

PHILOSOPHICAL GAS

A JOURNAL OF PANTOPRAGMATICS

32



A special issue for the 33rd
World Science Fiction Convention
Melbourne - August 1975

IF you happen to live more than 350 km (or 200 miles, as we used to say in the old days) from Sydney, as I do, you will probably never have heard 2JJ's fabulous radio serial CHUCK CHUNDER OF THE SPACE PATROL. I had never heard of it until tonight, when I saw a bit of it being recorded, on the local telly. It's the kind of thing - really, no kidding - that deserves at least twenty pages of in-depth criticism. And if I lived nearer Sydney that's exactly what you would be getting in this issue. However, I'm stuck here in Canberra, the Dead Heart of Australia, and no one in Sydney ever writes to me except Bert Chandler and Norm Gunston (oh, and Shayne McCormack! Hiya, Shayne! Isn't this world convention exciting?), so this issue is at least twenty pages short. Sorry about that.

Anyway, as my contribution to International Women's Year, and in the lamentable absence of Consumer Straight-talk, here is

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Number 32 : August 1975

Published by John Bangsund
PO Box 357
Kingston ACT 2604 Australia

Subscriptions A\$4.00 per year
Trades by arrangement
Contributions welcomed

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ACTUALLY I reckon every year is Women's Year. And Men's Year. I might be kidding myself but I think that Sally and I are sufficiently liberated not to need any special agitation or awareness-promotion or whatever the current cant is. But we do feel strongly about People Liberation! And we're working on it. Lately we've come to know and appreciate several People. They're a bit odd at first: you know, who isn't? - so you have to work at it. But it's worth it. Many People are human. Some of our best friends even - I don't want to sound at all patronizing about this or smug or anything - are People.

Take Robin Johnson for example. Or Mervyn Binns. Take them, go on! They're People, right? They are, aren't they? Of course they are. They might be science fiction fans, but by golly they're People all right. Lee Harding told me, so they must be. If you happen to be at the 33rd World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne, please be nice to them. WHAT WE NEED MOST IN THIS WORLD IS UNDERSTANDING AND NICENESS! And cheap offset printers on every street corner, two cheap secondhand booksellers in between and someone who knows someone who can get Kaiser Stuhl flagons wholesale, of course. If you happen to stumble over Robin or Mervyn at the Southern Cross, please remember that. Tell me afterwards, if you must, how hard it was to be nice to Robin and Mervyn and all those oddball Australian fans. I will understand, believe me, for I, too, am an oddball Australian fan. I will offer you (a) a sympathetic ear, (b) a sensitive nose, and (c) a lifetime subscription to Philosophical Gas. You could hardly ask for more, really. Could you?

I FEEL all overcome with nostalgia and things, typing this special issue for the 33rd World SF Convention. Goshwow, crikey, etc. No, I'm not overcome by the thought of the Worldcon - I understand they have one every year - but by the thought that this is the very last fanzine issue I shall ever type on this faithful old bastard of an IBM.

Man and boy I've known this machine since, um, oh I dunno exactly, but it must have been about this time of year in 1970 when I first laid eyes on it. A few weeks ago I took it to my friendly local IBM repair bloke for a bit of a check-up and he said it would cost me \$200, and it wasn't worth it anyway because the innards had just about rusted away, so I ordered another IBM from him. Not a new one, just a later model than this, with the same old familiar eye-straining typeface.

Unfortunately the 'new' machine won't be ready until after the convention, so I asked him a few days ago whether I could borrow this old pal of mine for a couple of weeks. Borrow, no. Hire, yes. Since I left it with him he has cleaned it, put new bits on it here and there and placed it on his shelf for sale. \$250. I guess it's probably worth that,

but in all conscience I must advise you against buying it, really. For one thing, even after only one flagon of Kaiser Stuhl's finest, it makes a lot of spelling mistkaes.

As I walked out of my friendly local IBM bloke's showroom, this dear old machine under my arm, I suggested that I might spill a bit of claret over it for old times' sake. He suggested that I should not. Maybe he won't notice if I spill a few tears over it.

LET ME TELL YOU A TALE...

(That's one of Harding's favourite expressions, but he probably stole it from somewhere, and he's since stolen some of mine, so, as I was saying) let me tell you a tale.

The origins of the World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne may be traced back to Hugo Gernsback, Jules Verne, Mary Shelley - indeed, should you be so inclined, to Lucian of Samosata or the Book of Job. But let's be reasonable about it and say that it's basically John Foyster's fault.

Ten years ago John decided that what Australian fandom needed was another convention. There had been at least six national conventions before then, but the most recent had been the 1958 convention in Melbourne. 'It's time,' John cried, or something to that effect. So in 1966 a motley bunch of dedicated fans braved the horrors of the Melbourne SF Club's primitive clubrooms - an ancient warehouse in Somerset Place, serviced by a hydraulic lift (the second-last in Melbourne) and infested by rats, Mervyn Sinns and old movie posters - and proceeded to enjoy themselves hugely and make fannish history.

Out of that convention came a fanzine called Australian Science Fiction Review, and out of ASFR came more conventions, more clubs, more fanzines...

And here we are.

The first issue of ASFR, published in June 1966, two months after the convention, featured Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, Langdon Jones, John Foyster, John Baxter, Lee Harding, Mervyn Sinns, Stephen Murray-Smith, Burt Kaufman, Jim Ellis, Bob Sessions - even Bernard O'Dowd. Not

a bad line-up for a first issue. Since then I've published so many fanzines I've long since lost count. ASFR became Scythrop in 1970. In 1968 Leigh Edmonds started ANZAPA and I discovered the joys of publishing apazines. My first apazine was The New Millennial Harbinger, which begat Crog, which begat Philosophical Gas. Along the line there were The Cosmic Dustbug, Australian SF Monthly, Revolting Tales of Sex and Super-Science, Bundalohn Quarterly, Lodbrog, Stunned Mullet and others I've perhaps mercifully forgotten.

In 1966 there was need for a good critical fanzine devoted to sf. Pete Weston's Zenith (later Speculation) was about the only fanzine around in this field. In ASFR 14 (February 1968) Samuel R. Delany wrote: 'The Review - a number of people around here have started referring to it simply as The Review (indicating that there is no other, perhaps?) - has become one of the more intriguing voices in the dialogue of current sf.' And so it was.

One of ASFR's early subscribers, a young school-teacher named Bruce Gillespie, decided that he wanted to publish a fanzine something like ASFR; and as he was thinking about this I was thinking how much I would like to publish something not so closely bound to sf. Bruce's SF Commentary therefore picked up the loose ends of the conversation that ASFR was about to drop, and instantly became every bit as intriguing a voice in the sf dialogue as ASFR had ever been. Happily, Bruce's work continues, and SFC is a great fanzine.

Bruce and I have won a Ditmar Award each, and each been nominated three times for a Hugo. Both of us (for once I think I can speak on Bruce's behalf as well as my own) know that we owe what we have achieved, and we have achieved a lot, primarily to all those friends of ours in fandom who have supported us by writing articles for us, writing letters to us, sending us artwork (which we sometimes use: Australian fanzines are not renowned for their artwork, and given half a chance at this convention we'll tell you why), buying subscriptions from us, and altogether making us feel that we really are as good as you tell us we are.

And of course, we are at least as good as that, dammit! We might be modest but we're not idiots! After the convention we'll go on publishing our stuff, and we hope you'll go on helping us in what Jack Speer has so aptly called 'the continuing conversation'.

Philosophical Gas, despite my occasional outbursts to the contrary, continues to be very largely concerned with science fiction. I've tried to interest my moronic readers in a better class of literature, such as the works of Thomas Love Peacock and Brian O'Nolan, not to mention Lennie Lower, but sf keeps on rearing its ugly head and I guess I just have to live with that if I want to go on publishing (and I do, I do: I don't know why, but I do!) so PG must be regarded as a science fiction fanzine.

It is also, as John Clark up there in Queensland remarked a few issues back, my private diary. It isn't as intimate a diary as, say, Dick Geis's, but it's a diary, and I like to think I am among friends when I sit down in front of a blank stencil and begin to recount the momentous and other events in my life.

Also, Philosophical Gas is about the only place where I write. I mean, write. Other people write on paper and get many cents per word for what they do. Between 8.30 am and 4.51 pm I probably earn more than they do by correcting what other people have written on paper. But my writing is very much confined to what I put on stencil. Most of it, like it or not, goes straight onto that stencil without forethought, and that's what you read - unless I think better of it next day. I also write letters. Robin Johnson will deny that, but it's true. Only last week I wrote three letters. (This week I'm having a rest.)

Anyway, for the benefit of people who have never seen (or even heard of) PG before - and they are in the majority for this issue -, I should mention that over the last few years I have been writing from time to time little stories about the University of Ard-Knox, an institution founded with John Foyster's encouragement some years ago, and about the exploits of Keats and Chapman. The latter anecdotes are loosely based on the original and utterly brilliant stories by Myles na Gopaleen, published in the Irish Times. I have never been much good at writing K&C anecdotes, so this time I have again made the worst of both worlds by inviting Keats and Chapman to the University of Ard-Knox. If you don't like this story, I don't mind at all. But I think I should warn you that, if this is the case, you are probably unlikely to get much pleasure out of Philosophical Gas.

THE SAD STORY OF DAI TODHUNTER

- being a further sad instalment of the History of the University of Ard-Knox, and a spurious Anecdote of Keats and Chapman into the bargain:

WE HAVE always enjoyed the visits of Keats and Chapman here at the University of Ard-Knox, and perhaps none of us more so than our late friend Dai Todhunter.

Dai was a strange but lovable sort of chap, a tall, thin, cadaverous man who rarely smiled (and when he did, tended to unnerve students and small dogs). He was our Senior Research Fellow in Storied Urns and Animated Busts, a field of learning in which he was universally reckoned an authority of the first rank, and he knew three jokes.

Dai loved Keats and Chapman because they always laughed at his jokes, and Keats and Chapman were very fond of old Dai because he knew so many extraordinary things about urns, busts and other monumental subjects, and because, as I have already mentioned, he was quite lovable in his own strange way.

Passing the Lower Ferntree Gully cemetery, Dai would invariably remark that 'this was the dead centre of Ard-Knox', and Keats would nudge Chapman and they would both laugh enthusiastically until Dai said (as he always did) 'Do you know that no one living in Ard-Knox can be buried in this cemetery?' 'Oh, why is that?' Keats or Chapman would always enquire. 'Because they have to be dead first.' Dai would say.

The friends would laugh again and talk merrily of this and that until they reached a certain corner. Here Dai would complete his repertoire. 'That's the undertaker's place there' he would say. 'Do you know why I like him? Because he's the last man who'd ever let me down.' And Keats and Chapman would slap him on the back and call him a gay dog and a jolly fellow and insist on buying him a milkshake, every time.

Dai Todhunter, at the time of which I speak, had been working for years on a book which seemed destined to be the ultimate and definitive study of storied urns and animated busts. The book was to be called THE VAULT. From time to time he would publish extracts

from his work-in-progress in various learned journals, always to the intense chagrin of his only rivals in the field, Dr Ness, of the University of Nebraska, and Professor Twomey, of Trinity College, Dublin. These men, in a manner that only academics truly understand, envied THE VAULT furiously, and they did not love its author.

Keats and Chapman happened to be visiting Ard-Knox when Dai succumbed to his last fatal illness. It was a sad occasion for us all. We knew that Dai had been warned often enough by his medical colleagues not to continue his work. We knew, in fact, that when quite young he had been told by a doctor that his gaunt frame and ashen complexion were classic symptoms of the dreaded Gray's Allergy, no doubt contracted in some suburban cemetery, and that he must perforce desist from his field work, perhaps even embark on some other line of research. Dai did neither.

We buried him in his beloved Lower Ferntree Gully cemetery, and his friend the local undertaker (as Dai had so often predicted) officiated. We remembered his three jokes, and we felt sorry for not laughing at them more often. I overheard Chapman talking softly with Keats as we left the graveside, and I knew that they were remembering the old man's jokes, too, and his great work, and those who would profit by it. It was coming on twilight. Up the road the bells clanged at the railway crossing. Chapman said 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting Dai...' Keats nodded sadly. 'And leaves THE VAULT to Doc Ness and Twomey!' he said, grimly. The friends looked at each other for a moment, uncomfortably, then Keats grinned and said 'Do you think it might be catching?'

I NOTICE that in the membership list for the 33rd World SF Convention there appears the name Kevin Gluyas. Kevin (there could only be one Kevin Gluyas in all this world, surely, let alone Victoria) went into theological college about the year after I left. Do you remember, Kevin, Laurie Trezise and his elocution lessons? How we had to learn to recite

'Charge, Chester, charge!
On, Stanley, on!'

and

'Never the lotus closes,

Never the wild fowl wake,
But some soul goes out on the East Wind
That died for England's sake.'

And of course:

'Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?'

Laurie Trezise, Randall Pitman, Will Gale and many more have gone since we learnt those lines. John Alderson and Bruce Gillespie and Leigh and Helen Hyde will remember these men, as we do. I don't know what connexion there is between the Churches of Christ and sf fandom, but it seems there is one. If there isn't, what the hell are you doing here? Trying to destroy one of my pet theories?

PHILOSOPHICAL GAS

has been published since about July 1970, which makes this the fifth anniversary issue, goshwow. It started off pretty modestly, mostly written by myself, and stayed that way until 1972. About then I let other people into its pages, being a bit short on inspiration and one thing and another, and the magazine has never looked back. I resent that a bit, but not much. I have always had this hang-up, see. Look, let's get into a huddle, just you and me and those two over there, and I'll tell you about it. You see (shhh! here comes Lee Harding! - not a word or he'll laugh at me!), the fact is that I've never been quite able to choose between two basic instincts in fanzine publishing: what I call the autobiographical and the entrepreneurial instincts. You know, I'd like to be like Harry Warner and just talk about what happened to me and what I thought about during the last three months. Then again, I want to go on basking in the reflected glory of the things I publish by people like George Turner and Bert Chandler. It's a problem, it really is. For the time being (watch out! here comes Foyster! - not a word or he'll have me publishing book reviews again!) I intend to go on trying to balance those two instincts. But - mind you - not a word to a soul.

IF YOU care to investigate what I've been up to lately, and are interested in what I'm likely to do next, I have a few back issues of ASFR, PG, Scythrop and so on for sale to Select Persons, and it is just possible that you might be able to engage me in conversation during this momentous weekend, especially if you should happen to be waving dollar bills before me or inviting me loudly to join you in a vintage red, an expensive meal, or both.

WELCOME TO
AUSTRALIA,

URSULA, SUSAN, MIKE,
RUSTY, BOB, DON (sorry, Don!)
AND YOU-ALL



And I hope yez
have a bonzer time!

J.B.

THE ORSTRALIAN NOTIONAL ANTHEM

Orstralia! Orstralia!

Yer know we'll never fail yer!

We'll fight for yer and die for yer

Whene'er yer foes assail yer!

Our sunburnt land is green in spots,

There's gold in sand - and we've got lots,

We're big on Truth and Liberty:

Orstralia is the place for we!

The East is red, the South is not -

This is the Land That Time Forgot.

But Time has caught up with us now

And we're all reading Chairman Mao.

Yes, Time has caught up with us now,

And we're all reading Chairman Mao,

But Chairman Mao is rather bleak,

So now and then we read Newsweek.

With E.G. Whitlam at our head

We'll soon be either red or dead;

Whichever it turns out to be,

It is our modest Destiny.

Whichever it turns out to be,

It is our modest Destiny -

But Destinies are born, not made,

So ours will likely be mislaid.

We've all got homes and cars and jobs;

We're all right, Jack - but we're not snobs!

If everyone was like we are

This World would be Utopia!

If everyone was like we are

This World would be Utopia!

There'd be a lot less strife and fuss

If everyone was just like us!

Orstralia! Orstralia!

Yer know we'll never fail yer!

We'll fight for yer and die for yer

Whene'er yer foes assail yer!

Our blokes are beaut, our sheilas grouse,

And we have got an Opera House -

And pies with sauce, and BHP:

Orstralia is the place for we!

