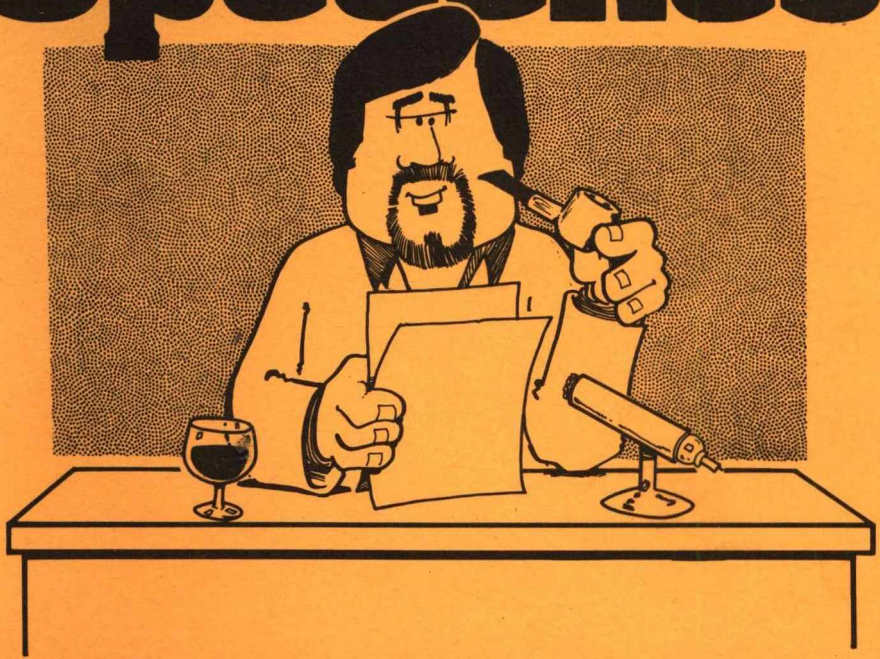
The Eastercon Speeches



BOB SHAW

(Complete BoSh: vol.2)

The Eastercon Speeches

BOB SHAW

Illustrated by Jim Barker

Contents

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Introduction: Mike Glicksohn

IT HAS become a cliché of hard core fannish fandom (that small but dedicated group who believe the only reason conventions are held is for people to drink and talk and socialise with their friends) that experienced con-goers "never attend the program." Some fans even brag about their perfect record in avoiding the formal structure of the convention and to some extent this is understandable. When one has sat in on a dozen panels investigating "Penis Envy In The Works Of Robert Holdstock" there is little to be learned from the thirteenth; and if the only alternative is a lecture by Pete Presford on "Fanzines: The Path To Increased Literacy" then the bar does indeed seem most attractive.

Thus is it that on both sides of the Atlantic the most often heard response to the introduction of a notable or to a question concerning the whereabouts of a well-known writer or fan is "He's down in the bar!" (That pronoun was rather carefully chosen, by the way; for some reason famous females in fandom don't seem to spend as much of their time in bars. There's probably a Masters degree for the first person to investigate and explain that phenomenon.) And there are those who apparently believe that nothing can entice these diehards from their comfortable den. My reaction to and refutation of that claim amounts to a single word: "BoSh!"

With over a hundred North American conventions in my past and a single British Eastercon to boot, I've seen just about everything, but I'd be hard-pressed to dredge up a more surprising sight than an entire bar filled with happily and heavily drinking British fannish fans voluntarily abandoning their womb in order to sit in on a program item. At first I thought some fiend had introduced an emetic or an aphrodisiac into the beer supply, but when everyone filed into the main program hall at the 1975 Eastercon in Coventry I realised I was witness to a truly unique fannish phenomenon. An hour or so later, I understood that unusual hegira perfectly: I'd just heard my first Bob Shaw speech!

For more than a quarter of a century, Bob Shaw has been recognised as one of the finest writers fandom has produced. Unfortunately, his first productive period was before the fan Hugos were instituted and since the second coming of BoSh the fan-writing Hugo has been dominated by a mass-circulation somewhat schizophrenic critic-economist who has deprived Bob of his richly-deserved formal recognition.

(But no fan with an I.Q. above 50 ever really believed that Fans Are Slans anyway.) Still, the establishment of special funds to take Bob over to America and the very existence of this series of volumes devoted to making available his best output indicates how strongly he has impressed and influenced several generations of fans.

I've only heard one of Bob's famous Eastercon speeches but that was more than enough for me to understand the incredible impact he's had on recent British cons. I could attempt to wax eloquent and lard on the superlatives about how well-crafted the speeches are, how tightly conceived and structured, how filled with convoluted word-play and punnery, but nothing I could possibly write could be as complimentary as the fact that the Pickersgills, Kettles and Brosnans freely left the bar in 1975 in order to hear what Bob would say. It is a rare speaker indeed who can prove themselves to be more attractive than a keg of Guinness!

And one of the joys of a BoSh speech is that it reads almost as well as it sounds. (It is a major advantage to have heard Bob talk at least once, however; having done so, one can very clearly hear that soft, lilting voice and visualise the deadpan expression as he sits there, one large hand clasped around a pint mug, and delivers the words that render an entire audience helpless with laughter, his face mildly troubled by an expression which clearly wonders "What are they all laughing at when I'm completely serious about this scientific theory?") I well remember getting my copy of Maya 11 and making the mistake of reading the reprinted version of Bob's 1976 Eastercon speech while walking down one of the busiest main streets of Toronto. Crowds of normally truculent rush-hour pedestrians parted before me like the Red Sea for Moses as I staggered along laughing out loud with tears literally streaming down my face. Later that night, I sent Bob a telegram congratulating him on the funniest fanzine article I'd read in years: I've read well over five thousand fanzines in my years as a fan and I've sent exactly one telegram. That's how good a Bob Shaw speech can be!

This volume — the second of the series — reprints the BoSh Eastercon speeches from 1974 through 1978, each one acknowledged a major highlight of the fannish year in which it was originally presented and published. If you've never encountered these tours de force before, I envy you the treat you have in store. But even if you've heard Bob give them in cities all over England, you still have a treat to look forward to: you'll undoubtedly discover bits of drollery you missed the first time, along with devilish puns that went unheard amidst the laughter of those sitting near you.

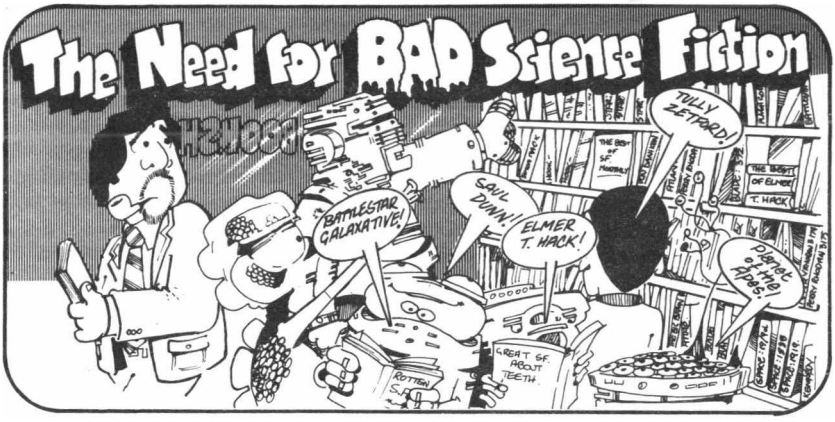
Bob Shaw has long been recognised as one of the pivotal contributors to fandom and this volume is going to help explain and enhance that reputation. Of the seven different definitions the Oxford English Dictionary has for "bosh", I like best the one that reads "to cut a dash, to make a show." Pour yourself a glass of Guinness, sit back and enjoy this collection. I think you'll understand what I mean.

* * *

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE articles which you are, I hope, about to read were originally given as talks at various British Eastercons — and for that reason each one is written as a talk. There is a vast difference between material which was written to be read and material which was written to be spoken. Choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, type of humour, pacing, emphasis — all these things are affected, with the result that a speech comes out looking rather different from an article proper. Possibly these considerations are important only to the author, but I thought I'd let you know.

1974: TYNECON



I THINK most of us have a clear idea of what we mean when we say a piece of SF is "good", or when we say a piece of SF is "bad". Our ideas remain clear even when we hear misguided people classifying a story that we know to be "bad" as "good", or one that we know to be "good" as "bad". And our ideas go on remaining clear even when we discover that a story we used to think of as being "good" was actually rotten all the time, although we hadn't realised it. I daresay our belief in our powers of judgement would remain unshaken even if the reverse happened, and we found out that a story or a book that we had once thought rather useless turned out to have been 'good" all along — although this seems to happen very rarely.

For some reason, about the only people it happens to are influential critics who have published reviews of my books. A few years ago I wrote a book called The Palace of Eternity, which some people liked, and which others hated. Greg Benford, the reviewer for Amazing Stories, was in the latter category and — being a friend — he sent me an advance copy of the unfavourable review he had written.

This is another curious phenomenon which sometimes afflicts a writer. Every now and then my friends take turns at deciding to prove that our relationship is strong enough to embrace honesty and straight talking. For months on end they come along, my friends, one after the other, and explain to me, at great length, how rotten everything I write actually is. Sometimes I get the impression that I have the most honest and candid set of friends in the entire universe!

Anyway, I happened to be in Boston a couple of months later for that year's World Convention, and Greg Benford came up to me and said, "Bob, you'll be pleased to hear that I've re-read The Palace of Eternity and I've completely changed my mind about it. I now think it's a really good book."

I said, "Thanks a lot, Greg. I was a bit worried about the review you sent me going into print."

And he said, "Oh, it already has — it's on the stands this month. I just thought you'd like to know it's all wrong."

I gave him a sort of inward smile — one that was very difficult to catch — and thanked him to the best of my ability. Strangely enough, exactly the same thing happened with another reviewer about the same book. Perhaps it was a delayed action book, like van Vogt's World of Null-A was supposed to be when John W. Campbell first serialised it in Astounding. I don't know how many people would remember that

far back, but in his blurb for the final installment Campbell said that the full impact of the story wouldn't hit you until 48 hours after you had finished reading it.

This statement ruined an entire weekend for me.

I finished Null-A about 8 o'clock on a Thursday evening, analysed my inner being, and realised I hadn't benefited from the experience to the predicted extent. This was a disappointment, but then I remembered Campbell's words about the story being constructed like a 48-hour Coldrex capsule, and realised it would all hit me like a bomb at 8 o'clock the next Saturday night. The next two days were an agony of anticipation; I even refused to go out with my friends on Saturday night, because I didn't want my translation to a higher level of understanding spoiled by my being full of Guinness and meat pies.

Come 8 o'clock on Saturday night I was sitting alone in the house — and nothing happened! As the minutes ticked by I tried to console myself by saying it was something to do with British summer time, or with the U.S. being five hours behind the U.K., and that I'd have been all right if I had read the British reprint edition of Astounding. Then, after about two hours, came this blinding flash of revelation. I realised I would have been better off out getting full of Guinness and meat pies.

Now, I was talking about the definition of "good" and "bad" science fiction, and the difficulties and ambiguities of such definitions. I'm fairly clear in my own mind about what constitutes SF in either category, but the situation is complicated by the fact that there is SF which I know to be "good", but which gives me no pleasure when I read it; and there is SF which I know to be "bad", but which I really enjoy reading.

In the little piece I wrote for the Tynecon programme booklet, I mentioned at some length the financial importance to the continuation of SF publication of the beginner or casual reader. When you've been closely involved with SF fandom for a long time, it is easy to start thinking that it is congruent with the readership a publisher aims at or gets when he publishes a book. And because members of SF fandom are usually highly vociferous, there is even a danger they can convince the publisher that they do indeed represent the general SF audience. I use the word "danger" because the first step in any commercial selling operation is to identify the customer, and anybody who fails to make this identification correctly is in trouble. A good example of what I'm talking about was the Scottish SF magazine Nebula, which was published from Glasgow during the Fifties. Its editor, Peter Hamilton, was a very nice

person who became deeply involved with fandom. As a result his magazine became more and more like a fanzine. It employed fan artists, had chat columns written by well-known fan writers, and had a fanletter section. All this was great from the point of view of somebody like me, who knew all the people concerned; but to the casual reader it presented an irritating in-group image, and as Nebula became more fannish its circulation dropped, until in the end it had to close up shop.

The disappearance of Nebula was a bit of a blow to me, because it was there that my first half-dozen SF stories were published. It is a peculiar thing that very often when I sell to certain magazines or publishers, I hear soon afterwards that that magazine or publisher has got into financial difficulties. I keep telling myself that there is no connection between the two events, but during periods of depression (such as are brought on by reading Isaac Asimov's jokes) I wonder; did they buy my stuff and then get into trouble because of its effect on their sales; or were they in trouble in the first place and only bought my stuff because no other author would submit anything to them.

Anyway, as I was saying, Peter Hamilton was an extremely nice person, and keen on SF fandom. He even started attending conventions, his first one being at Manchester in the mid Fifties. Well, I say it was his first convention; it was also his last. This was due to an unfortunate experience which led to a series of rows with the hotel manager, and the starting of a petition to have the Manchester Ship Canal cleaned up on the grounds that it was a danger to public health.

Conventions those days weren't the sober and respectable affairs we have now. The hotels tended to have wall-to-wall managers... and hot and cold running women in every room. A regular feature was the Humming and Swaying session, an experiment in mild mass hypnosis conducted in utter darkness in the Con hall. (I never had much to do with them, mainly because I had usually been humming and swaying all by myself since shortly after the bar opened.)

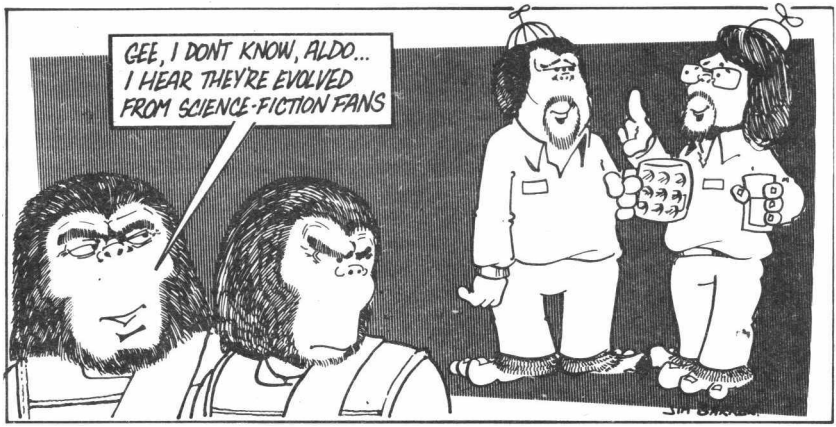
On this particular occasion, a well-known fan (who shall be nameless, because he is bigger than I am) arrived carrying a heavy cardboard box. He explained to Peter Hamilton that it was equipment which would be needed later during a ceremony, and asked him if he could store it in Peter's room. Peter said it was all right, not realising that the ceremony referred to was the annual sacrifice of virgins which always took place during the Humming and Swaying session. (The virgins shall also be nameless — because they were bigger than I was as well.) Nor did he realise that this well known fan had become so carried away in his quest for realism during the ceremony that he had gone round to his local butcher and obtained about half a hundredweight of animal intestines, which he planned to produce and brandish in the air as evidence that the virgin had been well and truly sacrificed.

Well, I remember that it was very hot in Manchester that year. The Humming and Swaying was on the second or third day of the convention — and the intestines had been none too fresh to start off with. They were offal! All that Peter Hamilton knew was that his room was filled with a ghastly stench, which became more unendurable as the long hot days dragged by; and he never thought of looking in the cardboard box, because he thought it was full of robes and regalia and so forth. That was what started all the complaints to the management, and when the source of the smell was finally located, old Peter was so embarrassed that he quietly packed up and left soon afterwards.

Talking about British SF magazines reminds me that I once had ambitions to be a science fiction artist, and I came close to doing the cover for its first issue of one magazine. Its art editor was another well-known fan, and the trouble was that he wanted to do the cover as well. The magazine's editor resolved the issue by having a

competition in which we submitted a cover painting. This sounded eminently fair to me — until I discovered, when it was too late, that the competition was to be judged by the one other competitor, the art editor who wanted to do the cover himself. In due course he considered the entries — and decided his was the best. He told me afterward that the reason he had picked his own painting was that he had been so pleased with the way he had achieved a two-dimensional effect. As paper is pretty two-dimensional to start off with, I regarded his achievement as a rather minor one, certainly not worth blighting my artistic career for.

All this is straying a bit from the definition of "bad" science fiction. As I was saying, it is very difficult to give a hard and clear definition of "bad" science fiction



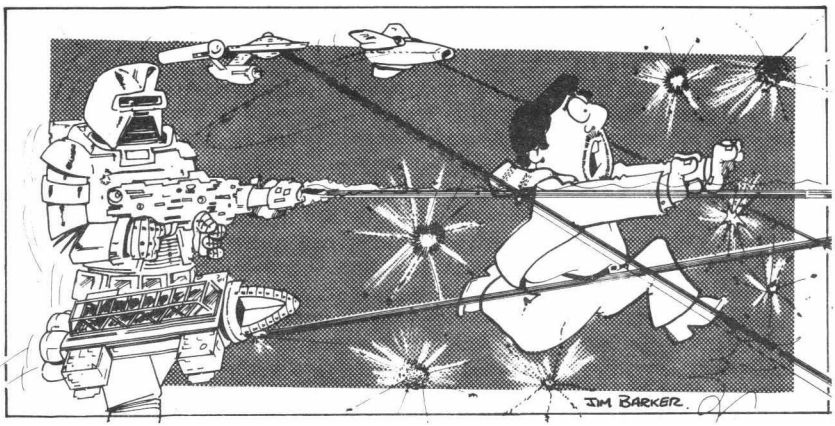
because everybody has his own ideas and even these can vary over the years. But one very interesting thing which can be said about "bad" SF is this — it is very often, even usually, the SF which is classified as "bad" which brings new readers into the field.

SF readers tend to be born rather than made, so I'm mostly talking about young people, rather than those who come into the field in their maturity. And, as well as being economically essential to SF, those youngsters are vital in another respect — because it is from their ranks that the writers, artists and editors of the future are drawn. One of the things which usually makes an SF story "bad" in my eyes is if it contains a blatant scientific impossibility or logical flaw which the author happily served up in the belief that his readers will not notice it, or — perhaps worse — in the belief that if they do notice it they won't care, because it doesn't matter.

An example of the sort of thing I mean occurred in the film Planet of the Apes. Charlton Heston's spaceship is thrown forward several hundred years into the future (I forget the exact number) and lands back on Earth — but the crew don't recognise it as the Earth, for no other reason than that it is important to the plot that they shouldn't. Now, one handy way to recognise the Earth would be by looking up at the sky and recognising the Moon, but this opportunity is denied them by "a strange mist which covers the sky every night". That's a hard one to swallow, but you just might get it down your imaginative gullet except for one thing: the Moon appears in the sky just as

much by day as it does by night. And there was no mist in the daytime sky. A few vapour trails, perhaps (probably the same ones I noticed in Alexander the Great and How The West Was Won), but no mist.

Another good clue as to where they came from was the apes themselves. Surely an alert mind, surely even Charlton Heston's mind, could have drawn some kind of inference from the fact that these apes spoke perfect English! With U.S. accents! (The apes, incidentally, seemed to have progressed from inarticulate banana-gobblers to intelligent, articulate machine-tool makers in a few hundred years. At that rate they must have been evolving nearly as fast as the constitution of the British Science Fiction Association. They were able to make rifles and seemed able to turn their



willing hands to anything — at least, their fingers were willing, but I noticed that their thumbs were opposed.)

In contrast to the inanities of Planet of the Apes, Pierre Boulle has written a rather nice SF novel called Garden on the Moon, in which Japan is able to win the race to the Moon by the simple expedient of not hampering their space rocket with the means of getting the crew back to Earth. The final chapter, in which the cosmic kamikaze lays out for himself a little garden composed of moon rock and personal trinkets and then commits suicide, seemed to me to be first class SF.

On this subject of stupid, careless flaws, the TV series Star Trek is another winner. And I'm not talking about the grammatical idiosyncrasies of the opening voice-over: "... to boldly split infinitives that no man has split before." I've talked at length at various conventions about the strange command structure of the Starship Enterprise, so I won't go into it again. Not much anyway. As you know, there are hundreds of people on that ship, but the chain of command seems to be such that when the Captain and First Officer are otherwise engaged, which they frequently are, the Chief Engineer takes over; and when he is crawling under the floor, personally adjusting the main drive system — by re-arranging plastic Lego blocks — the Medical Officer takes over!

That is weird enough, but it has lately occurred to me that as all the adventures occur when Kirk, Spock, Scotty and McCoy are all on duty, assuming they work

an eight hour shift the Enterprise must have two other complete crews that we never see, to whom nothing ever happens!

If Jim Blish ever feels like including a satirical piece among his Star Trek books, I offer him the idea of writing about a chap called, say, Arnold Dinkelschmaltz, who has been night commander of the Enterprise for years, and who becomes paranoid through boredom, and that fact that the day shift man — Captain Kirk — gets all the fun, all the women, and all the glory.

I was talking about new young SF readers, and what they like about the game. My own children enjoyed Planet of the Apes and Star Trek, and when I tried pointing out some of the flaws I have just mentioned they said, quite reasonably I suppose, that the apes had to speak English otherwise the people watching the film wouldn't have understood them. They could see the flaws, when they were pointed out, but were willing to accept them in order to get the other things they like: the other-worldliness, the colour, the glamour, the new concepts, the adventure, the strangeness, the sense of other places and other times.

And I found I was rather sad in a way. A good religion would be one in which belief was strengthened by enquiry; to my mind, a piece of SF should be constructed in the same way. The fact that so much of it isn't constructed in this way might account for another phenomenon I have noticed. This is that all children are SF fans by instinct, and then at a later stage, usually about puberty, most of them cease to be SF fans. Because of the timing of this change of heart, I once wrote a carefully worked-out fanzine piece in which I attributed the swing away from SF to the dawning of sexuality; but it could also be said that it is caused by nothing more than the dawning of reason and the critical faculty.

The sad thing is that there is no need for faulty workmanship in the building of a story. By working harder, taking more time, thinking harder, the author could, in almost every case, find a way to solve all the logical problems in the construction of a story — and at the same time retain, or even enhance, those qualities I mentioned, the other-worldliness, the colour, the glamour, the new concepts, the adventure, the strangeness, the sense of other places and other times. And if he can't find a way to solve all those problems, this means that the story should never be written.

I am, of course, assuming that it isn't the flawed nature of many stories which is the magnet for new readers. It is only when you have been reading the stuff for a long time that you can appreciate the real SF kitsch for its own ghastliness. An old favourite of mind is a line of dialogue which was discovered many years ago, I think by Ken Bulmer, and which went "'Rat!' he hissed." Now how do you hiss "rat"?

Perhaps paradoxically, after talking about the flaws which cut down the number of recruits for SF, it is worth mentioning some characteristics of the consciously "good" SF which I believe to have a similar effect. During the last decade or so there has been a move away from the old hard sciences and towards the social and biological sciences. This isn't a bad thing in itself, but it has somehow led to SF adopting a negative approach to the future. Authors tend to look at the future through morose-coloured spectacles; but I feel that doom stories can only be appreciated when mixed in — like All Bran — they provide roughage in a diet of optimism. (To go right off the subject for a moment, I wonder how many people have been put off taking up astronomy for a hobby by the fact they couldn't discuss it with other people, because they didn't know how to pronounce the names of stars. There is one star in particular that I avoided mentioning because I didn't know if I should call it Aldebaran or Aldeebaran. In order to be able even to think about it, I christened it All-Bran. Perhaps I had decided it was a regular variable.)

Doom stories are part of the SF trend towards contemporary social realism,

and they proliferate largely because the surest way to arrive at a doom prognosis is to try solving tomorrow's problems with today's resources. This is an attempt at realism, of course, but a more real realism could predict escalation of our problem-solving ability as well as an escalation of our problems. That's harder to do because, by and large, we can see tomorrow's problems quite well, whereas tomorrow's solutions are hidden from us. The point I'm trying to make is that the vital new recruits to the SF field are likely to be turned away if they come to think of it as a literature of disaster.

The same thing might be said of the tendency some authors have towards writing SF novels which become more and more like ordinary novels, and less like SF. I was going this way in my own work, until it dawned on me that the only reason a person picks up an SF novel in preference to a mainstream novel is that he expects it to be different from a mainstream novel.

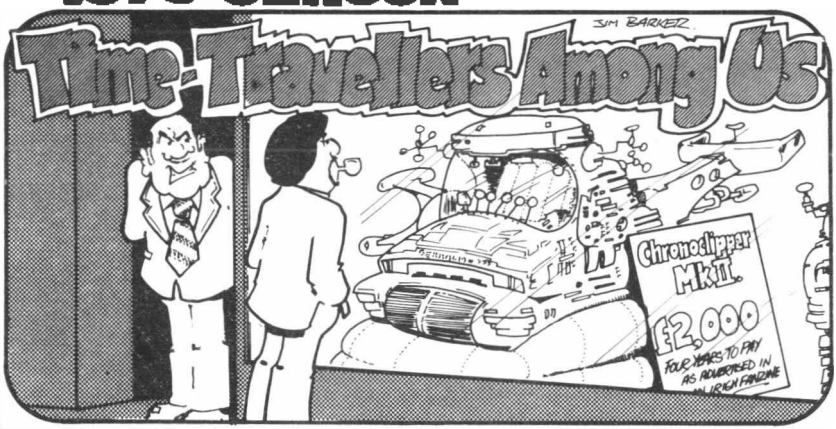
Authors who go in for this literary unisex — books that are neither SF nor mainstream, or which are both — feel a compulsion studiously to omit all the traditional props of the SF story. Spaceships become taboo. Time machines become taboo. Extraterrestrials become taboo — except, perhaps, as philosophical sounding boards, who are supposed to have been born in another galaxy, but who can handle the English subjunctive like Oxford dons.

Properly done, this kind of story has its place — after all, SF is a very flexible and accommodating field — but it rarely seems to achieve its objectives. Perhaps a writer who has had his grounding in the pulp magazines never quite manages to shake off that thick, dusty, choking, evocative smell that an old Astounding exudes.

Well, that's about it. I think what I've been trying to say is that the old traditional SF had its good elements, and its bad elements. And that one of the tasks of the SF author today should be to examine those elements very carefully: that he should retain and develop the truly good; that he should discard the truly bad; and that he should be very clear in his mind about which is which.

(Guest of Honour speech.)

1975: SEACON



A QUESTION that is frequently asked in the SF world is: If time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?

Only this morning I was talking to a well-known SF author in the bar, and I said to him, "Can I have that fiver you borrowed last Easter?"

He scrutinised me keenly for a moment and said, "Bob, if time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?"

It's possible, of course, that he was trying to divert my attention to other matters. Now that I think of it, it was a bit strange the way he rushed out of the bar muttering something about having left his Hieronymus machine on a double yellow line.

Anyway, the point of the story is that — quite apart from the moral that you should never lend money to SF authors — the SF world is deeply concerned with the searching question: If time travel is to become possible in the future, why have we not seen time travellers among us?

There are a number of possible answers to that question — a favourite one among SF writers being that anybody who visits us from the future has to obey the Prime Directive that you do not interfere in any way with a culture in a less advanced stage of development than your own. This Prime Directive is applied without fail, whether the visitors are arriving from the future or from another world, say, beaming down on a strange planet from the SS Enterprise.

It is applied so often, in fact, and repeated and chanted and intoned that it is easy to get the impression that it has the status of a universal law — like the one about toast always landing on the buttered side when you drop it on the floor; or the one about ICS courses which states that no matter which course you do with them — accountancy, draughtsmanship, dress-making, it doesn't matter — you always end up as foreman of the machine shop. I've seen it all in the ads in the back of old Astoundings, and I know.

The truth of the matter is, or course, that the Prime Directive was invented by SF authors and prompted by them for no other reason than that it provides a useful bit of plot complication. If Kirk, Spock and McCoy were allowed to do the logical thing and shoot any warlike primitives who attacked them, many episodes of Star Trek would have been over in five minutes. Which mightn't have been a bad thing — it would have let you get on to the good SF on TV, like the Cadbury's Smash commercials.

What it boils down to is that visitors from the future have to dress up in the clothes of the period they're in and be careful not to make themselves conspicuous, or to do anything which would influence the course of history. If they don't obey the rules the Chrono Police come after them, or the Paradox Police, or the Legion of Time...

Great stuff this! If any of you missed the Golden Age of SF — this is what it was all about. Mind you, I don't know what would happen if a time traveller carelessly changed the course of history, and the segment of the future he wiped out was the one in which the Paradox Police were formed! Anyway, they're still a fine body of men.

The point about time travellers blending in with the background is important because it means that the apparent evidence that the time machine will not be invented in the future is not admissible evidence. You can take it from me that time travel will become possible; and I'm going to go on to present a reasoned, carefully worked out, irrefutable, logical proof of that statement.

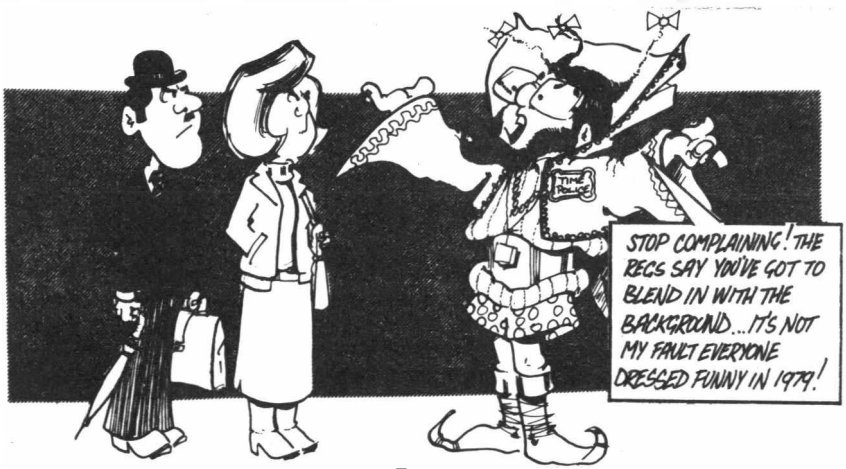
Unfortunately, I can't reveal exactly how it will be done.

One perhaps likes to think of a time machine as being something like a telephone booth, or a cage made up of shimmering rods which are joined together in a way which produces a curious wrenching pain in the eyes when you try to follow their geometries. More Golden Age stuff, this...

I once actually drew a time machine, on a Gestetner stencil, for the cover of a fanzine. I chose to draw the telephone booth type... mainly because I didn't have a proper stencil-cutting stylus, and it's almost impossible to portray shimmering rods and subtle mind-twisting geometries on stencil with a dried-up Bic ballpoint.

The drawing showed the time machine — it was labelled a Chronoclipper Mk. II — in a shop window. There was a notice on it quoting the price at £2,000 — but there was an extra bit saying that you had four years to pay.

This happened a long time ago, but I think the idea of the joke was that — if you were a quick thinker — you could put down your deposit, get in, drive four years forward, and reappear when you owned the thing. The only trouble was, I never figured out who actually made the payments in the meantime. This goes to show you what a complicated thing time actually is.



I'm firmly convinced that time is complex in its nature, and not a linear thing in the way it is so often regarded. It has always struck me as strange that time — the one dimension we know least about — is the one about which people are most dogmatic. For example, people often get precognitive dreams. It's an established fact. I've had them lots of times — and yet orthodoxy says they're impossible.

There's this fantastic explanation about one half of your brain receiving its data a fraction of a second later than the other, thus creating an impression that an event which actually is new to you is one that has already occurred, already been experienced.

This neurological trickery is used to convince you that the evidence of your senses is unreliable, in some special cases, i.e. the ones where the nature of time is called into question. Your senses are considered good enough, however, for minor things like giving evidence in a murder trial.

I mean, if you were walking along a street and heard a shot, and then saw a man running out of a house, and then looked in the window and saw a body lying there beside it; and if you swore to all that — they would be prepared to take some poor wretch away and hang him. But... if the defence counsel got up and said, "The witness saw the defendant running out of the house, and then he heard the shot, but because one half of his brain receives its information a fraction of a second later than the other this gives him the impression things happened the other way round," he would be laughed out of court.

In the case of the precognitive dream, they always ask if you wrote it down or told anybody before the predicted event occurred. And — naturally — you haven't. When you got up in the morning, faced with the prospect of working all day, late for the office, feeling like death, ready to burst into tears, you can't be expected to take two or three hours off to tell people everything you dreamed during the night.

Even if you tried it you would probably pick the wrong things, because precognition occurs in odd little fragments of dreams which aren't recognised as significant until the event.

A perfect example is a dream I had at the last Novacon.

On the Friday night I dreamed I was in a room helping somebody to look for their contact lenses, which had fallen on the floor. I looked down and saw them lying on the carpet, right at my feet, but they were much larger than I had expected and looked like solid hemispheres of glass.

Next day I was ordering some drinks at the bar, and the barman dropped an ice cube which fell at my feet. I don't know if you remember this, but the ice cubes in the Imperial Centre in Birmingham aren't cubes at all — they use fancy bits of ice shaped like two hemispheres joined together on the curved side, like very squat hourglasses. This ice cube which fell had split in half, and when I looked down there were the two little glassy hemispheres lying on the carpet at my feet, just as I'd seen them in the dream.

In spite of the difficulties involved, I have tried to tell people in advance, just to get the precognitive thing established with them — but it is a very curious fact that events you decide to relate to people are the very ones which never actually occur.

The only logical explanation is that there must be a kind of feedback from the future which is triggered off by your voicing a dream, and which modifies the subsequent course of events. In all probability there are Time Guardians — an undercover branch of our old friends, the Paradox Police — whose job it is to prevent anybody setting himself up as a successful seer. No doubt they think they are very clever, but it was by seeing through their scheme that — in 1957 — I was able to save the life of our greatest statesman, Sir Winston Churchill!

The fact that Churchill was in London at the time, while I was 5,000 miles away, living in Western Canada, only goes to show the extent of the fantastic powers we are dealing with here. There was a period of about two weeks in the summer of 1957 when I got a continuous run of precognitive dreams. Every night I would dream about something, get up in the morning, go to the drawing office where I worked, and when I walked into the office the other engineers were discussing the very thing I had dreamed about.

I got mild enjoyment from the phenomenon for about a fortnight — then came the night when I had a vivid dream that Sir Winston had died. This put me on something of a spot.

On the one hand, I wanted the supreme vindication of my precognitive powers; on the other hand, it was the time of the Suez crisis, and all that, and Britain had dire need of Sir Winston's presence among the living. In the end I did the unselfish thing.

I hurried out to work without turning on the radio, dashed into the design office and — before anybody could utter a word — shouted, "I dreamed Sir Winston Churchill died last night!"

The other engineers stared at me in silence for a moment — perhaps in some dim way they could sense the great combination wheels of time moving into new positions, or perhaps they just thought I had flipped my lid. In any case, I had the satisfaction of knowing that by voicing the dream I had tricked the Time Guardians into sparing the great man's life. As it turned out, I had wangled Sir Winston an extra eight years, and — even though he didn't do too much with them — the whole episode shows you how a good knowledge of science fiction and fantasy can be put to practical use in everyday life.

It may seem — to those of you who recall that we are supposed to be discussing time travellers among us — that I have strayed a little from the subject. But, in fact, my remarks have been very pertinent.

The point is that, because of the very nature of SF, its writers and keen readers have acquired insights into time that are denied to ordinary people. You must admit that this afternoon you have heard me say things about time which mundane outside society would view with some scepticism. We — the writers and readers of SF — are the biggest danger to secret time travellers, <u>because we are alerted to the sort</u>

of things that go on!

If anybody is going to spot visitors from the future and queer the works for them, it is us right here in the convention hall!

At this point in my talk I'm going to stray away from hard scientific fact and become a little speculative. It is my considered opinion that in a very short time — just a year or two, perhaps — some SF writers and readers will have deduced and learned to much about the activities of the time travellers among us that the time travellers will have to take action to preserve their secret.

And what action will they take?

At first I found this problem insoluble, then the other night I was sitting having a few pint whisky shandies and the whole thing became obvious to me. To preserve their secrecy, the time travellers have only to kidnap any SF people who get on to them, carry them back into the past, and maroon them there!

I predict that, in a year or so, leading SF authors and fans will begin mysteriously vanishing. Even without me reminding them they owe me a fiver. That may sound improbable, but here the Time Guardians have slipped up again — because the evidence is available for us all to see... in the pages of our history books!

The Time Guardians obviously expected the kidnapped SF people to sink without trace in the vast swamps of history — but they reckoned without the genius and drive and ability for sheer hard work which all SF authors have in such abundance. I would like you to look for a moment — with an unprejudiced, unbiased eye — at any fragment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from the valley of the Nile. These are, in fact, the very first appearances in print of Roger Zelazny stories.

His initials are clearly visible down in the right hand corner of most of them. The obviously mythological figures are, of course, a Zelazny trademark, one that he has built up in many of his novels. As far as I can tell, when Roger found himself stranded back in the ancient world he decided to cash in on the situation, so he went around to different countries inventing mythologies and spreading them all over the place so that he could write SF novels about them in the 20th century. This explains why all the various myth figures fit so neatly into his stories. Good thinking, Roger.

Other marooned SF authors and fans have made their presences felt in similar ways — going around carving drawings of space men and rocket ships in places where they were most likely to be found by later generations. The person I feel sorry for in

all of this is poor old von Daniken, with his "Chariots of the Gods" and so forth. Possibly the carvings were put there maliciously in the first place, just so he would grab the wrong end of the stick. That's just the sort of thing Brian Burgess would do.

One of the things which put me on to all this was my visit to the King Tutankhamen exhibition last year. I looked closely at his sarcophagus — they can't touch you for it — and thought to myself, "Where have I seen that face before?" The beard gave it away: King Tut was John Brunner.

And when you look dispassionately at the history of the Trojan Wars, isn't it obvious that the whole thing was written, scripted and masterminded by Harry Harrison? I mean, that business of hiding inside a giant horse and springing out of it at night is straight out of a Stainless Steel Rat story. Nobody else would have thought of such a crazy idea.

The next significant event in history is the decline and fall of the Roman Empire — of course, entirely engineered by Isaac Asimov so that he could work out what he was going to put in Volume 3 of the Foundation series. The Dark Ages came next, mainly brought on by L. Sprague de Camp, and then — because SF writers had been so active in the preceding centuries — an early form of SF fandom began to flourish.

Britain led the way with the invention of conventions, and the first permanent convention hall was built, at Stonehenge. News about the good times they all had at these affairs filtered across the Channel to French fandom, who promptly got jealous and came over here on a giant excursion — in 1066. Because they were principally interested in finding out about conventions or cons, this invention was known as the Norman Con Quest.

Things settled down after that for a while, until we had the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund — in 1492. Columbus wasn't a very good TAFF delegate. He only won the election because he had a lot of votes bought for him by Queen Isabella, and I suspect he wasn't an SF fan at all, but some magazine huckster like Rog Peyton or Bram Stokes.

Legend has it he hurried back to Isabella, not even taking time to write his TAFF trip report for Speculation, and reported to her — all excited — that he had found a country where the natives were so simple they were prepared to barter land against trinkets.

"That's marvellous," Isabella said.

"I know," Columbus replied. "Here's three strings of beads I got — we've got to be out of Spain by next Thursday."

Other SF people did get across the Atlantic later on, though. Frank Belknap Long went over and settled on Long Island. Michael G. Coney went over and settled on Coney Island. Vargo Statten went over and settled on Staten Island. Volsted Gridban went over, but he was refused entry because there was no way the Americans were going to stand for part of their territory being labelled Gridban Island.

Dan Morgan sailed for the Caribbean and became a successful pirate. And John Russell Fearn went over and started all the ghostly legends of Sleepy Hollow by rustling a few ferns...

Back on this side of the Atlantic things weren't going too smoothly — a lot of the feuds which mar or enliven the SF scene today began to break out. In the 16th Century there was a lot of trouble with the New Wave element, led by Martin Luther. And up in Scotland, a dispute about Analog's editorial policies led to the Massacre of Glencoe — in which the John W. Campbells slaughtered the John D. MacDonalds.

Anyway, I hope I've said enough to let you see that this threat to SF authors and readers is deadly serious. Now that I've let you all in on the secret, you are more at risk than ever. In fact, I think I've noticed that a few people have disappeared from

the back of the hall already!

"What can we do about it?" you are asking yourselves.

Well, most of you are asking what time the bar opens, but some of you must be asking what we can do about this threat from the time travellers among us. My answer is that we shouldn't wait around, passively, to be kidnapped. We should carry the battle to the enemy by going into the future and destroying their time machine factories.

Our technology hasn't yet reached the stage of being able to build time machines, but — luckily for us — some years ago Walt Willis invented a non-mechanical method of time travel, which I have named the subjective induced acceleration technique.

You know how slowly time goes when you are miserable? And how quickly it goes when nice things are happening to you? Well, to send a volunteer into the future you start off by bringing time to a virtual standstill for him by putting him in a cold grey room, with a Lena Zavaroni record playing, with nothing to drink but tea brewed in the Novacon hotel, and make him read right through a file of Wonder Stories Quarterly.

After a day or so of this, when he's really in the stasis, you pull a lever and he drops through a trapdoor into a luxurious suite where gorgeous nude girls cluster round him offering him cigars and glasses of champagne. This speeds his time flow up so abruptly that he goes into a kind of temporal overdrive, and vanishes into the future.

Last night, while the rest of you were enjoying yourselves at room parties and so forth, a group of us serious-minded types got together and started on this project by sawing a hole through the floor of Brian Aldiss's room into the room below. All we need now is a supply of champagne, cigars, and gorgeous nude girls.

All contributions should be handed to the convention chairman out in the bar, which is where the rest of us will be in a few minutes from now.

1976:MANCON

I EXPECT you're all wondering why I brought you here tonight... Heh! Heh! Heh!

Well, you must admit this is a bit like one of those old movies where an assorted bunch of people find themselves invited to spend a weekend at some really creepy, out-of-the-way spot. I got a couple of mysterious, anonymous notes telling me to come here, and a strange map — just like in the movies. The main difference is that in a film the weekend guests always find themselves in a huge, gloomy, draughty, creaky place, miles from anywhere, with no means of escape. And nobody could say those things about Owens Park. Could they? They're fake fans if they do. But come to think of it... the hall porter does look a bit like Boris Karloff.

This has got me wondering what crimes we all committed in the past. Who did we mortally offend and wants to take revenge on us? Hands up anybody who has ever kept a magazine belonging to the BSFA chain library. Hands up anybody who has ever used Science Fiction Monthly to wrap up fish and chips. Hands up anybody who has ever sent a fan letter to Space: 1999. I thought so: quite a few of you. That means you'll all start disappearing, one by one. If I'm not mistaken, some people have started vanishing from the back of the hall already! It's funny, but that happened during my last talk, as well...

This talk is going to be about alternative technology, but the subject of Space: 1999 has cropped up... and in a way, it features alternative technology, too. I mean, the technology in it is impossible, and that's a genuine alternative to all this plausible stuff that people like Niven and Asimov and Clarke keep churning out. I missed the first two episodes of Space: £19.99p — for some reason, that's how I think of that show — because I pay 10p a week for the TV Times, to get extra programme information, and it kept saying that it began at 7.30, whereas it really began at 6.30, and I kept switching on too late. "Just another readers service from Independent Television Publications..." Mind you, it sometimes takes me about an hour to find the programme pages in the TV Times anyway, so I might have missed those episodes regardless.

I do know, for example, that in Space: £19.99p they are journeying around the galaxy on the Moon, but I never found out what propelled the Moon out of the Solar System. All I know is that it must have been one hell of a powerful explosion, because they reach a different planet every week, and if you grant a high density of stars — say they're about four light years apart — that means the Moon is belting along at 200

times the speed of light! Luckily for Commander Koenig and company, the retro rockets on those Eagle craft seem to be pretty effective — even though they only emit little puffs of smoke, more in keeping with somebody having a crafty drag down in the toilets — and they can always land and chat to the local inhabitants. The residents of these planets all speak English — which is a very lucky thing, too — because I run into language difficulties if I go abroad as far as Italy or Holland or Macclesfield.

Other things I'd like to know about Space: £19.99p are: When are they going to show us the vast underground factory which builds the Eagle spacecraft? (A minimum of four of these explode or suffer spontaneous combustion every week, so there has to be a big production facility. When are we going to be told that Barbara Bain is really a robot? Why does everybody in the Moonbase whisper all the time? Why have they got Moon gravity outside the Moonbase and normal gravity inside it? (Maybe that's why everybody whispers and looks gloomy — they're introducing extra gravity into the situation.)

Thinking it over, the key to some of these mysteries could lie in something I've already mentioned — the fact that the Moon is travelling at 200 times the speed of light. This means that time in the Moonbase is running backwards, and all the characters in it are heading into their own pasts instead of their futures. Martin Landau is contemplating Missions that are even more Impossible; and Barry Morse is extending the hunt for The Fugitive into interstellar space. "That was no one-armed man, Jansen — that was an inhabitant of Rigel IV waving his proboscis, and you can't touch them for it."

Back to the main subject of the talk — "Lunar Rock: Will It Ever Be As Popular As Martian Country And Western?" No, that can't be right — that's Graham Charnock's talk. Mine is about alternative technology space drives. As you know, space flight is the most common theme in science fiction, and the fact that Moon landings have been accomplished in reality has wiped out whole areas of speculation which many a writer relied upon to earn his living. NASA is taking the bread and butter out of the mouths of science fiction authors, which is not only an immoral thing to do — it's downright unhygienic! Driven out of what used to be their own private territory, SF writers are becoming poorer and poorer. Things have reached the stage at which some of them have to use their Access cards to weigh themselves. Every time I have

to take some money out of the bank I feel ill for a couple of hours afterwards — I think it's called a withdrawal symptom.

There is, however, a ray of hope for the future in that present day space technology is not really adequate or suitable for the tasks it has to accomplish, partly because of the fantastic expense involved, and partly because of inherent weaknesses in our whole concept of the space rocket. All the big space powers are looking around for other more efficient, more reliable and more economic ways of getting hardware into the sky, and it is quite possible they will turn to science fiction for fresh, original ideas — for which, I hope, they will pay an appropriate fee. This notion isn't as far-fetched as it might sound, because many leading space technologists have acknowledged the stimulus they get from science fiction. Only the other day I read an article by a big man in the communications satellite business who said he had lost millions of pounds because in 1947 he had thought of, but failed to patent, Arthur C. Clarke. People even come to me and ask technical questions. Questions like: "If you put a hole in the middle of a Gemini spacecraft would that make it Apollo?" Or, "Up there in the emptiness of space, what would Isaac Asimov push against?"

Of course, not all the ideas that science fiction has put forward for space ship propulsion are worth following up. A giant gun about a mile high which fires people into space in a bullet is obviously not feasible — partly because of the tremendous accelerations involved, but mainly because you'd never get enough leather to make a holster for it. And it's no good talking about building it underground, with the muzzle at ground level, because it's against the law to have a concealed weapon. You see, it's practical little details like these that trip up some of our most visionary thinkers, but which us hard SF writers have built our reputations on.

A compatriot of mine, who has an equally down-to-earth approach, has pointed out on TV the difficulties that Bell got into when he invented the telephone — it was absolutely no use to him until he had invented another telephone that he could ring up. Then he got carried away and invented a third telephone, and when he rang up the second one it was engaged. That's what's called technological redundancy.

In contrast to some of the quaint old ideas in science fiction, the proposal for a new type of space ship propulsion unit which I'm going to outline to you has all the advantages of being inexpensive and totally practicable. The inspiration came to me one evening when I was sitting at home in an armchair... (have you noticed that chairs are good for sitting on? I keep half a dozen of them round the house for no other reason) ... idly toying with a half-pint whisky shandy. My intellect was wrestling with some of the great imponderables of our time, questions like, "Why was the book The Man Who Folded Himself written by David Gerrold and not John Creasey?"

Actually, the inspiration came in two parts — just the way Arthur Koestler said it should. That's the way you do creative thinking, by taking two imaginative elements out of your mental stock and synthesising them into something entirely new. I was sitting there watching my television set... (have you noticed that TVs are good for watching? I experimented with watching fridges for a while, and then sideboards, but after this period of trial and error I settled on television sets.) ... and a commercial about saving energy came on. It explained, the way they always do, that a big percentage of the heat loss in a house occurs through the windows. That's where your heat goes — right out through the glass of the windows. This information wasn't new to me, but — under the benign influence of the whisky shandies — my intellect was in a highly receptive state, and the stuff about the behaviour of window glass seemed to hang in the forefront of my mind, reverberating in a cryogenic chill. (I copied that last bit out of an Analog editorial.)

It's amazing the things which reverberate in the mind after you've had a few

drinks — that's why you have such interesting conversations in pubs. The part I like best is when non-SF pub customers start talking about things which we — as science fiction fans, usually with some awareness of science — tend to regard as our own conversational stamping ground. I remember sitting in a little country pub once having a pint with the landlord. Although this was in the Spring, it was a bitterly cold day outside — a fact which seemed to have a depressing effect on mine host. Quite out of the blue, in the middle of a conversation about the price of lettuce, he announced that he had worked out exactly why it was that the weather had become so unseasonal in recent years. My interest perked up at once because I had been speculating about the same thing ever since I saw that Horizon programme on BBC which told us that a new Ice Age was going to start the following Tuesday afternoon.

"It's these leap years that's doing it," the landlord explained. "They keep sticking in this extra day every fourth year, and they're all adding up and putting the calendar out of step with the seasons."

Although he didn't realise it, this man was a living proof of Weston's Theorem — invented by Pete Weston — which postulates that interest in science fiction usually springs from an underlying appreciation of astronomy. I spent a good thirty minutes with this man trying to make him understand what is actually meant by the terms "year" and "day" and why there's no cosmic linkage between the two, but I simply failed to get through to him. However, this is straying from the point.

The second part of the discovery I was talking about came later on that same evening, when my gaze fell on the second inspirational element, the vital catalyst — which in this case happened to be the inside back cover of the Radio Times. You've noticed the way in which certain publications are associated with different types of advertising — the Daily Telegraph for jobs; Penthouse for saucy French undies; the old Astounding for surgical trusses. Not that there's all that much difference between the latter two... between saucy undies and trusses, I mean... in the little illustrations they look equally complicated and disconcerting. Well, the back cover of the Radio Times used to be devoted entirely to ads for garages and greenhouses. Nowadays it tends to be given over to glossy adverts for Peter Stuyvesant — the cigarette the tobacconist refuses to sell you unless you produce your passport; and dry Martini — the drink the wine merchant refuses to sell you unless you can produce a licence to fly a seaplane.

At the time I'm speaking of, however, it was still garages and greenhouses, and I got to wondering about the famous Greenhouse Effect. For the benefit of anybody who hasn't read the science column in Tiger Tim's Weekly, I should explain that the Greenhouse Effect is a scientific phenomenon, all to do with changing the wavelengths of radiation, by which greenhouse glass refuses to allow heat to pass out through it, thus keeping the greenhouse nice and warm. This was the point at which the two halves of the inspiration began to come together, reaching critical mass.

There's something funny here, I thought, taking a diminutive sip from my whisky. In an ordinary house the glass in the windows lets all the heat out — but in a greenhouse the glass keeps all the heat in!

Suddenly the inspiration was complete.

It dawned on me, there and then, that we could solve all our home heating problems... and save the countries of the West billions of pounds in home heating bills... simply by taking the ordinary glass out of our windows and replacing it with greenhouse glass!

The idea was so devastatingly simple that for a moment I thought there had to be a flaw in my scientific reasoning. But, no! There was no denying the facts...

window glass lets heat out, greenhouse glass keeps heat in. Q.E.D. I celebrated my discovery by finishing off the Scotch — reflecting that I could probably afford it now that the Government was likely to vote me an honorarium of a million or two. Then I toddled off to bed, too excited even to bother with my nightly digestive biscuit and cup of Slippery Elm Food.

The big let-down came on the following morning when I was having my usual breakfast of two lightly poached aspirins. There was a flaw in my scientific logic, and I cursed myself for not having spotted it immediately. I had done a lot of research into glass while writing my "slow glass" stories, and I knew for a fact that the glass factories did not manufacture two different types — one for ordinary buildings, and one for greenhouses. My gleaming inspiration of the previous night had been the tawdry glitter of fool's gold. (That last sentence was a little literary bit I put in as writing practice in case they ever revive Planet Stories.) The realisation that I had been wrong lay heavily in me for a while — just like a Brian Burgess meat pie — but then I began to rally as the day wore on. I asked myself, "Would Einstein have given up so easily? Just when things were getting tough, would he have abandoned all his sculptures?"

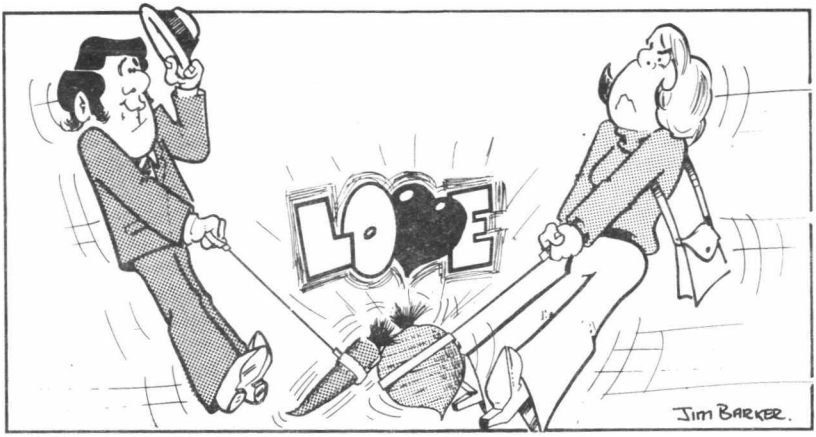
I think I have pointed out before that it wasn't a huge I.Q. which made Einstein a great scientist; it was his simple and childlike approach — and for all I know, I might be even more simple and childlike than Einstein.

Returning to the problem, I decided that my basic premise about greenhouses had been right, but that I had not been in possession of sufficient facts to construct a viable theory. Some vital clue was missing, but what could it be? (This is just like an episode from Microbes and Men, isn't it?) By this time I was hot on the intellectual trail and I consulted my library of science reference works, spending hours going through abstruse works such as The Penguin Dictionary of Shells; The Shell Dictionary of Penguins; Teach Yourself Embalming; Stand and Deliver — A Treatise on Overcrowding in Maternity Homes; Bionic Men — Would You Let Your Transistor Marry One?; Black Holes — A Successful Treatment Without Surgery. I even glanced through a manual on dog handling, hoping it might give me a strong lead, but to no avail. This is a weird thing about reference works — I never seem to get anything out of them. I've had a Roget's Thesaurus for years, and so far I haven't managed to get a single word out of it. So, it was up to my unaided powers of scientific deduction.

The basic problem was that the manufacturers produced only one grade of glass for normal domestic and commercial use — and yet when sheets of this glass were put into a greenhouse their physical properties mysteriously changed. Why? Well, it was Sherlock Holmes who said to Doctor Watson, "When you have eliminated all other possibilities the one which remains, no matter how unlikely, is the best that Conan Doyle could think up on the spur of the moment." With this truism in mind, I suddenly remembered the reports which have been in science journals lately and which state that vegetables are intelligent. Could it be, I wondered, that vegetables are even smarter than we think they are? Could they be changing the properties of greenhouse glass by mental control, so that they would be kept warm and healthy?

Some of you might think that this idea is a little far-fetched — this notion that vegetables have thoughts and feelings — but is it any more fantastic than some of the things which Einstein asked us to accept in his various theories of relativity? Do you really believe that two men can stand at each end of a moving train, and flash signals to an observer on the bank without getting thrown off by the ticket collector?

These reports that vegetables have nervous systems and are telepathically aware of their surroundings are perfectly correct, and I can even foresee the day when — perhaps by hormone treatment — we'll be able to give them mobility. There



might come a day when vegetables will be accepted as domestic pets, and there's no doubt that in some ways they are more suitable for this role than animals. For example, vegetables like to feed on manure. So you could have this situation in which the average citizen goes out for a stroll in the evening with his pet cabbage on a lead. It would be trotting along behind him — on its little roots — unfouling the footpath!

You might even find keen gardeners writing to the newspapers and complaining about how every time they put dung on their roses some thoughtless vegetable-lover allows his pet turnip to stray in and clean the place up. Obviously, there's a whole new field of research here, in deciding which vegetables are the most efficient at modifying glass. I myself suspect the tomatoes, because every time I stare into a greenhouse at them I see them turning a little red.

The more I thought about all this, the more certain I became that I had hit on the only logical answer. Therefore, to save all those billions of pounds on heating bills, all we had to do was put all our glass into greenhouse frames, wait until the tomato plants, etc, inside had altered its transmission properties by mental control at the sub-atomic level, then take it away and install it as windows in our houses. Once that was done, all the heat would be kept in, the country would be rescued from the clutches of the oil sheiks, and the national debt would be wiped out in a couple of years.

The only thing which prevented me from immediately phoning the Prime Minister and giving my idea to the nation was the sobering realisation that all the big, powerful combines would seize on it and make even more money than they have now. In particular, the giant glass manufacturers would make vast fortunes overnight and I didn't like the idea of that – mainly because when I was in junior school I was once spat on by a boy called Pilkington. This deeply philosophical consideration decided me to keep my discovery to myself, but I give it freely to everybody at this convention.

Some of you — the ones who remember the title of this talk — are saying to

yourselves, "What has all this got to do with spaceship propulsion?" Actually, most of you are saying, "What a load of old cobblers!", but some of you are saying, "What has all this got to do with spaceship propulsion?" Gerry Webb is, anyway, if he's here.

The answer lies in a straightforward, logical development of the basic idea. To make a really efficient drive unit, all you have to do is take a piece of greenhouse glass and fashion it into a tubular shape and attach it to the back end of your space ship. Up in space the unshielded heat of the sun will pour into this tube and, as we have established that the heat will not be able to escape out through the glass again — the temperature inside will quickly build up and up to a tremendous level. If you feed water into one end of the pipe it will explode into steam and be exhausted through the opposite end at great speed, producing the thrust needed to propel your starship.

Now, if there are any members of the British Interplanetary Society in the audience, they'll no doubt be thinking to themselves that they can see a major objection to the Hot Water Bottle Drive I have just outlined. Those of you who aren't technically minded might think it is something to do with the glass of the drive pipes perhaps losing its properties and cooling down. This could indeed lead to a sort of story situation in which Dan Dare is up front piloting the ship when he notices a loss of power and sends the engineer, Scotty, back to investigate. Scotty immediately realises what is happening, so he picks up the intercom and goes, "Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are cooling."

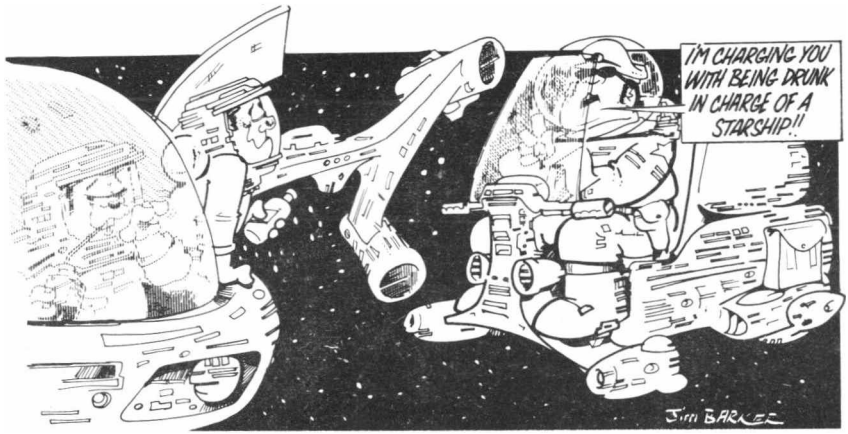
But that's comicbook stuff — the real drawback to the Hot Water Bottle Drive which will be troubling all the propulsion engineers in the audience is the old one about reaction mass. They'll be saying you could never carry enough water to give the ship interstellar, or even interplanetary, range. This is a perfectly valid objection — I've read The Cold Equations and I know all about this sort of thing — but I'm sure you'll be both pleased and relieved to hear that, through my researches in another scientific field altogether, I've come up with the answer to that one as well.

The inspiration came when I was considering a problem in nutrition. In general, researchers in this field are concerned with lack of nutrition, but in my case the problem seems to be an excess of it. I've checked with other beer-drinkers and they confirm the same thing — every time they have a pint of beer they gain a couple of pounds in weight as well. Now, the really intriguing scientific aspect of all this is that a pint of beer weighs only one-and-a-quarter pounds!

This means that three-quarters of a pound of mass appears from nowhere!

Incredible though it might seem, this process of matter creation within the human body is well authenticated — and it doesn't just happen with booze. Anybody who is a bit fat will tell you that eating just one measly little two-ounce cream bun makes them a pound or two heavier the next day. It's even possible that the entire mass of the universe was created by people eating cream buns and drinking beer, but I'm not interested in cosmology — it's much too airy-fairy and theoretical for me. I prefer to stick to solid, provable facts — such as my discovery about beer.

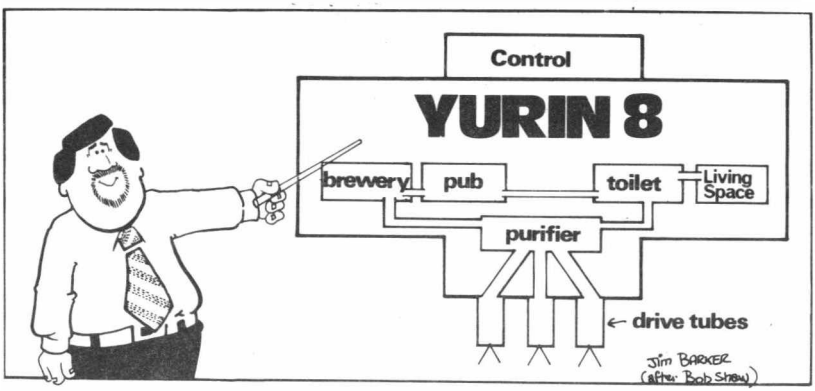
What, you must be saying to yourselves, does this new discovery of Shaw's do to the Second Law of Thermodynamics? Where, you must be wondering, does this extra fluid come from? Well, I don't know where it comes from, but I know where it



goes. And this knowledge is the final building block needed for the design of the perfect spaceship.

You start off by installing a small but highly efficient brewery. Next to it goes a well-designed pub with an atmosphere that is conducive to sustained drinking; and beside the pub you, of course, have a toilet. The outlet from the toilet leads into a purifying plant, which receives roughly one-and-a-half pints of liquid for every pint that has been drunk in the bar. Out of every pint-and-a-half of fluid that gets purified, one pint is recirculated back to the brewery — as part of a self-sustaining closed ecology — and the extra half-pint is fed through control valves into a cluster of our greenhouse glass pipes which provide the motive force. Living quarters and a control deck make up the other major compartments.

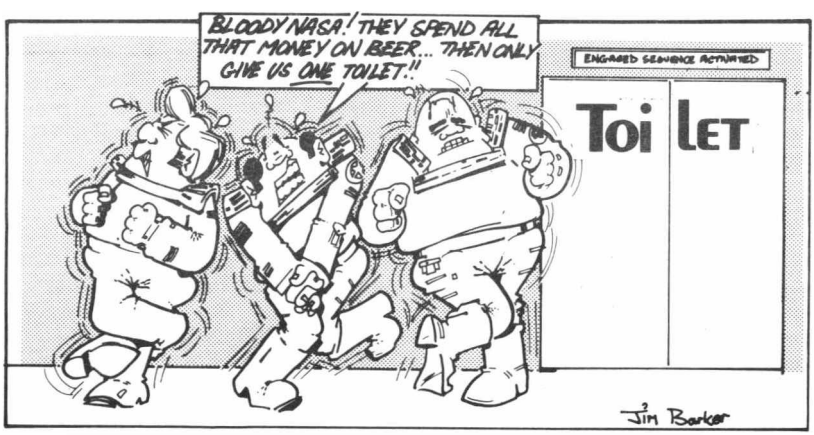
With this ship you can go anywhere in the Solar System, provided you have a



crew of dedicated people who are willing to sit in the bar, for day after day, drinking free beer, with no thought in mind other than getting mankind to the stars. Oddly enough, I think we could round up quite a good space ship crew right here in this hall.

Before you rush away and start building a ship, I should perhaps warn you that life on board won't be all beer and skittles. The beer-drinking complement would be a vital part of the ship, and heavy demands might be made on them occasionally. For instance, if the ship got into a dangerous situation the Captain, up in the control room, would pick up his microphone and say, "Increase speed to Booze Factor Eight," and all the topers down in the bar would have to start drinking twice as fast, whether they wanted to or not. It could be hellish.

Nevertheless, just in case my services are ever called upon to get us to the moons of Jupiter, I think I'll go out to the bar and put in a little practice...



PARDON ME if I don't seem my usual robust self today. I went round a few room parties last night, living it up — now I'm trying to live it down. Actually, the night started to go a bit wrong when I found myself at a temperance room party, which wasn't quite what I had planned on. I'm not saying the host was unfannish — but that was the first convention party I'd ever been to where I was expected to buy Tupperware.

I got out of there in a hurry, because we've got all the Tupperware we need at home. Our fridge, the pantry, all the cupboards, are filled with Tupperware. There's no room for food — just these heaps and heaps of plastic boxes which break your nails when you try to open the lids. When I die I'm going to be put away in a Tupperware coffin — I think I ordered it last night — and the worms just won't be able to get near me. When alian super-beings land on the deserted Earth in a few thousand years from now and start looking around for a human being to resurrect, I'll probably be fresh as a daisy in there. The only trouble is, the alien super-beings probably won't be able to get my lid off...

Anyway, by the time I got to a proper room-party I hadn't had a drink for about half an hour, and you know how it is with booze — a long period of abstinence like that really whets your appetite for it. I think I may possibly have imbibed a little too much, because this morning I had a bad headache, and there was no Alka-Seltzer or aspirin. Luckily, one of the committee was kind enough to nip out and get me some pain-killer they make in a little shop just around the corner from here — it's a local anaesthetic — and that enabled me to come here as planned to tell you all about the Bermondsey triangle mystery.

Now, to me, one of the most intriguing and sinister things about the Bermondsey triangle mystery is that nobody has ever heard of it!

I mean, practically everybody has heard about the old Bermuda triangle mystery, and it's even got to the point of popularity where the mystery is self-perpetuating. Did you know that the last three ships to disappear in the Bermuda triangle were carrying cargoes of books about the Bermuda triangle mystery? There's so much demand for them in that area that whole fleets loaded up with the books are charging about all over the Caribbean, running into each other, getting sunk, and adding to the legend. They're littered about all over the seabed, and what worries me is that pulp paper is terribly absorbent. One of these days we're going to hear a loud slurping noise — and the Caribbean will disappear! And Castro will blame it on the CIA...

There's even a new TV series about the Bermuda triangle — called The Fantastic Journey — which combines the scientific authenticity of Space: 1999 with the gripping story quality of Look at Life on a visit to Bootle. I mustn't start being sarcastic about Space: 1999 again, though — last time I did that I offended the show's regular viewers, and they both wrote to me about it. And I think one of them had even gone to the expense of buying a new crayon! Mention of The Fantastic Journey reminds me that one of my problems with the show is that, after all those Planet of the Apes programmes, I can't bear to look directly at Roddy McDowall any more. All I see is Galen... skinned! It's hard to think of anything more revolting.

But I was talking about the self-perpetuating nature of the Bermuda triangle mystery, a process which I find interesting. A vaguely parallel case has occurred up in the Lake District, where I live. There's a local confectionery called Kendal mint cake which, for some reason, is always brought along by climbers who are tackling Everest. The manufacturers set great store by this, and on the waxy wrappers always list the numerous mountaineering expeditions of the last fifty years which sustained themselves on difficult climbs by eating Kendal mint cake. What they carefully don't mention is the fate of the Peruvian Everest expedition of 1949, which was swept away on the south face, not by snow... but by an avalanche of discarded Kendal mint cake wrappers.

This shows the dangers of being a litter lout. It really is antisocial to go around throwing down old bus tickets and chocolate wrappers — except, of course, on the Continent, where they have a much better class of litter. One of the things that appealed to my snob instinct on my first trip across the Channel — it was on a day trip to Calais — was that even the garbage was in French.

But this is getting away from the Bermondsey triangle mystery, which is my main subject today. "What is the Bermondsey triangle mystery?" you must be asking yourselves. If you aren't, I've been wasting my time up here throwing out these tantalising hints, planting fish-hooks. That's something that authors do, you know. They go around planting fish-hooks. Other people plant seeds; authors plant fish-hooks. It's really stupid — because nothing ever grows from fish-hooks. I think the worms come along and eat them. Especially if they're worms like the ones I've got in my garden. The soil in my garden is so poor that the worms go around in gangs attacking birds. One of them savaged the postman last week!

I know, I know! This is getting away from the subject of the Bermondsey tri-

angle mystery, as well. In fact, some of you are saying I can't get away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle mystery when I haven't even got near it. Some of you may even be entertaining doubts that there is a Bermondsey triangle mystery.

Well, let me tell you... There's another funny thing — that business about entertaining doubts. Why do we always entertain doubts, while the best that can happen to more deserving cases such as beliefs and convictions is that they'll be firmly held? It hardly seems fair.

Now... what was I talking about? Oh, yes — the Bermondsey triangle mystery. This first came to my attention about twenty years ago, and I want to emphasise that I'm talking about direct, first-hand experience here — unlike these literary charlatans who write sensational books based on old newspaper clippings which were probably all wrong to start off with.

My first tiny and apparently insignificant clue was... You know, I love the way all tales of scientific discovery start off with a tiny and apparently insignificant clue — though I suppose it has to be that way. When James Watt was getting ready to invent the steam engine the only thing he had to inspire him was the bobbing up and down of the lid of a hot kettle, and his genius lay in seeing its potential. I mean, if he had been watching the kettle boil and suddenly it had gone toot-toot and shot off in the direction of London, picking up passengers and collecting mailbags, anybody could have got the idea of the steam locomotive from it. Though James Watt, being a true genius, might have jumped up and said, "If only we could harness this energy to make tea!"

(Come to think of it, perhaps that's what actually happens — the tea I get on British Rail tastes like it came out of the engine, though only a tea connoisseur like Ethel Lindsay could be absolutely certain. In view of that fact, I feel no guilt about telling you the method I have devised for getting free tea on train journeys. They operate a two-man system when they're bringing the tea around — the first bloke comes along asking who wants tea, and if anybody does he takes his money and gives him a plastic cup, which acts both as a tea container and a receipt. A few minutes later the second bloke works his way along the train, filling all the cups. So all you have to do, before leaving home, is to make sure you pack a few plastic cups, and set one out in front of you at the appropriate moment...)

But all this is straying away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle mystery. I don't know why it keeps happening — must be something I wrote. This tiny and apparently insignificant clue I started to tell you about was a strange aberration in the otherwise fairly unremarkable behaviour of James White. Jim, of course, is a writer whose name is well-known to all readers of journals such as Analog, New Worlds, and Stubb's Gazette.

He is also, as everybody knows, a very steady, respectable and sober person — compared to many other science fiction writers, that is. Admittedly, he has done a few odd things in his life. There was that time when he worked for a tailoring concern, and an encyclopaedia salesman called at his home one evening... Jim brought him in and sold him a suit!

But occasional lapses like that apart, he lives a very even sort of life — which is why my curiosity was aroused when Jim abruptly disappeared for four days. I remember the occasion very well, because it happened one Easter — a time when you would expect a man like him to be at home with his wife and family, helping the children roll eggs down hillsides, and spoiling the whole thing for them by lecturing about the mechanics of inclined planes, and about how it was all just another way of demonstrating Newton's ideas about inertia and gravitation. All authors who have sold to Analog tend to go on like that.

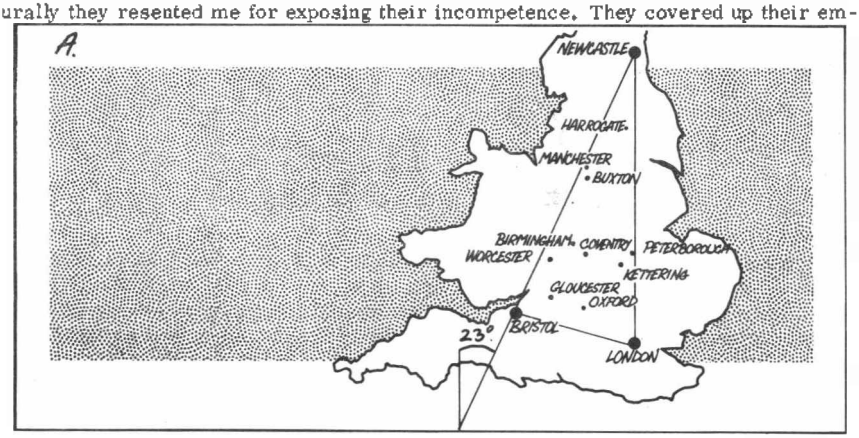
Unlike a ship or a plane which disappears in the Bermuda Triangle, however, Jim reappeared in his old haunts a few days later — but he was a changed man! He was tired and shaken, his eyes were glazed over, there was a strange spirituous smell from his breath, and he was incoherent about what had happened to him. He had obviously been through some traumatic, mind-warping experience which was too awful to talk about, perhaps too awful to comprehend.

I have to admit that I didn't investigate the matter fully at that time, because I was busy with other important scientific researches — namely work on my perpetual motion machine. I slaved away over that machine for many years before reluctantly giving up. In the end I was forced to admit that — no matter what ingenious mechanisms I invented, no matter what clever refinements I tried — there was just no way to stop the blasted thing. This was a big disappointment to me, but at least it gave me more time to study Jim White's behaviour, which had steadily grown more mysterious and intriguing.

He kept on vanishing every Easter — always returning in the same comatose condition — and then, to my horror, it began to happen in November as well! His condition was obviously deteriorating. I began following him on these strange excursions, regardless of any physical danger involved — us dedicated researchers are like that, you see — and found that the same thing was happening to hundreds of other apparently normal men and women. Twice a year they were drawn, lemming-like, to some mysteriously prearranged point, where they milled around for several days — often having no rest throughout the entire period — before disbanding and returning to their normal lives.

What, I wondered, was it all about? What occult power was influencing them to make them behave in this fashion?

Well, the first thing a scientist does when investigating a widespread phenomenon like this is to organise the data and impose some kind of order on it. Actually, that's not quite true. The very first thing a scientist does in a case like this is to apply for a Government grant, to keep him in beer and smokes during his labours, but I knew I wouldn't get any money from the Establishment. There had been ill will between me and the authorities ever since I reported a smuggling gang, run by a chap named Leacock, to the Customs and Excise and they had failed to do anything about it. It turned out that this gang were being fiendishly clever — they only smuggled stuff there was no duty on! The authorities are powerless against men like that... so naturally they resented me for exposing their incompetence. They covered up their em-



barrassment by threatening to prosecute me for wasting their time, so I knew there was no point in applying for Government money.

Instead I drew a map of the country and plotted out all the locations where I knew the strange mass hysteria had occurred. And it came out like this: (See map on previous page.)

Note the significant shape of the plot! A triangle! Can this be a coincidence? I ask you, CAN THIS BE A COINCIDENCE? Of course not!

Because this is just a rough diagram I can't show the precise trigonometries I calculated, but suffice it to say that the bottom right-hand corner of the triangle is positioned in the London borough of Bermondsey — hence the name I have given to the entire area involved. (In actual fact, the corner of the triangle proved to be located a little further south... To be totally precise, it is in the back room of a Chinese take-away in Peckham High Street... but who in his right mind would want to hear a talk about the Peckham triangle mystery?)

Now, as soon as I got an inkling of what I might be on to, I realised I needed expert help in unravelling the mystery involved, and I began looking around for somebody with the necessary intellectual qualities. My first choice was L. Ron Hubbard, but I had lost touch with him soon after he invented Scientology and... I have to be careful about how I say this... made a cult of himself. I then contacted a friend who shall be nameless, because he is on the Seacon '79 committee. He had the right sort of mental attributes, but he was too busy getting Brighton ready for its first convention. In fact, when he heard I would be addressing this convention he asked me to pass on a message to all of you who have asked questions about Brighton in general, and in particular about the famous Brighton peer.

Talking about the Brighton peer, he said, "This criminal lunatic, who operates from the rooftops of tall buildings in central Brighton — thus forcing people to carry

umbrellas at all times of the year — has not been apprehended at the time of writing, but the local police are confident he will be behind bars by 1979. There is some doubt about which bars he will actually be behind, but a close watch is being kept on all licensed premises in the area. A new clue about his identity has come from a tip-off that he is an East German who defected over the Berlin Wall. 'That is a superhuman feat, considering the height of the wall,' said a spokesman for the Brighton police, 'and shows the calibre of the man we're up against.'"

That's getting away from the subject of the Bermondsey triangle again, but I

thought you deserved the break — after all, none of you has done me any harm. I was saying that I was at a loss about who to turn to for help in sorting out this mystery, then I thought of the perfect man for the job... that great German-Irish writer, scholar and scientific researcher — Von Donegan!

I had trouble finding Von Donegan, because he moves around a lot — with the sort of books he writes he finds it advisable. I tried his various clubs — the Playboy Club, Foyle's Book Club, the Shillelagh (that's an Irish club) but he wasn't at any of those places. I was getting desperate when I remembered reading that you have only to stand in Piccadilly Circus long enough and you will eventually meet everybody in the world. This seemed a good logical approach, so I went and stood there and, sure enough, I did meet people from all parts of the globe, and some from the One Tun as well.

Piccadilly Circus really lived up to its reputation, because one of the first people I met was a genuine Bolivian Indian! He told me he was in England to research a science fiction novel he was writing about Ian Watson. Then I was approached and propositioned by a lady of the town, but when she noticed my BSFA badge she made an excuse and left. I have often since wondered what she thought BSFA meant. She possibly figured out that the BS stood for Bob Shaw, but the mind boggles at what she might have made of the rest. The next person to come along was Ian Watson, who told me he was a bit worried by a new delusion he had about being followed everywhere by a Bolivian Indian...

And finally, just as the immutable laws of probability said he would, along came Von Donegan. To those of you who don't understand the mathematics of chance this might seem an unlikely coincidence, but probability math is a wonderful thing. For instance, if two people lose each other in a large department store the laws of probability say there's no guarantee they'll ever meet up again unless one of them stands still. When you think of it, this is not a very helpful statement. In fact, it makes the poor lost person's dilemma even worse — because now he doesn't even know if he should start searching around or just stand there. And if you stand around too long some sales assistant will come along and start undressing you. This could be quite good fun, except that they always start by detaching your arms and head.

Anyway, I was talking about my meeting with Von Donegan. Strangely enough, he didn't seem all that pleased to see me. He was hurrying past with a furtive expression on his face when I stepped out of a shop doorway and grabbed him by the lapels of his raincoat. He stared at me... and we danced for a while... then he said, "Are you following me?"

"Certainly not," I said.

"Thank God for that," he said. "I must be losing my mind — I keep thinking I'm being followed by another science fiction writer and a bloody Red Indian."

"Bolivian," I said.

"No, it's true," he said.

I took him into a nearby pub to steady his nerves and ordered two large gin-and-tonics. He grabbed both bottles of tonic and poured them into his own gin.

"What are you doing?" I said.

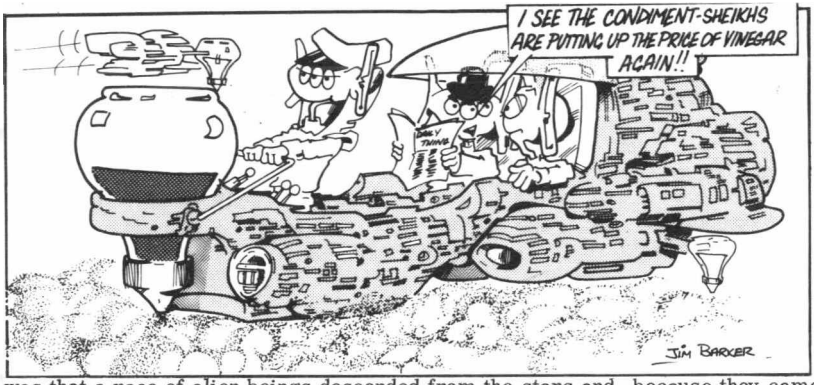
"Diluting my gin," he replied. "I always use two bottles because I'm part German — this is typical two-tonic efficiency."

"That's a good one," I said, trying to humour him. "What squirts out of a siphon into your whisky glass and makes sarcastic remarks?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Caustic soda," I said. "Do you get it? Caustic soda!"

"My God," he said nervously, "and I thought I was going mad — I knew I should



was that a race of alien beings descended from the stars and, because they came from a very chilly planet, settled around the North Pole. Von Donegan has already dealt extensively with these invaders, whom he dubbed Icekimoes, in his book The Skateboards of the Gods — but that is a slightly misleading title, because the Icekimoes actually went around in huge salt-powered sleds.

These bizarre vehicles, which could only have been the product of an alien mind, operated on an ingenious principle. Each one had a large salt shaker mounted in front of it. The salt was shaken down on to the ice, which promptly melted, creating a small hill which the sled slid down — and the process was continuously repeated. Ah, I can see that the technically-minded people in the audience are objecting to this notion on sound engineering principles — and I know what your objection is. You're saying the sleds would never be able to carry enough salt to go any distance. Well, the Icekimoes thought of that, naturally, and the positioned salt dumps, for refuelling, all over their territories which extended to the southern extremities of the ice cap.

However, the millennia rolled onwards inexorably, the ice cap retreated from England and reformed in its proper place, and the enigmatic Icekimoes withdrew from the stage of world history to be lost forever in the swirling Arctic snows. (You know, this stuff is too good for Stirring Science Stories — if I polished it up a bit I bet I could flog it to Readers' Digest. It would look well in there along with all those articles about how getting cancer is actually quite enjoyable. My favourite article from Readers' Digest was the one entitled "New Hope for the Dead".)

As I was saying, the Icekimoes gradually disappeared, leaving no traces of their existence except for numerous mounds of salt all over the place — but then a new lot of alien invaders came up from the south. Little is known about this second wave of invaders, partly because Von Donegan hasn't had time to cook up much archaeological evidence about them, partly because their empire was confined to areas of the world where the top layer was composed of limestone or chalk. The reason for this seemingly arbitrary limit to their movements is that they used vehicles which were even more ingenious than salt-powered sleds — they used vinegar-powered hovercraft!

Ancient hieroglyphs on the walls of caves near Dover — which Von Donegan is hoping to finish carving before he goes on his holidays next month — clearly show these beings sitting on their little hovercraft, which worked by spraying acetic acid on the chalky ground and floating on the clouds of carbon dioxide which were given off as a result. He gave them the name of Sarsons — not to be confused with Saracens — because their fuel was remarkably similar to a well-known brand of vinegar.

For a brief period the Sarsons ranged over that part of Britain which has a top

stratum of chalk or limestone, an area whose eastern edge is a fairly straight line running downwards from Newcastle through... you've guessed it! ... the back room of the Chinese take-away in Peckham High Street.

And there you have it! The Bermondsey triangle clearly defined, for all to see!

In case you haven't already worked it out, I should explain that the Sarsons stayed in Britain for only a short time, because a general Ice Age was coming and their technology wasn't sufficiently advanced to enable them to invent a satisfactory anti-freeze for their vinegar. They retreated to the south, the Ice Age held sway for thousands of years, and when the glaciers finally retreated Homo Sapiens had at last appeared on the scene. Who said "Bloody near time!" down at the back there?

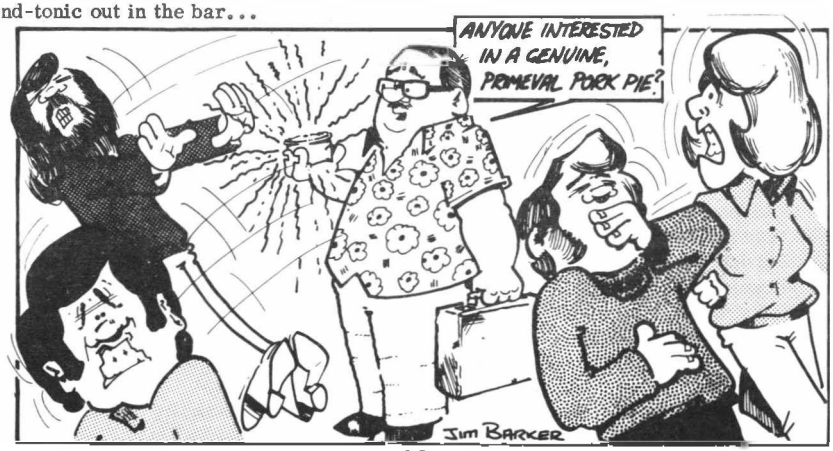
Anyway, life was very difficult at first for this puny hairless creature with his ineffectual teeth — this was long before the National Health Service provided him with wigs and stainless steel dentures for next to nothing. It was even before the Biblical scribes had started to write screenplays for Charlton Heston, and early man would have died away in short order had he not found the one place on Earth where survival was easy. Preserved in the permafrost of the Bermondsey triangle was a tectonic plate of fish and chips, ready-sprinkled with salt and vinegar.

When conditions were too harsh for intelligent life throughout the rest of the world, the fish-and-chip mines of the Bermondsey triangle were supporting thriving communities of well-nourished human beings, who — once or twice a year — gathered at the largest diggings to replenish their supplies and to give thanks to their deities.

Small wonder, then, that deep-rooted racial memories cause some of their descendants to flock to the same places and go through half-understood rituals. Large numbers of them cram themselves into small rooms at night and drink vast amounts of alcoholic liquor, much to the annoyance of those in neighbouring rooms — thus acting out the role of the Cod People getting tanked up on codswallop and enraging the Taters.

Many small blocks of duplicated paper are thrown around, an obvious re-enactment of the original showering of the area with sliced up Taters. And a tall, priestly, imposing figure, ceremonially robed, or sometimes ceremonially disrobed, passes among the pilgrims, distributing pork pies which are symbolic of — and nearly as old as — the primaeval fish and chips.

Von Donegan believes that the large amounts of alcohol drunk during the day at these strange congresses represents the acetic acid which the Sarsons sprinkled over everything from their hovercraft — which reminds me that I have left a large vinegar-and-tonic out in the bar...



1978: SKYCON

THE SCIENCE talks I've been giving at conventions in the last year or two have — as well as making Isaac Asimov start fretting about the competition — been reprinted in a few magazines. This pleased me no end, except that some letters of comment accused me of occasionally wandering away from the point. I took the criticisms to heart and included in my New Year resolutions a stern directive to myself: Always stick to the point during talks!

It's important to me that I keep this resolution because I had more of them than usual this year, and broke them sooner than usual. You know how it is... you start off the year full of high hopes and lofty ideals... 1978 was the year I was going to save some money, 1978 was the year I was going to get more exercise, 1978 was the year I was going to read Dhalgren right through to the end...

They've all gone by the board, except for this one about sticking to the point, so I'm not going to start off with one of my usual preambles about what I was doing at room parties last night. It was just the same old routine, anyway — about two hundred people all crammed together, drinking, smoking, making a hell of a noise, falling down, being sick — and that was just in the lift on the way up!

Actually, when I did get into a party in one of the bedrooms it was so noisy that we got a lot of complaints — from the pilots of Concordes. This afternoon they're going to hold a protest march to stop science fiction fans landing at Heathrow... (They tried phoning the Noise Abatement Society, but the people at the other end of the line couldn't hear them because of the noise.)

Anyway, I mustn't stray away from the subject of this talk, which is about astrology and all its underlying facts and fallacies, and a fascinating new scientific truth I have uncovered about the relationship between human affairs and the movements of the planets. My old sparring partner — the German-Irish writer and researcher, von Donegan — is going to be sick with jealousy when he hears what I've found out. Old von Donegan (VD, to his friends) is quite peeved with me, you know — over those jokes I made about him in my last talk.

He wrote to me from Germany and threatened to make me into sausage meat, but I wasn't scared. I wrote back and said, "Do your wurst." I thought he would have enjoyed that little bilingual pun, but he told me he had seen it before — on a 20,000-year-old tablet he dug up in Africa.

However, that is beside the point and I promised that all my remarks would

be relevant and pertinent. You'll note that I've given the talk a concise clear title — if there's one thing I detest it's this modern propaganda technique of the tricky euphemism which allows unscrupulous people to disguise their motives with fancy words. Like that society that was in the news lately, the one for people who like interfering with small children — Paedophile Information Exchange! It sounds so respectable it could be the governing body of the British Medical Association, or even the British Science Fiction Association.

And there's an even sneakier one on the go now!

The other night I was having a drink in a pub in Bermondsey when I was approached by this shifty-looking character who asked me if I was interested in necrophilia. I said to him, "Do you mean having sex with dead people?"

He looked a bit uneasy at that, glanced all around the place, lowered his voice and said, "Actually, old boy, we prefer to refer to it as posthumous caring."

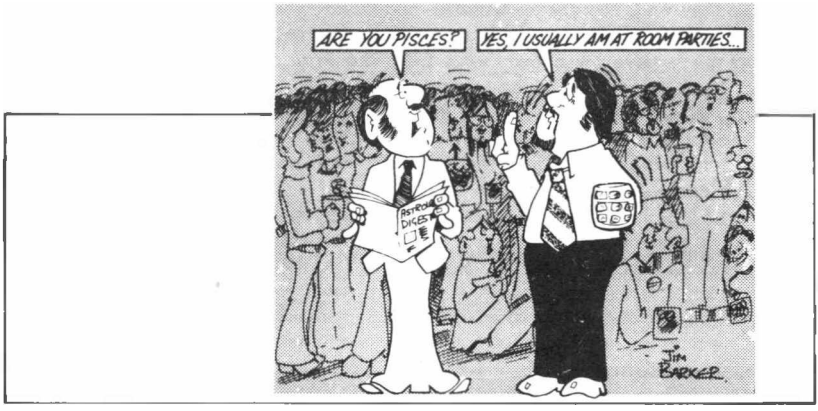
Horrible and underhanded, isn't it? — but that's the technique they use. I'll bet that if you set up a Society for Posthumous Caring you could get it established as a registered charity and get a member of the royal family as your patron.

Dear me — have I wandered away from the point again? No more of it! Belief in astrology has been with us since ancient times and it is deep-rooted in our thought and language. Men have always had the desire to know what the future held for them, and they have tried many different ways of getting this advance information. They used to, for example, poke around the insides of chickens, inspecting their entrails for signs. Or sometimes they used to sit and inspect the palms of their hands — which is what I'd do if I'd had mine stuck inside a chicken all day. It was a filthy habit, that, though no doubt its practitioners had a great fancy name for it which made it sound respectable. Prediction and Prognostication by Poultry Manipulation, perhaps.

But of all the traditional ways of trying to know the future — cards, divining, consulting oracles, subscribing to the "Racing & Football Outlook" — the stars seemed to offer the best prospects. They were a mysterious and ever-changing spectacle, quite obviously connected with the gods in some way, and it was only logical to assume that they influenced men's destinies. Thus the profession of astrologer sprang up, and it has been with us rather a long time — in spite of the fact that the stars have an infuriating habit of telling us things we don't really want to know, and of presenting the information in language of such peculiar vagueness that any value it might have had is completely dissipated.

Imagine what it must have been like to be an ancient Roman general leading an army which was going to face another army in battle the following morning, a battle whose outcome could shape the future of the world. He goes to his astrologer and asks him for advice about how to run things the next day, and should he throw in his cavalry first and keep the archers till later, and will the barbarians overthrow the empire or will the guttering candle of civilisation be kept alight for another decade. The astrologer does a quick horoscope and gives him the following inside dope, straight from the Horse's Head Nebula: "Personal relationships at the office could be difficult this month, but an old friendship could lead to a new outlook on life. Don't conceal anxieties from your steady boyfriend, and your lucky colour is blue."

That's the sort of thing they always say! Sometimes, in an effort to avoid a general air of vagueness, they particularise a bit by saying things like, "If you were



born on a Thursday and have red hair and blue eyes — don't fall out of any tenth-storey windows. The outcome could be distressing." Nobody's going to argue with him on that one, especially anybody who has ever fallen out of a tenth-storey window. Or anybody he landed on. Or sometimes they say, "Wednesday is a day for being careful in business dealings." Of course it is! Every day is a day for being careful in business dealings — although, strangely enough, astrologers themselves don't always appreciate that simple truth.

One of my prized memories from my days as a full-time journalist is the one about one of the big Fleet Street publishing empires which, about fifteen years ago, decided to cash in on the general superstitious interest in astrology by starting a new weekly magazine devoted to nothing else but horoscopes and predictions. It was called, I think, Your Stars and they got about a dozen of the very best astrologers in the country on the payroll so that they could guarantee to tell all their readers exactly what the future held in store for them.

Unfortunately, the magazine only survived for about a month — because sales didn't come up to expectations! The irony in that is so beautiful, and it sums up all my views about astrology.

Astrology as we know it is all a load of bunk.

"That means it isn't a very good subject for a serious scientific talk," you might say. Others might say the whole talk is a bit of a farrago, anyway, and I'm in-

clined to agree with them because I was born on a Thursday. You know the old rhyme — "Wednesday's child is full of woe; Thursday's child has farrago."

But please note that I qualified my condemnation of the subject by saying astrology as we know it is bunk. Other people could have an entirely different approach to astrology, and it is worth remembering that some of the thinkers of old were men of genius. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, was ahead of his time in many ways. I have revealed elsewhere how he created the world's first blue movie. Also, he was famous for his anatomical studies, but not many people know of his connection with early diagnostic medicine...

It came about because he liked working in tempera, which is a type of paint which has eggs as one of its constituents. He also liked working alfresco — he had some funny habits, old Leonardo — and once when he was living on a hill outside Florence he covered the entire outside of his house with a magnificent painting which all the townsfolk used to admire. Unfortunately, the land around his house was infested with a kind of insect which was attracted by the egg in the paint and kept climbing up the wall and eating Leonardo's painting away from the bottom upwards.

He used to counteract this by going out and repainting the picture day by day, but on the days when he wasn't feeling too good he couldn't do that, and the picture used to slowly disappear from the bottom. The townsfolk would look up at his house, shake their heads and say, "Leonardo mustn't be well today — his tempera-chewer is rising." And that's the true origin of that saying.

But that's beside the point... The discoveries I made about astrology came about because I'm an amateur scientist and therefore do not go in for narrow specialisation in one subject. The professional scientist often fails because he channels his mental energy into knowing more and more about one limited subject, whereas I go in for the interdisciplinary, broad spectrum approach. In fact, it's got to the point where I now know practically nothing about almost everything. In this case, I succeeded because I brought in my experience in the apparently unrelated fields of neurology and optics.

It started a few months ago when I got a bit tired of writing SF and decided to have a break from it. Actually, I was advised to have a break from it — by my agent and publisher. Looking back on it, I don't see what my agent got so annoyed about. I had just outlined to him what I thought was a great plot, all about how Winnie the Pooh developed a third eye in the middle of his forehead, a third eye which, naturally, gave him second sight, the way it always does in stories. In the plot he used this extrasensory perception to spy on two meetings of the London SF Circle in the One Tun. My agent seemed a bit uncertain about the commercial value of the proposed story, and he seemed to blow his top altogether when he heard I was going to call it "One Tun, One Tun, Middle Eye Pooh."

Anyway, the upshot was that I turned my restless inquiring mind to other activities for a while. I didn't delve into astrology immediately, or even neurology or optics, because I had got involved with the mystery surrounding the legend of the Flying Dutchman. I have always felt sorry for that poor bloke, condemned to sail around the oceans and seas of the world forever, never able to take a minute's rest, like somebody working his way through college by selling subscriptions to Science Fiction Monthly.

Eventually I proved to my own satisfaction that he wasn't haunted or anything like that — he had simply lost control of his ship. The culprit was a wood-boring parasite (related to da Vinci's insects) which originated in Holland and which had a special liking for the hardwood used in the steering wheels of all ships built in Holland. It used to eat them away, leaving the captain with no means of steering. You

may have heard the name I gave it — Dutch helm disease.

Having disposed of yet another famous mystery, I was looking around for something else to do when Joe, the owner of a local lawn mower factory up in Ulverston, telephoned and asked me to have lunch with him to discuss a problem. He sounded as though it was pretty urgent, which surprised me because one of the things I like about Ulverston is that nothing ever happens there in a hurry. The town's chief claim to fame is that Stan Laurel was born there. When I first went to Ulverston I used to think it was quite remarkable that Stan Laurel should have been born there, out of all the places in the world — then when I got to know the place I realised he couldn't have been born anywhere else. It's a sleepy Stan Laurel sort of a town, where there's never any rush about anything. In fact, I said to one of the men in the local pub, "The philosophy around here seems to be mañana." He said, "What does mañana mean?" I said, "You know — it'll do tomorrow." And he said, "Oh, there's nothing as urgent as that around here."

But Joe was obviously in a hurry, so I arrange to meet him that day, quite pleased at the prospect of a slap-up business lunch. My wife didn't seem too pleased, though. She warned me that I had a habit on occasions like that of eating and drinking far too much.

"It's all right," I quipped, "I'll put it on my Excess card." (She believes in moderation, but I think moderation is only all right in moderation. Excess is better, provided you don't have too much of it.)

I then went out and jumped into my new car. I have to jump into it — there aren't any doors. That's because it's a souped-up job — a Morris Oxtail. The thing I like most about it is that it has a very reliable Italian engine whose manufacturers didn't put it into production until no less than two thousand Italian engineers had checked the design and given their approval and consent. That means, of course, that it is a two thousand si-si engine.

All that aside, I went and met Joe for lunch and, to give him his due, I must say he really lashed out. He missed me though. Actually, it was a pub lunch and he bought me a Cumbrian pheasant, which is a sausage with a feather stuck in it. I had been recommended to him by a mutual friend, a fellow journalist who is the science correspondent for the Beano, but he seemed a bit doubtful about my qualifications, especially my connections with science fiction.

"Science fiction," he said, "isn't that those magazines with covers showing girls dressed in nothing but little bits of brass?"

"Yes," I leered, "but just think of the new dimension that gives to the hobby of brass rubbing."

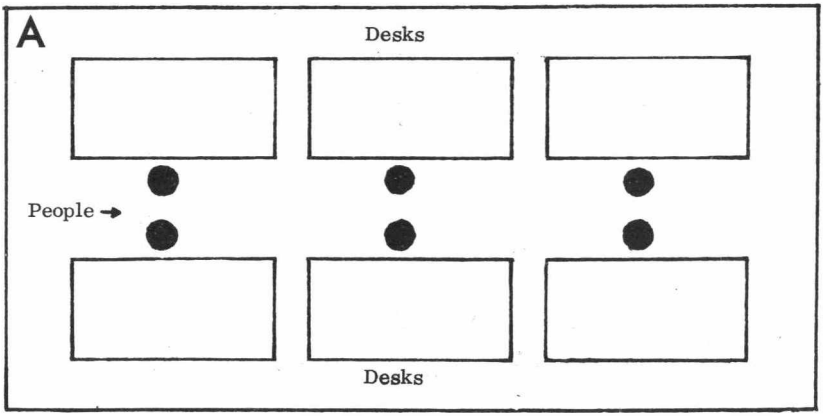
That seemed to reassure him, because he was a really lecherous looking character — the sort of person who could think impure thoughts about Margaret Thatcher. He said, "Doesn't James White write science fiction?"

"Yes, but not only science fiction," I told him. "He's now working on an Irish political musical called 'Don't Cry For Me, Ballymena'. It's a follow-up to his successful nude review, 'Oh, Balbriggan'."

That seemed to allay all his fears, so he told me about his problem, which was that his firm had built a new office block, but when the staff had moved into it their productivity had fallen away to almost zero.

"They don't seem to think properly any more," he said. "The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they're in the lavatory."

It was obvious from the look on his face that he thought the problem was insoluble, and when I asked him to sketch a typical layout for one of his offices he complied without much enthusiasm, and did a drawing like this:—



"Aha, I thought so," I said triumphantly. You should have seen his little face light up — he looked like a NASA official being told that the Mars landers had dug up definite proof of the existence of Ray Bradbury.

"Do you mean," he said, with a hopeful tremor in his voice, "you know what's wrong?"

"Of course," I said. "It's a clear-cut case of encephalic field interference."

It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that the look of joy on his face died out of his face a little when I said that. I went on and explained to him that the active human brain is surrounded by a faint electro-magnetic field which extends several feet beyond the skull. (The only known exception to this is in the case of fans of the TV show Space: 1999. Their skulls are too thick to allow anything to pass through.)

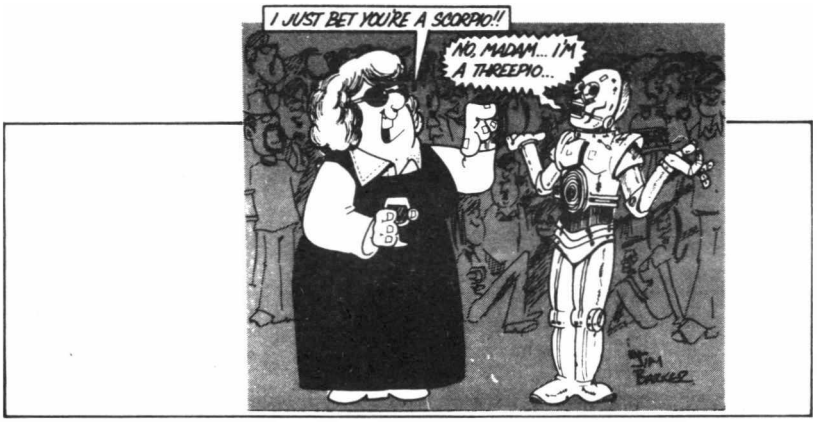
When people are crammed too close together their brain fields interfere with each other and that causes a severe damping down of the powers of thought — as you will be able to prove for yourself if you go to any of the room parties tonight. I explained to Joe that all he had to do was move his staff round to the other side of their desks, thus separating them enough to allow their brain fields full play, without any unwanted reflection from walls either, and everything would be all right.

"This is marvellous," he said, finally convinced. "The firm has lost so much money lately that I can't pay you in cash, but if you like I'll give you a lawn mower out of my factory."

I said, "No mower for me thanks — I'm driving."

We parted and I returned to my study to embark on some more vital scientific research. On the face of it, it appeared that I had wound up yet another successful case — and yet something was troubling me. I had a feeling that I had been on the verge of a major scientific discovery, that something that had been said during our meeting had contained a small and apparently insignificant clue to something else, a clue that I had missed. And as anybody who watches Horizon and similar TV shows will tell you, small and apparently insignificant clues are the very best sorts for scientific researchers. Big significant clues are a complete waste of time — but when you get a small and apparently insignificant clue you know you're really on to something good.

With the small voice clamouring at the back of my mind, I got down to work on another project of mine — the design for a spaceship engine powered by the heat from

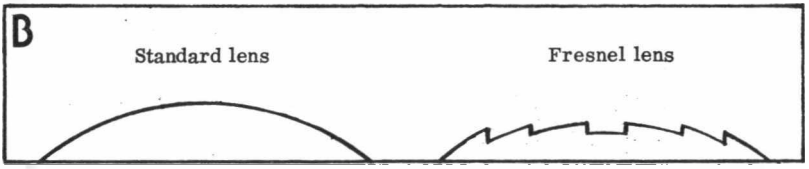


continental quilts. Continental quilts, or duvets, are marvellous things, you know — even though they're so expensive. When I was a kid, and this shows how times have changed, every bed in every house in the country, even the poorest, had a duvet on it — only we didn't know they were duvets. We called them eiderdowns.

And because we didn't know how they worked — there were no Sunday colour supplements to explain it all to us — we used them wrongly. In the wintertime we put a sheet on the bed, followed by about twenty woollen blankets, and put the duvet, or eiderdown, on top of all that — and we still froze every night. What was happening, you see, was that the duvet was heating the top ten layers of blankets, but that heat couldn't filter all the way down to us.

I worked on the spaceship engine for a while, but my mind wasn't able to grapple properly with the problem. I put it aside and dabbled a little with a paper I was writing on criminology which puts forward the theory that, just as some people claim that sex education in schools can lead to juvenile rape, the teaching of economics can incite schoolboys to go out and rob banks. But my heart wasn't in that project either, so I picked up a book on the science of optics and was idly glancing through it when, by purest chance, my gaze fell on a paragraph about Fresnel lenses. There was a diagram there showing what a Fresnel lens was like, and as I looked at it I felt something strange and powerful begin to well up inside me. It was the sausage I had eaten in the pub at lunchtime. A couple of indigestion tablets calmed my stomach down a bit, and I began studying the diagram again with the beginnings of a heady intellectual excitement. I knew I was on the verge of a breakthrough. (So was the sausage, but I was too busy to care.)

An ordinary lens has a single continuous curve, which means that a big lens tends to be very thick and heavy, which is a drawback for most applications. A Fresnel lens follows the same curvature, but keeps stepping down at close intervals so that you get roughly the same focussing effect with far less volume of glass or plastic.



I stared at the cross-section of the Fresnel lens — with half-formed ideas heaving in my subconscious — and tried to identify what it reminded me of, something from another field of knowledge altogether. Suddenly I had it! It was all there in front of me! No, not the sausage — I don't believe in flogging a joke to death — but the answer to the questions that had been niggling me all afternoon.

The Fresnel lens resembled nothing more than a cross-section through an ancient Roman amphitheatre!

Like a man in a hypnotic trance, I heard Joe's voice once again saying, "The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they're in the lavatory." That was the small and apparently insignificant clue I had missed. People do tend to think well when they are in the toilet, but according to my theories of encephalic field interference that should have been impossible because of the notorious smallness of office toilets. It dawned on me that I had made the mistake of thinking like a Flatlander — only considering the brain field in the two-dimensional terms of a plane. And the solution to this sub-problem lay in the fact that office toilets, although small in floor area, are usually high-ceiling affairs — and that allows the brain fields to extend upwards without hindrance. I had been making the mistake of forgetting all about the third dimension.

What has all this to do with Fresnel lenses, Roman amphitheatres, and astrology?

Well, just imagine thousands and thousands of people packed onto the terraces of the amphitheatre. It's just like a lens — or, more correctly, a mirror — focussing all their brain fields upwards into a psychic beam of unimaginable power. A concentrated torrent of human mind force which is being shot into space like an invisible searchlight beam!

The mind-shaking question was: What effect would such a beam have on any distant planet it happened to strike?

With trembling fingers I got out the calculator I had borrowed from Robert Silverberg — it's the one he uses to calculate how many novels he can write in a week — and did a few sums. A minute of high-speed computation showed me that at 3.15 on the afternoon of July 2nd in the year 80 AD... just as the newly-completed Colosseum in Rome was being used for its first gladiatorial combats... with the terraces filled with 100,000 blood-crazed spectators... the planet Mars was precisely at zenith.

We may never know what Mars looked like before that fateful moment.

It may have been a green and pleasant world... a place of tinkling streams and peaceful meadows, where colourful birds chattered among the gently nodding trees — but in an instant it was transformed, by the ravening force of all those minds filled with images of blood-stained sand, into the Mars we know today. The planet of endless red deserts.

Venus got the treatment next. It strayed into the beam from the big amphitheatre in Tunisia, but it was during the interval and there was nothing going on in the

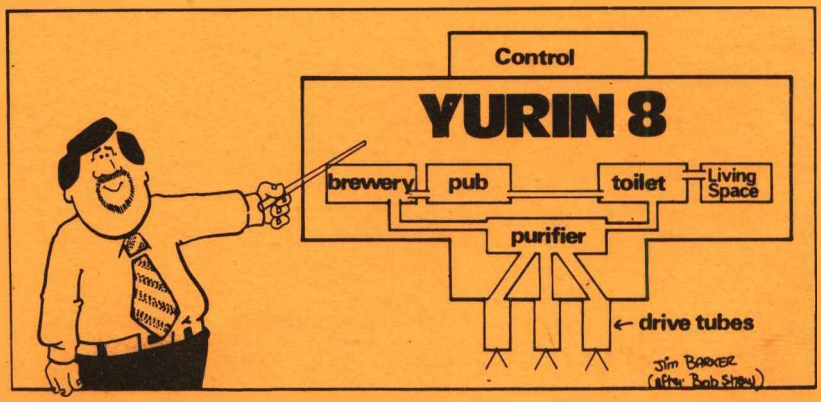
arena — so it just got turned into a ball of hot white sand.

Jupiter was unlucky enough to be caught in the beam emanating from one of the very earliest Welsh poetry and song competitions, held in a natural amphitheatre in Glamorgan, and it got turned into a huge ball of hot gas.

My researches haven't yet revealed what happened to the other planets in the Solar System, but at least now we know that there is a direct link between human beings and the planets and stars. The only trouble is that the astrologers, not being coldly logical thinkers like me, have got everything backwards. Astrologers on distant worlds must be important people because they can warn their customers about Earth being in the ascendancy. When they talk about Earth being in the seventh house, you'd better sit up and pay attention. We influence the heavenly bodies — and what a dreadful responsibility it is. Just think what the audience at a Linda Lovelace film could do to an unsuspecting little planet like Mercury. It hardly bears thinking about.

The only bright spot I can find in all this is that in August next year when the Worldcon is being held the Moon will be high in the sky above Brighton. If the convention hall is the right shape, and if we all work very hard at it and think the right kind of thoughts, we might be able to turn the Moon into a permanent science fiction convention. It seems to me that that's the sort of noble, yet practical, common cause which is just what the science fiction community needs to prove to the rest of the world that we aren't merely impractical visionaries.

See you up there!


Control
YURIN 8
brewery
pub
toilet
Living Space
purifier
← drive tubes
Jim BARKER
(after Bob Shaw)