

(Guest of Honour speech Albacon II)

THE SCOTTISH INFLUENCE ON SECTOR GENERAL

By James White

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, if the programme isn't running late. Because of the, at times, controversial content of this speech and the necessity of allowing more time for the questions which might arise because of it, I would like to make it a bit shorter than usual. Not short, of course, but just a few minutes on the shorter side of interminable.

Once again I appear before you in the increasingly familiar position as Guest of Honour at a Glasgow convention. The first occasion was at Faircon '78, when the place and the people were strange to me, the accents were even stranger, and the con committee were very strange indeed (Well, some things don't change), and the odd disaster which occurred from time to time was viewed as a breathtaking innovation. At subsequent Glasgow conventions I maintained a low profile (not an easy thing for me) until two years ago, for a reason I did not understand at the time, I was invited to be Toastmaster.

Little did I suspect that I was already being groomed for the Big One, this, the national Easter convention, Albacon II.

But there is worse to come ...

It is reportedly not true, and they themselves will strenuously deny it, that the Glasgow convention committees are finding it increasingly difficult to choose, from among the drunken and depraved ranks of the science fiction professional writers, one who is least undeserving of the honour.

The con committee has problems enough, you will appreciate, without having to worry about unpredictable behaviour from a maverick Guest of Honour.

It is for this reason that they are trying to employ one on a permanent basis; one who is easily led, or driven; one who is a harmless little pussy-cat.

I must be content merely to make this startling -- also amazing, fantastic, analogous and Azimovistic -- disclosure. Far be it for me to suggest anyone for this vitally important post of Permanent Guest of Honour.

However, it is possible that I, myself, possess a few of the necessary qualifications. For instance, I am completely against the consumption of alcohol in moderation; my convention misbehaviour is exemplary; and I can be very easily influenced -- by a pint of heavy or a wee Drambuie. Even Bruce Saville can get me to do things for him, by administering a quick kiss, a Glasgow Kiss, in the kneecap.

Regrettably, I no longer look as distinguished and debonair as I have done in former years. The eye-patch has gone. This is a pity in some ways, but, let's face it, that eye-patch was something of a mixed blessing. True, it gave me a certain dashing, devil-may-care air which was irresistible to the birds. But the only birds it really affected were parrots, who kept shouting piratical phrases at me, and messing up my nice St Fantony blazer, and threatening my virility with the dreadful disease Psittacosis. One of the most dreadful things about Psittacosis is trying to spell it.

As well, both the eminent Doctor Cohen (Where are you, Jack) and the nice, wee, totie Dr. Patterson (Hiya, Joan!) will confirm that among parrots Psittacosis is an unspeakable social disease -- how many parrots have you heard talking about it? -- and any young, misguided bird unfortunate enough to have it is immediately ostrichised

Even though the eye-patch is gone, the magnifying glass is still needed. This tends to slow down the delivery of my speech, as well as setting it on fire if the sun is shining, and I am very sorry about this. So much so that I'd thought of asking Peggy, concealed behind screens, of course, to read the speech while I stood here and mimed. But she has a very clear soprano voice, and this may have given people the wrong idea about me.

But enough of the health and social hazards of wearing an eye-patch. This speech is concerned with the influences, both malignant and benign, of the northern Gaels on the development of the most recent Sector General stories. It is entitled, naturally enough, "The Scottish Influence on Sector General", or more simply "The Influence of Scotch on Sector General" or "Sector General on the Rocks" or whatever title seems most appropriate to such serious and scholarly discussion.

A great many people, in addition to the Glasgow fans, have told me what to do with the Sector General series. Some of the suggestions have been improper, not to say physiologically impossible. Others have been beyond even my imaginative scope. What form, for example, would the DT's take in an extra-terrestrial alcoholics ward?

I mean, what kind of monster of the drink-disordered mind could be worse than the big, brown-eyed (six of them) and multi-tentacled nurse who is wheeling round the pill trolley? In such a situation the patients might be terrified, not by the variety of friendly horrors who are looking after them, but by solid, inanimate objects. Boxes or furniture, for example, would be particularly frightening to a bunch of soft-bodied, squishy and alcoholic aliens -- and sharp-edged, angular, structural supports of the ward would be worst of all because, wait for it, they are made from girders.

Some of these suggestion I have been impelled to use, because of psychological pressure, you understand, or physical coercion.

I well remember the time a couple of Faircons ago, when we were being run out to the airport. Well, actually it was the mini which was running us out to the airport, with minimal supervision by the driver, who was otherwise engaged in introducing us to the concept of intelligent but medically deprived budgerigars. We were made to feel that budgies, too, were God's creatures, and fully deserving of Sector General's care and medical expertise instead of letting the Hudlar and Tralthan heavies hog all

the available resources. Extra-terrestrial budgies, he insisted, were the salt of the Earth. Although his meaning was clear, he seemed to be geographically confused, and we hoped he knew where the airport was. He did, at least, the car did, and we were driven round and round the car park until I promised, on my hypocritical oath, to give budgerigars their proper place in Galactic Federation's Health Service.

Certain safe-guards were necessary from the legal standpoint, of course. This excitable, highly intelligent, light-gravity species was given three legs -- each one of them, I mean, not the whole species - - to avoid the risk of ordinary terrestrial budgies suing me. The race is known to the Galactic Federation as the Nallajim. The 'jim' is, of course, obvious and 'nalla' spelled backwards... Subtle, huh?

In the same story -- a novelette called Survivor in the latest SG book -- poor little Prilicla is nearly killed by a creature called a Dewett. For those of you who have never read a Sector General story, tsk-tsk-tsk, I should explain the basic premise behind the treatment of extra-terrestrials in the hospital. Simply, it is that a life-form cannot be affected, or infected, by the germs evolved by another off-planet species -- the e-t pathogens are incapable of reacting with any organism which is the product of a completely alien environment and evolution.

This is a bit of a cop-out, I know, but to do otherwise would mean that human and e-t medics would not be able to meet and talk, much less treat each other I mean medically, not alcoholically -- without all sorts of protective clothing and barrier nursing procedures necessary, and this would seriously slow down the action.

But while e-ts cannot be affected by other e-ts diseases, several members of the Friends of Kilgore Trout, and some other folks as well, have put forward ideas based on the exception which might prove the rule.

The Dewett life-form seems to be one of these exceptions, and Prilicla, the empath, is the being most at risk. I don't want to give away the whole plot, but I will say that the Dewett is a nice, placid, completely harmless and rather charming entity -- so long as one treats it with deference and respect, tells it it is a fine person, panders to its every whim, and plies it with its favourite tipple. However, should one of these rules be contravened, the effect on the convention, I mean the Hospital, would be terrible to behold.

The Dewett is, withall, a very serious, conscientious being who worries constantly about the behind-the-scenes operations of the hospital, the availability of suitable accommodation, the proper provisioning of the various kitchens, the administration pension schemes, the urgent need for a department of e-t chiropody. Thornnastor, the Tralthan Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology, for example, has callouses on all six of its feet, which is why the nurses call it Corny Thorny. It also makes frequent mention of the fact that proper consideration is not being given to the disposal or recycling of e-t body wastes.

You can see that the Dewett has a very tidy mind no, tidy, not tiny -- and it asks awkward questions on subjects like these, a new batch every year.

Another idea used in the latest SG book, which had its origin at a Glasgow convention is in a story called "Investigation". In this story, the ambulance ship team are involved for a time in the practice of forensic medicine. When they arrive at the scene of the disaster they find, not simply a wrecked ship, but evidence of a heinous crime. Pieces of the crew lay scattered about the vicinity of the wreck, as if some agency had been at work with an extra-terrestrial chain-saw. There were twitching heads and tails and limbs all over the place, resembling nothing so much as a CUSFS room party.

I can't remember who it was who came up with the idea originally, before it was cleaned up for the story. But if the sick mind responsible would persuade its host body to stand up, it can receive its egoboo.

Some of the plot suggestions have been unusual, even if one makes allowances for the condition of the alcohol-impregnated minds making them. For example, there was the suggestion that Dr Prilicla, the insectile, timid and extremely fragile empath should go berserk and beat up its colleagues. Ridiculous, you say. But even ridiculous ideas merit consideration {if one is desperate or drunk enough}, and suppose the being was not Prilicla but a look-alike, with muscles?

This particular entity is one of the new characters being introduced in a story I am currently working on.

I share the superstition held by many authors about discussing, in detail, work which has not yet been completed, much less accepted for publication. But I can talk about the story in general terms, I think, without losing the urge to finish writing it -- mostly because I haven't a baldy notion how it will end yet.

The working title is **Diagnostician**, and it is a novel in which Dr. Conway, having served with distinction on the senior medical staff of Sector General for more years than he (or I) cares to think about, is being considered for a position as of one of the medical elite, one of the hospital's Diagnosticians. This will be the sixth, and probably the last book in the series, As I have already said, it introduces a new recruit to the ambulance ship's medical team, a character called Dr. Danalta who, among its many other attributes, is a most effective and rapid shape-changer -- with a sense of humour which is not always appreciated by its colleagues.

This Danalta, whose physiological classification is TOBS, belongs to a race of shape-changers who evolved on a planet whose environment was incredibly hostile, and the natural weapon that its dominant life-form evolved were perfect offensive and defensive mimicry. The species is fantastically strong and virtually indestructible, with the ability of extruding any protective tegument, limbs, internal and external organs, sensory and communication equipment at will.

While an entity with such powers can easily reproduce the extremely delicate structure of a Cinruskin like Prilicla, the TOBS is a heavy creature who cannot lose mass during such a change.

Can you imagine such a Prilicla replica (that is hard to say), a Prilicla look-alike with its egg-shell body, pipe-stem legs and filmy wings perfectly reproduced, but in material so dense as to resemble neutronium? The thin, diamond-hard legs of this Prilicla would do more than scratch the furniture, and I

hate to think of what would happen if some heavyweight Hudlar or Tralthan bully tried to kick sand in its face.

There is also the incident where Conway expresses a need for the delectable Pathologist Murchison in Danalta's hearing, when she was at the other end of the hospital. The TOBS, anxious to please its boss, tried to oblige with a perfect piece of mimicry. Fortunately, the substitution is discovered before anything of an X certificate nature can take place.

For these reasons the being is treated with caution, but it is an entity with great enthusiasm and ability, and hopefully, the TOBS, will be given opportunities in the future for using its considerable talents for the general good.

In the new story Conway, instead of solving individual medical puzzles in a blaze of glory, will, because of his increased responsibility will be engaged on ongoing, long term problems which have been concerning the hospital for years.

One of these is the tragic and apparently insoluble problem of the FOKT. The FOKT's inhabit a world in the same galactic sector as the Rollers, leeches and strata creature described in **Major Operation** – the planet Drambo. For this reason I was going to call their world Drambuie. Then I thought that I would be more subtle and call it Goglesk.

The intelligent, sometimes, denizens of Goglesk had a very interesting evolution. They began as a species of giant plankton which grew so large that a role reversal took place and they began eating the eaters. This was accomplished by them linking up to form a group entity when threatened by predators, and this instinctive defence mechanism remained with them when the FOKT's left their oceans and became dominant on land.

Visually the physiological classification FOKT is an erect, egg-shaped being, very shaggy around the head and with their flanks covered by long, multi-coloured hair which falls naturally into an attractive, criss-cross pattern, the colours of which seem to serve some important family or tribal identification function.

When threatened with danger, real or imagined, the hair rises and stands out straight until a number of the beings have huddled together for mutual protection, then the individual strands -- which lie laterally and vertically, remember -- insinuate themselves under and over those of their neighbours until a large number of FOKT's have, in effect, woven themselves together into an enormous, carpet-like group entity with an overall tartan pattern.

But the problem, nay the tragedy, of the Gogleskans is that, although individually of a very high intelligence, when they become impelled to form a group, a marked deterioration in the overall IQ becomes apparent. As well as the reduction in the quality of the mentation, physical movements become wild and uncoordinated, they find it difficult to communicate verbally. Illogical and extravagant acts, many of them laudable, become the norm, and the proportion of blood in their alcohol supply .

Apt indeed is the saying taken from ancient FOKT lore, "As thick as two plankton". Truly the FOKT's are a sad case, and at the moment Conway is unable to answer the challenge of a race whose whole is

considerably less than the sum of its parts. In desperation, I had thought of making the Chief Psychologist the hero of this case. O'Mara would size up the situation and prescribe multiple doses of therapeutic schizophrenia. It is an old trick, but it just might work. But somehow I don't think Judy-Lynn del Rey, who has a terrific sense of humour, after office hours, would accept a story with that ending.

I have no idea at the moment. But the story is only half written, and maybe a solution will be suggested before the convention is over.

The Gogleskan situation deserve a happy ending.

And speaking of happy Things, there is an aspect of Sector General's work which I have studiously avoided in the past, in spite of many requests by one of the people here to describe the process in detail. Invariably, the request was preceded by a spell of nudge-nudge, wink-winking. Yes, you've guessed it, extra-terrestrial nookie. Well, in the next book I shall spend some time on one particular aspect of this thorny problem -- extra-terrestrial sex-change procedures.

I make no apology for not making no mention --I seem to be losing myself in a welter of negatives -- of the physical movements and positions associated with this activity practiced by the eighty-seven different intelligent life-forms which make up the Galactic Federation. The process is very repetitious and boring, for non-participants, and when more than twenty limbs are in simultaneous motion, and other Things are going on, it becomes very difficult for the author to describe.

On the other hand, or foot, or tentacle, the sex-life of the FROB Hudlar combines variety with a beautiful, almost classic, symmetry, and Conway is involved with a patient who changes its sex from male to female, then back again.

The Hudlars are... peculiar... in this respect. A healthy, adult and active male will, after several months hard work in the X-certificate area with its partner will, after conception has taken place, find that its resources have become depleted, and it loses interest. By the time baby Hudlar arrives Dad's speaking membrane is registering several octaves higher, its endocrine system has gone into reverse, and it is well on the way to becoming a female. Meanwhile, the process of giving birth has caused a similar reversal in the mother who has now gone distinctly Butch. For a few months there is a stage where they don't know whether they are coming or going, but since this is the period during which their infant requires the maximum of care and protection, their confusion causes little psychological hardship.

Eventually the situation clarifies itself, and Mama-that-was starts acting like a hopeful father-to-be and, after a decent -- maybe that should be indecent -- interval of nookie, father-that-was becomes a mother-to-be. And so it goes on, with each parent taking turns to be mother.

This is probably the reason why the minor psychological aberration , male chauvinism, is unknown among Hudlars.

From the foregoing you will have gathered that the Scottish influence on the Sector General stories has been considerable in recent years, and my difficulty in pronouncing some of the longer words would indicate that I have also been influenced by the Scotch. But now it only remains for me to answer any

questions you have, and to thank everyone concerned for inviting me once again to Gogleska, I mean Glasgow, as Guest of Honour.

Thank you.

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