

An homage to Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913 – 1966) writing as Cordwainer Smith



Paul Linebarger's father was a legal adviser to the Republic of China and a close personal friend of the founder of modern China, Dr Sun Yat-sen, who became young Paul's godfather. His father moved the family to France and then Germany while Sun Yat-sen was struggling against contentious warlords in China. As a result, Linebarger had unparalleled cross-cultural childhood experiences.

By adulthood he had become fluent in six languages and, at age 23 received a PhD in Political Science from Johns Hopkins University. He was Professor of Political Science at Duke University from 1937 to 1946 where he produced highly regarded works on Far Eastern Affairs.

Linebarger's academic career was interrupted by active service as a 2nd Lieutenant in World War II. In 1943 he was sent to China to coordinate military intelligence operations, where he befriended Chiang Kai-shek. At war's end he had risen to the rank of major. In 1947, he moved to the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC where he served as Professor of Asiatic Studies. He used his wartime experience to write the book *Psychological Warfare* (1948), which is regarded by many in the field as a classic text. He was recalled to advise the British forces in the Malayan Emergency and the US Eighth Army in the Korean War.

Paul called himself "a visitor to small wars", and refrained from involvement in Vietnam. He is known to have done undocumented work for the CIA. When active in those Cold War intelligence circles, he contributed a short piece on Puerto Rico for the magazine *ENCOUNTER* (ish #9, June 1954, pp. 57-59) that was bankrolled by the CIA's hearts & minds program (see *THE CULTURAL COLD WAR* by Frances Stonor Saunders).

He travelled extensively, became a member of the Foreign Policy Association and was called upon to advise JFK.

Those were Paul Linebarger's day jobs. His extracurricular literary output was *under the radar*, in that he employed pseudonyms to safeguard his anonymity. He was 'Carmichael Smith' for his political thriller *Atomsk*, 'Anthony Bearden' for poetry, 'Felix C. Forrest' for the novels *Ria* and *Carola*, and 'Cordwainer Smith' for his science fiction.

In 1966, most of his science fiction that had previously appeared in science fiction magazines under the pseudonym Cordwainer Smith was published in book form for the first time. All but five of the stories are about the Instrumentality of Mankind, ruled by the Lords of the Instrumentality who select themselves in relation to their survival skills in mental telepathy. There is the Lord Femtiosex who is just and without pity. There is the Lady Goroke who shows kindness to underpeople but only if kindness is lawful. And there is the Lady Arabella Underwood whose justice no man can understand. And there many other weird and wonderful characters among the Lords, less gifted humans, robots, memes, and animal-derived underpeople.

Set in the far future, his two novels and twenty-odd short stories chart the history of an evolving civilisation over a period of fifteen thousand years. To Western readers his writing style is unique; but his Asian fans will identify Chinese narrative techniques. His writing more closely resembles poetry than the dry prose of conventional SF.

At a basic level his stories are fun to read as adventure yarns that cast odd perspectives on the human condition but, for readers with the wit and erudition to perceive them and the patience to winkle them out, they are also full of historical references and complex literary puns.

The stories exhibit a consistent morality whose principal themes involving cats, cruelty and children recur again and again. The scientific mainspring is faster-than-light travel between the stars and the consequent expansion of human kind throughout the universe. In this interstellar culture true humans are cocooned in privileged ease, the work being done by robots or by 'underpeople' who are animals genetically modified to have near-human intelligence and appearance.

The Chiefs of the Instrumentality exercise more or less benevolent dictatorship over all, where themes of love, courage, cruelty, hope, innocence and belief are played out in settings of astonishing richness and complexity.

Smith's Instrumentality stories have a seductive appeal to Australians, considering that much of the wealth of the galaxy is concentrated in the hands of a squattocracy on the planet Norstrilia (strine for Old North Australia). It is worth mentioning, too, that Australian SF fan and critic John Foyster (1941 – 2003) opined that Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality of Mankind was meant to represent the U.S. military-industrial complex. The linkage is hard to reason out; but, once the connection is made, it's pretty obvious.

Pictured opposite is the book cover for Smith's most notable story, *Scanners Live In Vain*.

