

Sir Arthur C Clarke

1917-2008

One of the “ardent little groups” referred to by Wyn Wachhorst in the quote from *The Dream of Spaceflight* reproduced below was the British Interplanetary Society (BIS), which met in the 1930s over fish-and-chip suppers and included the young Arthur C Clarke.

In the process of planning those “voyages to the Moon that they never hoped to witness” they not only designed a rocket that bore a strong resemblance to the Apollo spacecraft but also anticipated much of the actual strategy, including lunar orbit rendezvous.

Arthur C Clarke was instrumental in the early days of the BIS, becoming chairman in 1946 and remaining a life-long supporter of Society activities in promoting future space exploration.

In those early days he went on to write *Interplanetary Flight*, the first book in English to present the basic theory of spaceflight in any technical detail, and *The Sands of Mars*, the first novel to depict Mars with scientific realism.

But it was *The Exploration of Space* that launched his reputation as the prophet of spaceflight. His scientific imagination, his clear, powerfully informed writing and his ability to reduce complex subjects to simple language would eventually make him one of the 20th century’s most influential visionaries, and the most read science fiction writer in the world.

He was born on the family farm in the seaside town of Minehead on the west coast of England. His father had been disabled in World War I and the family suffered hard times. Arthur was just 13 when his father died, and much of the farm work fell on his shoulders.

Then he discovered the March 1930 issue of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* and David Lasser’s *The Conquest of Space*, which suggested that spaceflight might one day really happen. These two books - the vast mysterious visions and the practical technological facts - set the course of Clarke’s life.

A loner and dreamer, always ahead of his years, he began to build and launch rockets on the farm, with pocket money earned by making and selling wireless crystal sets. As a teenager he built his first telescope from



Sir Arthur C Clarke, who died at his home in Sri Lanka, aged 90, on 19 March 2008.

“Soon there will be no one who remembers when spaceflight was still a dream, the reverie of reclusive boys and the vision of a handful of men. Most of those who met in ardent little groups in small cafés between the world wars, planning voyages to the Moon and planets that they never hoped to witness, are no longer living.”

The Dream of Spaceflight
by Wyn Wachhorst

cardboard tubes mounted on an old bicycle frame and mapped the mountains and craters of the Moon.

Clarke’s legendary energy and ardour were already evident in his teens when he worked as a night operator in the post office. Sleeping there and waking at 4 am to sort and deliver the mail, he would then pedal his bicycle ten miles to and from school, often

returning at night under a starry sky. Yet he still managed to read two books a day.

Working for the civil service, he found his speed with the slide rule enabled him to do all his work in an hour and devote the rest of the day to his own interests. He completed his undergraduate degree with highest honours in mathematics and physics at King’s College in two years. While there, he wrote his first space novel, *Prelude to Space*, in just 20 days, at the same time holding down a job as assistant editor of a physics journal.

In 1941 he joined the Royal Air Force, specialising in microwaves and radar. Combined with his interest in rockets and spaceflight, this enabled him to work out the principles of geostationary satellites that could provide global communications. He publicised the idea extensively in books and articles in the late 1940s and early 50s, beginning with his now famous 1946 article in *Wireless World*, ‘Extra-Terrestrial Relays’, ultimately prompting a US Navy programme and leading eventually to the development of artificial satellites in the 1960s. The geostationary orbit became known as the ‘Clarke orbit’.

For laying the cornerstone of the revolution in global communications, *Wireless World* paid Clarke the princely sum of £20, which he later reflected on it all in a piece entitled ‘A Short Pre-History of Comsats, or: How I lost a Billion Dollars in My Spare Time’.

He also had a hand in initiating the use of rockets and satellites for meteorological research, and his many other technological concepts include the space elevator and the electromagnetic launcher, a system that will

“I met Arthur a number of times, the first being in 1952 when I was 16. I had been reading *Interplanetary Flight* and then the exploration of space, so was completely committed to the idea that humans would go to the Moon and planets. I had started work as a lab technician at what was then Birmingham’s College of Technology (now part of the University) and had been trying to find where the Midlands Branch of the BIS met. I eventually found that it met at that very college - and that the next speaker was to be Arthur C. Clarke!

“In the years to follow I illustrated covers for many of his books, fact and fiction, and Arthur wrote forewords for some of my own books, like *Challenge of the Stars* and *Visions of Space*. He always took a great interest in artists and their work, and also owned some of my originals. He was a great man who made many valuable contributions to our planet, and will be sadly missed - but fondly remembered.”

David A Hardy - International Association of Astronomical Artists

probably be an essential component of any 21st century lunar base.

With his many hundred of stories and articles, over 100 books, Arthur C Clarke was one of the most prolific writers of science fiction in history.

His achievements in other media included numerous television series, an Oscar nomination for his work with Stanley Kubrick on the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and his coverage, with Walter Cronkite, of the first Moon landing and two more Apollo missions.

His countless other awards, fellowships, doctorates, and professorships include the Stuart Ballantine Medal of the Franklin Institute and the Marconi Prize for groundbreaking contributions to communications, the Charles A Lindbergh Award, the Lord Perry Award, the International Science Policy Foundation Medal, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Engineering Award, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Centennial Medal, the Aerospace Communications Award, the Astronautical Literature Award, the Aviation Space-Writer's Association Robert Ball Award, and a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. And in 1998, he became Sir Arthur Clarke.

Seasoned with dry wit and a touch of the poet, his works reveal his versatility and breadth of knowledge, his penetrating intellect, his boundless imagination, and his insatiable curiosity.

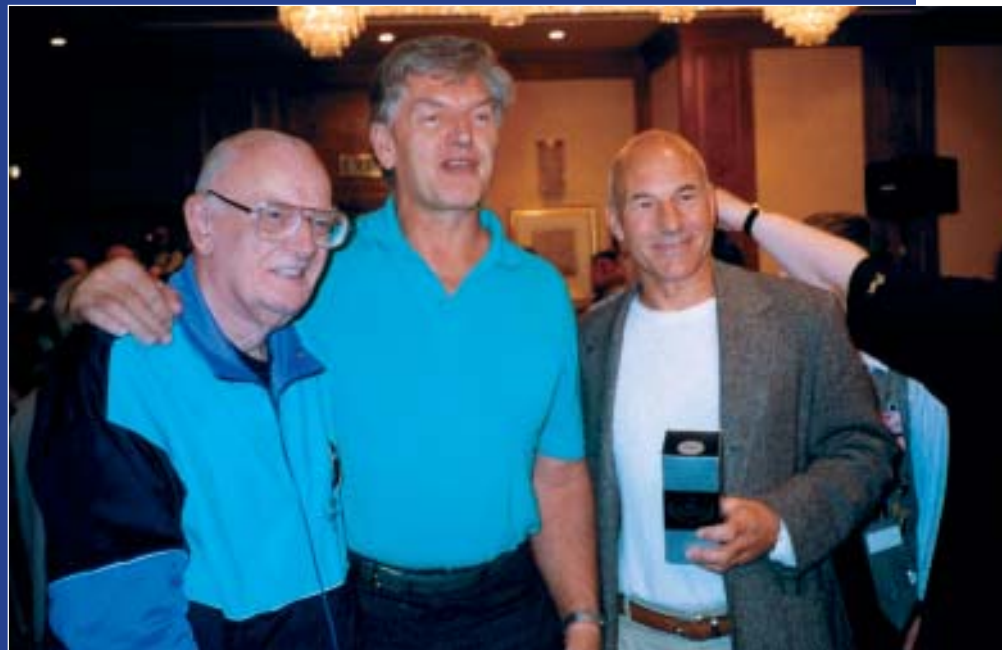
His books resonate with an unflagging optimism, a faith in the efficacy of science and reason, and his belief that truth is too vital and fascinating to indulge the illusions and idolatries of superstition.

The promise of Clarke's vision is that of a reality immeasurably larger and deeper than a world centred on oneself. Why do so many of us drift into adulthood ignorant of the vast vistas and inexhaustible mysteries of space and time? Unlike many, Arthur Clarke never lost that childlike delight in the unknown. Visiting him in his fifties, JB Priestly described him as "a man with the heart and mind of a boy of 16".

Clarke himself said he had always been more interested "in the spectacular possibilities of the distant future, and not the practical problems of the day after tomorrow".

As an explorer of ideas and possibilities, he has shown such remarkable prescience about what would be of crucial importance in the future that he may well be remembered as the greatest technological prophet of the twentieth century.

This is particularly true of his role in educating the public to the possibilities of spaceflight. Among those who grew up in the 40s and 50s, and who later became



Arthur with Dave Prowse - aka Star Wars' Darth Vader (centre) and Patrick Stewart - Star Trek's Jean-Luc Picard (right) in 1994 at the SF convention in the UK. *Mat Irvine*

"One of the most memorable recollections I have of Arthur is from 1994. He was on his way back from the US to Sri Lanka and stopped off in London for a week's visit. This was actually a slight ploy as, unbeknown to Arthur, he would be the subject of a *This Is Your Life* TV programme.

"However a few days previously, there was another event. The year 1994 was the 25th anniversary of Apollo 11 and Archon, one of the regular science fiction conventions, was celebrating with a combined Science Fiction-Science Fact weekend. A 'surprise guest' was already rumoured, Patrick Stewart, or to Star Trek stalwarts, Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

"During a visit to Arthur I mentioned slightly mischievously that there was a SF convention locally and, almost by

chance, that Patrick Stewart was to be there. Arthur immediately replied, 'Patrick Stewart - I'd love to meet him - he's doing the commentary for one of my underwater films. Do you think the organisers would mind if I came along?'

"At this point all I could imagine is what any SF convention organiser is going to say with an offer of a visit from the world's most famous science fiction writer? They are hardly going to say 'no'! But I casually said, 'I'll check - I'm sure it'll be okay....' The reaction from the organisers was, needless to say, one of total disbelief, and we even managed to keep it a surprise to the audience until he was announced, when he received a standing ovation.

"Arthur was one of the few truly great visionaries the world has seen. He will be sorely missed."

Mat Irvine - science model maker

prominent in space fact or fiction, there are few who would not cite Arthur C Clarke as a significant personal influence.

At a time when most of the world regarded spaceflight as pulp nonsense, he saw that we would soon be living in the dawn of a new Renaissance, a moment much like the morning of the modern age when most of the globe lay deep in mystery, when tall masts lured those of imagination to choose their own future, to challenge the very foundations of man and nature, heaven and Earth.

Just as seafaring enlightened 16th century Europe, spacefaring will cure the

post-modern failure of nerve, offering not only rich new veins of empirical knowledge but a great opening out of mind and spirit.

To Arthur Clarke falls much of the credit for elevating a pulp genre of superheroes and super gadgets to a literature of spiritual encounters with the mystery of being. Running through much of his fiction is the loneliness of man in the immensity of cosmic space and the finitude of human time.

His deep love of the ocean and his wonder at the night sky are one and the same. It is the feeling of insignificance, of insurmountable separation across the voids

"I grew up with the books of Sir Arthur C Clarke. I would say his work had the greatest influence on my writing of any author. Books like *Childhood's End* show enormous artistry in folding down transcendent concepts into heart-wrenching stories of individual humans.

"I first met Arthur in 1992, when my first novel was nominated for the Arthur C Clarke Award for best sf novel, through the kindness of Arthur's brother Fred, who was always a great supporter of his brother.

"Arthur was taken by *The Time Ships* (1995), my sequel to Wells's *The Time Machine*, and he sent me a little collectors' postcard of Wells himself. There is a sense of continuity here. Arthur never met Wells himself, but he did know Olaf Stapledon, who was a friend of Wells. Since then we collaborated on four novels. These projects were a great pleasure and a privilege for me.

"In his later days Arthur may not have had the steam power to fulfil all his ideas alone. But he remained fascinated by the future, as delivered to his study by the internet. He was a terrific email correspondent - and he never missed an opportunity to plug the new book. His liveliness, curiosity and huge generosity of spirit make him a model of how I want to be when I grow up."

Stephen Baxter - science fiction author

New BIS members

The Society welcomes the following new members:

Chris Crockford, Essex, UK
Adam Brocklehurst, London, UK
Alan Wild, Northants, UK
Andrew Whittaker, Kent, UK
Bob Guzik, Orangevale, USA
David Boyce, Leicestershire, UK
David Smith, Gloucestershire, UK
Donald Beattie, Florida, USA
Ernest Turriziani, Ontario, Canada
Hugh Marshall, Kent, UK
Jennifer Scott-Thompson, Surrey, UK
John Hondros, London, UK
Malcolm Stainforth, Lincolnshire, UK
Patrick Brough, Gloucestershire, UK
Saifudin Khalifa, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Shameemah Patil, London, UK
Willis Shirk, Harrisburg PA, USA



Arthur meets an old friend in the shape of the Orion space-liner from 2001 - part of the spaceship display set up by Mat Irvine for the Minehead Festival in 1992. *Mat Irvine*

of space, time, and death, that drove Clarke's quest for meaning and transcendence, for species immortality in face of certain death to the individual.

His best works, both fiction and nonfiction, are infused with the awareness that science is not only compatible with spirituality, but is a profound source of spirituality.

The need to see the whole - from the mountaintop or the Moon - is the hallmark of our species. The exploration of space, like the heart of science itself, is the attempt to complete a grand internal model of reality, to broaden the context of meaning, to find the centre by completing the edge. It is a search for roots, for something fixed and eternal. It is the hope that we are not alone.

And this was the vision of Arthur Clarke. That people from Earth will follow the probes into the ancient river valleys of Mars, out over wind-torn plains, out to the ice seas of Europa, the yellow skies of Titan, and the Great Wall of Miranda - out into the ocean of light, to those worlds within worlds where the star-children wait.

How sad it is that the Arthur Clarke's of this Earth are as rare as Earthlike planets. Yet theirs is the heartsong of humanity. Standing astride their time, they are the lamps that line our journey. Such was the life of Arthur C Clarke, that amiable,

bespectacled farm boy whose passionate energy and prolific vision started our journey into new worlds. In many ways he was - like science itself - a candle in the dark.

Adapted by Clive Simpson from a tribute presented by astronaut Buzz Aldrin to the Aerospace Historical Society in California, May 2003, at a dinner in honour of Sir Arthur C. Clarke.

"Arthur Clarke was a very great friend of mine. We first met at a meeting of the BIS and despite the five year difference in our ages - I was only 12 - we struck up an immediate friendship which lasted the rest of his life.

"Arthur was a great man, a brilliant writer, a great visionary and, in my case also, a very devoted friend.

"I think his influence on our way of thought is as great as any in our time.

"Sadly he is no longer with us but he will never be forgotten. His death is deeply regretted not only by close personal friends (of which I was one) but by many over the world.

"He will be very badly missed but his work will live on."

Patrick Moore

