

OPUNTIA

291

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FORT CALGARY

photo by Dale Speirs

In 1875, the North West Mounted Police forded the Bow River just upstream of Elbow River, and built Fort Calgary. The area where the fort was is now a park. Col. James Macleod commanded the Mounties in what is now Alberta, although he wasn't with the troop that founded our fair city at the time. He did, however, name it, after Calgary, Isle of Mull, Scotland. He had been born and raised on the Isle of Skye and had relatives on Mull. At right is the statue in Fort Calgary Park honouring him. I took this photo on an overcast day and so was able to get a perfect blank background to emphasize the statue.



ALTERNATIVE HISTORY REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

ZEPPELINS WEST (2001, hardcover) by Joe R. Lansdale is soft-core porno fantasy more than alternative history. It has airships, to be sure, but Buffalo Bill Cody's head resides in a jar where it is kept alive by assorted elixirs. His Wild West Show travels in a fleet of Zeppelins. Among the cast traveling with it are Annie Oakley (who is having an affair with Wild Bill Hickok), Sitting Bull (who speaks good English but talks in pidgin just to annoy palefaces), and Ned Buntline (seldom sober).

The show arrives in Japan. That country reached the American west coast before the Europeans, and General Grant is now trying to buy the Pacific Coast from them in order to achieve Manifest Destiny. The WWS has to make a hasty departure due to more than just a minor diplomatic incident. Japanese planes chase the Zeppelins and shoot down the flagship into the Pacific Ocean. Surviving members of the cast are rescued by Captain Bemo (not Nemo) and taken aboard his submersible, the Naughty Lass. From there to Dr. Momo's island, then the Tin Man shows up with an X-rated version of Dorothy and Oz. There are alarums, as the overthrow of Dr. Momo begins, then there are excursions as the island blows up and most of the principal characters die.

Not much of a novel, mostly sniggering soft-core porno. It is more a crossover of various stories than genuine AH, even if there are airships.

THE BEST ALTERNATE HISTORY STORIES OF THE 20TH CENTURY (2001, trade paperback) was edited by Harry Turtledove with Martin H. Greenwood. The introduction by Turtledove is a brief history of alternative histories, which he dates from the Roman historian Livy, who speculated what Alexander the Great might have done to Rome if he had gone west instead of east. Alternative histories were rare until after the downfall of Napoleon, when French writers began speculating about Napoleon triumphant. Modern alternative history began circa 1930s about the same time as modern science fiction.

"The Lucky Strike" by Kim Stanley Robinson leads off the anthology. The Enola Gay crew are killed during training, and a backup crew flying a bomber called Lucky Strike is chosen to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. The bombardier, Frank January, is tormented by what will happen to the Japanese civilians in the target city. On the long flight to Hiroshima, he thinks about the

different ways he could sabotage the bombing run en route, but doesn't have the courage to act. Instead, he wilfully drops the bomb late so it misses Hiroshima. He is subsequently court-martialed and executed. The military authorities tell Japan that the strike was a warning. After the war, an anti-war group called the January Society is formed, and brings about an earlier atomic weapons treaty than in our timeline. Although this story reads well, I find it difficult to believe that a neurotic mess like January ever managed to stay assigned to any kind of bomber duty.

"The Winterberry" by Nicholas Dichario supposes that John F. Kennedy did not die but was massively brain-damaged, so much so that his death was faked to get a competent replacement for President, namely LBJ. The story is Kennedy's diary over the next four decades as his struggles to regain his memory. He lives into his 80s as an invalid hidden away under private care, and only a few immediate family members know about him. He dies totally forgotten. Not strictly an alternative history, since there is little change to the timeline; more of a secret history.

"Islands In The Sea" by Harry Turtledove supposes that the Byzantine Empire falls to Islam in the 8th century instead of holding out as it did in our timeline. This leaves the way open to the Balkans for Islamic missionaries. The story is about a Muslim delegation sent to convert the Bulgars, only to find themselves competing with Christian missionaries from Rome. After long debates, the Bulgarian khan chooses Islam, on the grounds that they are the winning side and their heaven is more interesting. With the way now open into the Slavic areas, Islam is thus set to expand indefinitely instead of being blocked by Orthodox Christianity as it was in our timeline.

"Suppose They Gave A Peace" by Susan Schwartz has George McGovern winning the 1972 election, although Nixon demands (and loses) a recount. Under the McGovern administration, the Americans pull out of Vietnam quickly, but the withdrawal is even messier than it was in our timeline. The story is told from the viewpoint of a middle-aged Ohio man who loses his son, serving as a Marine in the final days of Saigon.

"All The Myriad Ways" by Larry Niven is an account of a police detective investigating why suicide and crime rates have soared. A company called Crosstime discovered how to travel to parallel universes and bring back new discoveries for profit. It is revealed that the detective's timeline is one where a limited nuclear war was fought over the Cuban crisis. Suicide rates are

climbing because people realize that each of them have millions of parallel counterparts, some rich, some poor, some who will live to a ripe age, and some who kill themselves young, so it doesn't matter if they kill themselves. This is a science fiction story, not an alternative history, and doesn't belong in this anthology regardless of its literary merits.

“Through Road No Wither” by Greg Bear is an alternative timeline story where the Nazis won the war and are now fighting the Americas in the 1980s. Two Nazis en route to a with secret plans for a trans-Atlantic missile to attack North America meet a fortune teller who tells them of a timeline where the Nazis lost. She says she is scourging them out of every timeline she visits. She uses magic to conjure up a demon to kill them and prevent the missiles from being developed. I am always annoyed at the arbitrary injection of magic into alternative history, and the story is ruined in the denouement by this.

“Manassas, Again” by Gregory Benford is a timeline where the ancient Romans developed steam-driven machine guns, although this story is set in more modern times, with a war of humans versus mechs. Human soldiers are ambushing mechs at a crossroads as the latter flee a battle they just lost. I gather from the title that this is an analogy to a battle from the American War Between the States, but the author seems to assume that non-Americans know all the fine points of that war (probably most Americans aren't any better informed).

“Dance Band On The Titanic” by Jack L. Chalker is pure science fiction about parallel universes and does not belong in this anthology. A loner is recruited to work as a deckhand on a ferry. He discovers that the ferry shifts between timelines on each trip. Each time it comes into port, it docks in a slightly different world.

“Bring The Jubilee” by Ward Moore has the Confederates winning the war and later expanding into Mexico and planning to annex all the Americas. The Union is left impoverished from paying reparations to the South, and has no transcontinental railroad, although both Canada and the Confederacy have them. The economy of the North is destroyed by inflation and the people kept down by a system of indentured labour. Germany has been expanding and now controls most of Europe and is moving into the Slavic areas. The narrator is a country boy who runs away to the big city in 1938, falls in with political conspiracies, and becomes involved with a woman who invented a time machine. He uses it to visit Gettysburg just as the battle starts and where the Union had been defeated in his timeline. He accidentally kills the woman's

great-grandfather, altering history so the Union wins. Since she was therefore never born, the time machine won't work and he is stranded in the past.

“Eutopia” by Poul Anderson is another story that is science fiction, not alternative history. Iason Philippou is from an alternative Europe called Eutopia, where science developed two millennia sooner than our timeline because Alexander the Great didn't die young but lived to consolidate his empire. Philippou is trapped in a different parauniverse where Europe is divided into numerous petty states, mostly Germanic, because Christianity fell before the simultaneous onslaught of Arabs, Magyars, and Vikings. He manages to return to his timeline and learns that the one he just left is considered by his superiors to be the better world, even though more savage.

“The Undiscovered” by William Sanders is a timeline where William Shakespeare, through drunken mis-adventure, winds up shipwrecked in the New World, where he is eventually taken prisoners by aboriginals. During his long captivity, he writes plays and convinces the tribe to stage one. The tribal matriarch agrees to the plan, mainly because nothing ever happens in the village and she could use a break from the routine. After much trouble, the native version of HAMLET is staged. It is a great success but unfortunately the tribe thinks it is a comedy, much to Shakespeare's disgust.

“Mozart In Mirrorshades” by Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner is more science fiction, about timeline hoppers who set up a petroleum refinery in Salzburg of 1775, in a parallel universe where Thomas Jefferson is the first American president and Mozart is a punk rocker. Told from the point of view of a company man whose employers are looting the timeline of its resources. Revolution breaks out among the locals and everything gets messy during the company's withdrawal to a safer timeline.

Alan Steele's “The Death Of Captain Future” is pure science fiction about a space freighter traveling to the asteroids that saves Mars from a direct hit by an asteroid. The captain of the spaceship is a pulp-magazine collector who thinks he is Captain Future. This story does not belong in this anthology; it is not even a parallel universe story.

The final selection is “Moon Of Ice” by Brad Linaweaver. Hitler lived until 1965, Roosevelt had been impeached way back when, the Russians were defeated, and Germany and the USA were now competing in the space race. Germany won the war because it successfully developed the V-3, a

nuclear-tipped missile, and used it in the final days of the war for a complete turnaround. By the 1960s, the Reich was economically stretched trying to maintain its empire, while American capitalism was booming. The story is narrated by Joseph Goebbels in the late 1960s. He is kidnapped by the SS and taken to their homeland of Burgundy. He meets a geneticist who is working on a virus that will kill all humans but Nordics. The SS do not realize they themselves will be wiped out, since the genuine Nordic type is in Scandinavia, not Germany or Burgundy. The threat is disposed of in the final few pages by a *deus ex machina* attack on the SS by a hitherto unmentioned Resistance group. A good story but a weak ending from the author obviously writing himself into a corner.

ALMOST HISTORY (2000, trade paperback) by Roger Bruns is a collection of 81 short pieces, most but not all discussing possible points of divergence in history. Some are based on actual documents, such as Richard Nixon's speech of condolence in case the Apollo 11 astronauts died during the mission, or Eisenhower's handwritten note accepting blame if the D-Day landings failed. Other items are contingency plans, such as Operation Unthinkable, prepared at Churchill's direction, a joint British/German defense against Russia if World War Three had begun in mid-1945. It would have used German troops which only a few weeks previous were the enemy!

Some of Bruns' hinge points are illustrated by 'documents' which are trivial, such as after-the-fact diary entries. Some documents are not at all hinge points, like the government pamphlets on what to do in case of nuclear war (go fill in a registration card at the post office and await instructions) or a little girl's letter to Abraham Lincoln suggesting that he grow a beard.

A few documents are outright bizarre when viewed from the hindsight of history. Richard Nixon, as a freshly-minted lawyer, applied to the FBI for a job as a Special Agent in 1937. Not only is his application form reproduced but also the results of his job interview. (*"Does the Applicant appear to have executive ability?" Perhaps.*) Although the interviewer recommended him for a job, obviously nothing ever happened. Special Agent J.H. Hanson wrote: *"It is believed that he is above average in intelligence and mental alertness. He appears to be possessed of sufficient force and aggressiveness; also of good, common ordinary sense. He expresses his thoughts well and uses good English. He is manly appearing, possessing a good physique, and it is felt that he could successfully contact persons of all walks of life and that he would inspire confidence."*

One can imagine Special Agent Nixon ambitiously working his way up the chain of command in the FBI. Assuming a typical climb up the ladder, it can be supposed that by the late 1950s he would be about second or third in command. Assuming that no pictures of J. Edgar Hoover in a dress appear in the press, Nixon would have to jump sideways into some other government agency to keep going, and from there perhaps into politics by the late 1960s. He would have excellent credentials for the Republican law-and-order platform in the 1972 election, defeating McGovern but in a close race. With no Watergate or bitter political past to trouble him (Eisenhower would have had some other Vice President, of course) his administration would have been more fondly remembered than in our timeline.

One can also imagine photos of J. Edgar Poofter surfacing in the newspapers, perhaps with an assist from Nixon anxious to create a job opening. The scandal drives J. Edgar out of office and Nixon becomes the new Director. He doesn't ignore the Mafia the way Hoover did, but concentrates most of his energy on commies and Vietnam protestors. He spends the rest of his career feuding with President McGovern before finally retiring.

PALL MALL CAN'T SPALL

THE TIMES (LONDON) reported its 1864-04-25 issue, as an afterpiece to the coverage of the Shakespeare tercentenary celebrations, that a political meeting had been held, *"... attended by about 60 members, Mr. Wiseass in the chair."* The following day, a correction was run acknowledging a mistake, and that the chap's name was actually Wieass. And the following day after that, another correction, from a member of the political group stated that the real name was Nieass. The corrector to the correction went on to write: *"In conclusion, allow me to add that you would be doing a world-wide service, and serve the working composers, as well as editors, and others connected with the public press, if you would give not only your, but other reporters, a gentle hint on the propriety of writing names at least in a legible way, which would save a great deal of waste time and annoyance to others."*

DISCWORLD: PART 2. THE WIZARDS

by Dale Speirs

The wizards of Unseen University make frequent appearances throughout the Discworld series, but the two major novels about them are THE LAST CONTINENT (1998) and UNSEEN ACADEMICALS (2009). Traditionally at UU, wizards advanced up through the hierarchy by assassination, it being the only practical method of clearing out those tenured old fools who don't know enough to get out of the way and let the younger men have a chance. Early on in the series though, Mustrum Ridcully ascends to the Archchancellorship and proves so adept at evading assassination that the other wizards give up and let him be. They find that it also makes their life easier, especially when they do little but eat in the banquet hall and sleep in their rooms.

Rincewind reappears in THE LAST CONTINENT (1998), set in a place called EcksEcksEcksEcks which the author assures us is not Australia. Most of the book deals with the wizards but Rincewind also gets in his scenes. This novel repeatedly jars the reader out of the story by frequent references to things of our world. Mention of cold fusion is made, and there is a scene where wizards sing "Lydia The Tattooed Lady". Discworld is a fantasy world that is not of our universe. In earlier novels, Pratchett uses analogies that come very close to Earth history but still remain as analogies, such as the Agatean Empire being a copy of the final years of the Chinese Empire. In this novel it becomes blatant, and while still an enjoyable read, it moves out of fantasy into the satire genre.

The subplots start off with the wizards of Unseen University dealing with the Librarian's illness, he being the only one who could keep the magic books and grimoires under control, and Rincewind adventuring in a land of red deserts and extreme heat, where abos wander about and white men dig for opals. Every time the Librarian sneezes, he changes into something else, from a deck chair to a book.

The wizards decide to consult with the Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography and visit his chambers. He is not to be found but the wizards do find a portal from one of his windows onto a tropical island beach. While exploring the beach, it being bitter cold at UU that time of year, the window is accidentally closed, stranding them in paradise, although the Librarian seems to be enjoying it. The story alternates between Rincewind in EcksEcksEcksEcks and the wizards on the tropical island, where some unknown source of magic is keeping everyone alive with magical food trees, for a purpose not entirely clear. If it

were clear, the novel would wrap up by page 122 instead of page 412, so the mystery must be kept going. The wizards note the bizarre flora and fauna which seem tailor-made to their wants, such as a tree that provides, not coconuts, but chocolate-covered coconut bars. The bizarre evolution is eventually discovered as the work of a small god who rules the island and enjoys tinkering with genomes. The Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography is never found and it becomes evident that he was cruelly eaten by something unusual on the island.

The wizards find a boat that is actually the giant pod of a plant made by the small god and they go sailing, while Rincewind travels across the red continent collecting plot coupons. If Pratchett had to type this novel on a manual typewriter instead of a word processor, it would have been tighter, more coherent, and better for the effort.

I found myself skipping pages near the end as Pratchett tries to fit in every bit of aborigine mythology he read about and all the Strine cliches that he can muster. The subplots seem to converge into the effect the wizards and Rincewind have in triggering a rare and almost unknown phenomenon of the red desert, heavy rain. But at least there is no kid on the quest for the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty so he/she can claim his/her rightful place on the throne. The red continent is a republic, even if Australia isn't.

UNSEEN ACADEMICALS begins with the UU's chief administrative officer Ponder Stibbons. He is the most dangerous type of person there is, an efficient bureaucrat.** He notices a clause in one of the UU's biggest endowments stating that the wizards must compete in a football match once a year, something they have not done in decades, otherwise the university will lose a comfortable source of income.

The football game played in Ankh-Morpork is not the modern version of soccer, rugby, Canadian football, or American football. It is the original medieval version where all the menfolk of two opposing villages turn out for the team and spend days and heavy casualties trying to get the ball away from the others.

** People complain about inefficient government. I spent 31 years with a large municipal government dealing with bureaucrats from the inside. The few serious problems I had with them occurred when I tangled with the rare ones who knew all the rules and actually tried to go by the book. The only realistic way we got any work done out in the field was by using common sense and ignoring official City procedure. You should be glad governments are inefficient, and your greatest fear should be an efficient government.

The novel is thickened by an extended look at football culture, the wearing of team colours, and how sports distract the masses from more important things. It's obviously based on British soccer, but in lesser degree could be football in Texas or hockey in Canada. The explanation of the Ankh-Morpork football culture is shown as a young man named Trevor befriends a naive goblin called Nutt, who has intellectual powers beyond normal. Trevor is also trying to jolly along two women, Glenda (a large woman and an excellent cook) and Juliet (a beautiful young scatterbrained girl). The romantic tragedy is that the families of Trevor and Juliet support opposing teams, so a marriage would not only be inconvenient but lead to violence.

Meanwhile, back at the football field, the wizards don't have a chance of playing another team in the regular way and aren't allowed to use magic, so they do the next best thing and change the rules. Juliet becomes entangled in another subplot when she becomes a fashion model, while Glenda primly tries to chaperone her through the fashion world that neither understand. The subplots take a lot of explaining, and the novel doesn't really get going until about three-quarters of the way through.

The action finally kicks into gear in the last quarter of the novel, as Nutt turns into an orc, Glenda sets Juliet free to become a fashion model, and the football game finally gets underway. There is blood and thunder in equal proportions on and off the field, as Ankh-Morpork experiences its first football game under the new rules. The novel is poorly paced and overly long. The wizards disappear for long sections, while other characters spend too much time agonizing. It could have been split into two separate books, or in the alternative, had some of the verbiage deleted.

[to be continued]



FONETIKS AND OTHER FAILURES

by Dale Speirs

We all agree that the English language is the one language in most need of spelling reform, holding back children in their lessons and making adults' lives miserable. But it is still a long time coming. The English language's development as a hybrid between Norman French and Anglo-Saxon German, with plenty of borrowed words from other languages, has produced letters with no sounds and sounds with no letters. One of the worse tragedies was that printing was invented too soon, at least for the English. Had it been delayed until the 1700s, when the language finally settled down into its basic modern form, things might not have been so bad.

The history of English in the last two centuries has been littered with unsuccessful attempts to reform spelling. Canada has brave souls like Ted Culp, a Toronto school teacher, who looks forward to the day when “ ... *all linggwistic owtrajes will end ... As this inferior langwaje iz displased everywhere ... illiterasi shud disapeer completely* ... ” [2].

Ghoti.

While I basically agree that some spelling reform is needed, I question the use of a pure phonetic alphabet. Those who advocate such reforms assume that the world would adopt their pronunciation, usually South of England or Eastern Seaboard American. Texans and Scots would beg to differ.

Culp, a Torontonion, proposes 'winer' as a substitute for 'winner', but it seems to me that the reformed word would be pronounced 'whiner'. Out here in Calgary, the home of the Stampede, the world's largest rodeo (1.2 million paid visitors), you can start an argument in any bar over whether a rodeo is 'road AY oh' or 'ROAD ee oh'. Us Cowtowners disagree heartily as to whether a coyote is 'ki yote' or 'koy oh tee'. I prefer the latter because it is closer to the original Aztec word 'coyotyl'.

Another problem is that pronunciation changes over time [3]. Extreme spelling reform would leave masses of old literature unreadable by anyone other than a specialist, just as Chaucer is read today in the original by few people outside a university. Much that is written can perish without loss, but much needs to remain accessible. As pronunciation changes, and such changes are unstoppable as even Samuel Johnson admitted, more and more literature would be lost.

This brings up the point that English is actually two languages, a written and a spoken one. Spoken English changes much faster than written English. The disguised blessing is that slang and deliberate bad usage quickly fades away from the spoken language, and will only survive in written English if there is something about it that withstands the test of time.

People are more likely to obey an order if they know the reason behind it. They are better learners if given a brief overview of the field before commencing their lessons, so they know where they are going and can measure their progress by where they have been. Much of the frustration that children experience in learning to spell is because they don't understand why the language is so illogical. I'd like to see schoolteachers take a moment to explain to their pupils that English is a mess because it is a hybrid and because the printing press fossilized archaic words before the new language was fully formed.

I make this suggestion based on 31 years of experience as a Parks Dept. Maintenance supervisor. I had to deal with many immigrants who no speak English so good, and lower-class Canadian-borns whose schooling and home life was substandard. I discovered that some of that frustration disappeared when I told them why English is so complicated. They suddenly realized that their spelling difficulties were not because they were stupid but because of our ancestors' linguistic neglect. It improved their self-esteem to know that it is not a matter that they are unintelligent. The difference in self-esteem makes a difference in willingness and ability to learn. Once they see the reasons why, they can renew their efforts with fresh energy. If more schoolteachers reminded their struggling students of this, perhaps more children might go on to better academic efforts.

Spreading The Faith.

Many years ago I picked up a bound volume of THE PHONETIC JOURNAL for the year 1873, published by Isaac Pitman of shorthand fame. It was a weekly periodical published out of Bath, England.; mine is volume 32. It contained news from correspondents across Britain and a few out in the colonies. That was the year the Mounties were formed, and as the North West Mounted Police, they would ride out across 1,600 kilometres of prairies to bring The Queen's Peace to the empty lands, and, two years later, build Fort Calgary.

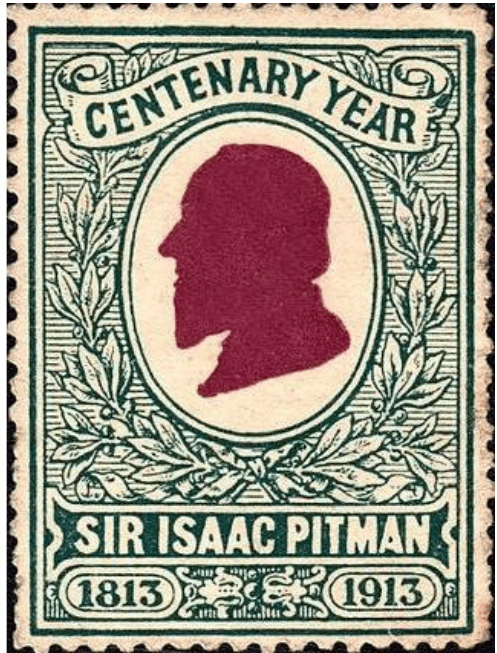
The journal's reports reminded me of a church bulletin, with its missionary reports detailing the number of converts called to the faith. Pitman's

missionaries reported how their classes were doing, how many students they had, and the success of their pupils in later life. The vast majority of these reports were from English and Scottish towns, but some of the missionaries really were missionaries. The Rev. Robert Moffat, for example, gave a report (page 227) on how his Bechuana tribes were brought to the English Bible by first teaching them the phonetic alphabet.

Most of the journal is given over to transcriptions to and from shorthand and phonetic type. The two were necessarily different in appearance. Shorthand was handwritten and meant for recording verbatim. Phonetic type attempted to replace the deficiencies of the English alphabet with a better one. The shorthand classes and clubs also reported on their social events. Grand banquets were held to celebrate shorthand, lectures given by distinguished speakers, and tours groups went out for day excursions.

There are also lengthy essays on the development of the English language and the advantages of Pitman's system. These were perhaps not so much a matter of preaching to the choir, as subscribers to this journal would already be aware of this, but to provide source material for those spreading the gospel of their squiggles.

Every church has its Satan to keep the congregation on their collective guard. In the case of Pitman, it was the Rev. William James Ball, who had a rival system of shorthand. Issues of THE PHONETIC JOURNAL kept close watch on him and regularly denounced his failings and the general inferiority of non-Pitman systems. And what church has not had a building fund? Pitman was endlessly soliciting contributions for the construction of a Phonetic Institute in Bath, to give the shorthand religion a permanent home.



Not a stamp but a privately issued label by Pitman's adherents.

A MAJOR GENERAL’S LOT IS NOT A HAPPY ONE

by Dale Speirs

The Calgary Public Library’s Central Branch downtown has free movies every Thursday afternoon. I only go occasionally because most of them are obscure art films that deserve their obscurity and should be made even more obscure. Recently the library listed THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE, the 1879 comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. I went along thinking it was the Kevin Kline and Linda Ronstadt version but discovered that instead it was a 2006 taped performance by the Australian Opera company at the famous Sydney Opera House. I stayed anyway, because “The Modern Major General” is one of my favourite songs. The opinion is widespread that it was the best of Gilbert and Sullivan’s compositions in all their operas.

The opera staging was well done and the film was high resolution. Too high resolution at times. The distance shots showed crisp and clear, but when the camera zoomed in for extreme close-ups of the singers, one could see the sweat on their faces due to the stage lights. The bud microphones in their hair were also distracting. The lead female singers portrayed the Major General’s 20-something daughters, and their makeup was convincing when viewed from the audience. The extreme closeups, however, showed clearly that none of the prima donnas would see 30 again. The male lead, specifically stated in the opera to have just turned 21, was obviously in his 40s.

To be fair, lead singers in operas take years to perfect their craft and by the time she or he becomes a headliner, they have spent decades in the business. It is why Juliet is so often a rotund matron instead of a slip of a girl, and dashing young lieutenants are portrayed by portly middle-aged men who would look better sitting around a boardroom table at a directors’ meeting. Nonetheless, the singers were good in this performance and deserved their bows at the end of the opera.

The Story So Far.

Frederic is a young lad who was apprenticed to a group of Cornwall pirates. His father instructed his nursemaid Ruth to apprentice him to be a ship’s pilot, but she was hard of hearing and misunderstood. Frederic is now 21 years old and his indenture will expire on his 21st birthday. The pirate captain doesn’t want to see him go, so he relies on a legal technicality. Frederic was born on February 29, so by the calendar he has only celebrated five birthdays and must

serve the pirates another 63 years. He is handsome but dumb. Nuff said. Ruth doesn’t want to see him go either because she is in love with him and she is the only woman he has seen, so he has no basis for comparison.

The pirates are not a successful bunch. They are sympathetic to orphans, as a result of which every ship they capture is crewed by orphans and every passenger to the last one is also an orphan. The Pirate Captain is no more cognitive than Frederic, and is puzzled why only orphans go to sea.

A group of beautiful young girls, all sisters and whose father is a Major General, chose the pirates’ lair as a picnic spot. They are captured, but their father arrives, introduces himself as a modern Major General, and pleads for sympathy on the grounds that he is an orphan. The pirates release him and his flock of daughters.

Most of the opera is what would be today a rom-com movie with all sorts of misunderstandings, lovers quarrels, and slapstick comedy. The Major General calls in the police to deal with the pirates but they initially fail. Assorted angst, and Fredric falls in love with Mabel, one of the daughters. There is a happy ending, Frederic is reunited with Mabel, and her sisters are all married off to the pirates. Cue the all-cast choral number and orchestral crescendo.

The Modern Major General.

This song is the highlight of the opera. It is a fast-paced patter song with complicated word patterns. Don’t try this at home; leave it to the professionals. The song parodies Sir Garnet Wolseley, who modernized the British Army. He never took offense at it, and is known to have sung it as a party piece for friends and family.

*I am the very model of a modern Major-General,
I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical.*

“order categorical” means the Major General can sort out the battles as land actions, sea battles, by type of units involved, and so forth. Some of those battles were his own. He is remembered by Canadians as the leader of a punitive expedition sent out to evict Louis Riel from the Red River Colony (today Winnipeg) in 1869. The transcontinental railroad wouldn’t be built for

another fifteen years yet, so his 1,000-man command took two months toiling across the Precambrian Shield (today northwestern Ontario) during the height of the blackfly season. They finally made it to Winnipeg, but by then Riel had scarpered.

*I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical,
I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,
About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o' news,
With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.*

*I'm very good at integral and differential calculus;
I know the scientific names of beings animalculous:
In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.*

The ability to do math for military purposes such as navigation or aiming artillery is fairly recent. For most wars until the 1800s, soldiers just banded away in the general direction of the enemy and hoped they hit something.

*I know our mythic history, King Arthur's and Sir Caradoc's;
I answer hard acrostics, I've a pretty taste for paradox,
I quote in elegiacs all the crimes of Heliogabalus,
In conics I can floor peculiarities parabolous.*

*I can tell undoubted Raphaels from Gerard Dows and Zoffanies,
I know the croaking chorus from The Frogs of Aristophanes!
Then I can hum a fugue of which I've heard the music's din afore,
And whistle all the airs from that infernal nonsense Pinafore.*

An officer must have a well-rounded education to reach the High Command. The last two lines of the above verse poke fun at music. You can't hum a fugue because it is a point-counterpoint song for two or more voices or melodies. And Pinafore, of course, was Gilbert and Sullivan's previous opera.

*Then I can write a washing bill in Babylonian cuneiform,
And tell you ev'ry detail of Caractacus's uniform.
In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.*

Not too much call for cuneiform back then. Caractacus was a First-Century Brit

who fought against the invading Romans. He only wore a loose wrap or loincloth, so it doesn't take much expertise to know every detail of his uniform.

*In fact, when I know what is meant by "mamelon" and "ravelin",
When I can tell at sight a Mauser rifle from a Javelin,
When such affairs as sorties and surprises I'm more wary at,
And when I know precisely what is meant by "commissariat",*

*When I have learnt what progress has been made in modern gunnery,
When I know more of tactics than a novice in a nunnery,
In short, when I've a smattering of elemental strategy,
You'll say a better Major-General has never sat a gee.*

*For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventurous,
Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century;
But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.*

Tarantara! Tarantara!

The other song I like in the opera is “When The Foeman Bares His Steel”, sung by a cowardly group of constables and their sergeant. In a later era they would be called Keystone cops. The police chorus appears several times in the second act, and one of their later songs includes a line that was introduced into the popular vernacular: “A policeman's lot is not a happy one.”.

*Sergeant: When the foeman bares his steel,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: We uncomfortable feel,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara!*

*Sergeant: And we find the wisest thing,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: Is to slap our chests and sing,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara!*

*Sergeant: For when threatened with émeutes,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: And your heart is in your boots,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara!*

*Sergeant: There is nothing brings it round
Like the trumpet's martial sound,
Like the trumpet's martial sound
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!, etc.*

*Mabel: Go, ye heroes, go to glory,
Though you die in combat gory,
Ye shall live in song and story.
Go to immortality!*

*Go to death, and go to slaughter;
Die, and every Cornish daughter
With her tears your grave shall water.
Go, ye heroes, go and die!*

Daughters: Go, ye heroes, go and die! Go, ye heroes, go and die!

The Major General's daughters, secure in the knowledge they won't be in the battle against the pirates, are quite willing to shed someone else's blood. Much like politicians. (Thus the joke about President Obama willing to fight the Russians down to the last Ukrainian.)

*Sergeant: Though to us it's evident,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: These attentions are well meant,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara!*

*Sergeant: Such expressions don't appear,
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: Calculated men to cheer
Chorus of constables: Tarantara!*

*Sergeant: Who are going to meet their fate in a highly nervous state.
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara! tarantara!*

*Sergeant: Still to us it's evident these attentions are well meant.
Chorus of constables: Tarantara! tarantara! tarantara!*

Naturally the Sergeant isn't too pleased. He'll be expected to lead the men into the battle, front and centre.

*Edith: Go and do your best endeavour,
And before all links we sever,
We will say farewell for-ever.
Go to glory and the grave!*

*Daughters: Go to glory and the grave!
For your foes are fierce and ruthless,
False, unmerciful, and truthless;
Young and tender, old and toothless,
All in vain their mercy crave.*

*Sergeant: We observe too great a stress,
On the risks that on us press,
And of reference a lack
To our chance of coming back.
Still, perhaps it would be wise
Not to carp or criticise,
For it's very evident
These attentions are well meant.*

*Chorus of constables: Yes, it's very evident
These attentions are well meant,
Evident, yes, well meant, evident
Ah, yes, well meant!*

*Chorus of constables: When the foeman bares his steel, etc.
Daughters: Go, ye heroes, go to glory!*

The opera made fun of the Victorian era in a way that only Victorians could truly understand. Many allusions will escape the modern listener without extensive use of Wikipedia articles to fill in the background. Having said that though, the songs have withstood the test of time, and the opera is considerably livelier than most of its contemporaries now forgotten.



From the “Aaaw, isn’t it cute!” department, I saw this squirrel sunning itself on the southern slope of Mount Jimmy Simpson in Banff National Park.



Elk at Johnston Creek on the old Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park.

On the next page is a telephoto shot of one of them.





Further down the old highway was this bighorn sheep.



A herd of bighorn sheep at Gap Lake, Bow Valley Provincial Park.



Rocky Mountain goats are not as commonly seen. This bunch were photographed on Highway 40 in Kananaskis Provincial Park. They are licking

salt off the asphalt, commonly used in winter for de-icing. Below are a ewe and her lamb. These photos were taken in late spring when the animals were still shedding their winter coats, which is why they look so mangy.



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Yeakel, J.D., et al (2014) **Collapse of an ecological network in ancient Egypt.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:14472–14477

Authors' abstract: *"Here we integrate depictions of mammals from Egyptian antiquity with direct lines of paleontological and archeological evidence to infer local extinctions and community dynamics over a 6,000-y span. We show that the extinctions of mammals in Egypt were nonrandom and that destabilizing changes in community composition coincided with abrupt aridification events and the attendant collapses of some complex societies. ... The Nile Valley north of Aswan is known for its intense heat, low rainfall, and relatively sparse vegetation. In fact, the last 2,750 km of the Nile is devoid of water-bearing tributaries and surrounded by desert with an average rainfall of 3.4 cm/y. The Egyptian landscape in the Late Pleistocene/early Holocene was very different; during the African Humid Period (AHP) (14,800–5,500 y B.P.), the region had a cooler, wetter climate driven by heavy monsoonal rains. These factors contributed to a diverse assemblage of mammals that bears a strong resemblance to communities in East Africa today. Termination of the AHP was associated with increasingly weak summer monsoons and the disappearance of many Egyptian species, including spotted hyenas, warthogs, zebra, wildebeest, and water buffalo, as well as the onset of dense human settlements in the region. A sharp increase in aridification about 5,000 y B.P. attended the fall of the Uruk Kingdom in Mesopotamia, but it might have catalyzed the rise of the Egyptian Phaoronic state. Another aridification pulse about 4,170 ± 50 y B.P. coincided with the Egyptian First Intermediate Period (about 4,140 y B.P.), an interval that is distinguished by failed flooding of the Nile and rapid dynastic successions. Other potential aridity-induced political instabilities are evident at this time, including the collapse of the Akkadian empire and the decline of urban centers in the Indus Valley. Finally, a third aridification pulse is evident in eastern Mediterranean sediments at about 3,000 y B.P.. This event is associated with widespread famines in Egypt and Syria and the end of the New Kingdom in Egypt and the Ugarit Kingdom in Babylon."*

Speirs: Global warming several millennia ago triggered major changes in ecosystems but by then humans had learned to alter their own environment and survive. The dispersed tribes of northeast Africa began concentrating along the Nile River and not only survived but increased their skills of survival by new technology such as irrigation.

Sayers, K., and C.O. Lovejoy (2014) **Blood, bulbs, and bunodonts: On evolutionary ecology and the diets of *Ardipithecus*, *Australopithecus*, and early *Homo*.** QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BIOLOGY 89:319-357

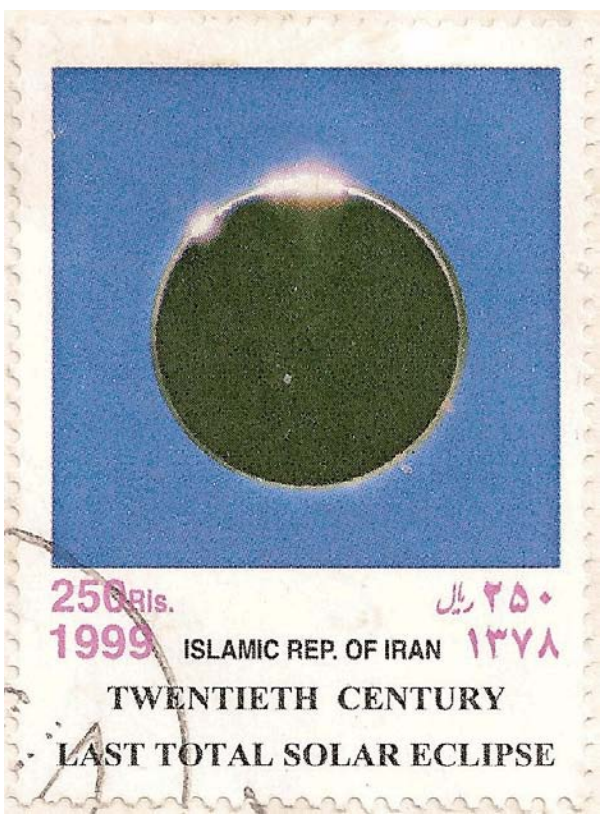
Authors' abstract: *"Beginning with Darwin, some have argued that predation on other vertebrates dates to the earliest stages of hominid evolution, and can explain many uniquely human anatomical and behavioral characters. Other recent workers have focused instead on scavenging, or particular plant foods. Foraging theory suggests that inclusion of any food is influenced by its profitability and distribution within the consumer's habitat. The morphology and likely cognitive abilities of *Ardipithecus*, *Australopithecus*, and early *Homo* suggest that while hunting and scavenging occurred, their profitability generally would have been considerably lower than in extant primates and/or modern human hunter-gatherers. On the other hand, early hominid diet modelers should not focus solely on plant foods, as this overlooks standard functional interpretations of the early hominid dentition, their remarkable demographic success, and the wide range of available food types within their likely day ranges. Any dietary model focusing too narrowly on any one food type or foraging strategy must be viewed with caution. We argue that early hominid diet can best be elucidated by consideration of their entire habitat-specific resource base, and by quantifying the potential profitability and abundance of likely available foods."*

Speirs: Humans evolved as omnivores, not carnivores or vegetarians. Our distant ancestors basically ate anything that didn't immediately make them sick to their stomach or kill them with poison.

Carman, C.C., and J. Evans (2014) **On the epoch of the Antikythera mechanism and its eclipse predictor.** ARCHIVE FOR HISTORY OF EXACT SCIENCES 68:693–774

Authors' abstract: *"The Antikythera mechanism is a Greek geared astronomical computing machine, built sometime between the late third century and the early first century BCE, which was recovered from an ancient shipwreck in 1901. A remarkable feature of a recent study by Freeth et al (2008) is a demonstration that eclipses were predicted on the lower back dial of the mechanism by means of the Saros cycle. Only a small portion of the inscriptions on the Saros dial are preserved. Nevertheless, Freeth et al were able to show that the predictive scheme is consistent with a Babylonian-style 8-8-7-8-7- pattern. The*

reconstruction is greatly aided by the presence of index letters in the glyphs for the eclipses. Each month box that bears an eclipse glyph is labeled by a Greek letter that shows where the glyph stands in the sequence. Thus, even though a large chunk of the dial is missing, it is possible to be sure exactly how many eclipse glyphs would have been carried by most of the missing part of the dial. ... The eclipse predictor (or Saros dial) of the Antikythera mechanism provides a wealth of astronomical information and offers practically the only possibility for a close astronomical dating of the mechanism. We apply a series of constraints, in a sort of sieve of Eratosthenes, to sequentially eliminate possibilities for the epoch date. We find that the solar eclipse of month 13 of the Saros dial almost certainly belongs to solar Saros series 44. And the eclipse predictor would work best if the full Moon of month 1 of the Saros dial corresponds to May 12, 205 BCE, with the exeligmos dial set at 0. We also examine some possibilities for the theory that underlies the eclipse times on the Saros dial and find that a Babylonian-style arithmetical scheme employing an equation of center and daily velocities would match the inscribed times of day quite well. Indeed, an arithmetic scheme for the eclipse times matches the evidence somewhat better than does a trigonometric model."



Speirs: The ancient people were not as stupid as some think. They didn't need aliens to build pyramids for them and they could calculate astronomical events such as eclipses. The Saros cycles are the mathematical predictions of eclipses.

Above right is a photo of the front face of the Antikythera device, made 2,200 years ago. The technology disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire and would not reappear until the



1800s. By X-raying the device, engineers were able to see all the hidden gear wheels in the corroded lump and were thus able to reconstruct how it worked and make replicas.

The device gets its name from its source, a shipwreck off the coast of the Greek island of Antikythera. The shipwreck was discovered in 1900 and has still not been fully researched.

GREY CUP 2014
by Dale Speirs

The 102nd Grey Cup game of the Canadian Football League was played in Vancouver on November 30, with the Calgary Stampeders defeating the Hamilton Tiger Cats by 20 to 16. I don't follow sports but the hype of the Stamps reaching the final game was unavoidable. This was especially so since the Calgary Flames hockey team hasn't won a Stanley Cup since 1989. They fizzle out so often that the popular joke here in Cowtown is that if the Flames win the Stanley Cup again, it will be a sign of the impending Apocalypse.



The Stampeders last won the Grey Cup in 2008. The following year, Calgary hosted the Grey Cup with much hoopla and a big parade, written up in OPUNTIA #68.5A. Alas, the Stamps choked in the semi-final at Regina, and Cowtowners had to watch the Saskatchewan Roughriders lose to the Montreal Alouettes.

MACLEOD REDUX
photo by Dale Speirs

And just to provide a symmetrical finish to this issue is a view below of Macleod Trail South, the main drag through southern Calgary. This is a typical midday view of its eight lanes plus a turning lane. During rush hour it is a parking lot. It is named after Col. James Macleod, of course. He undoubtedly rode his horse down this very stretch back in pioneer days when it was a footpath across the shortgrass prairie. Today he could probably ride his horse along the sidewalk and go faster than the cars.

