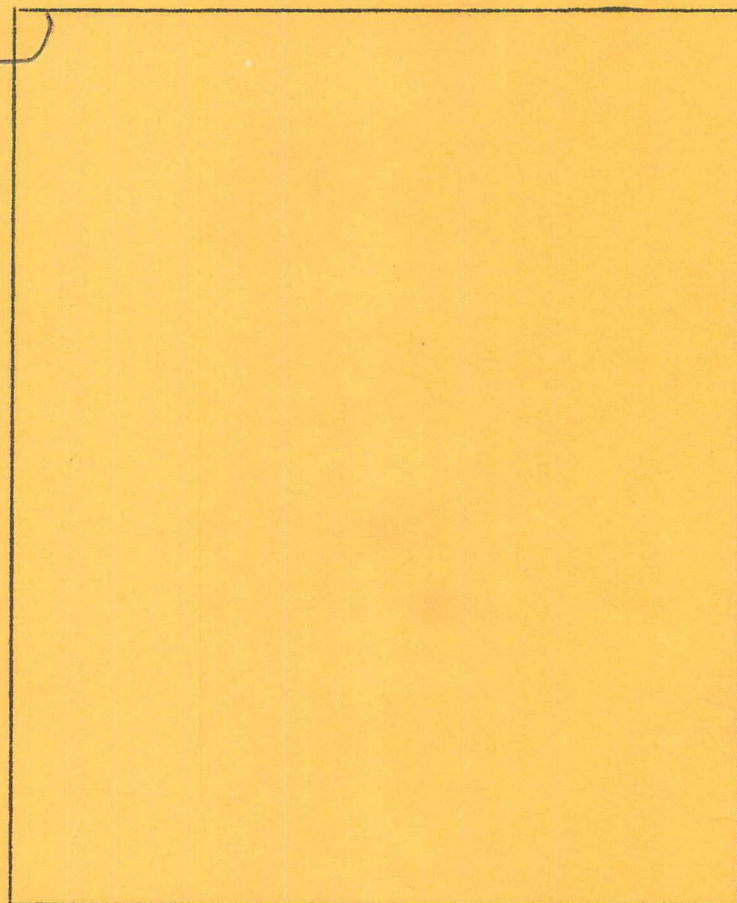


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In Memoriam
BRIAN RICHARDS



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Philosophical Gas

7th August 1973: A few days ago Robin Johnson wrote to me and mentioned that Brian Richards was killed in a road accident early in April. As I write I have not had time to comprehend this. For the past fortnight or so Sally and I have been moving into the house we are renting at Red Hill (and I think I need not detail the horrors of moving: you are probably quite familiar with the ordeal). I have been trying to negotiate the sale of my car and the purchase of another, cheaper vehicle, and there has been a lot of messing about with finance companies, estate agents, bank managers, public utilities and so on - to the extent that the death of a man I have regarded for some years as a good friend has not been at the front of my mind.

Perhaps it is just as well that it should be so. Brian was a man who lived fully; he was also a man who did not impose himself on others. He would be, I should think, as disturbed to think that his living or dying should distress anyone outside his immediate family as he was reluctant to talk about the great men he had known and respected - such people as Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan (and there might easily have been others as well known: Brian was not a name-dropper).

Brian was easily one of the greatest, most impressive, most lovable men I have ever met. I am sad that our correspondence became sporadic some years ago, about the time he moved from Perth to Port Hedland, and virtually ceased about the time I moved to Canberra. His letters were Johnsonian in style, somewhat stilted or too archaically mannered to anyone not in sympathy with the belles lettres of the late 18th or early 19th Century, and yet sharp as a rapier. He was a man fascinated by words (amongst many, many other things), and we wrote to each other in a deliberately sesquipedalian style. I recall his delight on discovering the word 'antepenultimate', which he used about four times in one letter - each time quite appropriately. It was a word I had known and occasionally used for some years, but I shared his delight, and at the same time knew that his knowledge of language was far beyond mine.

Brian was as Johnsonian in presence as he was in writing style. Not to put too fine a point on it, he was a huge man. But as soon as you got talking to him his sheer massiveness was forgotten: mentally, conversationally, he was invariably lithe, agile, alert - and incredibly stimulating. He was very much his own man. His ideas were original. You could disagree utterly with the things he said, but his logic was insuperable. You could argue with him until you were blue in the face, and he remained unshakable, and you had to go away and re-think your own inadequate ideas. But you went away happy, because he never made you feel inferior.

I met Brian in 1960, when I was in Perth trying to sell books for Cassell & Co. I am still not sure whether I met him on all four such trips or whether it was only the last three; and I still wonder at the impression the man made on me, that it has lasted and is still as strong as ever six years after I last saw him.

As far as I know only two other Australian fans ever met Brian: John Brosnan, who lived in Perth in those days, and Ron Clarke, who drove from Sydney to Perth (and elsewhere) about 1969 and made a point of visiting Brian. Ron published some of Brian's writings, including at least two excellent poetic parodies (the two I recall being about myself and ASFR) under the pseudonym 'Herald G. Harker'. Brian probably appeared in other fanzines, too, but my memory fails to recall any specific contribution. He wrote some good things for me, and he made quite an impression at the 1969 (or was it '68? - I grow old) Melbourne convention with his taped exhortation to fans to do something about science fiction. I have that tape still, and treasure it.

I published a transcript of that address in the last issue of ASFR, no. 20, and I will reprint it here to give those of you who never met, read or heard the man some very slight idea of his character and outlook.

[illegible]

A TAPE-RECORDED ADDRESS TO THE 1968
MELBOURNE SCIENCE FICTION CONFERENCE

- Brian Richards

[illegible]

Greetings and salutations to you all.' It is with some sorrow that one speaks to you by means of this contrivance rather than addressing you in the all-too-ample flesh. One is quite positive that this short congress will repeat and surpass the success of its forerunners. Indeed one expects the Melcon to be smoothly organized, backed as it is by the oldest fan club in existence in Australia.

John Bangsund, the burgomaster of Forny Gulch, sent me one of his brief Shavian postcards on which he asked for comments on several points and finished by writing the following words: 'For goodness' sake be short and to the point, because John Foyster is going to speak and that will not leave too much time for the rest of you.'

One must envy the newcomer to science fiction, that fortunate being on whom the field makes such a vivid and tremendously exciting first impact, driving home the sure and certain knowledge that here is the last refuge of imaginative and uninhibited writing; that here, and only here, is the challenge unlimited in its potential; etcetera - etcetera - etcetera.

One does not wish to sound cynical, but enthusiastic ramblings of this type are heard wherever two or more neofans are gathered together. This worshipful, unquestioning litany of the faithful is in point of fact vastly depressing in its massive untruth. Science fiction today consists in the main of a series of tried and true variations around stock themes. The experimental writings which could and should be carried out in this genre are being carried out in the mainstream of literature, whilst the great majority of sf writers potter away in their own backyards, rewriting the same book at regular intervals and occasionally joining forces with their fellow-writers in an orgy of mutual congratulation and self-esteem.

The overwhelming preponderance of today's writing is scatographic in the extreme. One would be hesitant about placing it in the jakes for emergency use. The responsibility for this rests squarely on our shoulders. For as long as the readers are prepared to ingest garbage without complaint, then garbage is what will be offered us. Of the readable remainder a large proportion is reprinted, old reliable stuff from the Forties and early Fifties. Then we have the pure gold which is the reward for reading the dross: current work from a small group of authors, work of remarkable high literary and imaginative value. This alone is what prevents complete gafiation and a retreat into transcendental meditation.

It has been suggested that the paucity of good work is due to science overtaking fiction, and that because of this the really imaginative writers have taken refuge in the field of fantasy. And indeed it must be conceded that fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, swash-and-buckle are flourishing as never before. It has also been suggested that the more conservative publishers are sneaking better-grade science fiction onto their general lists, so that it is missed by the specialist sf reader who generally speaking is not oriented towards publishers' catalogues. There is some evidence to support both these viewpoints. But one must emphasize and reiterate the implicit belief that the real reason for the rare appearance of good work, and for the deluge of garbage which assails us, is our own lack of protest. Any improvement in the standard of work offered to us must be enforced by us. The only important reading done by publishers is that of the balance sheet and the profit and loss account. It is our responsibility as readers to dispel their complacency. We can do it. We hold the purse strings.

Looking at the brighter side: A small, gradually expanding group of writers has come to realize that sf relating merely to the physical and biological sciences is as dead as yesterday's newspaper. The sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics are waiting as eagerly as vestal virgins to be raped and exploited for our advantage. The small but expanding horde brilliantly led by Ghengis Ballard is sweeping all before it in a magnificent attempt to broaden our horizons and expand our cerebral processes.

The more putrid of the magazines have vanished from the face of the earth. The survivors have clearly noted the warning and are markedly improved in content and in presentation. Even 'Amazing' and 'Fantastic', which for years have been the absolute bottom, are making a belated effort, but one feels that this effort is a bit too late. The most interesting development in the magazine field is 'New Worlds', with its new format and new approach. Mike Moorcock deserves full marks for trying. One can only hope he will succeed. He obviously knows what is good. Does he know what will sell, and further, can he sell it? One sincerely hopes he can. This mighty deviation from safe conformity to avant garde experimentation deserves to succeed. The rumoured new Ace Books format should give greater scope and reward to their authors, and not prove too ruinous for the pocket. (Although it's probably too much to hope that Australian distributors and booksellers will ever be contented with a reasonable margin of profit. You must admit a 100 per cent markup is, to say the least, iniquitous.)

Forget the table tennis; it's a kids' game anyway. Think about what you read. Discuss it. Write to authors. Write to publishers. Protest at booksellers. And above all, argue, dispute, wrangle, feud, criticize, protest, yell, scream and howl. Let's get some life into the movement! At the present time it's as dull as an old ladies' tea party.

[illegible]

I could, and perhaps one day will, write more about Brian Richards as I knew him, but not now. I don't feel like it. All I feel (and it was brought home even more strongly as I typed that speech and heard his voice in every line) is an acute sense of loss.

[illegible]

Picture a scene in the Richards lounge. We are entertaining local Roman-type clergy, who has come in to bum tea from us. He looks at book shelf. 'Aah: Holy Mary': - Karl Marx': - Das Kapital'. Works of the devil!' Richards: 'But, father, 'tis on the science fiction shelf.' Peace and goodwill restored. Roll on Xmas.

I have two tangible reminders of Brian's friendship, apart from his letters. One is a pair of sunglasses (he was an optometrist) which I wear to this day; the other a book inscribed 'To John Bangsund, my favourite editor... Dec. '68.' To have been Brian Richards's favourite editor is no small achievement. The book is mediocre; the honour I cherish.