OPUNTIA

288

Remembrance Day 2014

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta.
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.

SAY A PRAYER FOR THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER
by Dale Speirs

The largest Remembrance Day ceremony in Calgary is at the Military Museums (written up in OPUNTIA #71.5), but there are dozens of smaller ceremonies scattered throughout the city on November 11. In the southwest area of Calgary there is a suburb called Signal Hill, built on a foothill overlooking the World War One training camps. Those camps were a long drive from Calgary a century ago but by about 15 years ago were built over as Calgary's endless sprawl continues.

The slope of the hill was preserved as native grassland because off-duty soldiers built massive whitewashed stone numerals representing their unit numbers. The slopes are now Battalion Park, and the neighbourhood residents have their ceremony there.

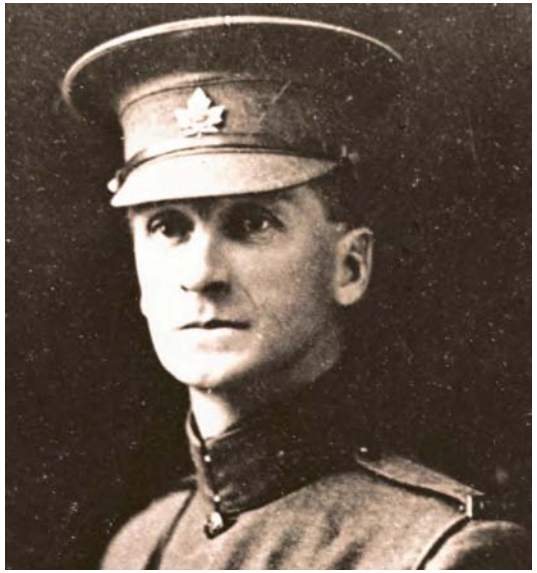
Looking down from the entrance of Battalion Park. Where the houses are now was where the training camps were. The forested land beyond is the Tsuu T'ina tribal Reserve, which now forms the southwest boundary of the city.

A reverse view from the bottom of the hill, showing the giant numbers the soldiers made. The numbers represent various battalions and regiments.

I did not notice the flock of seagulls in the foreground when I took the picture, only afterwards when I was processing the photo on my computer.

A close-up from the bottom of the slope.

The soldiers just left the rocks as is. When the hill was developed, the Parks Dept. knew what vandals would do, so they covered the rocks with heavy-gauge mesh. The stones are repainted every so often.



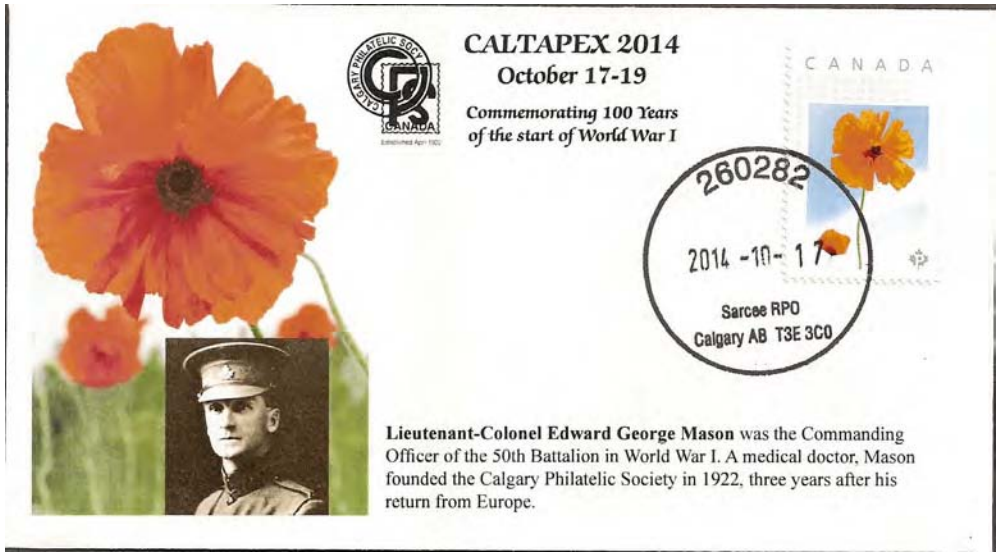
The main part of the training camps was known as Sarcee Field Camp, under the command of Lt.-Col. Dr. Edward George Mason. He was a philatelist and in 1922 he founded the Calgary Philatelic Society, of which I have been a member since 1980. Mason commanded the 50th Battalion and led it overseas to France, and was mentioned in despatches for efficiency and good training. His men were very loyal to him and called their unit "Mason's Man-eaters". In 1916 he was wounded in the trenches when a chlorine gas shell exploded in his face. After recovering from his injuries, he was assigned command of the Shorncliffe Medical Hospital in England, returning home to Calgary in 1919.

Mason spent the rest of his career treating shell-shock veterans, what today is referred to as post-traumatic stress syndrome. By all accounts he cared deeply about his soldiers' health. Mason died in 1947 at the age of 72, survived by his wife and three children.

This year being the centennial of World War One, the Calgary Philatelic Society (CPS) made it the theme of their annual stamp show CALTAPEX*, held every October on the weekend after Thanksgiving Monday. Each year commemorative envelopes (which philatelists refer to as covers) are prepared to sell as souvenirs at the show. One of our members ordered two sets of personalized stamps and designed the cover cachet. One stamp was the above image of Dr. Mason, and the other a photo of poppies. I took the covers to the Sarcee post office, a few blocks from where Mason once had his camp, and had them postmarked there.

* Just as science-fiction conventions usually call themselves something-or-other Con, so it is that most stamp shows are whatever PEX (**P**hilatelic **Ex**hibition).

This year's Remembrance Day stamp issued by Canada Post used one of the most famous war pictures of Canada, titled "Wait For Me Daddy". A newspaper photographer had set up at the bottom of a hill in New Westminster, British Columbia, to show a line of soldiers marching to the troopship. Just as he was about to click the shutter, a 5-year-old boy broke loose from his mother and ran to his father marching in the ranks. The photo was widely distributed and used in war bond drives. Look closely and you'll see the boy is an albino.



Above is the CALTAPEX show cover with the poppy stamp. I edit the bimonthly periodical of the CPS, titled CALGARY PHILATELIST. Each issue is mailed from a different post office with a different commemorative stamp, so members can build up a nice collection of postmarks on cover over time. The recent postage hikes may have shut down the print version of OPUNTIA, but for the CPS, the genuine use of stamps and postmarks is part of member benefits. The next issue will be mailed using the Wait For Me Daddy stamp and postmarked at Sarcee.

Meanwhile, at CALTAPEX 2014, I was browsing in the dealer bourse and came across a postal card with a World War One alternative history theme. This was a publicity card for the silent film THE FALL OF A NATION, about the invasion of America by Germany in 1916. It was a sequel to the infamous THE BIRTH OF A NATION.

Here is the message side. I checked Wikipedia and apparently there are no known prints of the film in existence, only a few stills. This is the first sequel ever made for a movie. The movie attacked the pacifist movement in America and urged that the USA get into the war, as indeed Canada already was from the beginning.

The film, despite the postcard message, was a financial failure, and Dixon Studios went bankrupt in 1921 without ever having produced another movie.

FALL OF A NATION

Gentlemen: October 11, 1916

The Strand Theatre, Toronto, opened Monday, and smashed all of its records for attendance and box office receipts, during the past two years with "THE FALL OF A NATION" playing to admission prices of from 15c to $1.00.

Double lines stretched both below Thompson's Restaurant and above Adelaide Street.

In consequence hundreds of people were unable to view the production.

The production depicts the German invasion of America,

The battle scenes are greater than any other picture yet produced.

"The Fall of a Nation" is Thomas Dixon's thrilling sequel to "The Birth of a Nation" of which production he was also the author.

We have available at the present time, only one print of this subject, therefore kindly advise us at your earliest convenience, upon what dates you desire to run this production in your theatre, and we will furnish you with full particulars.

This is in your interest as well as our own

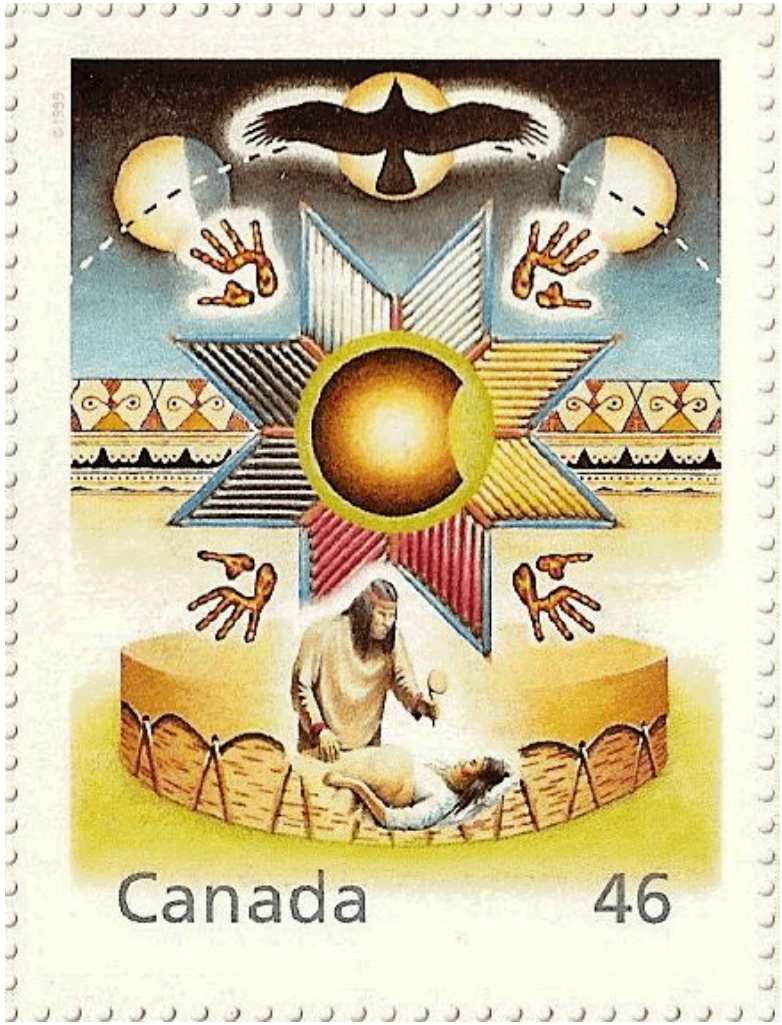
Very truly yours

VITAGRAPH—V.L.S.E
W. C. Gockin, Gen. Mgr. for Can.

Address: 15 Wilton Ave., Toronto
or 399 Bleury St., Montreal

Also at the bourse, I came across a real-photo postcard as shown at left. Doing a bit of research, I found this was a large petroglyph (aboriginal rock carving) at the Metlakatla Reserve, coastal British Columbia. The name of the petroglyph translated into English is “The Man Who Fell From Heaven”.

The story is that a man from the Tsimshian tribe told his people that he was going to go out on a holy walkabout up into the heavens. He came back a few days later, having run out of food in his hiding place, and told his people that he had fallen out of the sky and landed so hard that he left his imprint in the rock. As proof, he led them to where the petroglyph was. His people didn’t believe him and could see that he had carved the image into rock. It made a good story though, and thus the name given to the site.



SCIENCE FICTION REVIEWS
by Dale Speirs

This Shadow Doth Such Substance Give.

JACK OF SHADOWS (1971, hardcover) by Roger Zelazny is a fantasy novel set on a planet whose rotation matches the time it takes to orbit its star. Therefore one side always faces the star and the other is always in darkness. Both hemispheres are protected by separate shields, one to keep the light from boiling away the surface, and the other to hold in the heat to keep that half of the world from icing over. The darksiders have magic and live in a feudal economy, while the lightsiders are a technological society of scientific reason. The darksiders know that the centre of the planet holds giant machines that run everything, while the lightsiders believe that the planet has a molten core. There is no interaction between the two societies. Both believe the other is a primitive fiction.

Jack of the Shadows is from the Twilight, a darksider with no conscience and a determination to shake things up. He feuds with the warlords who control the Darkside and over a long period of time eventually conquers them all. He makes a visit in disguise to use the Lightside computers to plan out a scheme to destroy the status quo. He will wreck the machines in the centre of the planet, bring down the shields, and speed up the planet's rotation so that all sides have both night and day instead of just one.

The novel reads well. As it progresses, Jack of Shadows is seen to be both a hero and a psychopath. He has no soul and moves through his world without being a part of it. The Darkside society is shown, not told, and Jack's burning hatred of the warlords develops into his final Gotterdammerung.

Quantum Mechanics As A Weapon.

IMPACT (2011, mass-market paperback) by Douglas Preston is definitely a departure from the usual alien attack fiction. There are three subplots that converge near the end. Firstly, a meteorite flashes across northeastern USA and a young astronomer tracks it to an island off the coast of Maine. She and a friend follow it to the impact point but find only a small-diameter glassy borehole going down into the Earth with no apparent bottom. Meanwhile, the CIA hires a contractor to find the source of radioactive gemstones being marketed out of Cambodia, mined from a recent non-volcanic eruption of unknown origin. A scientist at the National Propulsion Facility discovers an intense pinpoint source of gamma rays apparently coming from Mars. He also finds out the hard way that people who enquire too closely into the matter wind up dead in staged accidents.

The three subplots meet when it is realized that the glassy borehole is the entrance and the blowout is the exit wound of a strangelet fired through the Earth from Mars by an alien weapon hidden inside Deimos for hundreds of millions of years. A strangelet is a quantum particle of ultradense quarks that converts any matter it touches into strangelets. The first strangelet passed through too fast to do more than bore a hole through the Earth. Most of the hole instantly closed up after the strangelet because the core is plastic molten rock or liquid, leaving only the entrance and exit wounds. The alien machine waits a few months and then fires a second, bigger strangelet through the Moon, with the entrance exactly at Tranquility Base, and blowing out a huge chunk into a new ring around the earth. That was either very subtle or very crude, depending on how one interprets it. It appears the machine was triggered when a space probe scanned Deimos with radar, indicating to the machine that Earth now had interplanetary travel worth extirpating.

The conclusion of Earthlings is that the alien machine is so advanced that they cannot fight it. They assume that it has been monitoring them since the Industrial Revolution and has learned the Earth languages by monitoring radio broadcasts. They broadcast a message to it: "We surrender". The machine replies that their surrender is accepted and for them to wait for the invasion force. Since any invasion wouldn't arrive for centuries, assuming the aliens do not have faster-than-light drives, this will give the Earth time to build up its defenses. In the meantime, Earth scientists monitor an undecipherable message the machine transmitted into the far reaches of space. But the stellar system it sent the message to went supernova twelve megayears ago, leaving behind gamma bursts that suggest the civilization that built the machine blew itself up with an accident or internal war involving its strangelets. There will be no invasion.

The novel is a good page-turner and I read it at one sitting. The concepts are well explained without any infodumps. The subplots, at first seemingly unrelated, are neatly brought together.

GOINGS-ON IN COWTOWN
by Dale Speirs

I moved to Calgary in 1978 and over the years have noticed it is not the best place to observe astronomical events. Let it be announced that a solar or lunar eclipse will appear at Cowtown and I know right away we will have overcast skies that night. A once-a hundred-years conjunction of planets will also bring with it a once-in-a-hundred-years rain. I finally got lucky for a partial solar eclipse over Calgary on the afternoon of 2014-10-23. Clear skies because of gusting chinook winds and the sun blazing down on my humble abode.

I made a pinhole camera from two pieces of thin white cardboard. Punch a hole through one piece with a safety pin and use the other for the display screen. Because the chinook was blowing so hard, I taped the display cardboard to the rear window of my car, parked in the driveway at the best angle to the sun and with the proper tilt to show the image. The photo below shows the setup. You can see a spot of light on the display cardboard.

A close-up of one of the images, taken at 15h23, shows the maximum extent of the solar eclipse. Only a small bite out of the sun at my latitude, but hey! it's science for the masses!

The rest of the neighbourhood took no note. Passersby undoubtedly wondered what I was doing hunched over the rear window with a camera in one hand and waving an index card with the other. Fortunately my immediate neighbours were all at work.

The eclipse was too small to cause any visible diminishing of the sun, but through the pinhole it was clearly visible.

In a southwest suburb of Calgary I saw this house, which initially attracted my attention because of the Batman flag. I then noticed a wood carving of bones made from a large piece of driftwood, a Buddha (with a small spotlight on the grass aimed at it), and half a canoe.

I'm sure there was a reason for the eclectic landscaping but I wasn't going to ring the doorbell and ask. No one bothers me while I'm eclipse watching and I'll return the favour.

Calgarians have developed the habit over the past decade or so of taking their 6-and-under children to shopping malls for Halloween trick-or-treating during the afternoon. It's a safe place for the kids, the malls plan for it, and the kids are home at night while their older siblings go to parties or trick-or-treating.

I was doing an errand in the Chinook Mall on Halloween late afternoon, and as I passed by the Purdy's Chocolates store, I saw this sign. What it meant, of course, was that there was no more free Halloween candy left. Their regular stock, of premium quality, is far too expensive to give away.

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: Ned Brooks 2014-10-30
Lilburn, Georgia

[Re: OPUNTIA #287, the typewriter issue] I have seen those Toledo Metal Furniture typewriter stands with the mechanism to engage the wheels. They are quite durable. But those wheels are too small, not too bad on a hard floor, but not good on carpet. And the thing with the machine on it is top-heavy and might topple at a door-sill. If I were making such a cart, the wheels would be at least 3 inches in diameter.

The writer of "The Craig Idea" seemed to try to avoid any actual brand names. There was a Rex, but apparently not in 1909.

[It was published in an office management magazine, so I suspect the author knew enough not to offend any advertisers by mentioning an existing typewriter. The magazine was about 60% display ads.]

The Yost ad's promotion of the new ideas of no shift and no ribbon could only have come after other machines had the shift and the ribbon. The shift won out and is with us still, and the only alternative to the ribbon was for the type-slug to brush against an inked felt on the way to the paper. That too vanished as ribbons became better.

There were ponderous typewriters that could type in an open book. I almost bought one once at the Goodwill in Norfolk, an Underwood-Elliott-Fisher. But I have never seen a Yale Lock Typewriter Book . An interesting idea. I would like to have an Emerson, but they are rare. The only thing similar is the Oliver, which was so successful that it is not particularly rare.

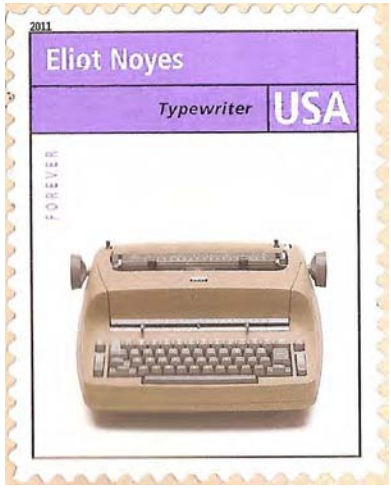
[Typewriter collecting, as interesting as it may be, is beyond me. Not because of cost, but because of the weight and space they take up. I do like to read about their history though. What personal computers were in the 1990s, so were typewriters in the 1890s as they became cheap and widespread. Most people don't realize the first telecom revolution wasn't a couple of decades ago, it was a century ago as typewriters, telephones, cheap postage, and telegraphs spread.]

FROM: Milt Stevens 2014-11-04
Simi Valley, California

In OPUNTIA #286, I very much enjoyed "The Science of Counterfactuals." Justifying alternate history is sort of fun in a bizarre fashion. Part of my mind realizes it would be easier to say "We just make this stuff up for amusement. Don't worry about the reality of it." That approach has worked for fantasy for ages. Of course, there are always a few people who try to figure out a rational explanation for witchcraft or vampires.

If I had my life to do over, I'd really pay a lot more attention to math. I was in my forties before I really became impressed with mathematics. Pythagoras said numerability was the essence of all things. He may not have been exactly right, but he was in the ball park. I think things like that bit about the usage of logarithms are fascinating. It's like finding a place where the bones of the universe are showing. The endless proliferation of universes makes me think of Alka-Seltzer. Each bubble coming to the surface is a new universe. Of course, another reason for thinking of Alka-Seltzer is that the whole idea upsets my stomach.

As you might expect, OPUNTIA #287 caused me to think about typewriters. I guess I always thought of typewriters as part of the natural world. Earlier generations thought of quill pens in the same way. There were paintings of angels writing with quill pens. If that was accurate, quill pens must have existed since the beginning of the universe and must be the ultimate writing device. As a child, I would have imagined angels writing with typewriters. That's obviously silly, since we all know angels use computers.



The device that always impressed me as being a little bit unearthly was the linotype. Linotypes looked like something that couldn't possibly work but were obviously working. I'm sure they would look much more natural in a steampunk universe.

ZINE LISTINGS
by Dale Speirs

[I only list zines from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read them directly.]

[The Usual means $5 cash ($6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

[SF means science fiction. An apazine is a zine for an amateur press association distro, a perzine is a personal zine, sercon is serious-constructive, and a genzine is a general zine.]

SHOW ME THE MONEY #40 (The Usual from Tony Hunnicutt, Box 48161, Coon Rapids, Minnesota 55448) A look at economics that you won't find in the mainstream media, as well as assorted and random facts and clippings.

THE FOSSIL #361 (US$10 per year from The Fossils, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) This year is the 110th anniversary of The Fossils, founded in 1904 as a group of zinesters interested in the history of zinedom. Zines as we know them today were first published after 1867, when Boston pharmacist Benjamin Woods invented a small cheap table-top printing press. He wanted one to print medicine labels and posters for his drug store but soon began manufacturing and selling them by mail order. At the same time, the concept of teenagers had been invented, as teens could now stay at home and further their education in high schools instead of going to work after Grade 9. The National Amateur Press Association was founded in 1876, and zinedom grew and multiplied in countless directions. This issue of THE FOSSIL has an account of zines in Harrison County, Ohio, during the late 1800s, and Lone Scouts of America zines (Boy Scouts who lived in rural areas that couldn't support a troop). There is also a brief history of The Fossils, and news about various zine collections in university libraries.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Cuthill, J.F.H and Simon Conway Morris (2014) **Fractal branching organizations of Ediacaran rangeomorph fronds reveal a lost Proterozoic body plan.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:13122–13126

Author's abstract: "*The branching morphology of Ediacaran rangeomorph fronds has no exact counterpart in other complex macroorganisms. As such, these fossils pose major questions as to growth patterns, functional morphology, modes of feeding, and adaptive optimality. Here, using parametric Lindenmayer systems, a formal model of rangeomorph morphologies reveals a fractal body plan characterized by self-similar, axial, apical, alternate branching. Consequent morphological reconstruction for 11 taxa demonstrates an adaptive radiation based on 3D space-filling strategies. The fractal body plan of rangeomorphs is shown to maximize surface area, consistent with diffusive nutrient uptake from the water column (osmotrophy). The enigmas of rangeomorph morphology, evolution, and extinction are resolved by the realization that they were adaptively optimized for unique ecological and geochemical conditions in the late Proterozoic. Changes in ocean conditions associated with the Cambrian explosion sealed their fate.*"

Speirs: Rangeomorphs were frond-growing organisms at the dawn of multicellular life just as the oceans were becoming aerobic. They were not photosynthetic, did not filter-feed like sponges, did not move around the sea floor, and were not active carnivores. They simply grew fronds in 3-D fractal patterns and absorbed carbon and other molecules floating by in the water. They were wiped out when other sea creatures such as sponges or mobile animals began intercepting the food supply more efficiently, thus starving out the rangeomorphs.

Chaboureau, A.C., et al (2014) **Tectonic-driven climate change and the diversification of angiosperms.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:14066–14070

[Speirs: This time I'll have to put my comments ahead of the paper so you can understand the abstract. Angiosperms are the flowering plants. They suddenly appeared in the fossil record as mammals also did, during the peak of the

dinosaurs. The Triassic was 251.0 to 199.6 mya, just after the Permian extinctions which wiped out 97% of all life on Earth. The Jurassic was 199.6 to 145.5 mya as the dinosaurs began their rise. The Cretaceous was 145.5 to 65.5 mya as mammals and angiosperms began their rise and dinosaurs began their decline. Pangea was a supercontinent that was later broken up by the movement of tectonic plates into all the modern continents. Most of Pangea's interior was desert.]

Authors' abstract: "*In 1879, Charles Darwin characterized the sudden and unexplained rise of angiosperms during the Cretaceous as an "abominable mystery." The diversification of this clade marked the beginning of a rapid transition among Mesozoic ecosystems and floras formerly dominated by ferns, conifers, and cycads. Although the role of environmental factors has been suggested, Cretaceous global climate change has barely been considered as a contributor to angiosperm radiation, and focus was put on biotic factors to explain this transition. Here we use a fully coupled climate model driven by Mesozoic paleogeographic maps to quantify and discuss the impact of continental drift on angiosperm expansion and diversification. We show that the decrease of desertic belts between the Triassic and the Cretaceous and the subsequent onset of long-lasting humid conditions during the Late Cretaceous were driven by the breakup of Pangea and were contemporaneous with the first rise of angiosperm diversification. Positioning angiosperm-bearing fossil sites on our paleobioclimatic maps shows a strong match between the location of fossil-rich outcrops and temperate humid zones, indicating that climate change from arid to temperate dominance may have set the stage for the ecological expansion of flowering plants.*"

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 16
by Dale Speirs

The original Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are referred to as the canon, and subsequent stories by other authors are pastiches.

Non-Fiction.

Today the Holmes stories are thought of as gaslight period pieces, but it must be remembered that they were written as contemporary fiction. SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE MAN AND HIS WORLD (2006, hardcover) by H.R.F. Keating is an explanation of the milieu in which Holmes and Watson lived. The book covers the geography and lifestyle of Britain more than a century ago, from how people got around town to how the different classes lived. Before the safety bicycle became cheap and common, people who could not afford horses or trains (and both were expensive to the lower classes) had to walk and were consequently confined to their neighbourhoods. The class system was taken for granted and everyone knew their place.

Several Holmes stories spoof Prince Edward, Queen Victoria's playboy heir, who was constantly scandalizing not only his mother but society as a whole. Many of the characters in the canon were transparently copied from public figures well known to the readers of that era, but whose analogues are unknown to the reader of today. Likewise many events, gadgets, and cultural references are explained in this book. A Victorian life-preserver in Holmes's day is not the round ring one throws to a drowning swimmer but was a leather blackjack used to slug victims over the head or conversely protect oneself from outrages.

Pastiches: Novels.

THE WILL OF THE DEAD (2013, trade paperback) by George Mann is about a parasitic batch of nephews and nieces who relied on Uncle Theobald for their allowances, he never having had any children. His will named them as the beneficiaries but it has gone missing. If the court declares him intestate, everything will go to a despised German relative. The chase for the will is on and Holmes is hired for the investigation. The old man supposedly died falling down a flight of stairs while drunk, but that is soon established as murder. Everyone is guilty of something, and the solicitor handling the estate is using an assumed identity.

Appearing through the novel is a side plot about steam-powered automatons smashing their way into townhouses of the well-to-do and stealing jewelry with impunity. Their inventor declares they were stolen and are being used by a criminal, but the automatons seem a little too advanced in their abilities. They prove to be instead Iron Man-style suits, if Iron Man had a steam engine on the back of his exoskeleton. The reader keeps expecting a tie-in with the greedy heirs to Uncle Theobald's fortune but instead it turns out that the subplot is completely unrelated. The novel seems to be a mash-up of a novella and an unrelated short story, but it does read well.

Pastiches: Short Stories.

"The Adventure Of The Grinder's Whistle" was published in Howard Waldrop's SF short-story collection NIGHT OF THE COOTERS (1990, mass-market paperback). It is a tie-in between two of Doyle's series, Holmes and Professor Challenger. The narrator is Edward Malone, who was to Challenger what Watson was to Holmes. It tells of an incident in his boyhood days when he was a street urchin belonging to the Baker Street Irregulars. They helped Holmes during the investigation of one of the Whitechapel murders, at first attributed to Jack the Ripper but then found to be caused, in this instance only, to a runaway steam combine. Rather a neat trick to add all them in together.

SIDEWALK ART IN CALGARY
photos by Dale Speirs

The City of Calgary spends other people's money (ie, taxpayers) on public art. Some of it isn't bad, some could have been done by a five-year-old child, and most is average. Skyscrapers and shopping malls also do the same, albeit on their own dime (which they will get back from tenants, who in turn will charge their customers a little extra). I don't specifically look for art to photograph, but as I walk about town I try to take smartphone pictures. My favourite is the scrap-iron draft horse on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall downtown.