

OPUNTIA

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Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

by Dale Speirs

Lest Darkness Fall, by L. Sprague de Camp (original version 1939 and still in print) is not a book about which I can add anything new in literary criticism. This is the granddaddy of modern alternative history stories. Martin Padway is suddenly zipped from modern Rome into 6th-Century Italy, and forced to fend for himself. He “invents” a variety of gadgets to cope with that era and simply to survive. The major effect that this book had on me, though, and the reason why I mention it, was to convince me that printing was the single most important change in our world and all else eventually flows from it. Armies can fight guerilla wars against superior technology, but printed words can constantly renew their effect year after year, decade after decade, at far less cost than the price of ammunition. de Camp also deals with the practicality of technology, such as Padway's efforts to find paper to print on, then his discovery that different types of inks are needed for different types of paper. Padway starts off with vellum, then discovers for his second batch of printing that he has depleted the entire marketplace supply and must now seek paper. The ongoing effort in the novel illustrates for the reader how tools are needed to make the tools to make the items needed. Many Ahs have the hero quickly rustle up some homemade invention in a primitive society where the crosscut saw is considered state-of-the-art. Nothing is that easy to make.

Pasquale's Angel by Paul McAuley (Gollancz, 1994) is a murder mystery set in a timeline where Leonardo da Vinci's inventions actually work. The Industrial Revolution began 325 years before our timeline, about when we had the Renaissance. This novel is set in Florence of the year 1518. Its citizens have the benefits of civilization, such as vaporetos running over pedestrians, smog, and velocipede traffic jams. Italy is still a squabbling collection of city states, and the fortunes of the de Medici clan took a different direction. Niccolo Machiavelli, fallen from office, now works as a political journalist. Amerigo Vespucci beat Cortes to Mexico, and the Italians are ensconced in the New World. In consequence, Spain is trying to stir up trouble between Florence and Rome to break the alliance of the city states. This would allow it to not only successfully intervene in Italy but to grab off the New World colonies as well.

The hero of this novel is Pasquale, a young artist at a time when the Artist's Guild is declining in the face of competition from artificers. What canvas-bound artist can compete with the dazzling light shows of the artificers? Those economic troubles fade into the background when Pasquale finds himself in the middle of investigating murders of the great artist Raphael and a member of his entourage (not in that order). As the deceased were great favourites of the Pope, and the murders happened in Florence, there may be war between Rome and Florence if the traitors working on behalf of Spain are not unmasked. The first

murder is a classic locked-room mystery; Raphael's is an equally traditional poisoning at a public banquet. Machiavelli and Pasquale team up to solve the murders, at first out of a sense of justice, but then out of survival, for the murderers understandably do not want to be exposed.

McAuley writes the novel as a mean streets story, exposing the dark underbelly of Florence. In the style of good alternative history the background details are allowed to trickle in as needed, or even if not, rather than expository lumps that stop the story dead.

Not By Sea was a novelette by Howard L. Morris in the February 1966 issue of *IF*. It chronicled an alternative timeline where the Napoleonic War almost results in a successful invasion of England by France, by air. The hero of the story is Sir Hubert Wulf-Leigh, who is Particular and Confidential Clerk to the Board of Lord High Admirals. In that capacity he examines documents and newspapers of the French regime to glean any useful information. He notices a minor economic report that the number of hectares planted to flax will increase dramatically next season, and that there is a strong campaign to conserve candle tallow for other uses. His further investigations lead him to conclude that England will be invaded by air.

Forewarned is forearmed, and a hasty defensive armaments campaign converts signal rockets into anti-aircraft missiles. Further intelligence received indicates the name of the town to be invaded, whereupon the settlement is blacked out and false lights set up elsewhere to lead the invaders into a trap in the moors. Thus are the perfidious Frenchies given their just deserts.

Bailey, Hilary (1966 December) **The court of the mad king.** THE SAINT MAGAZINE 24(4):104-135 This is a novelette alternative history set in 1954. The Nazis occupied Britain in 1946. England is living under severe rationing, and everyone works as slave labour. (Wales and Scotland are outside the scope of the story.) A young Englishman meets up with a psychic woman who has influence over Hitler, now completely insane. She finally quits helping Hitler function, touching off a power struggle in the Berlin court that will ultimately free Britain. (Because a collapsing European empire always withdraws its troops from the borderlands first.)

Alternate Skiffy is a short-story anthology edited by Mike Resnick and Patrick Nielsen Hayden about alternative science fiction fandom, writers, television, and editorships (Wildside Press, 1997) Given the limited and specialized readership the book is aimed at, it is not surprising that it might be incomprehensible to mundanes. The in-jokes and assumed knowledge abound. Not too surprising either, knowing that this

is a Friend-of-Mike anthology, much like his numerous other ALTERNATES anthologies.

Some of the stories are not too unreasonable speculation, such as John Campbell Jr editing AMAZING STORIES instead of ASTOUNDING, while Don Wollheim held the latter editorship (“**The Golden Years of ASTOUNDING**” by Frederik Pohl). Others are mad fun but play tennis with the net down, such as “**Plus Ultra**” by Anthony R. Lewis, which has Hugo Gernsback becoming President of the League of Nations. And what if Lovecraft had not only lived but had a child by Sonia and went on to edit WEIRD TALES? (“**GoH: H.P.L.**” by Greg Cox).

Overall, a mildly amusing book, but definitely only for those who know the history of written science fiction. While it is somewhat readable for others, I don’t think they would get the same amount of enjoyment out of it.

“**The Wheels Of If**” by L. Sprague de Camp starts off with a couple of historical vignettes about our timeline to inform the reader about the points of divergence to follow. The hero is Allister Park, who awakes and finds himself sliding between alternative timelines each day, such as a modern New York City with Union Jack bunting to celebrate the King, and sports scores from the Inter-Colonial Football League (Massachusetts beat Québec).

North America never consolidated into two nations as it did in our timeline. The two major divergences were the Celtic Church triumphing over the Roman Catholics in northern Europe of the 600s, and the Arabs making it all the way to southern France and staying there, instead of being turned back at the gates of Vienna. The Norse, English, and Irish settled North America by the 1000s, and Vinland became an established colony. Since Spain never was because of the Arabs, the Incas survived as an independent nation.

Park finally ends up permanently as a Bishop in the Celtic Church in New Belfast, Vinland (read New York City). Park settles in and becomes mixed up in local politics. It turns out that he is a victim of Joseph Noggles, a scientist who knows how to shift minds between alternative universes on 'wheels of if'. Noggle messed up and trapped himself on a wheel of if that is still rotating him with five other men, a turn each day, but which inadvertently locked Park into the Bishop's body. Noggle is desperate to get off his wheel of if, but Park finds he is happy where he is.

Park gets entangled first in local politics, then federal Vinland politics, then a war equivalent to the American War Between The States. The war is fought with the same muddleheaded army thinking, lack of resources, and green troops as our timeline. And from there, we go to...

“The Pugnacious Peacemaker”

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by Harry Turtledove is a sequel to “The Wheels Of If”.

The Inca Empire has come up against the Arabs in Brazil, and the two parties have agreed to arbitration by Vinland. Vinland sends Park, who has since resigned his Bishopric to become a judge. Both the Incans and Arabs are religious fanatics, the faith of the Sun versus Islam. Both are using sabotage, spies, and all the usual paraphernalia of diplomacy. Car bombs are used by zealots of both sides to disrupt peace negotiations.

Park manages to broker a deal, firstly by convincing the Incans to write down their religious texts and thus become Peoples of the Book, not pure pagans or infidels to the Arabs. He then points out to the Arab leaders that while they are obligated to pursue pagans mercilessly, they can do as they do elsewhere with Peoples of the Book, and levy a jizya tax, which allows them toleration in exchange for the privilege of filling the Emir's coffers. A few border adjustments, and all's well that ends well.

ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$3 cash (\$5 overseas), trade for your zine, or letter of comment on a previous issue. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are acceptable around the world. SF means science fiction. An apazine is a zine for an amateur press association distro, a perzine is a personal zine, sercon is serious-constructive, a genzine is a general zine]

Challenger #26 (US\$6 from Guy Lillian, 8700 Millicent Way #1501, Shreveport, Louisiana 71115) A 76-page doorstep zine with lots of reading. Travel reports include what to do in Peru when you are kidnapped, based on the author's personal experience. And you complained because on your last trip your hotel room wasn't ready on time. A brief essay discusses the lawsuits against insurance companies who wouldn't pay up for flood damage after Hurricane Katrina because homeowners didn't buy flood insurance. Not surprisingly, those insurance companies are now withdrawing from writing policies along the Gulf Coast. Lots of letters of comment. All in all, a good evening's read.

EOD Letter #5 and #6 (The Usual from Ken Faig Jr, 2311 Swainwood Drive, Glenview, Illinois 60025-2741) Devoted to original research about H.P. Lovecraft, #5 issue discusses the very muddled state of who owns his literary copyrights today. At first

it didn't matter, because they weren't worth anything, but today they are. August Derleth, for all his sins as a usurper of Lovecraft's copyrights, was responsible for keeping HPL in print during the decades when it didn't pay to do so, so the dispute isn't as black-and-white as traditionally painted. Also a review of a Sotheby's auction of Lovecraft material in December 2006. Issue #6 reprints Lovecraft's will and discusses what might have happened had he lived longer.

The Knarley Knews #124 to #127 (The Usual from Henry Welch, 1525- 16 Avenue, Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017) Genzine with thoughts on e-zines, skunks, winning Hugos, winning the war (WW2, that is), and letters of comment.

Lamplighter #16 (The Usual from Guy Miller, 2951 Archer Lane, Springfield, Ohio 45503-1209) Mini-zine about the 132nd annual convention of the National Amateur Press Association, the oldest zine publishing group in existence, founded in 1876.

Probe #133 and #134 (The Usual from Science Fiction South Africa, Box781401, Sandton 2146, South Africa) SF clubzine with lots of short fiction, book and movie reviews and letters of comment. Also included are an extended essay on the plausibility of Star Trek technology, and a history of SF fandom in South Africa from its origins in 1969.

No Sin But Ignorance #47 (Editorial whim from Claire Brialey, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) Perzine, starting off with school fiction (a peculiarly English genre), not writing convention reports, on being edited, and not being pregnant.

Your Mometer #7 (The Usual from Cathy Catheter, Box 66835, Portland, Oregon 97290) Mini-zine taken up mainly by how to annoy your mother.

Peter Jackson Will Never Work For Me Again #1 (The Usual from Murray Moore, 1065 Henley Road, Mississauga, Ontario L4R 3E2) Extended convention tour report of a Canuck visiting Britain.

Southern Fandom Confederation Bulletin V8#13 and #14 (The Usual from R.B. Cleary, 138 Bibb Drive, Madison, Alabama 35758-1064) SF clubzine with lots of convention reports, listings, news, and letters of comment.

Musea #157 to #161 (The Usual from Tom Hendricks, 4000 Hawthorne #5, Dallas, Texas 75219) #157 is a general survey of the best in comics and their creators, #158 is poetry, and #159 is a list of favourite zines, although some are actually small-press magazines, not zines. #160 is taken up by a Christmas story, and #161 by snow fiction.

Vanamonde #688 to #727 (The Usual from John Hertz, 236 South Coronado Street #409, Los Angeles, California 90057) Single-sheet weekly zine packed with comments on a wide range of topics.

Chunga #13 (The Usual from Randy Byers, 1013 North 36 Street, Seattle, Washington 98105) Alternative cinematic history and musicians who slipped into different timelines, as well as some letters of comment from people in our timeline.

The Anatomic Air Review #4 (The Usual from Sinoun, Box 1602, Decatur, Georgia 30031) Mini-zine with personal essays and some projects she has been working on.

Ethel The Aardvark #130 to #133 (The Usual from Melbourne Science Fiction Club, Box 212, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Victoria 3005, Australia) SF clubzine with news and notes, with well-illustrated convention reports, book reviews, and letters of comment.

MarkTime #77, #81 to #83 (The Usual from Mark Strickert, 9050 Carron Drive #273, Pico Rivera, California 90660) Perzine of a transit fan, with accounts of transit systems in California and Chicago. Also news of radio fanning, which is taping different radio stations, a decades-old activity now fading away because all the stations have dwindled to the same few formats.

The Fossil #333 to #335 (US\$15 from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan, Denver, Colorado 80209) This periodical is devoted to the history of zinedom. #333 is mostly taken up by the life and times of Edna Hyde "Vondy" McDonald (1893-1962), a zinester who was mainly active during the first half of the 1900s. Her nickname came from her birth name Edna von der Heide. She was American-born but like many of German descent, she was forced to change her name during WWI because it was too unsafe, much like being an American today named Mohammed bin Laden. Vondy was active in the amateur press associations, which in those days suffered from vicious politics that make Internet flaming look like a walk in the park. Some of her published work is included. #334 has articles on various zinesters, a zine convention in Oregon, zinesters famous to the general public such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, and miscellaneous. #335 tells of Thomas Edison's zine publishing when he was a young boy, 1930s zines with naughty cover artwork, and whether or not it is worthwhile to write histories of zinedom.

Going Postal #1 (The Usual from Kris Mininger, Calle Obispo 4B, Plasencia 10600, Caceres, Spain) Commentary and essays about life in the Papernet, including a zinester biography, self-publishing in Philadelphia, a turgid academic essay on perzines and the discursive self, and a zinester explaining what effect her newborn son has had on her life and her publishing.

The New Port News #237 (The Usual from Ned Brooks, 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720) Apazine with comments on a wide variety of subjects.

Statement #350 to #354 (The Usual from Ottawa Science Fiction Society, 18 Norice Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 2X5) SF clubzine with news and info about their activities, and a very good astronomy column.

The Ken Chronicles #4 to #6 (The Usual from Ken Bausert, 2140 Erma Drive, East Meadow, New York 11554-1120) Perzine, with articles on hunting for the best pizza, hunting for ancestors' homes and genealogy, music fests, stormy weather, and the record business.

Littlebrook #6 (The Usual from Jerry Kaufman and Suzanne Tompkins, Box 25075, Seattle, Washington 98165) Articles on SFdom, Sherlock Holmes versus cowboy actors, and letters of comment.

Tortoise #24 (The Usual from Sue Jones, Flat 5, 32-33 Castle Street, Shrewsbury SY1 2BQ, England) A wide variety of articles ranging from photographing hopper-heads (ornamental tops of drain pipes) to stained glass to soccer arenas to personal accounts of a day in the life. Also lots of letters of comment.

Murderous Signs #15 (The Usual from Grant Wilkins, Box 20517, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 1A3) Literary zine, with a short story and poems.

Sugar Needle #32 and Cherry Monocle #? (The Usual from Phlox Icona, 310 Elm Avenue, Easton, Maryland 21601) Hand-printed zines specializing on the topic of candy, with weird foreign types illustrated, plus an interview with Dishwasher Pete on zines and the best method of getting burnt sugar syrup off pans.

Lime #12 and #13 (The Usual from Ariana, 6066 Shingle Creek Parkway #148, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota 55430) Perzine with brief essays about her family and life in general. I liked her explanation to someone of what a zine is. Normally I tell people I publish a small-press magazine, which saves a lot of explaining, but she came up with a better idea for the younger generation by saying it is a blog in print form.

Thirteenthstory #2 (The Usual from Jaye Frisina, Box 381957, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02238) Mini-zone, mostly about art, with an interesting note about skywriting and skytyping.

Alexiad V6#3 to #6 and V7#1 (The Usual from Lisa and Joseph Major, 1409 Christy Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040) Lots and lots of book reviews, with an emphasis on history and alternative history, plus letters of comment.

FOSFAX #213 and #214 (US\$ 4 from Timothy Lane, Box 37281, Louisville, Kentucky 40233-7281) Doorstop-class zine with 60 pages of microprint, mostly on book reviews (especially alternative history) and American politics, with lots of letters of comment. One minor nitpick: on page 3 of issue #213 is a passing reference to the "arctic tar sands". The Athabasca Tar Sands are not in the Arctic; they are in northeastern Alberta about 300 km south of the border with the Arctic territories and about 900 km south of the Arctic Circle. The Tar Sands are in the boreal forest, not the tundra.

Banana Rag #36 (\$15 for two issues from Anna Banana, 3747 Highway 101, Roberts Creek, British Columbia V0N 2W2) Mail art news and bananas in the news.

It Goes On The Shelf #29 (The Usual from Ned Brooks, 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720) Reviews of older books and oddball stuff.

Banana Wings #31 and #32 (The Usual from Claire Brialey, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) Fannish SF zine, with commentary on the state of fandom and zines, tracking down the bibliographical remains of a hack writer, steam train fandom, and letters of comment.

For The Clerisy V15,#70 (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box

404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Lots of capsule book reviews of older mystery novels.

BCSFazine #409 to #417 (The Usual from British Columbia Science Fiction Association, Box 74122, Vancouver, British Columbia V5V 3P0) SF clubzine with news, letters of comment, and calendar of events.

Call And Response #2 (US\$4 or 3 IRCs from Gianni Simone, 3-3-23 Nagatsuta, Midori-ku, Yokohama-shi, 226-0027 Kanagawa-ken, Japan) The theme for this issue is "Home", with essays by various authors on where they have lived and what it meant to them.

File 770 #150 (US\$8 for five issues, from Mike Glycer, 705 Valley View Avenue, Monrovia, California 91016) SF newszine, with convention reports, obituaries, who won what award, controversy over awards, and letters of comment.

My Fat Irish Ass #-8 (The Usual from MFIA, Box 65391, Washington, D.C. 20035) Mostly detournement, some bad comix, and a detailed report of the popular new sport of hoaxing the Nigerian 419 scammers.

Warp #68 (The Usual from Montréal SF and Fantasy Association, Box 1186, Place du Parc, Montréal, Québec H2X

4A7) SF clubzine with news and convention reports, fan fiction, and reviews.

Zoo Nation #4 and #5 (The Usual from Pete Young, 62 Walmer Road, Woodley, Berkshire RG5 4PN, England) Extended discussions of the state of SF fandom, and reviews on various types of SF ranging from the Quatermass films to Lovecraft.

Zine Reviewzines

The following zines are all review zines. There isn't that much overlap between them, since everyone in the Papernet has a different node on the network, and thus gets a different set of zines in trade.

Narcolepsy Press Review #2 (The Usual from Randy Robbins, Box 17131, Anaheim, California 92817-7131) Zine reviews plus some reminiscing about the music the editor enjoyed while growing up.

Zine World #25 (US\$5 from Jerianne, Box 330156, Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37133-0156) A worthy successor to FACTSHEET FIVE, with hundreds of zine listings. Also has letters of comment, reports on censorship controversies, and problems with commercial distributors.

Xerography Debt #22 (US\$3 from Davida Gypsy Breier, Box 11064, Baltimore, Maryland 21212) Lots of zine reviews by multiple reviewers, plus some essays on the current state of the Papernet.

The Zine Dump #17 (The Usual from Guy Lillian, 8700 Millicent Way #1501, Shreveport, Louisiana 71115) Specializing in mostly SF zines.

The Trading Network #1 (The Usual from Sinoun, Box 1602, Decatur, Georgia 30031) Not actually a reviewzine but a listing of zine blurbs sent in by their editors, plus calls for craft trades or mail art.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

[Re: Stephen Leacock and his summer home at Orillia] I grew up in Orillia, which meant we took a lot of Stephen Leacock's works in school. I've been to the Leacock estate home at Old Brewery

Bay, just east of Orillia, many times.

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Leacock liked his liquor and pool table, and the home, to keep the atmosphere of the place intact, has an admirable wine cellar and pool room. In SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN, knowing the geography of Orillia certainly helps. I can confirm the location of many of Mariposa's main buildings from the way they are described, and some of the street names are correct. The post office, YMCA, Hotel Champlain, and the Opera House all are exactly where Leacock places them.

I have some doubts about the use of blogs. Writing up an online diary is fine but there is the assumption of an audience, and I think in many cases this assumption is not true. Why write for an imaginary audience? I know there is some audience for fanzines, and with FaceBook and MySpace the audience is gradually created.

[While there are bloggers with dreams of being the next big thing, many are simply using them as a method to keep family and friends informed about the new baby or how they're doing in Upper Piapot. The danger is that such blogs can be revealing to the wrong type of character, and many people will regret the impossibility of removing information from the Internet that they themselves put on it. With the Papernet, distribution is easier to control. While it is possible for someone to pass on a copy of a print zine to someone else who scans it, that involves more

expense and work than highlighting and clicking on a computer does. Many employees and job candidates are discovering that bosses aren't as dumb as they look, and are reading online posts.]

2008-02-05

Yesterday as I type, a survey of British students shows that a majority of them think that Winston Churchill was a fictional character, while Sherlock Holmes was a real person. Is alternate history becoming alternate fact for some people? Once again, literacy is on the way down. The surveyors blamed television for ignoring real heroes and promoting fictional ones. Those who were surveyed readily admitted they don't read history books. To be honest, I'm surprised they read anything at all.

[I don't believe literacy is on the way down in the sense of people not being able to read and write. The problem with surveys like this is they define literacy as cultural knowledge, which is a different thing entirely. Every generation has its own cultural standards. My mother stayed up late to watch the broadcast of Churchill's funeral in 1965 because that was her generation's cultural standard. My generation knows who Diefenbaker, Don Messer, and Wayne & Shuster are, but the kids coming of age now never heard of them. None of this has anything to do with the correct definition of literacy, which is the ability to read and write, not quote Shakespeare.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead
25509 Jonnie Court
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

2008-01-25

My father was an economist and not an amusing one, so the idea that Canada's greatest literary humourist Stephen Leacock was an economist boggles this mind!

[It just goes to show. The funniest man I ever knew was one of my botany professors at university, Dr. Wilson Stewart. He basically looked and performed like Jack Benny, except that instead of cheap skate jokes he would tell plant jokes. His explanation of how seeds evolved should have been recorded as a comedy album.]

I am still turning over the idea that Canada is a confederation. Then again, it is mostly semantics. Obviously I knew the units are provinces.

[Not just semantics. Canadian provincial premiers are equals of the Prime Minister, and the provinces have exclusive rights in certain areas where the federal government cannot go. British Columbia and most of the eastern provinces were independent dominions before joining the Confederation.]

FROM: Henry Welch
1525 - 16 Avenue
Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017

2008-01-07

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

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noticed by Dale Speirs

Is Stephen Leacock Canada's answer to Mark Twain or Garrison Keeler? It is hard to get a complete sense without the cultural referents. I still envy your patience with all the research you do.

[Yes, Leacock could be considered as a Twain. Keeler is better compared to Stuart McLean, whose CBC Radio 2 show *Vinyl Café* has homespun stories narrated in the old storyteller tradition (and are available on CDs from the usual online sources). As to my research, I only work three days a week, so that leaves me with lots of time to browse the University of Calgary Library.]

I Also Heard From: Danielle Maestretti, Peter Netmail, Ned Brooks, Franz Zrilich, Davida Gypsy Breier, Joseph Major, Joel Cohen, Ken Bausert

Napiera, W.M., et al (2007) **The origin of life in comets.**
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY
6:321-323

“Mechanisms of interstellar panspermia have recently been identified whereby life, wherever it has originated, will disperse throughout the habitable zone of the Galaxy within a few billion years. This re-opens the question of where life originated. The interiors of comets, during their aqueous phase, seem to provide environments no less favourable for the origin of life than that of the early Earth. Their combined mass throughout the Galaxy overwhelms that of suitable terrestrial environments by about 20 powers of ten, while the lifetimes of friendly prebiotic environments within them exceeds that of localized terrestrial regions by another four or five powers of ten. We propose that the totality of comets around G-dwarf Sun-like stars offers an incomparably more probable setting for the origin of life than any that was available on the early Earth.”

Speirs: I've never understood the obsession of the panspermia advocates who refuse to believe that life on Earth began on Earth.

Silver, P.G., and M.D. Behn (2008) **Intermittent plate tectonics?** SCIENCE 319:85-88

“Although it is commonly assumed that subduction has operated continuously on Earth without interruption, subduction zones are routinely terminated by ocean closure and supercontinent assembly. Under certain circumstances, this could lead to a dramatic loss of subduction, globally. Closure of a Pacific-type basin, for example, would eliminate most subduction, unless this loss were compensated for by comparable subduction initiation elsewhere. Given the evidence for Pacific-type closure in Earth’s past, the absence of a direct mechanism for termination/initiation compensation, and recent data supporting a minimum in subduction flux in the Mesoproterozoic, we hypothesize that dramatic reductions or temporary cessations of subduction have occurred in Earth’s history. Such deviations in the continuity of plate tectonics have important consequences for Earth’s thermal and continental evolution.”

Speirs: What this means is that there were times in Earth’s history when continental drift came to a dead stop after the continents ploughed together into a single supercontinent. Eventually subducting (downward rifting of tectonic plates) would re-start, the supercontinent would break apart, and a new cycle of drift would begin. The implications for the evolution of life are obvious.

Formenti, F., and A.E. Minetti (2008) **The first humans travelling on ice: an energy-saving strategy?** BIOLOGICAL JOURNAL OF THE LINNEAN SOCIETY 93:1-7

“The aim of our research was to understand whether an environmental feature such as a strong presence of lakes (frozen in winter) could force humans to develop ice skates in order to limit the energy cost of travelling. We hypothesized that the energy-saving principle was a determinant factor in the development of human locomotion on ice. Five healthy adult participants took part in the experiments, during which we recorded the speed and metabolic energy cost associated with travelling on bone skates. The gain reachable by using bone skates could lead to an extremely high energy saving (equal to 10% of the energy needed to survive during the cold season) and differs significantly between the regions considered in the present study. An analysis of the geometrical shape of lakes associated with fractal analysis of their distribution suggests that, in order to better adapt to the severe conditions imposed by the long lasting winters, Finnish populations could benefit more than others from developing this ingenious locomotion tool.”

Speirs: Being half-Finnish, I take a mild bit of pride in the idea that Finns might have invented skating.

Pope, K.O., and J.E. Terrell (2008) **Environmental setting of human migrations in the circum-Pacific region.** JOURNAL OF BIOGEOGRAPHY 35:1-21

“The expansion of modern humans out of Africa, following a coastal route into southern Asia, was initially thwarted by a series of large and abrupt environmental changes. A period of relatively stable climate and sea level from c. 45,000 yr BP to 40,000 yr BP supported a rapid coastal expansion of modern humans throughout much of Southeast Asia, enabling them to reach the coasts of northeast Russia and Japan by 38,000-37,000 yr BP. Further northwards, migrations were delayed by cold northern climates, which began to deteriorate rapidly after 33,000 yr BP. Human migrations along the coast of the Bering Sea into the New World appear to have occurred much later, c. 14,000 yr BP, probably by people from central Asia who were better adapted to cold northern climates. Cold, dry climates and rapidly changing sea levels leading into and out of the Last Glacial Maximum inhibited coastal settlement, and many of the sites occupied prior to 33,000 yr BP were abandoned. After 16,000 yr BP, the sea-level rise slowed enough to permit coastal ecosystems to develop and coasts to be re-colonized, but abrupt changes in climate and sea level inhibited this development until after 12,000 yr BP. Between 12,000 yr BP and 7000 yr BP there was a dramatic increase in reef and estuary/lagoon ecosystems, concurrent with a major expansion of coastal settlements. This

early Holocene increase in coastal environments and the concomitant expansion of human coastal-resource exploitation were followed by corresponding declines in both phenomena in the mid-Holocene, c. 6000-4000 yr BP. This decline in coastal resources is linked to the drop in sea level throughout the Pacific, which may have caused the widespread population dislocations that ultimately led to the human expansion throughout Oceania.”

Zhang, D.D., et al (2007) **Global climate change, war, and population decline in recent human history.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 104:19214-19219

“We show that long-term fluctuations of war frequency and population changes followed the cycles of temperature change. Further analyses show that cooling impeded agricultural production, which brought about a series of serious social problems, including price inflation, then successively war outbreak, famine, and population decline. The findings also imply that social mechanisms that might mitigate the impact of climate change were not significantly effective during the study period.”

Sanderson, E.W., and M. Brown (2007) **Mannahatta: An ecological first look at the Manhattan landscape prior to Henry Hudson.** NORTHEASTERN NATURALIST 14:545-570

“The British Headquarters Map, circa 1782, provides a remarkable window onto the natural topography, hydrology, and land cover of Manhattan Island, NY, before extensive urbanization. Manhattan formerly hosted a rugged topography watered by over 108 km of streams and at least 21 ponds, flowing in and out of wetlands that covered nearly 10% of the island in the late 18th century. These features are largely representative of the landscape prior to European settlement. We used ecological features interpreted from the British Headquarters Map, and additional historical, ecological, and archeological information, to hypothesize about the ecosystem composition of the pre-European island. We suggest that 54 different ecological communities may have once been found on the island or in nearby waters, including chestnut-tulip tree forests, Hempstead Plains grasslands, freshwater and tidal marshes, hardwood swamps, peatlands, rocky headwater streams, coastal-plain ponds, eelgrass meadows, and culturally derived ecosystems, such as Native American village sites and fields. This former ecosystem mosaic, consisting of over 99% natural areas, stands in sharp contrast to the 21st-century state of the island in which only 3% of its area is dedicated to ecological management.”

Palmer, T.M., et al (2008) **Breakdown of an ant-plant mutualism follows the loss of large herbivores from an African savanna.** SCIENCE 319:192-195

“We investigated the effects of removing large mammals on an ant-Acacia mutualism in an African savanna. Ten years of large-herbivore exclusion reduced the nectar and housing provided by plants to ants, increasing antagonistic behavior by a mutualistic ant associate and shifting competitive dominance within the plant-ant community from this nectar-dependent mutualist to an antagonistic species that does not depend on plant rewards. Trees occupied by this antagonist suffered increased attack by stem-boring beetles, grew more slowly, and experienced doubled mortality relative to trees occupied by the mutualistic ant. These results show that large mammals maintain cooperation within a widespread symbiosis and suggest complex cascading effects of megafaunal extinction.”

Speirs: This is another demonstration of a trophic cascade, where elimination of one type of organism in an ecosystem sets off a chain reaction as other species shuffle about and re-balance the system.

Walter, R.C., and D.J. Merritts (2008) **Natural streams and the legacy of water-powered mills.** SCIENCE 319:299-304

“Gravel-bedded streams are thought to have a characteristic meandering form bordered by a self-formed, fine-grained floodplain. This ideal guides a multibillion-dollar stream restoration industry. We have mapped and dated many of the deposits along mid-Atlantic streams that formed the basis for this widely accepted model. These data, as well as historical maps and records, show instead that before European settlement, the streams were small anabranching channels within extensive vegetated wetlands that accumulated little sediment but stored substantial organic carbon. Subsequently, 1 to 5 meters of slackwater sedimentation, behind tens of thousands of 17th- to 19th-century mill dams, buried the presettlement wetlands with fine sediment. These findings show that most floodplains along mid-Atlantic streams are actually fill terraces, and historically incised channels are not natural archetypes for meandering streams.”

Rees, Matthew (2007 October) **The hunt for Black October.** THE AMERICAN 1(6):46-54,104-110

On October 19, 1987, the New York stock market collapsed and the Dow Jones index dropped 22.6% in one day. By contrast, the

crash of October 28, 1929, only dropped it 13%.

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Unlike 1929, there was no economic depression and it only took the stock market two years to recover to its previous level, as opposed to decades for the 1929 crash. This article attempts to determine what caused the 1987 panic, and concludes that it was lack of information about share prices due to overwhelming volume of trades. The trading system in 1987 used manual paperwork to settle up stock trades. When small investors panicked over previous declines in the days prior, they swamped the system to the point that no one could match buy and sell orders, and no one knew what the current price of a stock was. When buyers do not know the current market price of an item, they stop buying until the data arrives, thus increasing the rate of price decline. This fed the panic in the declining 1927 and 1987 markets and crashed them. The author concludes that modern computerized systems and circuit-breaker halts in trading have reduced the chances of another severe crash in the New York stock markets. However, because of global trading in stocks, the current computer systems can handle a national panic but not an international panic.

Speirs: The current financial panic of early 2008 seems related to foreign banks buying too many subprime mortgage funds. It correlates with the above article because buyers did not know the fair market value of subprime paper, so they stopped buying it. Bang went the American housing market.