

OPUNTIA

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BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

THE REVENGE OF GEOGRAPHY by Robert Kaplan (2012, hardcover) looks at the influence of geography on the modern world, whether the stability of countries, ethnic group survival, or the economics of commodity transportation.

It is an axiom that mountainous areas are more difficult to control without the consent of their people, whereas flatlands are doormats for invaders. Unfortunately modern political boundaries often make no sense in many countries. Iraq was created without regard for its three major groups: the Kurds, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims. Kurdistan, in the mountains, is de facto independent, even if Saddam Hussein and the Americans thought it was part of Iraq. Afghanistan and Pakistan were historically one nation and one people before the British conquerors drew new lines, which is why foreign troops there have so much difficulty.

Kaplan considers that the latest era of political history began when high-level politicians and the chattering classes fell into the fallacy of Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End Of History", published in 1989 just before the Berlin Wall came down. Fukuyama agreed that revolutions and wars would continue, but stated that Hegelian history was over. All that remained for the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy was marching in a few

troops here and there to bestow the blessings of our way of life on any unruly tribes. We all know how that turned out.

In 2004, Kaplan was an embedded reporter with a U.S. Marines detachment when they moved into Baghdad to replace an Army unit. He observed that to drive across a few hundred kilometres of secured flatland, the distance between Calgary and Edmonton, required massive convoys of supply trucks, staging points along the way for repairs, and days to make the trip. I could drive the same distance from Calgary to Edmonton in four hours. Of course, I would be driving across friendly territory, and if I had car trouble I could rely on a local repair shop instead of bringing along my own mechanic. In mountainous country with opposing enemy fire, such as Afghanistan, it is no wonder that troops became bogged down. It was his Iraq experience that convinced Kaplan that Fukuyama was wrong and that geography still mattered.

The USA's ability to act as the world's policeman has been possible because its homeland has not been subject to attack by foreign powers since it was defeated in the War of 1812 by Canada. The American military has a secure centre from which to operate. They could carpet-bomb Nazi Germany without fear of retaliation, while the Germans had to defend themselves on all sides. Iraq and Afghanistan are distant foreign wars. They cannot invade the USA. European and Asian nations have never had the

luxury to pull back from an unsuccessful fight and rebuild their strength; they were in wars as a fight to the finish. Central Europe, the Balkans, and central Asia are hampered by a surfeit of mountains, which have the effect of reducing human populations to tribes, one tribe per valley. Although barbarian invasions were common in human history, it was the cities and farmers who ultimately prevailed, crushing the barbarians by weight of numbers and leaving them in isolated outposts deep in the mountains.

The phrase "The map is not the territory" has become a cliché, but Kaplan points out that maps did cause many problems. The Europeans used the Mercator map, which makes their countries look bigger than they actually are. The maps of African and Middle East colonies pretended to show European control as more extensive than it really was. Large colonies were mostly a few cities under European domination, while the hinterland peoples did as they pleased, with only a few European patrols to annoy them. The patrols and commissioners could only travel in armed convoys and live in forts.

Geography later stepped in to ensure that Islamic countries had most of the cheap, easy-to-get-at oil. That oil is now mostly gone. Saudi Arabian oil production peaked in 2008 and the world has to rely on expensive hard-to-get-at oil and natural gas, such as the interior of Asia, Athabasca Tar Sands, the Bakken shale, Arctic

deposits, and offshore drilling. Those who babble about how Peak Oil was a false alarm ignore the fact that oil now averages \$85 to \$105 a barrel. Kaplan points out one factor that the mass media and the general public ignore. Because all the new supplies are deep in continental interiors or offshore, the struggle to control them now centres on pipelines and railroads, not the actual oil fields. Saudi Arabia ships its oil a few kilometres to its ports. In contrast, the Athabasca and Bakken oil must cross the interior of a large continent before they reach the main population centres or export terminals. Russia is trying to control pipelines bringing oil and natural gas out of central Asia, while the American government is trying to bypass hostile Middle Eastern countries. Russia is fearful of its margins, dominated by Muslims, where ethnic Russians are being out-populated by the tribal people.

In considering China, Kaplan notes that it might have split permanently into two separate countries, the north and the south, because of geography. The Grand Canal, completed in 611 A.D., unified the two areas in the same way that the CPR transcontinental railroad unified western Canada with Ontario and Québec. China has an advantage that Russia does not, that of a long seacoast with many good harbours and river connections. Kaplan notes that one reason African nations have trouble developing economically is that the continent has very few deepwater ports.

The major point of Kaplan's book is in the final section, where he describes the greatest threat to the USA. Not Islamic jihadists or Chinese intrigue, but Mexico, flooding southwestern USA as part of what Mexicans refer to as the Reconquista. Of all the pairs of contiguous countries in the world, the economic gap between Mexico and the USA is the greatest. There are no swarms of Canadians trying to get south. Nor is Mexico a remote hinterland. With 111 million people, it has to be noticed. The threat is not military but is simply a matter of swamping the USA with migrants, mostly illegal. Half of immigrants to the USA today, legal or illegal, are Hispanic, and most of them Mexican.

Kaplan writes that while the chattering classes talk of the virtues of cultural diversity, the reality is different. Modern immigration into the USA is less diverse than any previous time in history. By 2050, one-third of the USA will be Hispanic. Because most of the American Southwest was part of Mexico before 1835, the immigrants do not feel they are settling in a foreign country but rather helping to take back their homeland, hence the use of the term Reconquista. Kaplan strongly emphasizes that in day-to-day terms, the greatest concern of American foreign policy should not be the Middle East or Asia, it should be Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. He considers that the greatest threat to the USA is not pinprick attacks by Islamic terrorists such as 9/11 or the Boston Marathon bombings, but the steady and on-going corruption of the Mexican drug cartels.

Kaplan's book is interesting reading, although he seems to spend more time summarizing the views of other academics than putting forth his own. The result is, excepting the final section on Mexico, that most of the book has a derivative feel about it. One might just as easily read the books Kaplan keeps citing at length. If you need a summary of current geographical thinking, the first three-quarters of the book will provide it, while the last section shows originality of thought.

ALIVE! (2013, hardcover) by Loren Estleman is a private detective story with a bit of secret history thrown in. The hero is Valentino, a UCLA cinema archivist and private "film detective" who lives in the world of early movie fandom. He moves among people who not only know who Theda Bara was but know that her original name was Theodosia Burr Goodman. Valentino is renovating an old movie theatre he bought, living in the projection room while scrambling for cash to pay for the renovations.

The plot hinges around a screen test by Bela Lugosi, who tried out for the part of Frankenstein's monster, the part that went to Boris Karloff. In our world, the screen test has long been lost, and it would be a coup for any movie fan to own that footage. Valentino finds out that such a film clip exists. The man who claimed to have it is brutally beaten to death just after contacting Valentino to offer it for sale. The police start their enquiries, Valentino starts his enquiries, and the plot rolls along. There are lots of old-

time movie factoids dropped into the text along the way, but Estleman knows how to do it without the "As you know, Professor" info dumps that commonly afflict SF.

There are some nods to those who know the background. Valentino meets up with completist collector J. Arthur Greenwood, not a rank man but an enthusiastic fan who publishes a pro horror fanmag and lives in a house stuffed with books and movie props. Forrest J. Ackerman anyone? Valentino has the Lugosi film test delivered to him from a person unknown. Some realistic touches are then applied, not often seen in private detective fiction. The police run him in for withholding evidence. None of this Miss Marple stuff. And he gets into a debate with a lawyer about property rights, since the movie studio that made the screen test may still own the rights. The lawyer works for a gangster whose stepmother had inherited the film clip decades ago. Several dead bodies later, including the lawyer's, the case, while not solved due to lack of evidence against the gangster, staggers to some sort of conclusion. All ends reasonably well. This novel is a good read, and I went through it in one sitting.

THE LEAKY ESTABLISHMENT (1984, mass-market paperback) by David Langford is a humorous novel about life in a British nuclear weapons research facility. Langford, an SF fan who used to work in such an establishment, is writing what he knows. The lead character is Roy Tappen, who gets involved in a silly bet to

put one over on Security by smuggling out a sphere of plutonium. The trouble is, just after he does so the system is changed and he can't get it back inside. New super-sensitive radiation detectors at the gates work on both outgoing and incoming traffic. If Tappen is caught with a plutonium sphere in his possession it won't just be his job that disappears.

However, he does think up an inspired work-around. When Security brags about how they have the place sealed tight, he easily goads them into a bet that the scientists can smuggle a plutonium sphere to the outside. Since he has one hidden down his garden from before the clampdown, it seems an easy bet to win. The problem is soon realized that if he announces his win, he will have to explain how it was done, so he has to come up with a fake plan that is workable. From there the complications arise, including inadvertently getting a second plutonium sphere outside without detection and discovering that Security was on the fiddle with some of their own smuggling.

GRIDLOCK (1991, mass-market paperback) by Ben Elton is a humorous novel that combines conspiracy theory with traffic management. Dr. Geoffrey Peason is a brilliant scientist in London, England, who is also a spastic. He has invented various machines as a work-around, and unknowingly also invented a hydrogen-powered car engine which put him on a hit list by Sam Turk, a big man in the auto industry. Two contract killers sent to

do the job bungle it in the opening chapters, and the novel goes on from there.

Elton does a lot of preaching against private car ownership and lack of public access for the handicapped. Some of it is funny, and some of it will bore the choir. He is, of course, writing about England, where public transit is more viable than out on the Canadian prairies.

The conspiracy of car manufacturers and road builders against the hydrogen car is not very believable either, since manufacturers can make money building cars no matter what powers them, and contractors can make a fortune building the infrastructure for the hydrogen economy. This novel ignores the one reason why hydrogen power doesn't work anymore than ethanol; both require more energy to create than is gained back. He also trots out the Seven Sister petroleum companies (actually only five are left) as Usual Suspects but trips up a bit on technical details. The most glaring error is what is supposed to be a fictitious Dutch company called Imperial Oil. As any Canadian can tell you, Imperial Oil is the biggest petroleum company in Canada, with ExxonMobil as the largest shareholder, so this detail is rather jarring.

But Elton is a good writer overall, and the plot against the hydrogen car is just a MacGuffin to keep the slapstick rolling along. Peason has a friend named Deborah,

trapped in a wheelchair after being hit by a car running a crosswalk, and she becomes mixed up in the defense against the hitmen. Her boarder Toss is a traffic warden who handles the physical action the other two can't. There is a Minister of Transport named Digby who loses his portfolio because he blabbed about a secret plan to build lots of roads and turn parks into car parks. He's more concerned about being outed as a homosexual rather than losing his job. And meanwhile, back at the conspiracy, Sam Turk is trying to keep his people from ruining The Plan.

The plot continues as a routine conspiracy novel, but Elton abruptly changes course when the hitmen succeed and Peason is blown away by a shotgun about two-thirds of the way through. Turk gets the engine blueprints and goes off on his own way. Digby exits this life not long after from suicide due to being outed. The supporting characters then take centre stage and the pace suddenly speeds up. Sam Turk tries to extort the OPEC countries who promise to pay him \$55 billion in two days for the plans in order to suppress the hydrogen engine. Turk's partner remonstrates with him, pointing out that you can't move \$55 billion into your bank account without the revenue agents of several countries noticing, or take it as gold when you don't have a vault big enough for it. Turk crosses paths with Deborah and Toss in a bloody encounter, as several conspiracies come to a head. The PMO's chief of staff engineers a massive gridlock in

London to convince the people to demand more roads. One of the OPEC generalissimos sends a hit team after Turk. If this were a Hollywood movie, Deborah and Toss would win, but instead the hydrogen engine plans are accidentally lost and the road lobby wins. All told, this novel was an amusing read, setting aside the implausibility of the hydrogen engine and all the lectures on public transit versus roads and wheelchair access problems.

TEXT SPEAK IN 1893

I recently came across an article in the November 2012 issue of THE LONDON PHILATELIST about a letter that had been mailed from New Zealand to San Francisco on 1893-02-21. The envelope was franked with some newly issued stamps and the cover was obviously from one philatelist to another. On the back of the cover was a handwritten note: "2 new 1d stamps 4 U hereon". The author of the article wondered if this was an early example of what today we call text speak. I'm sure there were earlier examples on telegrams and postcards, where space was limited. Rebuses and other types of puzzles also used text speak, although they were not in the same category as ordinary communications. It is nonetheless interesting to note that the cellphone generation did not invent what passes for written discourse today.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 13

by Dale Speirs

Pastiches: Short Stories.

BETWEEN THE THAMES AND THE TIBER (2011, hardcover) is a collection of short story pastiches by Ted Riccardi. Many of the cases take place while Holmes and Watson are wintering in Italy. Overall the quality of the stories is marginal, with several misses and the rest being mediocre. Riccardi has another pastiche collection besides this one but I will not seek it out.

The first story is “An Affair In Ravello”, a rather derivative mystery about a strange creature haunting a villa. Its attack cannot be seen coming, and the victims only feel a soft brush of feathers before something stabs them in the neck. The culprit is a pygmy from some unknown country, brought to Italy in a misguided effort to better its way of life. He is a specialist in poison darts. The story’s been done before, by Doyle himself, in “The Sign Of The Four”. Just a re-write.

“A Case Of Criminal Madness” brings forth a pair of supercriminals who have inherited the mantle of Moriarty but of whom no one (ie, Watson or the reader) has heard of before. Holmes baits them by intercepting their latest shipment of loot and forcing them to come to him to recover it. He disposes of them

with a deadly strain of acid-spraying wasps of which no one has heard of before. Too many improbabilities in this story.

“The Case Of The Plangent Colonel” concerns a young woman who comes to Holmes and Watson because someone keeps sabotaging her piano, just as she needs it to practice for an international music competition. It turns out that the piano was intended for a smuggling operation to send cash and weapons to the Middle East to foment a war (there is no new thing). Holmes pays a visit to the piano factory and arranges a surprise. I saw the plot coming a couple of pages in advance, and the only question was whodunit among the three or four suspects.

“A Death In Venice” is about a plot to murder Richard Wagner by poisoning him. Since the great composer was a turbulent man who had many enemies, Holmes’ first difficulty is narrowing down the list of suspects. He discovers how the poisoning is being done but Wagner dies before he can do anything. Holmes catches the poisoner and the rest of the story is taken up by pages and pages of confession. Pages and pages. Pages and pages. The woman just wouldn’t shut up. The reader will yearn for the traditional “Yes, I did it! And I’d gladly do it again!”.

“The Case Of The Two Bohemes” concerns feuding between several opera composers. Holmes must sort out who is plagiarizing whom. He uses textual analysis,

as writers and musicians tend to use certain phrases or words more commonly than others, or write/compose in unique patterns.

“The Case Of The Vermilion Face” concerns the disappearance of a cardinal from the Vatican. The Pope is dying and does not have long to live, so the vanishing of someone who might be voting or a candidate for the job makes the investigation all the more urgent. Holmes discovers the whereabouts of the missing man and a conspiracy behind it. If it happened today, the tinfoil hat crowd would be abuzz.

“The Case Of Isadora Persano” involves Holmes setting out to prove a medium to be a fake at a seance. She uses informants to gather background on the gullible marks and the drug datura as a truth serum. Holmes sets up a sting operation with a fake uncle for Watson to show up her spy network, not the first time that disinformation has been used to smoke out the enemy. Of course the true believers refuse to acknowledge the real truth (or falsity).

“A Singular Event In Tranquebar” is about a pair of Anglo-Indian expatriates come home to the mother country. There are some very bizarre incidents which had me wondering how the case would be resolved. The expats are killed, with no explanations provided, and Holmes shrugs it off as one of his defeats. The author is cheating here. If he couldn’t resolve the story, he should have put it back in the desk drawer instead of publishing it.

“The Case Of The Missing Lodger” is a tale of grave robbers, as in those days medical schools were not overly suspicious of where their suppliers got their cadavers. Holmes is initially hired to track down a missing tenant, and quickly zeroes in on an abandoned house with a strange history. The story is straightforward and reads well.

“The Mountain Of Fear” is a complicated storyline involving an Indian from the 1857 Mutiny escaping custody, impersonating a Garibaldi fundraiser in New Mexico, and then becoming a business magnate in England. He is found out and assassinated, and Holmes has to sort out the tangled web that was woven.

A STUDY IN SHERLOCK (2011, trade paperback) is edited by Laurie King and Leslie Klinger. “You’d Better Go In Disguise” by Alan Bradley leads off this anthology. It is a case of murder at Buncombe Place, nicely told from the perpetrator’s point of view. He is in a park with his co-conspirator, trapped as Holmes and Watson slowly move in and the constables hover at the edges waiting for the inevitable denouement.

“As To “An Exact Knowledge Of London”” by Tony Broadbent is set in the modern era, with analogues of Watson, Holmes, Moran, and Moriarty playing the Great Game. It doesn’t come off well. What some pastiche writers don’t understand is that the gaslight and hansom cabs are as important as Holmes and Watson.

“The Men With The Twisted Lips” by S.J. Rozan comes off very well. It tells the back side of the canon story “The Man With The Twisted Lip”, and provides a well-thought counterplot that is completely opposite of what Holmes thought the case was. It will be better if you read the canon story first before this pastiche. Holmes, who thought he was dealing with an imposter masquerading as a street mendicant, is instead being manipulated by a group of Chinamen who want the beggar out of the way but without involving themselves.

“The Case Of The Unwritten Short Story” by Colin Cotterill is a self-referential cartoon strip about him trying to write a Holmes pastiche. Godawful and a complete waste of space.

“The Case Of Death And Honey” by Neil Gaiman looks at why Holmes decided to take up beekeeping. It seems that in one of his cases he came across a man who had come close to discovering an infusion of plant extracts that would prolong life but the side effects were lethal. Holmes decides that bees might be able to purify the extracts and produce honey with the immortality essence. British bees don’t seem to work, so he goes on a quest to Asia for their bees. The story is told from multiple viewpoints and the narration moves the plot along smoothly. Well done.

“A Triumph Of Logic” by Gayle Lynds and John Sheldon is a murder mystery set in modern-day Maine. While the story reads

well, I kept waiting and waiting for any legitimate reason as to why it should be printed in an anthology of Holmes pastiches. In the final few paragraphs, one of the characters paraphrases from Holmes but that does not make it a pastiche or fan fiction. This story had no business appearing in this anthology. The crime is further compounded by the next story “The Last Of Sheila-Locke Holmes” by Laura Lippman, which isn’t even a mystery story but a childhood reminiscence with a passing reference to Holmes based on a character’s name. It’s the type of vignette story that one would expect to see in a literary magazine but has no place here no matter how forced the connection.

“The Adventure Of The Concert Pianist” by Margaret Maron is a pastiche told from Mrs. Hudson’s point of view. It takes place during the Great Hiatus, when Holmes was presumed dead. A niece of Mrs. Hudson is convinced she is being poisoned, and she and Dr. Watson track down the culprit. The method is one used in other non-Holmesian stories and I guessed it soon enough, but the story reads well.

Unfortunately two more non-pastiche stories appear, “The Shadow Not Cast” by Lionel Chetwynd, which is a modern-era mystery set in the military milieu, and “The Eyak Interpreter” by Dana Stabenow, about a bunch of Alaskans making cellphone calls to each other. Once again the authors’ afterwords bleat that the stories are a tribute to the Holmes method

of investigation, but once again they do not belong in an anthology of pastiches.

The anthology finishes up with, I can't call it a story, a piece of self-indulgent garbage written in the form of tweets by Laurie King and Leslie Klinger. Twitter may be useful for telling your friends that you're in the food court at the mall, but tweets en masse are not a basis for readable fiction.

All told, the anthology was a disappointment to those expecting it to be what the blurb implied, a collection of Sherlockian pastiches. Some of the stories, pastiche or non-pastiche, were of good quality, but the editors failed at their job. It is not enough to act as a stenographer and collect stories. A good anthology editor ensures the stories stick to the theme, are well written, and are organized in logical order.

Secret Histories.

Secret history fiction is that which makes use of true history but interpolates fictional characters into the story, along with a reason why they are unheard of by us. There is usually an alternative explanation or interpretation of the facts as we know them.

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE RUNNING NOOSE (2001, hardcover) is a collection of six novellas by Donald Thomas. In

each of these, the main story is a true event, but Holmes et al are operating in the background and keep quiet. The first story is "The Two 'Failures' Of Sherlock Holmes", which begins with a summary of Holmes' efforts to prove Dr. Crippen innocent of the famous murder for which he was hanged in our timeline, or at least get the conviction reduced to manslaughter. Crippen won't co-operate because he wants to protect his mistress Ethel Le Neve and willingly went to the gallows to save her honour. Holmes comes up with a good explanation of the events but with a suicidal client he can do nothing with it.

The second failure is Oscar Wilde, the subject of several crossover pastiches with Holmes elsewhere. Wilde comes to Holmes for advice concerning a proposed libel case against Lord Queensberry, who called him a posing sodomite. This famous and sensational case in our timeline has gone down in legal history as a cautionary tale showing why it is usually not a good idea to sue for libel or slander. Not only did Wilde lose the case, but he was bankrupted and ended up in prison because homosexuality was a criminal offense at the time. Holmes advises Wilde not to proceed with the action. Wilde leaves Baker Street in a huff, refusing to take the advice. At this point, this tale is an anecdote rather than a story, but is redeemed by Holmes explaining to Watson after the famous guest has left what clues he deduced from Wilde's appearance that would certainly lead to his courtroom disaster.

“The Case Of The Racing Certainty” involves Holmes investigating fraudsters who are running a Ponzi scheme based on a supposedly fool-proof method of horse race betting. The case spreads to corrupt police officers inside Scotland Yard (the true story), and to Holmes’ first meeting with Lestrade, then a sergeant. The two of them must not only put away the Ponzi men but also identify and work around the corrupt police detectives. The method they use is nicely thought out.

“The Case Of The Naked Bicyclists” has Holmes being consulted by a rural spinster about her neighbour on an adjacent farm. Miss Pierce is disturbed by the sight of Captain Dougal and his wanton women bicycling about his farm in the nude. The case is frivolous but Holmes is drawn in when Pierce’s servant makes a passing remark about a missing woman. The search for a body begins on Dougal’s farm and after some trouble it is found. At this point, the story seems to end as a routine pastiche. The epilogue, however, is a twist ending that reveals Miss Pierce is not the delicate elderly spinster one might believe.

“The Case Of The Sporting Major” begins with Holmes asked to help Alfred Monson against a murder charge in Scotland. Not only had the deceased abruptly departed this world in a supposed hunting accident with Monson, but the latter had taken out two large life insurance policies on him. Subsequently, Monson was revealed to be an undischarged bankrupt yet living well. Holmes

inspects the death site. His search first appears to confirm the police interpretation of events, but then readjusted to show matters from a different angle, both figurative and actual, that acquit the accused. In real life, Monson received the Scottish verdict of “not proven”, which as the old joke goes, means “innocent and don’t do it again”.

“The Case Of The Hygienic Husband” deals with a psychopath who marries gullible women for mercenary motives and arranges their accidental deaths to collect inheritances or insurance policies. His serial murders are the prelude to a father’s fear that his daughter is next. I would call the culprit a Black Widower except that Isaac Asimov has already pre-empted that term.

“The Case Of The Talking Corpse” is the longest story in this anthology, about a trail of poisoned women, blackmail, and a mad doctor named Neill Cream. The story is over-elaborated with details and supporting characters. I ended up skimming many of the pages.

Overall, this collection is a good read. Thomas has a bad habit of lulling the reader almost to sleep with what starts out as an ordinary pastiche but suddenly comes to life by veering off in a new direction. That said, he does show an originality that far too many pastiche writers do not.

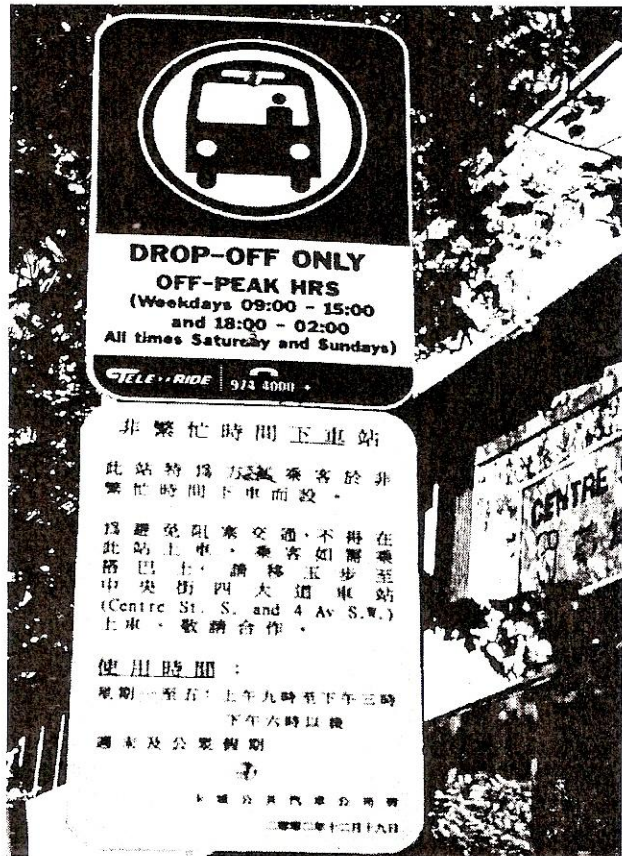
TRANSIT FANNING IN CALGARY: PART 5. BUS STOPS

by Dale Speirs

Bus stop signs are generally prosaic, hardly worth noticing even if you are standing shivering at one in the winter cold waiting for the next bus. Calgary Transit has a texting feature called Tele-Ride which enables one to find out when the next bus will arrive, assuming it is on schedule. I use it quite a bit going about town. Every bus stop has a four-digit number on its route sign. One simply texts the number to 74000 and the CT computer will bounce back the times of the next two buses for each route that stops there. Us lumpenproletariat have been campaigning for CT to put GPS devices on every bus so that we get the actual arrival times, not the predicted schedule, which sometimes borders on fantasy. No luck so far, but someday ...

I do photograph the occasional bus stop that is out of the ordinary. Calgary is officially anglophone but CT does yield to one language group and provides bilingual signs in Chinatown.

Almost without exception, the advertising on bus stop benches is taken up by real estate agents. There are occasional ads by barristers soliciting people hurt in accidents and, even rarer, auto body shops. In my neighbourhood, one of the local realtors who has about 95% of the benches, decorates the bus stop every Christmas with wreathes and tinsel, surprisingly never vandalized.





There are two types of bus stops: touch-and-go, and timing points. Buses wait up to ten minutes at a timing point to re-synchronize their schedule. If they are behind schedule, they just touch and go, dropping off and loading passengers and then zooming off. Buses, as you have noticed, are long vehicles and take up a lot of

space at the curb, so the timing points only handle a few routes.

Touch-and-go bus stops can handle more routes. I've been looking to see which stop has the greatest number of routes. The record so far is sixteen, shown here on 5 Avenue SW in downtown Calgary.



Alegreta, L., E. Thomas, and K.C. Lohmanne (2012) **End-Cretaceous marine mass extinction not caused by productivity collapse**. PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 109:728–732

"An asteroid impact at the end of the Cretaceous caused mass extinction, but extinction mechanisms are not well-understood. The collapse of sea surface to sea floor carbon isotope gradients has been interpreted as reflecting a global collapse of primary productivity (Strangelove Ocean) or export productivity (Living Ocean), which caused mass extinction higher in the marine food chain. Phytoplankton-dependent benthic foraminifera on the deep-sea floor, however, did not suffer significant extinction, suggesting that export productivity persisted at a level sufficient to support their populations. We compare benthic foraminiferal records with benthic and bulk stable carbon isotope records from the Pacific, Southeast Atlantic, and Southern Oceans. We conclude that end-Cretaceous decrease in export productivity was moderate, regional, and insufficient to explain marine mass extinction. A transient episode of surface ocean acidification may have been the main cause of extinction of calcifying plankton and ammonites, and recovery of productivity may have been as fast in the oceans as on land."

Speirs: One of the problems scientists have about the end-Cretaceous extinction event was why certain groups of animals such as dinosaurs and ammonites (shelled squids) disappeared while others (birds, mammals, and gastropods) did not. It appears that the asteroid impact hastened certain groups already declining or produced pulses of acidification that only wiped out the more sensitive species. -14-

Thompson, Helen (2012) **Ancient asteroids kept on coming**. NATURE 484:429

"Computer simulations of movements in the early Solar System had suggested that the Late Heavy Bombardment (LHB) that came after the initial accretion of the planets lasted from 4.1 billion to 3.8 billion years ago ... after Uranus and Neptune formed, a shift in the orbits of the outer planets could have destabilized the asteroids in their orbits, putting many on a collision course with the Earth–Moon system. But the model also suggested that the unstable asteroids were quickly depleted, causing the LHB to peter out around the time that the last giant circular impact basin on the Moon was created. Yet the continuing record of large lunar craters being created after the 3.8-billion-year cut-off, and hints of ancient impacts on Earth, suggested that the story was incomplete. ... Currently, asteroids orbit between Mars and Jupiter, with the main belt starting 2.1 astronomical units (au)

from the Sun (1 au is the distance from the Sun to Earth). ... during the LHB, the inner boundary of the asteroid belt lay just 1.7 au from the Sun. In computer simulations, the researchers discovered that asteroids dislodged from this extension would have been ten times more likely to have ended up on Earth-crossing orbits than their main-belt counterparts. That would have prolonged the LHB on Earth to around 2 billion years ago. The time frame ... corresponds to the Archaean aeon. This was a key period in early evolution, which saw the split of the single-celled organisms called archaea from bacteria, and the rise of photosynthesizing cyanobacteria."

Kastner, T., et al (2012) Global changes in diets and the consequences for land requirements for food. PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 109:6868–6872

"Provision of food is a prerequisite for the functioning of human society. Cropland where food and feed are grown is the central, limiting resource for food production. The amount of cropland needed depends on population numbers, average food consumption patterns, and output per unit of land. Around the globe, these factors show large differences. We use data from the Food and Agriculture Organization to consistently assess subcontinental dynamics of how much land was needed to supply

the prevailing diets during a span of 46 y, from 1961 to 2007. We find that, in most regions, diets became richer while the land needed to feed one person decreased. We compare the impact of these drivers for different subcontinents and find that potential land savings through yield increases were offset by a combination of population growth and dietary change. The dynamics of the three factors were the largest in developing regions and emerging economies. The results indicate an inverse relationship between the two main drivers behind increased land requirements for food: with socioeconomic development, population growth decreases and, at the same time, diets become richer. In many regions, dietary change may override population growth as major driver behind land requirements for food in the near future."

Speirs: What concerns me about this study is that it does not take into account the increasing energy and fertilizer costs to bring a crop in and get it to market. This expansion of yield depends on cheap oil for farm machinery and truck transport, as well as the cost of fertilizer manufacture and distribution. One also has to consider the amount of arable land that has been destroyed by urbanization; the replacement land is poorer quality and requires more inputs. These authors appear to be oblivious to the effects of Peak Oil and inflation generated by central bank currency printing.

Harrison, M., and N. Wolf (2012) **The frequency of wars.** ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW 65:1055–1076

"Wars are increasingly frequent, and the trend has been steadily upward since 1870. The main tradition of western political and philosophical thought suggests that extensive economic globalization and democratization over this period should have reduced appetites for war far below their current level. This view is clearly incomplete: at best, confounding factors are at work. Here, we explore the capacity to wage war. Most fundamentally, the growing number of sovereign states has been closely associated with the spread of democracy and increasing commercial openness, as well as the number of bilateral conflicts. Trade and democracy are traditionally thought of as goods, both in themselves, and because they reduce the willingness to go to war, given the national capacity to do so, but the same factors may also have been increasing the capacity for war, and thus its frequency."

Strassmann, B.I., et al (2012) **Religion as a means to assure paternity.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 109:9781–9785

"The sacred texts of five world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) use similar belief systems to set

limits on sexual behavior. We propose that this similarity is a shared cultural solution to a biological problem: namely male uncertainty over the paternity of offspring. Furthermore, we propose the hypothesis that religious practices that more strongly regulate female sexuality should be more successful at promoting paternity certainty. Using genetic data on 1,706 father–son pairs, we tested this hypothesis in a traditional African population in which multiple religions (Islam, Christianity, and indigenous) coexist in the same families and villages. ... Our findings provide evidence for high paternity certainty in a traditional African population, and they shed light on the reproductive agendas that underlie religious patriarchy."

Frohlich, Cliff(2012) **Two-year survey comparing earthquake activity and injection-well locations in the Barnett Shale, Texas.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 109:13934-13938

Earthquakes were reported in Texas area where none previously recorded and which were adjacent to some injection wells. However, none were reported next to most wells. This appears related to whether or not a well is near to a geological fault.