

Part II

**Something Rotten in
the City of Learning**

**The Adventures of Sir
Patrick McNamarra**

Andreas Skyman

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the politics of the capital lingered at the back of his mind, like an itch that you cannot possibly scratch without looking most undignified.

To be continued...?

Dedicated to my Friends, Honesty, and Science.

speaking of. Anyone, that is, except Sir Patrick McNamarra of Sherwellie.

Sir Patrick—admittedly an eccentric—had the quaint idea, that from the buzzing and boeing of the subjects, some element of truth, unclouded by the necessities imposed by politics and proper conduct, could be skimmed. And Sir Patrick was very worried indeed. A hippopotamus to lead the parliament? Unheard of! What would the reaction at the courts of Europe be? There had of course been numerous rumours of Louis, the King of France, having taken all manner of things—animate and inanimate—for Royal Concubine, but that was France. Sir Patrick was deeply worried that the popular idiom “well, maybe in France,” an exclamation useful when faced with absurd propositions, would soon be reversed.

He would not have it.



Sir Patrick watched solemnly as the spring-green hills of his home county marched by the windows of his horse-drawn carriage. Sherwellie, the small rural community in southern Wales, just on the border of Cornwall, was hitherto untouched by such monstrosities of modernity as the railway. Whenever the petition was raised to invite the iron-stallions, which happened every so often, it was invariably met with festive scorn and ridicule.

Well aware of the weight of his opinion with the town folk, Sir Patrick had never been outspoken on the issue, so as not to exercise any undue influence on his fellow subjects. Secretly, however, he was very pleased with the pervading opposition to the industrial contractors. Being a frequent visitor to London, his own view on the matter was firmly in accord with the perhaps less well-informed meaning of the local council: that train engines were dirty, noisy, and furthermore brought a most disagreeable stench wherever they went.

On any other day, the mere sight of the lush pastures would have dispelled all nightmarish visions of the busy city, but today

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Chapter I

Her Majesyt's Hideous Hippopotamus

It was hideous. It was huge. It was hideously huge, massively disproportioned, and grossly inappropriate for the position to which it was about to be elevated. But, there it was: the Queen's pet hippopotamus, clad for the occasion in Regal Burgundy and gold, paraded through the streets of the capital, this evening to be knighted and appointed Prime Minister of the Empire. More than a few members of the crowd that was usually seen at or around the Royal Court had written in their secret diaries of their desperate hope that this, the latest of Her Majesty's antics, would turn out to be nothing but a cruel joke on their behalf, but of course no one spoke a word of it.

Among the commoners, on the other hand, the situation was quite the opposite. The word on the street was— But surely you're all already aware of how slanderous and hurtful the common man can be in his ignorance, and it would not be fitting for me to disseminate such foul language any further. Anyhow, the opinions of those of lesser blood was of little concern to anyone worth

Part I

The Importance of Being Consistent

Chapter III

At the Head of the River

Sir Patrick McNamarra loathed gaols, and as gaols went, this was one of the worst he had been to. When the Local Council had realised how much the real estate represented by the Old Prison was worth, they had promptly sold it off, and the inmates and wardens had been relocated to an old, crumbling red-brick building, a stone's throw (or a glass bottle, if on a Saturday night or a particularly high-spirited Student's festivity) Railway Station. It was cold and draughty, and Sir Patrick constantly got his meandering thoughts interrupted by the hooting and puffing and rattling racket of passing locomotives.

Had it not been for the young ladies from *'Darn It & Stitch'*—a local charity—who came down to the gaol to give the prisoners knitting lessons (in the hope, he was told, that it would dissipate violent tendencies), he would likely have been weary from boredom after the first half-hour of his incarceration. Or the second half-hour, rather, seeing as the first had been spent politely explaining to a very young PC, that his whereabouts on the previous night were nobody's business, save Sir Patrick's own,

Chapter I

The Fate that befell Lady Margaret Hall

Sir Patrick McNamarra arrived in Oxford late afternoon. The trees were donning their reds and golds, much as the Dons and Students were now seen in the occasional scarf and long trousers, he noted, as the horse drawn carriage took him from the bustling city centre to the more quiet neighbourhoods north of University Parks. Sir Patrick would much have preferred this mode of travel to having to get behind the “Steel Stallion” for his trip from Sherwellie, but alas, the urgency of the summons had been such, that indulging in what many considered an archaic way of moving about, would have been most inconsiderate.

“Here we are, Sir: Lady Margaret Hall.”

Sir Patrick thanked the coachman and then proceeded to the Porter’s Lodge.

“I’m here to see Headmistress Malagata!”

◇◇◇

The Headmistress’ office was situated behind an unimposing old wooden door, with a highly imposing brass sign saying ‘Prof

"Inspector McNamarra, Special Branch." The caller flashed a badge at the Porter. "I need to see the headmaster."

"At this hour? Do you have an appointment?"

"No. Just let me in will you. . ."

"I'm sorry, but you know very well, that the police are not allowed on the College grounds without expressed permission—*Amnesia Universitatis*."

"Yes, but. . ."

"Dear Sir, either please make an appointment, or come back at a more appropriate hour—the only way you are getting in tonight, is if you go *through* me."

"I was hoping you would say that. Lads!" At this call, two more men appeared from the shadows."

"What is the meaning. . .?" The Porter was shocked and baffled, even a little frightened.

"Try not to hurt him *too* much," the caller said to his men. "I will be back shortly, with the headmaster in tow. . ."

Malagate, Headmistress' in letters whose sharp serifs were sure to scare the cheekiest of students. Sir Patrick, having spent some time in Academic circles, was, however, completely unfazed as he entered the room beyond.

"Ah, Sir Patrick! How good of you to come at such a short notice. You'll have had your tea?"

Sir Patrick had in fact not had his tea, but thought it rude to contradict the Headmistress in her own office, and so nodded in reply.

"Good, good." The Headmistress paced back and forth, and Sir Patrick wished she would stop. It was making him dizzy to keep his attention politely affixed to a point just above her left shoulder.

"You see, Sir, we have a traitor at the College. And I don't mean your ordinary subject, who disagrees with Her Majesty appointing Hippos to High Office; I mean a traitor to Science—a Homoeopath!"



At the word "traitor," Sir Patrick had felt a sigh of relief start its way up his wind pipe, only to get stuck, as the Headmistress concluded the sentence. Traitors he'd dealt with before; it was usually a simple case of talking them out of it, or explaining the benefits to foreign politics of having an African—albeit a Hippopotamus—as prime minister. But a Homoeopath? They were certifiably insane!

Before he could ask Professor Malagate about the specifics there was a cry from the quad below her window.

"Oh, dear!" Professor Malagate cried out, as she leaned out (carefully) to get a closer look. "Its one of the visiting Physicists!" "Physicists?" Sir Patrick enquired, ever thorough.

"Yes. I was just getting to that. There's a contingent of Physicists, holding a workshop on overly Contrived ways of Boiling Water."

The man who had collapsed on the walk below was now regaining his senses, though not his wits, if his bewildered look was anything to judge by.

"I sense a connexion here," Sir Patrick said. "I had better go visit their lecture!"



Nothing could have prepared Sir Patrick for the sight that met him as he entered the lecture theatre: Not a single life stirred; pale and lifeless scientists in ill-fitting sports jackets lay slumped over the bars and over one another, contorted fingers in desperate grips around empty coffee mugs. Even the speaker had succumbed, and was snoring silently on the theatre floor.

A sniff at one of the mugs confirmed Sir Patrick's suspicions: "Decaffeinated!" Even a seasoned tea drinker could smell foul play at a mile-and-a-half, when such abominations were involved.

"They are only faking it, you know." They voice belonged to a short man in a conspicuous lab coat, standing in the door. "I know, because I exchanged their water for a very potent *XI,000*, 000 solution of Morphine – it is just their bloody stubbornness."

Sir Patrick, never speechless for long, replied:

"You villain! What have you done? This will set back water-boiling research weeks, maybe months!"

"A small price to pay, once I prove to the world that water is best used to dilute other substances."

Sir Patrick made a move, but the villain raised a bucket.

"No closer, McNamarra. This is diluted honey. Very dangerous..."



Wisps of steam danced in the single shaft of sunlight, whirling guests from the land of Fairy. With a gentle "splash," the vapour dissolved, but the dance continued with Undine grace, as the

Having examined Dr Radley's mug, he had detected the faintest cabbage aroma under the coffee smell—a good thing with the rationing that; had the scientists dared drink their coffee at full potency, he might have missed it. Knowing that empiricists dislike leaving their experiments unless forced to, he had guessed that they habitually heated their coffee water in the research boiler. It had then been a simple matter of showing the astonished Doctor that, under a thin wash of paint, her machine carried a note saying 'Belongs to the Culham Canteen.'

But where had the real research boiler gone? He didn't know, and he didn't much care either, but he guessed he would have to look into it. Tomorrow. For now he was determined to go back to the hotel, and, once there, treat his sore lungs to a hot bath and a hotter cup of tea, sweetened with two drops of honey, before proceeding to correcting—with a Scientist's precision, the hotel bible he had spied in a drawer on his assigned room.

This, however, was not to be.

When Sir Patrick arrived at his lodgings, the Porter informed him that:

"I'm sorry, Sir, but the hot water's out. Someone nicked the boiler and..."

"And replaced it with a tiny fridge."

"Yes, Sir!"

Sir Patrick sighed (this time not suffering excessive coughing as a result). No tea, no bath. The bible would have to remain in its ridiculous native state. This was now *personal*.

"Young man, be so kind as to call me a cab! There is someone I have to see."



The old Porter rose, startled from his slumber. A caller? At this hour? What on *Earth* could be the matter? He donned a morning gown and slippers, went down to the anteroom of St. Edmund's Hall, and then unlatched the door with some hesitation.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Yea, the perpetrator didn't just *steal* the boiler, they *swapped* it for the *finest* fridge you can imagine..."

"Oh. Oh, dear."

"That's right. A Homoeopath. . ."



"Well! What are we waiting for? Show me this fridge!"

Sir Patrick didn't have to ask twice—in fact, he almost had to resort to a most undignified light jog to keep up with Dr Radley.

As they entered the kitchen, he saw that she had not exaggerated: In place of the boiler, a fridge, no larger than a thimble, had been connected to the water line. It was humming in a high, but not unpleasant, pitch, much akin to that of a colobri.

"Very good craftsmanship," he remarked, as he leaned close to the strange device.

"Yes," Dr Radley admitted, "the thief is clearly a professional."

"Or an enthusiastic amateur, that cannot be ruled out at this point. Dr Radley, you are an experimentalist, correct?"

"Yes, but..."

"And what was the last meal to be cooked here, before the incident?"

"Cabbage soup, but Sir. . ."

"Can I borrow your coffee mug, Dr?"

Resignedly, Dr Radley unhinged her mug from her belt, and gave it to Sir Patrick, who turned it in his hands, examining it from every angle before, with severe reluctance, giving it a sniff.

"Ah," he said. "Come Dr Radley! I know where your boiler is!"



Sir Patrick was pleased as he left Culham, no more than a few hours after his arrival. So pleased, that he didn't even mind having to ride the train back to Oxford, didn't mind the rhythmic 'thump-thump, thump-thump,' very *nearly* didn't mind the thirty minute delay due to a rail theft.

milk made its gyrating ways in the tea cup. Sir Patrick looked on, fascinated.

Being the perfect Gentleman, pouring milk after the tea was a secret pleasure he rarely indulged in: Only in the utmost privacy of his personal library, and only (or at least mostly) when he was feeling very sorry for himself.

And he was feeling pretty miserable this Wednesday afternoon, for though the Homoeopath's mixture had not been potent enough to even make him sticky, its sheer volume had combined with the October chill to give him a case of pneumonia, and they hadn't even captured the culprit, who had managed to shed his coat, and slip away quietly in the confusion that followed on his release of a bucket-full of homoeopathic tincture over poor Sir Patrick: All witnesses had immediately averted their gazes, so as not to embarrass the unfortunate Sir Patrick further by giving undue attention to his predicament. For this he was grateful, but it did complicate investigations.

Adding a large spoon of honey to his mellow cup, he raised the amber liquid to drink.

"Next time, Homoeopath!" he muttered, "Next time."

"Frankly," he mused to himself, as a red kite—formerly very rare in these parts—flew by over-head, "I don't see why they would need my expertise in this matter—besides my kettle, I know nothing of boiling water."

With a sigh (and a resulting coughing fit), Sir Patrick alighted, donned his hat, and started walking towards the Science Centre.



Sir Patrick was met at the gates of the Culham Centre for Water Boiling Science by a short red-haired woman, the pockets of her cardigan notably stuffed with minute packets of instant coffee.

"So the crisis has left its mark even here?" he thought to himself "Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

"Sir Patrick McNamarra? Hi, I'm Pat Radley, Ph.D. So glad you could make it—let me show you to the canteen!"

Sir Patrick accepted the outstretched hand, smiled his most endearingly intellectual smile and answered:

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Doctor Radley. However, as I have just eaten, perhaps it would be better if we 'got the fire started' so to speak?"

At this Dr Radley gave him a perplexed look.

"You mean, Sir, that you haven't heard? The kitchen boiler has gone missing, and foul play is suspected!"

"Now wait just a minute. Are you telling me, that I have been called here, on account of a *kitchen theft*? Surely this is a case for the Utensils Branch of Her Majesty Old-but-Firm Constabulary?"

The young woman gave him an impatient look.

"The OFC are a bunch of bureaucrats, if you ask me. Anyway, there's a reason we called you here: We suspect a connexion with your last case."

"Oh?" Sir Patrick replied, ignoring the uncouth language (in part, because he shared the Doctor's sentiment with regard to the Police).

Chapter II

The Craftsman Thief

Sir Patrick McNamarra's second visit to Oxford that autumn brought him considerably less pleasure already form the onset: The fresh russet-and-gold of the trees now lay in heaps on the pavements, and the chill winds were very disagreeable to his bronchitis—a memento from his last run-in with the villainous Homoeopath on his last visit.

"At least," he thought, "I'm not a coffee drinker—things would have been very dire then!"

As a result of the decaf-crisis, every College had started hoarding and rationing this precious commodity, fearful of the next strike from the Homoeopaths. Consequently, the Oxford crowd moved with considerably less spring in its steps on this visit, and the gaunt faces and harried looks abundant everywhere spoke a clear tale of the city's life in the shadow of anti-scientific terrorism.

Having checked in at his lodgings, Sir Patrick immediately called for a cab, only to hear that the Cab Driver's Union was throwing a party, and thus he was forced by circumstance to board a *train* to get to the reason for his return: Something was amiss at the Water Boiling Research Centre in Culham.

most of its creation.

A.3 The Oxford Chronicle

I don't particularly like travelling, especially not on my own. It makes me nervous and pitifully lonely. Therefore, when travelling to Oxford for a workshop on H-mode physics in Fusion Plasmas, I didn't much enjoy it at all, and was rather miserable much of the time.

In order to pass the time, and to feel closer to my friends at home, I started penning the chronicle of Sir Patrick McNamarra's visit to Oxford, drawing on real events for inspiration, writing different parts of it on postcards that I sent to my friends. I enjoyed this experience very much, and so it became a tradition.

The text making up the Oxford Chronicle has only been polished very little from that which I wrote on the original postcards. In the sections to follow, I will divulge some of the occurrences and parallels to the real world that make the backbone of the chronicle.

A.3.1 Workshop of the Water Boiling Physicists

donning their reds and golds: Oxford really is very beautiful in the autumn, but the sandstone facades are very pretty in any season. Also, people and things 'don' a lot of things in this chronicle, I noticed when typing it up. It's a very nice word, actually.

Steel Stallion: This refers to the train. In fact, I arrived by bus, but I don't share McNamarra's aversion to trains.

Lady Margaret Hall: This was the college at which the workshop was held. LMH (as it is sometimes known) is one of the

and that if his word as Gentleman were not good enough to alleviate any suspicions that he had been involved in that dreadful act, then he really had nothing more to add. Observing the PC's growing frustration and eventual inevitable collapse into fits of random gibberish—or maybe quotes from the Book of Law, Sir Patrick always thought the two sounded astoundingly alike—had kept him amused until someone or something had called the young man away on a police matter, and he had been left to his own devices.

As it were, the knitting circle was very pleasant, but having made two bonnets and a cowl, he was growing weary even of this—not that he would ever admit this to his captors, of course. Thus it was a relief when PC came back, saying that they had found the witness who had reported him to the Royal Constabulary.

"Good," said Sir Patrick, "let us get this over and done with."



"That's not him!" the Porter exclaimed.

"You... You're sure about that?" the Police Constable complained, baffled.

"Certain! The bloke was tall and muscular, not the academic type!"

"Good. Are we done then, Gentlemen?" Sir Patrick asked, politely.

"I guess we... got the wrong man," the PC answered, cheeks lighting up a bright red.

"Yes. I did tell you, you know. Perhaps next time you will listen!" and with that, Sir Patrick donned his hat, bid the Porter and the PC a good day, and walked out the door, a free man.

Feeling a tad peckish, having had tea and shortbread as his sole sustenance that morning, Sir Patrick quickly made his way up George Street, having in mind to grab a ploughman's at 'The Lamb and Flag,' or maybe at 'The Turf.' Before St. Giles, however, the road was blocked by a restive crowd. Having apologised

his way to the front of the crowd, he was just in time to see the object of the commotion: A train of Santas and Elves was making its way down Cornmarket Street under much merry *ho-ho-ho-ing* and atonal bell-chiming.

At long last, the final installation was passing by; an oddly muscled group of elves pulling a carriage, atop which lay a large, lumpy Christmas sack that appeared to be moving of its own volition. Beside the sack stood a large kettle-like contraption, which one of the elves was clearly having trouble operating. Perched precariously on the boiler was a huge block of ice, dripping slightly in the sun.

Sir Patrick was just about to move on, as he heard a familiar huffing and puffing behind him. He turned to face the PC.

“Good day, Constable. I thought we were done?”

“Yes, Sir. We are, Sir. Just passing like you, Sir. There’s been a break-in Wellcome Ancient Bio-Molecules Centre,” the PC replied, clearly happy to have a reason to cut down on his pace.

“Blimey, lad! The A.B.C.? Isn’t that where Headmaster of Teddy Hall is Honorary Fellow?”

“Yes, Sir. Right you are, Sir. Queerest thing: All they stole was a block of glacial ice...”

“Ice? Well, Constable. Seems lunch will have to wait. Come along, I know where your thieves have gone off to!”

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They (or rather Sir Patrick, the Constable was lagging pitifully behind, exclaiming in a broad Northern Irish accent, that he was getting too old for all this running) caught up with the carriage as it stopped on Folly Bridge. the boiler and the huge block of Glacial Ice™ perched perilously near the edge of the carriage, and it looked as if they could both at any moment topple over and tumble into the cold waters of the River Thames-or-Isis.

Sir Patrick immediately realised what had seemed so familiar about the man who had been tinkering with the boiler:

but to aid my own faltering memory, I will record some notes on some—in no way, however, all!—of the particular references I drew on in writing this text; I do hope, however, that readers who are note *me* will also enjoy this ‘Making-Of Featurette’.

A.2 The Birth of a Gentleman

Sir Patrick McNamarra—the name is meant to reflect that he is not to be affiliated with any one particular part of the United Kingdom, but that he is British. *Patrick*, of course, refers to the patron saint of Ireland,¹ and the family name McNamarra is reminiscent of Scotland. England is represented by the ‘Sir’; but where, the astute reader may enquire, is Wales?

Wales and Cornwall are represented by Sir Patrick’s home town, the small village of Sherwellie, on the border of Wales and Cornwall.² The name ‘Sherwellie’ is a reference to a hill that does not exist somewhere in Wales, named by a friend called Wellie, who for a short while worked on updating maps for the Geological Survey.

The first chronicle came about as I was walking from my office to meet my dear friend Dr Leo Grijndvar, who was being held-up at a central police station, on account of not being in possession of a valid passport. To pass the time, I made up the first part of Sir Patrick’s first adventure in my head. Since I had no way of writing the thing down, a central criterion was that the ‘text’ should be audibly pleasing, with a nice flow, such that it could be easily memorised. I am very aurally oriented in anything I write, so having the language *feel right* when I say it has always been important, but even more so in this case. Though it may be a shallow approach to art, I think this form-before-content aesthetic fits this particular work very well, and it has permeated

¹and also to a rather more famous knighted tea drinker

²A scholar of cartography may remark that such a border does not exist; I care not!

"You!" he exclaimed, "You are the Homoeopath from Lady Margaret Hall!"

The man, easily recognisable now that he had shed his Santa's beard, met Sir Patrick's gaze triumphantly.

"Patrick McNamarra! I had hoped the long arm of the law would keep you under lock and key a little longer, but no matter: Watch this, our glorious victory is assured!" At which point he beckoned at McNamarra to come closer. The Homoeopath's minions reluctantly parted to let him through, and Sir Patrick got more evil-minded sideways glances walking those few feet, than he had hitherto afforded in his entire life up to that moment.

"What have you shallow-minded charlatans done with the Headmaster of Teddy Hall?" asked Sir Patrick, as he got nearer. "Don't worry." The villain—who had now donned a lab coat—kicked at the bag of presents. It shuddered and groaned. "He's also here to witness our triumph."

Before Sir Patrick could say anything, the man continued:

"Yes! This day will be remembered as the day the World *finally* accepted the awesome power of Homoeopathy, alas, at its peril! This block of ice, locked in a Himalayan glacier since the dawn of Creation—this six thousand. . ."

"Six *hundred* thousand, you buffoon," the sack protested, but was at once set upon by the minions and silenced.

"As I was saying: This six *thousand* years old glacial ice will contain particles of Creation itself, and therein lies its power. . ."



Trying to stall for time, Sir Patric decided to humour the Homoeopath's follies:

"Particulates of creation, you say? And those will help you. . . how, exactly?"

The man, who had gotten back to tinkering with the boiler (which Sir Patrick saw, now that he was closer, bore the Seal of the Culham Science Centre. "Ah! Everything is falling into

Appendix A

Notes

A.1 Introduction

Anyone who knows me even just in passing, probably knows that I am a hopeless *Anglophile*. While there are many things in actual British society that I am not particularly fond of—the judicial system and abundant CCTV, the hopelessly low standards of houses and social security, and a majority of the kitchen—I am unabashedly fascinated and amused by the gentle and aloof humour (often unintended; always intellectual) represented by the stereotypical English Gentleman.

I am not alone in this fascination, this theme has been explored by Gilbert and Sullivan, P.G. Wodehouse, Douglas Adams, the Monty Pythons and many, many more. In many ways, the chronicles of Sir Patrick McNamarra is a love letter to those writers and performers.

As with so many other things that I write or otherwise create, this text contains many references to things and occasions that are not central to the text. Normally, I would hesitate to explicate on these matters, however, the bulk of the text came about as a whimsical chronicle of my own travels, so if for no other reason

place," he thought, quietly) looked up from the dials and valves to answer:

"Yes," he snickered—not an evil snicker, more like that of a spoilt child on the day before its birthday—"there will only be a handful of those locked in the ice, so when we use this scientific super-boiler to vapourise them, their dilution into the atmosphere will make them extremely potent: They will start the process of *anti*-creation. If only I could. . . there! Think I got it. Now, when I pull this lever, the world will finally give us Homoeopaths the credit we deserve!"

For once, Sir Patrick found himself at a complete loss for words—he knew he had to act, not because of what the madman had said, but because the Scientist at Culham had told him how prone their precious experimental kettle was to disrupt ("Violently," she had added)—but the many logical fallacies of the argument he had just suffered had paralysed his wits to a degree that not even being locked in over night in the Meta-Physical department (ironically situated next door to 'Logic') of the Bodleian could ever hope to achieve. All he could manage to force across his lips were the words:

"That's. . . just. . ."

Out of civilised options, Sir Patrick opted for a course of action hitherto entirely foreign to his temperament: He leaped gallantly onto the carriage, swung from the hip (as he had read that one should), and hit the Homoeopath square on his jaw!



Every bump in the road sent a wave of pain through Sir Patrick McNamarra, as his horse drawn carriage made slow progress over the cobbled Oxford streets. His inexperienced swing at the Homoeopath had caused no damage—except for the spraining of Sir Patrick's right wrist—but it had startled the man sufficiently to stop him from operating the boiler, and angered him enough to make him order his men about, rather than pursuing his task at the controls.

dees of the parallel conference on "Dust-Bunny Ethology and Protection" were engaged in low intensity warfare with the cleaning staff. The former desperately tried saving the objects of their fascination from the latter, going so far as to steal the staff's equipment, while the cleaners were rapidly growing tired of having to use guerrilla tactics to get their work done. Sir Patrick looked on in amusement.

Soon, however, he saw things were terribly wrong: Everywhere he turned, a single typeface met him, childish and innocent-looking, even comical, if you didn't know it's origin. . .



Without a moments hesitation, McNamarra sprung to action. He had seen this infestation once before, in Egypt, where the plague had transformed even the Hieroglyphs into their likeness. The Archaeologists had had no other option, but to quarantine the numerous sarcophagi and stone slabs in the British Museum, in order to save them from permanent ruin. Sir Patrick swiftly pocketed several of the more precious specimens to be found at the exhibition centre, and got out.

Refusing on principle (as well as for personal comfort) to ride the monstrous trains rattling hither and thither in great tunnels under the Swedish Capital, making his escape to his lodgings—a lovely B&B, far removed from the terrors of the town centre—took both determination and time. But Sir Patrick possessed an upper lip was stiffer than most: He prevailed.

Having said his goodbyes to his hosts (over the customary Swedish farewell Pizza-and-Insipid-Beers), he got on the first ship to beloved old Blighty. A good adventure, so far. . .

To be continued. . . ?

Unfortunately, the minion's homoeopathic aerobic exercises (one part sloth, diluted a hundred times over by excruciatingly exhausting athletics) had proven to actually work pretty well, which Sir Patrick had gotten first hand experience of, moments after he had leapt onto the carriage. Fortunately, however, the Police Constable had chosen that moment to catch up, backup in tow, truncheons ready to be brought down on Sir Patrick's assailants. Again unfortunately, bystanders and rubber-neckers had interpreted the scrimmage as a festive Town-and-Gown Brawl, and the unrest had spread all the way up the High, to Magdalen Bridge and beyond. Before things settled down, sixty-four scholars ("A new record!" was the cry in the streets) had been hospitalised, and who knew how many others!

Sir Patrick, once freed, had acted quickly to try and broker peace, but somehow treating the city to free *Gin & Tonic* seemed to have the opposite effect to the intended, and the Headmaster of Teddy Hall was furious at Sir Patrick for having chopped his block of ice into bits in an attempt to make the drinks more festive.

"No matter," Sir Patrick muttered to himself, as the carriage passed Sutton Courtenay. The Homoeopaths were now locked up in the same gaol that Sir Patrick had very recently been held in, and he wished them (privately, of course) a wholly unpleas- ant stay at the two-star establishment. Finally, after many ad- ventures and misfortunes, Sir Patrick McNamarra was leaving Oxford for the foreseeable future.

"But," he thought, looking out at the magpies groping for worms in the recently grooved fields, "I think I may like to come back here. One day."

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Chapter I

Remarkably bad taste

Once again, Sir Patrick McNamarra found himself in the com- pany of the Water Boiling Physicists, this time, on account of his "Extraordinary Feats of Bravery"—so the invitation had read—"in Oxford of Yesteryear," as their honoured guest at their an- nual Pan-European (*Pan* implying that the former colonies were also welcome) conference.

He soon found himself in the middle of a protracted and heated (pardon the pun) conflict between two sub-branches of the field: Those who preferred boiling under intense *heat*, on the one hand; and those favouring excruciatingly high *pressure*, on the other. Continually, from the moment of his arrival, represen- tatives of their respective camps implored him to try coffee pre- pared using *their* particular method, asking him to admit that it was *much* better than the alternative.

McNamarra thought both equally vile, but played a good and amicable guest, while secretly longing for a decent *cuppa*.

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Having momentarily evaded the coffee peddlers, McNamarra found that a second conflict had arisen of no less ferocity: The atten-

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Sans Sense

newer colleges, founded in 1878, and the first women's college in Oxford. Compared to the older colleges, the architecture is bland, but the gardens are well kept and very beautiful.

Headmistress Malagata: Professor Malagata is not, in fact, the headmistress of LMH. The name is a reference to *Madam Inéz Malagata*, Third Witch and Souse of Diom for the Santiago Conclave of Witches, whose acquaintance I had the profound pleasure of making at a conference at which we were both invited speakers. Those were the days...

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You'll have had your tea: Either you get this reference directly, or you haven't a clue.

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Overly Contrived Ways of Boiling Water: My research regards fusion power plants. It is interesting, that even a power source as near to science fiction as fusion, still basically amounts to a very advanced steam engine...

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sports jackets: Physicists' traditional garment, usually with leather patches on the elbows. I didn't know that it was called this before I looked it up. 'Sports,' of course, refers to hunting and the like...

Empty coffee mugs: I must have coffee. Absence of coffee is the mind killer. Absence from coffee is the little Death that brings total obliteration. *The coffee must flow!*

Decaffeinated! The coffee served at the conference was not decaf, but it was neither abundant nor strong (British coffee never is). This did not improve my mood...



Sir Patrick looked on, fascinated: With all the focus on coffee, it may be concluded that I do not care for tea at all. This would be an erroneous conclusion: Though I am thoroughly hooked on coffee, I am also very fond of tea, and I share McNamarra's forbidden passion for pouring the milk in the tea, rather than the more proper other way round.

A.3.2 Secondment

second visit to Oxford: I visited Oxford a total of three times that autumn. The second time was the first on "secondment," which is a kind of exchange where my employer (that is to say, my university) can send me away for a month or more, and let someone else pay most of my salary for the duration. Since universities are always short on funds, at least in Sweden, this is popular with the accountants.

bronchitis: I didn't have bronchitis, but I had forgotten my asthma medicine, which was not good at all: British houses are very often badly isolated, and the ventilation is terrible. This combined with cheap and very aromatic (or pungent) shower gel at the hotel at which I was staying (more on this later) to make washing off the day's grime a very unpleasant business.

Cab Driver's Union: There was a major strike when we were in Oxford, where public servants protested cuts and bad wages compared to industry. It felt a little bad going to work, but the



British Museum: I feel a little bad for providing the British Empire with just motivations for committing grand-theft culture...

Refusing on principle: Actually, I refuse to pay on principle (though mostly not on *my* principles, at least not to first degree), and hence I borrowed a bike from my hosts. (Nearly 20 miles a day—great exercise, pretty relaxing; terrible for my asthma and allergies!) I also genuinely dislike the subway, though not as much as I used to (still don't like the locals when in the subway, however...).

Pizza-and-Insipid-Beer: One day, me and my hosts met for lunch. We had delicious vegan kebab-pizza and folköl in a park. It was great.

One day.

A.4 Visiting the Capital

Pan-European conference: There is a major European plasma physics conference held each year, this year in Stockholm. As the text implies, it is not exclusively European, having participants from non-European countries such as (South) Korea, Brazil and Japan, among others.

These postcards were written in a hurry, on the last day of the conference, and I'm not very happy with them.

two sub-branches: Those who favour *hot* fusion plasmas belong to the Magnetic Confinement contingent, whereas those favouring *dense* fusion plasmas swear true to the Inertial Confinement scheme. The latter basically amounts to exploding a tiny pellet of fuel to harness the excess energy, in what is for all intents and purposes a miniature fusion bomb. Most experiments working in this field receive a lot of its funding from the navy and/or military.

I belong to the the former, morally superior, group.



parallel conference: The parallel conference was actually on general plasmas as well, so dusty plasmas—their phenomenology, dynamics and (I presume) use—was actually part of the the main curriculum.

typeface: *Why* are physicists so in love with Comic Sans? Not just just the posters and presentations at *this* conference, but even at the press-conference announcing the probable finding of the Higgs boson! Utterly incomprehensible.

strike guards said that we should, since we were paid by a different organisation all together.

red kite: On my first visit to Oxford, I spied what I thought were enormous amounts of red kites (*Milvus milvus*), flying low over the newly tilled fields along the M25 to Heathrow. It just so happened that the internet on the bus was working passably, and that my dear friend Dr Leo Grijndvar—who is an enthusiastic ornithologist—was online for consultation. He informed me that it could in no way be red kites if they were that many (I counted, I think, something like a hundred, or at least several dozen), since they were rather rare in England. I tried describing them to him, and in the end he had to agree that it did *sound* like kites despite all: they have very characteristic tail-feathers, among other things, that set them apart. After some further investigations, he found out that his book on English bird life was outdated, and that since its printing (early on in the third millennium of the Common Era), there had been a very successful effort of conservation. In the end we both learnt something. ('The Red Kite' was also the name of a pub we went to one evening.)



short red-haired woman: There were many short red-haired women at Culham, but I don't recall that Pat Radley was based on anyone in particular. Her surname is the name of a small community, the stop before Culham on the train, and one of the stops after Culham, on the way to London is called Reading, which is pronounced "Redding," and not "Reeding," as we initially supposed in our naivety. This rather contrived anecdote is the reason for the hair colour. (I also happen to be partial to red hair, but at this instance my preferences were secondary.)

Old-but-Firm Constabulary: Culham Science Centre is the training grounds for the UK Nuclear Constabulary. I tried to come up with a good pun on that, but failed (this was my second attempt).



unhinged her mug: I hung on to the (single use) mugs from my visit, since they fulfilled two minimum requirements that might make them interesting in the eyes of an artist friend of mine:

1. they had a sickly colour,
2. they were many...



rail-theft: Someone actually did steal the rails from an active railway track when we were in Oxford, but as I recall that happened in Sweden, not in England, let alone in Oxfordshire. The trains were consistently on time, which in the UK apparently means that they are no more than, say, twenty minutes late...

in the research boiler: There are two research reactors at Culham. The larger one, called *JET*, is radioactive, so you don't get anywhere near that one. The smaller one is called *MAST*, and while that is more accessible it shares one major design flaw with *JET*: both consume more power than they produce, by far.

hotel bible: I *may* have substantially improved the hotel bible I found on my room, though not only by corrections, but also with illustrations and comments. Hypothetically.



Gin & Tonic: Gin & tonic! I appreciate several things relating to British pub traditions: There are many local ales, they have proper bitters, there is always less strong ale available (stronger is, refreshingly enough, *not* considered simply better), and half-pints are not considered an oddity; and you are free to mix your Gin with as much or as little Tonic as you like—the bartender does not presume to know best.⁶

Sutton Courtenay On my first visit to Oxford, some years before this chronicle, I made a point of visiting Sutton Courtenay, where George Orwell (or Eric Blair, as his unassuming headstone reads) is buried, there to put some flowers in the colours of the Spanish Republic on his grave... A few days later we went back their again, when one of the locals who participated at the Culham Summer School wanted to show us Tim Burton's and Helena Bonham Carter's mansion.

magpies groping... recently grooved: There is a very narrow street called *Magpie Lane*, running south from the High. Before the modern name, it was known as Groove Street, referring to a particular anatomical groove. Before that it was actually also called Magpie Lane, but in the earliest records, from the days when streets were named after their main use or commerce, it had a rather more explicit name, based on the verb 'to grope.' (Also, I happen to like magpies, though not as much as My-Friend-the-Artist..)

I think I may like to come back here: There were may bad parts to my three visits to Oxford, but I also retain more than a few good memories of this beautiful city. Indeed I do want to go back there.

⁶The only reason I even look at Gin & Tonic as a viable alternative is, of course, the Guide. The fact that it—being rather more bitter than sweet—is also a fairly nice drink is, on the whole, secondary.

River Themes-or-Isis: The River Themes is only called the River Themes downstream of Oxford. Upstream, it is called the Isis. Where, exactly, it changes its name is unclear, and in Oxford (as a kind of snobbery, I assume) it is mostly known as the Isis. On some old maps, the cartographers have opted for the diplomatic solution of writing both names.



Particulates of creation: When travelling to Oxford the last time (or maybe it was already the second), I had all ready planned for much of the main story-arc (such as it is). This was nearly thwarted, however, when a Swedish comic magazine published an adventure with a very similar plot—*The Anthroposophic Apocalypse*. I am rather sensitive when it comes to . . . illogically irrational things, so I almost threw my story-sprout out the window. I'm glad I didn't let that get to me in the end, as I think my take on it was rather better executed.

Bodleian: The famous Bodleian Library in Oxford *does* have a whole department for Meta-Physics, and it is indeed situated next to the department of Logic.



a Town-and-Gown Brawl: The expression 'Town-and-Gown' is used to describe the sometimes strained relations between the Town and the University. One famous brawl was the 'Battle of St. Scholastica Day' in 1355, during which sixty-three scholars were killed, which is what 'A new record!' alludes to. The Town of Oxford then yearly paid the University sixty-three pence on every February the 10th, to commemorate the event. This went on for 470 years. It is interesting, though not remarkable, that there is no definite account of how many of the townspeople were killed. . .

St. Edmund's Hall: More commonly known as 'Teddy Hall.' This was the college that hosted us on my first visit to Oxford for a summer school in plasma physics a couple of years back. It's a small college, but charming, and the bartender thinks fusion scientists will boil the oceans away. Charming.

A.3.3 I'll be home for Christmas

as gaols went, this was one of the worst: What I am describing in this passage is the hotel we stayed at. It was probably even worse than I detail in the text, and feeling rather lonely and isolated in Oxford, I think the likeness to a cell is not entirely unfair. The *only* real selling points of those particular lodgings were their closeness to the railway station and the price. The second period of *secondment*, however, was three whole weeks, and that was far to long to stay in that place. Maybe during summer, but *emphatically not* in December. . .

Darn It & Stitch: Being rather fed up all ready after less than a week had passed of my third visit, I was very happy to find a knitting circle that met regularly on Mondays at a rather nice pub called "The Royal Blenheim".³ The knitting circle was loosely organised around a local yarn shop by the name 'Darn It & Stitch,' and I think I owe some of my remaining sanity to the participants. Besides being a very nice break from the monotony (and cold) of my cell, I managed to finish a hat for Leo's sister Neunstern there.

It should come as no surprise, that I was the only male attendee. What is surprising, however, is that I went at all.

I don't do that sort of thing.

Under normal circumstances, I thoroughly dislike meeting and chit-chatting with strangers, and I am normally about as

³the pub also had a lot of boardgames for customers to borrow, which endeared the establishment to me

spontaneous as the applause after the average contributed talk at a conference. It mystifies me to this day, when I think about it, but I guess it is somehow encouraging and hope instilling.

the PC's growing frustration: I often imagine, that if I were ever caught by the police, I would act much like Sir Patrick does in this scene. I share some of his detached disrespect for authority and law, though, being a pitiful wimp (and not entirely stupid), this will likely remain a sweet day-dream.



The Lamb and Flag: Tolkien's and the Inklings' *other* pub, the first being 'The Bird and the Baby'.⁴ There is an awful lot of name dropping in this chapter. Not sure why, but I guess that I wanted to emphasise that this was part a chronicle of *my* visit as well: All the pubs and streets mentioned are *real* pubs and streets that I visited at some point or other,⁵ and I *did* enjoy a ploughman's on at least one occasion, I'm not very happy with those details as I feel that they detract from the quality of the text, but I let them remain anyway, as a reminder not to do it again.

The Turf: This was one of Inspector Morse's favourite pubs. I went for a guided tour of Morse's Oxford one weekend. It was fun.

⁴ or 'The Eagle and Child,' if you're not from around

⁵We went for a pint every night, me and my supervisor, and mostly to new pubs each night, but I feel that I've only just scratched the surface of what the city has to offer—and that is even disregarding the fact that every pub has its own broad and perpetually updated selection of real ales...

blocked by a restive crowd: There was a 'Santa Run' one weekend—a kind of charity gig, like *Comic Relief*, where people dress up as santas (and elves...) to participate in an informal running contest. I missed it (and the restive crowd), but I saw it when it was dissolving.

Wellcome Ancient Bio-Molecules Centre: This actually exists, though I know nothing of it's proposed affiliation with Teddy Hall.



Northern Irish accent: I met a member-in-training of the Nuclear Constabulary in the Culham Science Centre canteen. He regularly showed up after us, complaining that we couldn't possibly be doing any work, since we always showed up so early for lunch. He was from Northern Ireland, where he had been an ordinary PC, but now had do retrain due to staffing cuts. Like the PC in the story, he complained that he was to old for all the running. Unlike the PC in the story, he was a genuinely nice man.

Folly Bridge: This is the main bridge across the Thames-or-Isis. Situated next to it is one of Oxford's most classic pubs, called "The Head of the River," after the traditional title awarded to the winners in the peculiar bumps rowing bouts common to both Oxford and *The Other Place*. Folly Bridge is where the university's summer regattas finish, starting some way downstream, at Iffley Lock. The Head of the River public house is a very good starting place for those interested in the history of university rowing.