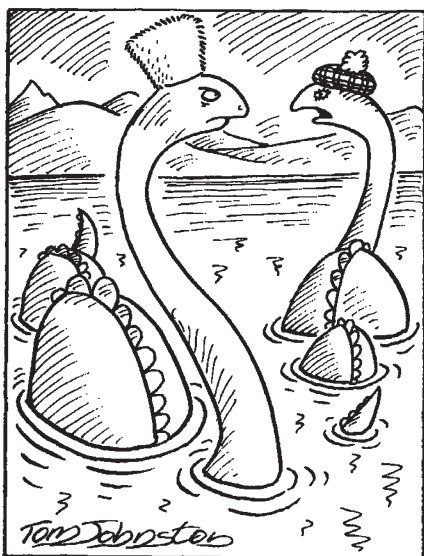


Soviet New Year Diary

(to be taken with two vodkas and a pinch of salt)



"Better extinct than Red!"

Koskolteras Rhombopterix?

A Loch-Ness-type monster, 15 m long with a head 2 m long by 1 m wide has been reported in Lake Kos Kol, Kazakhstan. An unnamed commentator on Moscow radio observed that since several "extinct" species have recently been discovered to be still surviving, he considered it quite possible that "unknown creatures of the kind reported in both these lakes" might, indeed, exist. What he did not suggest, however, is any kind of joint Soviet-British (or Kazakh-Scottish) study project. This seems a strange omission; joint scientific research is a major feature in all discussions of mutual cooperation, and a possible monster investigation would enliven what too often become dull routine talks on oil drilling equipment and fertiliser plants. Indeed, should the two creatures prove to be of the same species, an interbreeding project might not be beyond the bounds of all possibility!

Bubble bath

Small boys on both sides of the space race have always been attracted to the profession of cosmonaut/astronaut—not least because of the obvious impossibility of taking a bath under conditions of weightlessness. Alas for childhood dreams—the days of a lick and a promise with a cologne-dampened washcloth are gone; Soviet technology has succeeded in equipping Salyut-6 with an experimental shower. Enclosed in a special shower cabinet, the cosmonaut is sluiced by a stream of water droplets borne by an airflow; the mixture of air and water being separated by a filter and recycled.

Un-cooking the books

According to geographer Arkadii Sopotsko, the geographical discoveries on the North West coast of the American continent, attributed to Captain James Cook, should rather be credited to Vitus Bering and Aleksei Chirikov 37 years earlier. The logs of the two explorers were long believed lost, largely because Imperial policy decreed that "Asia eastward cannot end", and evidence to the contrary constituted an important state secret. The missing logs have now come to light in the central Navy archives, and it now appears clear that when Bering, aboard the *Svyatoi Petr* (St Peter) reached the North American coast in July 1741 he mapped and named several features later recorded by Cook. These include the St Athengen Ridge (now the Hayday Glacier), Cap St Mary (Cape Suckling), and islands of the Aleutian group which he named respectively for Sts Marcian, Stephen and Abraham.

To each according to his needs . . .

Aleksandr A. Bulgakov, Chairman of the USSR State Committee for Vocational Training recently announced that the text-book situation has greatly improved during the last year. There is now, he said, "a text-book per pupil in almost every [vocational training] establishment".

Up the Pole . . .

According to Aisultan Kalybaev, described by TASS as "a young Kazakh scientist", the terrestrial poles can move only by "tens of kilometres", and hence "the hypothesis that 500,000 years ago the North Pole was in the centre of the Pacific Ocean" must be false. This remarkable deduction, "based on the laws of mechanics" was apparently arrived at during research to provide a mechanical and mathematical basis for predicting earth-tremors in Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile a team from Leningrad and Yakutsk have established that the Siberian permafrost is retreating at the rate of 1 to 2 m "along the vertical line" (sic) per century. The melting is not due so much to climatic change as to an inflow of geothermal energy. Whatever the reason, it must be gratifying to the planners responsible for the development of the Soviet Far North to know that they have the backing of a natural process.

Whose was that baby . . . ?

The problem of the sailor, returning from a tour of duty, to be greeted by

an infant unbelievably forward or backward for his official age must be as old as Jason. Soviet seamen need no longer jump to the obvious conclusion, however; a recent broadcast on the seamen's service of Soviet radio reports the case of little Oleg Slonin, who at 14 months knew the entire Russian alphabet "except the hard and soft signs", and could recite 28 poems. The broadcast explained that "such a phenomenon is not very frequent, but is not now altogether rare. It is explained by the fact that, together with a physical acceleration, an intellectual acceleration takes place. Children nowadays have an early intellectual development."

In dock . . .

A new system for dockworkers, based on the study of "hourly, diurnal, and monthly" biorhythms is under test at the port of Odessa. In the service of productivity and safety, a computer is used to record for each man the "days notable for the maximum decrease of work capacity" and his "highest peak of inattention," according to his "biorhythm-activated schedule". The pattern obtained is used for planning work-schedules: a docker's days off will also be his "off-days".

Na zdorov'e

The Soviet anti-alcoholism campaign was inaugurated in the middle of the last 5-year plan—to the considerable disruption of targets for potable alcohol, which had suddenly to be replaced by beer and soft drinks. Although a considerable amount of the surplus vodka was unloaded onto the USA in return for pepsi-cola, the problem of hard drinking still remains pressing.

In addition to prosecution and/or compulsory committal for treatment, there is a widespread campaign of publicity and psychological pressure, including publication of crime and fatality statistics associated with the imbibing of alcohol, public rebuke of persistent offenders before their work-mates, and loss of privileges and bonuses. The latter sanctions are common Soviet practice in dealing with antisocial or "uncultured" behaviour—nevertheless, in this case there seems something wrong with the underlying psychology. A common factor in social drunkenness is that a family man living in a one-room apartment cannot conveniently invite his friends home, but must meet them in a bar. To relegate such a culprit to the end of the housing list hardly seems helpful.

Vera Rich