

OPUNTIA

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BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

The Postal Age: The Emergence Of Modern Communications In Nineteenth-Century America by David Henkin (2007, trade paperback) is a look at how the Papernet developed and spread in the USA of the 1800s, and how it turned that country from a collection of local identities into a national consciousness. As Henkin remarks: *“postal exchanges began habituating large groups of Americans to new expectations of contact with distant places”*, and goes on to write that *“in 1820 most Americans did not engage directly in any form of interactive, long-distance communications network, while by 1870 most of them did”*.

In the earliest decades of the USPO, it was essentially a broadcast system for newspapers at a subsidized rate, while personal letters were prohibitively expensive. Prior to postage rate reform, it was common for people to send distant friends the local newspapers, which were cheaper to mail than personal letters and considered just as good for correspondence. Cheap postage converted the USPO into an interactive network of people corresponding directly with each other. The spread of networking in the postal system in the 1850s resulted not only from cheap postage but the realization that it was no longer necessary to have news at hand to impart in a letter. One could send a letter for no other reason than to say hello and keep up contacts in faraway places.

The major reasons for the spread of the Papernet were mass literacy, fast transport (railroads and canals), and cheap postage. In the good old days of the early 1800s, postage was 25 cents, about one-third of a non-farm labourer's daily pay. (Call it \$30 per letter in today's equivalent.) Telegrams were extremely expensive, had no privacy, and were only used for business and personal emergencies.

After the USPO introduced 3-cent postage in 1851, correspondence bloomed exponentially. The advent of postage stamps, a high-tech item for that time, required educating the users on how to lick them. Stamps became popular, the Microsoft Windows of their day, only more reliable.

The burst of correspondence after cheap postage also introduced new fads and practices which became practical for the first time. Autograph collecting became popular in the middle-late 1800s because it cost little to request and send autographs. Trading daguerreotype portraits was common among family and friends separated by the width of a continent; for the first time in history the masses did not have to depend on fading memories of their distant loved ones' faces. Horticulture experienced a massive boom as garden seeds could be sent across the country, whether a nurseryman's gaudy packets or a few seeds from the old home town Back East to a homesick Forty-Niner toiling for gold in California.

In urban areas it became possible for a young American woman to have a postal box number, a prospect which alarmed the prudes. This did not go over well with traditionalists, who expected women to stay and home and rely on their menfolk to pick up their letters. A great controversy of that era was whether or not it was immoral to write letters on a Sabbath, and certainly many busybody preachers tried to prevent the USPO from carrying mails on Sundays. The Papernet was a threat to those who wanted the old ways to continue, and people to know their places and stay in them.

The post office building was both a public place where citizens could congregate, and a private place where mail could be sent anonymously and received pseudonymously. It was where a heterogenous crowd of people could see and be seen, and a meeting place of diversity, where different economic classes and ethnic groups rubbed shoulders or stood in line behind each other.

The sudden rise of personal correspondence made it necessary for letter writing to become a subject in schools. Everyone learned standard formats for letters, and by experience discovered the social norms expected in correspondence, just as today e-mail senders are taught not to write in all caps or to forward urban legends.

During the California Gold Rush and the Civil War, the sudden increase in mobility of settlers and soldiers meant that the postal system became an integral part of people's lives in keeping their families connected. Migrants worried a great deal about keeping in contact. When a post office in a pioneer settlement announced the mails had arrived, most of the adult population would surround it in a frenzy of anticipation. The Civil War was the first mass war in which the majority of combatants were literate and expected to send and receive mail.

The effect of cheap postage had side effects. Prior to it, St. Valentine's Day was an obscure event, seldom noted anywhere in the USA, but by the late 1850s millions of valentines were exchanged by mail. Cheap postage also brought mass mailings of junk mail and circulars, as for the first time businesses and charities could spam a nation at low cost.

Not far behind were the fraud men, working many of the same scams that today have migrated to the Internet. Another effect was a huge surge in dead letters, which in turn forced letter writers to become more clear in addressing letters. Everyone had to have a street address or box number, and simply writing "John Smith, City" increased the probability of the letter being diverted to the Dead Letter Office. Pornography became a booming business, as people could now receive it anonymously. When the postcard rate was introduced, it was the e-mail of its day.

A Flat On Foo Ming Street by Esther Halstein Dubé (2007, trade paperback) is a biography of an Alberta librarian who spent several years teaching English in Hong Kong during the 1960s. Before I go further, I should add a disclaimer that Esther is my second cousin. Her maternal grandparents, immigrants from Finland, were my great-grandparents, who homesteaded near Eckville, Alberta, in 1903.

In 1963, Esther was still single and working at the Edmonton Public Library. A bitter cold winter prompted her to seek a change of pace. Having lived in Edmonton for four years while studying at the University of Alberta, I can sympathize with her. The main reason I moved to Calgary after graduation was because I couldn't bear the thought of spending another winter in Edmonton.

Esther booked steerage passage on a steamship bound for Manila with a stopover in Hong Kong. Air travel was too expensive for most people. The ship was still at sea on November 22 when rumours swept it that the American President had been assassinated. The Chinese and Filipinos were shocked; they were used to such things in their lands, but the USA? Esther recalls how everyone was huddled around shortwave radios trying to pick up the news out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

In Hong Kong, she initially stayed in a cramped apartment with another family and their servants. She had the luxury of a tiny bedroom for herself; the servants slept on cots in the kitchen hallway. Esther didn't marry until after her return to Canada, so she was still using her maiden name of Halstein. Her circle of Chinese acquaintances had trouble pronouncing it, so they adapted her name as Ha Soo Ting, meaning "snowflake", a reference to her homeland.

Hong Kong was squalid and incredibly over-crowded to European eyes. (All white folk were called Europeans, even if they were from the Americas.) Worse yet was the humidity, for Alberta has a dry climate and humidity is never mentioned in weather forecasts on the radio. It took getting used to, such as constantly airing out clothes so they wouldn't go mouldy in a couple of days.

Esther soon realized that teaching English was not as easy as it seemed. Her night-school students worked by day and took classes every night of the week, leaving them little time for life. The turnover rate of students was extremely high; Esther estimated only 3% of her students succeeded to any extent. The best she could hope for was that they could get through a couple of short stories in a term. Most of the students should never have been admitted as they were hopeless, but the private colleges that Esther worked for took the money and ran. She remarks the students would have been better off spending their money at the

cinema, where they could at least get some enjoyment out of a movie.

Later she taught at church-supported schools. She was told they were tough places to teach and the students rowdy, but found that compared with the typical Canadian high school, they were places of decorum. For regular students, examinations were a matter of great stress because to fail was to lose face. Not a few suicides happened after final marks were posted. Esther initially tried to teach English by the accepted method of studying great works of literature, but later dropped this in favour of having her students write or speak on current events and politics, which gave better results.

After being settled for a while, Esther found a flat in Foo Ming Street., a relatively prestigious 17th-floor unit. She was the only European in the neighbourhood. She was such a sensation that the local inhabitants soon began referring to the high-rise as the European's place, and giving taxi drivers directions for a certain address as being near the European woman. Esther tamed two alley kittens for her apartment to control the rats and cockroaches, and later brought them back to Canada. The high-rise was crowded, and homeless people slept in the hallways. Esther got to know them and viewed them as human burglar alarms, since no thief could get past them without arousing suspicion.

Her flat had poor kitchen facilities but this didn't matter since she usually ate out. She also browsed the bookstores, and comments on finding one store with several copies of "Teach Yourself Finnish", a useless language in both Hong Kong and Alberta.

Her stay in Hong Kong was in the days of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guard. The colony was always atwitter with fears about what might happen, and constantly plagued by refugees flooding across the border. Many of Esther's students approved of the Cultural Revolution shaking up the mainland, and had no sympathy for the Americans in Vietnam. When Hong Kong began to suffer more directly from the attentions of China in 1966 and 1967, they suddenly changed their minds. As Esther notes in her book, revolution is all very well if far away but when it is in one's own backyard, opinions suddenly change.

The riots worsened in 1967, fomented by the Red Guards, and it became dangerous for Europeans to be seen in public. This was not the sole reason Esther decided to return to Canada. She also felt herself drifting into a dead end as an expatriate English teacher. It was time for her to make changes, starting with a return to Canada. And so she did. After returning to Canada, Esther worked as a librarian in Sylvan Lake, just east of Eckville, before retiring in 1993 with her husband to a nearby farm at Kuusamo, where many of our mutual Finnish ancestors are buried.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

by Dale Speirs

Alternative history has become increasingly popular over the past decade, although it has been around, in the modern form that we know it, for more than a century. AH refers to other history written as fiction, and speculative fact articles are called counterfactuals, which have no pretense to character development.

Rising Sun Victorious is an anthology edited by Peter Tsouras (2007, mass market paperback). The stories are counterfactuals about how Japan might have won the Pacific War of the late 1930s and early 1940s, which the USA did not enter until 1941. By "won" is not meant occupying continental USA, for the Japanese knew they could never do that. Their only strategy was to try and hit the USA forces hard enough in one punch to make them agree to a peace treaty that would allow Japan to hold its gains in southeast Asia.

The first story, by Tsouras himself, is "Hokushin: The Second Russo-Japanese War", and posits that the Japanese decided to attack northward instead of southward as in our timeline. They first try to annex a large chunk of the USSR by one grand invasion, but lose badly because the Soviets have a huge armaments manufacturing base, while the Japanese could not hope to match them.

After licking their wounds, the Japanese decide to take the vital port of Vladivostok and district, as being something easier to bite off and chew. They are help by Hitler's invasion of Russia, which diverted Red Army divisions to the west. The Japanese attack Vladivostok from China and by sea, and eventually isolate it as a new Maritime province of the Empire. Meanwhile, Stalin has disappeared after the fall of Moscow. Russia is done for, slowly dismembered from each end.

“Be Careful What You Wish For” by Wade Dudley discusses War Plan Orange, the American military strategy to deal with Japanese aggression. This counterfactual has Japan skipping the Pearl Harbor attack in favour of the Philippines/southeast Asia invasions. The Americans plan an old-fashioned battleship war but MacArthur botches up the same way he did in our timeline before the U.S. fleet could get there. American battleships charge into Surigao Strait unaware that the Japanese carrier fleet is awaiting them, and are slaughtered. When news of the defeat reaches the USA, there is massive demoralization and panic. Roosevelt, with no worthwhile Pacific defenses left, sues for peace so that he can concentrate on Germany, and yields to Japan its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in exchange for leaving Australia and New Zealand alone.

“Pearl Harbor: Irredeemable Defeat” by Frank Shirer looks at what is one of the paradoxes of our timeline, namely that Pearl

Harbor was a failure for the Japanese. The attack -6- in our timeline missed the aircraft carriers and antagonized the USA without making any dent in its massive industrial capacity on the mainland. Shirer considers a very plausible counterfactual, where the American commanders in Hawaii actually got the warnings in time, albeit they would only have had two hours notice. They needed time to mobilize (you don't just turn an ignition key on a battleship and pull away from the dock a moment later) but at least they weren't totally surprised. The defenders got a fair number of fighter planes into the air. The other divergence is that the Japanese scout planes spot an American aircraft carrier at sea, and split the attacking force between the two targets. This reduces the intensity of the attack on Pearl Harbor but also results in the Enterprise being sunk. In our timeline, the Japanese just missed sinking the Nevada in the narrow channel of Pearl Harbor but in this one they catch it there. The sunken battleship blocks the harbor for months, bottling up the what is left of the Pacific fleet. Another plausible divergence is that the Japanese do launch that third wave of planes, taking out the submarine pens, fuel storage tanks, and the heavy repair facilities. The result is that whatever ships the U.S. has left in the Pacific are pulled back into a West Coast fleet, leaving the Japanese free to run amok in the Pacific.

“Coral And Purple” by James Arnold begins with Station Hypo, the cryptanalysis station monitoring Japanese radio traffic, and its

intelligence officers trying to predict the next move of the Japanese Navy. Everyone on both sides is concentrating on the Coral Sea, the eventual invasion route to Australia. The Japanese learn from an agent in Australia that their codes have been broken, and Admiral Yamamoto takes action accordingly. Instead of changing the code, the Japanese keep transmitting fake plans while using couriers for the real plan. The Coral Sea engagement becomes a minor kerfluffle, while the Japanese send their capital ships east instead and re-write their Midway plans for better results.

“Nagumo’s Luck” by Forrest Lindsey hinges on a divergence that almost happened in our timeline at Midway, when the American planes that wiped out the Japanese carriers instead got lost trying to find them and decided to land at Midway to refuel. This left the American carriers undefended and the Japanese sank all three of them. From there, it was a pro forma matter to successfully invade Midway, cutting off the Americans from much of the Pacific. The Japanese never had any intention of conquering the USA in our timeline; all they wanted was to force a peace treaty that would make the Pacific a Japanese lake. This Midway alternative results in Hawaii being taken and bombarding aircraft factories conveniently located along the California coast. The American priority of “Germany first” was rescinded and Operation Torch in North Africa canceled. Everything was thrown into defending the West Coast and the Panama Canal. The

Battle of California commenced October 8, 1942, as Yamamoto’s fleets arrived off the coast at Los Angeles and San Diego. But the Japanese over-reached themselves and were forced to withdraw after the attack, thus confirming the basic trend of the Pacific war, that they never had the capability to hold their expansionist gains.

“Samurai Down Under” by John Gill deals with the Japanese invasion of Australia. Yamamoto would not be dissuaded from his Midway plans, so Japan found itself fighting on two fronts at opposite ends of the ocean. The plan was never to occupy all of Australia, but to set up enclaves for the bombers to hammer the cities and ports. The intended idea was to establish a Vichy-style Australia. The Battle of Coral Sea, the last hope of the Americans in stopping the invasion, only slowed the Japanese by two days. Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea, was taken and became the springboard for the invasion. Cairns and Townsville, on the northeast coast of Australia, were the first landing sites for the Japanese. That was as far as they got, for logistics put them in a tight spot and lack of re-supply finished them off, saving Australia from being incorporated into the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

“The Japanese Raj” by David Isby supposes the least likely of any Pacific War counterfactual, an invasion and occupation by Japan of India. This would have over-extended Japanese supply lines past the breaking point,

and thinned out their troops too dangerously. India was a fractious subcontinent riven by ethnic feuding. The British were already in the process of slowly losing control, and had no moral arguments for the natives as to why they should be the overlords, other than that the Japanese would be worse. The invasion began in March 1942, assisted by the low morale of the population and unwillingness of natives to die for the Brits. Ghandi and company quickly find out that non-violent resistance is a non-starter when applied to the Japanese. But Japan was over-extended, and by 1943 India and Pakistan had re-emerged as independent Dominions. One side effect was that while the invasion lasted, China was cut off from the Allies, and the Nationalist government fell in 1944.

“Guadalcanal” by John Burt begins with the U.S. Marines easily taking Guadalcanal on August 8, 1942. The Japanese respond with a naval sortie the next day, and over the course of the month the two sides pushed each other back and forth. This included the loss of the carrier Enterprise. From there, the battle degenerated over the months to a race to see who could stay on the island longest. It turned out that the Marines, deprived of supplies, were the first to blink, and were evacuated. Guadalcanal becomes Japanese property.

“There Are Such Things As Miracles” by Christopher Anderson looks at the beginning of the end of the Pacific War. In the

summer of 1944, after the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, the Leyte Gulf became the last hope of the Japanese as they tried to stop the American landings there that would retake the Philippines. Due to a breakdown in communications between American admirals, the San Bernardino Strait had been left unguarded. The Japanese sailed through to annihilate the tightly packed American transports waiting to offload in Leyte Gulf. FDR was forced to sue for peace as the disaster turned public opinion against him.

The final story “Victory Rides The Divine Wind” by D.M. Giangreco also is the weakest story of this anthology. It is written as a tedious question-and-answer session at a military conference with far too many data dumps. The divergence is that kamikaze planes (and speedboats) were more effective than just the pinprick attacks they were in our timeline, a rather big assumption. The story begins after the kamikazes have stalemated the Allied invasion at Kyushu in the Japanese home islands. The first two atomic bombs failed to convince them to stop. Since there weren't any more bombs available in the immediate future, the war drags on to late 1945, as both sides stagger to the finish.

So ends the anthology. One thing that comes across from the collective reading of these stories is that Japan was far too extended in fighting its wars. It had fronts in China, a dozen places in southeast Asia, the Aleutian islands, and far to the east

to Midway. This was not unnoticed by the Japanese command. Their entire strategy throughout the Pacific War was to try and force a single knockout blow and hope the Americans would sue for a peace that would let the Empire keep some or most of its gains. As they found out, Americans would not buckle.

What If The Moon Didn't Exist? asks Neil F. Comins (HarperCollins, 1993, hardcover), who also goes on to ask a variety of other astronomical what-ifs and proposes various divergences.

Starting off with a moonless Earth, he proposes a divergence with a planet called Solon. The Earth-Moon couplet was formed by impact of a planetoid with Earth when it was freshly congealed during the formation of the Solar System. Comins has that planetoid miss Earth, and it is assumed the rest of the Solar System is the same. Today, Solon would have a year of 1,095 days of 8 hours, since there would only be weak solar tides to slow down Solon's (and Earth's) original 6-hour day. The faster rotation would mean constant hurricane-force winds scouring the planet, and lower mountains due to extreme wind erosion. The magnetic field would be stronger due to a faster rotating planetary core. The atmosphere would be thicker, since it wasn't originally blasted away by a Moon-creating impact.

On Solon, life would have taken hundreds of millions of years longer to evolve. It would be slower to develop since the weak solar tides would not wash in nutrients into the oceans from the beaches nor mix them well into the water. The thicker atmosphere would produce a very intense greenhouse effect. It is assumed here that it would not be a runaway effect such as on Venus since that would eliminate the divergence, but Solon would certainly be a lot hotter than Earth. On land, the strong winds would prevent plants from growing tall. Heating would be a problem for land animals' physiology. They would also need stronger muscles and claws to grip the ground against the wind. Thick skin, even armour, would be a necessity against the constant hail of flying debris. Nocturnal animals would not have the benefit of moonlight to live by. If humanoids should evolve, the Moon would not be there to encourage space travel. For the Solon humanoids, the only alternatives would be low orbit or Mars. Comins gets silly by suggesting telepathy might have evolved, what with trying to hear anything over the noise of the winds.

His next divergence gets back to the plausible by supposing that the Moon was today closer to Earth than it is now. This was indeed the case several billion years ago, so it is not improbable. He calls this alternative Earth as the planet Lunholm. Around Lunholm, the Moon would loom four times greater in apparent size and would orbit the Earth in 3.5 days.

The closer moon would be 16 times brighter than ours, almost like daylight. The nights would have no real darkness. This Moon would also absorb more impacts from deep space, acting as a better shield against meteorites and comets. Being closer would mean about 180 eclipses per year, half of them solar and the other half lunar, as opposed to Earth's 2 to 7 annual eclipses.

Tides on Lunholm would be 8 to 64 times higher, depending on how close you set the Moon's orbit. The coasts would be uninhabitable for tens or hundreds of kilometres inland. The tides would be strong enough to not only move water but also the land, which would flex about 3 metres with each lunar passage, causing very severe lunholmquakes. Stronger tides would have sped up evolution of life in the ocean, but it would be slower to move onto the land due to tidal scouring. Sentient humanoids would be slow to develop astronomy, due to the absence of dark night skies. The high seas would be far too dangerous until steel steamships were invented.

Petiel is Comins' divergence for an Earth with less mass. Supposing that Petiel was two-thirds the diameter of Earth, then its Moon would orbit in 54.7 days and would produce lower tides due to the further distance of orbit. Small bodies radiate heat faster, so there would have been faster heat radiation from Petiel's core. The result of that would be a thicker crust, which in turn means no tectonic activity and thus no continental drift. Lack of

continental drift would also reduce the diversity of life, since there would not be the same opportunity for mixing or habitat changes. There would be few petielquakes. Volcanos would also be few but the ones that did manage to push through the thick crust would be the highly explosive stratovolcanos that blow huge quantities of ash into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Petiel would have a thinner atmosphere, leading to stronger winds. Land life would have to be armoured against frequent impacts by flying objects. Animals would need larger lungs to get sufficient oxygen. -10-

Urania is an alternative Earth tilted like Uranus. If Urania's rotation axis was in the plane of its orbit around the Sun, then there would be extreme irregularities in seasons and day lengths around the poles. Eclipses would occur only once every 40 years. Life on Urania would first evolve at the equator, then migrate and adapt to the polar extremes later. Plants would be deciduous (drop their leaves with the frequent changes of seasons). Animals would hibernate or migrate much faster, and would have severe problems synchronizing their biological clocks due to the irregularity of seasonal and daily cycles.

The next what-if is Granstar, where the Sun is more massive than it is now. Due to practical astronomical constraints such as habitable orbits and life cycle, Comins sets the massive sun at 1.5 times more massive than the Sun. It would radiate blue-white

light and be five times brighter. Granstar, therefore, would have to be where the asteroid belt is in our timeline in order to avoid a runaway greenhouse effect such as has afflicted Venus. Granstar would have a year 5.3 times longer, and would be teetering on the edge of runaway glaciation. Ultraviolet light would be much higher, thus there would be more nocturnal life. Longer seasons would mean longer time for animals to mature. A massive Sun will have a shorter lifespan than our Sun. If evolution followed the same timeline as in our universe, the massive Sun would expand and destroy Granstar just as humanoids were evolving a technological society. They would therefore be undertaking a massive space programme.

Suppose a supernova blipped 50 light years from Earth (closer than 50 light years would destroy all life). Comins calls this rouge star Antar. When Antar goes bang, humans know nothing about it for 50 years, then the ozone layer is suddenly destroyed. Not just a couple of holes over the poles, but gone completely from the blast. Earth's surface is saturated by ultraviolet light as a consequence. Although the ozone layer will re-form after a few decades, the interval will trigger mass extinctions from radiation poisoning, and major biological and ecosystem changes.

Roads Not Taken, edited by Gardner Dozois and Stanley Schmidt, (1998, mass-market paperback) is an anthology of alternative history.

“An Outpost Of The Empire” by Robert Silverberg takes place in our time, where Pax Romana has recovered the Byzantine Empire by treaty after a long separation. The Byzantine Empire's foothold on Italy was Venetia, now freshly occupied by the Romans. Nova Roma is the Americas of our timeline. This is a love story between a Venetian lady of the now-gone Greek Byzantine aristocracy and the Roman procounsel, a rising star in the Roman government who is only there until he can pad out his resume with another credit. The lady has difficulty accepting the defeat of the Byzantines, who had once ruled over Rome for centuries after Basileus Andronicus defeated Caesar Maximilianus, but then fell apart from internal decadence. The times are changing; the printing press is newly invented, and books are the new media. The modern Romans rule most of the known world and are convinced it is their destiny to do so.

“Over There” by Mike Resnick has Theodore Roosevelt taking his Rough Riders to Europe in World War One, something President Wilson denied him in our timeline for good and sufficient reason. Teddy doesn't understand that honour is no more in the trenches, and is not prepared for mechanized war. The Rough Riders are kept behind the lines because no one wants them getting killed in combat; they are too famous for that. But they will not sit quietly, and Roosevelt defies orders by moving them out to the front. He becomes a hero in death leading his calvary on a futile charge at a German machine gun nest.

Gene Wolfe's "How I Lost The Second World War And Helped Turn Back The German Invasion" is an account of how the Nazi Reich decided to compete economically, not militarily. Fortunately Winston Churchill turns back the threat of Volkswagens on English streets by a rigged consumer test based on the idea of N-P-N semiconductor theory.

"Ink From The New Moon" by A.A. Attanasio considers what would have happened if the Chinese had been expansionists. They settled Polynesia, then went on to the Americas from west to east. The Unified Sandalwood Autocracies, or USA, (the author is getting too cute here for his own good) is a coalition of kingdoms west of the Mississippi who seceded from the Chinese Emperor two centuries prior to the story. The Chinese settlements are now working their way through the eastern forests. The story is told by a Chinese bureaucrat who is part of a group meeting up with Christopher Columbus. In this alternative timeline, Columbus really does have reason to believe he has discovered China. The Spanish get no conquest here against the superior technology of the Chinese.

Michael Flynn's "The Forest Of Time" considers what happened when the 13 American colonies not only failed to unite but are still fighting two centuries later in a patchwork North America. Hernando Kelly is a multiverse jumper who arrives in the midst of the brushfire war in the Appalachians. He has gotten lost from

his home timeline, and each jump gets him further lost. -12- Since he landed in a military zone, he is taken prisoner. The story revolves around his talks with his interrogators about the philosophy of multiverses. Not infinite in number, since most changes are too small and damp out. It is the Tide of History and chaos attractors, where, if not Columbus, then some other bold Spanish explorer. The failure of the colonies to unite reduced the critical mass of ideas circulating around the population, so the timeline Kelly jumped into is backward technologically. Numerous warring states speaking diverse languages (Pennsylvanians are German) prevent the free flow of ideas and trade. Our timeline has only two big nations straddling North America to allow easy flow of ideas, not 63 independent countries with tariffs and customs officers.

Harry Turtledove's "Must And Shall" diverges when Lincoln is killed by a stray bullet while inspecting a battlefield during the War Between The States. His successor takes a very hard line with the South, which is not only crushed but still under military occupation in 1942. The 16th Amendment disenfranchised the Rebels and their descendants, and gave Negroes preference, and the Sedition Act heavily censors newspapers and radio stations. The rest of the world seems to have followed pretty much the same timeline as as ours but with a few twists. The Nazis are gunrunning into the South, in the hopes of fomenting another civil war that will take the heat off the Germans and Japanese.

The protagonist of the story is a federal government agent named Neil Michaels, who is seeking the hiding place of smuggled guns in New Orleans, and finding himself unpopular with the whites because he is a Northerner. Michaels does his job as he must, but is well aware that his employer's policies are sowing the seeds of a future internal war. He finds the guns but ends the story thinking about the long term consequences of 1865. An American Ulster.

“We Could Do Worse” by Gregory Benford is about how easily the USA could have ended up a dictatorship of goons in the early 1950s. Eisenhower was never nominated, losing to Taft. The elderly Taft died shortly after becoming President, leaving his Vice-President Joe McCarthy to succeed, with Nixon named as the new Vice-President. Now, as the 1956 nomination convention is underway, the anti-Communist government rules with heavy-handed brutality. Adlai Stevenson is under house arrest, and Congressmen are beaten and detained. Not plausible? Not then and not now has it been difficult to stampede the general public into support for such follies. It may be a long fall but it's only a short step.

Bruce McAllister's “Southpaw” is based on the true fact that Fidel Castro was a baseball player who was offered a contract by the New York Giants in our timeline but instead chose other employment opportunities. In an alternative timeline Castro

accepted that offer, and is now struggling to stay in the majors instead of being relegated. He is troubled by strange dreams of fighting in Cuban mountains. A Cuban political agitator tries to convince Castro to leave his baseball career, but Desi Arnaz talks him out of it. The story would have been a little better without him having those dreams, as they really don't enter into it.

Greg Costikyan turns recent Russian history 180 degrees about in “The West Is Red”. The USA has the shoddy economy that Russia has in our timeline. West Germany withdrew from NATO to reunite under the Communists. Russia and China have the superior economies with microchip computers, while the best the USA can do is a roomful-of-tubes Univac in the Pentagon. The point of divergence is that central planning economies really were more efficient because of economies of scale, while capitalism slowly decays because of resources wasted on needless duplication by competitors. The capitalists are losing ground to the CPUSA, and stage a coup in Washington, placing President Jackson under house arrest at Camp David. The crowds rush to support the fledgling American Communist government, and Senator Radley climbs on top of a tank to make a speech, an image that news photographers distill into the essence of the crisis. The junta loses its nerve and collapses, enabling the restored Communists to bring a bright new future.

The Alteration by Kingsley Amis (Viking Press, 1976) is an alternative history novel that opens with the funeral in 1976 of King Stephen III and the accession of William V. Not only is God an Englishman, so is the Pope. John XXIV is a Yorkshireman sitting on the papal throne in Rome, and ruling a Catholic Europe both spiritually and temporally, albeit as a presence behind the thrones of their various Catholic Majesties of the European countries.

The point of divergence was the stillbirth of the Reformation, a world where Martin Luther was elected Pope in 1535. There is a Schismatic faction of Christian heretics, safely ensconced across the Atlantic in the Republic of New England, but they are a minor irritant. New England declared independence in 1848; all those other revolutions that year in Europe may have failed but supply lines were evidently too long to reach across the ocean and snuff out the North American rebellion. Matters were not helped by the unsympathetic population of New England, a large part of whom were criminals transported across the sea. True patriots, as they would exclaim in knowing ironic tones, for we left our country for our country's good. Shakespeare was one of those excommunicated and transported, for having published licentious plays. The Turks long ago settled across the Danube River. New England still honours the memory of its brilliant general Edgar Allan Poe, who defeated Louisiana and Mexico in the War of 1848.

In 1976, the Pope hasn't yet had time to sit down and read a newly-published book "De Existential Nature" by the Jesuit priest Jean Paul Sartre. Science fiction is banned, but tolerated as long as people keep quiet about it, much like softcore pornography. The actual term for this blasphemous literature is Time Romance. A popular branch of it is the Counterfeit World story, which deals with alternative histories such as the Catholic church losing temporal powers in the 1500s when Martin Luther doesn't become a Pope but instead founds a Schismatic church.

Diesel-powered vehicles are just starting to displace horse-drawn vehicles in the 1970s. Electricity is seldom used in Catholic Europe because it is so dangerous, but the New England heretics are making strides in the study of electricity. High-speed steam engines whip across the Channel Bridge between England and France, and zeppelins cross the Atlantic. A new world is being born, and Pope John XXIV and the Catholic hierarchy are worried about it because their temporal control of Europe is slowly starting to slip away.

In our timeline the last castrato died in 1922, but they are still to be found in John XXIV's world. The title of this novel, in fact, refers to this, not to the point of divergence, as the plot concerns the efforts of church officials to have the 10-year-old boy Hubert Anvil become a castrato. The boy has a beautiful singing voice,

which they want to preserve. He is uncertain, his mother and family priest (her lover) oppose, and his father can only see the wealth and courtly favour that castratos are given by way of compensation for their sacrifice.

Hubert runs away, takes asylum in the New England embassy, is kidnapped, and then escapes. An action adventure novel, to be sure, where the adults scheme and love in the background, while the boy decides his future. Hubert falls ill and ends up having to be castrated anyway because of testicular bilateral torsion, thereby resolving the conflict between duty to the church and individual pleasure. This, to me, was a cheat by the author, who seems to have run into a brick wall when trying to decide how to end the novel and took the deus ex machina solution.

The Pope's mind is on other things besides a potential castrato. The Pope is tone-deaf, so the matter is of no interest to him anyway. The Catholic Church was hamstrung by a previous Pope's condemnation of birth control. Europe is becoming overcrowded to the point of serious damage. John XXIV tries experiments with biological warfare to reduce the population but it is too unreliable to work properly and without attaching suspicion to the church. His only other choice is to start a Holy War to throw the Turks out of Europe. He does so, knowing the cost (we learn in the epilogue that 30,000,000 Europeans died in the fighting) but unable to find any other method of population

control. Overall, the novel flows along smoothly and is a good page-turner. Amis gradually introduces the background of the alternative history as it is needed, and one can deduce readily from passing remarks much about the world.

Pavane by Keith Roberts (1966, reprinted 1982 by Ace) diverges with the assassination of Queen Elizabeth I in 1588. This touches off a religious war between the Catholics and Protestants in England. The Spanish Armada intervenes successfully, and Catholicism is triumphant. Catholic England assists against Protestant Netherlands and the German states, and Europe becomes entirely Catholic, as do the colonies overseas.

By 1968, as the novel gets underway, the Church's temporal rule is pervasive. Technology is not as advanced, but steam is widely used for road wagons, rails, and a few cars belonging to the overlords. The internal combustion engine is just coming in, but the Papal Bull of 1910 limits them to 150 cc displacement. Highwaymen still prowl the rural roads. Electricity is not used, but the Pope is in constant communication across his domains through the use of semaphore telegraphs. The telegraphs are controlled by a strong Signaller's Guild, who keep their power by keeping their codes secret. Technology is held back by the Church, who must approve new ideas and seldom do.

This novel is not a continuous narrative. It comprises several vignettes of different characters and times, used to illuminate the background of this alternative history. Sequences set in southwestern England bring in faeries and the Old Ones from time to time, who are always careful to avoid frontal challenge to the rule of the Church. That could have been avoided by the author, since the faeries only play a peripheral role, but it seems that most authors writing alternative history have an irresistible compulsion to add in magic or mythology. I don't know why this must be so, but the habit seems ingrained.

We read the life of Jesse Strange, a small businessman who runs a road hauling company; the affairs of Church and State are a background to his worries about competitors, highwaymen, and romance. An account is given of the life and apprenticeship of Rafe Bigland, Signaller, who works his way into the elite group who tolerate Church and State the way that a computer technician tolerates the manager who needs advice on how to change page margins on a spreadsheet. There is the tragic story of Brother John, a monk whose skill with lithographic art (no photography yet in the 1960s) gets him sent out to document the British Inquisition. The sight of torture turns him into a rebellious para-Luther, using letterpress printed propaganda (no offset printing yet) and impassioned speeches to stir up rebellion. There are the machine smugglers, and finally the revived Reformation, successful centuries after it was in our timeline. The epilogue has

a twist, revealing that the Church was delaying technology to ensure its proper use, foreseeing that electricity leads to fission bombs and the threat of real global war, not just a few clashes of sailing ships here and there.

This book leads the reader through the history of the alternative timeline by illustrating it as a backdrop for the characters. It doesn't actually have a smooth flow of a plot. We see the slow course of events leading up to rebellion and the fall of the Church from temporal power, but it is the background that is actually the foreground. The author has worked out how the world would run and uses the characters to show it.

