FOUNDATION AND EMPIRE, ENGLISH STYLE

A Report from Peter Nicholls,
Administrator,
The Science Fiction Foundation

In the last few years all you Americans must have become very blase about the new respectability of science fiction. Jack Williamson's list of college courses in SF is a spectacular document, and even the New Yorker has cocked a sophisticated eye at the phenomenon of students having science fiction unleashed upon them, just as if it were real literature.

Until recently things were different over here, but now we have the Science Fiction Foundation. Physically, the Foundation consists of a room 30 feet long by 9 feet wide, two desks and 6000 science fiction books cascading occasionally from the overstuffed shelves they are piled into and onto and under. The only other unusual thing about the room is that it is situated slap-bang in the middle of the biggest polytechnic in the U.K.

Does this mean that the Science Fiction Foundation is a part of the Polytechnic, an actual department of it? The answer to that question is difficult and delicate. The SF Foundation is unique, not least in the peculiarly English compromise it represents. It is officially part of the Polytechnic in that the Polytechnic pays the salary of the Administrator (that's me) and gives us an office and seems to approve of the sort of thing we do. (Mind you, since they pay my salary, I have to be a bona fide lecturer in the Department of Applied Philosophy, where we are housed, with the standard academic qualifications. I have to prove these occasionally, in a pragmatic way, and last week I found myself lecturing on Darwin and Lysenko, and the week before on the poetry of Alexander Pope. I don't spend all my time on science fiction.)

On the other hand, the Science Fiction Foundation is an autonomous body. It has a legal existence apart from the Polytechnic, and if the Polytechnic ever decided that science fiction was a lot of
nonsense after all and gave us notice to quit, we would continue
to exist, altho homeless, forlorn, and in my case unpaid. The
Science Fiction Foundation is a voluntary association of twelve
people, and it has an advisory panel of twelve more. Nobody is
paid, except for me. We all meet once a month to decide what we
ought to be doing, and then we quite often go ahead and do it.
Mind you, seven of the twelve are academics at the Polytechnic,
and this gives us a certain amount of confidence that the fruit-
ful link between the Foundation and tertiary education in Great
Britain will continue for some time, more especially as our Presi-
dent happens to be Dr George Brost, who is also the Director of
the Polytechnic -- a man with the imagination to see that pione-
ering the use of SF in education over here would bring, in the long
run, a lot more praise and enthusiasm than well-bred laughter, tho
there's been plenty of that too.

The other five members are writers. We hope to have a sixth soon.
Ursula LeGuin has joined the Committee as American represen-
tative since this was written. We have a patron, too -- Arthur C. Clarke,
who lends his moral support from Ceylon. He is not able, unfortu-
nately, to be a member of the ordinary working Committee.

The five writers are Jim Blish, John Brunner, and Ken Bulmer, and
to represent a younger generation of writers, Christopher Priest.
The fifth is George Hay. Now George Hay is not as well known in
the States as the other four, and altho he has published a number
of stories he is probably better known as an anthologist, but the
most important thing about George is that he is a phenomenon to be
reckoned with. He has been described to me in a letter from an
awe-struck friend as "the nearest approach to a human dynamo that
I have ever encountered". Insofar as the original idea for a Sci-
ence Fiction Foundation sprang from one mind, that mind was George's.

George Hay, when he gets an idea, sinks his teeth into it like a
bulldog (which he resembles in no other sense, being tall, thin,
and bespectacled), and will not let go. He will ring you up on
the telephone and nag you about it. The post office will be choked
with stern letters advising courses of action on which not only
your own peace of mind and clarity of conscience depend, it is
implied, but also the future of the race. It is difficult to get
cross with such a man, because he is so transparently selfless.

I was not around when the Science Fiction Foundation was first
mooted. Eyes streaming, but otherwise contented, I was lying in
the sun in Hollywood, California. But since then I have been able
to reconstruct the sequence of events. George feels very strongly
about science fiction, as being in both senses the literature of
the future, and he is not alone in this. He feels that science
fiction writers are also creative problem solvers -- men and women
whose genius it is to propound "non-linear" ways of thinking about
problems that have traditionally been coped with (or not coped with)
by good old straight-line Aristotelian methods. George feels (and
spells out the case at length in the third number of our journal)
that science fiction has values that go beyond the merely literary
-- that SF provides more sophisticated models of where we might be
going than any university think-tank. George is a fervent mission-
ary for this cause, and his first idea was to get together a group
of like-minded people (the number twelve is a coincidence) to help
promulgate it. He also believes that the SF publishing business relies on insufficient knowledge about the field, and that most speculation about the social function of SF is more by guess and by God than by well-designed research. So the second thing he wanted was to found a body which would be able to conduct this research.

First he contacted other writers. Not all of them had convictions of precisely the same ideological variety as his, but there was a great deal of cautious sympathy for the broad idea of a Foundation which would promote a responsible attitude towards science fiction in the world at large, and for increasing our knowledge of the field. On the other hand, it was quickly recognised that good intentions are never enough when it comes to forming groups of this kind. A seed will germinate in the dark, but its stalk will be limp and spindly, and rapidly topple over, unless the sun shines on it. Where could such a group find its place in the sun?

There, with this all too valid doubt, matters might have rested. Even George's perennial optimism, his feeling that if you tend to the basic principles all the niggling little details like manpower and money will sort themselves out, might not have been sufficient to get the project going.

There remained two possibilities for a power base. One was to find a commercial organisation -- a major computer company, perhaps, or a consortium of publishing houses -- that would dole out a sufficient grubstake for the pioneers to set off with. Science fiction opinion turned out to be slightly split on this notion. Several writers felt that objective research, and indeed any sort of promotional activity in which critical discrimination was implicit (for we would look pretty silly if we indiscriminately pushed all SF as a panacea for just about everything) would be difficult indeed if objectivity might call upon us, at some stage, to bite the hand that fed us.

The other possibility was to attract the support of an educational establishment. Here the threats to cut objectivity would surely be insignificant. We could irradiate the commercial world with smiles or frowns as the mood took us, making brief sorties from the safe shelter of an educational system that had no vested interest in science fiction (for the simple reason that officially it hardly seemed to know that science fiction existed). A different potential problem was real enough, tho. If we pushed SF screaming from the gutter, washed its face, dressed it in a grey suit, and stuck a mortar-board on its head, might we not render it numb from sheer cultural shock? Look what happened to jazz, as William Tenn once commented, when it left the cathouses of New Orleans and Kansas City behind!

But this was a risk, everybody seemed to feel, that could be worried about later on. The whole idea of a Science Fiction Foundation was still on, then, if only it could find an academic home. Indeed, the more everybody thought about it, the better the whole idea seemed. After all, if, as we were all agreed, science fiction was of the first importance in society, then it followed that it certainly should not be ignored by the educational system. Why,
the health of the commonwealth depended upon the schools and colleges not turning away with a shudder whenever science fiction was mentioned.

We had to force the system to look science fiction straight in its formidable and multi-faceted eyes, and include it in the great brotherhood of the welfare state, which guarantees education and literacy for everyone until one is sixteen years old.

There is no space here to give a formal analysis of the differences between universities and polytechnics. Indeed, a formal analysis might look very different from an informal one. Universities are ancient and respectable -- one might even say they are a middle-class institution. Polytechnics are scruffier. Paradoxically, they stress vocational training to a greater extent than the universities, thus seeming even more "subject-oriented", but they also allow plenty of room for experiment, perhaps because they are newer and less settled in their ways, and in this respect they are often less subject-oriented. In theory at least, there is plenty of room for flexibility in the planning of polytechnic courses. Both universities and polytechnics are places you get educated in after leaving school, and both give degrees. But polytechnics give diplomas as well, and do things like taking factory lads one day a week on so-called "day release", and lab assistants for three months at a time on so-called "sandwich" courses. Polytechnics are closer to industry, they are easier to get into, they are more working class, they have more Black students and Asian students, and tend to be in uglier and grimmer buildings with fewer lawns and trees. They have over-heated refectories for all the world like factory canteens. Altho polytechnics are easier to get into, they have quite stringent standards thereafter, and a polytechnic degree, tho it often carries less cachet in practice than a university degree, is difficult to get and a universally-accepted qualification.

Anyhow, a polytechnic seemed a good place for the Foundation to be. Polytechnics are urban, vigorous, and not terribly well-groomed, and much the same could be said of SF itself. We were lucky. The North East London Polytechnic, situated not far from the giant Ford Motor factory in Dagenham, about 14 miles from London, offered us a home. I am not familiar with the details of the negotiations. Ralph Cook, a lecturer in Chemistry, is our industrious and invaluable secretary.

Applied Philosophy said they'd have us, and the Head of the Department, Leon Crickmore, Bachelor of Music from Cambridge University, came onto the SF Foundation committee, where his calm knowledge of the intricacies of academic procedure has smoothed the way for us on many occasions. Leon is not a science fiction fan himself, but he likes what we are doing. The Department of Applied Philosophy, incidentally, is not quite so transcendental a place as its title suggests. It is the department primarily responsible for general studies, especially those interdisciplinary studies which straddle the boundary line between the arts and the sciences. Obviously the appropriate place for us to be.

I have been writing "us", but this is an editorial and inaccurate use of the pronoun. I was not around at the time. I was an ex-
lecturer (in English literature at the University of Sydney, Australia) who had fled the academic world and was studying film-making for two years, on a Harkness Fellowship, in the United States. When I arrived in England in 1970 I naturally expected the film world to fall at my feet. Well, the London film world was undergoing a particularly gloomy depression when I arrived, and frankly, they ignored me.

It was, therefore, with a sensation akin to the feeling Paul had while standing on the Damascus carriageway that I read in the Times Educational Supplement, "Wanted, Half-Time Administrator of Science Fiction Foundation". I got the job (it has been full-time since last September) -- and furthermore I got it over some applicants who may have known more about SF than I did, but as far as I can reconstruct matters, the interviewing committee was anxious to find someone with university teaching experience and a degree, so that we could begin by presenting a relatively sober and conventional image to the world. This was October 10th, 1971 -- almost a year and a half ago. It marks the point at which the Foundation activities really began to move forward, not because of any special expertise on my part, but simply because there was too much work to be done efficiently in the purely voluntary spare-time hours that the twelve committee members could devote to it.

I found myself sharing an office with the Foundation chairman, Charles Barren, a jovial lecturer in history in the Department of Applied Philosophy. Charles is also a prolific writer, more in the field of historical novels than in science fiction, although he has co-authored one SF book. He is deeply interested in future studies, however, and jumped at the chance of becoming a part of the group when it joined the Polytechnic. As both an academic and a professional novelist, and a man very much at home in all sorts of convoluted committee work, he was a natural choice for Chairman of a group which was half academic and half authorial.

I have stressed the role of people whose names you may not have heard before, in the interests of simple realism. A working group consists of much more than its notable names. But our professional writers, Jim Blish, John Brunner, Ken Bulmer, and Christopher Priest, are not just prestigious nominees to make our letterhead look good. All are severely overworked men, quite apart from the Foundation, but nevertheless they have been amongst the most consistently interested in the project from the beginning, have worked hard to get it all together in the first place, and have labored stalwartly ever since. Their enthusiasm has done much to keep the initial vitality flowing. It might have been expected that a mixture of writers and academics would be uneasy, with different life styles, different aims, tending to polarize the group into two. That has not happened. There are many arguments, in some cases almost basically different views, about what the Science Fiction Foundation should be doing, but whenever we do split over an issue and argue it out, the nature of the split is unpredictable, and different every time. It is never "the academics" versus "the writers", as various gloomy prophets had predicted would happen.

So much for our history. I went into details because I know that on your side of the Atlantic the notion of colleges dealing with
science fiction crops up quite regularly, and I wanted to illustrate at least one of the systems under which science fiction and academia can meet without too much mutual revulsion, or too many compromises stultifying the originality of what might be done.

Of course what we are doing is the important part. In a way it's not very exciting, simply because it's predictable. We promote science fiction by talking about it, and by using the press and television where possible. We are setting up a formal lecture agency quite similar to the Science Fiction Writers' Speakers Bureau over there. But promotion is a vague word. How best to go about it?

We are not in the business of promoting science fiction indiscriminately. Whenever people tell me that a lot of science fiction is rubbish I nod happily and agree. Nobody knows that better, after all, than many of the professionals themselves. But we do argue that at its best (which happens a great deal more often than a lot of people think) science fiction is worth very serious attention. And how many literatures worthy of serious attention carry the bonus of being fun to read as well?

Anyway, from the point of view of public relations things are going very nicely. We have spoken at many universities, and had splendid press coverage, and generally convinced a great many people that they should sit up and take notice of science fiction. Some of the people who laughed at us as a bunch of idealistic semi-literate are now chewing busily on their words. A full page in the sober Guardian, forthcoming discussion groups on commercial television, even a full-blown season of SF films at the National Film Theatre -- these are the sorts of things we have accomplished, and while it is difficult to estimate their value in any quantitative terminology, it seems to me to be considerable.

why, the U.S. Embassy gave a two-day seminar on science fiction a little time back.

But these achievements are nebulous, too. We can be more specific about the research side of things. Here, the first thing to do is to provide the basic material. We have a long way to go yet, but with the help of the British Science Fiction Association (the nation-wide fan organisation over here) we have built up a library of something over 6000 volumes, including most of the available bibliographical and critical material so far published on science fiction. We are not doing nearly so well with the magazine collection, because it is difficult to convince a not very wealthy Polytechnic library that the expenditure of something like 1000 pounds on complete runs of apparently garish pulp magazines is of educational value. With patience and stealth we hope to build up the magazine collection also.

We already have enough research material on hand to be able to answer most queries on SF that come our way, even tho the volume of these queries increases Formidably every month. One of our functions is as an information bureau. If we don't know the answer, we probably know who will know, and we pass the query on. We are interested in collecting factual material about the publishing side of SF also: sales figures, reader surveys, profits, losses, prejudices, editorial pressures, coups, and so on.
Incidentally, we are on pretty good terms with a number of British publishers, and while we hope to be able to withstand any pressures from the commercial world, we are chauvinistically in favor of the reverse procedure. We hope that publishers will buckle immediately under any pressure that we exert. At the moment these pressures often consist of the attempt to see that science fiction classics, from Wells to Kornbluth and later, are kept in print or periodically reprinted.

Our single most stimulating activity is the publication of FOUNDATION: The Review of Science Fiction. It is, we hope, something more than an expensive fanzine, even tho I am often lost in admiration at the energy and intelligence displayed over a considerable area of the fanzine spectrum. Perhaps the difference is that we hope to be read by non-fans also, and to stand back a little from the science fiction ghetto and see SF as part of a larger whole.

I don't mean to be patronising here as I know there are excellent critics writing in fanzines.

Good intentions don't necessarily lead to a good journal. Some of you have seen Numbers 1 and 2 of FOUNDATION, and noted that it is typographically poor, rather too expensive for the number of pages it contains, and that in some cases it has reprinted material from other sources. You may even have noticed that Number 3 is not out yet (I write as of February), even tho it was due last September.

Truly. But we remain quite brashly confident, and with good reason I think. We did have money problems, resulting from spiralling printing costs, initially low circulation, and the lack of any subsidy. We found a publisher willing to take us on, altho this resulted predictably in too high a price -- simply because of the publisher's natural fear of losing money. However, subscriptions keep coming in, and every subscription makes the prospect of a larger and cheaper journal more imminent. Beginning with Number 4 we intend taking editorial control of layout and typography, and we are sure that this will result in a better looking magazine.

And finally, we have figured out a way to produce the whole thing more cheaply without sacrificing quality.

The most important thing, however, is the quality of the material we are receiving. The need to reprint material is gone. We are receiving excellent, fresh material in such volume that it is totally clear that we fulfill a need. There are not many platforms available yet for serious detailed criticism of science fiction. We provide one. At first we also considered publishing a middling proportion of fiction, but we have reconsidered that. Good fiction never has any trouble being printed, and we have no desire to set up in competition with the professional magazines, especially since we do not pay contributors. But in England at least there is nobody publishing good criticism or factual studies of SF, nor historical studies -- apart from ourselves, that is -- except in book form. And there are very few books, tho Brian Aldiss's history is due out soon from Weidenfeld and Nicolson, and my own from Penguin Books some time in 1974.

You have Extrapolation over there and I admire the job Tom Clareson has done, but Extrapolation is perhaps a little more formal in its
approach than we are, and concentrates to a greater extent on SF's past rather than its present. So we remain friendly competitors, and despite the occasional collision, we hope that we are appealing to a slightly different aspect of the same audience. At least that's my feeling, and I hope it's Tom's too.

Anyway, we have a drawer full of first-class material at hand, and now that Number 3 is on the verge of coming out, we look forward to turning FOUNDATION from an already worthy journal to an exciting one. I have had many arguments about the dichotomy between "academic" and "popular". If we have to opt, then I suppose that we are "academic", but in my view this is a semantic quibble. Good academic writing is crisp, informative, and intelligent. So is good popular writing. The two worlds can and should meet, and I would despair if our only customers were up-and-coming Young Turks in university English departments. But I would be equally melancholy if we sacrificed a certain astringency, a cool logic, to colorful "features" that simplified issues in the name of a presumed "popular" appeal. I think we'll get away with attracting both audiences, and I hope our prospective readers bear with us for at least four issues while they make up their minds, and while we settle into shape.

This survey of what we are and what we do is not as brief as it was meant to be. But I do have space, I think, to point to our last area of activity, within education itself. We already give successful classes in science fiction to external students (anyone can come -- they are night classes), but we have not yet cracked the formal syllabus barrier. It seems very likely that we will soon. There is an especially valuable place for SF in formal courses in this polytechnic (and in others), and that is as part of those studies in which the technological side of things is linked up with the arts. Can anybody seriously construct a course labelled "science and society" and omit SF? We think not (even tho it has always been left out in the past) and we have initiated the difficult negotiations which may lead to science fiction being included as part of various conventional syllabi -- ultimately in literature and science, in sociology and politics, we hope. Eventually we hope to offer an M.A. in science fiction. But all of this must be old stuff to you, judging from Jack Williamson's list of American SF courses. We are simply trying to catch up.

We are not a very big or powerful group. We don't have the money to do a lot of things we want to do, such as to conduct a major international academic conference on science fiction, and to make a series of films, on science fiction writers, even bigger and better than James Gunn's University of Kansas series. (We have Bob Shaw, Jim White, Brian Aldiss, James Blish, and John Brunner lined up as the first victims -- the films are not going to be straight filmed lectures.) All of these things, and a large group of other projects, are in a pending file which is carefully examined for signs of dust every other month. Two more years, and we'll do it all.

And why should our ambitions stop here? George Hay deserves the last word; let me quote from a recent letter: "I hope you will manage to insert some reference to the fact that we hope...or at
all events, I hope...that the Foundation would help writers, academicians, businessmen, and fans to actually accomplish things...the introduction of at least a modicum of order into the present chaos of SF publishing, the encouraging of scientific research based on SF concepts, the translation of SF books into plays, films, music, etc." I underlined that key phrase. Who knows, we might have a working time machine within the decade.

So there it is. We are not quite an academic department, but we're not quite a fan group either. In fact, the big fan group over here, the B.S.F.A., watched us with some suspicion at first to see if we were just a bunch of loudmouths, or whether we were going to produce something. They gave us their library not long ago, on semi-permanent loan, and we are proud that we seem to have succeeded in not alienating them. We are not in competition with the fan groups.

High hopes are not capable of definition with the sharpest clarity. Idealistic non-profit-making groups such as ours come and go. In two years we may have faded away, but I doubt it. I think we will be speaking by then in a recognised voice of authority for a field that in the past has not had too many voices to speak for it. Except of course for the voices of the writers themselves.

We recognise that truth. Science fiction is what the writers write. The most that we can do is to tell people about it, and how much we like it.

-- Peter Nicholls.

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The third number of FOUNDATION has been published, and a quarterly publication schedule has been resumed. To subscribe, send £2 sterling, or the equivalent in dollars, for four issues, to:

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