

ADDRESS TO BE DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF THE SECOND  
"AUSSIECON" WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION BY THE MINISTER  
ASSISTING THE PREMIER FOR THE SESQUICENTENARY AND BICENTENARY  
CELEBRATIONS, THE HONOURABLE RACE MATHEWS, M.P., 22ND AUGUST, 1985.

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### INTRODUCTION

Being invited to open a world science fiction convention after a thirty year absence from the ranks of science fiction fandom recalls the parable of the prodigal son. Alternatively, fan chauvinists may see a closer parallel in the story of the clergyman who had among his flock a well-known prostitute. After service one Sunday morning, the clergyman said to the prostitute: "Mary, I prayed for you all last night". Mary, in her turn, replied: "Why Reverend, you needn't have done that. All you had to do was pick up the telephone and I'd have come right over". Be this as it may, it is good to be back briefly on the occasion when the Aussiecon takes its place as a major event in Victoria's 150th birthday celebrations calendar.

It is appropriate, in an age of unprecedented science fiction abundance, to remember an age of scarcity now behind us, I hope, for all time. It is appropriate on the occasion of Melbourne playing host for the second time to a world science fiction convention that we should recall how science fiction lovers in this city first came to organise themselves in the post-war period. In so doing, they laid the foundations on which this convention has been built. It is appropriate to review the roles of those who were involved - one dead before his time, others like myself long since departed for other callings or pre-occupations, and others again serving science fiction still. It is appropriate to reflect on what science fiction has been and its promise for the future.

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

By definition, there are as many accounts of first encounters with science fiction as there are readers of science fiction. Kingsley Amis has written about how, at the age of "twelve or so", he discovered science fiction while rummaging through a display bin in the neighbourhood Woolworths, The bin was labelled YANK MAGAZINES: Interesting Reading. Frederick Pohl has described coming across his first copy of Science Wonder Stories Quarterley when he was nine. Predictably, a scaly green monster dominated its cover. As Pohl recalls, "I opened it up. The irremediable virus entered my veins."

There is a common thread which links these episodes and the pre-war science fiction experience generally. Science fiction, once discovered, was abundant and readily accessible. As Pohl has pointed out: "Magazines were a Depression business. If you couldn't afford fifty cents to take the family to the movies, you could probably scrape up a dime or twenty cents to buy a magazine, and then pass the magazine back and forth to multiply the investment". For Amis, in Britain, the price would have been even lower. The Yank Magazines from his Woolworth's bin would almost certainly have been unsold copies returned to the publishers from news-stands across America. "Returns" were shipped out of the country by weight, and ultimately sold through English and Australian department stores for something marginally more than the scrap value of the paper.

A further common thread exists in the relative ease with which pre-war science fiction readers were able to make contact with one another. Pohl belonged in quick succession to the Brooklyn Science Fiction League, the East New York Science Fiction League, the Independent League, the International Cosmos Science Club and Thre Futurians. To quote him for the last time: "We changed clubs the way Detroit changes tailfins, every year had a new one and last year's was junk". In the unlikely event of Kingsley Amis having wanted to join a fan club, the choice open to him in pre-war Britain would have included various chapters of Hugo Gernsback's Science Fiction Association and the British Interplanetary Society. Pre-war Australian readers had a Futurian Society of Melbourne and a Futurian Society of Sydney.

#### SCARCITIES

Matters were otherwise in wartime and immediately postwar Melbourne. There is a passage in Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Sentinel" which, even today, those of us who were growing up at the time cannot read without emotion. Clarke wrote:

"Nearly a hundred thousand million stars are turning in the circle of the Milky Way, and long ago races in the worlds of other suns must have scaled and passed the heights that we have reached. Think of such civilizations, far back in time against the fading afterglow of Creation, masters of a universe so young that life as yet had come only to a handful of worlds. Theirs would have been a loneliness we cannot imagine, the loneliness of gods looking out across infinity and finding none to share their thoughts."

Science fiction seemed to us to be truly "..... a universe so young that life as yet had come to only a few worlds". Being a science fiction reader was still mostly a solitary pursuit, involving something truly akin to "..... the loneliness of gods looking out across infinity and finding none to share their thoughts". Books and magazines were few and far between. Those which were turned up through painstaking searching and scrounging had to be savoured, eked out and repeatedly re-read. Often a point was reached where a favourite story was known virtually by heart. We had reason to understand better than most the much-quoted paraphrase of a famous 1949 Astounding punch-line, "It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan".

#### CHILDHOOD

It was my good luck to be born into a household where both reading generally and science fiction were as much a part of life as drawing breath. As a baby, I was walked up and down in my father's arms while he recited Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome and Tennyson's Idylls of the King from memory, over and over again. Books from the children's shelves in the Melbourne Public Lending Library were read to me for hours on end, until I learned to read for myself when I was five or six. In addition, I was brought home copies of Oakey-Doakes, Alley-Oop, Flash Gordon and other imaginative American comics in the Famous Funnies series, which Coles' and Woolworth's used to remainder until the war choked off their supplies in 1940 and '41. Most of the material my father chose for me reflected his own liking for imaginative writing.

He had once owned a collection of early issues of Amazing Stories, which unhappily for me had to be sold to meet mid-Depression household expenses before I was born. The library books included such magnificent fantasies for children as H.C.F. Morant's neglected Australian classic Whirlaway, Hugh Lofting's Dr. Doolittle stories, The Midnight Folk and The Box of Delights by the poet laureate, John Masefield, Kathleen Tozer's Munfie books, An Experiment with St. George by the mathematician and philosopher J.W. Dunne, who also wrote the much better known An Experiment with Time, and My Friend Mr. Leahey by the geneticist J.B.S. Haldane. My father had a special affection for The Three Mulla-Mulgass by Walter De La Mare and A.E. Coppard's Pink Furniture, and I came to know sections of them almost by heart.

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit reached Melbourne in the early 'forties. My brothers and I loved it so much that we may have worn out the library's copy single-handed. When I was eleven or twelve, we wrote to Tolkien asking the sort of questions about Moria, Gondolin and the ~~New~~cromancer which Humphrey Carpenter's two books - J.R.R. Tolkien, a Biography and The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien - have shown were addressed to him by hundreds of readers. There was no reply, but the effort did not go unrewarded. Years later, in 1953, Allen and Unwin sent me their prospectus for a new story about hobbits. As a result, I was able to savour the exquisite suspense of waiting months after The Fellowship of the Ring reached me for The Two Towers to be published, and months again for The Return of the King.

The books I owned myself were mostly acquired as Christmas and birthday presents. These were usually wartime "austerity editions" of well-known children's writers, such as Edith Nesbitt, Richmal Crompton and Captain W.E. Johns. Crompton and Johns were the creators respectively of "William" and "Biggles". Nesbitt wrote such glorious fantasies as Five Children and It, The Phoenix and the Carpet and The Story of Amulet, but my favourite was a collection of her short stories called The Magic World. There were also Chums Annuals and Nelson Lee Library school story weeklies which had been left behind in a garden shed at my grandfather's house by my father and uncles. Chums and Nelson Lee belonged to a departed era which the social historian E.S. Turner has styled:

".....that agreeable period when steam men puffed across the prairie trampling Indians underfoot; when the elect of Britain's boarding schools set off every other week by balloon or submarine to discover a lost city or a vanishing island; when almost every Northcliffe boys' paper carried a serial describing the invasion of Britain by Germans, French or Russians; when wellnigh every tramp ice-cream vendor, organ-grinder or muffin man turned out to be Sexton Blake; and when every self-respecting football team had a mysterious masked centre-forward".

Contemporary boys' weeklies - Champion, Wizard, Hotspur, Rover and Adventure - had to run the gauntlet of enemy submarines before going on sale each Wednesday at the local newsagency.

Their shrunken wartime pages were taken up largely by serials, with a large element of fairly primitive science-fiction. Characters such as the Iron Teacher and Wilson the superhuman athlete abounded. Following their adventures acquired a special quality of heightened expectancy. It was never certain, from week to week, whether the next instalment might not already be lying somewhere on the bottom of the sea.

When I was eight or nine, I discovered that the family's "grown-up" bookshelves included tattered copies of Jules Verne's A Journey to the Centre of the Earth and Rider Haggard's The Ivory Child. I read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World at about the same time, and had nightmares about it for weeks. I acquired early the habit of haunting every secondhand bookshop I could find, in the hope of obtaining Allen Quartermain and Tarzan novels, which were out of print for the duration of the war.

#### SCIENCE FICTION

All this was prelude. The circumstances of my first real encounter with science fiction were much the same as for Amis and Pohl. The year was 1944. I, too, was nine. Travelling to school involved a change of trams at the junction of Balaclava Road and High Street in St. Kilda. Close by, second hand comics and magazines were sold by a down-at-heel shop with a verandah which carried in faded letters the word "Saddler", alongside a lifesize wooden horsehead. Accordingly, it was as "Saddler" that the equally down-at-heel proprietor figured in my mind.

At first, the daily wait for my change of trams was passed simply staring at the exotic American comics such as Captain Marvel and Torch and Torro which dominated Saddler's window. American comics, unlike their local poor relations, were printed in full colour. Their content similarly was believed to be superior. Their value as schoolyard status symbols was immense. The combination of these qualities enabled Saddler to price any item of American origin at 2/6. British and Australian comics cost no more than a penny, twopence or threepence. 2/6 in my terms was pocket money for an entire week.

I was shortly to need it all. The two-and-sixpenny upmarket section of Saddler's stock had a display stand to itself. One Thursday, the comics there had been moved to make room for a thicker magazine, with untrimmed edges. The cover featured a couple of bulbous red bipeds, directing something like an old-fashioned movie camera at a man and woman dressed for tropical exploration and confined in a cage. It was the tenth anniversary issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories published five years earlier in 1939.

The effect on me was instantaneous. No glittering prize in later life has ever beckoned me quite so alluringly. I lived on tenterhooks for the next two days, hoping against hope, that no other buyer would appear before my pocket money came due on Saturday morning. In the event, no such disaster occurred. The precious 2/6 passed across the counter, and I walked back up High Street to the tramstop, engrossed in John Taine's The Ultimate Catalyst.



The issue also contained Dawn of Flame by Stanley Weinbaum, The Man Without a World by two sons of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and - I think - one of the Via series by Gordon A. Giles, which for years afterwards exercised a special grip on my imagination. As the weeks went by, further pre-war issues of Thrilling Wonder Stories made their appearance in Saddler's window, along with occasional copies of Amazing, Startling Stories, Astounding and Famous Fantastic Mysteries. I bought all that I could afford, and, where all else failed, endured the exquisite agony of swapping from among the least favoured items already in my possession.

The great McComas/Healy anthology Adventures in Time and Space and Groff Conklin's The Best of Science Fiction were among my 1947 Christmas presents. More secondhand bookshops were sought out, and their proprietors cultivated. My regular stopping places included Quaine's and Hall's in Prahran, Bird's Hanley's and Hall's in the city, sundry opportunity shops and bookstalls in half a dozen suburban markets. Newsagents, I discovered, stocked the pitifully thin British reprint editions of Astounding and Unknown Worlds, from which, unbeknown to Australian readers, the great serials of the 'forties - novels such as Slan, The Weapon Makers, Children of the Lens and a dozen or so more of comparable quality - were consistently omitted.

What remained was magical. For thirty and more years the memory has remained with me of savouring for the first time stories such as Clifford Simak's City series; Vintage Season, Mimsy Were the Borogroves and the Baldy series by Henry Kuttner; Rescue Party by Arthur C. Clark; Child's Play by William Tenn; Tomorrow's Children by Paul Anderson; Hobbyist by Eric Frank Russell; He Walked Around the Horses by H. Beam Piper; In Hiding by Wilmar H. Shiras; and Murray Leinster's The Strange Case of John Kingman. I was left with the conviction that one sure test of a good piece of science fiction was whether the editor of Astounding, John W. Campbell Jnr. would have found a place for it in his magazine. Today, writers like - for example - Larry Niven in Ringworld and The Mote in God's Eye, Arthur C. Clarke in Rendezvous with Rama, Robert Forward in The Flight of the Dragonfly, and Brian Aldiss in the Helleconia trilogy still triumphantly meet the Campbell test. In defiance of the lessons of Ringworld, Engineers and all Frank Herbert's sequels to Dune, I continue to hope that Arthur C. Clarke will someday take up the option which he left open for himself with those lines of infinite promises which conclude Rendezvous with Rama. Clarke wrote:

And on far-off Earth, Dr. Carlisle Perera had as yet told no one how he had woken from a restless sleep with the message from his subconscious still echoing in his brain:  
"The Ramans do everything in threes".

Ursula Le Guin - in The Dispossessed and The Left Hand of Darkness -- has expanded the conceptual horizons of science fiction in ways which Campbell could never have imagined. Along with other women writers such as Joanna Russ and Vondra McIntyre, she has created a body of work which he would have welcomed into Astounding with awe and delight.

### FANS

By 1950, I was buying my science fiction by mail from Britain. An advertisement in one of these purchases introduced me to Ken Slater's "Operation Fantast" network. Ken was a captain with the British Army on the Rhine. His purpose in life was putting science fiction readers in touch with one another. He also supplied American magazines and pocket books to countries where the postwar dollar shortage meant they were otherwise unobtainable. Operation Fantast linked me with Roger Dard in Perth. Roger, in his turn, gave me the address of Graham Stone, who was running the Australian Science Fiction Society from Box 61 in the Student Union House at Sydney University. A middle-aged schoolteacher named Bob McCubbin struck up a conversation with me while we were browsing side by side over the Franklin Lending Library's stock of bound pre-war pulps, in the Eastern Market, now long since vanished from the site of this hotel. My copies of Astounding were passed to me across the counter at the McGill's newsagency in Elizabeth Street by a shop assistant who ultimately made himself known as Mervyn Binns.

Through Graham Stone, I got to know Dick Jenssen, a student of the school which I had just left, and Lee Harding, an aspiring professional photographer who has since become a notable science fiction writer.

Sorting out some papers recently, I found some samples of Lee Harding's earliest work. In April, 1952, Lee sent me a letter introducing himself which read in part:

I'm fifteen years of old age, a stf. fan for five and an intelligent one for two. Get what I mean? I know the difference between a Bradbury and a Kuttner. I know my pen names too. ....At the moment I'm just a newcomer to Fandom, but in three months I've (1) joined Ken Slater's "Operation Fantast", (2) subscribed to Stone's Stopgap, etc., (3) become a member of the Australian Science Fiction Society, (4) subscribed to Woomera, (5) have made arrangements to get the good U.S. mags regularly, and all the British dittoes, except of course the four Spencer mags (ugh!), (7) (Am i boring you?) Stopped getting Thrills Inc. (again, ugh!), (8) made contact with booksellers Carnell and Chapman, (9) (Phew!) Begun my career of collecting rejection slips from stf. magazines, under the able guidance of Roger Dard.

Lee and I became good friends. This did not mean that we were uncritical of one another. When I failed to answer his letters regularly enough or at acceptable length, he wrote:

I've just about had it. If you don't want your books back, okay. If you don't want to correspond with me, okay again, but I still think it's a dirty show. There's plenty of important fans who don't think its going out of their way to write to me regularly - Dard, Stone, Haddon, Solnsteff, Slater, Carnell and the rest. Tell me, how important are you?

A week later, peace was restored. A further letter from Lee commenced:

I'm a cad! I'm a bounder. I'm ungrateful. I'm a Yank. I'm a no-hoper. ....Please, tear up or atomise that letter I wrote you. I've buried yours!

Lee was not alone in bringing a certain frenzy to everything he did. All our activities were coloured by the frenetic quality which prompted Sam Moskowitz to title his history of early fandom The Immortal Storm.

The sheer frustration of dealing with fellow fans sometimes drove to distraction those who were at heart serious-minded organisers. In December 1951, Graham Stone poured out his feelings in a letter to me which read in part:

There can be no doubt that many readers of science fiction are inadequate individuals - what used to be called "escapists", though the term is unsatisfactory. They make up for their defects in ordinary life by building themselves up in their own estimation. And you can't think of yourself as superman very effectively if you admit others as your equals.

Graham continued:

Many fans, while living more or less well-adjusted lives and not tending to paranoid superiority, are extreme intellectual snobs; ever critical of others, finding faults which might well be over-looked and so on..... such fans, which will be reinforced by inspection of escapists, who are usually painfully obvious second-raters.

It may well be that these attitudes explain why the affairs of Sydney fans were conducted frequently in an atmosphere reminiscent of the War of the Roses.

Melbourne tackled matters in a different spirit. The five of us - Bob McCubbin, Mervyn Binns, Dick Jenssen, Lee Harding and myself - made up the nucleus of the Melbourne Science Fiction Group. The Group met for the first time in 1952. I had just turned 17. Along with a further newcomer - Ian Crozier - we established a publishing firm of our own under the name Amateur Fantasy Publications of Australia. A.F.P.A. was located in the garage of Mervyn's home. The assets consisted of a secondhand Roneo 500 duplicator, together with our stocks of stencils, paper and ink. The publications were Lee Harding's Perhaps, Ian Crozier's Question Mark, my own Bacchanalia and the newszine, Etherline. Etherline established what may well be an all-time record by appearing regularly at fortnightly intervals for 100 issues, between 1953 and 1958. In time, the Melbourne Science Fiction Group felt sufficiently assertive to take over from Sydney the role of organizing most of Australia's Science Fiction conventions.

Melbourne's first national science fiction convention - the Olympican - was held in 1956 to coincide with the Melbourne Olympic Games. Australia's first world science fiction convention - Aussiecon One - followed nineteen years later, in 1975.

### QUIRKS

The Melbourne Science Fiction Group and Amateur Fantasy Publications of Australia exemplified the unfractious face of Australian fandom. Meetings revolved around talk, letters, publishing, barter and chess. Puritanism too was pervasive. At an early date, our proceedings were removed from the living room at my home, in favour of a Swanston Street cafe called Val's. Shock and horror prevailed when Val's turned out also to be a meeting place for some of the courageous Lesbians whose coming-out from the closet was just getting underway. Bob McCubbin wrote boldly in Etherline that "Extroverts and introverts we may be, but perverts never". Given that our membership at that stage was exclusively male, such risks as the Val's clientele may have presented were remote. Had an invitation been issued, it probably would not have been understood. Nevertheless, future meetings were held in the austerely asexual surroundings of the Latrobe Street Manchester United Oddfellows Hall, in comforting proximity to the Russell Street Police headquarters.

The episode illustrated a further quirk of fandom. Women were not only mostly absent but mostly unsought.

When Bob McCubbin's wife was asked how she felt about science fiction, she replied quite seriously that it kept Bob away from chasing other women. If Bob harboured any such inclination it was a well-kept secret. When Rosemary Simmons applied for membership of the Futurian Society of Sydney in 1952, her application was rejected on the grounds that, in Vol Molesworth's words, "the admission of women had caused trouble in the pre-war days of the club". The poet Lex Banning intervened with the query "Are we Futurians or are we Victorians?", but the Society's all-male membership went ahead to vote down Ms Simmons by a two-thirds majority. My own practice of bringing my fiance with me to meetings of the Melbourne Science Fiction Group was sufficiently unusual for her appearances to be reported regularly in the secretary's notes which appeared regularly in Etherline.

The unreported fact was that my courtship was being funded largely by selling off my science fiction collection, meeting by meeting over the best part of two years. The school library and parliamentary society had already fanned my long-standing interest in politics, and the lecturers at Toorak Teachers' College were further developing my liking for music and theatre. My marriage in early 1956 marked the point where I had moved on irrevocably from the world of science fiction to the pre-occupations which subsequently have shaped my life. The ties which held together our little circle of friends were likewise loosening. Bob McCubbin died before his time, while Dick Jenssen had his time taken up increasingly by work in the Science Faculty at Melbourne University.



It remained for Lee Harding to become the author of a series of outstanding science fiction novels which includes Displaced Person and Future Sanctuary, and for Mervyn Binns to establish Melbourne's Space Age Bookshop. Along with millions like us, virtually in every country on earth, we are all indebted deeply to science fiction for the new pleasures to which it introduced us, the new friendships it has enabled us to establish and the additional edge which it has imparted to our curiosity, imagination and hunger for ideas.

### REVOLUTIONS

Today, science fiction finds itself in the grip simultaneously of two revolutions. Intellectually, the Campbell Revolution of the 'forties instated serious speculation in the "hard sciences" - engineering, physics and chemistry - at the heart of science fiction. Currently, science fiction is becoming in addition a vehicle for the serious examination of anthropological, sociological and overtly political ideas. To an immense extent, the change has been brought about by the work and influence of women science fiction writers and - increasingly - women critics. Feminism and the women's movement, as ideas whose time has come, are reshaping the whole way in which humanity sees itself, and, in the process, science fiction too has changed. It is not only that women increasingly are setting major science fiction agendas through the incisive quality of their analysis of issues of special relevance to themselves. The best of them have introduced new benchmarks for insight, sensitivity and good writing which apply now equally to male writers and the traditional pre-occupations of mainstream science fiction.

There is a further area of change. Today, scarcity of science fiction has given way to abundance, and solitude to gatherings such as this great world science fiction convention audience. No reader, however zealous or long-lived, can hope ever to cope with the deluge of science fiction which retailers and librarians now make available to him. The televised science fiction mini-series has established itself in the select ranks of successful prime time claimants. The science fiction movie - although not necessarily the quality science fiction movie - has become commonplace. Role gamers exist in a state of constant new product overload. Trekkies enjoy a level of access to the log of the Starship Enterprise undreamed of by earlier generations with an enthusiasm for comparable steam radio programs. Video discs, video cassettes, home computers and new printing technologies have become key tools in a broadening and deepening of the creative possibilities for science fiction, which previously in the most literal sense were unimaginable. Additional doors are opening up constantly to new futures, where even greater numbers of people will be able to avail themselves of all that science fiction has to offer. I look forward to enjoying science fiction in the future as I have done in the past, if more sparingly.

I declare the Aussiecon Two 43rd World Science Fiction Convention open.