



The Drink Tank Issue 213

The Eaton Conference 2009

Sometimes, I feel like a kid wearing his Dad's suit to play business. Going to the Eaton Conference at the University of California at Riverside proved that. I'm not completely unknowledgable about the history of science fiction, I've read a fair amount of the important classics and I specifically have read up on Verne over the years, which was the focus of this year's conference, but I'm just not smart enough to see into a text deep enough to pull out what academics can coax from a text. Thus, it was probably a bad idea to drop myself right into the middle of conference like the Eaton, but then again, it was a great time so I'm so very glad I went.

Linda and I drove down to Riverside, leaving my place around 4:30 in the morning on Friday, managing to make it down there around Noon. We checked into our hotel, a comfortable motor lodge right up the street from UCR Extension, and then went and got ourselves the badges. It was just like any other con with 150 or so attendees. We got our badges, headed off to get food. There was a big ol' Mall across the street and as we were looking for the Fatburger, we ran into Mike Perschon.

Those of you who remember me talking about Steam-Powered

last October will remember that Mike was the guy who was on the panel about Victorian technology and also did the great Jules Verne presentation. We chatted for a bit, with Mike asking why I didn't have a paper in the conference.

"I'm not nearly smart enough to have a paper at a conference like this." I noted.

We agreed to have a meal at some point during the conference and I said we would. Linda and I headed off to Fatburger, where Linda's chicken sandwich was falling apart. It was weird. I loved my burger, but I always love Fatburger, and I so rarely get to eat at one. We headed back and got there just in time for the afternoon presentations. The section was called SteamPunk Verne, all about the ways in which Verne led to modern SteamPunk. Robert O'Connor delivered a paper about Nemo's Nautilus as Instrumented Will. It was a bit over my head, but there was something there to the character of Nemo having a strength of will that he imposed using his submarine. It was a very colonial paper and it was really fun, but then it was Mike Perschon's turn to deliver



a paper that was really good stuff. It was called Finding Nemo: Verne's Anti-Hero as Original Steam-Punk. I think there was a lot to see there, and I really liked his take on Nemo in much the same way I really took to it when he presented at Steam-Powered. I always thought that Nemo was Verne's way of saying "look, Colonialism is the only way, like it or not." and he's also the precursor to every Hong Kong cop who ever showed up on the Silver Screen. Mike was a great speaker, whereas the previous dude had just read his paper, Mike went from the paper and worked with it. I expect the fact that he was previously a minister and delivered sermons regularly helped him figure out how to properly deliver at such times.

The final talk came from my buddy Howard Hendrix. Howard's paper was on Phileas Fogg, who he

called an “OCD Aspergers-type” which is absolutely true. Howard put him forward as the prototypical Steampunk, which is something I don’t really agree with specifically because of that OCD tendency. The Steampunk hero is a stoic figure, one who is more related to the Wild West than to Victorian England, even if the stories are set there. If you look at stuff like *Perdido Street Station* or even *The Anubis Gates*, you’ll find the Sheriff and the Drifter and all those other kinds of characters that come from Western Literature. Still, Fogg is one of if not THE greatest character

that Verne ever put forth because, it should be noted, he was the Clockwork Man! Howard put it right when he said that Wells wrote about Time Travel and Verne about Travel Time. I’ve always loved Fogg, and that’s why I’ve always been big into *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg* by Philip Jose Farmer.

I asked a question of Howard, about the relationship of Fogg and the tradition of the Western as informer of Steampunk and he certainly pushed that forward. There’s a lot

there to look at.

The presentation went really well and I was glad to see it. It was a great start to the conference.

After that, it was a couple of left-over muffins, a glass of watered-down orange juice and then sat back down for the second session, which was really interesting. It was called Steampunk After Verne, which was really far more up my alley than discussion of Verne himself. You see, while I like and have read some Verne, he’s not much in my mold. Now, Steampunk, Blaylock (who’s the writer GoH at Windycon!) and Jeter

and folks, they’re the ones I’m into. Perhaps that’s part of the reason that I didn’t really fit in with the conference, because I was much more into the Steampunk than the Verne. It would make sense. It opened with Stanley Orr giving a paper called Cyberpunk, steampunk and the imaginary voyages of James S. Lee. He wasn’t the best at delivering his paper, but he had some good points. Personally, I don’t see any connection between Cyberpunk and Steampunk. There’s the whole paranoia thing in Cyberpunk that you only kinda get in Steampunk...except for Gibson and Stirling. Those guys got



the paranoid in spades.

That got followed up by Andrew Butler of Canterbury Christ Church University delivering a paper about going beyond the Gernsback-Campbell Continuum in 1970s Sci-Fi. I was impressed with his take on Moorcock and Priest, but there was something lacking, as if he didn't really see that there was a massive sea of steampunk during that period and that it really was a slight sliver of time. As a talk about SF, it was probably perfect, but I guess I was looking at it as Steampunk first. These things happen. He did deliver it well. He was followed by my bud Rob Latham of UC Riverside. He did a great paper on Thomas Pynchon's *Against The Day* and Retro-futurism. It was a great paper, one of my two or three favourites from the entire weekend. I love Pynchon, and Latham had a total clutch on the material. I thought it was wonderful.

I asked a question after the final paper. Well, it was partly a question and partly a comment. I mentioned that it was the re-discovery of Babbage that really put an end to the period of time that Andrew had talked about. The *Difference Engine* had really changed everything. It brought the concept of mechanical calculation brought back into the Victorian Age into the forefront and that's been a major part of the Steampunk movement since 1990. Andrew didn't

seem to catch what I was saying, that the Moorcock age of steampunk died in 1990, but he said that Moorcock was coming more from an Edwardian take, which is an interesting take and one which I grasped when I took a look at a couple of things when I got home. I may not be the kind of guy who can be understood by folks who are really smart.

That was the last of the paper sessions for the night. That led to the panel, which made me happy with the folks who would be on it. There was Patrick Gyger, the curator of *Maison d'Allieurs*, a guy who I had met at a SwissNex event in San Francisco in 2004. He's a nice guy and they do

some great stuff out there in Switzerland. There was Greg Benford, writer and long-time fan. There was also Mr. Rudy Rucker. I love that guy. He's crazy and he's got the most amazingly dry sense of humor. It was a wonderful panel, but really, I don't remember nearly as much about it as I do the post-panel stuff. After the panel broke, I walked up to introduce myself

to Greg Benford. I walked over to where he was chatting with someone, waiting patiently. He looked over, read my badge and went, "You're Chris Garcia!" and thus, we started talking. He was really nice, recognising both me and Linda from the pages of *The Drink Tank*. We chatted about this and that, he mentioned that he had been to the Museum and no one had told me, and he mentioned that folks had been talking about putting the Little Men back together. This sounded like a great idea to me. He then introduced me to Jim Benford, who lives in the BArea, and we grabbed a couple of drinks.

Now, this would be a moment where I should say that I totally didn't have the ultimate Fanboy thing going on. I've not read much Benford, a little but not much, and I've always appreciated him as a fan so it was more like meeting a fan I've always been impressed with more than a writer. This would contrast interestingly with a moment later in the conference. We ended up chatting with





Jim Benford for another hour or so. The guy's freakin' charming! We talked more about the Little Men and I mentioned the Hyatt Regency FyDySyFy meet-up and he said maybe he'd stop by. That'd be awesome! I like that guy.

Linda and I headed back to our hotel and watched some TV. As we were flipping through the channels, we found old wrestling on ESPN Classic! It was the last minute of the old Abrahms UWF, but that was followed by 1988 AWA! It was the last year of the promotion, really, but it was still fun. We saw Badd Company, Paul Diamond and Pat Tanaka, and the Rock 'n Roll Express. It was totally awesome!

Saturday started with free breakfast at the hotel. It was donuts (the Hostess Sampler pack, actually) and make-your-own waffles and apple and orange juice and sausage. There were also scrambled eggs, but the less said about those the better.

We headed over for the first session, which was where Linda and I split up for the morning. I went to the session on Michel Verne and the posthumous novels of Jules Verne and how Michel interfered/made better. This was a fascinating pair of papers because this was something I knew a little about but had no idea how deep and intensely Michel had fiddled with Jules' stuff, but also apparently made them better. Julie Mastro gave a great paper about *The Survivors of the Johnathan*, which is a work I'd never even heard of, but it turned out that it was a work which had been meddled with after Jules' death, and many thought that it was improved by Michel. Having found it on Scribd.com, I tend to go with those who thought that Jules' original was weaker than the one carved and rearranged by Michel.

Arthur B. Evans, who ended up being the best over-all speaker for the weekend I think, delivered a review of *The Golden Volcano*, another of the Jules novels played with by Michel. This one I'd heard of and I know

that one of the French classes at Santa Clara High used it as a teaching text in French because it was one of the few Verne books not translated at that point. I've ordered the book because Arthur made it sound interesting and I want to be able to weigh in on the matter of publication.

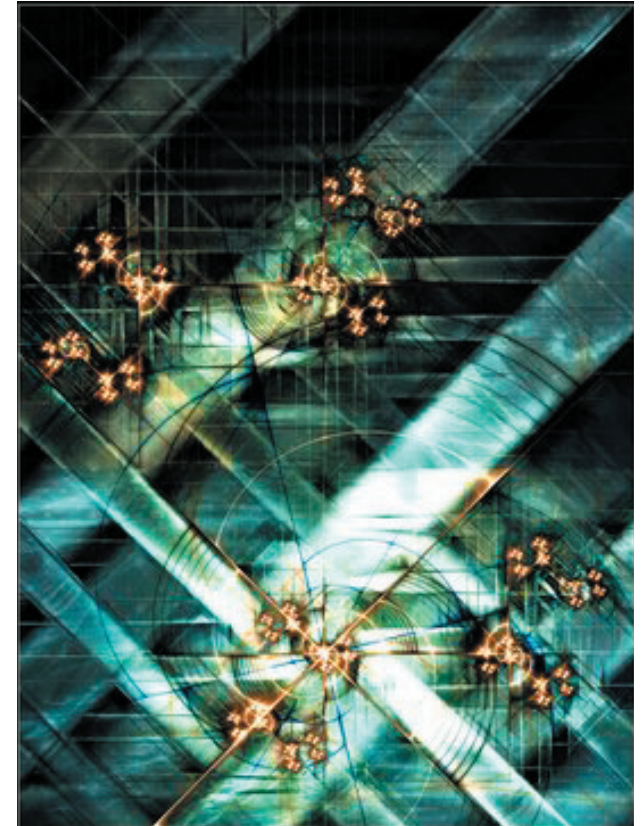
You see, Michel really isn't known as anything more than a medler, never having proven himself as a writer, and though many believe that the novels that Jules left behind are tainted by his interference. The original manuscripts exist, so they've been published as the real novels, but that means that the Michel versions are unavailable, which is sad as those versions are more entertaining according to most. This is sad, especially since there's money in releasing an annotated version or a side-by-side like they do with *The Canterbury Tales* or *Beowulf*. I'd love to read them both, hearing the specific differences, and I think it might be something to step up and go for.

After that bit, I headed back to the other room where Linda was waiting for the series of papers on *The Extraordinary Journey in Other Media*, which was being moderated by Mike. It was an interesting pair of papers, but it was marred by problems of projection. The first was on Verne in the Classics Illustrated line of comics. I had seen those in quarter bins when I was a kid.

The speaker, William B. Jones, gave a good talk, but with the projection being so wonky, it made it hard. It was a shame and I'm hoping that I can get a copy of the paper because I'm betting it was fantastic if all had gone right.

The following was called *Oceans of Noise: Archetypal Readings of Jules Verne in The Abyss*. I love that movie, and obviously so did the presenter, Matthew Snyder. He was so into it that he kept reading at Fanboy speed. That's rough. I know how it goes, though. You're into something and you start to talk about it and sooner-than-later you're blasting through it at speeds that are no longer allowed in Star Trek canon. This was a solid presentation and I'm glad I got to hear it, though I'm sure as he gains experience presenting, he'll get to the right level.

After that it was lunch. I ran into my pal Brad Lyau and asked if he wanted to join Linda and me for lunch. There was a crowd all going to together and we joined in. There were two folks whose names I didn't catch, Howard Hendrix, Sheila Finch (who sadly I didn't get to chat with), Rudy and Sylvia Rucker, Jim Benford, Linda, Brad and me. It was a good crowd. We sat down with Rudy and Howard and Jim. It was a fun set of conversations, including talking about publishing and academics and writing and so on. Jim was charming. Damn, that man is



charming! Linda's food took forever. I think they forgot about her, and even worse, they had to check whether she wanted number 17 or 70 (it was 70). The food was tasty, and then we had to deal with the check, which was a pain. They were really deficient on the matter of the English language. Even more so than many of the Pho places I go. It happens.

Back to the UCR Extension with us, which was good, since two of our crew were presenting. There was a plenary address from Walter James Miller, who couldn't be there, but his text was delivered by Terry Harpold.

The thing is, I didn't know this, and since I had to run upstairs to use the washroom, I got there about 10 minutes into the talk. Terry, a guy who looks to be about 45 or so, was a great speaker, delivering a fine speech, but he kept talking about how he had been instrumental in several annotated editions of Verne as early as 1965! It was weird, and it wasn't until ages later that I found out that he was simply reading the words of Walter James Miller. He did an amazing job of making the words sound like his own. As I have often noted, confidence can convince anyone of anything.

This was followed by a panel about collecting. Brad, Patrick, Jean-Michel Margot, the head of the North American Jules Verne Society, and a collector of Verne texts, both the original fiction and the commentary on those texts (which he donated to Maison d'Ailleurs) and George Slusser, the Curator Emerita of the Eaton Collection and a legend when it comes to Scholarship in the field of Science Fiction. This was about collecting Verne and it was a solid panel. Patrick's museum has ample exhibit space, which the Eaton doesn't have much of, but they are different institutions. I was impressed with the personal collectors more than the



institutional collectors because they all showed the possibility of personal collecting. For example, Jean-Michel mentioned that folks pointed to the thoroughness of the footnotes in his book about Verne. That's because he had the books in his basement so it wasn't a

difficult thing to get them for noting. Most institutional folks complain that private collectors hold their collections in their tiny little fists and that's no good, but I actually think that many private individuals do a great job of getting their stuff out there in one form or another.

The next panel was teh awsum. It was a panel called Steampunk and Extraordinary Voyages with Rudy Rucker, Greg Bear, Kathleen Ann Goonan (who was robbed last year when In War Times didn't make the Hugo ballot) and Tim Powers, with the panel moderated by Mr. Howard Hendrix. The panel was full of people who had written things that were nearly steampunk, but really only Tim and Rudy had written anything I'd say was Steampunk. I asked a question at the end which was about the role of Popular History in the way that Steampunk portrayed its vision. This got some nice reaction from Howard.

After the panel, Tim Powers, my

favourite living author and a guy I'd put into the Hall of Fame before almost any other author out there, came up to me in the audience.

"Hey, Chris!" He said. "I didn't know that you were going to be here." and we chatted for a few minutes.

This was AWESOME.

Tim's probably the nicest guy in the world, and he's the Writer Guest of Honor at SteamCon in Seattle. I mentioned that I'd be giving my 'Those Whacky Victorians' talk at the con and that he should try and sit in on it.

"You know, I'm kinda concerned because I'm not sure that I've written any steampunk." Tim noted.

I went over all the stuff he's written in my head and I realised that the last thing that I'd call Steampunk that Mr. Powers wrote was The Anubis Gates and it certainly was Steampunk. It had all the elements in the setting, the secret history aspect, the powerful bi-location concept and most importantly, the characters all had that feeling of displacement in time and realities. The thing was gorgeous and paced brilliantly too! It's probably the best of the first wave of American Steampunk novels!

Tim and I chatted and he told me to say Hi to Espana. I Twittered to her immediately that he said hello. It was magic.

After that, it was time for the Fred Pohl portion. Fred couldn't make

it out, but they had a video where he delivered a talk about trying to predict the future where he talked about a project that the Rand Corporation worked on asking folks to predict when certain things would happen and them both being right and totally wrong. The matter of working AI was one of the things they were supposed to figure out and they said in 25 years, which would have been more than 25 years ago! It was a very good piece, and Fred looked good in it too! Better than he did at Con Jose, that's for sure.

Then it was time for the SF Poetry Association reading, which meant that Linda and I were off to dinner with Mike. We chose what turned out to be a really good Mediterranean place right across the street. Mike's a great guy and he told us stories of his days as a part of a rock band and then as a minister. He's a good guy. We go to talking about movies and fandom and such and it was a generally good time.

Back to the hotel to watch some more TV, which was no good, but what do you expect on a Saturday. Linda and I did watch the end of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, which is a really fun film. We went to sleep and woke up to more of the fine, dirt cheap breakfast.

Heading over to the UCR Extension, I was tired, but there were two more sessions and I was going to make it through them. The first



one was Verne's French Legacies, which was interesting. The first one was from George Slusser and was all about Verne and Surrealism. It was an interesting point, focusing on a number of works which I was unfamiliar with, but honestly, it didn't seem to connect that deeply. There was the point that *Journey to the Center of the Earth* has surrealist over-tones, specifically a feeling of being out of time, but really, it kinda felt like a stretch. The second paper, about Magritte and Verne, was great stuff from Ben Stoltzfus, a professor

at UCR. His was a solid paper that investigated a lot of connections and how Magritte really pulled in Verne to his paintings. It was also the only presentation I saw with Slides. And by slides, I mean slides in a projector. This one really made me want to dig more into Magritte, who is an artist I've appreciated for years, even though he's a Surrealist.

The final paper in the set was a decent one...I think. A prof from Geneva presented a paper in French. I caught that there was a connection between Andre Breton and Jules

Verne, which makes total sense, but since I don't speak any French, I had no grasp of the topic. Afterwards, he answered questions in English, which helped me to come up with a bit of understanding.

After that, it was the last of the sessions for the entire conference. It was a series of papers about Hollow Earth and Verne. They were three good papers, though the last one, Sherryl Vint's Humanity, Technology and Hollow Earth, seemed about $\frac{3}{4}$ formed, but not there all the way. She was a pretty good presenter. Mike said that this was the Canuck session. I totally agree!

All in all, it was a lot of fun. I really caught a lot of new information on Verne and an appreciation for the dude that was certainly raised by the various papers. I really think that the Michel Verne stuff was the most interesting and I'd love to read more. Someone really needs to write a book about what happened!

