



A Tale from the White Hart

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Roz Kaveney

Artwork *Brad Foster*

This little fanzine is a single issue one only, though letters of comment would be very much appreciated and may even be published! It is without doubt the most difficult fanzine I've ever produced, and probably the one most deserving to be so.

This fanzine is dedicated to the memory of Iain Banks

A Tale from the White Hart

I can tell you exactly where I was when I heard that Iain Banks was seriously ill. I was in the lounge of a Butlins self-catering apartment at Skegness, checking my emails on the phone when the news came through from Dave Hodson. I was with my family at Spring Harvest (a Christian event organised at a couple of Butlins sites around Easter, we've been going to it for years – which is the main reason you don't see me much at Eastercons lately, it being difficult to be in two places at once..), the mobile signal was weak and the free Wi-Fi only available at certain parts of the site. The weather was glorious, the sun was shining, but a cloud had just arrived.

The day afterwards there was a message from Iain via Dave. Iain was thinking of arranging a get together with 'skiffy pals' in a London pub one evening in mid-May and was passing on the news through various friends to anybody who would be able to attend. Dave kindly offered me his sofa bed for the night, the

date was confirmed and rail tickets bought.

I didn't know Iain Banks that well, basically I've drunk with him at convention bars over the years and dined with him at a superb Indian restaurant in Glasgow one August, along with Wanda (my wife) and John Jarrold. Iain came onto the fannish scene about the same time I did, I gaffiated in the 90's and so didn't meet him again until Interaction in 2005 and then later at Novacon 40. So we weren't exactly what you would call 'close'. That's the strange thing about Fandom, and especially so in the age of the Social Media revolution. People stay connected, even if it's only loosely, for decades – and sometimes even decades apart.

Yet I wanted to go, I wanted to meet up with Iain again and share a pint whilst he was still well enough.

Up until meeting Dave at Euston station I still didn't actually know where we were going. Dave and I hadn't met in person for the best part of twenty years (like it or loathe it, Facebook really has changed the world) and it was good to chew the fat. Unfortunately, thanks to a recurring problem with a troublesome tooth I was restricted to a non-alcoholic choice of drinks, so my pint of beer was replaced with diet coke; the reunion was about as un-fannish as it could be! We did

however wander off to a certain SF bookshop in the area and then onto the White Hart Hotel on Drury Lane – a little early at 6 pm' ish and hence the first ones there.

I can count on one hand the number of London pubs that I've drunk in over the last five years and have never visited the White Hart. I was quite impressed with its classic pub nature and wasn't too surprised that it was supposed to be the oldest licensed premises in London. It's a small place with a function space at the back of the room. Dave and I poached a couple of comfy seats and settled in for the night.

We had no idea who would be joining us. Dave knew who he had invited, and also knew that other fans had been asked to 'spread the word', but we didn't have a clue about who would turn up. People did though, one by one or in small groups, people I knew and people I didn't, people I had last seen a couple of months ago, people I hadn't seen in decades ...

An early arrival was John Jarrold. I was surprised to see John as he was flying out to New Orleans a day or so later (he goes there a lot, I suspect it probably his second home town) and it was great to sit and chat with him – we've known each other since the early 80's. Roz Kaveney, Chris Fowler and Pat Cardigan arrived as well as Avedon Carol, Alun Harris and Owen

Whiteoak – a full group of friends that I hadn't met face to face for the best part of thirty years, though we had been reconnected through the web.

It was more than strange. To meet up in a bar with people that I had last saw in a convention years before was amazing. Facebook images ensured that we could easily recognize each other, however the photos we choose to publish can't portray the fullness of person – it's almost as if physically meeting up with people stirs memories in our shared pasts. Bizarrely, once the initial 'Hi there, how have you been' conversations were over, it was like we were picking up on conversations we had started decades before – fandom at its best.

Avedon and Rob had actually only just returned from Corflu, both of them had come down with a bug on the flight back, Rob was pretty rough with it and wasn't up for the night out anywhere. I didn't even recognize Owen (that's what happens when you don't join the FB gang, no one knows what you look like now) and was truly surprised to see this youngish looking guy with Short Hair - I suspect he might well have a portrait in the attic. We had last met at a Conception in Leeds in the April of 1987.

The only other person I knew in the ever increasing group (we were

beginning to swell at this time to about twenty or so) was Jim Burns – who is without doubt one of my favourite professional SF artist – Jim had just managed to nurse his car over from the West Country for the occasion. I've always liked Jim's work, and he had become one of my earliest Facebook fandom friends, probably back in 2010 or thereabouts. It's always a real pleasure to spend time with Jim, and next time we meet I hope not to be on another course of dental antibiotics!

The evening looked like it was going to be a good one; however the underlying facts about Iain's condition were never far from the surface of everyone's conversation. We all knew how seriously ill he was, and many of us suspected that this would be the last time we would meet. Personally, I've been to many gatherings of friends sharing a drink in memory of someone who had passed – but I had never been to one whilst the person was so very much still with us. However this night certainly wasn't a wake; this evening was to be a living celebration of friendship, a few hours of good companionship amidst difficult times, a truly unique evening. Iain was due to arrive at about 7.30 or so, the tiny room was pretty full now with about forty of us, the fine buffet spread that our host had provided certainly looked

more than enough for all comers, the White Hart obviously knew what it was doing in the kitchen. Malcolm Edwards had joined us thirty minutes before (somebody else I knew from the past) and the room was now buzzing.

Iain arrived, and was looking a good deal better than I had expected he would.

To be honest, I can't remember what happened next, there may be have been applause, there certainly was a crescendo of greetings from the gathered fannish clan, it was as if the entire room just got brighter. Everyone was on their feet.

Iain Banks always did have a way of lighting up a room. Looking a bit tired and a bit thinner, he still had his brilliant sense of humour and sparkle in his eye. He was obviously glad to see us.

And the back room at the White Hart was now officially a con room party, with Iain making his well round every small group of fans and friends for the next half hour or so, welcoming us; laughing with us. The inevitable 'how are you feeling mate' questions were asked but never dwelled on; his positive approach to life had not been beaten by the small matter of having a terminal illness. After a short while, we all settled back into the usual fan bar huddles, putting the various worlds to right ...

Iain was drinking sparkling water – which I suspect was not the preferred drink of choice – so I didn't feel too much out of place with my pints of diet coke. In conversation with him it sounded like his consultant was hoping to start chemo in a few weeks time, something that could improve the prognosis, Iain sounded quite hopeful that he could gain a few more months, at the time he thought he had six months to a year.

There was talk of possibly arranging for an interview to be filmed, with the intention to show it at next year's worldcon in London if he wasn't well enough to attend, we talked about the book due to be published in the next month or so, there was a future that wasn't all negative. Reality was acknowledged by all of us and accepted - but there's no point dwelling on dark times when the lights are still on!

After a couple of hours Iain made his goodbyes to us all, coming round to us individually, shaking our hands and wishing us well. This was for me the saddest part of the night, with the full reality returning and settling in. When we spoke, I gave him Wanda's best wishes, and reminded him of that great evening in Glasgow where Iain had managed to get a table by saying that he was Iain 'Banks of Scotland' – a play on words that apparently did the trick!

With a laugh and a smile he left us that evening and went back to his hotel along with some close friends, tired but happy.

It was like the clock had stopped; a defining moment had taken place and had been shared by dozens of us. The room was noisy; if not actually noisier than it had been just five minutes earlier, yet in another sense it had gone quiet for just a moment.

And then the fan room feel returned. Beers were drunk, diet coke was sipped and the worlds again put to right. After a while we all drifted away, and said our goodnights.

Dave and I caught the last tube out of town and made our way over to his flat. I enjoyed a very comfy sofa bed, fine coffee in the morning and a good breakfast before heading back into town, the day's itinerary including the British Museum and Euston station. I'm sorry to say; this was my first visit to the museum and I couldn't help but be impressed by the place. Euston was of course no stranger to me.

Iain left us on the 9th June, way, way too soon. It came as a real shock to me as there was no sense at any time that evening that the end was near.

I know that I had made the right call to make the trip. I wouldn't have

missed the evening for the world and
it was a great privilege to share a
few hours with him, I know that he
enjoyed himself!

Roz says it far better than me, and
wrote a poem for him on the night.
Iain loved it

A poet cannot lie. Must tell the fact
that people go, in pain, and cannot
stay.

Last month, last week, last hour of
last day.

He took my hand. And my voice
might have cracked

but his did not. A sort of madcap
grace he had. We used to think it
was the drink.

He'd laugh, be serious, dance on the
brink of parapets. No mask behind
his face.

He wrote, once, of a gentle alien spy
observing, liking. Someday going
back.

That wasn't him. He has no chance
to pack
some souvenirs. He won't leave, he
will die.

Cheeks slightly gaunt, his shy
sardonic smile
haunts like his rich sad sweet
roccoco style

Roz Kaveney

I thought it would be only fitting to
finish this zine with a message that
Iain sent over to Dave a few days
after that great night at the White
Hart. Dave subsequently sent it over
to us via Facebook....

"Just paid the remains of the
catering bill over the phone and told
the girl I'd had as much fun as I'd
ever had in pub without drinking..."

Thanks Iain, it was a great night!

Ron Gemmell, October 2013