder and enjoy. All are worthy of reprint and, collectively, they are the nearest thing to an autobiography that Dave ever did. I will certainly miss Dave, as will all of fandom. And I am honored that he was my friend. ☼

Afterword:

The very brief *Ansible* obit reprinted above doesn't list all of Dave Kyle's achievements and activities in science fiction fandom. As you've read, he was an attendee of the very first Worldcon, back in 1939. And in the autumn of 1936 he was an attendee of the *very first* science fiction convention.

Or maybe he wasn't…

Some Thoughts on Who Was *Really* #1

It was 80 years ago that an extraordinary event took place.

It happened on January 3, 1937, in the English city of Leeds. It was there that a group of fans gathered for what has been described as the first-ever science fiction convention.

Walter Gillings, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ted Carnell at the 1937 Leeds convention

What records remain indicate there were fourteen people in attendance, several of whom would go on to become luminaries of the science fiction literary genre: Ted Carnell, Walter Gillings, Eric Frank Russell, and Arthur C. Clarke. It was a single-day conference, hosted by the Leeds branch of the newly-formed world-wide Science Fiction League of fan organizations. The day featured speeches and testimonials on various topics related to science fiction and after that, group discussions on "ways and means of improving British science fiction" according to a one-off fanzine published soon afterwards which reported on the proceedings. What resulted was the formation of the Science Fiction Association, a proto-British fan organization centered around the "four Hells" fan clubs in Leeds, Liverpool, London, and Leicester. It only lasted about two years, due to the onset of the Second World War, but it did set the stage for a permanent organization, the British Science Fiction Association, which eventually came into existence in the 1950s.

That 1937 convention was truly a seminal event, and it helped pave the way toward the promulgation of science fiction fandom throughout the United Kingdom. But was it really the *first* science fiction convention?

Maybe not.

Donald Wollheim, Milton Rothman, Fred Pohl, John Michel, and Will Sykora at the 1936 Philadelphia convention

On October, 22, 1936, about half a dozen fans from New York City traveled by train to Philadelphia, where they convened for several hours at the home of one of the fans there. In all, there were a similar number of fans brought together as for the Leeds convention. What made it a convention, in the minds of its attendees, was that a business meeting was held with the host, Milton Rothman, being elected Chairman. Fred Pohl, who had been designated the Secretary, took the minutes and then subsequently lost them. But Pohl later stated that no recordable business had been brought up because the event had only been informal in nature, with fans talking to fans about things like which books they had recently read, which authors they liked, and what they hoped these authors would write next. The most significant outcome was that everyone had such a good time that a follow-up event was held in New York in February 1937 with about 40 fans attending. This created the momentum for an even bigger event, a bit more than two years later which was held in New York in July 1939 – the first World Science Fiction Convention.

Those first two fan gatherings have been a source of continuing controversy ever since then. Which one was *really* #1? The Leeds convention was the better planned of the two, with groundwork laid for the event several months earlier – the Philadelphia convention was, according to accounts from several fans who attended it, mostly spur-of-the-moment with little advance preparation. There has been speculation that the only reason that the Philadelphia event occurred at all was because of one-upsmanship. The idea for that gathering was originally put forth by New York fan Don Wollheim, who back then had gained the reputation for being quarrelsome, antagonistic, and more than a bit provocative. It's very possible, even likely, that he knew of the upcoming Leeds event, which had been talked up not only throughout Britain but also in some U.S. prozines. So, if we suppose the underlying reason for the Philadelphia meet-up was really only to sabotage any Leeds stake to being the first science fiction convention, should it disqualify Philadelphia's claim for that distinction?

No, that's insufficient. There have been other conventions which have been organized on little more than a moment's notice and in any event, overall intent is irrelevant – you can hold a convention for any purpose you want. A much better reason for possibly honoring Leeds as #1 is that the Philadelphia event was an invitational gathering not open to the general public, with only the New York and Philadelphia fan clubs involved. But this, too, does not hold very much water as there have subsequently been other, in effect, invitation-only conventions, including the very first DeepSouthCon. And one other criticism of the Philadelphia event's claim for being #1 is that there was "no recordable business", very little reportage after the fact, and indeed, not even a program. But this is the weakest argument of all, and one only has to point toward the annual Midwestcon conventions, which also have none of these, as a refutation.

And so the controversy has lingered for all this time. The 1936 Philadelphia event was first chronologically, but was it a convention or just a meeting? In the end there probably will never be a consensus – after eight decades this is still perhaps the most polarizing topic in all of science fiction fandom, at least from a historical perspective, and people will believe what they want to believe. But there have at least been attempts at finding some middle ground. Noted fan historian Mark Olson, in *Fancyclopedia 3*, has suggested that: "Perhaps it would be fairest to say that the first thing that *could* be called a convention was held in Philadelphia in 1936, while the first thing that *must* be called a convention was held in Leeds in 1937." And he's right.

But as for me, I think we are asking the wrong question. What we should instead be inquiring is: "Who first came up with the *idea* for staging a science fiction convention?" That's really the more important aspect, and the Leeds group was first. There's serendipity that they held their event at the Leeds Theosophical Society – the word 'theosophy' parses to 'divine wisdom', which is an apt description of the concept for the science fiction convention. And of *that*, at least, we can be absolutely certain! ☼

Afterword:

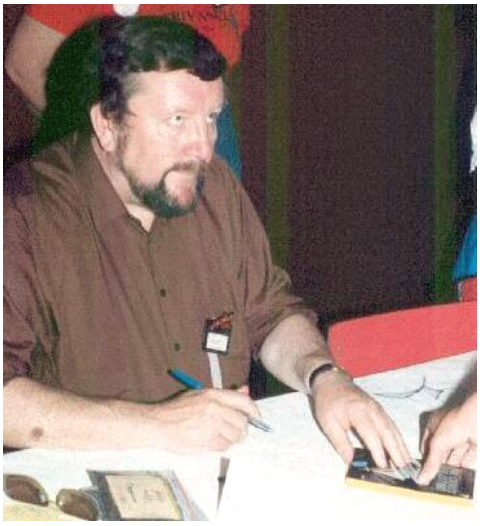
About 13 years after the Leeds convention, fandom in that part of the world was blessed when Bob Shaw joined the group which became known as Irish Fandom. He's described (in Wikipedia) as being "noted for his originality and wit" and that's absolutely true – Bob was one of the very best fan writers, a genius with both the spoken and written word, and it was very entertaining to listen to his talks. In 1987, Nicki and I published one of his "Serious Scientific Speeches" in our fanzine *Mimosa*. And also met him for the first time. It was a memorable encounter.

Where Are You, Vernon J. Schryver?

You know, some of the nicest people are the ones you never meet.

Take book collectors, for instance. Nicki and I are both avid readers of science fiction, and over the past decade or so we've amassed a considerable collection of SF paperbacks and magazines. It's gotten big enough lately that it's even defied attempts to prune out lesser-read paperbacks for the used book shops. It wasn't unusual, for instance, for us to take in an armful of books for trade and after a half-hour or so of browsing, leave with an armful-and-a-half of new material. It's gotten so bad lately that our 'to-be-read' stack is becoming a good sized SF library in itself.

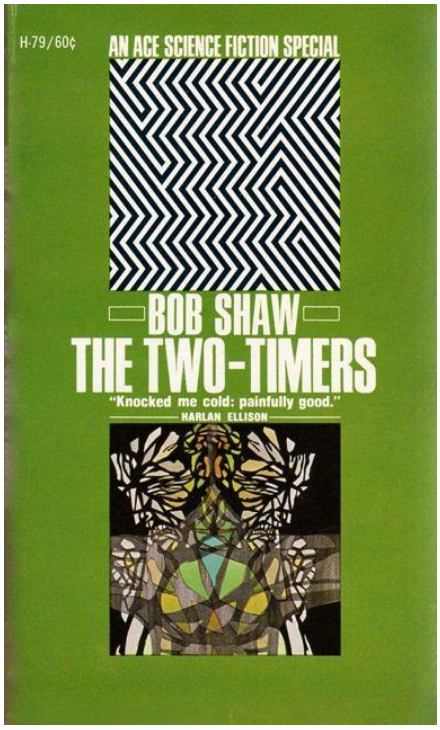
For the past year or so, though, we've noticed something unusual about many of the volumes we were bringing home from The Book Rack and other bargain bookstores. For one thing, many of them had the look of true collectibles – Ace Doubles and Ballantine SF from the `60s were turning up regularly. Also, just about all of these paperbacks had been owned by one Vernon J. Schryver of Boulder, Colorado, who had thoughtfully printed his name in large letters on the title page of each book.



Bob Shaw in 1987

We were grateful to get them, but I couldn't help wondering who this Mr. Schryver was, and why he was gutting an obviously well cared-for twenty year old SF collection. Not to mention how his books found their way from Boulder, Colorado to this corner of the world. We still haven't a clue.

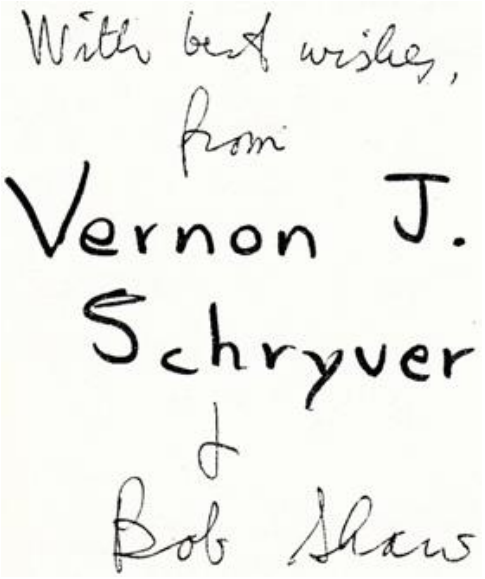
But this brings me, in a round-about fashion, to our own personal Bob Shaw story.



Bob was the Guest of Honor at Rivercon this year, and we had been looking forward to recording his speech for publication in our fanzine *Mimosa*. But, being the collector that I am, I had sifted through some of our SF collection before we drove north and had grabbed five or six BoSh books to have them autographed. We were fortunate when we got there to be invited to Bob's room for a party with him and some of our friends, and were able to get all of them signed. But when he got to the copy of *The Two-Timers*, he opened the book and there, staring back at him, were the words 'Vernon J. Schryver'.

"Schryver?" said BoSh, "*Who* is Vernon J. Schryver?" At which point I related, in somewhat abridged form, the first part of this essay.

Well, BoSh is nothing if not a good sport. I was afraid he'd be offended by being asked to autograph some hand-me-down the current owner had been too cheap to buy new. Anyway, here's how he signed:



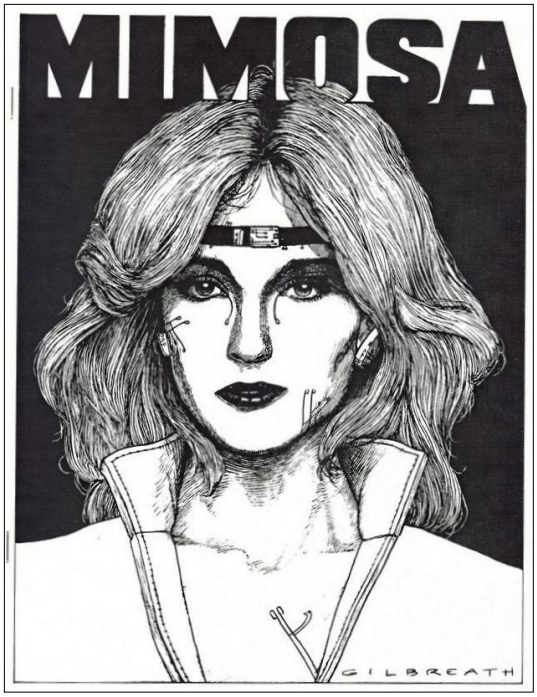
Everyone in the room got a laugh when they saw, and the story made the rounds the rest of the convention. So thanks, Bob! You made this year's Rivercon truly memorable for us. And thanks to you too, Vernon, wherever you are! ☼

Afterword:

There's a bit more to the story than just that. This essay appeared in the third issue of *Mimosa*, back in 1987. About five years later the Information Age was turned upside down by the coming of the World Wide Web. It took a few years more before I realized that, yes, I *could* figure out who the mysterious Vernon J. Schryver was – a simple web search found him and provided a mailing address.

So I sent him a copy of the issue with a short note of explanation. And then… nothing. It was disappointing not to hear back from him, but I respected his privacy and did not further follow up. As for the signed book, I still have it. At least for now. I wonder how much it would being at a fan fund auction.

Next up is an essay I wrote back in 2005 about another famous person. But whereas Bob Shaw was a genius with the written word, this man enchanted us with his musical compositions, including one which has puzzled musicologists for more than a century.



Wade Gilbreath's cover art for *Mimosa* 3

Happy Birthday to the World's Most 'Enigmatic' Composer

It's June the second, and the famous English composer Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was born on this day 148 years ago. He was fortunate to have a father who owned a music shop and tuned pianos for a living, as it allowed young Edward to learn to read music at an early age and, as a result, to teach himself to play not only the piano but also several other instruments. By the time he was 16, he had learned enough about musical composition and had become proficient enough at violin and piano that he had left school and embarked on what he thought would be an immediately successful career.

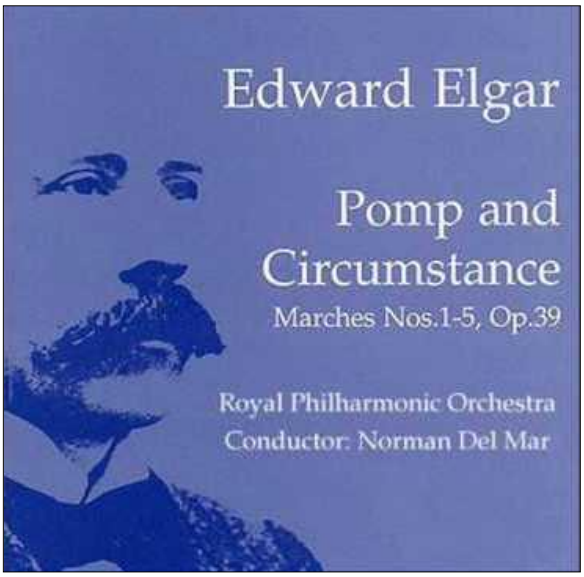
Sir Edward Elgar

It didn't quite work out that way, though. There were some relatively lean years as a music tutor, and then, at age 22, he finally was offered his first bandmaster position – at a local lunatic asylum. This position likely was not very well paying, but Elgar was able to supplement his income over the next decade by performing in local symphony orchestras. On one occasion there was a notable guest conductor, the great Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, and Elgar's resulting huge respect and adulation for Dvořák was a major inspiration to for him to succeed as a composer as well.

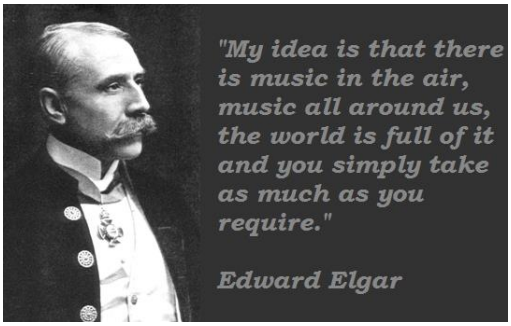
But success at composing was not soon in coming. Instead, there was success of a different sort – in 1889 he married one of his students, the daughter of a Major-General. Her unwavering faith in Elgar's talent served to erase some of his self doubt, and he soon made the career decision to devote all of his available time to composing. After several more relatively lean years this eventually paid off, in 1899, with his first major orchestral composition, "Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)", a series of thirteen variations on "an original theme". The work quickly became notable and popular, not only from the outstanding quality of the composition, but also because nobody had a clue exactly what the original theme sounded like – it never appears in the work, and musicologists to this day are still debating what it is.

After that, life finally started to become easier for Elgar. His "Enigma Variations" had put him on the musical map, but it was a stately composition two years later, celebrating the coronation of King Edward VII, that has provided Elgar his measure of immortality. The work features a melody so familiar that Elgar immediately recognized that it would be extremely popular: He wrote that "I've got a tune that will knock `em – knock `em flat! A tune like that comes once in a lifetime!" And he was right. The work became evergreen and it is played in

May and June every year while graduating seniors march to the stage to the melody. It was the first of his "Pomp and Circumstance" marches, which after it was matched with words supplied by the poet A.C. Benson, became an unofficial national hymn of Britain: "Land of Hope and Glory".



Elgar was honored by knighthood in 1904, and other honors and awards cascaded upon him in succeeding years. The final decades of his life were largely spent writing chorale works, and he stayed busy as a composer literally until the day he died. For Elgar, success arrived relatively late in life but in the end, he had become the most honored self-taught classical musician who has ever lived. And besides being a world famous composer, Elgar was also a bridge to the modern day – in 1926, he became the first composer to conduct his own compositions in a recording studio. He was taken with the new technology and even while he was terminally ill with cancer, arrangements were made for him to listen to studio recording sessions of his works.



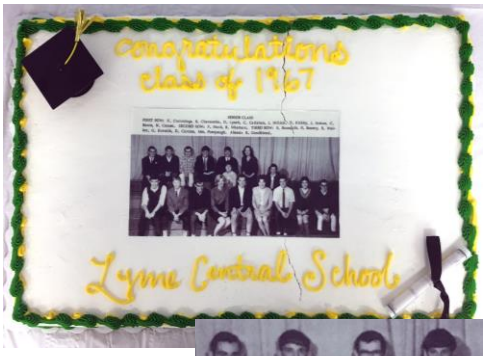
Much can be written about the legacy of Sir Edward Elgar as an enigmatic, unlikely success story who became a national icon, but I think I prefer what Elgar himself said: "There is music in the air, music all around us, the world is full of it and you simply take as much as you require." For those of us interested in classical music, there are no truer words. ☼

Afterword:

I think probably all of us who made it through high school have marched into our graduation ceremonies to the melody of "Pomp and Circumstance". For me that was at a very small school in the North Country of New York State.

It had been a *very* long time since my previous visit there. I went back in June, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of my high school graduation, and had been looking forward to reconnecting with some of my high school classmates. It turned out that about one-quarter of the Class of `67 did show up. But for a school that small, 25% of the graduating class was really not all that many.

Fifty Years Later



"This isn't right," I told my wife Nicki. "I feel like I'm being a cannibal."

It was the evening of June 3rd, and Nicki and I were at a fire hall in the northern New York State village of Chaumont for the alumni dinner event of the local K-through-12 school. It's an annual event, encompassing all graduating classes, but for this year Nicki and I had made the effort to come all the way there from where we live in Maryland. As part of the Class of 1967, I was a Guest of Honor.

There were only 17 of us in that graduating class, and just three of them besides myself attended the dinner. I recognized all of them, and even better, they all recognized me. There was a cake for the occasion which had an edible-frosting yearbook photo of the Class of 1967. I was the only one who wasn't looking at the camera, so I surmise that I was easily distracted back then.

The piece of that cake which was set before me contained the upper left corner of the photo, and that's what prompted my comment to Nicki. Staring back at me was someone I had last seen a quarter of a century ago, the only other time I had ever been to one of these dinners. He'd never left the area and had suffered the cruel fate of losing his vision not all that long after graduation. And now he's deceased, a crueler fate.

As for all the others, I don't know what has become of many of them. A few years ago I did online searches and discovered that one had become an elementary school principal down in Florida, one was a Professor of Chemistry at North Carolina State University, and one was an ex-Army Ranger who had seen action in Vietnam. All accomplished in their own ways, and I only wish they had attended the dinner so I could have learned more about what had happened to them over the years.

attending members of the LCS Class of 1967

It was a different world for us, fifty years ago. But the more things change, the more they stay the same – the 2017 graduating class was all of 16 people. A few were at the dinner, and I had a short conversation with one of them about some of the things that had happened to me over the past half century. I could sense a bit of uncertainty in his voice, so I took the opportunity to reassure him on what he could possibly expect in his own personal next half century.

"Hang on," I said. "It's going to be one hell of a ride." ☼

Afterword:

It definitely *has* been a hell of a ride for me, this past half century. Back in 1967, I never thought that I would have the opportunity to live and work in the Washington, D.C. area. I've had a good career, and living near the nation's capital has even afforded me opportunities to attend interesting events outside work like the one, back in 2003, described in this next essay.

Lunch at the CAFE

There was a Cato Book Forum and luncheon today titled "The Real Environmental Crisis: Why Poverty, Not Affluence, is the Environment's No.1 Enemy". The main speaker was a retired professor from the University of California-Berkeley who was flogging his book about global poverty and how it leads to global environmental problems. It seemed pretty much a truism to me – easily observable in India and Africa where animal dung is being burned as fuel and rivers are being polluted by waste runoff. But in true Berkeley form, the speaker thought that the world's richest nations had the power to lift the world's poor out of poverty, and much, much more of our resources should be committed to doing this.

All well and good, said the Cato Institute speaker who followed, but any sort of success of that nature requires a much more ideal world than we have, where there is no corruption or waste. Just providing money by itself is not the answer – wealth needs to be created.

All this I could more-or-less agree with, and it had started to look like I wouldn't have anything I could use to build a question to ask. But then the Cato guy moved on to their usual Libertarian-leaning rhetoric about how Government should not use its might to unduly influence how people behave in a market-based environment – for example, if somebody does (or does not) want to buy a fuel efficient vehicle, or "organically-grown" produce, etc., the decision should not be because the Government has slanted the marketplace with subsidy incentives or regulations that dictate what can and cannot happen. An example of this is the U.S. Government's Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) requirements for new cars – the Cato speaker thought that the Government should not be dictating how private industry operates, and that if we *really* wanted to reduce the consumption of gasoline (and therefore, the need for imported oil), the "easy" (though politically impossible) way to do it would be to add a hefty tax at the gas pump. At that point, I thought there might be a chance I could inspire a bit of a rant from him, so I managed to get called on for my question:

"You mentioned that you don't believe it's a good idea for the Government to set CAFE standards, but Sen. Lieberman from Connecticut has said that he believes that it's possible to totally eliminate the need for foreign oil imports by simply requiring that automakers produce much more fuel-efficient vehicles. So what do you think of that*?"*

Well, he didn't think very much of it, but he didn't go into rant mode, either. He just said that it wouldn't work, because it would only induce people to drive more miles. He thought it was highly unlikely the United States would ever become totally energy self-sufficient. And once again, I found myself agreeing with him. Kinda, sorta. Maybe this was just too easy a target. ☼

Afterword:

The Cato speaker was wrong – in the years since then there has been a large upswing in the amount of petroleum and natural gas produced in the United States – so much so that the USA *has* in effect achieved energy independence. But it turned out that the Cato speaker was also right – an increase the CAFE standards from 2005 did result in about a 6% increase in total vehicle miles driven. There's probably also been an increase in the total number of air miles flown, and for me that's certainly true. In the past 14 years I have visited some out of the way places in the world, but none more so than what awaited me on a business trip last May…

Northern Swing

A new personal record!

Dulles International Airport is just not a good place to be on a Friday afternoon. There are almost always hordes of people scrambling to get out of town for the weekend, and it inevitably results in long lines and short tempers.

On this particular Friday afternoon in early May, it was a worse experience than usual for me. Dulles Airport is actually only about 15 miles from where I live, as the crow flies. But you can't get there from here. It's 35 miles via the Washington Beltway, which is usually about a 45-minute drive. But there had been a ferocious thunderstorm which had caused Friday rush hour traffic on the Beltway to come to a dead stop, and by the time I had reached the airport it was a full hour later than I had planned. When I finally made it to the British Airways check-in counter, the attendant took one look at the suitcase I had with me and said, "You're not going to be on the flight." Turns out I had missed the TSA-mandated one-hour-before-flight luggage check deadline by about 10 minutes, and now I was stuck.

If I hadn't needed to check luggage, all would have been right with the world, at least as far as this trip was concerned. As it was, my upper level manager, who was traveling with me, was wondering where the hell I was. As was I, actually. For the next hour and a half I felt like I was in Dante's purgatory, desperately hoping that the Government travel people could find me an alternate way to get to Norway.

In the end it all worked out, sort of. I was switched to a much later overnight flight on United to London where I connected to a British Airways flight to Oslo on Saturday morning, and then a SAS flight to Bergen. But the connection in Oslo was only 40 minutes – way too short to clear customs, claim and recheck luggage, and then make it through the security line. So I missed a second flight in less than a day. A new personal record!

In the Plassen

There was another SAS flight about three hours after the one I missed, and by the time I finally made it to Bergen it was about 12 hours later than I had planned. But it still worked out fairly well. I had left a day earlier than usual because there were no seats available for the Government contract flights on Saturday evening. And that meant I still had a day to myself, on Sunday, before the big meeting began.

during the U.S.-Norway bilateral meeting

This was the latest in a continuing series of annual bilateral meetings with Norway, mostly focused on aspects of carbon sequestration. There is a lot of synergy between the American and Norwegian programs in this area, and these annual meetings have started attracting interest from industry and non-governmental research organizations. I am lead coordinator from the U.S. side, and the roll-up to the meeting was busy enough that for months I was talking almost daily with my Norwegian counterpart.

The two days of meetings in Bergen were busy enough to where I was constantly in conference mode, but the one day I had to myself before it all began was pleasant and serene. But definitely not quiet. The Festplassen, a largish gathering area in the University district, had been taken over by a sizeable motorcycle rally that weekend. There were hundreds of bikes lined up on the plaza, and as I watched the number continued to grow. I even got free entry! While I was taking a photo of the event they decided they needed more room and moved the roped-off entrance point out beyond where I was standing.

motorcycle rally in Bergen

Most of the motorcycles I saw were of the hotrod street bike variety. But there were also a few ornately-painted choppers that seemed as much works of art as functional transportation. Exquisite in their own way, but I had come to the Festplassen to see other kinds of art.

entrance to the KODE art museum in Bergen

The KODE, according to its website, is one of Scandinavia's largest museums for art, craft, design, and music. There are four separate KODE museums in downtown Bergen that are all located close to the Festplassen. The ones I visited were nos. 2 and 3, which are home to collections of paintings by prominent Norwegian artists. The most renowned of these was Edvard Munch, whose famous painting "The Scream" was stolen in 1994 from the National Gallery in Oslo and recovered about two years later.

But there are actually several versions of "The Scream". Between 1893 and 1910, Munch did four of them, as well as a lithograph series of prints. But before all that there was an undated pen-and-ink drawing that may have been the predecessor of all the others. That's the one on display at the KODE in Bergen. It's the most famous of his works there but I think not even close to his best. I very much liked his pre-1890s work which were influenced by contemporary French artists such as Seurat and Gauguin. But his father died at the end of 1889, and the resulting financial chaos sent him into prolonged depression which stylistically carried over into his artwork. It was such a divergent change that the KODE Munch exhibit seemed like a display of two different artists. As perhaps it was.

the pen-and-ink drawing of "The Scream" at KODE in Bergen

The views from on high

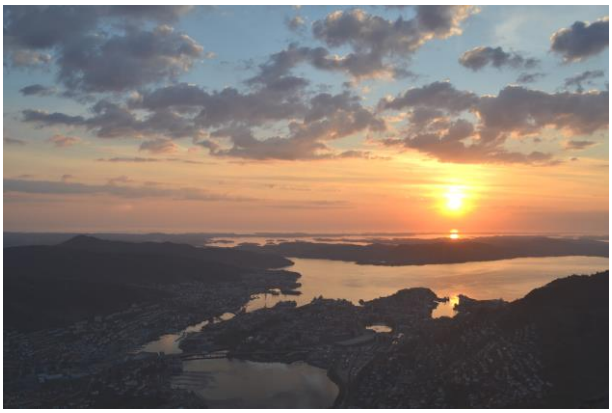
Some of the paintings by other Norwegian artists conveyed a depiction of the country as filled with epic and often amazing-to-behold scenic vistas. And from my experience that's entirely accurate. The 45-minute flight from Oslo to Bergen took me over lots of snow-covered mountainous terrain in the interior of the country. Bergen is located at the head-end of a fjord that is nestled up against some of these highlands, and the picturesque view from the top of the nearest one, Mount Fløyen, is something I look forward to every time I am in town.

the view of Bergen from the slopes of Mount Fløyen

There are many walking trails up and on top of Mount Fløyen, and on a warm spring day there were no lack of people out and about on them. Most looked to be in disgustingly excellent health. At my age I'm really not into strenuous hikes, so I took the funicular up to the top. But it was a pleasant walk back down, switchback after switchback, with plenty of time to stop and smell the flowers. Especially the mountain edelweiss. This time of year it was in full bloom and practically everywhere.

mountain edelweiss along the Mount Fløyen walking trail

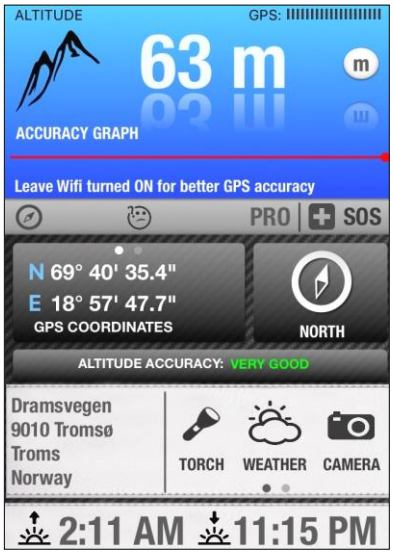
There are many higher mountains than Mount Fløyen that are nearby to Bergen. Supposedly, seven mountains surround the city (akin to the Seven Hills of Rome), though the locals are not in agreement which seven they are. But there's no dispute that the highest is Mount Ulriken, which at 2,100 feet above the harbor is double the altitude of the top end of the Fløibanen funicular. No inclined railway to the top of that rock, but there is a cable car to get you there. I didn't see mountain edelweiss at that elevation, and it was high enough that, even in May, there were still patches of snow. And also the most scenic sunset I've experienced in a very long time. That it happened close to 10:00 pm was an indication on just how northerly Bergen is on the map. But it was not as far north as I would go on this trip. No, not nearly.



sunset over Bergen from the top of Mount Ulriken

We come from the land of the ice and snow…

It's an apt description that the name 'Norway' is derived from an Old Norse word meaning "northern way". Even the southernmost point in Norway is as far north as the upper end of Scotland. Bergen, at slightly more than 60° north latitude, is actually one of the southerly cities in the country. About a thousand miles north by northeast from there is the most northerly.



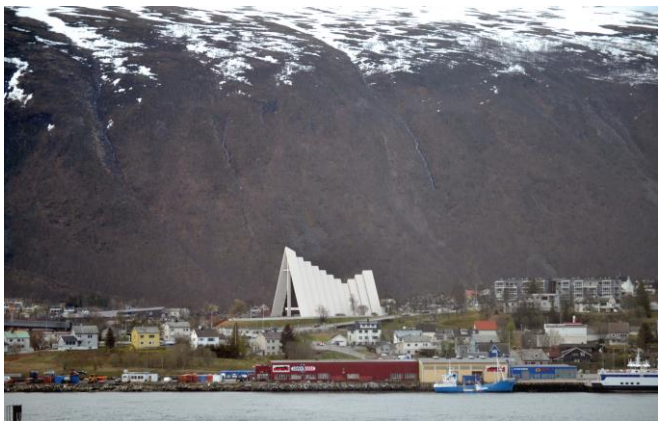
Tromsø is very far north!

Tromsø, located about 220 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is the world's northernmost city of at least 50,000 population. It's located along the Norwegian Sea coast, in an area where there are many islands and fjords. The city center, in fact, is on one of those islands, and the fjords, which remain mostly ice-free thanks to the warming effects of the Gulf Stream, have made the city an important arctic seaport. Like Bergen, the city is mostly surrounded by mountains, but unlike Bergen, they were all covered by ice and snow. In every direction that I looked.

view of the Tromsø harbor and surrounding mountains

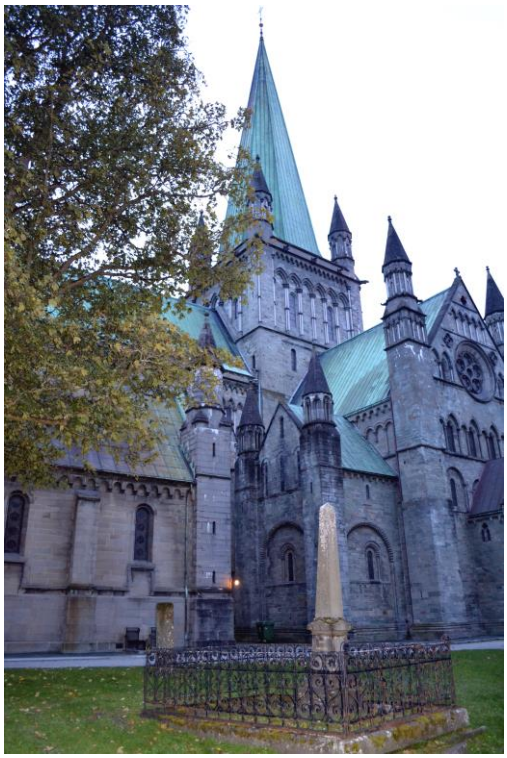
I was there for just a single day along with my upper level manager for a series of meetings, one of them at the world's northernmost university. I expected it to be cold, and it was. Summer had come early to Bergen, with clear skies and short sleeve shirt temperatures. But in Tromsø, on the university campus, the trees were only just beginning to show buds. When I inquired with our host if spring was late this year he replied, "Not at all. This actually looks to be an *earlier* spring than usual!"

May is a good time to visit Tromsø if you're there on business, but it's the worst time of year to experience the two things far northern Norway is notable for. The so-called Midnight Sun doesn't happen until late June. What early May got me was an 11:15 pm sunset and a 2:11 am sunrise, easily bright enough the entire night to read a book without need for any lamp. But those 'white nights' also make it impossible to see the aurora, and there are some spectacular ones this far north. For that, the best time of year is anytime from mid-September to mid-March. If there's ever to be a next time, I'll have to plan differently.


the view, across the fjord, of the Church of the Arctic

The pleasantest city in Norway

Both Bergen and Tromsø are places where I would like to return again and again, but the city in Norway that I like best is Trondheim. It's located about 200 miles below the Arctic Circle, but due to its location on a fjord inland from the coast, it experiences pleasant summers and reasonably mild winters (by Norway standards, anyway). The main tourist attraction of the city is the Nidaros Cathedral, built over the burial site of Saint Olav. It dates back to the 11th century and is the northernmost medieval cathedral in the world. But for me, the signature image of the city is the colorful houses along the Nidelva River, especially in the area of the Old Town Bridge. That span is a relative youngster compared to the cathedral – it only dates back to the 1680s and was reconstructed in its current form about the time of the U.S. Civil War. Nowadays it's also known as the Gate of Happiness.



Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim

I really like Trondheim because it's a pleasant city to walk around in, with plenty of interesting shops and restaurants and a strong historical presence that extends from the middle ages to the depths of World War Two. And best of all, I have friends there.

Old Town Bridge over the Nidelva River in Trondheim

I extended my personal record for this trip by missing one more flight, but this time it was because of an airline cancellation which very nearly extended my stay in Tromsø by another day. If not for quick thinking by my Norwegian counterpart from the bilateral meeting (who had come along with us), the 4:00 am wake-up would have been all for naught. By the time we did finally make it to Trondheim, it was rush-rush with end-to-end meetings until late in the day.

I was kind of hoping for yet another airline cancellation that would have kept me in Trondheim for one more day, but by the next morning the hex hovering over me had finally dissipated and the trip home was uneventful. I do expect to be back before I retire – if not next year then the following year for sure. And Bergen as well for that matter. As for Tromsø, there's a chance that a return visit could come even sooner, but it will largely depend on a few things happening that are not yet under my control. The single day there was productive enough that there is easily enough justification for another visit. It's the most northerly place I have ever been. Or I will ever go. Maybe. ☼


OTSD
PL
Berliner Mauer – Orte des Gedenkens
Berliner Mauer – Orte des Gede