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# War and peace in British science fiction fandom, 1936-45

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## Abstract

Fans of science fiction offer an unusual opportunity to study that rare bird, a “public” view of science in history. Of course science-fiction fans are by no means representative of a “general” public, but they are a coherent, interesting and significant group in their own right. In this paper we follow British fans from their phase of self-organisation just before WW2 and through their wartime experiences. We examine how they defined science and science fiction, and how they connected their interest in them with their personal ambitions and social concerns. Moreover, we show how WW2 clarified and altered these connections. Rather than being distracted from science fiction, fans redoubled their focus upon it during the years of conflict. The number of new fanzines published in the mid-century actually peaked during the War. In this article, we examine what science fiction fandom, developed over the previous half-dozen years, offered them in this time of national trial.

## Who were the fans?

Fans in general, and science fiction fans in particular, have recently become a subject for respectable scholarly study.<sup>1</sup> Readers are increasingly familiar with the pleasures, politics and schisms of early US fandom,<sup>2</sup> but little academic study has been carried out for the UK. A good deal has been written about British sf classics from the interwar period, such as Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), but a focus on British fans of the same period (who were rather little affected by this particular novel) adjusts the historian’s viewfinder. In making this adjustment, we do not presuppose that 1930s and ’40s fandom constituted a predecessor to today’s sf fans; instead, we find a multiplicity of issues and identities specific to working and lower-middle class young men in industrial, war-poised Britain. Still less do we presuppose what, if anything, counted as a canonical base of literature around which science fandom coalesced. In fact, such questions faded into the background in the context of war. British fans, then, offer to tell us something about science as malleable cultural resource, and have the potential to disrupt US-centred generalisations about the nature and trajectory of sf. This topic

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Westfahl, “The Popular Tradition of Science Fiction Criticism, 1926-1980,” *Science Fiction Studies*, 1999, 26: 187-212; John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia: Univ. Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 215-250; Andrew Pilsch, “Self-Help Supermen: The Politics of Fan Utopias in World War II-Era Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies*, 2014, 41: 524-542; Charlotte Sleight, “‘Come On You Demented Modernists, Let’s Hear From You’: Science Fans As Literary Critics In The 1930s,” in *Being Modern: The Cultural Impact of Science in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Bud, Paul Greenhalgh, Frank James and Morag Shiach (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 147-165. The last of these articles addresses the question of canon-building in relation to identity, which is not discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Isaac Asimov, *I, Asimov: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 60-63.

begins to open up space to consider sf as a transnational scientific discourse in the era just prior to transnational big science. It is well-known that British and American fans were in correspondence from the 1930s; during World War Two, they began to meet in person as well as extending their communicational networks for the exchange of fanzines.

The article also offers historians of science the possibility of considering their field in conjunction with fan studies, arguably a natural step on from the treatment of science as essentially mediated knowledge as pioneered by Jim Secord, Sally Shuttleworth and others. Fan studies, as described by Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, may be considered in three waves which in some ways are reminiscent of waves of HSTM scholarship.<sup>3</sup> A first wave of study, they assert, was constructed around a political bi-polarity of absorption into, or resistance to, mass-mediated culture. This resembles early HSTM accounts of professionalization, including accounts of systematic exclusion (such as that of women). Second-wave studies, Gray et al. contend, modified this to create a consumption-orientated account of fans as mobilising their resources simultaneously to enact and re-enact cultural capital and its hierarchies. This, broadly, resembles Foucauldian and Schafferian accounts connecting science and politics. Third-wave studies, of which Gray et al. position themselves as pioneers, tends instead to consider personal and cultural/political motivations for becoming a fan; it is an account which, by their lights, makes most sense in only the very recent past, in which opportunities for fandom multiply, diversify and fragment; and in which, as numerous commentators have observed, “we are all fans now.” This article pushes some of those third wave questions into an earlier period, the early to mid-twentieth century, asking how and why an engagement with science provided fans with a cultural resource in a period dominated by the threat and then reality of conscription. The culture of auto-didactic engagement with, and satire on, science-related writing provides a *longue durée* prologue to the rise of science skepticism.

“Fan” is an abbreviation, a shortening of the word “fanatic.” Deployment of the word “fan” in early twentieth century Britain suggested a reference to the fan’s class or a somewhat sneering judgement; it was applied to football-goers, to indiscriminate theatre-goers, and to bystanders of street fights. It connoted also a discomfitingly American quality.<sup>4</sup> Fans, and their magazines, occupied a special position in the ecology of science publishing. The fans were consumers – at full price, at pulp price, or for free through networks of loan – of professional science publications. Such professional publications included science fact and fiction. Some were books, but it was the fiction periodical that most overlapped with, and modelled and inspired, the world of fandom.

Who were the British science fans? For a start, they were young: too young to have served in the Great War – indeed, many of them were born after it. They had not experienced the personal psychic trauma of conflict and killing, although doubtless the inter-generational effects of it redounded in their families and other networks. Nor had they suffered the disillusionment that the

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), pp. 2-7.

<sup>4</sup> See exemplary quotations given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the period 1914-25. “fan, n.2.” OED Online. June 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/view/Entry/68000?rskey=21zg3E&result=2> (accessed July 10, 2018).

Great War had provoked in earlier generations of science-participants (such as Olaf Stapledon, of whom more later). Active in the 1930s, they were young enough not to have family responsibilities that might have called them away from their reading, writing and meeting.<sup>5</sup> Lacking dependents and the anxieties of maturity, they were relatively untouched by the economic worries of the Great Depression. They existed in a peculiarly fragile historical moment of relative hope.

A sense of the youthfulness and tightly-bounded generational nature of these early fans can be gained by looking at the photograph of the fourteen attendees of the first Science Fiction Association Convention in Leeds, 1937. They came from around the country: from Essex, London, Leeds, Liverpool and the Midlands, so it was not as though they were a pre-existing coterie of friends naturally bonded by their common age (as if they were, for example, fellow members of a youth club or workplace). The oldest-looking person in the picture is Eric Frank Russell (1905-78), and even he was too young to have fought in the Great War, though he would undoubtedly have had considerable memories connected with it. Russell was one of two people at the convention who went on to have a professional career in writing. Also born just before the war was Ted Carnell (1912-72), and Walter Gillings (1912-79), then 25 but founder of the first fan group at the age of eighteen. Leslie J. Johnson, a key advocate of scientifiction and fandom, was born in 1914. George Airey was born in 1916 (-2001); the convention's most famous product, Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008), was born at the war's end, as were John Michael Rosenblum (1917-78) and Maurice K. Hanson (1918-81). Douglas Mayer (1919-76), editor of the successful fanmag *New Worlds*, was born just afterwards.

On a specifically scientific note, one might further note the presence of the wireless amongst this generation. As recent histories have indicated,<sup>6</sup> returnees from the Great War very often brought wireless expertise with them; they went on to build their own sets and to share them with their children. There was an overlap between magazines treating radio-related topics and those in non-fictional futurism and scientifiction. The publisher Hugo Gernsback was in one way or another involved with a dozen separate wireless magazines, along with other science and mechanics titles. From his point of view at least, these were overlapping and complementary markets. Many of the young scientifictionists were wireless fans, too. Arthur C. Clarke built an early set;<sup>7</sup> Leonard Kippin,

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<sup>5</sup> Gillings had a child in c.1934; mention of his four-year-old is made in *Tomorrow* Issue 6 (Vol 2. No.2, Summer 1938), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Tilly Blyth, ed., *Information Age: Six Networks That Changed Our World* (London: Scala Arts & Heritage, 2014), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood Ends: The Earliest Writing of Arthur C. Clarke* (Rochester, Michigan: Portentous Press, 1996), p. 59.

co-founder of the first fan club, was a wireless buff,<sup>8</sup> and Douglas Mayer's Institute of Scientific Research in Leeds incorporated two pre-existing wireless clubs.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the general contextual features defining these young men as a generation, there was also very specific historical contingency that precipitated their emergence as an identifiable group. Gernsback, the proprietor of *Amazing Stories* (1926) – the first periodical dedicated to science fiction – decided to facilitate communication amongst his readers by printing their full names and addresses in the magazine's "Discussions" section. The tradition continued in other titles and in 1930 a rookie reporter on the Ilford *Recorder*, Walter Gillings, spotted a letter in *Wonder Stories* written by a fellow-fan who lived only four miles away.<sup>10</sup> This man, Leonard Kippin, was a commercial traveller, and had picked up a substantial number of magazines on his journeys. Together the young men agreed to set up a group for discussing their shared interests, and thanks to his position at the local newspaper, Gillings was able to use its pages to spread the word. On Friday 3 October 1930, a letter entitled "Science Fiction" appeared in it, inviting interested Ilfordians to get in touch and help set up a "Science Literary Circle." Whether this letter succeeded in prompting replies from strangers, or whether due to pre-existing connections (Gillings asserted the former), a group was indeed established. Its meetings were chronicled in the pages of succeeding issues of the *Recorder*; H. P. Lovecraft, time travel, light years and future predictions were all subjects of discussion. A visit from the Australian James Morgan Walsh (1897-1952), then living in London, provoked debate concerning life on other planets.<sup>11</sup> In a letter to *Wonder Stories* of November 1931, Gillings surreptitiously bumped his group's title up to the "British Science Literary Association," and mentioned similar movements afoot in Manchester, Liverpool and Blackpool. Gernsback mentioned in response that he has also heard from Leslie G. Johnson in Liverpool (apparently a "hamlet" in Gernsback's mind), who was indeed a key figure in establishing British fandom.

Travelling and meeting were not always easy for these men of limited holiday time and means. Their main social forum was virtual – on paper – the fanmags that they wrote, produced and circulated amongst themselves. The first major British fanmag, *Novae Terrae*, was launched in Nuneaton in 1936; only in the following year did its editors meet up with other fans from around the country, at a meeting hosted by the Leeds chapter of the American Science Fiction League (SFL). *Novae Terrae* was adopted as the official magazine of the British Science Fiction Association (SFA) that emerged from the Leeds meeting, and along with other fanmags forms the major archival source for this

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<sup>8</sup> Rob Hansen, *Then: Science Fiction Fandom in the UK: 1930-1980* (Reading: Ansible, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, *Then*, p. 25. On science fiction and wireless, see Charlotte Sleight, "'Not one voice speaking to many': E C Large, wireless, and science fiction fans in the mid-twentieth century," *Science Museum Group Journal* Issue 8 (Autumn 2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/170802>

<sup>10</sup> Their addresses appear in the Ilford *Recorder*. Gillings was eventually sacked by the newspaper in 1940, for failing to put a sufficiently patriotic spin upon war stories. *Futurian War Digest* Issue 1, October 1940.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Knight, "Walsh, James Morgan (1897–1952)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/walsh-james-morgan-8969/text15783>, published first in hardcopy 1990, accessed online 28 November 2014.

article. Because the majority of the fans did not go on to become historical figures in any significant way, there is little else by way of archival resource – no collected papers or letters, no workplace records – to go on. Instead, this article follows a broadly discourse-based methodology, based upon their writings.

The fans and their writing constitute an example of what Michael Whitworth has called “virtual communities” in science; studying their productions enables the reconstruction of – in his words – “the local *zeitgeist* of a particular social network.”<sup>12</sup> As such, one could examine the productions of fans in any country (and any period) to find a locally specific para-scientific culture. In the case of science fiction, Whitworth’s model of localism can be stretched a little, in the sense that mid-century fans were rather international in their outlook and communications. Hence an interesting combination of local and transnational features might be expected to emerge by combining a number of national studies, such as this. In the case of Great Britain, there are specific historical reasons for interest in the fans. How did these moderately educated young men locate themselves in relation to professional scientific culture, and the new general public culture of expertise that was emerging thanks to wireless broadcasting? In what ways was science a cultural resource through which to articulate their identity and space within society at large? And, of course, how did all this pivot around the watershed experience of World War Two, in its anticipation and unfolding?

### **In what ways were the fans connected with science and engineering?**

The most significant fan groups to be founded through the 1930s were in Leeds, Liverpool and the Midlands, all places noteworthy for their industrial and engineering heritage. Very many of the fans had some peripheral involvement with engineering industries, though they were rarely highly qualified. Few of the first-generation science fans were educated at university, though this was beginning to change just as war broke out. Richard George Medhurst (1920-1971) was studying mathematics at London University, and relocated to Cambridge due to hostilities.<sup>13</sup> Rosenblum described Medhurst as having probably the biggest science fiction book collection “kept in two enormous bookcases.” Not long after Medhurst went to Cambridge, his mother wrote to tell him that a bomb had exploded close to their house, and a piece of shrapnel had embedded itself in, of all the many books in his collection, *The Shape of Things to Come* by H.G. Wells.<sup>14</sup>

Douglas Webster reported having “received excellent education at a Grammar School,” which he followed with “Varsity – science,” though it is unclear where exactly he studied, or what specific

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<sup>12</sup> Whitworth, Michael H. *Einstein’s wake: relativity, metaphor, and modernist literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> “JMR,” “Introducing: Richard G. Medhurst,” *Futurian War Digest*, Issue 1 (Vol. 1, Number 1, Oct. 1940), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Hill and Jas from Global Information Centre, Eastbourne, “The Shape of Things to Come,” *BBC WW2 People’s War*, 2005  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/67/a4386567.shtml>> [accessed 1 August 2017].

course.<sup>15</sup> After Donald A. Wollheim suggested that science fiction fans found science “distasteful” because they “work for science, not in it” and would not descend to practical levels, Peter G. Sherry was moved to write in to *Tomorrow* to argue that his reading of science-fiction had been increased since he started studying a B.Sc. (Honours Chemistry) course at Glasgow University.<sup>16</sup> Doug Mayer (1919-76) read physics at the University of Leeds around the beginning of World War Two. At the age of sixteen he had founded the “Institute of Scientific Research” and its “library” at the home of parents; together with two others he formed the Leeds chapter of the SFL, which by the end of 1935 had twelve members.<sup>17</sup> The authorities’ condemnation and demolition of the house where they met gives an indication of the socio-economic position of its members. Fortunately, one of them had an estate-agent father, who gave them a virtually free room to meet instead.

Fans aspired to higher education on behalf of the next generation, too. In the 1940 announcement of the birth of Alys Rita Rathbone’s son James, the infant was described as being:

... like a futureman, with a colossal head compared with his body, but when he obtains his University degree in two weeks, he may look more normal. Meanwhile he will be cutting his teeth on “Principia Mathematica” and Hegel’s “Principles of Logic” with a little Euclid on the side.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the few fans who went to university, many of the first generation had connections to industry or had technical occupations. James Parkhill-Rathbone (father of baby James, 1918-?), for instance, was a scientific instrument salesman. Walter Gillings, founder of the first UK fan group, studied at Leyton Technical College – though in what field is unclear. He was actually noted amongst fans as having an unusually low level of interest in physics, chemistry and so on, but communicated his love of science fiction in the pages of the newspaper for which he worked.<sup>19</sup>

Ted Carnell was, like Gillings, in the world of type, and during the lifetime of *Novae Terrae* he was a printing apprentice. He had been turned down for his first choice, a Trade Scholarship in book-binding, because the Board disapproved of his practice of home-binding such tripe as the *Boys Magazine*, “a lurid red-covered ‘blood’ which ran lengthy serials on invasions by Martians.”<sup>20</sup> Before the war, Maurice Hanson (1918-1981) was a civil servant from Nuneaton; he later commuted from Kettering to Imperial College London, where he worked as a librarian in the transport library.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Introducing: Douglas W.L. Webster,” *Futurian War Digest*, January 1941, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Various, “Candid Comments,” *Tomorrow*, Autumn 1938, pp. 14–16.

<sup>17</sup> Rob Hansen, “The Rise and Fall of Leeds Fandom,” *Relapse* 21, Spring 2013, pp. 4-11, p. 5

<sup>18</sup> James Parkhill-Rathbone, “Birth of a Son,” *Futurian War Digest*, February 1943, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> “Cosmivox,” “His Tale of Wonder: An interview with Walter H. Gillings, Editor of ‘Tales of Wonder,’” *Tomorrow* 6 (Vol. 2. No.2, Summer 1938), pp. 7 and 13; p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Futurian War Digest*, November 1942, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Rob Hansen, “Forgotten Fans #6: The Sage of Nuneaton,” *Relapse*, August 2014, 1–8 (p. 7). Imperial College still award a Maurice Hanson Prize for the student who produces the best paper on

Further north, fans were more connected with big industry. Olaf Stapledon, universally praised by the fans although not one himself, had a strong family connection to the great Holt shipping company in Liverpool. His father was senior within the firm and was posted to Egypt during Olaf's early childhood. In early adult, Stapledon had temporary employment from his father's firm. Eric Frank Russell (1905-1978), another Merseysider, and the most prolific and successful story-writer of the early sf period, studied science and technology at college before working as a telephone operator, quantity surveyor, draughtsman, and then as a trouble-shooter for the large engineering firm Frederick Braby & Co.<sup>22</sup> William Temple (1914-1989) trained for some years as engineer but by 1939 was working in the Stock Exchange. D. R. Smith (1917-1999), the "Sage of Nuneaton" was a regular reader of *The Engineer* magazine and worked as a draughtsman.<sup>23</sup> Harry Turner (1920-2009) from Manchester worked as a rubber chemist.<sup>24</sup>

## Before the war

During the late 1930s, the brief window of time in which the fans coalesced in clubs and printed their fanmags, the prospect of a Second World War was an unavoidable backdrop to everything, science fiction included. Alexander Korda's *Things to Come*, released in February 1936, was universally praised by the fans, as it was by professional critics. As Jeffrey Richards points out, Korda's film more or less dispensed with the critique of capitalism that had underpinned Wells's book, in favour of a prophetic focus upon warfare.<sup>25</sup> The horrifying scenes of bombing, with which

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the Advanced Course in Transport, see: "Postgraduate Prizes: Transport Cluster Awards," *Imperial College London* <<http://www.imperial.ac.uk/engineering/departments/civil-engineering/prospective-students/postgraduate-prizes/>> [accessed 2 June 2017].

<sup>22</sup> Paddy Collis, Sharon Maxwell, and Josette Reeves, "The Eric Frank Russell Collection: Biographical History," *University of Liverpool Special Collections & Archives Catalogue*, 1998 <<http://sca-arch.liv.ac.uk/eas/search/?operation=full&recid=gb141efr>> [accessed 2 August 2017]; John L. Ingham, *Into Your Tent: The Life, Work and Family Background of Eric Frank Russell* (Reading: Plantech, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Hansen, "The Sage of Nuneaton," p. 2; D. R. Smith, "Cover and Other Things," *Novae Terrae* Issue 25 (Vol. 3 No. 1 August 1938), pp. 32-33; at p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> RFV and SDS, "Harry Turner: Obituary & Appreciation," *Henry T. Smith Productions*, 2016 <<http://www.htspweb.co.uk/fandf/romart/het/hetobit.htm>> [accessed 2 August 2017]. The fans' connections with engineering help to make sense of the entrepreneurial nature of much scientific science, turned towards profit and practicability; see Charlotte Sleight, "Science as Heterotopia: The British Interplanetary Society before WWII," in Don Leggett and Charlotte Sleight (eds), *Scientific Governance in Britain, 1914-79* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 217-233 DOI:10.7228/manchester/9780719090981.003.0012

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Richards, "Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s," in I. Q. Hunter, ed., *British Science Fiction Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): pp. 16-32; at pp. 19-20.



the film opens, connected film-goers very directly to the likely future, as they prominently featured a cinema, such as that in which they were then sitting, in amongst the destruction.

Wells was indeed an omnipresent figure in British science fiction fandom, a counter-balance to the trigger-happy tales that tended to feature in Gernsback's magazines. For Britons, there was a cultural memory (and anticipation) that perhaps tempered enthusiasm for such worlds.

Notwithstanding the thrilling excitement of *War of the Worlds* (1898), its accounts of the mass flight of ordinary people was harrowing and perturbing. Wells continued, in fiction and non-fiction, to inveigh against war-mongering.

Another of the fans' favoured authors – for many, ranking more highly than Wells – was Olaf Stapledon.<sup>26</sup> Stapledon crops up as a touch-stone for the fans over and over again in their magazines, suggesting that he was widely read and respected. His sprawling, staggering evolutionary histories produced a terrifying and vertiginous sense of insignificance in their readers, and one may well read the source of this horror as his front-line experiences. *Last Men in London* (1932) gave particularly gruelling descriptions of the Great War: its horrors and its after-effects upon mind and society. What had seemed the sum of knowledge and experience for Stapledon was shattered by what he saw, just as it was for readers of his epics. "The world of breakfast, sixpences, and artificial silk/ ... seems vast and safe"; but "minds are fledglings in a cliff-ledge nest," and when the drop is revealed – that is, the insignificance of the self – the minds reels.<sup>27</sup> Stapledon's correspondence and journalism reveals his immersion in pacifist circles; the fans, by and large, recognised his perspective.

The youth of science fiction fans took on a new significance in the light of likely conscription. In June 1937, Eric Frank Russell was moved to comment on "Archbishop Cant's" apparent calling of youth to military service.<sup>28</sup> Though Archbishop Lang's "Recall to Religion" campaign – the source to which Russell apparently alludes – was primarily aimed at inducing personal piety, it was understood in context by Russell as a patriotic call to armed service. Lang's articulation of his evangelistic message as "the consecration of the *king's people*" to the service of God was likely to blame.<sup>29</sup> Given God's alignment with war and fatherland, debate raged amongst the fans as to whether He was present in, or absent from, Stapledon's epics. Some claimed that his presence would give comfort in what was

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<sup>26</sup> Maurice Hanson named him as author of his favourite book; Arthur C. Clarke gave one of his novels – uniquely amongst all his collection – the appellation "superb." *Novae Terrae* Issue 25 (Vol. 3 No. 1 August 1938), p. 25 and *Novae Terrae* Issue 24 (Vol. 2 No. 12 June 1938), p. 16, respectively. D. R. Smith was a little more ambivalent; he had a love-hate relationship with literature that attempted higher meaning. However, even he conceded that "Last and First Men by Dr. Olaf Stapledon [was] hailed as the best imaginative story since Wells left the field." *Novae Terrae* Issue 14 (Vol. 2 No. 2 June 1937), p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Quotations from "Poem 1 from *The Nether Worlds*," Robert Crossley, ed., *An Olaf Stapledon Reader* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 307.

<sup>28</sup> Eric F. Russell, "Rationalism and Youth," *Novae Terrae* Issue 15 (Vol 2 No 3, July 1937), p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Beaken, *Cosmo Lang: Archbishop in War and Crisis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 122, 133. Emphasis added.

otherwise a bleak and inhuman universe. One correspondent to *Novae Terrae* found Stapledon's god to be a Tennysonian figure, careless of the single life; and this "scientific" view, it seemed, was preferable to a god who personally desired the death of young men.<sup>30</sup> Others claimed that Stapledon's post-war universe was atheistic.

At the beginning of 1938, after a year in which Italy, Japan and the US had rattled their weapons, fans debated amongst themselves the purpose of science fiction. The fan and amateur writer D. R. Smith was taken to task by his fellow fan Albert Griffiths for maintaining a commitment to fiction for the sake of fiction. Griffiths despaired that, if it did not connect with higher aims, scientifiction would remain as a "sophisticated [kind of] fairy story" or else "sugar-coated science a la Gernsback."<sup>31</sup> Instead, "true science-fiction should attempt to portray the impact upon society and civilization of new scientific ideas and ideals." Griffiths recommended – as we might by now guess – one of Stapledon's novels by way of example.

Griffiths had rather got Smith wrong. True, Smith maintained a dogged independent-mindedness in the face of the "'strafing' of the Left Book Club" and the "imperialist and capitalist authors" who opposed them. Yet he had, in fact, been exploring social questions through his series on "cosmic cases" in the very same fanmag as that in which Griffiths wrote. These subtle and amusing pieces pre-empted the international courts and tribunals instigated in the wake of WW2, making fans their judges. Their accounts of inter-planetary battles and the rights of nations satirised international politics and the pointless destruction of war, as well as colonialism. Smith, in his article "The Drift Away From Scientific Fiction," in fact condemned the fans for not reading *real* sociology, claiming that those who had done so – such as himself – required the soothing balm of fiction as counter to life's bitter realities. "The stalwarts are putting aside the toys of childhood," he concluded, "and are going forth to the war that really is to end war, and all other forms of man's purposeless suffering. Ave atque vale."<sup>32</sup> As ever in Smith's writing, the irony is complex. On one level it sounds like a (lone) call to war; on the other, Catullus' lament for his brother, re-voiced by Tennyson, suggests that the suffering may not be worth it after all.

Notwithstanding Smith's tergiversation, questions of society and war continued to build amongst the fans. The issue of *Novae Terrae* following the first "cosmic case" included a peace pledge union folder in its mail-out.<sup>33</sup> A sub-group of the SFA was formed, committed to progressive sociology.<sup>34</sup> They were inspired by the US fans Claire P. Beck and especially John B. Michel, whose socialist convictions (briefly flourishing as "Michelism") were propagated at the Philadelphia Convention of

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<sup>30</sup> E. Longley, "Regarding Mr. Knight's Letter (August issue)," *Novae Terrae* Issue 26 (Vol. 3 No. 2, Sept 1938), pp. 11 and 17.

<sup>31</sup> Albert Griffiths, "Ideas and Ideals," *Novae Terrae* Issue 21 (Vol. 2 No. 9, March 1938), pp. 12-14.

<sup>32</sup> D. R. Smith, "The Drift Away From Scientific Fiction," *Novae Terrae* Issue 20 (Vol. 2 No. 8, January 1938), pp. 6-7; at p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Even the title of the journal, "new earths," suddenly acquired an oddly biblical resonance in relation to the "new earth" of Revelation 21: 1-4, in which there is no more death.

<sup>34</sup> Anon., "Branch Reports," *Novae Terrae* Issue 20 (Vol. 2 No. 8, January 1938), pp. 17-19; at p. 18.

1936. British readers were bombarded with questionnaires to discover their opinions on matters of politics; one revealed that 93% of readers liked articles “with a sociological trend.”<sup>35</sup> The Leeds fan Douglas Mayer, reflecting on all this, called on fans to “wake up.”

No one who has meticulously digested the contents of the past few issues of “*Novae Terrae*” can have escaped noticing the trend for contributors to ignore science-fiction itself, and to expound in their articles the ideas, beliefs and inspirations that science-fiction arouses.<sup>36</sup>

However, this was not movement away from science fiction, but rather towards its logical apotheosis: “British fans are at last beginning to realise that science-fiction is something more than a mere type of literature’ (ibid, p. 10). Mayer claimed two features specific to science fiction that allowed it to function as social and political criticism. One was the vastness of the canvas upon which its writers painted—a scale of worlds, that was appropriate to global warfare. Stapledon, as ever, was the natural referent. Secondly, and seemingly even more important to Mayer, was the cultivation of “a detached standpoint” within science fiction. Fans, claimed Mayer, had cultured through their reading an ability to see terrestrial affairs as from afar. (Yet again, the technique is centre-stage in literal form in Stapledon’s novels, where the reader is conducted through aeons and light years until earth is less than a pin-prick). Mayer quoted the US fan Claire Beck:

[The fan] finds himself set free, not only of the cramping bonds of conventional incident and conventional locale, but free also to criticize historically, allegorically, or how he will, the petty meanesses [sic] and misdirection of our petty affairs. He may sketch the ideal with a clearness and directness that in any other type of literature would get him called a menace of a fool!<sup>37</sup>

In the Leeds Branch, at least, Mayer perceived that such a change had taken place amongst its members, transforming them “from amateur scientists to idealistic sociologists.”<sup>38</sup>

There are many ways of reading this science-fictional sense of mental superiority and freedom from convention. On one level it is a simple expression of late adolescent identity. Some authors – Gary Westfahl and Steve Silberman – have noted its appeal to some persons whom today we would class as being on the autistic spectrum.<sup>39</sup> Still another reading might relate it to an emergent political,

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<sup>35</sup> See special insert, *Novae Terrae* Issue 20 (Vol. 2 No. 8, January 1938).

<sup>36</sup> Douglas F. W. Mayer, “Wake Up, Fans!” *Novae Terrae* Issue 19 (Vol. 2 No. 7, December 1937), pp. 10-13; at p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (New York: Penguin, 2015). See chapter “Princes of the Air.” Silberman quotes John Campbell: “Write me a creature that thinks as well as a man, or better than a man, but not like a man,” implying that such may be the description of a person with autistic spectrum disorder – and a fan. See also Gary Westfahl “Homo aspergerus: Evolution Stumbles Forward,” Feature Review, (*Locus Magazine*), *Locus*

social and educational identity amongst these young, working and lower-class males, against a background of generational segmentation (due to the Great War) and the ascendancy of mass media. The sense of an “establishment” was perhaps emerging as a foil for the “ordinary man” [sic]. One fan noted by way of self-contextualisation that “the king of England himself had been thrown out for not confirming with the Establishment.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, however, we may note that this identity is explicitly “scientific”:

... the applications and teachings of science should be used to sweep away archaic beliefs and superstitions, and to create on Planet Three a world fit for the superior race that man would then become.<sup>41</sup>

The scientific designation of Earth as “Planet Three” exemplifies the mind-set proposed by the author: despite this planet being the author’s home, it is stripped of its familiar and emotive name, and renamed – that is renumbered – according to its position from a physically distant perspective, logical to a naming of the solar system as a whole.

There were limits to “scientific” distancing, however, increasingly vocalised by both scientists and fans. As war loomed over Europe, fanmag *Tomorrow* reported that scientists had been making various statements of their ideals, proposing a scientific “‘brains trust’ for the world,” active planning and control of science by scientists, and suggesting that technocracy could remedy global ills.<sup>42</sup> In response, in the next issue (one of the last fanmags published before the war), Mayer wrote an editorial urging scientists to seize control of the application of their discoveries. Under the heading “Action Applauded,” the editorial team expressed their hopes that scientists’ “academical musings rapidly give way to determined action!”<sup>43</sup> Fans had also written in to express their approval of the scientists’ intentions to act.<sup>44</sup>

For the science fiction fans, as for scientists, the potential of war carried with it the potential for the unleashing of the full powers of science. Mayer invoked the metaphor of Icarus and Daedalus to imply that scientists had flown too close to the sun with their scientific developments.<sup>45</sup> Less abstractly, Geoffrey Daniels argued that:

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Online 6 March 2006, [http://www.locusmag.com/2006/Features/Westfahl\\_HomoAspergerus.html](http://www.locusmag.com/2006/Features/Westfahl_HomoAspergerus.html) [accessed 2 August 2017].

<sup>40</sup> Sid Birchby quoted in Hansen, *Then*, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Mayer, “Wake Up, Fans!” p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Anon, “The Revolt of the Scientists: A Comprehensive Survey of How Scientists Are Setting Out to Save Our Civilisation,” *Tomorrow* Issue 6, (Vol 2. No.2, Summer 1938), pp. 12–13.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas W.F. Mayer, “Editorial Comment,” *Tomorrow* Issue 7, (Vol 2. No.3, Autumn 1938), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Various, “Candid Comments,” *Tomorrow* Issue 7, (Vol 2. No.3, Autumn 1938), pp. 14–16.

<sup>45</sup> Mayer, “Editorial Comment.” Mayer suggested that Professor Piccard might be a modern equivalent: this presumably refers to Jean Piccard, the high-altitude balloonist whose exploits the fans who so closely overlapped with the BIS would undoubtedly recall. Shortly before the war,

In the arbitrary advance of science some branches have leapt ahead, while others have lain neglected through the centuries. Physics, chemistry and engineering have provided man with a means for the almost immediate destruction of a city, but no branch of science has yet provided sufficient deterrent from such things.<sup>46</sup>

Fans, so many of whom were from technical or engineering backgrounds, believed that “something more than scientific achievement is required” because the “arbitrary” advance of science was potentially dangerous. They believed that a “practical” planned and applied science offered the best hope of a better future for humanity.

British fans, sometimes referring to “sociology” and sometimes to “science,” espoused a progressive and anti-establishment mind-set: a Wellsian rejection of war and of capitalism as it was experienced. Writing at the time, fan Dave McIlwain characterised fellow members of his species as those “idealis[ing] certain states or concepts – Altruism, Pacifism, and so on.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the social perspective was badged as inherently “scientific.” Fan Sid Birchby recalled:

As a fan, I felt it was quite right and proper that the fanzines ... should print their steady diet of pep articles on “Whither Mankind?” and “Science Progress.” It was the New World we were making, and the golden tool was Science. Around us [i.e. by contrast] the world was moving into the first steps of the dance of death ...<sup>48</sup>

Some fans were overtly socialist; others maintained remarkably thoughtful and relativist about the value systems they saw around them. Some were pacifist and some were not. Differences of opinion over precise political commitments, and indeed over the place of politics in science-fiction, were amongst the reasons for the first schism within fandom in 1937.<sup>49</sup> These varying positions, and the relationships between their proponents, would be tested as warfare moved from the realm of fiction to fact.

## War

When Britain entered the war, the Science Fiction Association disbanded, and J.M. Rosenblum noted that initially fandom was decimated as men were called up or left to serve, falling into what he termed the “draft abyss.”<sup>50</sup> Maurice Hansen was the first to be drafted, being called up in July

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Piccard had used a TNT charge to release a balloon, which set fire to excelsior wood-wool and destroyed his craft.

<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Daniels, “The Future of Applied Psychology: A Forecast of the Applications of the Newest of the Sciences,” *Tomorrow* 6, (Vol 2. No.2, Summer 1938), p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Dave McIlwain, “One Hour with a Psychiatrist,” *New Worlds* Issue 4 (Autumn 1939), pp. 28-30; p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Hansen, *Then*, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Hansen, *Then*, pp. 34-9.

<sup>50</sup> J.M. Rosenblum, “Editorial,” *Futurian War Digest*, April 1943, pp. 2–3.

1939.<sup>51</sup> War also caused the loss of many fanmags, whether due to the call-up of those who produced them or the destruction of materials and equipment in the eventual bombings. One publication, however, was “British fandom’s main unifying force... the main chronicler of the trials and tribulations facing fandom in these uncertain times”: the *Futurian War Digest*.<sup>52</sup> During the war, it enabled the fans scattered across the world to stay in touch and was even used to recruit new members. It is primarily via this publication that it is possible to explore the relationships, interests, and experiences of the fans.

Some fans were connected by their service as well as their fanmag. Rob Hansen has observed that most fans served in the RAF, which he attributes to both preference and their having “a number of things in common (i.e. being predominantly middle-class, literate, and interested in science) that the RAF was looking for.”<sup>53</sup> Whilst the Royal Navy drew only a couple of fans to its ranks, the Army, and specifically the Royal Corps of Signals, attracted almost as many as the RAF. Fans themselves made a joke of the idea that their allocated roles were any indicator of ability: Signalman Eric Williams commented “Isn’t it amazing and significant the number of fans who are joining up in the Signals? Guess it must be the high level of intelligence and keenness [sic] needed to become a Signalman.”<sup>54</sup> Signalmen’s work ranged from maintaining radar systems to being radio operators and teletypists and despatch riders. In fact, many fans performed similar, technical, roles regardless of their force allocation: for instance, J.F. Burke was a radar mechanic in the RAF and Donald J. Doughty was a wireless mechanic for the Navy.<sup>55</sup> A book review in the February 1944 FIDO attests to the technical leanings of the fans: the main criticism of *On the Way to Electro War* by Kurt Doberer (1943) was that “radio enthusiasts in fandom may be disappointed at the incomplete nature of its technical explanations – and exasperated at the vagueness of many terms used.”<sup>56</sup> Fans were interested in more than simply the story-telling possibilities of new technology. One fan in particular found that his technical understanding shaped his war experience. Doug Mayer wrote an article for *Discovery* journal on “the possibility of making use of the latent energy of the atom,” which he closed by pondering whether this would lead to “a Wellsian chaos with each nation dropping bouquets of uranium bombs in a policy of encirclement.”<sup>57</sup> Airey and Warnes recalled how, shortly after its

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<sup>51</sup> Rob Hansen, *Then: Science Fiction Fandom in the UK: 1930-1980*, 2016, p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> Hansen, *Then*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> Hansen, *Then*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> “Overseas Mail,” *Futurian War Digest*, August 1942, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Fans’ wartime roles has been traced mainly through reports of their call-up and service included in the pages of FIDO.

<sup>56</sup> Julian Parr, “Book Review,” *Futurian War Digest*, February 1944, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas W. F. Mayer, “Energy from Matter,” *Discovery: A Popular Journal of Knowledge*, New Series, II.18 (1939): 459–460.

publication, Mayer was “whisked away to London, where he became one of the famous “backroom boys.””<sup>58</sup>

The common features of the wartime roles taken by fans reinforce the idea arising from their pre-war jobs that many of them shared technical interests and skills: their interest in science-fiction went beyond the stories. Moreover, if these skills were useful to the military, finding themselves in similar roles also benefited the fans by making face-to-face meetings easier even than before the war. As well as forging international connections, war enabled British fans to connect and to discover each other. Three science-fiction veterans, McIlwain, Russell and Forster, were sent to No. 1 Signals School at the same time and were joined shortly afterwards by Birchby; they held bi-weekly suppers and a mini-convention.<sup>59</sup> Fans hoped for the same sort of “flourishing fan colony” at No. 2 School where Clarke was joined by Canadian fan E.A. Atwell.

Another group of fans, only discovered by FIDO readers in October 1942, were based at the Teddington Paint Research Station. The work conducted there could be described as materials science. The overall aim of the work was to improve camouflage and strength of equipment; in practice this involved developing more sophisticated chemical substances: the organisation celebrated the construction of its first electron microscope in 1944.<sup>60</sup> The Teddington group were initially unknown even to one another, until E. Frank Parker donated his collection of science fiction reading to help National Fire Service members to pass the time as they sat on the roof of the building watching for fires.<sup>61</sup> For fandom, the PRS group (later renamed the Cosmos Club) presented exciting possibilities, as they had access to printing machines and technical printing abilities which were in short supply. Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of this, the authorities at the Paint Research Station considered that science fiction was not good for science (or morals), which forced the newly bonded group into clandestine meetings.<sup>62</sup> Tribe-making, for fans during the war, was closely connected with scientific and technical roles both because of common interests that resulted in the work, and because of the access to spaces such as cafeterias and rooftops which were shared during breaks from that work.

Fans connected internationally in an ad-hoc way too. In some cases, fans met by chance and in others they were connected by FIDO, which acted as a hub for letters detailing locations. For instance, from Egypt, one fan reported “more fans are out in the Middle East. Letters will start to shuttle back and forth pretty soon, and we’ll be a stf Colony.”<sup>63</sup> In 1943, FIDO announced that

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<sup>58</sup> Airey & Warnes, *Crystal Ship* 14, February 1988, as quoted in Hansen, *Then*, p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> “Per Ardua Ad Astounding,” *Futurian War Digest*, July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> “About PRA, PRA History,” *Paint Research Association*, 2016 <<https://www.pra-world.com/about-pra>> [accessed 2 August 2017].

<sup>61</sup> “FIDO Goes VOMish,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1942, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Rob Hansen, “The Cosmos Club & the 1944 Eastercon,” ed. by Peter Weston, *Relapse*, 16 (2010), pp. 22–27.

<sup>63</sup> “FIDO goes VOMISH,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1942, p.3

“contact betwixt the respective fandoms of USA and England in person has at last been effected.”<sup>64</sup> This transatlantic connection of fan communities continued throughout the war in the form of letters, magazine exchanges, and occasional meetings whenever they could be managed. British fans also connected with Australian and Canadian fandoms through military service, enabling the fans to compare their communities. Bert Castellari lamented that Australian fans often seemed to clash and pondered the differences: “Perhaps it is because the whole make-up of British fandom differs from that of Australia and America in that British fans are genuinely interested in the problems of the future, in scientific development.”<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Eric Frank Russell “(the Australian one!)” explained in 1943 that: “In Australia at present there is practically no science fiction active at all. There exists the Sydney Fantasy Society which has a lot of ups & downs. No fanmags are being published owing to their being stopped because of the paper shortage. We receive some but not all of the reprints of Astounding and Unknown and occasionally there is a native Stf booklet.”<sup>66</sup> The war made the world of fandom smaller and more interconnected as fans themselves spread across the globe.

Science-fiction magazines also spread across the world and surprisingly, even with paper rationing the war made it easier to circulate publications. Though secluded from the “ravings of Anglofandom” for a brief time due to the secrecy of an attack in which he was involved, Carnell reported from Algiers that “Going on board a troopship in the harbour... we were amazed to find all the latest US mags on sale at the canteen. The steward had loaded up at New York prior to the trip. Even the British reprints were there.”<sup>67</sup> Eric Williams also reported the international reach of science-fiction publications from his posting on the Middle East Front: “I expect you would like to know the position of SF out here, well, believe it or not, it has a terrific sale New SF mags appear in the shops one day and the next you have to take a rifle with you if you want to make the wog [sic] shopkeeper hand over the last copy that he has been saving for his own use.”<sup>68</sup> Rosenblum mused that it might be the challenges of accessing science-fiction publications during wartime that had facilitated the growing community:

it has been almost impossible to obtain the magazines without some degree of skullduggery, but the generous help of American fans has sent over a sufficient supply of the magazines to enable most fans... to keep up the tradition. They have been circulated under various schemes... I might suggest, in fact, that the strongest force drawing fandom together during the war has been a desire to share in this slender supply!<sup>69</sup>

Fans took advantage of these closer connections by arranging gatherings and outings whenever they were able. The activities that fans engaged with during their gatherings sometimes seem far from

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<sup>64</sup> “Contact,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1943, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> “FIDO goes VOMISH,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1942, p.4

<sup>66</sup> “Potted Paragraphs,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1943, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> “Sands of Time – Dec/Jan issue,” *Futurian War Digest*, January 1943, p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> “Overseas Mail,” *Futurian War Digest*, August 1942, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> “Fan - The Embers!” *Futurian War Digest*, August 1944, p. 13.



scientific discussions and experiments. In the summer of 1943, the Cosmos Club's junkets included attempts at water-divining and extra-sensory perception tests, for example, though the ESP tests were dismissed as meaningless by "Physicist Bullet."<sup>70</sup> In the "Introducing" feature where fans described themselves or were described to other fans, a reader is often more likely to discover that a fan speaks Esperanto, or is vegetarian or teetotal, than what that fan did for a pre-war living, or what they did in the military. This is not to dismiss the technical interests that fans had in common; it was unnecessary to communicate something so obvious as to be assumed (the assumption of scientific interests can be seen in the decision to start a chain-letter for science discussions because "there must be a number of our members who are very much interested in scientific developments").<sup>71</sup> It does highlight, however, the fan community was built upon shared ideals and interests rather than scientific work or military service alone.

One particular shared ideal was remarkably common amongst fans during this period: pacifism. In Britain, approximately one percent of those drafted objected to the war on moral or political grounds, and of those 60,000 were granted some form of exemption from combatant service.<sup>72</sup> Amongst British science-fiction fans, the proportion of conscientious objectors was far higher than in the British population as a whole.<sup>73</sup> Foreshadowing the arguments that his fellow fans would later make in tribunals for conscientious objection, Philip S. Hetherington wrote in 1938 that: "As regards the method of mending this so very ill world, my own view is that any attempt to mend it by force would be worse than the disease."<sup>74</sup>

For some, Nazism was such an extreme "disease" that it changed their views. Eric Williams told other fans that "For this war at least, I have given up my pacifistic ideas; they won't work. If we give in, in would come Nazism, out would go freedom, down would come darkness."<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Sam Youd (1922-2012) changed his stance due to the politics of the time, and argued with other fans such as Burke and Russell that fighting was necessary: he wrote to *Fan Dance* in August 1941,

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<sup>70</sup> E.F. Parker, "Report: Too Much Water in Cosmopolis!," *Futurian War Digest*, July 1943, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> "Science Discussions Group," *Futurian War Digest*, January 1943, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, *World War II: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection [5 Volumes]: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection* (ABC-CLIO, 2016), p. 448.

<sup>73</sup> About ten percent of fans whose wartime roles it is possible to trace either explicitly declared objections to combat and sought exemption from combatant service, or else chose to sign-up for medical rather than combatant roles.

<sup>74</sup> Various, "Candid Comments."

<sup>75</sup> Eric Williams, writing in FIDO supplement *Fan Dance*, as quoted in Hansen, *Then*, p. 59. Hansen has suggested that the Spanish Civil War led to a split between pacifist fans and socialist fans due to their difference in priorities over whether violence should be refused or fascism should be resisted by any means.

ridiculing the idea of combatting Panzer tank divisions with “Ghandi” methods.<sup>76</sup> But many other fans held on to their pacifism.

At his tribunal, Rosenblum engaged in fan-style hypothetical arguments with the chairman. When asked what he would do to protect other Jewish people from the Germans, Rosenblum countered: “Of course, this army you speak of is not a thing that would suddenly appear from nowhere.”<sup>77</sup> Forced to consider the possibility of invasion, he replied “I would not oppose them by force because I would be using their methods, opposing them on the plane on which they are naturally the stronger.” Instead, he suggested that he would work to bring down their administration, and asserted that “the method you prefer would destroy the things this country stands for.” The chairman said that his argument was not rational, to which Rosenblum responded “I am perfectly rational, and am prepared to follow that argument up in a rational way.” The ideals of science and reason were deeply held by Rosenblum, to the extent that he risked prison for his convictions. The newspaper reports imply that the chairman grew increasingly irritated with Rosenblum, at one point telling him: “You would probably be put in a concentration camp and have your toes broken so that you could not walk away from it.”<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, he was registered for non-combatant duties.

Webster, like Rosenblum, knew that his views were not without risk: he wrote to fellow fans that he expected to finish his degree in jail due to his pacifism.<sup>79</sup> He refused even to facilitate the fighting, telling his tribunal that “if by taking work on a farm he allowed others to go to fight he would be unwilling to do so, but if it would help to feed people then it would be a reasonable thing to do.”<sup>80</sup> Other fans elected to serve in other ways which better fit with their ideals: Harold Gottliffe and the “pacifistic” James Parkhill-Rathbone served with the RAMC, Osmond Robb and Arthur Busby served with the National Fire Service, and Rob Holmes worked in Air Raid Shelters and for the Pacifist Service Unit until his father’s death when he was permitted to leave and care for his family.

Jack Walter Banks was not so fortunate; he was rejected because the courts did not believe he was sincere in his objections, and was sent to prison in early 1942 for refusing to submit for medical examination.<sup>81</sup> Walter Gillings lost his job on the *Ilford Recorder* due to refusal to “change my attitude to suit a more warlike policy,” and was then rejected in his application to become a conscientious objector both at his tribunal and appeal: he was in military service with the Royal

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<sup>76</sup> Sam Youd, *Fan Dance*, August 1941. Russell replied with a disgruntled letter to FIDO calling Youd’s comments “sheer twaddle” and asking “Has the Home Guard introduced him [Youd] to that strange stuff called beer?” Eric F. Russell, “A Few Words from Eric F. Russell,” *Futurian War Digest*, September 1941, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> “Jewish C.O. Before Leeds Tribunal: First of His Faith in the Area,” *Yorkshire Evening Post* (West Yorkshire, England, 15 December 1939), p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> “Jewish C.O. Before Leeds Tribunal: First of His Faith in the Area.”

<sup>79</sup> “Introducing: Douglas W.L. Webster,” *Futurian War Digest*, January 1941, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> “North East C.O. Tribunal,” *The Scotsman* (Midlothian, Scotland, 4 July 1940), p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> J.M. Rosenblum, “Editorial,” *Futurian War Digest*, January 1942, pp. 2–3.

Armoured Corps by late spring of 1941.<sup>82</sup> Rosenblum observed that Gillings had been forced to “succumb to his fate for the sake of his wife and child”: Rosenblum had also mentioned at his own tribunal that he knew many more who would become conscientious objectors if they could afford to, so it is possible that their lower-middle-class situations masked a potentially even wider pool of pacifistic-leaning fans. Even without the potential for wider objection amongst fandom, for a significant number of science fiction fans, reason was a counterpoint to violence on a personal as well as an international scale, and was an ideal for which they were willing to risk humiliation and even imprisonment. Science fiction fans did not simply give voice to scientific ideals in their home-made magazines, they actively sought out roles in wartime that fit with their view that the best hope for humanity lay in planning, co-operation and negotiation rather than physical power. The reactions of the fans to conscription may be anecdotally compared to the non-fan British subjects from this period interviewed by oral historians for the book *Men in Reserve* (2017).<sup>83</sup> These men, in reserved occupations during WW2, were of the same class and generation as the fans (including, for example, a draughtsman). The book describes a similar set of identity issues, differently configured – masculinity, duty, patriotism, autonomy. Some were simply happy to continue in safety, earning well, while others articulated conscious fulfilment in “playing their part” on the home front. Others (half the sample) were desperate to join up and made multiple attempts to do so. In general, this “control set” articulated more patriotism and duty, and less political scepticism, than the fans, and were more concerned to preserve or at least reconfigure a version of masculinity in their self-identity.

Besides the fans themselves, women frequently crop up in the pages of FIDO. Some appear as passive: Mrs Smith, Mrs Fearn, and Mrs Rosenblum were presented as long-suffering martyrs who permitted fans to colonise their homes whenever the opportunity presented, and Webster’s sister allowed him to use her nail varnish as correcting fluid.<sup>84</sup> Others, though, were enthusiastic facilitators and fans. Stoke-on-Trent’s club lost its only female member to the Land Army in early 1943, but other women became active participants in fandom precisely because of the war. Joan Lane was vital to the existence of the April 1944 issue, which she duplicated and distributed with her brother Ron.<sup>85</sup> Ann Gardiner was described as taking her brother Derek’s place as a fantast on his departure for Farnborough, and the community offered “Welcome indeed to a recruit fannette.”<sup>86</sup>

Women’s engagement with fandom during the war was not considered remarkable. Female names crop up regularly in lists of subscribers and letter-writers, indicating that although they may not have written so many public pieces for fanmags they felt comfortable inhabiting the world of fandom. They were also frequent attendees at meet-ups. The Cosmos Club “girls” mocked the “far from

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<sup>82</sup> “Forum,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1940, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor and Linsey Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>84</sup> D.W. Webster, “Stenciller’s Oar,” *Futurian War Digest*, June 1944, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> J.M. Rosenblum, “Editorial,” *Futurian War Digest*, April 1944, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> J.M. Rosenblum, “Oddments,” *Futurian War Digest*, May 1943, p. 3.

divine” anti-tank ditch found during the water-divining expedition, for example. Joan Temple both hosted gatherings and made trips to participate in fan gatherings, and one fan’s sister wrote that, following her experience at a convention, she was “on the verge of becoming a fan MYSELF despite the dissuasion of my brother who never had a friend to warn him!!!”<sup>87</sup> Many of these women had relationships to men science fiction fans, but they were engaged with fandom in their own right. Marion Eadie, who worked for the Transport Department and was founder of the Junior Branch of the British Astronomical Association, married fellow fan Harry Turner because of their shared interests. Though Hilda M. Johnson contributed a comic poem on the “Despair” of being a SFF’s GF (science fiction fan’s girlfriend), she was more than just a “SF-widow.”<sup>88</sup> Poems such as “Inspiration” indicate that she was herself engaged with fan culture and values:

In a world gone all awry, where the bombs and bullets fly,  
And killing is the order of the day - -  
There’s a steady little band of intelligentsia, who demand  
That the Password should be “culture,” not “decay.”

...

They won’t use their wits for war, for it’s war that they deplore:  
They’re planning earth’s rebirth and not its end.  
So, re the future, don’t look glum, for the “shape of things to come”  
Has a scientific, idealistic trend.<sup>89</sup>

This echoes precisely the sort of views expressed more widely in FIDO and in fans’ justifications for their conscientious objection to war.

The “shape of things to come” was, perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the biggest concerns of fans. In this respect, they were no different from the wider British population.<sup>90</sup> For science fiction fans, their hopes and fears for the future were always linked with their fan interests: whilst they had always speculated about how society should or would be, the war gave immediacy to their musings.

Their primary concern was not scientific or technical, and an explanation for this can be inferred from a letter from Stapledon. He had become disengaged from fandom during the war but was moved to express his views when scolded for ingratitude for the copies of FIDO he had been sent:

You asked me about my attitude to the present condition of the world. I think we have come to one of the great turning points in the career of our species. I agree with Wells that we may crash into extinction or at least a dismal dark age, but that we may also turn the corner

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<sup>87</sup> A Brother’s Sister, “My Impression of Fans: ‘Orrible Disclosures by An Outsider.....,” *Futurian War Digest*, February 1944, 10.

<sup>88</sup> Hilda M. Johnson, “‘Despair’ ; to the S. F. F. ‘s G. F.,” *Futurian War Digest*, August 1943, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Hilda M. Johnson, “Inspiration,” *Futurian War Digest*, February 1944, pp. 3–4.

<sup>90</sup> Mass Observation highlighted such concerns; see Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, *War Begins at Home* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1940), p. 40.

and create a world order far more favourable to human capacity than anything that has existed before. If the corner is successfully turned, a few generations may transform the race into something amounting almost to a new species, and in a sense a super-human species. The future, I believe, depends less on the further advancement of science (though that is important) than on the search for wisdom, and the realization of the kind of being that we ought to desire man to be. We have power, but not wisdom.<sup>91</sup>

Many pre-war fans had believed that planning could direct science towards the improvement of humanity. This appears to still have been considered possible, but the war had caused fans to direct their attention to the *sort* of person who should be planning this future and how active they should be in their direction of society. For Eric C. Hopkins, for instance, “entry into the Forces has made him think more deeply about post-war planning and all the difficulties attendant on the abolition of war from human relationships.”<sup>92</sup> Rather than focusing on technologies or science, fan debates centred upon the question of how a future society should be governed, and in particular whether this should involve a technocratic state headed by people like themselves.

Significant amounts of ink were spilled over this topic when the “socialistic” Julian Parr triggered a discussion of moral obligations based upon something he appears to have written in *Fantast*. R.R. Johnson acknowledged that the war, and H.G. Wells’ *Phoenix*, had caused a change in his views:<sup>93</sup>

I used to deny social obligation - had some lovely scraps with Julian Parr over that point, in and out of DT’s [fanmag *Delirium Tremens*] - because of the worthlessness of Homo Sap(ien)s. I used to say something like this: It is the duty of every man to his fellows to take a complete interest in social, political, &c. matters; but since the majority of men are too unintelligent and apathetic to do this, any duty towards them can be disregarded, and therefore we who are intelligent enough to take notice of things have no obligations to do so.

I still can’t think out a reasonable reply to that argument. It simply depends on whether the present apathy of man is indeed synonymous with worthlessness - or whether there is, indeed, still some hope. I used to think the former; I now believe the latter.<sup>94</sup>

Like Johnson, Jack W. Banks believed that H.G. Wells’ recent works had issued the challenge to fans to “‘Become a conscious devoted Revolutionary’... whether one chooses to interpret ‘Revolutionary’ in the usual sense or not.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Letter from Stapledon dated 7.9.42, “FIDO Goes VOMish.”

<sup>92</sup> John F. Burke, “Spirit of the New Age #4: Eric Charles Hopkins,” *Futurian War Digest*, February 1944, p. 5.

<sup>93</sup> In 1943, Johnson was still a student, though he had just passed his matriculation exams ready to head off for university; unusually for a fan he was attending a public school.

<sup>94</sup> R.R. Johnson, “Inspiration - Concerning Social Obligation,” *Futurian War Digest*, August 1943, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Jack Banks, “Sociological- ‘The Rape of the Masses’,” *Futurian War Digest*, October 1943, p. 2.

In the same issue that Banks echoed Wells' challenge, Sidney Dean took a very different view, and in opposition to Parr (and Johnson) posited:

My idea: First Oblig. is to yourself...be happy. Second, to the present...be productive enough to maintain the status quo. Third, to the future... contribute to posterity. For the mass of us, this third obl. means to produce more than enough, and try by our increased efficiency & production to further progress. Some of us can invent, some uncover new sociological knowledge, some of us can delve into philosophy and theoretical physics. Even as amateurs in these fields we can achieve somewhat. But first, we should earn our way, better our relations (social & industrial) with the masses, and then...as a hobby...try our hand at some world shaking ideas (if we think it will do any good.) But I cannot agree that it is imperative for us to lead & guide, point the way for, etc, poor ignorant humanity. Nor can I see why we just gotta save the world from a dastardly fate. It got along by itself some millions of years, suddenly it will all collapse if we don't go absolutely crazy & fly into a frenzied burst of activity. Well, suppose somebody tells me what dangers must steer humanity clear of? And also, what powers have we that fit us for leadership? Imagination and broadness of view is not enough, without mental and emotional stability. And most fans lack both.<sup>96</sup>

By 1944, Johnson was more emphatic in his views in his response to Dean, where he expressed his belief that it was the duty of "every educated, intelligent person... to act so as to point the way for the unthinking and unintelligent masses, who otherwise are swayed by what they are told."<sup>97</sup>

Johnson was vehemently against capitalism, believing that efforts to overthrow it could quite easily cause "continuous war." He presented his solution (slightly undermined by Webster's editorial intrusion):

But if the intelligent and educated people of today start with a full knowledge of the problem, a complete awareness, and an absolutely unbiased attitude with regard to "propaganda" the removal of capitalism can be effected simply and easily. [Hey presto! And there's your rabbit, complete with spats and plus-fours, for the asking. Who is kidding who? -DW] That is a fact, and that is why Julian Parr and I are starting an intensive campaign of sponsoring political awareness.

Not all fans were as earnest about their hopes and fears for the future, however. Eric Hopkins' response to the topic from Canada eventually arrived:

Since Fido went intellectual it has become more entertaining if not amusing. R. R. Johnson's castigations of the pore old people used to tickle me immensely. His conversion to social obligation etc. is not quite so jolly but still leaves room for a rib-tickler or two. I am enormously enthusiastic for these quiet critical closely banded people who understand all and await everything. Furthermore, I admire Passive Revolutionaries; I coup at their d'etat. Lastly, I could not help but love a guy who eminently disagrees. Such insouciance. What's the

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<sup>96</sup> Sidney "Simald" Dean, "Reactions – 'Why Fans' -- & -- 'Moral Obligations,'" *Futurian War Digest*, October 1943, pp. 2–5.

<sup>97</sup> R. R. Johnson, "Sociological – 'The Reason Why,'" *Futurian War Digest*, February 1944, pp. 2–3.

beezer mean, anyway? Starting a campaign for the Awakening of Politically Unconscious Fans! Starting! Listen, R.R., rigor mortis has been setting in for years. Vote for Laney! Down with Temple and Clarke!!!<sup>98</sup>

Rosenblum also made light of some of his fellow fan's heated discussions in the strapline of FIDO: "being an amateur magazine devoted to the central and moral elite of mankind known amongst ourselves as 'Fandom.'"<sup>99</sup>

However they envisioned the post-war future, British fans were transformed by their experiences of war itself. Their speculations about the future were given a particular intensity, their beliefs about peace were put to the test, their fascination with technological systems had new outlets, and their communities grew and became internationally connected.

## Conclusion

To return to the questions that closed this article's first section, we find that the British fans appropriated a public culture of expertise and made science their own; it gave them a sense of participating in the conversations of, as Hilda M. Johnson put it, "the intelligentsia." In a period on the brink of war, they used science as a cultural resource to define and assert their independence of thought: their freedom from what they perceived as patriotic or superstitious cant. Thus they were, for example, more likely than average to be pacifists or conscientious objectors.

The outbreak of war gave many fans the opportunity to participate in technical activity beyond what their education in civilian life would ordinarily have made possible. There is good circumstantial evidence to suggest that wartime roles enabled the type of intelligent, technical work that they had been unable to access before the war. Moreover, war enhanced fans' sense of community, though of course this was far from a unique experience in wartime. The fannish sense of being a rare voice of sanity amidst the unthinking masses was, perhaps, a successful coping strategy under conscription, where unquestioning obedience to commands was expected. Being part of a tribe that rejected this mode of life, and conducted a parallel life in print that was lived otherwise, may well have been a source of psychological and social sustenance. Thus World War Two did not end the nascent tribe of fandom; in many ways it strengthened its emergent features. Moreover, thanks to the heightened emotion and organised communication circuits of wartime, the *Futurian War Digest* succeeded in a way that *Novae Terrae* (the "official" first fanmag) had hoped to but had not, drawing together fans around the world and recruiting new ones.

Whatever their precise opinions on politics and pacifism, fans' utopian inclinations were re-focused by the war; where they had previously discussed hypothetical re-designs of society, there was now a sense that this was a real-life project. Their reading-knowledge and their cognitive skills equipped them, they believed, unusually well to the task. The fans' ruefully anticipated disappointment – that they would not in fact be recognised as the "central and moral elite" of post-war society – may suggest topics for future historical inquiry, concerning the failure of the post-war elites (Universities

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<sup>98</sup> "Airgraph Dept.," *Futurian War Digest*, December 1943, pp. 9–10.

<sup>99</sup> FIDO, August 1942.

and the media) to sustain public buy-in to their vision of democracy, ultimately resulting in the crisis of expertise of the late twentieth century.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>On democracy, productivity and identity see Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Production, Identity, and Democracy," *Theory and Society*, 1995, 24: 427-467; and Alice White, "From the science of selection to psychologising civvy street: the Tavistock Group, 1939-1948." PhD dissertation, University of Kent, 2016.