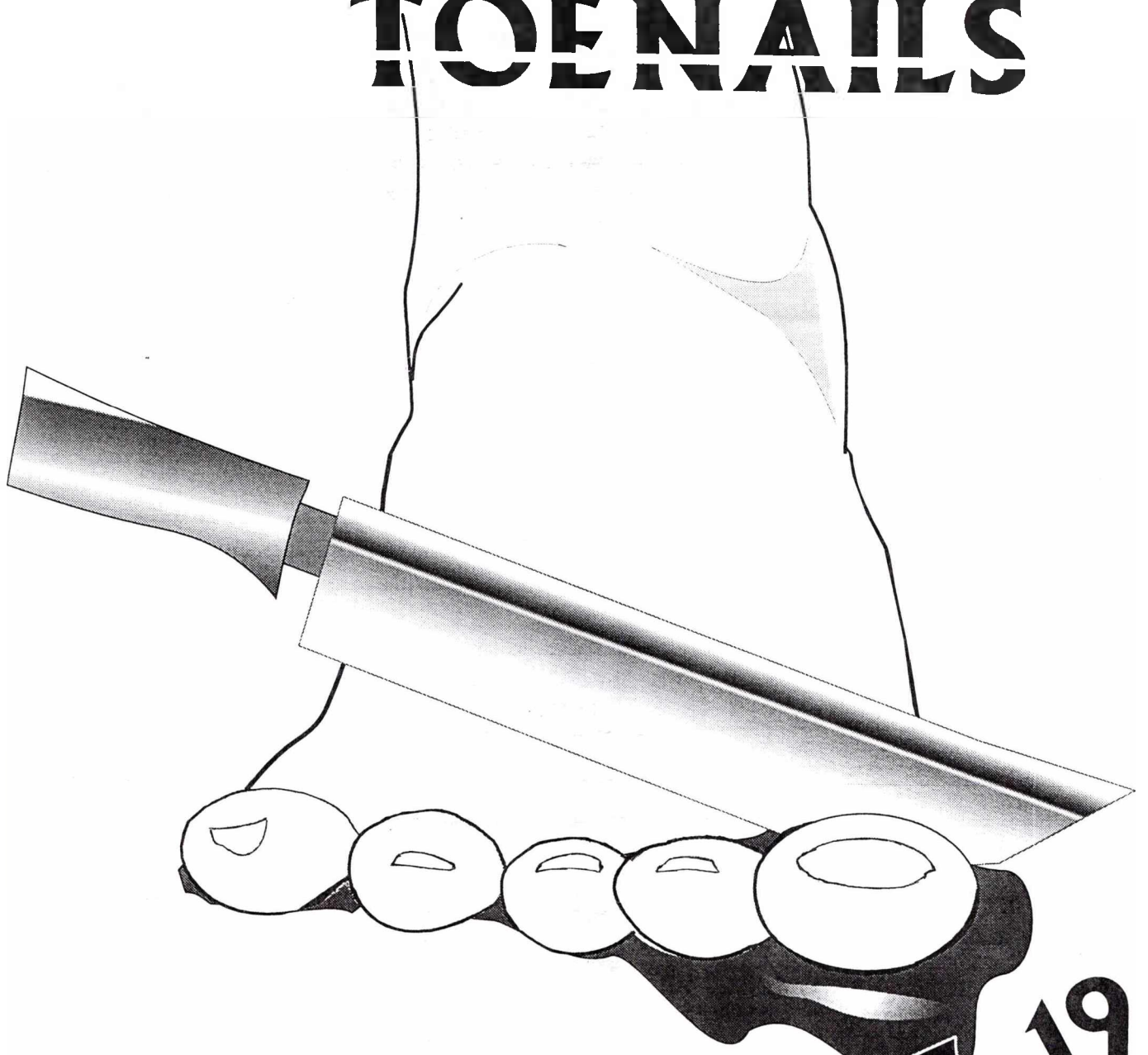


FASTIDIOUSLY TRIMMED TOENAILS



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Judith Hanna & Joseph Nicholas
15 Jansons Road
South Tottenham
London N15 4JU
United Kingdom

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Gosh....our third issue this year! One might almost think that we were eager young fans again, raring to pub our ish and get involved, instead of forty-something homeowners attending our first Novacon for, er. (And we went to the Eastercon as well. Blimey. We haven't been to this many conventions a year since, er er.) But because it is Novacon 25, and because lots of people will be emerging from their hiding places for the occasion, we thought we should make the effort too. Most British readers will therefore be receiving their copies in Birmingham (with, as on a previous occasion, the overseas copies being sent out later).

This is a science fiction fanzine (with some slight mention of science fiction in several of the letters and articles), available for all the usual reasons -- your publication in exchange, a letter of comment every so often, a contribution of some kind (but use discretion -- that fact that this is a science fiction fanzine doesn't mean we're panting to hear your latest Elvis abduction theory), or £1 if you're really too busy to do any of the previous three. As before, those who have failed to respond in some fashion to the previous three issues will find a mark in the margin adjacent to this paragraph; others, having been warned last time, may eventually discover that they have not received this issue.

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The cover illustration is by Steve Jeffery, from a title suggested by him. (We usually like to think them up for ourselves, but this one was too good to resist.) Internal illustrations are by Judith Hanna (page 5, from an idea by Cath Tate) and Ian Gunn (pages 4 and 8, from originals drawn for our GUFF party in August).

British readers will be well aware of the government's lunatic attempts to privatise the railways. But they may not be aware that this lunacy extends as far as press releases about it:

"This news release is issued by the Department of Transport and has been approved for the purposes of Section 57 of the Financial Services Act 1986 by Samuel Montagu & Co Limited ("Samuel Montagu"), which is regulated by The Securities and Futures Authority Limited. This news release has been prepared for general information purposes only and is not intended to form the basis of any investment decision or constitute an offer or invitation to bid for any passenger rail franchise or to acquire shares in a Train Operating Company. Neither this news release nor any copy of it should be taken into or distributed in Canada, France, Japan or the United States except in accordance with an applicable exemption. The distribution of this news release in other jurisdictions may be restricted by law and therefore persons into whose possession this news release comes should inform themselves about and observe any such restrictions."

So that's us told off, then.

HOVERFLY HOTELS FOR GUFF

Judith Hanna

Our worldcon starts with Ian and Karen Pender-Gunn ringing from the local station one Saturday morning at the start of August: "Karen is in pink; I am wearing green," says Ian. We set off to fetch them, Joseph all in pink, me wearing green and carrying the luggage wheels. Naturally, they have got out the *wrong end* of Seven Sisters station, ignoring our explicit written instructions to take only the exit marked "High Road". But there is sunshine, Britain is sweltering in what feels like real summer, exotic shopping crowds throng the fruit and veg shops of West Green Road, where you can buy seven varieties of yam, breadfruit, even pumpkins.

We introduce Karen and Ian to the garden, including frog in pond. They introduce us to Gladstone the anatomically correct yellow felt banana. They spend the week being good little tourists each day, even getting to the wilds of South London to see the dinosaurs and remains of the Crystal Palace. By night, Karen sits sewing platypodes for GUFF. Then we throw blankets and pillows down the stairs so they can turn the TV-watching futon into a bed. Karen is large and competent, with more character than her cute obsessions -- pink, chocolate, dinosaurs, and soft toys -- and her absence from her own fanzine, *Pink*, would suggest. Ian is a teddy bear.

GUFF Party

Next Saturday the house and garden fill up with a GUFF party. Smokers colonise the lawn and garden, keeping an eye on the pond frogs, conscientiously puffing at the aphids, and contributing their butts to the compost heaps, obedient to the notices Ian has drawn. This time, nobody traumatises the compost worm workforce by chucking rubbish into their bin by the back door. The tidy edging of green wine bottles which divides our permacultural jumble of edible plantlife from the tiny lawn and narrow path is admired.

People keep asking Ian and Karen if the "Australia in 1999" bid is for real. They say it is, but information on it has not been plentiful in Australia either. Once they're back from their GUFF trip, and the convention they're organising for the following month is out of the way, they'll see what bid publicity they can sort out. We gather that Alan Stewart, editor of *Thyme* the Australian newszine, is chairing the bid or something like that -- so why, we ask them, isn't he using the newszine to publicise it? Indeed, why does he seem to have stopped sending copies overseas at all -- including dropping us, after our 9 years or so of acting as UK agents for the zine, from the mailing list immediately he took over? Karen and Ian remain diplomatically mum, but promise to pass on the comments being made.

Ian and Janice Maule drop in from the past. Eve Harvey, having mostly given up flying round the world to teach poor countries how to play international capitalism, looks almost relaxed. Bridget Hardcastle brings along a nice young man and a bag of sticky ersatz Marks & Sparks chocolate substitute, for which no-one could develop an obsession. Alan Baum and Donya White bring American delicacies including delicious sugar-dusted fried doughnuts from California. Dave Langford spills red wine on our nice cream carpet by bumping into Martin Smith. I sacrifice someone's abandoned white wine all over it, and strew salt liberally while Joseph hovers. Dave spills another glass of red wine and runs off muttering about last trains, as Joseph shouts death threats and waves his fists. "I was nowhere near, that time," Martin points out virtuously.

In the kitchen, Joseph has fallen asleep. "I died in the war for people like you," a sign balanced on his well-tanned knees announces shakily. He does look cute. I announce a change of policy: "If the boy falls asleep at fannish social gatherings, limited rights to decorate him will be auctioned for

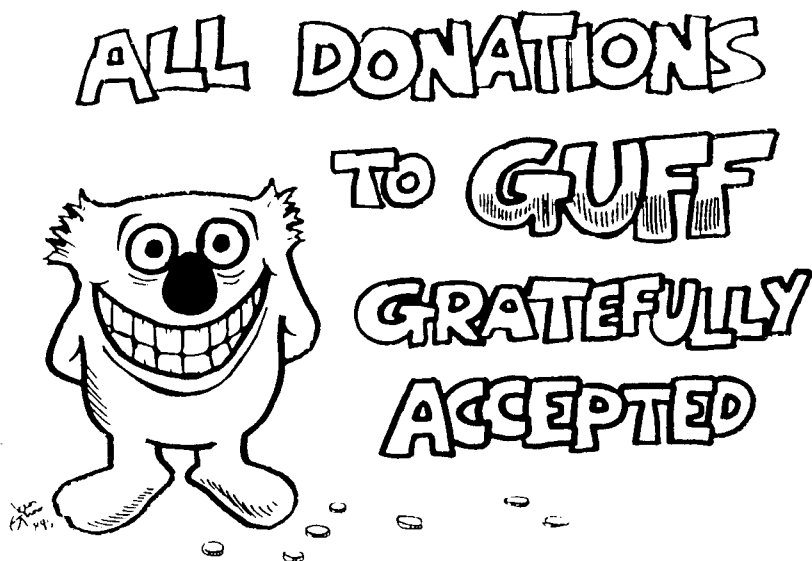
GUFF." This immediately raises £6.02p. Abi produces a tasteful mocha lipstick and decorates his thighs. Party starts to drift off.

Joseph wakes up, and goes into tidying-up mode. He is worried that Dave L may have taken the death threats seriously. "I must write an apology in the morning," he keeps telling me as he washes up, as if Dave hadn't known Joseph for years.

I clear up the leftovers. We have Pam Wells, who booked the military bed upstairs in the Lair of Attila the Tidy when we first circulated the party invites. We have Mike Ford down from Leeds, who booked floor space at the jolly and crowded August 'Ton but ends up with fewest cushiony things. We have Simo of *SFX* magazine, up from Bath. And we have Martin Smith, who really just wants to catch up on our *Footrot Flats* collection of comic strips about the life of a New Zealand sheepdog. Martin scores the air mattress, minus plug. Red wax from Edam cheese proves an effective makeshift plug -- but in the morning remains messily in the bung.

We wave them all off to a dim-sum lunch in Chinatown, from which Ian and Karen will head to Cambridge for a stay with Mike Abbott, then on to Portmericon and Glasgow. We spend a nice quiet day clearing the U-bend under the sink, and counting the party spoils. We have gained two dozen wine bottles, for extending the garden borders; 18 plastic soft drink bottles -- vital garden resources convertible into anti-slug rings, mini-cloches, deep watering devices, and hibernation hotels for hoverflies, ladybirds and lacewings. The 16 beer bottles and 24 drink cans are of no practical use, and get carted round to the recycling bins by the old town hall. I have a word with the local vicar about a discouraging note from the vice-chair of his parish council about my pet project to transform the neglected grounds of their Old Sunday School adjoining Tottenham Green into a community wildlife garden. The problem seems to be suspicion of "wildlife", as if this might mean deliberately cultivating luxuriant beds of nettles instead of just letting them flourish through neglect. Having observed over the summer that the nettles weren't supporting interesting caterpillars, I assure the Reverend that the idea is something that looks like nice flowery garden and will be safe for kiddies to play in. Don from the local Wildlife Trust and local RSPB group turns up to have a look around the site, and suggests bird-nesting boxes in the trees.

On Wednesday, John Berry and Eileen Gunn arrive from Seattle while we are both at work and manage to follow our complex directions to find a hidden front door key and let themselves in. Already, we feel worn out by unaccustomed social whirl, but they are old friends we don't mind being disorganised with. They take us out to dinner at a new local West Indian cafe, where the menu choice is between stew chicken and stew beef. Both are good and plentiful, washed down with strange Jamaican fruity soft drinks. Joseph's paranoia about going into a strange foreign cuisine he hasn't been properly introduced to, without even a proper menu outside, almost abates by the time we leave. How British he is. Is this the spirit which built the Empire, and exported boiled cabbage and custard around the world?



Precursor

Saturday morning, Eileen drives us in the Gunn-Berry hired car to the small and informal Precursor con. Reaching Stevenage, the map says, involves travelling a block east from our house to the A10 High Road (which was the old Roman Ermine Street to Cambridge, Lincoln and York) and following it north until it hits Stevenage. In these circumstances, even I have trouble misdirecting us, so John can concentrate on driving on the wrong side of the road.

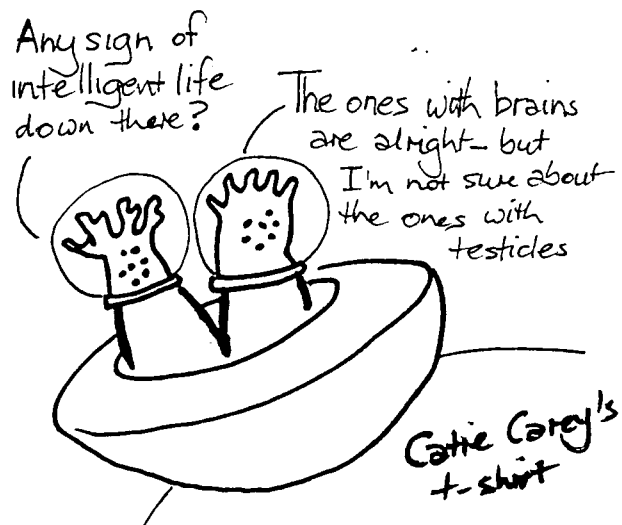
At least Precursor is a social whirl in which I do not have to figure out what to feed people. Pam Wells musters a party for dinner at one of the two Chinese restaurants in Old Stevenage, and we all set out no more than 10 minutes late and with just two extra people to fit into the booking. Neil Rest talks about his Indonesia trip following Aussiecon I -- a conversation of comment on my trip report last *FTT*. Jack Henegan talks about life in Colorado and with Christina Lake about economics until I join in, when they drop the subject just as I was starting to get going on what's wrong with orthodox indicators like GNP. Christina talks about the work she's doing setting up information resources for the new Bath Environmental Centre. Vicki Rosenzweig talks about things.

Back at the con, Vince Clarke is looking bewildered by the crowd of a whole 50 people all at once, by way of training for being Guest of Honour at the Worldcon. Chuch Harris, having yielded without a struggle to Geri Sullivan's persuasion that it would be more sensible to stay at the con overnight than try to drive home, makes the most of his chance to boost his reputation for being a Bad Boy. He would not want his fans to be disappointed. I draw Catie Cary's t-shirt -- as worn to the 'Ton -- for him, and he falls about.

Sunday is Sports Day. After breakfast, almost everyone turns out for the softball match. Style in swinging at the ball proves to bear no necessary relation to ability to hit it. Joseph, Lyn Steffan, and Carrie Root, for instance, all look jolly convincing as they take their stance at the plate and square up. But gangling Mike Ford and girlishly giggling Christina Lake just hit the ball. Joseph even manages to hit it once and score a whole run. "Fucking A!" he shouts, punching the air with a new-born enthusiasm for this sport stuff. He has the good sense to keep his t-shirt on, so that only his carefully tanned legs, lithe from his every-morning run to fetch *The Guardian*, are on display.

Revenant Peter Roberts, fannish guru of the 70s, now a taxonomic mycologist working at Kew, is clearly hampered by his public school grounding in cricket. Our boys have all grown up carrying the bat as they run from end to end of the wicket. In baseball, you are apparently supposed to hurl the bat behind you, or at least drop it, not run with it. There is also some complication about the way to use those snowshoe-like baseball mitts to catch the ball, which I do not want anyone to explain to me again. Martin Smith displays a totally unfannish facility at all this sport stuff, and has clearly been practising.

The week before the Worldcon is almost peaceful. I whack a transport column off to a magazine about to be launched in Paris; we hand the box of GUFF stuff the Pender-Gunns have left to Chris Donaldson and Paul Oldroyd who will drive it up to the Worldcon. We are expecting my little brother Julian on Wednesday. Instead, it is Alexander Vasilkovsky who calls, asking us to take the box of Ukrainian trade goods stored in our attic up the Worldcon. Not possible, we point out: we aren't going, and would have needed to make arrangements at least a week ago to sort out a lift for it. Has he arranged for



places to stay, as we warned him at Easter (when he arrived almost without notice to stay with us for over a week) would be necessary? We ourselves are booked out. I ring my parents in Australia to check if they have news of Julian.

Julian rings Thursday evening from Miami, having missed his connecting flight from Belize. He finally arrives on Sunday, to the relief of Albert and his crew in the car repair yard across the street and Victor next door, who had been alerted to keep an eye out for him turning up. Julian discovers the sports centre round the corner and sets off for a relaxing 70 laps or so, but seems in no hurry to go travelling again. There is plenty in London to see, pubs to gossip in, and the natives seem friendly -- even Joseph most of the time. After all, the lad's been walkabout for three months or so now, and is due for a rest. Besides, he's family, and family isn't really people. We watch the Craig Charles Intersection review, shown as part of Channel 4's 'Sci-Fi Weekend'. It seems fair enough: Craig comes across as even loonier than those he's interviewing.

Post Worldcon

John and Eileen are due back Tuesday night, flying out next morning. First phone call comes about eight -- they're caught behind some tailback on the motorway near Birmingham and will be late. We eat. Next phone call comes about ten: pulling out of a motorway rest area, they've driven over some poorly visible kerbing which has damaged the vehicle and are waiting for the RAC. By this time I need some early nights, so retire. They make it about midnight, and I catch up with Worldcon news in the morning -- Brunner, Hugos, Christina Lake pairing up with Frank Lunney... Then we wave them off and head for the workday.

Pascal Thomas and Christine arrive that evening, with different angles on much the same collection of gossip and more time to discuss it. They duly declare their opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific instead of in the Massif Central, and we complain to them about the gaping hole in our lifestyle created by the idiocy of M. Chirac and the necessity to boycott French cheeses. They bring peach-flavoured tea and ginger-flavoured shortbread, and head for the Yorkshire Grey pub-gathering.

On Thursday Alexander Vasilkovsky phones: could the Ukrainians take some stuff from their box in the attic and leave a few things at our place. They do not have a place to stay. Of course they can continue to leave their box in our attic, I say, but we cannot put them up. They will pop round that evening, says Alexander. I have retired to sleep by the time they arrive. Next morning, it is some shock to find that the "few things" left amount to about a metre square of suitcases and shopping bags. After all, by this time, our tiny house is also holding Julian's belongings spread lavishly all over Attila's Tidy Lair; Pascal and Christine's bags by the futon in the living room, and a bag or two bags left by the Pender-Gunns. "Alex said they'd come and get them on Sunday or Monday," says Joseph.

Parties Galore

On Friday, Rob and Avedon throw a party, so we take Julian along. Pascal and Christine have headed back to France that morning. We have neglected to warn my clean living farmer brother that Avedon keeps a smoking house. Also, he asks her what she does, which means he hears more than he ever wanted to know about the dangers of sexual censorship. "What about political censorship? Isn't that a worse danger?" I hear him ask at one point. ("Your little brother is practically a Nazi," Avedon tells me later. "He thinks there should be censorship of everything.") We wave at him from the far side of the cloud of smoke and words, trying to lure him out to meet more people and hear about other topics, or maybe even talk a bit himself, but to no avail. Geri Sullivan is staying there, also Moshe Feder and Lise Eisenberg, who murmur about coming about to see us on Sunday, but don't make it, and Patrick and Teresa Neilsen Hayden, and Jack Henegan. Rob and Avedon must be even more peopled out than we are.

Saturday, we head to Reading for a Langford party, for those who aren't attending the simultaneous Birmingham bash. The Pender-Gunns are there, and we hand over a spare key so they can let themselves in when they get back to London. Teresa and I diagnose the mysterious exotic purple-berried plant among the yew trees in Hazel's backyard as pokeroot, *Phytolacca*, poisonous in

all its parts but with medicinal uses for treating rheumatism and skin troubles. "It grows all over the American north east," says Teresa. Hazel is disappointed -- she preferred it as a mysterious and unidentifiable alien. We discuss *FTT* covers with Steve Jeffery.

The Kazakh economist who has moved in next door drops in with her husband, both looking very normal and a little perplexed by all these noisy eccentrics. Hazel talks soothingly to them. Dave looms grinning deafly in all directions, and I know just how he feels. Joseph shows signs of falling asleep, until I remind him his hide is for rent to the highest bidder. "I'd better not fall asleep then," he says, and calls for coffee and more coffee. The Harveys offer us and Martin Smith a lift home. We offer Martin crash space; "At the Harveys, I get a *real bed*," he informs us crushingly. Also, they have a bigger comic book collection for him to peruse all next day.

Knee-Deep in Aussies

Arrive home from work Wednesday to find the Pender-Gunns have returned on schedule. Little brother Julian is still vaguely exploring London with no clear plans for what to do next. Driving a safari truck around Africa seems a possibility -- he's used to off-road driving, to taking vehicles apart and putting them back together again so they work, and that sort of thing. But the tour companies all seem to want their drivers to pay their own fares out to Africa, work for nothing, then pay their own way back to civilisation again. This does not seem a good deal. He's also interested in checking out how the stand-up comedy circuit works. And there's an ex-girlfriend somewhere in the country he might do some travelling with... Also he has been caught by surprise at finding that, as far as his Eurail pass is concerned, the railways in Britain aren't part of Europe. I point out that I told him this when I saw him in Australia in March, but admit that it is an understandable mistake for him to make (though his travel agent should have known), and that it is the British Rail position which is stupid.

The Ukrainians' bags have not been picked up on Sunday or Monday, as promised, nor on Tuesday or Wednesday. Nor have we heard anything from them.

The Wellington

Thursday is the 'Ton. Bridget Wilkinson, den mother to all East European fandom, is by the entrance. Does she know what's happened to the Ukrainians? "Don't talk to me about the Ukrainians," says she. She too had warned Alexander repeatedly that staying with people needed to be arranged in advance; she had already twice had Ukrainians ring her late at night with nowhere to sleep unless she took them into an already full flat (once, we deduce, after leaving their bags with us); she was worried that people would think that all East European fans were similarly disorganised and a bother. And she was worried about her mother, ill in hospital in Germany.

A few steps onwards, I am greeted by Alexander Vasilkovsky himself. "Ah, Judith, can you find us a place to stay for tomorrow night and Saturday?" he asks. They are staying with Martin Hoare at Reading tonight. Have they asked Bridget for suggestions? "There are reasons it is not possible for us to ask Bridget," he says. Indeed, so Bridget has been telling me. I forbear to point out that we feel much the same as Bridget does. "When will you be coming around to get your bags?" I ask. Leonid, it transpires, needs to get his bags tonight, for his coach leaves for Ukraine tomorrow morning. This means leaving the 'Ton no later than the dot of 10pm to take him home to fetch them. Truth to tell, the excuse for an early night is not altogether unwelcome.

Meanwhile, since one can't leave fellow fans to sleep on the streets, I conscientiously ask around for bed-space for them. Caroline Mullan, pale and exhausted from running the Worldcon huckster hall, seems willing to take them in to their house, which is already full of book dealers, but Brian sensibly puts his foot down. Sylvia Starshine says that if they're desperate, they can sleep among the boxes and welding gear in her spare room. But Bridget Hardcastle comes up trumps and says she and her dads will be glad to put them up. She goes off to tell Alexander.

By now it is time to take Leonid away to reclaim his bags. Joseph arranges for Alex to reclaim the remaining bags on Friday night. "If they call while my gardening is on TV, you'll have to deal with them," I warn him. But Friday passes with neither phone call nor visit from the Ukrainians.

Winding Down...

Saturday, Ian and Karen head off to explore Canterbury, I attend a local Tree Warden course where Sylvia and her house-mate Rosemary talk about the Worldcon art show and about their plans for the local Queens Wood. For the evening, we have arranged for the Neilsen Haydens and Rob Hansen to pop around so Teresa and I can talk gardens, knitting and saints, and Patrick can berate Joseph for being so unreasonable as to cut them off the *FTT* mailing list merely because it's been eight years since they sent a LoC. Successive calls from the Ukrainians say they will be around for their bags at 6 o'clock, at 7 o'clock and at 8 o'clock. I serve up some supper about 9 o'clock, and the doorbell rings. Joseph and I pass their bags out to Alex and Ellen, and we wave farewell to the Ukrainian saga.

Ian and Karen depart Monday, leaving us a frog for our collection and a Kaz Cooke advice book to share around. Tuesday I organise Julian onto the afternoon coach for York, telling him he'll like the rest of Britain and Europe once he tries it out. It seems to have worked -- we haven't heard from him since. And life returns to normal. No more having to be polite in our own home. No more conversation at mealtimes, instead of getting on with reading. Back to our normal unsociable selves.

No need to join the Worldcon, we had thought from the start. We'll just catch up with people as they pass through London. There's sure to be plenty going on. There was indeed. Next time, perhaps it will be more relaxing just to go to the Worldcon itself and give a miss to all the peripheral social activity.



ACTING LOCALLY

Christina Lake

When I joined the project to set up an environment centre in Bath, it had a vision ("Bath -- a sustainable city") and not much else. True, there was a manager, seconded full time from Marks and Spencers for two years, but he seemed to know as little about the environment as he did about computers; and there was going to be a building, a former NatWest bank, if the trustees would ever risk signing the lease. And then there was Liam, one of the few who actually seemed concerned about the vision.

When I came on board, donated two days a week by my employers, Wessex Water, in lieu of cash, I went to work with Liam on setting up an information resource. As a results-oriented person, the process was very strange to me. Instead of plunging in and doing practical things like buying books, CD ROMs and computers, we seemed to spend all our time holding meetings. We sat around in pubs, listening to people argue over what we meant by Bath, what was the Bath bioregion, should we forget bioregions and use the new council boundaries instead, and of course, the biggest question of all -- what is sustainability? Liam maintained that sustainability was about solutions. If this did not work as a definition in the strictest sense it did at least give us a direction. Our information resource was not going to be about doom and gloom and environmental guilt, but about positive solutions to living in the modern world. Consequently, our newly devised list of subject categories would not include a section marked POLLUTION in big letters (though individual sections might sneak it in in lower case -- after all, it's hard to avoid!).

As a librarian, I knew that trying to organise information on visionary lines such as by elements -- Air, Earth, Fire, Water -- would not really work. But as a person fired with enthusiasm for this new project, I was more than half-tempted by the idea. Fortunately, sense prevailed and we devised ten rather more logical subject categories.

It did not take me long to come to the cliched conclusion that environmentalists were just like fans. Well, not just like fans, but that their world was as much a fandom as the one I knew. Activist Tania talked of conventions in Germany. Everyone knew everyone else and gossiped about them in terms of their opinions and activities. The group dynamics were similar if not the specific interests. And I could feel some of the same elements that had attracted me to fandom in the first place, pulling me towards this new group. The ethos that you could do things for yourself, that you did not have to fit in with the mainstream of society, that there was more to life than holding down a good job and earning lots of money. So, in spite of being a representative of a profiteering privatised utility, it was easy to fit in. I felt I belonged far more than I ever did in my real job where all people talked about were golf, their families, and of course, the latest share price!

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before my new friends came into conflict with my employers. One of the big campaigns in Bath is against the building of the Bathampton bypass, and road builders Ameys had just come up with a scheme whereby they could off-load all the spoils from the project onto Wessex Water as infill for a reservoir. The environmentalists were furious. They suspected (a) that there was some underhand deal going on between Wessex Water and Ameys; (b) that the scheme would wreck yet another piece of the surrounding countryside; and (c) that the reservoir did not necessarily need infilling in the first place. Wessex Water, for their part, claimed that their involvement was benefiting the environment since otherwise the spoil would have to be transported miles to the nearest tip, leading to more traffic congestion in the surrounding areas, that the reservoir was dangerous, and they were taking the opportunity of this cheap source of fill material to save some money and re-landscape the area as a local amenity. My friend Tania went to press with the comment that the project would be a scar on the local landscape. The Wessex Water spokesman riposted with a vehement interview about ignorant environmentalists failing to check on their facts and using the project to publicise their own campaign. Despite my suggestions that the environmentalists might have some legitimate concerns, the spokesman refused to tone down his attack.

None of this spoke well for my role of building bridges between Wessex Water and the environmental community in Bath. Here was my first chance to do something positive, and the whole thing was escalating into conflict regardless, with me stuck in the middle.

The next Monday I approached my friends in the Environment Centre with trepidation, knowing that there had been a demonstration up at the reservoir. Luckily, Wessex Water seemed to have rethought their belligerent approach and engaged in some diplomacy after all, so although no-one was exactly happy, there had been some dialogue between the two sides, and the prospect of a protracted campaign against Wessex Water receded.

So, it was back to business as usual and trying to set up the information resource. Liam decided it was time to give us some environmental training -- fed up, perhaps, with us asking him all the time: "Liam, what is permaculture?" (Of course, I wouldn't have needed to ask if I had paid more attention to Judith's article in *FTT*.) So, Liam got out a flip chart and began drawing us chickens. Chicken number one lived in a factory and needed feeding, regulated temperatures and people to clean up after it, meaning that the energy input to produce either eggs or meat far exceeded the value of the output (particularly where you were importing feed from the third world), while chicken number two, the permaculture chicken, grazed your land and contributed heat to your green house and chickenshit as manure. It sounded wonderful, providing you happened to have a permaculture homestead. But Liam maintained that the principles could just as easily be applied to your window box, so long as you took to considering your potential elements of waste as assets. I tried to imagine my small, concreted backyard working on permaculture lines, but failed. Perhaps I should consider getting in some chickens.

By the end of July, we began to feel that we more or less knew what we were doing. Unfortunately, at this point in the proceedings, Liam's contracted work period ended and several of the volunteers suddenly found themselves jobs, leaving me wondering how I could run everything on two days a week. After suggesting cloning, I rearranged my schedule to be there an extra evening a week, and Liam was prevailed upon to continue one day a week. Fortunately, at this point some new volunteers turned up, who unlike the previous set did not spend half their time sitting on the roof in the sun, breaking for ice creams, giggling over in-jokes and going down the pub. Regretting the hedonism of the old regime, I recognised that if we were to open in a month and a half, people who were willing to organise the admin and set up computer databases were exactly what we needed, even if they did have a regrettable tendency to argue at length over the minutiae of the past and present systems. I left them to get on with it, and found myself suddenly being treated as if I was in charge and therefore spending my days in meetings rather than doing any work. As a contrast to my normal routine at Wessex Water where I do lots of work but no-one ever talks to me about it, this was rather pleasant, but ultimately frustrating when there were various things I wanted to achieve, like a working thesaurus and no time in which to do anything, except, inevitably, at home (and remember, this was the same month as Intersection, for which I was trying to run fan programming and complete a fanthology!).

My finest (or possibly daftest) hour came when I promised the trustees that we would have a book list ready for them by the end of the week. The original plan had been to order books as we went along, as time was short, and it might take weeks for everyone to agree a booklist. The trustees, however, refused to sign the first set of cheques, and asked for an overview. Knowing that if we delayed any longer, we would have to open without an information resource at all, we ploughed through publications catalogues, rang up subject co-ordinators, sat adding up lists with our calculators, stuck arbitrary priorities on suggestions, and charted the frequency of various periodicals, all in the hope of achieving a balance between our ten subject areas, spending the right amount of money (not so much as to frighten the trustees, not too little in case they reallocated it to someone else) and a list that would convince the chairman of the trustees before he went on holiday. By the end of deadline day, I was on my own making the last adjustments to the list, discovered the hard disk was too full to print, went through various time consuming routines too tedious to describe and was still there at eight o'clock, desperately feeding paper through the extremely primitive fax machine. After so much effort, the trustees did not dare argue with our list (though one of the volunteers did make serious allegations about us ordering books at random which had just a tiny grain of truth to it), and they released the money.

The information resource was go (to borrow terminology from the notably unsustainable space programme).

The next major headache was book shelves. Sourcing books was something I did all the time, but bookshelves were rather out of my field, particularly bookshelves you didn't have to pay for. We thought we might be able to get some from the university which was in the process of refurbishing, but no-one seemed to quite know what they had. Then Boots the Chemist came through with an offer. The Centre manager waxed lyrical about the unified look the shelves would give the Centre, as they could be used both in retail and information resource, but I had serious doubts that powder pink shelves designed to hold cosmetics were really suitable for our books and periodicals. However, there did not seem to be much choice, so we drew up yet another floor plan design and put in our order.

In the week leading up to opening, the Marks and Spencers manager kept coming up to our office to check that we were confident about filling the shelves. I always said yes, even though I didn't have the slightest idea. Our shelves arrived, but there were too many people using our information resource area to paint ceilings, lay carpets, store plants and lie on the floor screaming to do any serious planning. Eventually on the day before opening we cleared them all out of the way and brought down our carefully prepared files of information on environmental organisations, boxes of journals and hastily classified and labelled books. We dumped one set of shelves in favour of the photocopier, abandoned using the bottom shelves as none of the book supports would fit and made a creditable and not too illogical attempt to fill the rest. At the end, we stood back in amazement. We had produced an information resource after all. The Centre manager failed to be equally amazed, and asked us to do half an hour of cleaning before we went home.

The day of the opening came. Peter Gabriel, Van Morrison, Chris Evans, Anita Roddick, Sting, David Puttnam and Hugh Grant and Liz Hurley had been invited, but as far as I know none of them showed. Instead we had speeches from the mayor of Bath and an EU commissioner from Brussels (who was supposed to be giving us £10,000 to be a ULIC or Urban Local Initiative Centre, but commented rather damningly that it didn't seem to him that Bath had many environmental problems). After the speeches we went outside for the mayor to cut the ribbon and declare the Centre open. It was a lovely sunny day, the Centre was decked in banners, a samba band was playing on the pavement opposite, and as a finishing touch a break-away group of environmentalists was carrying out a demo against the centre's main sponsors. "Don't drink French wine from Marks and Spencers" read their banners, and "NatWest deals in death" and in rather smaller letters "Say no to corporate environmentalism". The banners were hastily cleared away for the opening ceremony, but were soon out again so, as people flocked into the Centre, you could hear them asking: "What have NatWest done?" and: "Why are they protesting against Marks & Spencers?" For those who had worked long and hard to get the Centre open and knew the protesters personally, it was a blight on their day, but most of the public did not seem to mind.

The opening was a success. The Centre seemed to be buzzing with people and activity from when it opened at 11.30 till when we shepherded the last few out at five. People came to the information resource and asked us questions. They browsed the books and didn't complain about our choices. It was only the first day, but at least we felt we had made a start. With all the leaflets, organisation information and alternative publications we had done what we had set out to do, to bring together in one place information which would help the people of Bath, whatever their background or depth of knowledge, to consider ways in which they could improve their environment. "Bath -- a sustainable city" was, at least, out on to the drawing board.

"In the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth and all therein.

"But scientists said let the seas be populated by fish containing human, mouse and rat genes.

"And Hoechst and Monsanto said let the land produce plants and trees bearing fruit containing bacteria and virus genes.

"And Ciba-Geigy said let corn grow containing scorpion genes.

"And Amoco said let there be tobacco containing hamster genes.

"And Zeneca made all kinds of fruit and vegetables and they did not rot.

"By the seventh day the work of the Lord had been undone and the companies saw they had recreated life for their own ends."

(*Greenpeace Business's* view of genetic engineering, quoted in *Ethical Consumer*, August-October 1995.)

THE LETTER COLUMN

Edited by Joseph Nicholas

The North American copies of FTT 17 were mailed in late May; the Canadians received theirs within a month, but most US readers had to wait until August for the trans-Atlantic mails to disgorge theirs. This is why FTT 18 contained no US letters; and why most of the US letters which appear here are in response to that earlier issue. (Or even the one before.) But enough introduction; let the readers speak!

Chester Cuthbert
1104 Mulvey Avenue
Winnipeg
Manitoba R3M 1J5
Canada

"Jilly Reed's article amused me because I was much like the best friend she mentioned: the pulp magazines and adventure fiction I read as a young man hardly ever mentioned sex, a subject which interested me but was forbidden in my culture, so I was inexperienced even when I married at thirty-one. Five children and seven grandchildren have since given me some enlightenment, but the infinite variety of sexual experience disclosed in the daily papers alone supports a need for careful education."

Andy Sawyer
1 The Flaxyard
Woodfall Lane
Little Neston
South Wirral L64 4BT

"What a lovely pastoral flavour to this incarnation of *FTT*! I must check out our own frogs which we occasionally see lurking in the undergrowth, although we are far from a pond and I suppose it's the unweeded parts of the garden which attract them. Jilly's endpiece was delightful. I have a suspicion I'm going to be quoting 'In the *daytime*?' if I don't watch out. Although we are pretty suburban here we are still just two minutes from open country and are occasionally treated to nature red in tooth and beak: not long ago we observed a sparrowhawk tearing chunks out of a pigeon in our back garden. Previously, we'd blamed the cat for the piles of feathers on the lawn, but now we're not sure."

Monika Best
Dossenheimer
Landstr 61A
6900 Heidelberg
Germany

"It's probably a little late to comment on Judith's 'On Being Grown Up At Last' in *FTT* 16, so let me just say that I loved it. The description of your garden was absolutely wonderful -- I live in a small apartment full of houseplants (and books, of course), and you can't imagine how envious I was because I've always wanted a garden. If I ever manage to find a well-paid job I can finally afford a place with a garden or at least a balcony....maybe that way I can stop the houseplants taking over."

Cathy Doyle
118 Terrell Road
Newport News
Virginia 23606
USA

"Your sixteenth issue contained such wonderful descriptions of your new house that I decided we needed one of our own. So we've finally purchased a home, after ten years in this town. It's a three bedroom brick rancher with a moderate amount of bath (one-and-a-half, neither of them very large by comparison with most American houses these days, where the master bath is a major entertainment centre, judging from its size and position in the house). The best thing about it is that it's on a small pond (dug by the people on the other side thirty years ago) which hosts a large amount of wildlife, including thirty ducks, a muskrat, a blue heron, and several moles which are tunnelling through our back yard. The people who lived here before us did a lot of the major work that needed to be done to a thirty-year-old house, such as roof replacement and a new heating/air conditioning system, and built a den on the back of the house. At last we have room to spread the books out so we can see what we have and even a room to entertain in. Although I don't think I'll ever be a real gardening pro, I'm going to try to turn some of the vast expanses of green lawn the house has into gardens next summer and grow tomatoes and flowers (the previous owner just loved to take care of his lawn, the neighbours tell us -- not one of our major preoccupations in life). Now hopefully I'll get tenure in 1997 so we won't have to sell the house suddenly!"

You've got a small pond, with thirty ducks and a muskrat? This gives a whole new meaning to the word "small".... Beside yours, our four feet long, three feet wide pond is just a puddle!

Susan Zuege
W63 N14262
Washington Ave
Apt 88
Cedarburg
Wisconsin 53012-3016
USA

"My parents live by a small lake that is home for an assortment of frogs and toads. When I visited them in late August, hundreds of toads could be seen crossing the road each morning on their way from the lake to the woods. They ranged in size from half-an-inch to two inches long, and were either brown, black or a rusty red In colour. Each evening, they would hop back across the road to the lake.

"My parents became impatient with the slow pace I set for our daily walk, since I was careful not to step on any of the tiny toads. When I heard a car coming, I'd gather up as many of them as possible and carry them to the side of the road.

I shudder to think how many never made it across.

"My parents seemed relieved when I left, as they could once again take their walks at a more invigorating pace. They also hinted that August would be very busy for them next year, and that perhaps I should select a different time for visiting them!"

What odd parental behaviour! However, this seems an appropriate point at which to say that some of what we thought were froglets in our pond in fact turned out to be toadlets: darker in colour, with a squarer body shape, and a preference for walking rather than hopping. We haven't seen any frogs or toads for the past few weeks, so presume they're now overwintering under our piles of compost and garden rubbish.

Alexander Slate
8603 Shallow Ridge
Drive
San Antonio
Texas 78239-4022
USA

"*Nil salienta, summa bufonidae est.* At least that's the situation here. We don't have a pond, so we don't have frogs, but we were very surprised to go out onto the back porch one day and find a toad sitting in the cats' water dish. We eventually put a separate dish of water out for it, so that the cats would still have theirs.

"Since then, we've discovered two other toads that have made our home their base camp -- one smaller one which goes in and out of our garage, and a large one which either sits in our front entryway or in the strip garden we have along the side

and front of the house.

"Evidently, toads must not taste good to cats, because none of our three bother them. One evening, I watched Beauty (the real hunter of the group) and Mr Toad (the one from the front) sit totally ignoring each other for about 15 minutes. But for a while I was afraid that a snake might have eaten Mr Toad -- we discovered a bull snake near the front door about a month ago, and didn't see Mr Toad for a week thereafter. But the snake moved on and Mr Toad reappeared. We were all quite happy about that."

Neil K. Henderson
46 Revoch Drive
Knightswood
Glasgow G13 4SB

"As a callow youth, I had a muddy terrarium containing four frogs and two toads -- the tank had a plastic water dish with a stone in it at one end, and various supine flower pots for shelter. I had to supply slugs, worms, etc. which I foraged from waste ground on my way home from school. As spring arrived, and the 'mud' got smellier and smellier, it was decided that the amphibians should be returned to

wherever my uncle's friends had acquired them, and they were seen no more. The strange thing, though, is that one of the frogs was bright red -- well, a sort of dark blood orange. I presume it must have had some sort of pigment disorder, but had nevertheless survived to maturity -- they were all a good size (though my feeding may have increased that). I wonder how it fared back in the wild (if it ever actually got there).

"I was interested in Jilly Reed's account of bird diversity in the 'real' country. I heard a disturbing Radio Four programme, in which birdsong recorded in farm-infested country was compared with that in a London park. The park was found to have a greater diversity of species than the hedgerow-bereft rapeseed wilderness, where only the usual blackbirds, starlings and other 'town' birds were to be heard. It's a curious inversion. I've actually seen a kestrel at Partick Cross in Glasgow, where a bend in the River Kelvin provides a miniature nature reserve amid the usual big city buildings. If nature keeps moving into the towns, maybe inner-city hedgerows could be introduced -- planting them along the outer edges of pavements to double up as traffic insulators and preserve the lungs of pedestrians."

Steve Jeffery
44 White Way
Kidlington

"We inherited a frog with the house (the previous owners left us a note about it), but after clearing the ubiquitous spreading silver weed/leaf/thing from the front patch (creating an immediately attractive cat litter tray right outside the large front Oxfordshire OX5 2XA window) we've not seen it again. Instead we have hedgehogs in the back garden.

Enki, the cat, has learned to leave them alone, and they seem completely oblivious to either her or us as we sit on the back step and watch them tucking into a bowl of bread and watered milk not four feet away. (One of them is getting braver; it just wandered up to the back step, peered myopically

up at this big bearded thing looming over it, then scuttled off under the trees.) I know you're not supposed to give them milk, but they seemed distinctly unimpressed by all the other offerings, including pet food. We've now become a permanent evening truckstop for Vikki's 'babies' as they climb into the dish and walk around inside it to get the last bits out.

"It's an interesting observation about the style of government in power and the music of the time. Is it that people see no alternative, and no possibility of an alternative, which leads to the separation of popular music from politics, and a retreat into technological blandness (The Pet Shop Boys) or escapist hedonism (house/rave culture -- which seems a harder and more cynical expression of seventies' Pink Floyd psychedelia)? The lyrics could be written in large print on the back of a postage stamp -- 'Let me take you there', repeated one thousand times. Donna Summer did this first over some 22 minutes of 'Love To Love You Baby', and nobody should ever be tempted to repeat the exercise.

"Your list of punk bands missed the inestimable Ruts. The energy of that era, though, was always tinged with the edge of imminent threatened (and actual) violence at gigs."

Colin Greenland
2A Ortygia House
6 Lower Road
Harrow
Middlesex HA2 0DA

"You and Steve Jeffery are right about music not 'energising long-term change' (but absolutely wrong about The Pet Shop Boys -- have you really missed the irony? I suppose I might not have listened if Bill Gibson hadn't advised me to, in the gravest possible terms: their best lyrics are, as he says, absolutely chilling). Music no more does that than adverts make you buy products. What all this information does is create and constantly recreate, bit by bit, your sense of the world and what there is in it: experiences, notions and feelings just as much as commodities. That's important. But just because the recorded demands of Bob Dylan or The Clash don't describe our present culture in any programmatic way, does that mean they contributed nothing to the changes that have happened? Just because our present SF doesn't display the formal audacity and headlong anarchy of 'New Wave' SF, does it mean that effort failed? Chris Priest, I see, thinks it does. I reckon, on the contrary, that it's a major part of what's invigorated us. *New Worlds* made us aware that a genre is a whole imaginative economy. It sensitised us to the power of our inheritance by showing us its ambivalence; forced our standards up by exposing how low expectations had been. There may be a lot of crap around now -- more crap than ever before, I shouldn't wonder -- the point is, the standards of the good stuff, its assumptions about its place, purpose and capability, are immeasurably higher than they were thirty years ago."

Whether or not I'm wrong about The Pet Shop Boys, my list of eighties' rock bands contained one definite error: as Pascal Thomas pointed out, I overlooked Billy Bragg, whose first three albums were overtly political in tone and content. But the fourth, Workers' Playtime, brought a distinct change of direction: as he remarked at the time, it was pretty pointless to record another album about the evils of Thatcherism when the Tories had just been re-elected to another term of government. But back to science fiction:

Steve Jeffery
(address as before)

"Science fiction has been largely overtaken by sci-fi, its bastard media offspring. Most of the images in the media, in adverts, are second or third generation retreads from *Mad Max* or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. SF films, from *The Terminator* onwards, are special effects extravaganza versions of action thrillers -- when was the last time you read a car chase or a shoot-out in an SF novel? But there must always be one in a film. The (internal) sense of wonder generated by a good book has been overtaken by the (external) sense of the spectacular available to the multi-million dollar budget film."

Neil K. Henderson
(address as before)

"A further frog-thought brings me neatly to the SF debate. I agree with Stephen O'Kane that *sense of wonder* is what it's all about, and the more 'bosh' the scientific element is, the better. Once it gets bogged down with socio-political-technological 'realism', SF takes on the role of lecturer/conscience and consequently loses its essentially romantic appeal. I'm thinking of a truly wonderful, awful B movie (the name escapes me) in which a two-hundred-year-old aristocrat -- who has to be mysteriously dragged downstairs every night by flunkies and flung into a pond -- is revealed to have lived for so long because he was born as a giant frog. The brilliant scientific bosh is that humans go through an amphibian phase in the womb, and that if this were extended into adulthood amazing longevity would result. Alas, our frog-person has become so sensitive after centuries of studying art and philosophy that, upon discovery, he can't bear the shame and commits self-frogicide by jumping out of an upstairs window. The final splat is enough to bring a tear to a glass eye. This is what science fiction should be all about, and to hell with 'realism'. Real scientific speculation only results in bigger

profits for BT anyway."

An influence on Terry Pratchett's Witches Abroad is perhaps revealed, suggests Judith. Not having read much Pratchett myself, I wonder whether this is a reference to British Telecom or giant frogs....

Jerry Kaufman "I wonder if I can say anything sensible about your arguments in your linked pieces
8618 Linden Ave N about music and science fiction. If I understand them correctly, one says that pop
Seattle or rock music no longer has either hopes or pretensions of changing society, while
Washington 98103 the other says that science fiction is no longer in the vanguard of the development
USA of technology. Impossible, actually, to summarise the second argument in a single
sentence. And very difficult to see the link between the two.

"Perhaps it's that neither form of entertainment engages the Bigger Picture any more. The practitioners of both, in the main, are either straight-on entertainers or, if they have artistic pretensions, play them out in a very personal field. There are still a number of musicians writing and performing socially engaged material, but the ones I'm familiar with are all folk musicians: Roy Bailey, Si Kahn, Rumors Of The Big Wave, to name a few. They're also relatively obscure. The pop groups I think of as socially aware seem to express this in other ways than their music, like REM. Rappers write a lot about society and social injustice, but I don't listen to rap, so they haven't affected me directly. I can't guess whether they intend to create action in their listeners or just to make them more aware of pain, cruelty, and the raw deals they get.

"As for SF, I still read and enjoy it, although never in the quantities I read as a teenager. And there doesn't seem to be a shortage of interest in or passion for technology, although it's more along the lines of computers, networking, biological engineering (biohacking) and the like, which shows what sort of SF I read. (I did read *Red Mars* because I'm a Robinson fan more than I'm a space travel fan.) I'm not familiar with the 'genre' SF you attack so vehemently, since I don't read Niven, Pournelle, Steele, etc.. Could it be I wonder, that 'genre' SF in this usage means 'the SF you don't like'?"

The "missing link" between my two arguments for which you seek is the collision between environmentalism and technocracy, the former arguing that we are an inseparable part of the natural world and that our activities must take account of it and our impact on it, and the latter claiming that by adherence to the correct procedures and ur-scientific rules we may rise above it and transform it in accordance with our will. There was quite a lot about environmentalism, and its growing impact on British politics, in the first half of the article; rock music was merely the hook on which to hang it. Unfortunately, there's rather less than there should have been about technocracy in the second half, which concentrated too much on science fiction, didn't say enough about the so-called "science" of economics, and never addressed the Whig conception of history and the myth of progress.

*Even so, you need to keep clear that the subject is technocracy, not technology; that is, the perspective from which the world is viewed, not the things with which it's filled. I therefore reject your suggestion that the genre SF I criticise is merely the SF I don't like, because SF which deals with "computers, networking, biological engineering (biohacking) and the like" is just as technocratic, just as prone to argue that the solution may be found through the attempt to dominate the world rather than to integrate with it, as the stuff churned out by Allen Steele and his ilk. That section was entitled "The Literature Of A Failed Technocracy" because I argue that it's not just some SF which has failed, but all of it, because at its core the genre relies on exactly the same precepts as those which informed the zeitgeist of the twenties and thirties. The technocratic solutions which informed the socio-politics of the fifties and sixties drew on just those precepts; but we now recognise these solutions -- big dams, big nuclear power stations, big airports, big office blocks -- as hopelessly unsuited to the problems they pretended to address. Ditto for genre SF -- and although such novels as *Virtual Light* and *Heavy Weather* address today's post-modernist dissatisfaction with technocratic solutions, they cannot escape the paradox that at root their existence depends on the same desires for systemisation and hierarchy.*

Jerry Kaufman "I think your second piece may have said entirely too much about economics if your
(address as before) thrust was to prove SF a literature of a failed technocracy. It seemed on re-reading to be a big digression. Now the question about that part of your article is: if SF is a failed literature, etc., why are so many authors and would-be authors eager to write it?

"I see huge growth in the body of working (part or full-time) writers, and Clarion West Writers' Workshops never go begging for new students. SFFWA, last I heard, was enormous. (This could be old

information, and the numbers could be swollen by horror or fantasy authors. Presumably horror and fantasy are not literatures of failed technocracy!) But if sales are flagging for both classic and new SF, why are publishers still flogging it?

"I could also argue with Charles Platt, as you quote him, regarding SF's failure to address the new technologies, and *Wired* and *Mondo 2000* as being the things to read. I quit reading the latter a couple of years ago; I currently read the former. Both can be quite tedious at times, and the 'creative' layout of the latter seems to discourage reading. And I can suggest several SF writers who have grappled with some of the tech Platt refers to, like Neal Stephenson and Mary Rosenblum, although you have already fielded this argument. So what literature, if any, grapples with the issues you raise from the far side of the divide -- from the environmentally-aware, non-controlling, beyond-technocracy side -- if any?

"As for economics, I'll have to let you know more after I complete the economics course I've just started. (It's part of a series of course I've been taking to get a professional certificate in insurance as a Chartered Property and Casualty Underwriter.) I can tell you that, even in the first chapter, reference is made to the complexities of economic analysis due to people's tendency to do things from habit rather than logical consideration. There's also the concept of 'satisficing', which means taking the first solution which satisfies needs, rather than looking for absolutely the best solution. So maybe at macroeconomic levels rough corners are rounded off in order to present predictions, but I think there's also an awareness that on a microeconomic level people and businesses don't always act in their own best interests, or take other needs into consideration. But I'll know more about the 'official' line by the end of the year."

Rebecca Ore
P.O. Box 129
Critz
Virginia 24082-0129
USA

"The *Wired* contingent is as technophilic as sixties' LSD enthusiasts, and my first exposure to the Internet had me thinking 'TV, but not as interesting'. Others beside myself have pointed out the dangers of networks supplanting communities -- but now we've got a system that allows close to perfect international sort-of believer groups. I'm not sure how desirable this is.

"*Wired* loves computer tools. If Charles Platt thinks the mind-set is an improvement, he should take a closer look at the adverts for games: the images are aggressive to downright military. The *Wired* boys are still bashing the vicious aliens. Nature is winners making more winners (Richard Dawkins, not Stephen Jay Gould). Cyberspace is a metaphorised frontier. Gibson's conceit that cowboys need fast reflexes to punch deck is ridiculous -- what human fingers can beat speeds of 180,000 miles a second? The mythos of hacker/game player reflexes is as absurd as FTL travel. To beat the reflex problem, military jet designers are researching eyeball control and computer-aided flight -- and military jets don't travel inches in nanoseconds."

Harry Andruschak
P.O. Box 5309
Torrance
Calif 90510-53209
USA

"I received *FTT 17* the day after 20 July, which was barely noticed as Apollo 11 Day and totally ignored as Viking Lander One Day. Well, of course. So I read the fanzine and noted your comments on the space programme; as usual, no mention of the uncrewed space programme. Not surprising, since NASA headquarters always hated space scientists taking all that money -- one or two percent of the total NASA budget -- for uncrewed spacecraft which actually worked. NASA went dreadfully wrong in promoting the crewed space programme as the only one that needed to be properly funded."

Susan Zuege
(address as before)

"When I was in grade school in the late sixties and early seventies, I remember how all the students were gathered together in the school library to watch the launch of each Apollo mission. They were such thrilling and inspiring events that I was convinced I would be an astronaut when I grew up. I strongly supported the space programme, and joined every pro-space club and association my meagre allowance permitted. I drank Tang, ate Space Food Sticks (which tasted as good as they sound) and did all my homework with an official Space Pen (writes at any temperature or gravity). At the same time, I was an avid reader of SF, waiting expectantly for these scientific and technological wonders to become reality.

"By the early eighties, I realised that the Space Age of media hype would not occur in my lifetime. Plans for exploration and colonisation remained on the drawing board and my enthusiasm for NASA and SF plummeted. Today I still watch the Shuttle launches and I still feel that same thrill of excitement as the countdown reaches zero, but that is the extent of my interest in the space programme. I abandoned my plans to work for NASA, and am happily employed as a librarian at a local public library. My reading preference now runs more toward fantasy and the supernatural than SF. Considering the state of the space programme, I have a better chance of wandering into the Realm of Faerie than I do of visiting Mars."

Gregory Benford
1105 Skyline Drive
Laguna Beach
California 92651
USA

"Your ruminations on space made me rethink some assumptions. You stress current social forces, but I think a larger game's afoot...."

"If Gorbachev in 1987-88 sounded much like Khrushchev, talking up space, so did George Bush in 1989 resemble Kennedy, setting a goal: a crewed Mars landing by the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing, 2019. Both leaders sounded the charge. Both countries yawned and changed the subject. Shortly afterwards, they changed the leaders, too.

"Bruce Murray, former director of Jet Propulsion Laboratory and professor at CalTech, pointed out to me many of the curious analogies and features of the Space Age, but his most striking analogy reached even further back. Once we had a distant, hostile goal, and men threw themselves at it, too: Antarctica. Early in this century, Scott and Amundsen raced for the south pole with whole nations cheering them on. The Edwardian Englishman who tried to impose his own methods died. The savvy Norwegian who adapted to the hostile continent came through smoothly. Others tried to follow. Shackleton made some progress, and then national rivalry became far more serious: World War One swallowed up the exploratory energies. Admiral Byrd and others made headway between the wars, but true, methodical Antarctic exploration did not resume in earnest until the International Geophysical Year, 1957.

"The wars gave the IGY teams cheap, reliable air and sea transport technology. Military services were happy to assist, exercising their capabilities. International though the spirit was, national and territorial claims did not vanish; Argentina and Chile still mutter over their rights to turf. Indeed, perhaps the major reason nobody disturbs the present high-minded international air is that no serious resources seem to be at stake. Discover a rich field for mining or pumping, however, and all bets will be off.

"Scott and Amundsen: Apollo. Shackleton and Byrd: Voyager and Galileo. The World Wars, in this analogy, are like our rising concern with domestic problems -- not soaring nationalism, luckily, but at least a deflection of those energies to local concerns. Bruce Murray pointed out that a science fictional alternate world scenario can perhaps illuminate our predicament. Think what our world would be like, he said, if the two-term limit on the US presidency had not been enacted in the late forties. Franklin Roosevelt's four terms had provoked that change in the Constitution, and the first president it applied to was Dwight Eisenhower. I remember how popular he was even in 1960. I'm pretty sure he could have beaten Kennedy; good grief, Nixon almost did.

"Eisenhower would have presided over the whole early Space Age, 1957-1964. He called space programmes 'pie in the sky', refused to fund research at a fast clip, and warned us against the military-industrial complex. In a parallel world with Eisenhower in office until 1964, we would have had no brave setting of the Apollo goal, no race to the Moon. Bruce Murray thinks that by 1990 we would probably have seen some US-USSR muscle-flexing in near Earth orbit, and probably a few unmanned probes would have studied the Moon. No Grand Tour trajectory for Voyager, probably no Mariner to Mars or any of the rest of it. George Bush's 1989 speech might have been a stalwart call for a crewed Moon Landing before the turn of the millennium.

"The plausibility of this imaginary history tells us that we have been very lucky. We lived through dramatic times, Sputnik-Apollo-Voyager, which quite probably will be seen as like Columbus-Magellan-Drake. Maybe we are now *getting back to normal*. And normal means, alas, dull.

"Large space projects have fed off nationalism. Kennedy sold fears of Soviet technology, with an attractive patina of worry over our science education. This worked well -- and I directly benefited from the special science courses rushed into schools, being a senior in high school in 1959; in fact, I might well not be a scientist today, were it not for the sudden spotlight cast on lowly high school physics courses. Gerard K O'Neill tried to hook his giant solar power collecting satellites to the energy 'crisis' of the seventies, but of course the price of oil fell well before any such gargantuan project could get under way. (I never really believed in O'Neill's designs or strategy, and spent an entire dinner in a pricey restaurant trying to argue him out of the approach. When he died in 1992 he was still rather wistfully pushing the project.)

"The paranoia road is necessarily short. Fears abate. Enemies topple. So it's time to face 'space as a place' -- a terrain to be studied and used in its own right, not as a sideshow battle for earthly concerns. We must also face the fact that *we've done the easy things*. Putting a pressurised Huygens probe on Titan, amid chilly winds and with many more light-minutes of delay in getting radio orders through, will be a much tougher job than landing Viking on Mars.

"There are some signs of intelligent management. In January 1994 NASA launched Clementine, a bargain basement mission which rose on a Titan IIG rocket, recycled after spending twenty-five years in an Arkansas ICBM silo. It is a light, low-cost probe, using sensors developed by the Ballistic Missile Defense Organisation, the heir to the Strategic Defense Initiative. It has a powerful laser ranging device

which will map the Moon completely for the first time, then leave it to fly by an asteroid, 1620 Geographos, within one hundred kilometres. In contrast with the billion-dollar Mars Observer, Clementine cost a mere \$75 million. A small team put it together in two years. Such savings point to the hard-nosed, realistic programme we need.

"Space must be made cheaper. Even Space Station *Freedom*, an orbiting pork barrel, is proving to be more than Congress can swallow. The present NASA administrator, Daniel Goldin, has negotiated with Russia to combine *Freedom* and *Mir*, since the reality of the mid-nineties is that a go-it-alone station will not be funded. A three-step plan appeals: first, send Shuttle flights to the existing *Mir* for early experiments. Second, fly up US add-ons, so we get our own gear running. Third, collaborate on *Mir II*, a much fancier station, a decade or so hence. The trouble here is that shuttles can carry only light payloads into the high-latitude *Mir* orbit. We can't get by with this 'workhorse' any longer, which opens the door to a new, better workhorse vehicle to come.

"I suspect this is how matters will work out. US-Russian joint ventures will contain the ominously large station costs, letting the rest of the space programme continue long-range plans that have some fiscal plausibility. Symbolising the end of the Cold War, collaboration will also provide jobs for Russian engineers who might otherwise be working on North Korean or Libyan missile projects. Collaboration would also lessen the load on the Shuttle. This is a time bomb in the belly of NASA, for its own internal studies show that the odds are about one in 78 of a major accident, every time it flies. I served on a study group assessing the Shuttle in the seventies, and we calculated the odds rather higher -- about 4%, or one flight in twenty-five. Regrettably, *Challenger* was right on the money. Then NASA became obsessed with hand-tuning every bolt on the craft, and now the odds are better. But they will never be good. Rockets are not safe, period -- the Titan failure rate is about 3%, and the Russian Protons do about the same. No rocket has ever done better over the long haul.

"The schoolteachers-in-shuttles agenda came out of wanting to project the Eisenhower perspective -- a go-slow Space Age, elbows tucked in, chin down, making no mistakes. How can we counter that?

"First, appeal to the frontier. Young people, not just Americans, want to believe in an expansive sense of the future. Our time needs heroes rather desperately. Political leaders are tuned to sense this better than scientists. Hence the emphasis on manned space, which scientists like James Van Allen deplore because, after all, it is pricey and returns little for researchers to study. Man-in-space is a political event. The general risk of rocketry plays to this. Danger equals drama. It would be a breath of fresh air if the President would simply tell the public that every launch is much more like a test pilot run, with casualties expected. No schoolteachers riding a bus into orbit; instead, gutsy men and women on a wing and a prayer. As it said in *The Right Stuff*, 'No bucks, no Buck Rogers'.

"Second, we should have a clear set of cost-conscious reasons for every single project. There are solid national *and* global reasons for space. Here the Antarctica analogy helps. Nobody thought that there were good scientific uses for Antarctica when Scott and Amundsen raced across it. We didn't see it as a laboratory peculiarly sensitive to the whole planetary system. Now the ozone hole is a major diagnostic of our planetary health, an early indicator of the depletion which is hard to measure globally but gives itself away among the frozen crystals floating high above the poles. The space analogy to this is 'comparative planetology'. We can learn basic information about how our system works by seeing the variants played out on Mars, Venus and elsewhere. These places can teach us much about the sensitivity of planets to the sun, to chemical components in their atmospheres, and much else. Clearly, there is some connection between solar activity and climate, but we know little of how it works, much less how to make predictions. Mankind arose during the last great inter-glacial epoch, and another may be coming. What should we do about it?

"The Martian polar caps contain layers going back to Earth's Ice Ages. Was the main cause external to both planets -- the sun? Or is there something more complicated going on, involving the atmospheres as primary players? These questions are best answered by robots. They can send back reams of data, grist for the scientists' mills -- for people like me, who explore the solar system in their mind's eye. But what about crewed flights?

"An old siren song might work here: leadership in aerospace. Control of how to get into orbit. Further, dominance of the technologies which might be useful in future conflicts. This certainly means communication and surveillance satellites, but it probably implies some space station capability as well. Certainly, big robotic expeditions to other world will take some assembly in orbit. I doubt that robots can do that, though the answer is not obvious. Politically, the crewed solution to orbital assembly might be preferred simply because the public will find it far more interesting than watching a cousin of R2D2 fitting pipes together in zero gravity.

"Most space advocates have regrouped around a clear, seemingly inevitable goal: Mars -- mostly, I suspect, for its romance, mystery, and because it's there. Of all crewed projects -- the space station, a Moon base, even power satellites -- it promises the *least*, Allen Steele argues, in economic or technological spin-off benefits. But it's also the one goal which can quicken the pulse of the multitude. Bob Zubrin told me that his group at Martin-Marietta has designed a lean Mars programme that sends five crewed expeditions, for two-and-a-half years each, for \$30 billion. (The key is chemically extracting fuel from the Martian atmosphere.) So it could be quite cheap, if done as a risky venture. I don't think anything else on the space menu can satisfy a public longing for action with meaning.

"But even to propose such a thing, as George Bush did, pushes quite a few problems to the top of any space agenda. Current blue-sky planning for Mars exploration assumes that we will use liquid rockets and take about a year each way. This means problems of human deterioration in zero gravity become major: calcium leaches from bones, muscles atrophy. Should we do studies of people inside spinning cans to see if centrifugal effects will duplicate gravity in the physiological sense? Or perhaps we should look beyond chemical rockets, to fast ships which can get a small payload, of people plus a few weeks' rations, to Mars within a month. Nobody needs to leave until all their support gear is in place and working. Of course, space station research in rotating living quarters has more human involvement, so it might be politically preferred. But the other major problem of a Mars expedition, the really high reliability of all that gear, is best served by sending back-up systems by long, slow, *cheap* orbits. This underscores another need: really big rockets for getting considerable masses into Earth orbit. Or else much better ways to do it -- laser-driven systems, say.

"All these are policy decisions, but they must be made in the light of what humanity as a whole wants to see in space. Drama. People. Mystery. Wonder. Perhaps human presence should now be seen as intrinsically international, because we desperately need goals as big as the human prospect. The *world* needs lofty aims. Space buffs love their iconography -- the drama of liftoff, of horizons brimming with the unknown, of Voyagers serenely gliding above alien landscapes. As well, they have an answer to those who say that these are the distractions of a high culture, perched atop a seething, oppressed mass. As follows:

"The industrial nations have about twenty percent of the world's population. The bulk of humanity labours long and hard for little. Not because the industrial nations steal their wealth -- that same twenty percent produces two-thirds of the world's output, including agriculture -- but because most of the world has not learned the many social and intellectual abilities which produce wealth. We should therefore say, as C P Snow did in the fifties, that uplifting humanity is the Great Cause, then concede that space can play a role in the Cause.

"We will probably have no real peace in the world until most of humanity is prosperous, or at least has solid hope of becoming so. But if they pursue the agenda of the industrial nations, the strain on raw resources will be vast. So, too, will the pollution from more mining, metal smelting, fossil fuel burning, irrigation, and the like. The planet can't support it, not with present technology. The energy and mass needed for uplifting humanity must therefore come from elsewhere -- space. It is quite foolish, in the long run, for us to do messy, polluting things in this thin shell of air and water which gave birth to us.

"We're fouling our nest, granted. But a smart bird learns to fly."

The historian in me insists that your speculation on what might have happened had the personalities and/or circumstances of the fifties and sixties been different is counter-factual, and that we have to address what actually was the case; but the SF reader acknowledges that what-if speculation of this nature is intrinsically entertaining. For example, I recall that the reason the USSR got a human being into Earth orbit ahead of the USA was that it had larger boosters because it had been unable to miniaturise and/or reduce the weight of the components of its ICBM nuclear warheads. Had it done so, however, would it have been first to orbit a man? Or would there have been a crewed space race at all, with nothing for the USA to pit itself against?

But let's address your suggestions for countering the heads-down, "getting back to normal" view of spaceflight which you advance as a reason for the loss of interest in it. Firstly, you suggest an "appeal to the frontier" because people "want to believe in an expansive sense of the future". However, this is to rely too much on a cultural phenomenon particular to the USA. Expansion into and conquest of a perceived wilderness is one of its founding myths, but doesn't have anything like the same resonance for other cultures. Inevitably, therefore, Britons will have a different outlook from Americans; and my sense is that while people certainly want a future, they couldn't care whether it's expansive or not, as long as it grants them a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, and provides a range of interesting friends and activities. A humanly-scaled future, in other words -- which almost militates against it being an expansive one.

Indeed, its non-expansive nature is supported by the continuing shift away from what I call (and

what much technocratic SF celebrates as) the "bigger! faster! huger! more!" paradigm which underpins expansionism. The UK protests against new motorways and veal exports to which I referred in the first half of my article in FTT 17 are just two examples of a wider and deeper European revolt against the mega-projects which characterise the expansionist paradigm and which used to be dressed up as "progress"; but we no longer wish to be awed by "progress", or look up to globe-bestrident role models, because these are now perceived as part of the problem, not the means of its solution. Although you suggest that because ours seems a duller age than hitherto it "needs heroes rather desperately", I'd argue that it already does have heroes, albeit that they are not immediately recognised as such and are qualitatively different from the heroes of earlier years (Shackleton, Byrd, et al). An example: former Winchester children's librarian Emma Must, who wound up leading the protest against the destruction of Twyford Down to build a section of the M3 motorway, was imprisoned for it, and was subsequently awarded £49,000 by the Goldman Foundation in recognition of her stand against the Department of Transport's environmental vandalism. Or there are the Greenpeace campaigners who took possession of the abandoned Brent Spar rig Shell wished to dump off the edge of the UK continental shelf, forced the issue onto the agenda of this year's North Sea conference, and embarrassed Shell into accepting the rig's land-based disassembly instead. Such "heroes" (although they'd probably reject the label) do what Shackleton and Byrd can no longer do: they engage with the kind of world we'd like to see and -- because times have changed and our desires are different -- thereby satisfy us rather more. To argue (even by implication) that we should try to create new heroes in the mould of the old seems to miss this fundamental point entirely.

Later, you argue that "the industrial nations have about twenty percent of the world's population" but "produce two-thirds of the world's output, including agriculture" without stealing from the other eighty percent. We've been over this ground before, but the fact is that the rich North only sustains this fraction of global output by the import (at ruthlessly underpriced values) of eighty percent of the globe's resources -- that is, it is massively overconsuming, and if it continues to do so will provoke greater global instability as the have-nots agitate more vociferously for the return of their share. We cannot therefore try "uplifting humanity" by mining the asteroid belt to provide the poor eighty percent with substitutes for the resources taken from them by the rich North, because such a project, even if economically feasible, would take too long to realise: it would lose the race to global political instability. So while I agree that "we will probably have no real peace in the world until most of humanity is prosperous, or at least has solid hope of becoming so", we have to redefine prosperity in global rather than individual Western terms. As Ted Trainer put it in *Abandon Affluence*, we must learn to live more simply so that the rest may simply live -- that is, reduce the share of the resources we consume, and redirect them to satisfy the eighty percent's basic wants.

Your analogy that while birds foul their nests, "smart birds learn to fly" is thus inappropriate. They can only do this if they have another habitat to go to, with food, shelter, and other birds and perches. We have only this one world, and as yet no means of finding another, nor of making it habitable -- which means that we have to clean up this one, and keep it habitable, before we start anything else.

Stephen O'Kane
Flat 168
Wick Hall
Furze Hill
Hove
East Sussex BN3 1NJ

"How long have you been reproducing statistics from *The Guardian Weekend* on the back page? Their broad message is simple, of course; humans run the world like lunatics. So what next?

"Try a couple of speculations. If the hypothesis that male fertility is falling is correct, then we may suppose that one of the principal forces driving us to compete for wealth and status is being quietly removed. Needless to say, that prospect cuts across the partisan lines. Anti-green contrarians are apt to rely on biological programming (to reproduce our genes) to say we have to continue on roughly our present track. So where do they go on this? But how many green campaigners want to say that the obvious candidate for sperm destroyer, chemical or radiation pollution, is going to stop us? (Although James Lovelock might.)

"In September, *The European* newspaper carried an account of the Coca-Cola invasion of Romania -- Timisoara now has the highest consumption in Europe, with nearly two hundred bottles per year for every man, woman and child living there. Typically, the lone voice of protest comes from a local MP who says that 'this is not the democracy we fought for. This is mass western culture that washes away all the region's character'.

"The popularity of Coca-Cola shows that capitalism produces the goods in narrow consumption terms. Even ecologically, it can hardly be worse than the planned heavy industry which was so prevalent in Eastern Europe before 1989. But capitalism does not meet the spiritual needs of some people, and it does not claim to. The market economy is a social institution, but its Romantic and Hegelian critics in the nineteenth century realised that it does not make people *feel* involved in society. (I reckon the nationalist

and socialist alternatives they came up with were even worse.) In the past, many expected religion to fill spiritual gaps, but now even that readily appears as more feuding groups. I sometimes wonder whether we're in a parallel position to the old Roman Empire prior to the advent of Christianity when the old pagan religions were dying and there were numerous cults and philosophies which attracted limited followings but did not catch the attention of people as a whole until the story of the god who died to save us. Any guesses as to who might have what it takes?"

Er....I'll pass on that one, I think. But here's a more general observation on the tenor of the times: which is that a lot of the uncertainty we feel may be a consequence of the fact that we are approaching not merely the end of a century but the end of a millennium, and although none of us expect it to transform our lives in any way the date has been invested with so much psychological significance that we can't help but feel there must be some sort of "change" on the way.

Steve Brewster
School of Mathematics
University of Bristol
Bristol BS8 1TW

"Your remarks on constitutional reform to Pam Baddeley (that there's more to it than proportional representation) are quite right, but I feel rather depressed at the low probability of our being able to carry through really thorough constitutional changes now. We've left it too late; it should have been done in 1945, but Britain came out of the Second World War with a rather dangerous delusion of its own indestructibility: it had won the war single-handed (okay, maybe with a bit of help from the USA. And the Soviet Union, if you insist) and felt that the victory had justified its social structures. As a result, the Attlee government went in heavily for changes in ownership and control (railways, mines) and swept away a few safe and withered relics of earlier ages (for example, nationalising welfare, which still bore many hallmarks of the old Poor Law-Parish-Guardians system). But we missed out on the wholesale redesign of law and economy that Germany received after the war -- courtesy, funnily enough, of us and the other victors.

"I was disheartened recently to hear that the Norwich Union is planning to float itself as a public company: it seems that the whole mutual sector is dismantling itself post-haste. What with mergers, takeovers, and conversions into banks, it looks like the Ecology will soon be the only building society left. There will soon be a big gulf between the small-scale self-help financial institutions such as Credit Unions and LETS schemes, and the big bad world of the national economy. Goodness what my grandfather would have thought of it -- he was an early-generation working class socialist, a product of that curious clash of Methodism and Marxism which gave rise to the Labour Party. His job as a tanner (a grotty occupation, even by the standards of the job in Leeds in the first half of this century) presumably had a big influence on his politics, but his views were tempered somewhat by his experiences in the First World War -- the Leeds Pals saw action in a couple of the big battles; I forget which -- and I think that what he saw there gave him a low opinion of humanity, and by extension a pessimistic opinion of how far a political system could overcome the baser side of human nature. I wish I'd known him; he died long before I was born."

Walter Willis
32 Warren Road
Donaghadee
Northern Ireland
BT21 OPD

"I was interested in your analysis of Tony Blair's approach, in particular your argument about the entrenched influence and position of the 'Tory placemen'. It seems to me that if the influence of these placemen was not sufficient to stop the imposition of inheritance taxes which destroyed so much of the landed gentry, there is little a Labour government could not do, assuming that it found its proposals were really practicable. It seems to me that a Labour government has more to fear from the practical objections of the civil service to their proposals than the obstruction of 'Tory placemen'."

This slightly misses my point. I was concerned not with quangocrats in particular but the Establishment in general -- an Establishment which includes the civil service, and which because it pursues its own agenda irrespective of which government is in power has equal power to thwart Labour's intentions. For example, the putative legislative agenda for a Labour government's first year of office contains such constitutional reforms as a Freedom of Information Act and Scottish and Welsh assemblies, but Labour has no draft Bills ready to implement them. This doesn't preclude it from picking a Bill off someone else's shelves (there are plenty of draft Bills for FOI Acts and regional assemblies around), but it seems more likely that, true to the Fabian vision of the neutrality of the organs of the state, it will ask civil servants to draft the legislation instead. Yet the centralised state that modern Britain has become will not willingly surrender that kind of power -- and, irrespective of their practicality, Freedom of Information proposals will vanish into a fog of (well-prepared) procedural and organisational objections and the Scottish and Welsh assemblies, if they are ever established at all, will be merely consultative fora with appointed rather than elected members.

But to stay with the prognosis for a future Labour government: Labour seems to think that it has until October 1996 to work out its policy agenda, to fight a general election in April 1997. However, it needs to move faster than this, because the next general election is likely to be no later than May next year. My reasoning is thus: renegotiation of the Maastricht Treaty will begin in summer 1996. Other EU members have said they will drag out the renegotiation beyond April 1997 in the hope that the Conservatives will fall and be replaced by a more tractable Labour government. Nothing excites Tory backbenchers more than the EU. So if you were John Major, would you call a general election while the Maastricht renegotiation is continuing, and run the risk of having to fight parts of your own party as well as the opposition; or would you get the thing out of the way before the renegotiation begins, and even claim your election manifesto as your platform for it? The answer is obvious.

Labour could still win an election next spring, of course, but probably with a lower majority than the opinion polls currently suggest. But herein lies the long-term strategy of the Tory right: they want to lose, because they think that a spell in opposition will give the party time to regroup and rethink. A small Labour majority would allow the Tories to exploit the lingering resentment of Europe still felt by a significant fraction of Labour MPs to push Britain out of the mainstream of post-Maastricht European integration. Coupled with Labour's habitual Fabian timidity -- which a narrow Parliamentary majority would heighten, as it would lack the confidence for a confrontation with the Establishment -- this would ensure the progressive abandonment of Labour's programme for government and a retreat into the vacillation and day-to-day survival techniques characteristic of the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the seventies. Then, when Labour is driven from power at the succeeding general election by an electorate infuriated at its failure to achieve anything of substance, the revamped and re-radicalised Tories would return to power, secure in the knowledge that they had laid the ground to consign Britain permanently to the margins of the EU, and ready to complete the Taiwanisation of the British economy.

I hope that it doesn't turn out like this. But if Labour wins in 1996 with only a small majority, then it's almost certain that, after 2000 or 2001, we will endure another generation of market triumphalism before a new political coalition emerges to supplant the dominant right-wing paradigms. In a way, it might almost be preferable for Labour to lose in 1996, since that would speed its disintegration and thus the emergence of a new oppositional coalition without any of the statist ideological baggage with which Labour is still encumbered. And with a more radical vision than sharp suits and short, verbless sentences, too.

Lloyd Penney
412-4 Lisa Street
Brampton
Ontario L6T 4B6
Canada

"Now that John Redwood's challenge to John Major is out of the way, the next UK general election could be quite interesting. In our last one, the electorate did not vote for anyone, but against the Progressive Conservatives, to the point where they not only lost power but also official party status, from two hundred-odd seats to a mere two. Their role was assumed by the ultra-conservative Reform Party. Such may happen to the British Conservatives, if they stray to the centre. I have not much use for the right, but a similar party could easily displace the Conservatives where you are. This possibility might ruin the likely Tory rebound after a Tony Blair government that you describe."

If the Conservatives "stray to the centre" they're more likely to win re-election than not, given that it's their constant rightward drift which has alienated such huge swathes of their so-called "natural" supporters. But their replacement by another party is unlikely under the present first-past-the-post electoral system, which effectively reduces every contest to a race between the two strongest parties and pushes third parties to the margins -- so anyone breaking away to set up a third party is simply dooming themselves to political oblivion. (After all, who now remembers the SDP?) Exotic alien fauna like John Redwood are thus likely to remain on the fringes for some time to come, bound together with more mainstream Tories by the one thing which unites the Conservative Party above everything else -- power. Getting it and keeping it are their chief aims, and anything which interferes with that is always ruthlessly suppressed.

Apart, perhaps, from the Brussels-o-phobia which grips so many of them, and which was on display at the recent party conferences, but the logical consequence of this -- complete withdrawal from the EU -- is so politically incredible that it can't be voiced at all. But I suspect that protest voting of the kind you describe -- against rail privatisation or Euro-federalism -- is less evident in British general elections than by-elections and local government elections, where the result is often perceived not to matter very much. At general elections, parties usually have to offer a positive reason for people to vote for them, which is why Labour's current styling of itself as the Not-The-Conservative Party and waiting for cumulative disgust with the incumbents to deliver a Commons majority is so short-sighted. (Labour tried this once before, in 1990, and look what happened.) This isn't to say that the Tories aren't in a cul-de-sac: having made tax cuts and

the control of inflation the centre of their programme, and having subordinated everything to that (requiring the centralised control of ever larger chunks of the British economy and society in order to deliver it), they have now run entirely out of ideas, and seem to be running on autopilot while they wait for something to put them out of their misery. Like the next general election....

But just to prove that US politics is different:

Rebecca Ore (address as before) "I've seen a report that white militia groups are trying to explore possible common grievances with black militants. The militia movement in the USA is quite scary, not so much for itself but for the excuse it gives for a more repressive state. I've met right-wingers who expected the economy to collapse and planned to organise against the expected 'roving urban hordes', and I thought 'Oh to be a tank sergeant if society collapsed'. A friend who knew survivalists in Oregon said their plans never included the military. Nor did they include their neighbours."

There was some British media interest in the US militia "movement" following the Oklahoma bombing in April, including a Channel Four documentary which featured an interview with one of their national "leaders" who was allowed to rant on at some length about how this outrage had actually been perpetrated by the Clinton administration as a prelude to incarcerating them in concentration camps. The interviewer was obviously proceeding on the basis that, given enough rope, the interviewee would hang herself; and, sure enough, the more she talked, the more obvious it became that she was in need of urgent psychiatric assistance. So my response to your suggestion that the militia provide an "excuse" for a "more repressive state" is that it is close to embracing the militia's own delusions; it would be best to treat them as the gun-obsessed idiots they are (who bloody cares about the "right" to bear arms?), and ignore them.

Which seems a suitably inflammatory note on which to end. (Look out! Here comes a Fosfax editor now!) In assembling this letter column, however, I'm conscious of not having quoted anything in response to Bruno's, Zena's, and Judith's articles in the previous issue, but this is because most people's comments were confined to saying how much they were enjoyed -- which would have made for a rather boring letter column. (Although Colin Greenland did suggest that my editorial note introducing Bruno's article was one "that I rather think we could have done without".) But we do have this comment from:

Mike Don 233 Maine Road Manchester M14 7WG "Zena was both incredibly lucky and, in a way, unlucky, too. Lucky, in that the eruption was a pretty minor one as these go (it was minor because she was a few hundred yards from the crater rim and lived); and unlucky, in that Merapi went off at that time after two years -- two hours either way, and she'd have been well clear.

"I've had a lifelong fascination with volcanoes ever since growing up in Edinburgh, which is built on and around big black lumps of volcanic ejecta. I studied geology at university largely as a result of that interest, though I've never been a professional geologist and would never go near a volcano. Good thing too, since one of my student friends, Geoff Brown, was killed by Galenas volcano in Colombia. Chills down the spine when I heard the news -- if I hadn't dropped out of college, it might have been me...."

Time now for the WAHFs: Pamela Boal, Tommy Ferguson, George Flynn ("Don Fitch may be correct about the percentage of affluent people in fandom increasing, yet I wonder. For example, I not only travelled to Glasgow for the Worldcon, but spent over two additional weeks touring Britain; I suppose this might be taken as a sign of affluence. But I certainly don't feel affluent, and I'm afraid that a more accurate evaluation might be that I'm just squandering my savings"), Teddy Harvia, Jean Heriot, Tim Jones, Brant Kresovich, David Langford, D M Sherwood (pursuing an argument left over from last time about influences on SF writers, which rather baffled me), Pat Silver ("I chortled over Jilly Reed's piece about living in the country. It reminded me of some acquaintances who named their new goat kids Korma and Vindaloo. Nothing like being realistic!"), Alan Sullivan, Geri Sullivan, and Henry Welch. And, just in time to be mentioned here, a late letter from Taras Wolansky following up our "Death And Democracy" exchange in FTT 16 -- but, at eight pages, far too long to summarise or quote. (We want to publish in time for this year's Novacon, after all....) If you wish to see a copy, however, send us 60p in stamps or two IRCs to cover postage and photocopying, and one shall be yours.

"So she wouldn't be available for book signings?"

(American investor in the BBC's production of *Pride And Prejudice*, on hearing that Jane Austen died in 1817.)

TRAJECTORIES OF HISTORY

Joseph Nicholas

One of the great "what-ifs" of history -- perhaps the greatest -- is how the trajectory of European expansionism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries might have been affected if Admiral Cheng Ho had continued his explorations of the western Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century. He was by then trading with East Africa, exchanging Chinese porcelain for African ivory, and in time would surely have rounded the Cape of Good Hope into the Atlantic. His course then would almost certainly have been northwards -- eventually to encounter the Portugese, who had reached Cape Verde in 1443 and were then exploring the West African coastline. Instead, the Ming emperors, seeking to re-establish the Confucian ideals of stasis and purity that the recently expelled Mongol conquerors were held to have violated, took the decision to recall Cheng Ho, break up his navy, and forbid all future foreign trade and exploration. Navies and foreign trade had become associated with the destabilising and dangerous ideas that they brought with them -- Cheng Ho himself was a Muslim of Mongol ancestry, and his father had made a pilgrimage to Mecca -- and also with the Black Death, which by 1393 had reduced the population of China to 63 million from a previous census total of 123 million in the year 1200. To seek reassurance in traditional values, in the face of such a catastrophe, was as common to the Chinese as it was to medieval Europeans.

In 1433, therefore, Cheng Ho sailed home for the final time. The Portugese, under Bartolomeu Dias, eventually entered the Indian Ocean in 1487. In 1498, Vasco da Gama made landfall on the coast of what is now Mozambique, and found an Arab pilot to guide him to Calicut in western India -- the same port that the Chinese had abandoned sixty years earlier. By the time the Arab rulers of the area realised that, unlike Cheng Ho, the Europeans had come to stay, it was too late: their sea power had eroded too far, and they were heavily defeated in a battle off Goa in 1509. The Portugese, and later the Spanish and the Dutch, swept on to the Spice Islands of South East Asia. The scramble for overseas territories was under way.

But if it had happened otherwise, might European expansionism have been stopped in its tracks almost before it had begun? Might their contacts with Cheng Ho have led the nascent European sea powers to believe that the Chinese navy already ruled the waves, and that there was little point in exploring further? After all, the chief trigger for European seaborne exploration had been the need to secure continued supplies of goods from the East in the face of the gradual closure of the overland routes, and the increasing prices charged by Muslim middlemen, during the fourteenth century -- but if the Chinese, with an inscrutable smile and a desire to maintain their dominance, had presented themselves as the main source of the goods, might not the Europeans have found it easier to pay their prices rather than make risky investments in speculative merchant adventures to unknown regions?

It is true that at this juncture the Americas had still to be contacted, and a Portugese encounter with Cheng Ho in the mid-fifteenth century might not have aborted Columbus's voyages forty years later, which after all were originally intended to find a shorter route to the East. Columbus's voyages could then have been made to break a Chinese monopoly rather than thwart the Portugese; but it might have taken the Spanish longer to organise them without the pressure of Portugese competition, and Columbus might equally have found the Chinese there ahead of him.

One can speculate about such questions for ever. My reason for raising them, however, is to suggest that the European expansionist paradigm we consider fundamental to our worldview is not just of relatively recent origin but also that, although we have generalised it to the whole of the rest of the world, it has little if any purchase beyond our particular era of history. Before the fifteenth century, indeed, European culture was just as static as the Ming emperors wished China to be. For example, although French historian Jean Gimpel makes out a good case in *The Medieval Machine* for an "early" (if slow) industrial revolution in Europe of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, what is striking about his thesis is how little impact the innovations of this period -- in agriculture, milling, weaving, building, mining, wind and water power -- had on the social structure of what is often known as the "Age of Faith" -- an age so called precisely because the world was held to be God-given and unchangeable. The fact that the world *could* change did

not become apparent until the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries -- the first period in human history in which the pace of change became sufficiently accelerated that it was possible to grow old and die in a world visibly different from that into which one had been born. Prior to this, society and the social order were regarded as essentially fixed, and the principal goal of most philosophical enquiries into what's often short-handed as "the human condition" was to determine how we should live in order to preserve the harmony which was perceived to govern relations between the natural and the spiritual worlds. From this perspective, the Ming emperors' desire to protect their society from alien and subversive influences makes perfect sense -- and appears perverse to us now only because we are viewing it through our distorting European expansionist lens.

The expansionist paradigm finds a particular expression in the myth of the frontier elaborated by US historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the late nineteenth century. Turner's frontier hypothesis held that the development of the USA could be explained by a continuous movement westwards -- into the open spaces beyond the Mississippi, marking a deliberate break with the Old World and allowing immigrants to the New to be symbolically reborn as free individuals, with a new culture -- and argued that the nation would remain young and dynamic only as long as it remained in motion. The closing of the frontier therefore meant an end to movement; and because stasis leads to ageing and ageing ends in death, a nation without a frontier is to eventual oblivion. Yet even as Turner was developing this hypothesis, the frontier was closing: the 1890 census showed that there were then as many people living west of the Mississippi as living east of it.

It is possible to interpret the history of the United States throughout much of the twentieth century as a reaction to this closure: as a search for some other frontier, geographical or conceptual, somewhere else in the world, this time not for pioneers with a plough in one hand and a gun in the other but for expeditionary armies or men in suits with corporate capital behind them. Tongue-in-cheek such an interpretation may be, but the persistent identification of spaceflight with the myth of the frontier tends to reinforce it. (There was even a period in the late seventies, following the publication of Gerard K. O'Neill's *The High Frontier*, when *Analog* ran advertisements from space lobbyists complaining that the UN Lunar Treaty would destroy the USA's "right" to "pioneer space", making plain that for at least one group of people the need to keep moving was to be taken not metaphorically but absolutely.) Just as Columbus sailed to explore a new route to the East, it is implied, so US astronauts will "discover" a way to Mars, or "homestead" the asteroid belt.

This points us in the direction of another paradigm which underpins our era: that of progress. Like so much else, however, our current ideas of progress derive principally from the accelerated pace of change ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, and tend to revolve around measurable quantities such as how much we know rather than how much we understand; what we can actually do with our knowledge rather than whether it makes us wiser. It's common to argue that the more we know the more sophisticated we become and thus the greater distance we place between ourselves and our less couth forebears (a formulation which reminds one of Brian Aldiss's definition of progress, in *The Dark Light Years*, as the distance man (*sic*) has placed between himself and his excreta), yet to interpret progress in this fashion is again to generalise to the whole of the rest of the world -- and, worse, to every era of history; to assume that every culture, whether living or dead, shares or shared our precepts, and that those which lacked our technological sophistication or desire for mastery of the world were therefore "backward" or "primitive". But this is merely a subjective value-judgement, not something handed down from above or encoded in our genes. We consider ourselves modern, and our society "better", because we live in cities, drive cars, and have to work forty hours a week to pay for our lifestyles -- whereas so-called primitive people, even today, spend only a couple of hours a day gathering food and the rest of it loafing about telling stories, making music, and bringing up well-adjusted children. The awful truth, which we cannot acknowledge because it would undermine our present claims to superiority, is that it is we and our complex technological society which teeters constantly on the edge of famine and starvation, while allegedly "primitive" peoples face a world of leisure and plenty, untroubled by any thoughts of "improvement" or progress. From their point of view, they long ago achieved perfection; it is us who have fallen from harmony with the world.

As both Paul Harrison and Jared Diamond show in, respectively, *The Third Revolution* and *The Rise And Fall Of The Third Chimpanzee*, it was the human species's transition from a hunter-gatherer to a pastoral mode of existence around 10,000 BCE (Before Christian Era) which reduced our quality of life, brought us into open conflict with our environment, and set us on the road to our present vulnerability. But to acknowledge the truths uncovered by their examination of the palaeo-anatomical record -- poorer diet,

reduced height, harder work, shorter lifespan -- would not only undermine our present claims to superiority but negate the whole thrust of our species's history. What is the story of evolution, we contend, but the story of our emergence from lesser creatures?

But this is to thoroughly misunderstand evolution -- or, as Charles Darwin preferred to call it, "descent with modification". As Stephen Jay Gould pointed out in a recent lecture at the Natural History Museum (reprinted in *New Statesman & Society*, 15 September 1995), Darwin fought the use of the term evolution precisely because it implied something ordered where he saw nothing of the kind:

"Why? Because evolution was a perfectly well-understood, if uncommon, vernacular word in English at that time, which meant progress. Darwin would not have used a word that meant progress because, almost uniquely amongst 19th-century evolutionists, Darwin's own mechanism of evolutionary change does not include any necessary predictable, inherent progress. Natural selection is a theory about adaptation to changing local environments: that's all. Darwin would not use a word that meant progress, especially when he was trying very hard to separate the mechanism from the common social belief, the psychological hope, the desire of everyone, to equate this process with progress. He was quite clear on that. He was reading Chambers's *The Natural History Of Creation* and he wrote a marginal note in his copy: 'Never say higher or lower'.

"So why do we call it evolution today? Largely because Herbert Spencer won. Spencer was an inherent progressionalist and used the word evolution for that reason -- and perfectly properly within his system. Spencer thought there was progress in cosmology and economics and the history of language and biology and everywhere, and his system took hold, much to Darwin's disappointment. Darwin finally gave up and used the word evolution, I think for the first time, in *The Descent Of Man* in 1872."

Thus Darwin succumbed to the *zeitgeist* -- the same *zeitgeist* which had earlier given us Marx's *Capital*, with its vision of successive economic orders emerging from below, each more advanced than the other. Yet despite Marx, despite Spencer, despite anyone else who uses the terms "progress" or "evolution" in the same fashion, there is nothing directed or predictable about any of this -- rewind the clock of Darwin's "descent with modification" to the beginning and set it going once again, and there is no reason why the human species should be the eventual result. Indeed, Gould has even argued that human intelligence does not necessarily confer any evolutionary advantage: that it may have emerged only as a by-product of the struggle to exploit the evolutionary niche in which we have found ourselves, and thus -- as the niche closes around us and our opportunities run out -- a precursor to our eventual extinction.

One can see why such ideas are so unpopular, and why the belief that we are the pinnacle of evolution has taken such hold. In some quarters, this has resulted in the pretence that our species can somehow avoid extinction through application of our superior intellectual and manipulative skills to escape from this planet altogether. Transplant our brains into starships, download our consciousnesses into microchips, spread our seed amongst the stars somehow or other; onwards and upwards and outwards, frontier after frontier, the expansionist paradigm triumphant. But history teaches that there is no reason to believe that our era can be without end, or that our ideologies of progress and expansionism will be remembered once it is over -- or even that it will be distinguishable from others. Writing in the September 1995 issue of *History Today*, Felipe Fernandez Armesto said that he had:

"a vision of some Galactic Museum of the distant future, where Diet-Coke cans will share with coats of chain mail a single small vitrine marked 'Planet Earth, 1000-2000, Christian Era'. The last decade of our millenium may be under-represented, because so much of our significant trash will have bio-degraded into oblivion; but material from every period and every part of the world, over the last thousand years, will be seen by visitors as evidence of the same quaint, remote culture: totem poles and Tompion clocks, Netsuke ivories and Nayarit clays, bankers' plastic and Benin bronzes. The distinctions apparent to us, as we look back on the history of our thousand years from just inside it, will be obliterated by the perspective of long time and vast distance. Chronology will fuse, like crystals in a crucible, and our assumptions about the relative importance of events will be clouded or clarified by a terrible length of hindsight."

Armesto is the author of *Millenium*, a history of the past thousand years which approaches its subject from a perspective which we Europeans might regard as not merely unusual but downright deviant: "there is more, for instance, on the thirteenth century in Tunis than Paris, more on the sixteenth in Siberia than Moscow, more on the eighteenth in Xinjiang than in Beijing". "The history of early Ming China...is approached through a look at the animals in the imperial menagerie; that of the eighteenth century Spanish empire through the plants of the Madrid Botanical Garden...late medieval Byzantium through the gates of the Church of Chora and the world of the Maya in the same period by plunging with the Diving God of Tulum into the plasterwork waves that decorate the temple facade". This is because:

"The hardest kind of knowledge is self-knowledge, and we will be seen to have been suckered by our imperfect knowledge of ourselves. In the star-year 12,000, humanoid archaeologists with queer-shaped heads will be objective not just about the rival world-cultures of our millenium, but even about the rivalry of species: the current trend to historical ecology may even lead us to begin to re-assess ourselves in the meantime. Perhaps, to the historian from somewhere way beyond Mars, it will look as though wheat was the dominant life-form on our planet during our recorded history -- cleverly exploiting human vectors for its propagation and global distribution."

As Zhou En Lai remarked when he was asked about the significance of the French Revolution: it is too early to tell. Just as it may be too early to judge the significance of the end of Soviet communism -- an event which is important to us because it has happened in our lifetimes, but which future historians may regard as only a detail in a century-long, Europe-wide "civil war". Equally, a longer view may interpret the era of European expansionism as the export of internal European squabbles for dominance to a more global stage. Take yet a longer view, and the birth of Christianity and Islam may be seen as no more than a response to the crisis of transition from an older, stabler polity to newer forms of society. And so on. (And anyone who wishes to argue that Armesto's "humanoid archaeologists with queer-shaped heads" proves that we will continue to "progress" and "expand" must first explain on what basis they assume that these people will be any descendants of ours.)

But we can say one thing for certain, and that is that the longer view teaches consistently that the principal goal of the great civilisations of the past has been the search for stability, not expansion; that their enquiries have been focused inwards, not outwards. Ancient Egypt is perhaps the archetypal example: a culture in which life was viewed as a brief prelude to death, and that because death was for eternity, stasis was the natural order of affairs. Yet far from being, as Frederick Jackson Turner would have it, a nation doomed to oblivion, it was a civilisation which lasted for around two thousand years. The role of Pharaoh was not to lead and inspire, but to mediate between the earth below and the heavens above to ensure that each year the gods favoured the land with the Nile floods on which Egyptian civilisation depended. Other than farming, the principal activity was the preparation of one's tomb -- which is why most of what we know about ancient Egypt is derived from study of the funerary monuments, since they were built for eternity while the houses of the living were not. But do we therefore suppose that the ancient Egyptians did not enjoy life, or succumbed to a fatalistic lassitude about the world? Their tomb paintings suggest quite otherwise -- theirs was clearly a lively, enquiring culture, brimming with style and self-confidence.

The Pyramids today evoke more fascination than the sites of space missions. And when we think of space missions today, we tend to think of them as past rather than present events -- for example, the day on which the film *Apollo 13* opened in the USA, to critical and commercial acclaim, was the day a US Shuttle made the first-ever link-up with the Russian *Mir* space station. The film commanded by far the greater attention; the link-up, almost none. But should we be surprised by this? J. G. Ballard, for example, has argued that the Space Age cannot properly begin until large numbers of people are living and working in orbit -- and what the different reactions to *Apollo 13* and the *Mir* link-up perhaps demonstrate is that we no longer expect this to happen, either within our lifetimes or at all.

If so, we can say that the frontier was clearly a transient phenomenon, and that with its closure the era of European expansionism is drawing to its inevitable end. We can now look forward to a long period of stasis in which we may attempt to uncover and celebrate our correct place in the natural order, and perhaps contemplate what the world might have been like had Cheng Ho not been recalled in 1433.

England's King Edward II spent enough on wine in one year to employ 6,666 ploughmen -- the equivalent in today's prices of a booze bill for £100 million.

It was once the custom at wedding ceremonies in St Georgen Church in the Black Forest for the happy couple to try to tread on each other's toes; traditionally, the first to succeed would dominate the marriage.

When coyness struck the Roman church and the Italian state in the 19th century, naked male statues throughout Italy and the Vatican City had their penises and testicles replaced with fig leaves. A Vatican curator now guards a secret cellar stacked high with stone genitalia which there are no plans to replace.

Humans, the highest apes, the guineau pig, the fruit bat, and the red-vented bul-bul bird are the only species for whom vitamin C is essential for good health.

Giraffes are particularly susceptible to throat infections, because they cannot cough.

For every tiger poached in India, there are eight to ten leopards killed. (Leopards in the state of Himachel Pradesh: 821. Homo sapiens: 6.7 million.)

Herbicides are 10% cheaper now than they were in 1990 and water-polluting chemical fertilisers have gone down in price every year since then, while the unit price of bread has gone up faster than pet food. (Unit price increase of bread and flour since 1990: 22.7%. Of pet-food and non-animal feeds: 13.5%.)

The power used by one car factory could run 40 trains. (Wattage of Toyota's Burnaston car plant: 40 million. Wattage required per East Coast main line train: 1 million.)

If British work sites repaired half their damaged wooden pallets every year, it would save 170 stacks of wood as high as Mount Everest. (Replacement pallets produced every year: 22 million. Estimated number in use: 90 million. Percentage reduction in the price of pallets since 1990: 2.8.)

The City of London's annual £61 billion post-tax profits would be swallowed by the cost of urgent environmental clean-ups. (Handling industrial waste at an average of £10 per tonne: £3.68 billion. Planting trees to absorb 17 million tonnes of global warming CO₂ emissions at £2500 per acre, one acre per tonne: £42.5 billion. One-twentieth of 20-year dismantling of 15 nuclear power plants plus Sellafield at £2 billion each: £1.6 billion. One-tenth of 10-year fund for purging 30,000 toxic industrial sites at £5 million per site: £15 billion. Total: over £62 billion.)

An average £19 million in criminal income is laundered through a London bank every year. (Number of banks in the City of London: 213. Scotland Yard's estimate of illegal earnings laundered through City banks in a year: £4 billion.)

Redirecting the cost of buying Eurofighter warplanes would wipe out unemployment. (Cost of UK Eurofighters: £14.9 billion. Cost of creating a community job: £4500. Jobs created: 3.3 million. Cost of each of proposed 40,000 Eurofighter jobs: £372,000.)

Thirteen days separated the Royal Navy's test-firing of its nuclear doomsday weapon, Trident II D5, from the first French bomb test in the Pacific.

More than a million workers have been driven off Britain's land and sea in a lifetime. (Employed in British fishing and agriculture in 1931: 1.397 million. In 1992: 288,800.)

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Judith Hanna & Joseph Nicholas
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London N15 4JU
United Kingdom

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