



Forty Thousand Tigersnakes
Fuliginously Turbid Thuribles

Filmic Fibs on Television

Fading through Turquoise

FOLLOW THAT TUMBRIL

fixing Toy Trains **Feebly Told Tales**

Furtively Twisting Tornadoes

Fungal Tracks & Tunnels

Fortissimo Treble Terrapins

Fusspots, Tantrums and Tidiness

Filthy Teething Toddlers

Follicular Tantalisation Targets

Fiscal Tiddleywinks Theorisation

Farting Toilet Trainers

Fruitfully Tippy Trifle

FREDERICK TORTURES THOMAS

Flaccid Tomato Towers

Falsetto Trucks & Tractors

Fish Talking Turkish

Fiendish Tangential Traffic

Floating Transcendent Turtledoves

Frantically Tumbling Turnips

FORMULAIC TATTERDEMALION TARADIDDLES

21

fortifications, trowels & torcs

flagellating Twisted Towels

Futuristic Traditional Toxicology

FUNDAMENTALIST TERRORIST THEODOLITES

FTT 21

(incorporating *International Revolutionary Gardener* --
"Building Horticulturalism in a New Economic Zone!")

November 1996

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Welcome to the twenty-first issue of this dedicated environmentalist fanzine, whose editors have striven heroically to deliver a tasty crop of allotment produce but were thwarted by a dry summer which caused the potatoes to die back, the sweetcorn not to germinate, some of the parsnips not to survive, and the jerusalem artichokes to look a bit feeble. (Although the allotment has delivered on the carrot, tomato, broccoli, broad bean and blackberry fronts.) In the garden and greenhouse, by contrast, the peace-loving peoples of Jansons Road have brought forth a bumper crop of tomatoes, purslane, radishes, spinach, beans (runner and french), artichokes, pak choi, pumpkins, melons, aubergines, cherries, redcurrants and sundry herbs, while the frogs in the pond have contributed by spawning lots of tadpoles, increasing in number, and establishing an insect-eating collective to assist in the glorious overfulfilment of this year's plan. Victory to international revolutionary gardeners everywhere! (Pity the minarette apple and pear trees still haven't delivered....)

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GREAT MANAGEMENT BOLLOCKS OF OUR TIME

"Quality assurance may be defined as all the planned and systematic activities implemented within the quality system and demonstrated as needed, to provide adequate confidence that an entity will fulfil requirements for quality. Thus in order for quality to be assured it is necessary for quality to be defined. Quality may be defined as follows: totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs."

(Quoted in *Commentator*, journal of the DHSS Group, PTC Union, June 1996)

Out in the Sticks

by Judith Hanna

We moved to the farm six weeks before my youngest sister was born, which must have been hard on Mum. It was well past bedtime, when our two-tone grey Holden station wagon pulled up at what was to be our new home. I had never seen such darkness, no street lights out in the lonely country, only the car's two yellow headlights under the jet-black sky picking up the ghosts of gum trees as we huddled in the car. Dad had to run down to the shearing shed to turn on the generator engine before the lights in the house could be turned on. Then we kids were put into strange beds and fell asleep.

The farm life we woke up to was one of freedom to roam through paddocks and bush, of cycling two miles down a dirt track each morning to catch the school bus to the nearest town, Kojonup, 22 miles away, and of being a key part of the farm labour force. At the time having to feed the chooks, chop firewood, and chase sheep about were grumbled about as unwelcome impositions. But looking back from a grown-up perspective, because we all worked on the farm as a matter of course, we kids grew up feeling it *our* farm, a family concern. We grew up knowing how a farm ran, how to manage sheep, and in the case of the boys, how to take engines apart and put them together again so they worked.

I was twelve then, a dedicated bookworm with two long gingery plaits, in the last year of primary school. Next came John, two years younger, a quiet, steady, determined brown boy, and a year below him, Peter the Skeeter, skinny, blond and fierce, with astonishingly long curling eyelashes and mad about tennis. Then a three year gap to Julian, the clown of the family, with gingery hair and golden tan, who'd just started school. Three years from him to two year old Zena, blond and bouncy, who always fell asleep in the car just five minutes before journey's end -- then cried at being woken up. And in six weeks time, Roslyn would arrive, brown and cuddly. And of course there were the parents, who when you're a child are more landmarks than individuals.

Dad had been in the Navy, retired at 45 to go farming, tended to lose his temper and swear, had black hair, from him we all inherited brown eyes, and the boys inherited being good at sports. When he was in the Navy he'd been an occasional figure, appearing at bedtime after being out at work all day, and mustering family expeditions at weekends. And, while we were living in Fremantle, he'd hauled us out of bed in the mornings and taken us down to Port Beach for early morning swims and runs along the beach, an experience which was as much an ordeal of standing around turning blue and goosefleshed with chattering teeth as it was an opportunity to collect interesting shells, spot occasional dolphins, and amass

small fortunes collecting soft drink bottles for a tu'penny refund per bottle -- fortunes enhanced when the boys discovered the pile of returned bottles at the back of the beach shop and began raiding that. The farm put an end to early morning beach runs -- and substituted the chores of chook feeding, wood chopping and cow milking to be done before breakfast.

Mum's approach to managing her tribe of children was to remain calm rather than making a fuss about things, listen as if she were interested and seriously consider all the questions we came up with, never to make threats she wasn't prepared and able to carry through and in general, it seemed, to treat her children as human beings she quite liked. This must have been a difficult course to steer at times. No doubt it was made much easier by being able to simply shoo us out from underfoot -- "Off you go! Out of the house!" -- in the knowledge that as far as we could wander, there were no threats we shouldn't be able to cope with -- no traffic, no wicked people, just trees to fall out of and the remote possibility of meeting a snake that hadn't heard us coming and got out of the way. Mum had the gingery-gold hair Julian and I inherited, and had been a physiotherapist before she got married. All her stories about when she was growing up were of a world in which the women were competent and in charge of their households, did interesting things and had an equal say with their menfolk. So of course I grew up thinking this was normal, and I remain surprised that for so many women, this taken-for-granted self-confidence in equal worth is lacking.

We were, I think, a happy family. That is, we argued and fought with each other about all sorts of things, uninhibitedly and frequently, and a wonderful spectator sport it was for those not involved but throwing in provocative comments from the sidelines. Mealtimes were the great times for arguments, with all eight of us gathered around the big kitchen table, discussing this and that, and seldom more than three of us talking at once.

From time to time, Mum told us with some surprise, people said to her what nice quiet well-behaved children she had. Individually, this may have been true enough -- we did not get up to such adventurous mayhem as Auntie Beverley's kids -- but in the aggregate we were a noisy tribe. Almost any discussion could turn into a fierce argument, winding itself up through "You always say that!" and "It's not fair!" to a finale of storming out of the room in high dudgeon, giving the door a good slam behind you to make sure you had the last word.

The farm was a War Service place on the boundary between Kojonup and Boyup Brook shires, fine wool country. War Service, or Soldier Settlement, properties were sold off at subsidised prices to ex-servicement after (in our

case) World War II. When we bought the farm, in 1966, from a family called Robinson, only some 500 acres of its 1,500 area had been cleared of bush. Dead trees stood on the cleared paddocks, the carcasses of ring-barked jarrahs and white gums (wandoo), red gums (marri) and, in the low-lying areas, blue gums which were also called flooded gums. Dad had been warned that on wet years, half the place could be under water. During summer, of course, the creek would be dry. Almost all Australian creeks dry up in the dry season.

It takes a while to learn your way around a new farm. Naturally, we started with the area around the house. All war service houses were built of 'fibro' (asbestos board) on the same basic pattern: two bedrooms with small poky windows, plus front verandah, and back verandah with sleep-out. All had been altered and expanded in entirely different ways.

Ours had had the kitchen expanded, which made space for a huge long dining table to take over what had previously been the old kitchen. An unfinished extra back room and side verandah had been started, back of the kitchen, and a cement-floored carport added to the front of the expanded kitchen. The first few years we were there, the carport was filled with our packing cases and furniture that wouldn't fit, with a narrow strip at the front with a couple of cane chairs where Mum or I would sit with an afternoon cup of tea, peeling the potatoes for dinner. Or we'd sit on the side verandah outside the kitchen door, looking out at what had been planted as an orchard -- but as its sandy soil attested, that side of the house was an old watercourse, with the water table running close to the surface underground. The fruit trees, not liking waterlogged feet, were dead or dying.

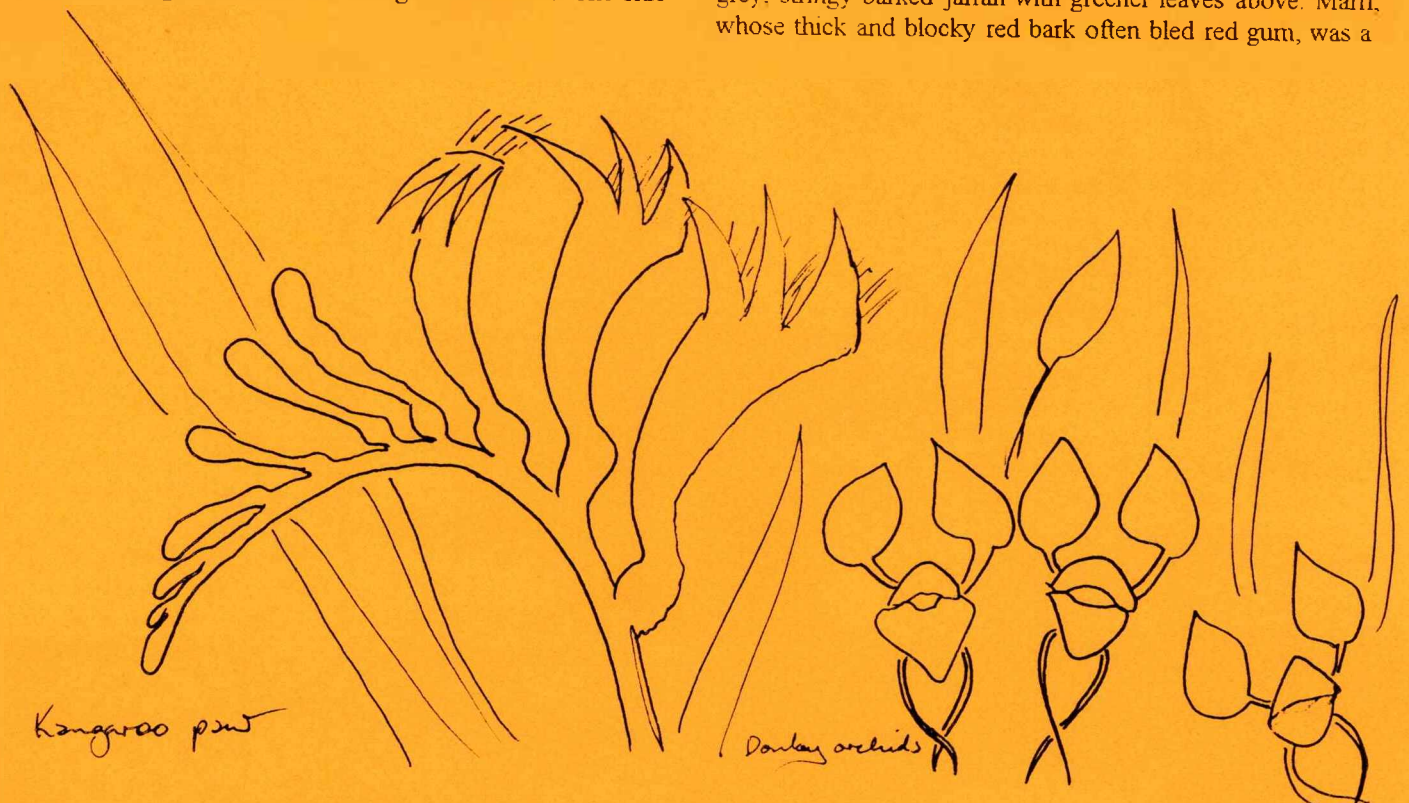
We joined enthusiastically in the local sport of building onto the house. Mr Batt, the one-eyed itinerant builder, came to stay while he turned the carport into a family room with nice big windows and sliding french doors. The side

verandah was demolished and the roofed-over gap behind it turned into a sewing and work room for Mum, with nice big windows. Instead of the side verandah, a patio was laid with a pergola for grape vines above it. The old front verandah became a bedroom. The result was a 5-bedroom house for a 6-kid family.

That sufficed, for when each of us reached 16 we had to move on from the local Junior High School and go away to school. For John and me, during the farm's straightened early days, that meant boarding at Katanning Hostel and spending Sundays after compulsory Church being spoiled by Nana Hanna who made the world's best sponge cakes. Peter headed for Sydney to do an engineering apprenticeship with the Navy. When the time came for the three younger ones to be sent off, the farm had pulled through the late 60s/early 70s agricultural depression and they were sent to 'good schools' in Perth.

Beyond the house was, in one direction, the shearing shed and sheep yards -- the working focus of the farm. Between the shed and the house lay chook yards (poultry runs) and the wood heap -- the outdoor domestic chores. The other side of the house was the home dam, from which water for the garden and the toilets was pumped, and where we swam on hot summer days. Its fringe of trees was good for climbing, and blue fairy wrens lived in the ti-tree scrub behind it. Beyond the shearing shed, and beyond the home dam, lay open paddocks, then the bush of the creek paddock.

In spring, the wildflowers came out, along the road verges and in the bush. On the creek flats, mushrooms came out. So on a fine spring day I'd set off to commune with nature, sometimes with a bucket to collect mushrooms. The bush was mostly what Neville Cayley's classic *What Bird is That?* called 'Open Forest'. Smooth and graceful white-barked trunks of wandoo rose thirty to fifty feet above to grey-leaved branches. Among them were stands of grey, stringy-barked jarrah with greener leaves above. Marri, whose thick and blocky red bark often bled red gum, was a



Kangaroo paw

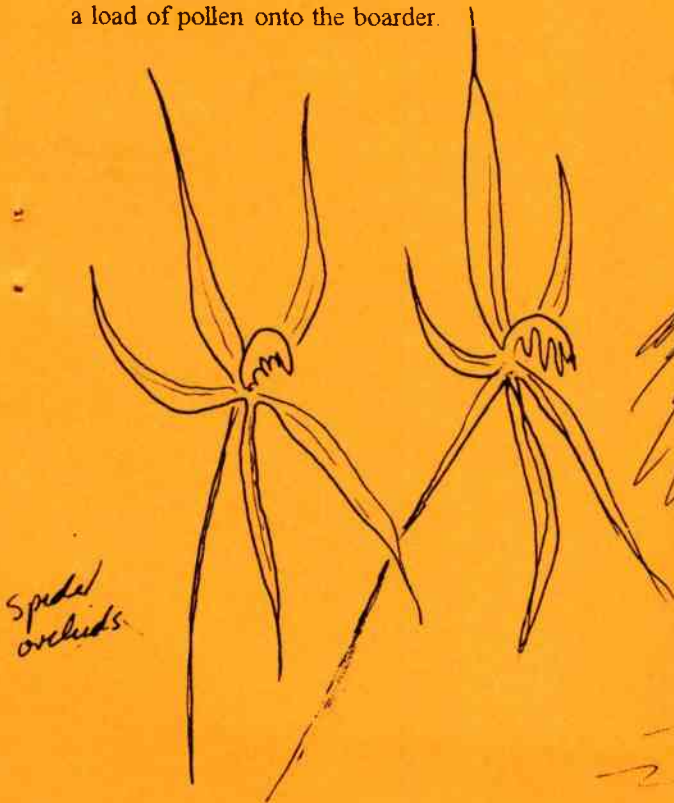
Darwin orchids

stockier-built tree, almost oak-like in structure, and we were close to the northern boundary of its distribution.

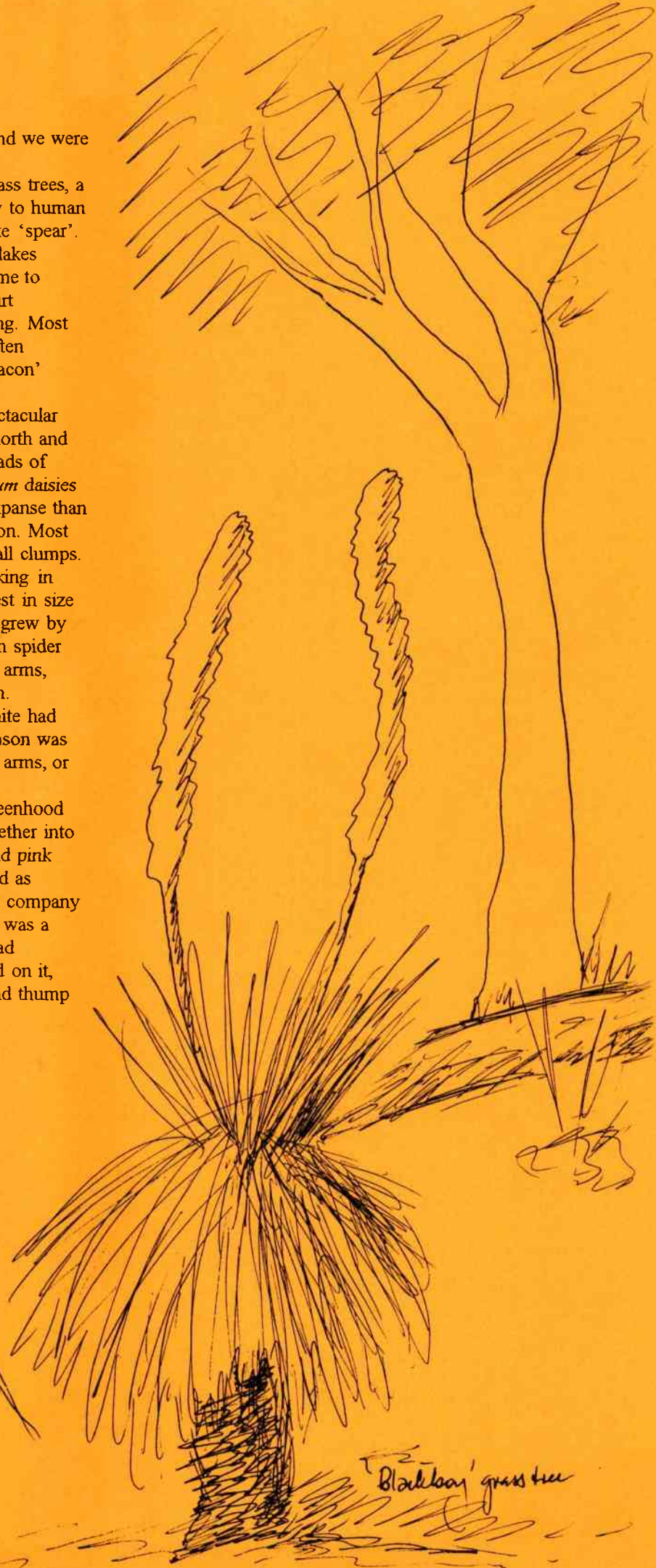
'Blackboys' grew among them -- Australian grass trees, a long-lived member of the lily family, which grew to human size or more, and might be carrying a flower-spike 'spear'. Their trunks were made up of stacked leaf-base flakes coated with a lovely-smelling resin -- when it came to burning-off season, blackboy flakes and dried skirt whiskers made the best kindling to get a fire going. Most of the ground cover scrub was prickly bushes, often leguminosae with yellow and brown 'eggs and bacon' flowers of various sizes.

In our area, wildflowers didn't grow in the spectacular sheets of colour found in the grasslands further north and in the desert. Down by the creek we did get spreads of 'everlastings', pink or white or yellow *Helichrysum* daisies -- but they were smaller and more restricted in expanse than in the drier areas around Caernarvon and Geraldton. Most of our flowers came elusively scattered, or in small clumps. Red and green kangaroo paws were the most striking in colour, perhaps the oddest in shape, and the largest in size -- they could be three foot or so tall. They often grew by blackboys, and were often found in company with spider orchids. Spider orchids are graceful -- long white arms, each with a delicate central stripe of deep crimson. Sometimes you'd come across a clump whose white had deepened to cream or even yellow, or whose crimson was tinged with green; others had sturdier, less wispy arms, or more deeply fringed labella.

Clearly related to them, and scarce, were the greenhood orchids, whose green-striped arms were fused together into a sort of pitcher shape. As with the little white and pink hammer and trigger orchids, which could be found as low-growing sheets along the creek flats (often in company with everlastings and insect-eating sundews), this was a pollination device. Hammer and trigger orchids had trip-sensitive labella which, when an insect landed on it, triggered a coiled-back stigma to whip forward and thump a load of pollen onto the boarder.



Spider orchids



Blackboy grass tree

There were also golden-brown donkey orchids, whose name came from the ear-shape of their two upward-pointing petals. Hare orchids, with thinner, crimson ears, and deep brown bee orchids were rarities. Then there were cowslip orchids with broad yellow petals striped with red, gleaming purple enamel orchids, and quieter lilac sun and blue-lady orchids.

Not all our wildflowers were orchids -- dryland grass orchids, quite different from the fleshy tropical sort. I've mentioned the variety of 'eggs and bacon' leguminosae prickly bushes and creepers. Other leguminosae included the 'scarlet runner' or 'running postman' creeper, the charming magenta and chartreuse *Kennedya coccinea* creeper which I called 'babies in bonnets', and violet-blue hovea or *Hardenbergia comptoniana*, also known as 'native wisteria'. Then there was the *Leschenaultia* family: knee high bushes of crepe-delicate clear blue blooms, the creeping scarlet leschenaultia, and a small scarce yellow and brown leschenaultia. Almost all were unique to the south-west Australian plateau, with its leached and nutrient-bare ancient surface of gravelly ironstone laterite cap over pre-Cambrian granite, and sandy stretches marking dried-out water-courses. They were adapted to six months of baking summer drought, and about 20" of rain over the mild winter. The bush provided a rich, varied and lovely protective skin for a climatically fragile zone.

The creek paddock has been cleared now, of course. Over summer, it looks just bare soil, though subterranean clover burrs in it provide more nutriment for grazing sheep than a waving silvery cover of dry annual grass would do. A series of three earth dams provide water for the sheep, and shelter belts of trees provide shade and windbreaks here and there. Along the creek, the paperbarks and ti-trees have died off -- salts brought to the surface by evaporation where water lies on cleared ground have killed them off. Our place still has more bush left than almost any other

property in the area -- the salt that killed them off washed down along the water-course from longer-settled farms upstream. But after a series of wet winters, says Julian (who now runs the place) salination is taking hold in our paddocks.

Proposals to clear a stretch of bush -- the glorious tall golden-grey forest -- always meant arguments at the dinner table. The female side of the family always wanted to keep our bush. Dad, who knew all the birds but had to deal with the banks and the bills, pointed out that the place had to pay its way, which meant clearing land to bring in more sheep and grow cereal crops, so he said some bush had to go, and it did. The place is now clear of debt (fingers crossed) -- but fencing to prevent the sheep wandering into the bush areas left and eating out the wildflowers costs \$1,000 a km upwards, plus the time and work taken to put it up.

Going through a permaculture analysis of how the farm works, Julian and I came back again and again to the farmer's time and work as the tightest and most over-stretched resource -- simply keeping up with the year's round of shearing, dipping, seeding, lambing, drenching, crutching, harvesting left almost no time to invest in keeping the house comfortable or husbanding the 'set-aside' natural zones on the land. Money, and the uncertainties of wool and wheat prices, remain the other great constraint.

Farming is a way of life that involves back-breaking work, often in lousy weather, miles from anywhere. Looking back down the years, farm childhood blended purposeful exercise with enviable peace and independence. It meant working with nature in a glorious landscape, picking up unthinkingly the year's round by which she makes things grow and yield, or wither and die, with or without human help.



(The author of the following article is openly pseudonymous. Although the question of who he or she "really" is has much exercised the minds of some fanzine editors, we at International Revolutionary Gardener take the view that if people wish to re-invent themselves then they should be allowed to do so without at any time having to answer the demands of others who want to know why. So there.)

BATTLE SITE

A MODEST TRAVELOGUE

E. B. Frohvet

Having recently relocated to the Baltimore area, and having long had an interest in history, we determined to visit Fort McHenry. As every American schoolchild knows (or ought to know), this is the site whose 36-hour bombardment by the British fleet in September 1813 inspired Francis Scott Key to write the poem which, later set to an extant piece of music, became the US National Anthem. Our visit was by no means disappointing, though appreciation of the historical value of the site is not untouched by a certain irony.

The bombardment took place during the War of 1812, a brief and on the whole inconclusive war fought between Britain and the then-new United States from about 1812 to the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 (which ironically took place after the Treaty of Ghent, which concluded the war, had been signed in late 1814). The American version of the war's origins is that it resulted from the arrogance of the Royal Navy, which in violation of the traditional freedom enjoyed by neutral vessels in international waters, kept stopping American ships and extorting crewmen, etc, to serve in their conflict with Napoleon.

The British expeditionary force, operating from a fleet in Chesapeake Bay, marched across Maryland, burned much of Washington, and moved on to the next target. This was the city of Baltimore, a hotbed of anti-British sentiment, and then as now a busy shipping port. Fort McHenry on Whetstone Point, and other long-vanished batteries, guarded the main shipping channel into Baltimore harbour.

To reach the Fort today, one proceeds from the Inner Harbour, travels south on Light Street, and bears left onto Key Highway. This ill-titled road is, we are informed by the local citizenry, in a perpetual state of being torn up and refinished, so progress is not hasty. However, allow patience to

prevail, and in due course you will reach the succinctly named Fort Avenue. Follow this to its end and you will come to the destination.

The neighbourhood through which one passes to attain Fort McHenry is not without interest, being a curious mix of industrial and residential. Rowhouses and warehouses share the street, enlightened with a rail yard, neighbourhood taverns, and the occasional yuppie fern bar. Passing through the gate of the brick-walled fort grounds, one draws a deep breath as time seems to halt. All the hostility of the battle itself has leached away with the years, leaving a mood peaceful and reflective.

There are one or two modestly disguised modern buildings on the grounds, but the total effect is early 19th Century. It takes a bit of wandering, and putting together a pattern from tacitly admitted facts, to appreciate the irony of which we spoke earlier.

The fort was designed and built from 1798 to 1800, the architect being one Jean Foncin, a French military engineer, and named in honour of Colonel James McHenry, who was President Washington's Secretary of War. Only an accident of history has prevented McHenry's name from being consigned to minor footnotes in historical texts. The inner revetments, in the form of a five-pointed star, are virtually all that survive of M. Foncin's original design. Virtually everything else has been rebuilt to such an extent that the brick-and-rammed-earth walls are almost the only existing features which date from the time of the famous battle.

The Revelin, an arrowhead-shaped fortification which protects the main gate, existed at the time of the battle, but was much rebuilt to its present conformation in 1837. The present gatehouse is of Civil War vintage. The four

buildings inside the surprisingly small centre of the site (two enlisted men's barracks, one junior officers' quarters, and the quarters of the commandant), were all single-storey structures at the time of the battle, and were substantially rebuilt to their present two-storey form later.

The fifth side of the parade ground is occupied by the great barrel-vaulted powder magazine. This, curiously, was built in 1814: not only after the battle, but because of it. The action having revealed the inadequacies of the existing powder magazine -- a British shell penetrated the roof, and only by a fluke failed to go off and blow up the whole fort -- the historic original structure was promptly torn down, and the present magazine constructed on the same site. This in turn was abandoned during the Civil War, and a new and better powder magazine was built on the east side of the grounds. That building still stands, ignored and unused.

All the big heavy-calibre guns which sit on the outer ramparts are Civil War vintage or later -- don't take our word for it, check the dates stamped into the muzzles. None was ever fired in anger, though some were maintained in working order as late as 1903, when they were used to fire a salute. (The signs do not specify who, or what, was so honoured.) In a corner of the courtyard next to the 1814 magazine are preserved a few dinky cast-iron (and one long bronze) four- and six-pounder cannon, with a weasel-worded sign noting that guns "of this type" were the actual armament of the post at the time of its only military action. There is no proof that any of them were actually in the Fort in 1813.

A flagpole of recent origin flies on one side of the parade ground; but it is asserted that it does stand on the site of the original. This was known only since the 1950s, when the heavy wooden cross-braces buried nine feet below the ground to support the original flagpole were rediscovered and excavated.

As for the famous flag itself, this was ordered by the then commanding officer, one Major George Armistead, for the express purpose of being so large that the British would have no difficulty seeing it. It was sewn by a local seamstress, Mary Pickersgill, and her daughter and niece. A point frequently overlooked is that this great flag (the tattered and much-faded remains of which are preserved in the Smithsonian in Washington, so we are told) almost certainly did not fly over the Fort for all of the action. The flag itself was made of linen, which is highly absorbent, and the night of the attack was rainy: typical "cannon weather", the concussion and released gases of the artillery

serving to condense whatever humidity was in the air and causing rain. Had the famed flag flown all night, it would probably have been soaked through and hung limply. Much more likely is that it sat, neatly folded and dry, inside (probably in the commandant's quarters) all night. Only as dawn began to break on the second day, and the British began to withdraw from the action, did the Americans raise the great flag as a gesture of defiance. Securely dry, it blew out in the breeze; whence it was seen by Francis Scott Key from his location two-and-a-half miles away. Key snatched out an envelope he chanced to have in his pocket, and wrote the first draft of the poem.

We don't know if "mooning" was in the arsenal of gestures of derision at the time; but it is not difficult to visualise the American gunners dancing on the ramparts and sending a storm of hoots, catcalls, and vulgar gestures after the retreating British vessels. After all, the Americans were in the admirable position that a draw (which was effectively the result of the action) counted as an American victory. They did not have to inflict any actual military damage on the British fleet, which is just as well, because they didn't. The British chose to break off the action, and withdrew in good order with few casualties.

(There was also an inconclusive land action, the whole being called the "Battle of Baltimore". The British commander, one General Ross, having arrogantly told his officers "I will dine tonight in Baltimore or in Hell", was killed by American snipers early in the action. Undecided, the next in command eventually ordered a controlled retreat. Much like the more famous naval action, the net result, militarily speaking, was a draw. For the record, the American ground commander in overall defence of the city was an elderly officer named General Sam Smith. Although he had fought in the American Revolution a generation earlier, the successful defence of Baltimore was his crowning military achievement. Smith went on to serve in the United States Senate and lived to a ripe old age.)

Another aspect of Fort McHenry which is often overlooked is that it remained an active military post for more than a century after seeing its only action. It was a POW camp for Confederate prisoners and Southern sympathisers during the Civil War (by a fine irony one of those then locked up was Francis Scott Key's grandson); and a military hospital during World War I. Much of what are now rolling and open lawns were then covered with buildings. The statue of Major (later Colonel) Armistead is of 20th Century vintage. So is the statue of a naked guy holding a lyre,

mistaken by many ignorant of the classics to represent Key (in fact it's supposed to be Orpheus, as patron of poetry). Between Orpheus and the abandoned Civil War powder magazine is a memorial grove, with trees each bearing a modest plaque: "This Tree Is Dedicated To...", with a plethora of names, some famous, some obscure. Four are in remembrance of Americans killed in the action. Let their names not be forgotten: Lieutenant J. Clagett, Sergeant John Clemm, Gunner Charles Messenger, Private Thomas Beeston.

Footnotes? Surely. It's ironic that one man who deserves at least an honourable footnote is not recalled anywhere. Francis Scott Key, as a mere civilian, could not negotiate with the enemy on his own authority, but sailed out to the British fleet under flag of truce in the company of Colonel John Skinner. Skinner was a *parlementaire*, as the French word would be: under the laws of war in effect at the time, a military officer empowered to negotiate with the enemy concerning temporary cease-fires, exchange of prisoners, treatment of wounded, and similar matters. Without Skinner's approval and assistance, Key would never have been where he was, and no poem would have been written, although an aspect of this event which is fuzzy even in the histories is how Key and Skinner reached the British fleet, even under a flag of truce.

The vessel they used is apparently not remembered; an educated guess might be a harbour vessel, perhaps the harbourmaster's, or a local fishing boat. We're tempted to guess they got Americans to sail right under British guns by a combination of cajolery, threats and discreet bribes. Yet Colonel Skinner is the forgotten man of the story. We suspect there's an unfairness here which even now ought to be dealt with.

As for Fort McHenry at present, it's really more a public park (with incidental artillery standing around). Its current inhabitants run chiefly to schoolchildren, joggers, preppie handholding couples, and old guys walking their dogs. In one corner of the grounds is an area set up with picnic tables; but if you want to spread your tablecloth anywhere on the outer grounds, sit on the grass and lunch *alfresco*, it's permitted. This is not the place to hold a kegger -- drunken rowdiness is not encouraged -- but the park rangers tell us a small group discreetly having wine with their picnic will not be hassled.

It's a nice place, both educational and relaxing. We're glad we went. We intend to go back. If you're going to be in the area, you should definitely see it. How much is authentic, in terms of dating from the actual day-and-a-half for which the place is chiefly remembered: well, that's another question.

"A third of teenagers greatly admire Thomas Chippendale, the famous bodybuilder. They are very surprised to learn he also designed the odd chair. He could even have been a mate of Capability Brown, the celebrated military general.

"Warwick Castle guides were so startled by the questions regularly asked by British visitors -- 1066 *And All That* has no significance for a third of teenagers and a quarter of adults -- that the castle owners commissioned a national survey of historical knowledge. Overall, 65 percent had no idea who fought whom at Agincourt, and as many believed Capability Brown was a general as knew he was a landscape gardener.

"There was profound uncertainty about who fought whom in the Wars of the Roses, the Battle of Naseby, the English Civil War, and the Battle of the Somme. Some 57 percent could not name the sides at the Battle of Goose Green in the Falklands War just 14 years ago."

(Reported in *The Guardian*, 22 May 1996)

Taebreca, goddess of competitions
Blacandecca, god of household repairs and improvements
 The *Vimpii*, gods of speed, who preside over road-building and fast food
Toisrus, the god of childhood
Hypercostus, the god of overcharging, particularly for central heating installation
Quota, the Germanic goddess of trawl fishing, introduced under the Treaty of Rome (*Pax Romana*)
Ambiguus, the god of manifesto writing

Referendus, the god of avoiding the issue
Pilobricus, the god of modern art
Lilo, the god of fugitives
Tescus, the god of homecare
Trustus, the god of financial advisers
Skoda and *Lada*, the goddesses of cheap chariots
 The *Cariociae*, goddesses of embarrassment
Dianisius, the god of royal lovers
 (Some of the entries (and winners) from a competition to devise new Roman gods and goddesses, reported in *Current Archaeology* No 149, September 1996)

NOT THE EASTERCON...

by Andy Sawyer

We spent a week in Tunisia while everyone else was at Eastercon. We'd been there before, but hadn't got to Tunis itself to visit the Bardo Museum, which is said to have the best collection of Roman mosaics in the world. This time we did visit it, and if there is a better one I'd like to see it.

We'd actually started mosaic-spotting not far from our hotel. The scrappy map we were given by our tour rep mentioned Roman remains at Pupput -- sort of 'at the back end of this field you'll find piles of bricks.' In fact, almost a small town was there, half-buried among the scrub, overseen by one man and a dog. Some serious excavating had left some superb floor mosaics cleared. One was a pattern of semi-oval curves which, looked at one way were stylised fish, and looked at the other were stylised serpents. Another was musical instruments. A wrecked statue which was only a torso showed (according to Rosamund, fresh from a year's dissection of the human body) incredibly accurate musculature. And this was stuff just left out in the open, exposed to the elements.

We met a young lad who introduced himself as the caretaker's son, an engineering student who helped out -- that is, showed tourists around for, we assumed, a tip -- during his holidays. He seemed to know a lot about the site, so if it was a scam it was a plausible one, and he directed us to parts of the site we would have missed.

A couple of days later we made it to Tunis and the famous Bardo Museum, which was every bit as good as the guidebooks said. Most of the mosaics were nature scenes, some showing quite relentlessly bloody hunting scenes. One, of a horse being savaged by a bear, blood pouring out of the mouths of both beasts, was particularly nasty. Others were as pastoral as you could wish. Some amazed by their size and detail, others by their attention to light and shade. A portrait of Virgil, for instance, was amazingly lifelike and seemed as natural as any painted portrait. The skill in selecting and matching the coloured pieces of mosaic must have been immense, and the wealth and self-confidence exhibited was enormous.

We took a day tour to Carthage, which is now basically a rich peoples' suburb with Roman remains dotted about. It was fascinating to see kids playing football on waste ground with Roman columns as the goalposts. The walk up and down Sidi Bou with its blue and white houses reflecting the sea and rock was curiously restful, despite the crowds of local tourists doing exactly the same thing.

Having decided we wanted to see more than we got on the coach tour, we hired a car and driver to take us around the Cap Bon peninsula, via a Spanish fort, a fishing village, and a 'real' Carthaginian site. Carthage itself is largely Roman, built after the devastation of the original city in the

Punic Wars. But at Kerkouan a fascinating Carthaginian town has been excavated. Its houses are so identical that it was first thought maybe a kind of holiday camp. Now it is thought to be more akin to a Barratts estate for the factories where the Royal Purple dye was extracted from shellfish, and the quarries from which the stone for Carthage was taken. This was quite spooky -- it reminded me of the beginning of *Spartacus*, of slaves in the mines being worked in the baking heat until they dropped. I'm sure that was the case there. We walked around, and left.

Like most Islamic countries, Tunisia's human rights record isn't much to write home about, but it seemed relaxed enough and people were very friendly. A year ago, the press reported a couple of women winning a court case for harassment by waiters in their hotel, but we saw no sign of that sort of thing. Harriet did get asked out by one young waiter, who was obviously terrified of being seen by his bosses spending too much time hanging around our table, which caused some problems when Harriet had to change the arrangement. I was offered five million camels for both daughters in the souk at Tunis, but I got the impression that this was the kind of thing stallholders in Tunisian souks think tourists expect.

There seems an interesting tension in Tunisia between fundamentalism and relative political liberalism. We bought a new French-language magazine aimed at women, which included an interview with a human rights activist. In a radio interview publicising its first issue, it claimed it would take a critical stance at times. Of course, this was Metropolitan Tunisia, far removed from the rural poverty and the small towns we'd seen while driving between the major centres. It was interesting that such attitudes were to be heard, whatever the undercurrents that we missed, as tourists knowing little more about the country than a few guidebooks and newspaper reports.

We got into art collecting during our visit to an exhibition of ceramics at Hammamet's cultural centre. This had been a Romanian millionaire's villa in the 1920s, was described by Frank Lloyd Wright as the most beautiful dwelling he'd ever seen, and was used as HQ by Rommel and Montgomery during WW2. After negotiating with people whose French was little better than ours, we reserved a small saucer painted and glazed with Arabic lettering. Its delicate work suggested Japanese influence. We returned to collect it on the day we left, from some charmingly affluent arty people who were obviously the Exhibition's organisers. Glossy catalogues were available for sale then, and we discovered that our ceramicist was one of Tunisia's top artists, had exhibited extensively abroad, and had stuff in the British Museum. And he had studied in Japan.

About that hippo...

by Roslyn Hanna (with some prompting from her big sister)

My youngest sister Roslyn popped in to visit us in London a few years ago, then joined a truck safari down through Africa on her way home to Australia.

Postcard from Roslyn Hanna in Africa, Dec 91:

"Dear J&J, Zimbabwe is great. We went canoeing on the Zambesi yesterday and got charged by a hippo. Catching the plane back to Perth tomorrow. Love, Ros"

Judith Hanna to Roslyn Hanna, 20 Dec 91:

"Dear Ros... Now about that hippo... you can't just send a postcard saying it charged you, and leave it at that. How much did it charge you? What for? Did it take Visa or American Express? Were you in danger? How did you get away? Kindly rush details soonest."

Judith Hanna to Roslyn Hanna, 12 Feb 92:

"...thanks for the photos of you with monkeys in Africa. But what about that hippo -- you still haven't told us what happened. How about an FTT article on it?"

R to J, Apr 92

"Well, Larry was paddling and I was taking photos, and I was saying 'Closer, a bit closer' and I was about to get a really good shot, when it opened its jaws and just went for us. So we paddled furiously, and I didn't drop the camera overboard. But I didn't manage to take the photo. That's all really."

J to R, various occasions

"Now, about this FTT article -- never mind verisimilitude, we want drama..." "Now that Zena has beaten you to it, how about your FTT piece..." "Now that Julian has done his duty by FIT..."

R to FTT, Aug 96

"My battered old Africa trip diary turned up during the move to our new place. It isn't much help -- all it says is:

Mana Pools. Hired canoes for a morning paddle up the river. Hard work paddling upstream but well worth the effort. The Zambesi is teeming with birdlife -- lily pad walkers, herons, cranes, kingfishers and bee-eaters. In one section of the river the mud wall was honeycombed with the holes of bee-eater nests, and hundreds of carmine and aquamarine bee-eaters flitted around us, obviously upset that we had come so close.

After four hours paddling, pulled over and walked to where some other Australians had described seeing lion. Sure enough, we spotted two lions, about 300 metres away from us. We decided not to

go any closer.

The paddle back downstream was easier. On the way back, we drifted too close to a herd of hippo while I was taking a photo. The big male charged us. Larry and I had to paddle like mad to get away.

"That's it. Apparently more people are killed by hippos than any other animal in Africa -- except for mosquitos. But I don't think this fellow really meant us any harm. No doubt he had dumb (but harmless) tourists floating past him every day. He just wanted to give us a warning and say 'Stay away'."

"Mana Pools is the only wild life park in Zimbabwe where tourists are allowed to walk unaccompanied wherever they like. This makes it the perfect place to experience African wildlife close up. The campsite is right on the banks of the river, and not separated from the actual park in any way.

"I don't think they've 'lost' many tourists. We heard that a couple of months before we arrived a tourist had gone wandering by the river and startled a buffalo. Buffalo have very poor sight, and charge if they feel threatened. The tourist was trampled. I've also heard that a couple of months after we were there a tourist was taken by a lion -- from the edge of the campsite. I was glad we camped close to everyone else. Mind you, when you're sleeping out with just a piece of flimsy nylon sheeting between you and the marauding outside world, being close to everyone else isn't that much comfort. I remember some long nights lying rigid, listening to the snuffling outside my tent and telling myself over and over, "It's only a honey badger... it's only a honey badger..."

"Honey badgers have developed a wonderful relationship with the aptly named black-throated honey guide. When this small bird finds honey, it will go and fetch a honey badger or a human, and lead them to the hive. The bird feasts on the leftover honey.

"But it was disconcerting to wake up the next morning and find huge hippo prints testifying that something very large indeed had tiptoed around the tent pegs while I'd been fast asleep."



THE LETTER COLUMN

edited by Judith Hanna

New lives for old

Colin Greenland
98 Sturton St
Cambridge CB1 2QA

“‘Reinventing Life’ was alarming, Judith, not because you walked out of the job, but because of all the things you propose to do instead. Then when I read Julian’s account of careering energetically around the US looking for ever more dangerous people to annoy and ever more colourful ways to kill himself -- Denver must have changed a lot since I was there -- I simply melted into a (very small) puddle on the floor.

“What is it about people, energy and time? Maybe its the permanent after-effects of the post-viral thing that prostrated me a few years back, but for me putting in a load of washing, doing the washing up, toddling to the shops or the postbox, then sitting down to write for three or four hours is absolutely all I can manage in a day. Susanna was never sick, but finds it as hard as I do to fit things in, and she has to reserve enough of her leisure time for the novel everybody is waiting for her to write. We barely have time to read, go to movies or even attempt a social life, let alone chair think-tanks, work allotments, campaign, or become tree wardens. Judith the Ent, patrolling the ancient paths of Haringey Forest with her crook, while hornbeam, ash and oak plod trustingly in her footsteps.”

Ah -- there's a vocation to aspire to! But I've no time for tree-training at present, I fear. The weekend after getting back from holidays I took on chairing the Permaculture Association. And my Nature Garden project has just got itself a start-up grant -- £1000 from Shell Better Britain campaign -- which we now have to spend on getting things done -- and that means more work and commitments and detailed planning. Looks like this will be another year that The Book doesn't get written. But I remain determined to fit in as much laziness as I can.

The matter of non-standard life patterns seemed to tap a vein not merely of theoretical interest, but of experiences of putting conscientious objection against the rat race into practice:

Neil K Henderson
46 Revoch Drive
Knightswood
Glasgow G13 4SR

the word go. I could not -- and still cannot -- believe that the work a person does to provide the bare necessities in their life actually defines that life -- unless one is blessed

“Reinventing Life’ was alarming, Judith, not because you walked out of the job, but because of all the things you propose to do instead. Then when I read Julian’s

with the rare opportunity to made a living from doing what you really want to do. It should be as brief and as efficiently dealt with as possible, to leave maximum time for *real* life, that ‘avocational sub-culture’ Dale Speirs referred to. If you ask someone to tell you about themselves and they tell you they’re a plumber, you’ve learned nothing more than a statistic. It’s the other stuff someone does outside their working day that defines the real them. In an ideal world, job-share would be the norm (and fantastically well-paid, of course).”

Pamela Boal
4 Westfield Way
Charlton Heights
Wantage
Oxon OX12 7EW

“I’m all in favour of the work ethic, as long as it is translated into using time and talent constructively, rather than simply tied into earning money. On a recent TV programme, a sage gentleman likened a country’s wealth to a three-legged stool -- one leg being government, another being industry/commerce, and the third being unpaid work, be it organised voluntary work or self-help through DIY, family careers, etc.

It has been easy for me to be happy as a ‘third leg’. Derek and I are people of few wants and low as our income has been, it has taken care of the family needs. Also, if you are not spending the major part of your time earning money, you can make what you do have go further. Though the third leg has been decreasing in size for at least the past 20 years, there are signs that it is now growing again, not only in participation but in prestige.

Christina Lake
(somewhere in transit
around the world)

“I agree with Judith (and James Robertson) on the benefits of sharing paid work through society. Such a pity that we all tend to owe large quantities of money to building societies -- it makes for structural inertia, even assuming people would be willing to live without their cars and send their children to state schools, not to mention survive without a 100Mhz Pentium with multimedia facilities and built-in fax/modem. Yes, I’m with Judith, I’d rather earn less money and have more free time -- a somewhat unnecessary statement, I realise, from someone who is giving up her job to bum around in America and Australia.

“But I’d also rather live in a society where you don’t have to make such stark choices between total commitment to a job or marginalisation through lack of income. Of course, when I used to job-share, it was made easier by living with one full-time wage-earner. I might be able to survive on part-time work now I’m on my own if the salary was high enough, but it certainly wouldn’t be possible if I had any dependents.”

Jackie Duckhawk
11 Hayster Drive
Cherry Hinton
Cambridge CB1 4PB

"I have been job-sharing for three years now. For me it is the only civilised way to survive with a toddler, since I couldn't bear never to see her, and couldn't possibly

get all the household chores done either. But nor would I stay sane without my two days a week of adult life.

"I am lucky my job 'shares' very easily. I work as a clinical scientist, looking at chromosomes down a microscope all day every day. Occasionally, when puzzled by a difficult case, my job-sharer or I may leave the slides out for the other to look at, with a note. We almost never meet, since virtually all our work requires us to be using the same microscope.

"Surely other jobs couldn't be split so easily? My husband, Tim, a patent agent, has a rolling onslaught of urgent work from clients, immovable deadlines from Patent Offices and large, indivisible tasks. He can't imagine someone being able to do the job part-time. Is it only the more lowly or technical jobs that can easily be job-shared, and is that one of the reasons why managers have been slow to promote them? At last, an inequality that works against the fat cats?"

Alex Slate
8603 Shallow Ridge
San Antonio
TX 78239-4022
USA

"Judith, I think that was very sexist you leaving your job and not giving poor Joseph the chance to resign and only work part-time. Who says the male has to work?"

Indeed, that is just what Joseph has been thinking. Despite my complaints about all the overwork I've managed to take on in interesting directions, Joseph is now looking for options that will let him reclaim a couple of days a week of own time. "What will you do with it?" I ask him. "Heavy Reading Programme," he replies. But at least one of us will have to sacrifice a bit of time to buckle down and write The Best Selling Nov in order to keep us in the style to which we wish to be accustomed. Nor is he the only male looking to reclaim his life...

Sue Thomason
190 Coach Road
Sleights, Whitby
N Yorks YO22 5EN

"Working part-time is something I thoroughly approve of, and both me and Rory are doing it. In Rory's case, it means four people doing 2.5 official posts worth of general practice doctoring.

Officially, he has Tuesday mornings and Thursdays off -- in practice, both are often eaten into by meetings and paperwork. He starts a morning surgery at 8.30am the other three days a week, and usually finishes surgery at 6.55 to get home at 7pm. He often brings paperwork home or goes back to the surgery to finish it off in the evenings. He's on call one weekday evening every week, and one weekend in four. No wonder there's a shortage of GP trainees in the UK!

"In my case, working part-time means (officially) two hours per weekday morning at the surgery (in practice often longer), doing the data handling for fundholding. The practice has gone into fundholding purely as a defensive measure, because patient services are being eroded and

non-fundholding practices are being disadvantaged. I've been doing this since May last year. Having a job, any job, and a little money of my own has certainly boosted my self-esteem. Part of me still feels I ought to be doing something more useful and Important. However, I absolutely cannot face the thought of job interviews, 'selling myself', trying to persuade strangers how wonderful I am when actually I think I'm rather a failure. And part of me knows I'm extremely lucky, in this part of the world, to have a job at all."

Bridget Hardcastle
13 Lindfield Gardens
Hampstead
London NW3 6PX

"It was interesting and reassuring to read how Judith manages to combine paid employment with fulfilling voluntary work and hobbies. Hey, if you exchange 'paid employment' for 'housework',

it's pretty mid-America of 40 years ago ideal. All you need is a husband with a good job -- not that there are many of them around these days -- jobs that pay well enough to support a family and their hobbies that is, not husbands."

Err, Bridget, the basic point of the 'America 40 years ago' ideal was that women didn't have an option about exchanging 'paid employment' for housework. Married women only worked for pay if the family was poor, as cleaners or shop workers. Teachers, secretaries and so on were expected to resign on marriage. The same applied in Britain, and Australia. Some married women got stuck into running all the different community, church and other voluntary services -- others stayed pretty well tied to their kids and kitchen sinks. One reason for the break-down in communities today is indeed the absence of married women (as well as men and single women), out at work instead of keeping an eye on the neighbourhood. This is not, however, an argument for women to get back to being just housewives and mothers -- but (as I said last issue) for both men and women to be able to opt for 'flexible lives', with companies allowing employees to have family and community work commitments.

Alan Sullivan
30 Ash Road
Stratford
London E15 1HL

"The idea of working shorter hours, and sharing jobs so everyone has some work, has its appeal. It makes sense to get at least some use out of all those people available for work.

The problem is that if contract, temp and casual workers like me on £4/hour with no benefits, sick pay, etc, do shorter hours we get less money. I can barely afford a rented room in an East End slum. I have been told (by someone happily living in a very nice flat with her boyfriend) that if I am not starving, and have a roof over my head, I'm not impoverished. Bullshit. Nine hours a day, five days a week, hammering raw data into a VDU at the above rate of pay barely allows me to survive, with a little on top for minimal fanning and occasional congoing. It might not sound too bad, but I'm learning nothing, and wasting time, skills, effort and health just getting by, when I should have bought some security by now and a chance to ease off a little. I'd love to tell them to take this job and shove it.

"I would love to re-invent my life. But there's this

minimum income requirement, no job to go to, and no interviews or explanations forthcoming. Like I say, you've been lucky. You've made good use of the opportunity, and I hope it works out for you."

What also makes sense is sharing the more rewarding work (both in interest and money) among twice as many people. A compulsory minimum wage also seems necessary -- though your £4/hr is only a tad below the half median male earnings level being discussed for this. However do cleaners and supermarket cashiers get by?

Chester Cuthbert reiterates the theoretical context:

Chester Cuthbert
1104 Mulvey Avenue
Winnipeg
Manitoba
Canada R3M 1J5

"If you have not already come across it, I recommend *The End of Work* by Jeremy Rifkin, which comes closest to detailing the views I have been advocating for the past 30 years: accepting the role of machines to do our work

for us, and establishing an adequate Guaranteed Annual Income. Even Rifkin, however, tries to stay within the confines of our current economic system, which I feel was designed to deal with scarcity and is wholly unsuited for distributing the abundance which is produced by modern technology. The GAI must be paid universally to the fair to the reduced number of workers, to reduce crime and the current battle between union and non-union workers, and be taxed back from those who do not need it. Since the majority of work done is unnecessary, human employment must be further reduced to conserve natural resources, and our educational system must be radically changed."

Of course, that is a broad brush and simplified manifesto -- the devil is in the detail. One problem is that money is now Bad Value/false information. Therefore, I am not sure that GAI, or 'Citizen's Income' as it gets called here is an adequate answer. Alongside it there needs to be accounting for the unmonetised and unpaid production and services that home-keepers and community volunteers carry out. The LETS systems I wrote about in FTT14 and 15 help do this, as do 'Time Dollar' systems in parts of the US. And environmental services and capital, and human welfare, also need form part of the annual social accounts -- GNP and GDP basically just count the extent to which life has become money-dependent.

Julian in America

My little brother Julian's account of his travels through America drew an astounding assortment of responses from our ever-alert readership. First, how could I be other than flattered that two such eminent reviewers as Andy Hooper and Alison Freebairn -- who both praised the piece enthusiastically -- got all the way through it convinced that it was me (Judith) who had gone driving across the States, imperturbably seeing off crazy cops with wildly waving guns, chatting nonchalantly with Indians in sweat lodges and assorted other colourfully dangerous characters, all without turning a hair. But I must disclaim the credit.

Some Americans seemed put out by what he wrote. E.B. Frohvet asked "Did Julian actively seek out and write

about only the distasteful elements? London has slums older than the US has cities."

No, Julian, being a farmer from the boondocks, has a distressing innocence in the face of the 20th century. EBF should note that Julian is Australian, not English, and also that Joseph and I live in one of London's poorest and blackest areas, within walking distance of Broadwater Farm which erupted in a riot a few years ago. It is not a ghetto, and the black guys I encounter as I walk home late at night tend to take pains to show themselves harmless, not to be feared -- far more so than white chaps do. It is normal enough in rural Australia (or even urban) to stop for a chat with whoever happens to be around.

His impression of this country was fairly neutral: "It's good to be in a country where the natives are friendly -- even Joseph most of the time," he wrote home to the parents. Julian found people happy enough about chatting on his way through Europe and the Middle East -- but in the States he found the paranoid reactions he wrote about.

Alex Slate
(address as above)

"Julian's article comes as the fear-factor seems to be decreasing in the US. Crime rates appear to be dropping, and a recent poll found

that 91% of San Antonians feel secure in their own neighbourhoods. Julian may not have known it, but in San Antonio at least as many people speak Spanish as English. We are 65% Hispanic here.

"Strictly speaking, the siege at the Alamo wasn't part of US history. It is where the 'Texicans' gained their independence from Mexico. It wasn't until at least a decade later that Texas joined the union.

"It seems as if Julian has a morbid fixation on death and dying. As for purposely driving into an area where a hurricane is headed! Emergency workers in these areas will have their hands full of people with legitimate reasons for being there. To go in just for a thrill because it happens to be the direction you're heading smacks of irresponsibility. The same goes for TV stations around here which insist on sending news reporters to the scene of every accident and in the paths of oncoming hurricanes.

"I knew Venezuelan students who financed their education with the sort of thing Julian did. They would come to the US (Texas A&M) and buy a used car. At the end of the year they would drive it home for their summer break, and when they got home sell it for 3-5 times what they paid for it, financing their trip back and much of their school expenses."

For some Canadian and British readers, Julian's experiences merely chimed with the impression of the US given by TV and the movies.

Julian's repeated stoical reflection on the possibility of death was because (as briefly noted) he had had a malignant melanoma removed just before setting off on his trip, and was by no means assured that it had been caught in time. So he was in a state of 'Timor mortis conturbat me', as William Dunbar chillingly put it several centuries ago. We spotted the melanoma on his leg when he turned up for Roslyn's wedding only just in time, after being caught up by floods in the desert centre of Australia. He

may well have felt he might be pushing his luck a bit...

Murray Moore
377 Manly St
Midland, Ontario
Canada L4R 3E2

"Marjorie Thompson drops a lot of names in the article I think of as 'Born Republican - a survivor's story', and Julian Hanna recounts his one-man, Easy Rider odyssey across the US. Did Julian take photographs?"

A feature of my parents' (and for some years, my own) entertainment was attending slide shows in the nearest small town. Local people paid to sit in an auditorium and watch the slides and hear the narration of photographers who'd been to Europe or South America or wherever. It was going the neighbours to see their slides formalised as an event. I would pay to see Julian's hypothetical slide show.

"In the mid-1980s I interviewed an Englishman who was walking from the bottom of South America to the top of North America. His worst experiences were getting through borders in one piece without being robbed, south of the Rio Grande. I sometimes wonder what became of him afterwards, as he headed north for Alaska."

What we had were family slide shows, to which visiting friends were often subjected, as Dad ran through (mostly) the slides of the time we lived just 70 miles from the equator, at Manus Island north of Niugini. See twenty tropical sunsets over curving white beaches, you seen them all...

Lloyd Penney
1706-24 Eva Rd
Etobicoke
Ontario
Canada M9C 2B2

"Julian mentions how dangerous Las Vegas' streets are, and on this very day, Tupac Shakur, popular rapper and very bad boy, died after being gunned down while being chauffeured back to his hotel after watching a Mike Tyson prize-fight

there the previous week. Coincidence? No, just confirmation. I have not had any run-ins with American police, but from what I see and hear on television and radio news (I don't watch police dramas), the treatment given Julian is the usual. Those days of teaching your children that the nice policeman is your friend are gone, at least in the US. I'm sure that Julian is as convinced as I am that the United States of America is the biggest insane asylum in the world."

Neil Henderson
(as above)

"I lost count of the number of times Julian acquiesced to the inevitability of death. But he made it, ok. It would be interesting to compile a dossier on

people who live their lives in that kind of high tension, life-threatening environment, and live to a good age without coming to any harm at all. Maybe some people live a charmed life -- but maybe we'd find there aren't so many victims as we might suppose. Linking this with the discussion on science's impact on the future, maybe some absent-minded boffins will leak some chemical into the water supply which will turn the whole human race into *very nice people indeed*. As humanity dashes to extinction, the penultimate person will be overheard by aliens saying, "No, no - after you..."

Not so much 'Independence Day' as 'Inter-galactic Politeness Day'? Meanwhile, back in the real America:

Berni Phillips
1161 Huntingdon Drive
San Jose
CA 95129-3124
USA

"Marjorie Thompson's article was a real eye-opener. So that's what it's like to be a rich Republican, and I really can't see being a Republican without being rich.

"I come from a staunchly Democratic family, and both my parents were union members. My father used to regularly regale us with stores and brands we had to boycott because they were non-union. For instance, it was years before I could walk into a Safeways store. But despite these minor inconveniences we were still aware of how much good the unions did. It is so easy to abuse workers who are not organised. It's ironic that I now work in a non-unionised industry -- electronics/semi-conductor manufacturing. I am told that we don't need a union, it's a good, clean industry -- at least, if you're in one of the good companies.

"I can't help wondering if the now common 12-hour shifts that the fab people [fabricators?] work would have come about if there were a strong union? People say they like the schedule because of the three or four days off a week, but the days on are tough. You get so tired that all you do the first day off is sleep. At least in California, hourly paid workers currently get time-and-a-half after eight hours plus another percentage for working these long shifts. Some states don't have overtime kick in on these shifts, and there's a movement in California to have overtime kick in after the 40th hour worked in a week rather than after the eighth hour in a day. This would mean a lot less money for the awful hours these people work. I did 12-hour shifts sometimes in my first job, back in my early twenties. It was hard on me then; I can't imagine trying to do it regularly now at my age."

And in the real Britain:

Derek Pickles
44 Rooley Lane
Bankfoot
Bradford
W Yorks BD5 8LX

"I had a heart attack on 9 September -- fortunately I was in the best place I could have been, the heart ward at the Bradford Royal Infirmary where I had been for three days having tests and treatment for completely unexpected angina chest pains.

"Within two minutes the whole 'Casualty/Cardiac Arrest' scene had been enacted, I was wired up to monitors, had drugs coursing through my bloodstream. The doctors' and nurses' efforts were successful -- as this note bears witness.

"I have to take things very easy for four to six weeks, so no getting worked up, loccing fanzines or answering letters for a while. I'd still like to hear from you all and read the fanzine masterpieces you send me -- but responding will take longer than usual. Please pass this information on as I can't contact everyone."

We hope you're recovering well, Derek!

Green and pleasant land

Bridget Hardcastle
(as above)

"I was particularly moved by Joseph's account of the walk along the Newbury bypass route. During the summer I often walked into

college across Hyde Park, noticing nature and landscape. I was surprised how quiet the park was -- most of the noise comes from traffic. But nearby Kensington Gardens was full of birdsong. In a short walk I'd see robins, chaffinch, thrushes, magpies and the ever-present pigeons. Being a townie, I thought this was a lot of exotic birds. But Hyde Park could be concreted over for all the soul it has.

"I'd be interested to know more about the history of Hampstead Heath, my local bit of greenery. There are all sorts of conservation groups, battling with each other to preserve the Heath as it is today, or to restore it to the way it was years ago. The latest uproar was about cutting down some trees [to restore the prospect from Kenwood House across the lake below it]. This brought out birdwatching groups, all-trees-are-sacred groups, "But its a 'Heath', its not supposed to be overgrown with trees," groups, and the gay rights 'You bigots just want the trees down to stop us shagging in them' groups. As ever, the disagreements were more interesting to the local papers than the outcome, so I don't know what the plans are for the trees."

No clear decision has come out in the English Heritage newsletter circulated to members like us. Your editors favour some selective felling to clear some view lines -- but that area of Hampstead Heath is now very much woodland, and should stay so.

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

"I enclose sheets of paper bought at Christina's Environment Centre -- cut up from Ordnance Survey maps of East German airspace, Cold War vintage. Swords into ploughwhatnots...

"You could almost take Bath as a worked example of environmental problems. Bath Green Park, which was the northern terminus of the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway until the Beeching era, now serves as a covered car-park for the Sainsbury's supermarket and DIY store further along the old track-bed. Since the S&DJR's demise there's been a creeping programme of 'upgrading' of roads around the larger towns along its former route, like Glastonbury and Wells. East of Bath city, of course, is the true horror -- the Batheaston bypass, which by taking an insane course more or less sideways across the valley of the Avon requires the building of both an outstandingly ugly concrete bridge and a deep coffin-trench cutting through Solsbury Hill. It looks every bit as bad as the Twyford Down construction. What was a view of remarkable beauty, considering that it's only a five minute walk from the centre of a big city, is wrecked until someone in the 21st century manages to put it right."

Steve was puzzled by Joseph's praise for 'DIY culture':

"All we've got out of DIY culture is hideous out-of-town

tin shack DIY superstores accessible only by car, together with a generation of proudly 'self-sufficient' clots eager to move into pleasant Victorian town-houses and wreck them by demolishing internal walls, tearing off plasterwork and uprooting fireplaces."

An interesting ambiguity here -- the 'DIY culture' Joseph praised is the kids (dreadlocked or crew-cut, tattooed and pierced) who get out and sit in front of bull-dozers, oppose the Criminal Justice Act, organise raves and free festivals, and so on -- no doubt in twenty years time, they'll be restoring the Victorian town-houses and deploring the new generation. Meanwhile, a different take on railways:

Chris Terran
9 Beechwood Court
Back Beechwood Grove
Leeds
W Yorks LS4 2HS

"Right outside my front door is a little (unstaffed) local railway station. One of the pleasures of this is the avenue into town it affords various flora and fauna. Foxes are seen at night, poised and alert, raiding the bins, and

cats do their best to control the small mammal population. The main drawback of the station is that it attracts kids and other undesirables, out for a bit of healthy vandalism. Earlier this year there was a terrible murder, still unsolved. I was interviewed five times as a potential witness, which instilled considerable guilt that I wasn't able to help."

But not everyone has taken on board the sustainable transport perspective:

Walt Willis
32 Warren Road
Donaghadee
N Ireland BT21 0PD

"I might have known that Joseph would turn up at Newbury. I won't argue with him about the merits of the Government proposals because I am sure he has rebuttals ready for

any point I might try to make. I shall just say that my experience of government tells me that no decision like the Newbury Bypass is made without a far better case than Joseph and his friends will admit."

Tut, tut Mr Willis -- you seem to be overlooking the comments in my piece on the hocus-pocus of the Department of Transport's COBA cost-benefit appraisal formula, on which the Government's road proposals were based -- and which the Government itself has admitted is wholly inadequate for dealing with urban traffic patterns. Basically, the new Newbury bypass (which will be the fourth bypass around Newbury), and the currently-at-issue Salisbury bypass, and the South Coast motorway-by-stealth, all contradict a raft of Government policies -- such as the DoE/DOT PPG13 Planning Policy Guidance on Transport which calls for measures to reduce private car travel and for facilities to be located so they can be reached by walking, cycling and public transport. Then there was the 1992 Standing Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) report, in which the DOT's expert advisers confirmed that the evidence was indeed that building new roads generated car journeys that had not previously existed, thus increasing rather than reducing town centre congestion -- because almost three-quarters of journeys are less than five miles long, and almost all start or end in the congested towns and cities. No, the DOT has

admitted, in general principle, the case against the Newbury bypass -- but the Government is nevertheless bulldozing it through.

Stephen O'Kane
Flat 169, Wick Hall
Furze Hill
Hove BN3 1NJ

"In the snarling intellectual (or pretence intellectual) climate of today, a group like the New Economics Foundation should do everything to escape a cuddly, nice image and made sure they are as

nasty as possible -- while sticking to their ideas. One well-tryed method is eco-horror-disaster scenarios of the future with flooding of coastal areas, famine due to desertification, mutations from chemical or radiation pollution, and the like. That has now come up against the short boredom span of today, plus some actual blunders like the old Club of Rome claim that oil reserves would run out before we had time to foul things up with greenhouse gas. The events of 1914 and 1939 should remind us that most people cannot take an emergency seriously if it is more than a week away. Maybe they are right; despite warnings of dire emergency, people simply have to get on with their own lives. But groups like the NEF might take a leaf out of the book of modern journalism and make sure they are as sneering, snide and nasty about their critics as we generally are about do-gooders.

"More important is a point coming from the predictable response Judith gets to talks on 'sustainable jobs in a sustainable economy'. The real reason why all this is idealistic is that most people are competing for status. The neo-Darwinists are probably right to say we are genetically programmed to behave that way and we ought to be honest enough to admit it."

Other neo-Darwinists, of course, are pointing out a multitude of examples of individuals, species, and even cell parts (viz Lynn Margulis), cooperating for survival. Nature, or Gaia, is not necessarily 'red in tooth and claw' but can be as nice and fluffy as she looks -- though not necessarily with any special care for our pesky species. I keep wanting to point out to those who talk of 'global warming' as meaning a Mediterranean style climate for Britain that it might just as easily mean the Gulf Stream switching off, leaving Britain with a Labrador weather pattern.

Dave Langford
94 London Rd
Reading RG1 5AU

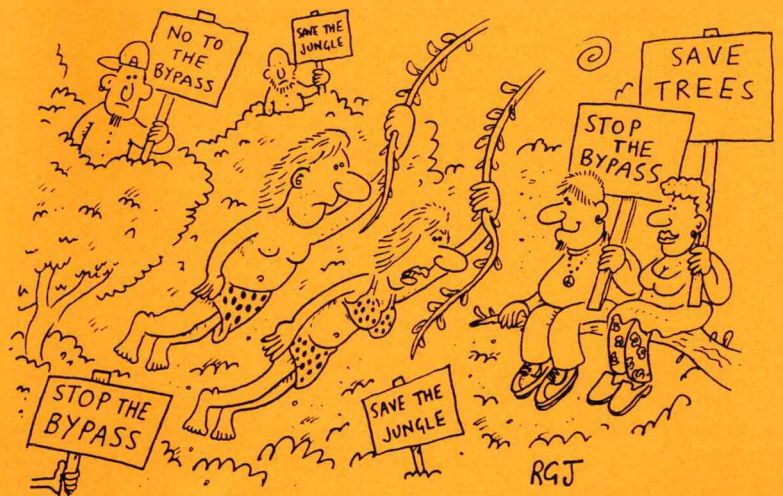
"Nature notes for FFI, the fabulous fanzine of politics, travel

and gardening: we found a most menacing insect crawling up the kitchen curtains this week. Thin, black and leggy with waving feelers, about an inch long, and decorated with vivid yellow stripes that proclaimed it to be some exotic wasp. It was duly transferred to a glass tumbler for eviction... and on closer examination, the illusion of wasphood began to fade. No wings? Or were they black wings with wasp-stripes on them? In fact they were wing-cases,

with one stripe curved precisely to give an illusion -- except in close-up -- that the dead-straight body bulged like a wasp's abdomen. Such was our introduction to the supposedly common Wasp Beetle (*Clytus arietus*), which stalks around gardens and hedgerows terrifying other creatures -- just as Joseph's protective rhetoric sometimes masks his basic cuddliness. Well, we thought it was interesting."

We at International Revolutionary Gardener are outdone in the exotic nature stakes, and green with envy.

WAHF: Andy Andruschak ("I read with sheer awe the story of Judith leaving her full-time paying job. I would never have the guts to do something like that. Never.") Sheryl Birkhead, George Flynn, Susan Francis (on the travails of trying to get an Environment Centre set up in Colchester), Michael Hailstone, Teddy Harvia ("The Chinese could have done no worse in world conquest than the Europeans who virtually wiped out the indigenous peoples in North and South America and Australia."), Steve Jeffrey, Jerry Kauffman and Suzle Tompkins (June, coa to 3522 NE 123rd St, Seattle, WA 98125), Brant Kresovich, Robert Lichtman, Par Nilsson ("Not many four-legged creatures about here, apart from pissed students. But once I was nearly run over by a badger who seemed late for some important business.") and Steve Palmer. David Redd ("Here in Wales, I would guess that 50% of employees have been reorganised, privatised or downsized in the last year. Environmentally, our beaches are oil reserves under the pebbles, our cows have been sentenced to death, and ten years after Chernobyl we still have sheep too radioactive to eat... I still maintain I'm too busy earning a living to do anything about the social ills I diagnose, FTT is bad for my blood pressure...") Yvonne Rousseau (telling us off for omitting important scholarly and bibliographic notes from her Cheng Ho essay), DM Sherwood ("Wrote you a mind-staggeringly brill letter which would have won me a Nova by itself but for a variety of reasons it never got typed up.") Pat Silver ("Thanks for the pumpkin information."), Lennart Uhlin, and Henry L Welch. Our thanks to you all.



'Swinging through the treetops just isn't the same any more. Tarzan.'

FIRST AND LAST AND ALWAYS

Joseph Nicholas

The first Saturday in July was Open Day at Kensal Green Cemetery in West London – not because the cemetery is otherwise closed to the public, but because it was the Friends' annual opportunity to raise money for its upkeep by taking visitors on guided tours, selling booklets and postcards, and generally entertaining, either by selling refreshments or by organising a parade of historic hearses. We missed the parade, and passed up the offered tours of the surface – dealing with the cemetery's history, its notable monuments, its wildlife, and Victorian funerary symbolism – in favour of buying a guidebook and exploring it on our own.

Kensal Green was the first of London's dedicated necropolii, opened in 1832 to relieve the overcrowding in the city's small churchyards, and then lying well beyond its limits. The accelerated migration of people from the countryside, and the rapid expansion of London westwards following the advent of the railways, meant that the cemetery was soon engulfed by suburbs; but, still owned and operated by the General Cemetery Company, it continues in use today – albeit that today's interments are less spectacular than those of the last century. Flat slabs with headstones are common, and the black marble tombstones which mark the many Greek and Polish burials are larger than most; but for all their size – and their tributes from relatives and portraits of the deceased – they pale into insignificance beside the colossal edifices erected by the Victorians. People you've never heard of, and who were probably so full of themselves that you wouldn't have wanted to know them in life either, are marked by some of the most overwrought mausolea imaginable – polychrome gothic sarcophagi supported by heraldic griffins, mock classical temples decorated with draped urns and grieving angels, red granite obelisks atop stelae of grey Portland stone bearing inscriptions of the most florid and rambling kind. They must have cost a bomb, even for their time – and the burial plots above which they stand are apparently mostly empty: although the sites may have been purchased by one member of the family (usually a patriarchal male) with the aim of eventually accommodating them all, few of his relatives chose to be interred in the same spot.

The tombstones of the genuinely famous, by

contrast, are relatively simple. Leigh Hunt, who championed Keats's poetry when few others were interested, is marked by an upright block of grey Portland stone, the bust which originally surmounted it having been vandalised long ago. Isambard Kingdom Brunel and his father, Marc Isambard Brunel, lie beneath a rectangular white block marked only with their names – the guidebook primly advising that Brunel's *Great Eastern*, the bridge over the River Tamar at Saltash, and the Great Western Railway's other bridges and viaducts are "his true monuments". Charles Makepeace Thackeray's worn grey slab, surrounded by a rusting iron railing, is crammed awkwardly between two other, larger, slabs of stone. Anthony Trollope's and Wilkie Collins's graves might be overlooked altogether did the guidebook not draw attention to them. And just to demonstrate the impermanence of even the simplest headstones, outlying parts of the cemetery, away from the chapel and the central avenue, have almost completely disappeared beneath encroaching vegetation – trees and shrubs, in some cases, but also waving summer grasses, left to grow wild as a habitat for butterflies and other insects. It's real dust-to-dust, endless-cycle-of-nature stuff.

Although we passed up the tours of the surface, we did buy tickets for a tour of the catacombs beneath the chapel. Indeed, one can't ordinarily get into the catacombs any other way, although they are still in use: our guide pointed to a recently deposited collection of wreaths in one corridor, and told us of a woman who regularly comes to talk to her deceased husband in his lead-lined coffin. But modern interments in the catacombs are rare (and apparently very expensive); the heyday of interment there was, as one might expect, the Victorian era.

The Victorians thought of cemeteries as not just places of rest for the deceased, but as places of education for the living: for those who had yet to shuffle off Shakespeare's mortal coil to sit and contemplate the imperishable achievements of those who had gone before. Interment in the catacombs, by contrast, restricted contemplation to the relatives of the deceased, allowing them to view not a monument but their actual coffin. Or at any rate the outer, display coffin, sometimes elaborately decorated and sometimes carrying only a simple

plaque; within each is a leaden box, soldered shut to contain the smell of the embalmed owner's inevitable putrefaction. Some are concealed behind inscribed marble slabs, and thus -- apart from rare spy-holes -- cannot be seen at all; some lie behind sealed glass panes -- one of which, our guide pointed out, was so airtight that the reds and yellows of the wreath interred with it had retained most of their colour; but most lie behind iron grilles of various different designs -- different, our guide said in response to my question, because the deceased are free to choose whatever kind of interment they wish. They may buy only a place on a shelf; they may purchase the entire shelf for themselves and their immediate relatives; or they may buy the entire bay for use as a family vault. And, like the burial plots on the surface, the vault may never be filled: other members of the family may be buried elsewhere, or if the family dies out the vacant spaces will remain forever vacant. Once someone's paid for it, the guide said in response to another of my questions, the company will never take it away from them.

Back on the surface, another group awaited their turn below -- including a pair dressed in full Edwardian mourning rig, the female of the couple sporting jet black hair, pale make-up with scarlet lipstick, and a coffin-shaped handbag. Others were more normally attired -- although it was evident that the Open Day had also attracted a considerable number of Goths, presumably taking the opportunity to become more closely acquainted with the notional subject of their favourite songs. Yet, Goth or not, whether we dress up or not, isn't there something slightly macabre about poking about in cemeteries and touring catacombs? Isn't an interest in the disposal of other people's corpses somewhat unhealthy? And isn't death the one thing about which one is not supposed to talk in polite company?

Death -- the great unmentionable. Although it's the one thing that none of us can avoid, it's also the one thing that all of us try to avoid thinking about, doubtless because our sentience and self-awareness makes it difficult for us to come to terms with the fact that our sentience and self-awareness will one day be snuffed out. Thus we concentrate exclusively on life, and leave the thinking about what to do when it ends to others. Yet it wasn't always thus; and the more one strives to understand the past the more pragmatic and the more accepting of death our predecessors seem. Perhaps they had a faith to sustain them in a belief that death was not the end, but a new beginning; perhaps because, prior to the Industrial Revolution, they lived closer to nature than modern city-dwellers such as ourselves and saw in the cycle of the seasons a

microcosm of their own existence; perhaps they just got on with the business of living in the full knowledge that one day they would be making the reaper's acquaintance and should have the grace to go quietly when he finally called. In addition, our predecessors' seeming pragmatism probably stemmed from the fact that in earlier ages the reaper used to call more often, and much earlier: women often died in childbirth, many children did not survive beyond their fifth birthday, diseases or ailments which are now shrugged off in days were then routinely fatal, wounds acquired in combat usually turned gangrenous, ordinary toil would wear people out well in advance of their allotted three-score-and-ten. Death was so obvious, and so frequent, that thought of it was unavoidable -- even in late Victorian times, for example, it was common for young children of the middle classes to be shown the recently deceased, lying in open coffins in the front rooms of their former homes; while earlier in the nineteenth century Sunday Schools in the north of England routinely maintained "funeral clubs" to which working class children were expected to contribute (from their own wages) to defray the cost of each others' interment.

But there were doubtless some occasions when death was perceived to become truly malign; when, rather than waiting patiently for everyone to come to it, it seemed to go hunting for them instead. Disease epidemics are an obvious instance of this; and the Black Death of 1347 to 1349 is perhaps the most famous epidemic of all.

Mere years after everyone else, I've finally read Connie Willis's *The Doomsday Book*, and found -- as many others have remarked -- that the historical sections are considerably more interesting than those set in the near-future. (None of the near-future characters ever become more than names on the page, and potential empathy with them is blunted by the auctorial insistence that they spend large parts of the novel studiously avoiding the blindingly obvious source of the disease which grips their Oxford.) As those who've read it will know, the novel concerns a time traveller sent back to research everyday life in early fourteenth century England but who by mistake lands in the middle of the Black Death and, before her eventual rescue, spends her time caring for the villagers of Skendgate as they die one by one. The Black Death is depicted much as one would expect of a novel in which the time-traveller knows but cannot prevent what is happening: as an appalling, terrifying wave of slow-motion destruction which the people of the time probably did perceive as the inexplicable wrath of a Christian God who had withdrawn his protection from his own creation in punishment for

their sins. Contemporary European chroniclers were so consumed by despair that they recorded it as "the end of the world"; and by the time the Black Death was over the global population had been reduced by uncountable tens of millions. An estimated one-third of the population of Europe had died; the fatality rate in Asia and the Near East, where it had originated, could scarcely have been much less.

But the key problem with Willis's depiction of the Black Death is that it views disease not as a natural (and recurring) part of human history but as something which has to be confronted and overcome -- a very old-fashioned view of disease, and one which a succession of books over the past twenty years, from William McNeill's then-pathbreaking *Plagues And People* in 1975 to this year's winner of the Rhone-Poulenc Science Prize, Arno Karlen's *Plague's Progress*, have completely overthrown. As these authors have argued, disease is not an agent which acts to retard human progress but one which actively helps shape it. The Black Death, for example, is commonly supposed to have been a necessary precursor to the destruction of the European feudal order and the emergence of a wholly money-based economy because it drove up the price of labour and thereby freed peasants from the obligation to toil on their liege's land, allowing them to instead begin working for themselves -- a key factor in promoting the later formation of the artisanal and mercantile classes which in turn enabled Europe to assume the leading role in the development of the global economy. Indeed, Fernand Braudel considers that the Black Death's impact on the price of labour was so great that in the first volume of *Civilisation And Capitalism* he draws repeated attention to the fact that, relatively speaking, the working peasant of the late fourteenth century enjoyed a standard of living higher than that which has ever been enjoyed by any European worker since.

As the old saw goes, one can prove anything with statistics, and since the records of the period are neither comprehensive nor readily interpretable Braudel's argument is not easily disproved. Living standards aside, however, the "common supposition" about the Black Death's effect on the price of labour is actually very debatable, and no longer commands wide support. In the first place, the plague did not discriminate between the classes: nobles died just as nastily as peasants, and the fact that plague killed more of the latter than the former is merely a reflection of their greater number; the class ratio remained relatively unchanged, leaving the peasants still owing their labour to their lords. Secondly, and more importantly, the population of Europe was in

decline anyway as a consequence of the climatic downturn now known as the Little Ice Age, which began sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century and made itself most keenly felt in the cold, wet summers of 1315 and 1316, with results which within a few years had drastically undermined the support system against whose limits society was pressing: agricultural yields fell, the volume of trade (and the number of annual trade fairs) slumped, the European economy tumbled into recession. From this point of view, all the Black Death did was accelerate the existing decline, so granting the surviving population valuable time in which to reorganise European society's support system to cope with the next wave of economic expansion.

(Nevertheless, it's fun to speculate what a world without the Black Death might be like. If we accept the old argument about the price of labour, and assume from labour's continued abundance and cheapness that it therefore took longer for the feudal order to crumble, then the initiation of the Age of Exploration and, later still, the Industrial Revolution could have been deferred for another century or so, resulting in a twentieth century in which many people still died young, total population levels would still be counted in tens of millions, and technological levels would be much lower -- for example, wars might still be fought with muskets, and the seas crossed by wooden sailing ships which had still to solve the problem of calculating longitude. It might also be a world in which many great empires of the past were either still extant or had only recently broken up -- the Ottomans might still be knocking at the gates of Europe, the Moghuls might still dominate south Asia, Mali and Zimbabwe could still rule large tracts of inland Africa, and the struggle for the Americas, assuming the continent had actually been discovered by Europeans, would have been under way for only a century or so, with the interior (South as well as North) still populated by indigenes and European settlement confined to the fringes. But it would be a world with as many environmental problems as our own -- instead of the smog-creating internal combustion engine to poison our cities and trigger increases in child asthma, a permanent haze of smoke from the wood and coal burnt in primitive manufactories would hang over parts of the planet. Global warming would be as much of a reality in that world as it is in ours -- and, because they would not be possessed of our world's fantasies of escaping it by colonising the Moon or Mars, the people of this imaginary alternate world might perhaps address it more seriously than we do.

(And if this hypothetical history replicates

too closely the events of the past five hundred years, but on a slower timescale, a more radical alternative would be a world in which China and the Arab states remained the dominant powers while Europe became an insignificant Asian peninsula, with a level of population and technology lower than those which obtained in the early fourteenth century. Or, even without the Black Death to winnow the numbers, the Little Ice Age could have resulted in a Europe-wide famine equally as murderous -- which might also have driven up the price of labour, similarly breaking the feudal system and positioning Europe for later global economic leadership....)

The peak years of the Little Ice Age were, roughly, 1450 to 1850, after which the world's average temperature began rising once again -- albeit that temperatures in northern Europe have yet to regain the levels they achieved in the first millennium of the Christian era. But this nevertheless raises the interesting question of how much of the present global warming is attributable to human agency, and how much to natural processes. Environmental doomsayers (of whom there are these days very few, and in any case most of them appear to be nutters of the David Icke school) would claim that it's all due to us; the business conservatives and other right-wingers associated with the US's "Wise Use" movement, on the other hand, would claim that it's all natural (and, into the bargain, that the IPCC science is a lie from beginning to end, that every Friends of the Earth member is a potential terrorist, and that nothing should be allowed to stand in their way of looting the world's resources for maximum short-term profit). What is not in dispute, however, is that the world is getting warmer -- while, irrespective of whatever natural processes may be in train, common sense alone should tell us that it is absurd to pretend that the human species has no effect on its environment. (Indeed, history provides repeated instances of civilisations whose collapse was attributable largely to ecological factors, at periods when our numbers were far less than they are now. An argument that we can avoid similar catastrophes because we have the technology that our predecessors did not merely substitutes a modern form of wish-fulfillment for theirs, since physical limits are physical limits irrespective of the era in which they are confronted.) And as average temperatures rise, augmented to an unknown extent by human activity, so existing climatic zones will extend a few degrees further north or south, taking their biota with them -- leading, perhaps no later than the middle of the next century, to diseases which are at present found only in the tropics appearing in the Mediterranean or the southern

parts of the US. Future epidemics will be more likely than not. Will we be ready for them?

We like to think that twentieth century medicine has enabled us to overcome the epidemics which ravaged previous eras -- for example, smallpox has been eradicated, and now exists only as a few dormant cultures in WHO laboratories. But in recent years tuberculosis, another disease we thought we'd beaten, has reappeared in the poorer areas of developed western nations; most strains of malaria have developed resistance to the current range of anti-malarial drugs (while new anti-malarials such as Lariam have proven no more efficacious); methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus is now the commonest cause of hospital cross-infection and increasingly implicated in skin disorders such as eczema and psoriasis; and even bubonic plague occasionally breaks out in parts of the Third World (most recently in India in 1994 -- but because it was immediately recognised as such and treated accordingly, few people suffered). Some bacteriologists and virologists suggest that drug resistance is now so widespread that the Antibiotic Age -- and thus the age of broad general protection against disease -- may be drawing to a close. If so, then within a century or two the human species might be facing a crisis of underpopulation, as the death rate from new strains of old diseases begins to gradually exceed the replacement rate. But then a world with a lower level of population might well be one which exerted a lot less pressure on scarce resources -- which prompts the thought that a resurgence of disease might be (one of) Gaia's ways of restoring environmental equilibrium.

Whether we could ever again accept death as pragmatically as our predecessors seem to have done, however, is quite another matter. Unlike them, we do not have the same depth of belief in the afterlife or the resurrection to sustain us, and thus it would almost certainly require more than merely a higher death rate, or more visible and public manifestations of the "cult" of death, to lessen our fear of the great unknown. A resurgence of Victorian-style interments is therefore highly unlikely -- assuming that any of us could afford the overblown monuments they favoured. But as we left Kensal Green Cemetery on that July afternoon, Judith and I nevertheless touched lightly on the monuments we'd like to have erected over us -- a crashed helicopter gunship for me, I suggested, and for her an oversize crossed garden fork and spade, with ball of wool and recipe book rampant. Or perhaps nothing at all, the quicker to encourage our decay and recycling....although we also agreed that we really haven't the time to die: there's just too much to see and do!

A notice circulating on the Internet demands immediate action to protect people from the killer chemical dihydrogen monoxide (DHMO):

"Dihydrogen monoxide is colourless, odourless, tasteless, and kills uncounted thousands of people each year," the notice warns. Most of these deaths are caused by accidental inhalation of DHMO, but the dangers of dihydrogen monoxide do not end there. "Prolonged exposure to its solid form causes severe tissue damage. Symptoms of DHMO ingestion can include excessive sweating and urination, and possibly a bloated feeling, nausea, vomiting and body electrolyte imbalance."

Not only is DHMO dangerous to humans, the notice points out, it is also extremely hazardous to the environment. It is a major component of acid rain, it contributes to the greenhouse effect, and it is a common cause of erosion of our natural landscape.

Worldwide contamination by DHMO is reaching epidemic proportions, the notice cautions. Quantities of the chemical "have been found in almost every stream, lake and reservoir in America today. But the pollution is global, and the contaminant has even been found in the Antarctic".

So far, governments, and environmental watchdogs have been indifferent to the problem, the notice says. Despite the danger, DHMO is often used as an industrial solvent and coolant, in nuclear power plants, as a fire retardant, as an additive in certain junk foods and other food products, and in a wide variety of other uses. "Companies routinely dump DHMO into rivers and oceans, and nothing can be done to stop them because this practice is still legal," the notice reminds us.

The notice concludes: "The American government has refused to ban the production, distribution or use of this damaging chemical due to its 'importance to the economic life of the nation'. In fact, the navy and other military organisations are conducting experiments with DHMO, and designing multibillion dollar devices to control and use it during warfare situations. Hundreds of military research facilities receive tons of it through a highly sophisticated underground distribution network. Many store quantities for later use.

"Act now to prevent further contamination. Find out more about this dangerous chemical. Send e-mail to no_dhmo@circus.com."

(From *New Scientist's* "Feedback" column,
in the 18 May 1996 issue)

This is FTT 12, from:

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PRINTED MATTER

REDUCED RATE