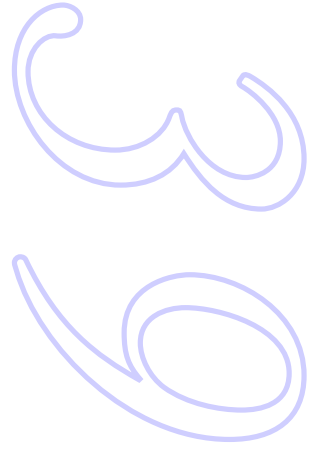


Graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals



Scratch Pad

Scratch Pad 39

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 24, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for August 2000 mailing of Acnestis. Cover graphic: Elaine Cochrane, using DJFractals.

Contents

2 THE PURE QUILL: SF BIOGRAPHIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES by Bruce Gillespie

Scorched Neck Syndrome

This is a membership saver. I can do no more. Heinemann was (and is) breathing down my neck for more chapters of the textbook I'm editing. Until a few days ago, Oxford University Press was breathing down my neck for more chapters of another textbook I'm editing. That pays the bills. Damien Broderick was breathing down my neck for an article I promised last November for an anthology whose positively last deadline was a week ago. I finished it this afternoon (5 August). I had hoped to gain a week of free time between last November and now, but that hasn't happened. That doesn't pay any bills, but I did finally write the article. I had promised some months ago to give the following talk to the Nova Mob on the first Wednesday of August. So I wrote it last weekend. Which is why Damien was still breathing down my neck this weekend. I'm afflicted by Scorched Neck Syndrome. Maureen had written last mailing that that I had to send an Acnestis contribution this time, or I would be out on the street. So instead of sending this piece to Paul and Maureen as my contribution to the next *Steam Engine Time*, I had to use it for my membership saver. Double Scorched Neck Syndrome. So please forgive the following . . .

THE PURE QUILL: SF BIOGRAPHIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

by Bruce Gillespie

Presented to the Nova Mob, 3 August 2000.

I

Go into any major bookshop, such as Reading's or the Brunswick Street Bookstore, and you will find large sections on biography and autobiography, many of them on and by professional writers.

Go into a science fiction bookshop and you find no such section. If Justin Ackroyd, for instance, set up an 'Autobiography' section at Slow Glass Books, he might be able to scrape up one shelf of books. If he set up a 'Biography' section, how many books do you think would be on it? Two? three?

I looked in the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. There are no entries for 'Autobiography' or 'Biography', despite the *Encyclopedia's* propensity for theme articles.

Is it that science fiction writers do not lead eventful lives?

Or are readers of SF uninterested in the lives of their favourite writers, unlike the readers of most other forms of fiction and non fiction? Or is there something very odd about science fiction, precluding biography and autobiography?

My own interest in the lives of writers goes back to childhood and Enid Blyton. Enid Blyton was the most popular writer of children's fiction in Britain and throughout the British Commonwealth during the 1940s and 1950s, and still manages to sell a few million copies a year. People younger than me will not remember that Enid Blyton's career was carefully promoted by her publishers, including the publisher, during the 1950s, of the monthly *Enid Blyton's Magazine*, which was subtitled 'The only magazine I write'. Until Blyton began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease in the late 1950s, she wrote a large number of books per year, as well as writing every word of her own magazine. She wrote a monthly editorial directed to her readers, which gave us glimpses of an English country paradise in which Enid

Blyton and her family led blissfully happy lives and she wrote all those wonderful books for us, her adoring readers. (The truth was very different, as readers of Barbara Stoney's biography will find out.) Reading these magazines in the early 1950s gave me the notion—one that never occurs to many people—that books are actually produced by *people* called *writers*, and to earn my living as a writer when I grew up sounded much better than any of the alternatives.

Having learned this lesson from Enid Blyton, I wrote the odd bits of fiction when I was a child and teenager, until I realised I wasn't much good at it. In my early teens I received another surprise—I discovered that science fiction was *also* written by writers, real people sitting behind real typewriters. I had seen the writers' names in the magazines, mainly, to an Australian boy, very exotic names, such as Fitz Leiber, Kris Neville with a 'K', Cordwainer Smith, Roger Zelazny and Thomas Disch. But I had no clear idea of who these people could be, except that I thought they must be making heaps of money if their stories kept appearing in my favourite magazines.

Imagine my shock and disillusionment when in 1962 I began reading *Amazing*, and found a series of articles by Sam Moskowitz, each one of them a short biography of an SF writer. These essays were later collected in two volumes, *Explorers of the Infinite* and *Seekers of Tomorrow*. As far as I can discover, they were the first biographies of genre SF writers.

Moskowitz's most disillusioning revelation was that SF writing was produced by people who didn't mind being paupers, if they were full-time writers, or didn't mind taking on boring mundane jobs, just like everybody else, if they wanted to eat.

Take Moskowitz's short biography of E. E. Smith. By the 1960s Smith was a legendary figure in the field. But Moskowitz told me, without irony, that for the sequel to *The Skylark of Space*, which had made Smith's name in science fiction, '*Amazing Stories* voluntarily paid him three-quarters of a cent a word for that second story, a quarter of a cent more per word that they had paid any author up to that time'. Moskowitz considered this a triumph. Even when I allowed for inflation rates since the early 1930s, even I could calculate that the only way an SF writer could make a living wage would be to type many thousands of words per day.

In Smith's case, the rates he was receiving for SF had nothing to do with earning a living. While churning out the novels that made him the hottest writer in the field during the 1930s, he earned his living as a doughnut specialist. At the same time as the serialisation of *The Skylark of Valeron* was making *Astounding* into the most successful SF magazine of the thirties, Smith:

shifted to Dawn Doughnut, Jackson, Michigan, in January 1936, on a salary plus share-of-the-profits arrangement. To get his new firm out of the red, he worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week, for almost a year, even designing new machinery to implement his plans. Once the company was over the hump, he sat down and wrote an 80-page outline for a 400,000-word novel divided into four segments: *Galactic Patrol*, *The Grey Lensman*, *Second Stage Lensman* and *Children of the Lens*.

Smith never could escape the doughnut business—until he retired.

In *Seekers of Tomorrow*, Moskowitz also tells the story of John W. Campbell, who during the 1930s was also selling a large number of stories, both under his own name and that of 'Don A. Stuart':

Campbell returned to his home state of New Jersey, in 1935, working at a variety of jobs: the research department of Mack Trucks in New Brunswick; Hoboken Pioneer Instruments; and finally Carleton Ellis, Montclair, in 1936 . . . Campbell was able to tolerate only six months of writing and editing textbooks and technical literature for Ellis . . .

By the end of the thirties, as we know, Campbell had solved the problem of earning his living by taking over the editorship of *Astounding* and making it into the most successful SF magazine ever. But he published no fiction after that, except 'Who Goes There?'

II

If SF writers did not write for money, why did they do it? Moskowitz has often been derided for his enthusiastic, un-ironic approach to SF writers and their craft, but reading a fair number of SF autobiographies has convinced me that he came as close to the truth as anybody.

Of E. E. Smith's *Skylark Three*, Moskowitz writes:

Tremendous battles of conflicting forces with an assortment of offensive rays and defensive force screens were popularized by the new novel. Spaceships miles in length and a fabulous array of bizarre aliens which justified the novel's subtitle 'The tale of the galactic cruise which ushered in universal civilization', became standard science-fiction fare. Science-fiction writers would never again be bound to their solar system.

Damon Knight says it even better, in his book *The Futurians*, published in 1977. Teenage Damon has just discovered the science fiction magazines:

In one of his short stories, 'We Also Walk Dogs', Robert A. Heinlein says of a character's first experience of beauty: 'It shook him and hurt him, like the first trembling intensity of sex.'

Christ! Beauty was not in it, or sex either—I knew them both, and they were pitiful, pale things in comparison. *Battleships hanging upside down over New York! Men in radio tubes being zapped by electricity! Robots carrying off pretty girls in Antarctica!* Here was the pure quill, the essential jolt, so powerful that if my parents had understood what it was they would have stopped my allowance, painted my eyeglasses black to keep me from reading such stuff.

So what is it about 'the pure quill, the essential jolt' that inspires SF writers to lunatic efforts at insulting pay rates, but stops most of them from writing their autobiographies?

The most obvious answer is: those insulting pay rates. Moskowitz's books make it obvious that most SF writers of both the first two Golden Ages of SF, the early 1930s and the early 1940s, were too busy scratching a bare living to have time to write personal or reflective writing. A few of them,

such as Knight, wrote book reviews for a living, and some wrote more personal material for the fanzines. Others, such as Frederik Pohl, became editors of SF magazines until they felt financially secure enough to resume full-time writing. Most of them were young people who were constructing the genre and writing at manic speeds to pay the rent. They had little time to stop for reflection, and not yet enough memories to make a book.

Eight years after Moskowitz's collections, the next major attempt to documenting the people who write SF was *Hell's Cartographers*, edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, in 1975. In his Introduction, Aldiss writes:

My thought was to invite the men [*sic*] who have been most successful in inventing such fictional scenarios to write a brief memoir of themselves. They were asked to be as frank as possible about their lives and to discuss their involvement in the world of science fiction.

The result is a book of unique significance. We have been the weather men flying above alien cities, and we have not delivered our reports before. When we began to write, it seemed as if we were doomed by our beliefs to work in obscurity. Yet . . . what we had to say proved to be on a subject with which millions of people of our generation were concerned . . . We are an entirely new sort of popular writer, the poor man's highbrows.

I find it startling to return to *Hell's Cartographers* 25 years after first reading it. Three of its authors have since written autobiographical books based on their 50-page essays in this book. They are Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl and Aldiss himself. In each case, the original *Hell's Cartographers* short essay is franker and gives more information to the SF reader than do the later books. Aldiss, in his essay 'Magic and Bare Boards', draws a clear map of how his career developed, a map that is obscured in *The Twinkling of an Eye*, his autobiography. Much the same could be said of Damon Knight, whose own story, told clearly in *Hell's Cartographers*, is more interesting than the stories of the people he describes in *The Futurians*.

The Futurians were the group of SF fans who gathered in New York in the 1930s, and later became some of the best-known SF writers and editors in America. They included Pohl, Knight, Don Wollheim, Judith Merrill, Isaac Asimov, when he was very young, James Blish, Cyril Kornbluth, Virginia Kidd, Robert Lowndes and other people who are now nearly forgotten, such as John Michel. Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* and Knight's *The Futurians* are vivid autobiographies because their main characters are imbued with the two main characteristics of SF writers: they were willing to live on infinitesimal amounts of money for the sake of writing SF, and they showed a remarkable independence from—or indifference towards—the mainstream of ordinary American life of the thirties and forties.

In *Hell's Cartographers*, Knight writes of his first encounter with the Futurians:

[They] were an odd-looking group. Wollheim was the oldest and least beautiful (Kornbluth once introduced him as 'this gargoyle on my right') . . . Lowndes was ungainly and flatfooted; he had buck teeth which made him lisp and sputter, and a hectic glare like a cockatoo's. Michel was slender and looked so much more normal

than the rest that he seemed handsome by contrast, although he was pockmarked and balding. He had a high voice and stammered painfully. Cyril Kornbluth . . . was plump, pale and sullen. He had narrow Tartar eyes and spoke in a rumbling monotone . . . He liked to play the ogre . . .

From my first reading of Knight's article 25 years ago I remembered him as saying, 'The Futurians were the ugliest group of people I had ever met', but he doesn't actually say this. He only implies it. Nearly all of his new companions had serious health problems, although only Kornbluth died before he was forty. All of them had had dislocated childhoods. So had most of the writers described in Moskowitz's books.

Of course, dislocated and lonely childhoods do not guarantee that a person will grow up to become an SF writer. What it means that when such a person has brilliant ideas, he or she won't feel that social constraints need stop him or her from leading a writer's lifestyle: hand to mouth, obscure, raffish, and fun. Knight writes about one of the Futurian apartments, the type of setup that fans would later call 'slan shacks':

[At the] Futurian Embassy . . . Kornbluth stayed over on weekends; he lived with his parents, and so did Wollheim. None of us had any money; for amusement in the evenings, we played poker for stakes of 15c each, and drank California wine at 50c a gallon. Once or twice when Chet and I were sent out for wine, we bought the cheaper stuff at 35c and pocketed the difference.

The Futurians tells stories of drunken parties, near starvation, feuds between the Futurians and the rest of fandom—feuds that were never forgotten by Moskowitz, for one, since the only Futurian he profiles in his books is Asimov, who left the Futurians when he was very young—and feuds between various factions of the Futurians, endless wanderings from one apartment to another as rent day approached, and a bewildering range of male–female relationships.

The mood and tone of the Futurian lifestyle can be found in my favourite two stories from the book:

[After one Futurians meeting] 'The "Things to Come" suite and other recorded fantastic music was played for the edification of the members' aesthetic sides. Not scheduled were playing same pieces backwards & taking of Asimov on thrilling rocket-ride, blindfolded, with eggbeater, clanking spoons, spacial [*sic*] sound effects. Mr A. was also successfully levitated, after involved, highly complicated ritual.'

The Futurians' method of levitating someone was to get him to lie down on a couch or floor, telling him that after a short time he would rise, 'untouched by human hands'. Then they just left him there; when he got tired of this he would get up, and the Futurians would say, 'See?'

The second story features James Blish, who had a peculiar place in the Futurians, since in the 1930s he was just as loudly and theoretically pro-fascist as most of the rest were loudly and theoretically pro-communist, yet his aspirations and lifestyle were much the same as theirs:

[Blish] was more than ordinarily fond of cats, and told many stories about them. Once, when a small kitten climbed up the inside of his trouser leg . . . he discovered that the only way to get it out was to open his fly. In the midst of this operation, he glanced up and found himself being observed with fascination by a neighbor across the airshaft . . . 'And when I met her on the stairs the next day, she muttered, "My God, ears!"'

The Futurians engaged in musical beds with a guilt-free enthusiasm that people of the late sixties and early seventies thought they had invented. Judy Zissman, who became Judy Merrill, married two of the Futurians, and other female companions, such as Virginia Kidd, tried the range of these unprepossessing lads before settling down with one or other of them. All of the Futurians married several times.

It occurs to me that these tales could not have been published in America until the 1970s. In the fanzines, yes, and probably were. But not in hardback books from respectable publishers. When I began buying the SF magazines in the early 1960s, the mere existence of science fiction itself was somehow horrifying to my parents and people like them. At that time, because I insisted on reading on the school bus instead of joining in the general mayhem, I sticktaped a portable brown-paper cover which I used to cover my paperback books while I was reading them. Much better to do that than risk derision when people saw that I was reading an SF book. Think what it must have been like in the 1940s to be an SF writer or fan! The Futurians regarded themselves as radically left wing, but what really separated them from the surrounding society was their enthusiasm for science fiction. Add to that a sense of sexual freedom that would have been unthinkable to most Australians, even in the sixties, and you have people whose autobiographies were not likely to sell well.

III

Why autobiography or biography at all? In the last twenty years, autobiography and biography have developed into a highly successful publishing category. It's a category that can be easily derided, for instance, as novels for people who don't want to read fiction. The trouble is that most autobiographies are, not surprisingly, written by writers, and by necessity writers lead very boring lives. They sit and write. If they don't, they starve.

In *The Age*, 28 July 2000, Lucy Sussex writes: 'the test of a good biography is whether the sense of the subject as a person is conveyed'. Yes, I agree, but would point out that usually the person must be already famous enough to be written about. It's very hard for an unknown writer publish an autobiography merely because he or she has written a good book.

I would also say that, no matter how interesting the life being written about, we want from an autobiography something more than the life itself. My favourite biographies are David Marr's of Patrick White, Hazel Rowley's of Christina Stead, and Veronica Brady's of Judith Wright. All are powerful books because these people leap out of the page, because the biographers have created on the page the whole environment from which they can leap.

What do we find in science fiction? Very few biographies, for a start. There are Charles Platt's pen portraits in the two

Dream Makers collections, Robert Crossley's superb biography of Olaf Stapledon and two biographies of Philip K. Dick, about which I've already talked at the Nova Mob, and . . . what else? There is Ronald Miller's funny and horrifying *Barefaced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*, now nearly unobtainable because, I'm told, some years ago the Scientologists world wide sought out and destroyed every copy they could find. There are no biographies of SF's leading figures, such as Campbell, Heinlein, either Kuttner or Moore, Asimov, Sturgeon, Aldiss, Ballard, Le Guin, or Disch. Some of these people have produced autobiographies. There is Asimov's peculiar autobiography—very readable, but essentially a sort of long list of his triumphs in selling stories and books to various publishers. There are no biographies of women or autobiographies by them. I've heard firm rumours of a Merrill autobiography, which didn't appear before her death, and a Tiptree biography.

I know of one perfect autobiography in our field: Jack Williamson's *Wonder's Child*. Nobody ever praised Williamson's style when writing fiction, and nothing in Williamson's fiction could have prepared us for the clear prose and wise musings of his book. Williamson tells the story of how, at the time of his childhood, his parents found themselves in the most marginal farming land in New Mexico, how he grew up with no money and little schooling, how he failed to fit in to his rural society, so began reading and writing, how he was so shy that it took him until his late thirties to pop the question to the girl he should have married when he was young, how he spent all those years questioning himself, berating himself for loving SF and risking much to continue writing it, and eventually realising that he was going to go broke, how he picked up the bits of his life, and became a teacher, then one of the first SF academics, introducing courses in the subject long before other American colleges would do so. *Wonder's Child* is perhaps the sweetest, most modest and realistic book produced in our field. It's an extraordinary picture of America during the Depression. Perhaps only some of the great Depression novels or Woody Guthrie's autobiography give the same sense of trying to survive in that society.

Nobody could ever accuse Brian Aldiss or George Turner of modesty. (Modesty is not a survival trait among SF authors.) For two people who disliked each other on sight, it's extraordinary the parallels between their attitudes and experiences. Aldiss's autobiography is *The Twinkling of an Eye* and George's is *In the Heart or in the Head*. What makes Aldiss and Turner different from most other people in the SF field is that their tastes were as much shaped by the wide world of English-language literature as by science fiction. Both would like to have been as well known in general literature as in science fiction, with the difference that Turner published mainstream novels before he began publishing science fiction novels, while Aldiss has alternated between SF and mainstream, or mixed them, probably in the long run doing his career in both fields more harm than good.

The other link between Turner and Aldiss is the overwhelming effect that World War II had on them. Turner wrote little about the war in his autobiographical writings, but he wrote two novels directly based on his experience, and many of his characters in his SF novels are soldiers. Aldiss's description of his war experiences in *Twinkling* is the book's most vivid section. What is unexpected is the sheer exuberance with which Aldiss remembers India, Burma, Sumatra

and the other places where he spent the war. The same can be found in those pieces of his fiction that draw on those experiences. *Hothouse*, my own favourite Aldiss novel, seems on recent rereading a metaphor for his war experiences: filled with a love of a sun-scorched, dangerous landscape (the giant jungle in *Hothouse*; Burma in real life) and a growing horror of approaching a safe, sun-starved landscape (the border with the dark side of the earth in *Hothouse*; the return to Britain after the war in real life). Turner's attitude to many things was indifference or grim stoicism, but as Judy Buckrich, his biographer, points out, *A Young Man of Talent*, his first novel, which is based on his war experience, is filled with a similar love of the ferocious beauty of the New Guinea landscape.

Aldiss and Turner are also alike in that they became hardworking and respected critics of the SF field as well as writers of fiction. In them we see the impulse to overcome and replace the naïve attitudes in SF that we find expressed most clearly in Moskowitz's work, but also feature in many of the other SF autobiographies. Aldiss and Turner want SF to be so much better than it is. Oddly, Aldiss's crusade for a better brand of SF is expressed much more clearly in his piece in *Hell's Cartographers* than in *The Twinkling of an Eye*. In the latter book, I get the feeling that Aldiss has, somewhat ruefully, almost given up on the improbability of SF. Turner, on the other hand, as he became older became more concerned about the future and about SF's ability to deal with the age-old problems of humanity. Half his autobiography is about science fiction and its possibilities! We always come back to Damon Knight's 'the pure quill'—the quality of science fiction itself is what makes SF autobiography a unique genre.

Do we really need SF autobiographies or biographies?

Yes, we need SF biographies and autobiographies to gain a sense of the history of our own field. This was the strength of Moskowitz's pioneering efforts. The struggles of the writers mirror the struggles of the genre itself. Those early years were exhilarating to their practitioners. They traded ideas with each other, and somehow remained alive, despite the insulting word rates they are offered, the essentially crummy nature of the pulp magazines in which they appeared, and the absolute contempt with which they were treated by the rest of society.

We also need SF biographies and autobiographies for the qualities that they haven't exhibited so far. For instance, few SF autobiographies give us much idea of what the writers find exciting in SF itself. Asimov's autobiography is a faithful record of the growth of the SF industry. Pohl's and Knight's are more about the SF lifestyle than about the literature.

I would like SF autobiographers to stop being defensive about themselves and their craft. Most of them give the impression of leaving out any details that do not help their public image. Few of them, except Jack Williamson, attempt an in-depth exploration of what the author has found out about life. We certainly need some autobiographies by women SF writers, as we have none at the moment.

More importantly, we need what has been missing in SF, except in the case of George Turner: the biography that can be compared with the autobiography. Turner's is the only case since H. G. Wells of an SF writer who has written an autobiography and who has also been written about. This talk began with the aim of comparing the two books, but became sidetracked. Such a comparison would take another few thousand words.

I apologise for not having gone back to Crossley's biography of Stapledon, or Sutin's biography of Philip Dick, both of which showed me that even the most esoteric science fictional subject matter is based on the direct experience of the author. I haven't returned to Delany's autobiographical writings, which raise for me the question of whether the point of autobiography is not to reveal the truth about a writer but to conceal it. We await Alan Elms' long-promised biography of Cordwainer Smith and a rumoured biography of James Tiptree Jr.

I don't think we can say the SF field has fully grown up until its practitioners routinely feel they should write autobiographies and biographies of each other. I look forward to them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Autobiographies

- Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison (eds): *Hells' Cartographers: Some Personal Histories of Science Fiction Writers* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975)
- Brian Aldiss: *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's: A Writing Life* (Avernus/Hodder & Stoughton, 1990)
- Brian Aldiss: *The Twinkling of an Eye: My Life as an Englishman* (Little, Brown, 1998)
- Brian Aldiss: *When the Feast is Finished: Reflections on Terminal Illness* (Little, Brown, 1999)
- Piers Anthony: *Bio of an Ogre: The Autobiography of Piers Anthony to Age 50* (Ace, 1988)
- Isaac Asimov: *Autobiography: Vol. 1: In Memory Yet Green, 1920–1954* (1979); *Vol. 2: In Joy Still Felt, 1954–1978* (1980)
- Samuel R. Delany: *Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love* (Bantam, 1979)
- Samuel R. Delany: *The Motion of Light in Water* (Morrow, 1988; Paladin, 1990)
- Damon Knight: *The Futurians* (John Day, 1977)
- Sam Moskowitz: *Explorers of the Infinite* (1963)
- Sam Moskowitz: *Seekers of Tomorrow* (Ballantine, 1967)
- Frederik Pohl: *The Way the Future Was* (Victor Gollancz, 1979)
- George Turner: *In the Heart or in the Head: An Essay in Time Travel* (Norstrilia Press, 1984)
- Jack Williamson: *Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction* (Bluejay Books, 1984)

Biographies

- Judith Raphael Buckrich: *George Turner: A Life* (Melbourne University Press, 1999)
- Robert Crossley: *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future* (Liverpool University Press, 1994)
- Ronald Miller: *Barefaced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* (Michael Joseph, 1987)
- Charles Platt: *Dream Makers, Vol. 1* (1980) and *Vol. 2* (1983) (Berkley)
- Gregg Rickman: *To the High Castle: Philip K. Dick: A Life, 1928–1962* (Fragments West/The Valentine Press, 1989)
- Lawrence Sutin: *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* (Harmony Books, 1989)

Thanks to **Lucy Sussex** and **Alan Stewart** who have already sent me extra items for the list. I didn't know that unofficial biographies of Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke have been published; and I had forgotten de Camp's biography of

Lovecraft, and didn't know about the Howard until Alan alerted me. Lucy tells me that the Merrill biography is definitely set for publication. This article has only just begun.
7 August 2000