

OPUNTIA

354

Late September 2016

IN THE ROLLING HILLS OF ALBERTA

photos by Dale Speirs

On the last day of August, I drove a 300-km loop northwest of Calgary through the rolling hills of the Raven and James Rivers. Rolling hills are the transition zone between the Rocky Mountain foothills and the prairie flatlands. They are lush and green, with many patches of forest. Good farming country.

Below is a typical view, looking west from Highway 766 and Township Road 334. The land was homesteaded a century ago, but about half the original forest still remains.

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.



An unnamed pond on the west side of Highway 22, somewhere north of Sundre.



The James River bridge. You know you're in a rural area when the county only put in a one-lane bridge because they didn't want to spend the money on a bigger one.

The hamlet of James River Bridge is several kilometres away, nowhere near the bridge or the river. It's just one of those historical accidents.



Gleniffer Reservoir on the Red Deer River. I used maximum telephoto range but couldn't get a closer view of the pelican (right side of photo). The seagull at left, on the other hand, flew towards me with hopes of a snack. It was disappointed.



This sign isn't as ominous as it seems. The Little Red Deer River is placid all the way through, but there are no roads further downstream and the banks are overgrown with spruces.

This view was taken at Red Lodge Provincial Park.



The Little Red Deer River was undercutting the outside curve.



The banks of the Raven River. Photo taken from the Range Road 42 bridge.



THIS JUST IN FROM VULCAN

In previous issues of OPUNTIA, #3.5, 70.5A, and 342, I reported on the progress of Vulcan, Alberta, in its struggle to stay alive out on the flatlands by using the Star Trek connection. Alas, things just got a little more difficult, as the Trekcetera Museum has decided to abandon Vulcan.

CBC News (www.cbc.ca) reported on September 9 that the museum is relocating to Drumheller, the capital of the Red Deer River badlands, an area that is the second largest tourist attraction in Alberta after the Rocky Mountains. The headline on the news report was what one would expect of news editors, “Star Trek museum beams out of Vulcan”.

The problem is that Vulcan is off the main tourist routes. They get destination-specific trade from Trekkies for a couple of months in the summer, but the trade is non-existent the rest of the year because there is absolutely nothing else of interest there. Drumheller is a bigger town, adjacent to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, the world’s largest fossil museum and a year-round destination for international tourists. There are numerous other attractions up and down the badlands, and several major highways cross at Drumheller, so the Trekcetera Museum expects to pick up more visitors.



HANDHELDS IN FICTION

by Dale Speirs

Science fiction is often thought of as a literature of predictions. While some stories have successfully predicted certain things, the field is in general no better than any other branch of literature. There are hundreds of SF stories about the Soviet Union building an empire in space a century from now, but Norman Spinrad was the only SF writer to correctly call in 1980 for the collapse of the USSR by 1989 and for the right reasons (ref: DESTINIES, 1980 Spring). SF writers wrote hundreds of stories about a world-spanning supercomputer running amok but instead we have a distributed network running amok. Those space station wheels should be littering Earth orbit but all we have is one tin can. Wherefore art thou, Mars colonies or the L5 habitats?

Close But Not Quite.

My interest in predictive stories is not the wild swings that were completely wrong, or the over-the-fence home runs, but the stories that just missed reality by a little bit.

An example is “A Handheld Primer” by Christopher Anvil (1978 January, AMAZING). By late 1977, when the story went to press (magazines are postdated for distribution reasons), pocket calculators had advanced from four-functions to scientific functions. Anvil extrapolates a near-future world where one can buy all kinds of specialized handhelds, one for historical dates, one to be used for a personal diary, another containing scientific facts for disciplines such as chemistry or physics, and different ones for tradesmen, from plumbing to electricians to carpentry.

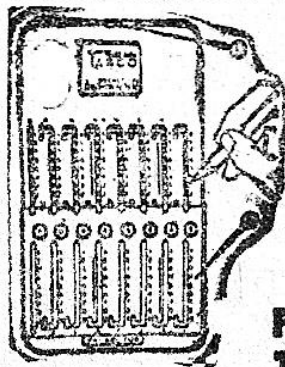
Anvil’s handhelds each only had data for one topic, and those data were pre-loaded on the handheld, not read over a wireless connection. As you know, Professor, we have handhelds today that can download any amount of data from the World Wide Web. We don’t need a different handheld for each subject because all knowledge is found on Google. Unlike Anvil’s handhelds, we can talk, send mail, and take photographs over ours. He just missed it by that much.

Almost simultaneously, Charles Ott’s story “The Astrological Engine” (1977 September, ANALOG) dealt with the same subject. An engineering firm making specialized handhelds is asked to make one for astrological predictions. Because the predictions look scientific on a display screen, people start taking

them more seriously than before. The company makes handhelds for artillery calculations, case-hardened for military conditions, as well as sports statistics calculators. The story indicates that the microchips are specific for each application, firmware rather than software, so the company has to design a new chip each time. The idea of a programmable chip did not appear to be commonplace among SF writers back then. However, the idea that people would believe nonsense just because it was displayed on a screen is spot on.

Calculating Stories.

Many stories even into the 1970s had starship pilots using slide rules and computers spooling out tape instead of flashing results on screens. One thing I keep an eye out for is the pocket calculator in very early stories. “Katahut Said No” by J.T. M’Intosh (1952 April, GALAXY) is a story set in a future where a supercomputer runs the economy by sorting through data on punch cards. There is, however, a throwaway line in the story that describes someone using a pocket calculator. “*He pulled out a small calculating machine. He pressed the buttons. “Twelve to the power of five is 248832”, he said.*”



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advertisement from AMAZING, 1947 March issue

Future Handhelds.

THE WORD EXCHANGE (2014) by Alena Graedon is a novel about an unfortunately too plausible future in which the printed word on paper has disappeared. Everyone uses handheld devices called Memes, which not only

communicate like smartphones but can predict behaviour and act accordingly. The next step from there is implanted microchips for direct contact, at which point the story begins.

The narrator is Anana Johnson, who works for her father Douglas Samuel Johnson, in charge of what will be the final edition of the North American Dictionary of the English Language. She is going through assorted romantic distresses when a worse event happens; her father disappears. From there, she goes on the usual sort of quest as she searches for her father.

Anana goes behind the scenes at the Word Exchange, the all-powerful and world-dominating network that has been hacked. Word definitions and facts are being deleted or altered from it. Doubleplusungood, but the sheeple are oblivious to what is happening to them. A computer virus S0111 spreads what is called the Word Flu, which garbles words with nonsense letters. The idea seems to be to change the current language so much that no one can read the old texts anymore and thus will lose their history. We have always been at war with Eastasia.

There is a megacorporation conspiracy, and the end of civilization is nigh. S0111 becomes an actual biological virus via the microchip implants some users have, plus a goodly amount of handwaving. The neural interface becomes the Mark of the Beast. The victims are dyslexic and eventually dysfunctional to the point of death.

The conspiracy is finally stopped, the Meme executives go to jail, and their megacorporation is dissolved. This classifies the novel as a fantasy. Consider the Panic of 2008, where the Wall Street bankers who caused it were not only not punished but received trillions of dollars in bailout currency because they were too big to fail. The book finishes up with a happy ending as the USA staggers back up onto its feet. Strangely, other countries were not affected, the Internet not being as international as one might assume. But the sun will come out tomorrow, notwithstanding Revelation 13:17.

And, Of Course, The Cellphone.

Every SF writer completely missed one of the greatest changes in human behaviour that has ever occurred, the fact that throughout the world, the majority of pedestrians walking about today do so with their heads down. Handheld devices have altered the course of our evolution. Those with poor

peripheral vision will be selected out of the gene pool by vehicle-pedestrian accidents.

The City of Calgary has a programme of painting utility boxes throughout the city. I took this photo in 2016 at the corner of 5 Avenue SW and 5 Street in the downtown core. A typical modern scene of heads-down pedestrians.



LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 6
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #310, 321, 328, 332, and 337. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

Mars Before Mariner.

“The Two Shadows” by William F. Temple (1951 March, STARTLING STORIES) is about a spaceship sent to Mars just as Earth is turned into a lifeless planet by global thermonuclear war. The ship crashes on Mars and two men find themselves apparently the only two survivors and thus the last two humans on either planet. That doesn’t stop them from quarreling or playing power games. Then a woman appears, having also survived the wreck. The rest of the plot is predictable. At least their names weren’t Adam and Eve.

“Plan X” was a 1953 episode of the old-time radio (OTR) show SUSPENSE, written by Richard M. Powell. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.) It stars Jack Benny, considered one of the greatest comedians of all time. In this episode he plays the part of a Martian named Zeno, who works in an escalator factory. The writing appears aimed at a juvenile audience, but it originally played to an adult radio audience as a comedy without a laugh track from a live studio audience. Mildly amusing.

The Martians have been watching Earth for some time, and when the first rocket lands from there, they initiate Plan X. Their giant computer selects Zeno to go out and meet the Earthlings, while the rest of the population goes into hiding. Zeno shows the explorers around his city and awes them with the vast Martian technology. The Earthlings still don’t fully understand the significance of it.

As they prepare to return to Earth, they are converted into Martians by a superscience ray gun and the spaceship remains sitting on the ground. No one actually says “We will assimilate you”, but the deed speaks for itself. The Martians will obviously deal with any future spaceship crews the same way.

Movies: Red Planet Survival.

The first movie I want to mention was a box office success about a Marsnaut stranded on the planet by himself. He is forced to use all his scientific knowledge for the basic task of surviving. I am, of course, referring to

ROBINSON CRUSOE ON MARS (1964), written by Ib Melchior and John Higgins. What? What other film?

The movie credits specifically mention it was based on Daniel Defoe's book, and the plot is indeed roughly the same, with obviously different places and circumstances. A two-man spacecraft has arrived in Mars orbit, but before they can get comfortable, they use up all their fuel evading a meteor in the same orbit. They eject in separate landing craft, leaving the mother ship in a decaying orbit. One of them does not survive the descent.

There are the usual nitpicks, such as the spacecraft that roars through the vacuum. In the opening sequence before the encounter with the meteor, the engines run continuously, instead of a boost phase followed by a long coast. Not only that, but later on in the movie the spacecraft continues to roar even though it is out of fuel.

The meteor is a red-hot ball of molten rock instead of a black lump as it should be. Mars is far enough away that it takes radio transmissions about twenty minutes to reach Earth, yet when the Marsnauts advise Mission Control about the meteor, they get a reply in a minute.

The SFX are very mixed. The scenes of orbiting spacecraft are cartoonish. I'm not stating that figuratively. The images of the spacecraft and landers are actual cartoon-like, flat paintings like those done by Chesley Bonestell, and matted onto the film. The medium-distance shots of the landers are obvious toy models, while the close-ups are more realistic props built to scale for the actors to clamber in and out.

Views of the mother ship from above show it diving into the planet at a 45-degree angle each time, while from below, it and the meteor are in stable orbit. The Sun is shown from the surface of Mars as big as the view from Earth. The spacecraft uses mechanical computers that would have made Babbage feel right at home.

Notwithstanding those nitpicks, the movie did get some things right, and was far better at it than its contemporaries. One can see that the producers had good scientific advice and acted on it. The science of 1964 is long obsolete, but an SF movie has to be judged by its time, not our subsequent superior knowledge. The Martian skies are well done in reddish-brown dust with intermittent auroras. As one looks further up, the view quickly fades to a starry sky. At a time when

it was still commonly believed that Mars was vegetated, the movie shows barren lifeless ground (it was filmed in Death Valley, California).

The landing craft are Gemini capsules, which were cutting edge at the time. What particularly impressed me was that when the mother ship was evading the meteor, the thrusters were clearly shown in operation. Offhand, I can't think of many SF movies that acknowledge how spacecraft pitch, roll, yaw, and change course. Almost all movies have them zigzagging about like WW2 fighter planes with no sign of thrusters working.

The surviving Marsnaut, Christopher Draper, can survive for brief periods breathing Martian air but has to supplement it with bottled oxygen. We know today that Martian air is unbreathable, period, but back then it was thought to be thin but not necessarily the next closest thing to a vacuum. Draper keeps a diary on a tape recorder, which helps explain the plot and the background information to the audience.

The struggle for survival begins. A monkey named Mona was brought along as a test specimen for who knows what purpose, and also survives the wreck. Draper uses her to help survive, such as feeding her salty food so that she will lead him to a pool of water. She also sniffs out some aquatic plants, the tubers of which are edible, and the fibres of the stems pliable enough to be woven into warm clothing.

Draper finds combustible yellow rocks for a fire pit to keep him warm. After his oxygen tanks run empty, he realizes the rocks must have their own oxidant in their chemistry, otherwise they wouldn't burn in the thin air. They give off oxygen as they burn, thus he can use them for breathing as well as warmth. This is a clever point that an average Hollywood screenwriter would have completely missed.

Having solved the physical problems of survival, Draper runs into the psychological ones. Like no one before him who ever lived, he is utterly alone. Mona isn't much help, chattering away mindlessly. Draper suffers nightmares and delusions from his loneliness.

The second part of the movie finds Draper out exploring. He finds the grave of a humanoid. The skull has a hole in its forehead, and the exit wound is fused and charred. Draper realizes there must be hostiles about, so he hides his camp. He also transmits a destruct signal to the mother ship, still roaring around in

orbit, and destroys it to prevent anyone or any being from knowing he is on the planet.

Just in time, too, for alien ships soon arrive. They are almost but not quite identical to the Mars invader ships in the 1953 movie version of WAR OF THE WORLDS (see OPUNTIA #289 for a review of all the WOTW movies), and were done by the same SFX people. The aliens are using humanoid slaves for an open-pit mine. This makes no sense because any spacefaring civilization would use robots and automated machines for such a task. One of the slaves escapes and meets up with Draper, who names him Friday after the Defoe book.

There is a brief glimpse of the aliens, a bad mistake that should have been edited out. We only see one alien in his spacesuit, a humanoid, but his face looks like Rod Serling and he is simply unbelievable. It wasn't necessary to show him, and it destroyed the mystique of the aliens and their fabulous spaceships. The SFX of the spaceships were very well done and ahead of their time. The only nitpick is that the same process shots were used repeatedly.

Having gained their ore, the alien overlords kill the remaining slaves and zip back into space. The pace lags a bit. That is soon resolved when the flaming meteor in low orbit around Mars makes a pass through the upper atmosphere and buries Draper and Friday under ash. Eventually the aliens return and keep blasting the same cliff they did in the previous process shots, while Draper and Friday scurry for cover.

The two men work their way down into a giant lava tube, while the overlords give up and go away again. A Martian odyssey then ensues, with the two making their way to the polar ice cap. The meteor makes its final pass around Mars, then runs out of delta vector and impacts into the ice cap, melting it all away.

Even as the waters drip all over the characters, Draper receives a radio message from a rescue ship, and soon a cartoon Gemini lander descends past a Bonestell backdrop to Draper's position. He's going home, and boy has he got a story to tell them!

The movie is well done on the whole. Bearing in mind that it was made before the Mariner space probes, the science was respectable for 1964. Not a single giant spider in sight.

Movies: Red Planet Creatures.

MISSION TO MARS (2000) was a big-budget movie with very good SFX and extrapolated science, mixed in with cliches and UFO conspiracy theory. The SFX include long-duration spacecraft with rotating hulls to provide artificial gravity for the journey to Mars. The surface of Mars is believable, and near the end of the movie are 3-D hologrammes that show a very realistic simulation of the Solar System.

The movie begins with a pre-launch barbecue in an astronaut's backyard, already a laughable cliché by then, but which serves to introduce all the characters. This barbecue was for the Mars 2 manned mission. At the time it was held, the crew of the Mars 1 mission were already on the surface of the red planet, but mercifully we are spared any flashbacks to their barbecue.

The Mars 1 mission gets into trouble when scanning Cydonia with radar. This is the infamous Face on Mars, a group of hills that looked like a human face when first photographed from orbit. Subsequent photos by later space probes showed the face was just a trick of the light. The movie, however, runs with the idea that the Face is a real alien artifact.

The radar scan triggers a self-defence mechanism in the Face, which kills all but one of the Mars 1 crew. Mars 2 therefore becomes a rescue mission. On arrival at Mars, just before orbital insertion burn, the Mars 2 ship is riddled by micrometeorites. The crew is busy for a while repairing the hull, but they don't have time to inspect the entire ship before the window to do the orbital burn is upon them. That sets up a disaster, because the fuel lines were drilled by several micrometeorites. When the engine burn commences, the ship blows apart.

The Mars 2 crew transfer to a resupply capsule already in orbit and use it to get down to the Mars 1 base camp, where they meet up with a survivor. After all the pleasantries and information is exchanged, they decide to examine Cydonia again while waiting for rescue. Examining the radar data, it is discovered that Cydonia had been transmitting a code based on human DNA. The Marsnauts figure out a response to transmit back to Cydonia, which works.

The Face opens a door and the Marsnauts enter. There is a holographic display inside which shows the Solar System 500 megayears ago when Mars was a blue planet. A large asteroid impact converted it to desert, and the Martian

civilization scatters to the stars, but not before seeding Earth with their DNA. A lengthy and excellent SFX.

The ending is an anti-climax. Having shown the Earthlings their history, Cydonia then self-destructs for no good reason. The Marsnauts run for it and launch into orbit to await rescue. I think the scriptwriters (a committee, always a bad sign) ran out of ideas and rushed to a finish.

Overall though, it is a good movie, with reasonably good science for Hollywood, and a budget well spent on SFX.

STEPHEN LEACOCK: PART 4
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #64.1A, 351, and 352.]

A Vaster Empire Than Has Been.

Leacock was born in 1869 and was part of the last generation of Canadians who thought of themselves as British subjects who happened to live in Canada. The next generation who fought in the Great War came home with a different idea. As a consequence, Leacock's books on the British Empire were obsolete within two decades of publication. They serve more to illustrate the things people believed were a bedrock of society that would always stand, but instead have been consigned to the dustbin of history.

An example is ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE (1930) in which Leacock pines for a greater whole than has been. He was realistic enough to appreciate there would never be a single homogeny ruling the Dominions and colonies from London. The outlanders would never accept the rule of British bureaucrats. That was proven violently in 1776 in the thirteen American colonies and again in 1847 in the Canadian colonies when it took the British Army two years to suppress a rebellion against the overlords. But Leacock hoped for what today we call a free-trade agreement between the members of the British Empire to screen out the rest of the world.

Leacock also harped upon a continuing theme, that of taking capital out of the London banks and dispersing it to the Dominions to develop their vast resources. The bankers, however, preferred lending money at interest or indulging in sharp practice on stock exchanges, instead of doing something useful with the money. Nothing has changed since. During the Panic of 2008, the U.S. Federal Reserve gave trillions to prop up Wall Street banks, money that would have built countless roads and sewer systems to better effect.

The gold standard was one of those immutable forces that Leacock could not even envisage being done away with. He wanted that as part of an Empire trade agreement, but it would not have worked any better than the European Union.

Disparate cultures cannot adhere to a common economic policy, as the Europeans have learned in our time. The Germans outwork all the others, while the Greeks are a cautionary tale. The Empire was no different. Canada and Australia cannot be compared to corrupt jungle republics in Africa where colonies were still fighting tribal wars. Leacock was dreaming of a world that was already fading away in his time.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE (1940) is a general summary of how the Empire was built, more by accident than design. Leacock notes that North America revived seamanship in Britain. Before Cabot**, the British were a minor sea power, but as their empire grew piecemeal, they had to expand their fleet to hold it. It was North America that made the Royal Navy powerful.

The Empire was a low-population density empire, save for India and a few small African colonies. Canada, Australia, the thirteen American colonies, and South Africa were and still are mostly empty lands, with the majority of their populations crowded into cities. Leacock pointed out the vast mineral resources and croplands waiting to supply the world.

Some of them have since been exploited but the majority of them still wait. I regularly drive around rural Alberta where a century ago the population was double what it is today. Perhaps the Greater Depression that we are now going into will encourage more people to go back out and resettle the empty lands. I won't live to see it.

** Columbus did not discover North America, he discovered the Caribbean and Latin America.

Long Ago And Far Away.

THE DAWN OF CANADIAN HISTORY (1914) is precisely that, a look at Canadian history just as Europeans were arriving and making contact with aboriginal peoples. Leacock recounts the belief of the time as to where and how the first peoples arrived. Some of it is obsolete but the basic picture is still the same today.

He notes that the Norsemen who planted colonies along the northeast coast of Canada failed not only because they couldn't and wouldn't adapt the way the Inuit had, but because the time was not yet ripe. Specifically, Europe was still struggling to repopulate itself and rebuild its economy after the breakup of the Roman Empire.

This is a point often missed. To exploit the New World required large ships that did not exist then, and an economy where gentlemen wore beaver felt hats and women wore furs. The abundant fish were useless until the Europeans could pay for them in coins, whereas at the time they lived in self-sufficient villages where barter was standard.

It wasn't until five centuries after the Vikings landed in Newfoundland that Europe needed new resources and could pay for the ships and men to get them. Everyone was looking for a shortcut to China to save on the cost of spices. They instead found a richer continent, although it was several more centuries before they realized that the Americas were the better deal. Jacques Cartier sailed up the Saint Lawrence River expecting it to be a passage to China. At that point, Leacock ends his history. Canada had been discovered but it would be 200 years more before its riches were outlined and all the land settled.

I got to thinking about this in regards to fantasy novels. You know the kind; ten-volume trilogies where the young farm boy/girl is the rightful heir to the throne, and goes off on a quest for the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty before claiming the kingdom. The hero rides through a medieval world whose authors seldom think through what the economics of it would be.

I avoid reading them, but others have pointed out their fallacies. Knights in shining armour, even if they were the rightful heirs, were a burden on rural economies, and the villagers despised them rather than flocked to their colours. It mattered nothing to them who sat on the throne, since they would be treated the same.

LINCOLN FREES THE SLAVES (1934) seems a peculiar choice of topic for a Canadian economist at a Quebec university. On reading the book though, the emphasis on the history of slavery clearly shows Leacock's interests. Like a man with a hammer who sees everything as a nail, Leacock looks at the history of slavery as economic theory.

He begins by looking at slavery since ancient times. As Europe slowly industrialized, slavery became too inefficient and expensive, and was instead replaced by factory workers who didn't have to be housed and fed at the employer's expense. Machinery required slightly more intelligent humans and at piece-work rates provided more incentive for them to work. Slavery only paid in low-technology agrarian societies, of which the southern USA was one.

It was noted by many observers in the first half of the 1800s that plantation slaves were healthier than slum-dwelling factory labourers because they were out in the fresh air and ate fresh farm food. It was also observed that slaves were not motivated to work very hard, and a Yankee dirt farmer could hoe a row of beans quicker than three slaves. The northern USA industrialized faster than the southern states, and could piously do away with slaves, not from decency but because machines could do the work faster.

Leacock considers that the eruption of the civil war in the USA was triggered more by increasing economic disparity than by moral outrage at slavery. In the Confederate States, the slaves did not take advantage of the war to rise up in rebellion, and after 1865 did not establish black rule. They were ignorant farm workers who didn't know how to make a profit from a crop or herd of livestock. They were bewildered by the sudden changes, and easy prey for carpetbaggers and segregationists.

What the war did establish was new methods of using up surplus manpower by killing them off in massive battles. "manpower" is the correct word, and is not sexist. There were too many males to employ when factories became mechanized and something had to be done with them. Leacock points out that the slaughter was a harbinger for the future, a way of destroying surpluses of humans and factories by diverting production into means of destruction. Farmers couldn't afford harvesting machinery but governments could certainly afford cannons and warships.

Leacock also considers the behaviour of Lincoln as too slow to move at first because he was rooted in the agrarian world of his upbringing. But Lincoln did

eventually change, and might have done more had he lived. The economics favoured the northern states once the surplus manpower was removed. After a while, the factories needed more labourers again. This brought in a massive flow of immigrants. The newlanders could be hired for less than the cost of a slave, and thereafter the slavery question was dead, done in by economics.

Far Away, Long Ago.

MY DISCOVERY OF ENGLAND (1922) is a trip report of a lecture tour Leacock made to England just after World War One. It is not a standard geographical account, nor a diary of what he saw and when. Rather, he writes about the psychology and sociology of the English in general.

“The Balance Of Trade In Impressions” leads off with a look at all the British authors who came to North America for a few weeks, then wrote a book or essay about the USA and Canada as if they were experts. Leacock notes that for too long the balance of these authors was in favour of Britain, so he was going to help redress matters by becoming an expert on England after his tour.

“I Am Interviewed By The Press” is an essay resulting from twenty interviews given to the newspapers on his arrival. (No radio or television networks in those days.) He kept clippings of the published results. The reporters who interviewed him in the morning wrote that he was a brisk energetic man, the ones who saw him midday noticed “*a peculiar languor*” in his manner, and the afternoon interviewers saw him as a weary old man.

He was taken out several times to tour the factories, of which he had no more interest in than Canadian factories. Several reporters asked him his impression of English drama versus the French, for which he had no reply, being an economist and humourist.

Leacock then churns out his impressions of London, Parliament, and businesses in a set of humorous essays. The general impression was that the Brits don’t function very efficiently and yet seem to muddle through somehow, even if they ruin their chances for better things.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Beauchamp, J.P. (2016) **Genetic evidence for natural selection in humans in the contemporary United States.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 113:7774-7779

Author’s abstract: *“Recent findings from molecular genetics now make it possible to test directly for natural selection by analyzing whether genetic variants associated with various phenotypes have been under selection. I leverage these findings to construct polygenic scores that use individuals’ genotypes to predict their body mass index, educational attainment (EA), glucose concentration, height, schizophrenia, total cholesterol, and (in females) age at menarche. I then examine associations between these scores and fitness to test whether natural selection has been occurring. My study sample includes individuals of European ancestry born between 1931 and 1953 who participated in the Health and Retirement Study, a representative study of the US population.”*

“My results imply that natural selection has been slowly favoring lower EA in both females and males, and are suggestive that natural selection may have favored a higher age at menarche in females. For EA, my estimates imply a rate of selection of about about 1.5 month of education per generation (which pales in comparison with the increases in EA observed in contemporary times). Although they cannot be projected over more than one generation, my results provide additional evidence that humans are still evolving, albeit slowly, especially compared with the rapid changes that have occurred over the past few generations due to cultural and environmental factors.”

“Until recently, it was often held that human evolution had come to an end about 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. However, new evidence that has been accumulating over the last decade suggests that natural selection has been operating in humans over the past few thousand years and that a number of adaptations, such as lactase persistence, resistance to malaria, and adaptation to high altitude, have occurred relatively recently. It has also been shown that height and body mass index have been under selection in Europeans.”

Speirs: I am reminded of Cyril Kornbluth's story "The Marching Morons", which originally appeared in the April 1951 issue of GALAXY and has been reprinted many times in anthologies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2016-09-23

OPUNTIA 349: I really like the Harvia cover, I think mostly because I liked "Midnight at the Oasis".

[Re: National Music Centre in Calgary] I am a little leery of anything that calls itself National. They can say they are the national centre for something, which implies that anyone in the nation can enter and use what's inside, but I find that even if it is funded by the federal government, only a select few individuals and groups can use what's inside; otherwise, stay out.

[I haven't set foot inside the NMC nor am I ever likely to. It has a museum, for which an admission charge, but I don't care about looking at some dead rocker's guitar. It also has recording studios and an area for private functions, both of which cost good money to set foot in.]

Recently, we were vendors at a huge street fair in Hamilton, and a violin player set up kittycorner from where we were, attempting to raise funds to assist the local firefighters who were down the street. We quickly found out he was a poor player with a very limited repertoire. I don't remember what he was playing, but I heard Pop Goes the Weasel too many times. After one vendor shouting at him to shut up, and another requesting The Sounds of Silence (he got the jab), he moved off down the street, but we could still faintly hear him, squeak, squeak... In spite of him, that street fair was great fun, and we hope to return next year when it probably won't be as rainy and windy.

[Calgary street fairs have strict controls on who may present, and new acts must audition. You can't just show up and play, otherwise you will be escorted from the premises. Street fairs are controlled by local community associations in accordance with City bylaws and regulations.]

Your article about Conan Doyle's "The Lost Special" sounds quite good. We spent the last two weeks of August in England, and we did spend some time on

England's amazing train network. The Gatwick Express from Gatwick Airport to Victoria Station, Virgin First Class from Kings Cross station to Newark, and then East Midlands Rail from Newark to Lincoln. All comfortable, and competition with other train lines we simply couldn't sustain here. Comfortable all the way, and reasonable food on Virgin First Class.

[My visiting European friends are surprised to find that there is no interurban passenger rail service in Canada outside southern Ontario and southern Quebec. It is simply a matter of too much geography and too few people. Alberta is three times larger than the British Isles but with only 3 million people. Calgary is the same land area as London but one-sixth the population. There are summer excursion trains in Alberta to the Rocky Mountains, but if you are traveling between cities, you go by bus, car, or airplane.]

OPUNTIA 350: The Republic of Whimsy by Theo Nelson. I think we've all been there from time to time, and enjoyed every visit.

Coming up in Toronto next year is the World Mystery Convention, the Bouchercon, so I hope there will be plenty of the nation's Sherlockians will come to the convention. We had to leave the committee for personal reasons, but we expect to be there.

[Re: Canadian national SF convention] Convention: I may have more to do with CFSSA in the future. I suspect the motion to allow pro writers to compete in the fan categories will mean fans will not be able to win their own awards. With that, fans will not be interested in participating in these awards.

I confirmed that the steampunk event at Historic Benares House in neighbouring Mississauga will take place again next July. I look forward to it.

I know you asked me to write an article on Baker Street in London, but to be honest, there isn't much to it to differentiate it from any other shopping street in London, where there seem to be hundreds of them. When we got there, we walked up to 221B Baker Street, where the line-up to see it was more than a hundred feet long. We did not get to see it, but we did get to the next-door Hudson's Gift Shop, which was quite comfortable, and not too crowded. We picked up some nice items.

Down the street was the Beatles London store, and Yvonne walked in, expecting to see amazing things, and walked out disappointed and

empty-handed. Lots of Beatles merchandise, and not much more. Beside the Beatles store was an Alef Bookstore, and we spent the most time there, perusing their items, and talking with the clerk. The people who ran and staffed the bookstore were Syrian refugees, making their way and making a living. They were pleased to find we were Canadian, for they knew how many refugees Canada has taken in. Aside from the Lebanese restaurant across the street re-labeled the Holmes Grill, there was little else to do. We had lunch at the nearby Pret a Manger, and hit the Tube again.

OPUNTIA 351: Zine indexes would be fine to have, but would there be anything of interest to future researchers in them? I would hope there is, but I have my doubts.

[I think if they exist, graduate students will come to them. The problem now is trying to sift out what items are of interest, which is too much work for unindexed zines.]

I probably told you long ago that I grew up in Orillia, Ontario, Stephen Leacock's Mariposa. We all knew Leacock well, and his home at Old Brewery Bay in Orillia's east end is a popular tourist attraction.

I have noticed that some of the painted utility boxes in our area have been vandalized with gang spray-paint markings. Nothing is sacred.

[It hasn't been a problem in Calgary.]

OPUNTIA 352: Railway buildings should be a more preserved part of our heritage, and that isn't always the case. The West Toronto station was torn down years ago by developers with no licence or notification, but nothing was put up on the site. In our rail travels in England, we saw large railway buildings in small towns, all maintained if not used.

[It's spotty in Alberta. Rural areas tend to preserve more because of the higher cost of construction out yonder which justifies saving buildings and re-using them for other purposes. Thus there are more railway stations in the countryside than in the big cities.]

I see so many cars parked right at the No Parking sign, and I am so tempted to smack people who pause by the No Smoking sign to light up.

When I lived on Vancouver Island, I knew that Canada's national sports were lacrosse, hockey and hating Toronto. Toronto wants to be world-class, but that emotional response comes mostly from insecure politicians.

[Re: Toronto the Good] I am old enough to remember on Bloor Street West, west of Jane Street, a restaurant that straddled a boundary line of blue laws. The west part of the restaurant was dry, and the east was wet. At the time, not only were you asked "Smoking or non-smoking", but also "Drinking or non-drinking". Toronto does whatever was fashionable in Manhattan last year? In many cultural things, yes, but right now NYC Transit is copying Toronto's transit choices, and purchasing the subway trains you can walk through.

OPUNTIA 353: Street fairs here have some activities for everyone, but most of all, they are mean to sell stuff to you. The one I mentioned in Hamilton was fun, but I have been to street fairs in Toronto that were anything but.

Beakerhead looks like it was lots of fun. There is a very artistic show held in Toronto every year called Nuit Blanche. It does promote the arts, but it runs all night in a single night. I will get my sleep, and hear on the radio how it went. More and more, to me, arts are for the artists, and all the public is wanted for is to be an appreciative audience. Players only love you when they're playing, as the song goes.

[Or as Samuel Johnson wrote: "*We that live to please must please to live.*"]

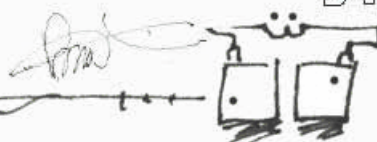
This weekend, Yvonne and I will be going to the biggest steampunk event in Canada, the Grand Canadian Steampunk Exposition, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, but just for the Saturday. Sunday is Word on the Street, the annual literary festival that winds up becoming a place for publishers to sell at reduced prices what readers didn't buy over the past 12 months. We used to go, but I doubt we will this year. A busy weekend, nonetheless.



To:

Date -

Autumnal Felicitations!



We arrive at the
September Equinox.

Autumn in the north,
Spring in the south.

One of two points
On our sine-wave journey
Around the Sun.

Where Day and Night
Reign as equals.

For then we slowly travel
To the palace of the Night
And the south journeys forth
To the kingdom of the Day.

whimsyandcolour.com

"Seasonal
Greetings!"

Autumn 2016 #2

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YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING WHY I CALLED THIS MEETING
photo by Dale Speirs

I saw this in Fort Calgary Park in August. I'm sure there was a reason. It wasn't an art installation.

