

Global communicator

Ed Regis

Odyssey: The Authorised Biography of Arthur C. Clarke. By Neil McAleer. Contemporary Books/Gollancz: 1992. Pp. 430. \$25, £16.99.

How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village. By Arthur C. Clarke. Bantam/Gollancz: 1992. Pp. 289. \$22.50, £15.99.

NEIL McAleer gives us the bad news right away, in his preface to *Odyssey: The Authorised Biography of Arthur C. Clarke*: "This writer never probed too deeply into Clarke's private affairs. I no more wanted to describe intimate details of a living man's private life (assuming the information was available) than he or his contemporaries wanted to read about them. If this is the compromise of an 'authorised' life, so be it."

What this means is that we're not going to hear about Clarke's sex life. Nonetheless, despite this disclaimer, McAleer presents a full account of Clarke's whirlwind, two-week engagement ("Spontaneous combustion", he said; "Electric", she said) and fleeting, six-month marriage to a young American divorcée, as well as his later musings about sexuality in a *Playboy* interview: "I think Freud said something to the effect that we're all polymorphously perverse, you know. And of course we are", Clarke says, adding (when asked) that he has had bisexual experiences: "Who hasn't? Good God! If anyone had ever told me that he hadn't, I'd have told him he was lying."

Arthur Charles Clarke, one gathers, is a man of unequivocal and strong opinions. A farmer's son from Somerset, he developed a taste for exploration early on. "The north coast of Somerset offers vistas of the Atlantic Ocean, which created the illusion of infinite space", McAleer says, "and there was the regular excitement of ships leaving port and beginning voyages to distant lands."

Space, ocean, distant lands — these were the main ingredients of Clarke's life and work. He became a science fiction fan at the age of eleven, when he read an issue of *Amazing Stories* at a

friend's house, and was soon writing science fiction himself, an enterprise that McAleer improbably construes as Clarke's "search for his missing father", who died when the boy was thirteen.

Clarke was an early member of the British Interplanetary Society, and built homemade rockets ("Why get excited about anything that doesn't go straight

ped out because he found it "extremely dull", and took a job instead as assistant editor of *Physics Abstracts*, work that gave him a far better education: "I probably had a bird's-eye view of research in physics unmatched by anyone else on Earth during this period."

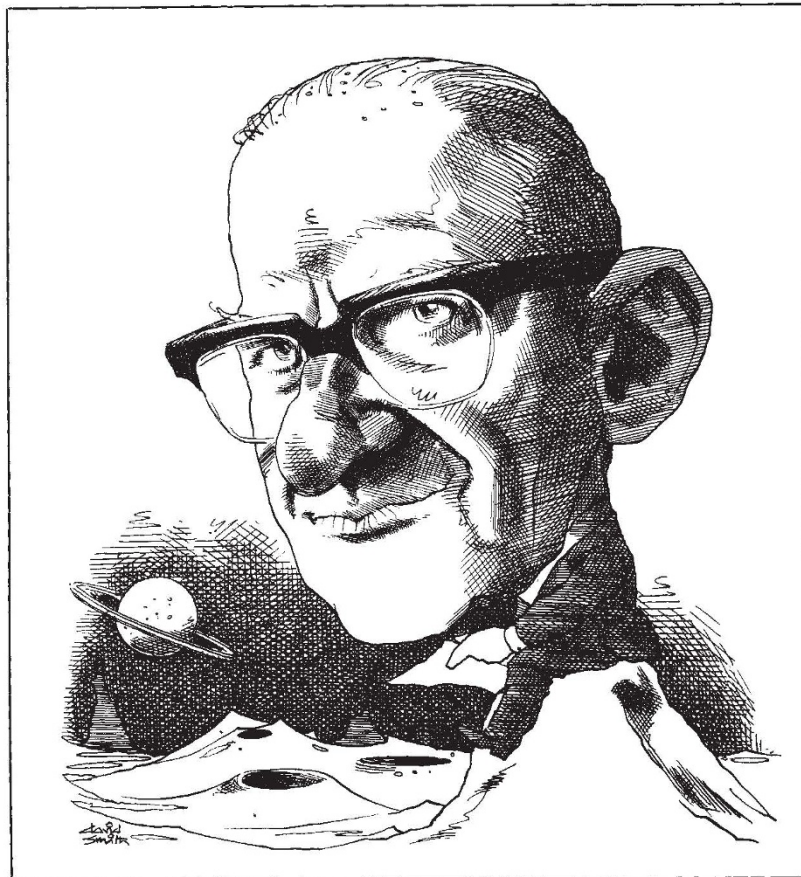
One of his first nonfiction books, *The Exploration of Space*, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in the United States, for which he got a big advance and great reviews, and from that moment on his career was made. Ever since, Clarke has been leaving drab terra firma in one form or another, whether through science fiction, nonfiction writing about space travel, or scuba diving. "Mr Clarke is not worldly; he is other-worldly", says an acquaintance.

Throughout, Clarke emerges as a man of warmth, wit and good cheer, with a vast tolerance for human foibles and ironies. He cried when he watched Apollo II leave for the Moon, but laughed when he noticed what one of the television technicians was doing while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the lunar surface: "He was reading the racing reports", Clarke recalled.

He had tolerance as well for the foibles of his own body. A bump on the head in 1962 led to temporary paralysis, ultimately diagnosed as post-polio syndrome, an ailment from which he never fully recovered. Nevertheless, his innate happiness and optimism never left him, and it was after this episode that J. B. Priestley described him as "the happiest writer I have ever met". Indeed, it is hard to find a picture in this well-illustrated book in which Clarke is not smiling, "a beaming shambles" according to a friend.

Odyssey is an anecdote-filled, compulsively readable story of Clarke's own voyage through the twentieth century and beyond. It tells of his inventions and prophecies and, toughest of all, manages to rekindle the sense of wonder and awe from the early days of spaceflight, when the words "Live from the Moon" were broadcast on television for the first time.

It also tells the story of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and its famously unintelligible ending. He and director Stanley Kubrick couldn't decide how to close the movie,



up?"), telescopes and — "the thing I'm proudest of" — a device that, by means of a carbon microphone, bicycle lamp and photoelectric cell, transmitted the human voice across short distances. Communications technology proved to be Clarke's other main passion: he was, and remains, the world's foremost telecommunications evangelist.

Clarke attended King's College London where he got a Bachelor of Science degree in physics, pure mathematics and applied mathematics, and then enrolled at University College London for a post-graduate degree in astronomy. He drop-

but finally Clarke came up with an ending. There is no indication that either of them ever knew what it meant, or cared very much one way or the other. "I don't like to talk about *2001*", said Kubrick; "I don't pretend we have the answers", said Clarke.

Clarke later wrote a succession of sequels and other 'last books', and one might suppose that *How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village* is one of them. But in truth it's mostly an early book repackaged. Although it is not mentioned anywhere on the dust jacket, *How the World Was One* is largely a revision of Clarke's book *Voice Across the Sea*, first published in 1958. The rest consists of addresses given on various occasions, three previously published short stories and, for good measure, the two scientific papers in which Clarke proposed the idea of communications satellites. Not that there is anything wrong with an author's recycling of old materials — just so long as the prospective buyer is informed of the fact beforehand. Notwithstanding that there are fewer than 50 pages of new material here, Clarke has described *How the World Was One* as "My longest book It may also be one of my most important, since it's covering the whole history of telecommunications, from the invention of the telegraph, up to the fibre optic revolution."

The whole history is indeed there, and the first part of the story, dealing with the laying of the transatlantic cable, makes exciting reading. "Wiring the abyss", as Clarke puts it, was one of those impractical utopian fantasies that everyone knew could never be realized. Often enough it seemed that way even to the participants, chief among whom were Cyrus W. Field, who financed the project, and Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who built the ship, the *Great Eastern*, that laid the cable. Much of their tale is cliffhanging stuff. The first attempt to lay the cable, in 1857, met with failure when the cable snapped and was lost after 335 miles had been paid out. The second try, in 1858, was successful for a three-week period, after which the line went dead. The third try, in 1865, went well until the cable parted in the middle of the ocean and dropped to the bottom. Incredibly, the broken end was snagged by a grappling hook and was almost retrieved, but at the surface the rope broke and the whole mess slipped back to the ocean floor, two miles below, where it was not found again for several months.

The rest of the book, unfortunately, is not nearly so compelling, describing how a gaggle of communications satellites were lofted into orbit on a series of anonymous rockets. Instantaneous global communication is now something

that we take so much for granted that the story has lost its lustre.

One may wonder, then, why Clarke is still so entranced by it. His answer, made clear in the text time and again, is his belief that instantaneous global communication is the royal road to peace among men. Satellite talk will make the world 'One', turning us into the Big Global Village, the Planetary Happy Family. This, though, is a delusion. Whereas Clarke's hope is that communications satellites will promote "understanding", the fact is that they will promote whatever messages are bounced off them, and it is just as easy to send orders to assassinate a leader or wipe out a village as it is to bring tidings of universal peace and brotherhood. Nowhere was this better illustrated than during the Gulf War, instantaneous live coverage of which Clarke portrays as showing us "the true horrors of modern

mechanised war". On the contrary, what it showed us were absolutely thrilling images of 'smart' bombs homing in on and destroying office buildings — images that were in large part responsible for making this one of the most popular wars in American history.

As for the idea that One World means unity and peace, sufficient disproof is offered by the existence of civil wars, which have been some of the bloodiest ever fought on the planet. Anyone who thinks that One World (or One Nation or One Anything Else) will bring us peace and harmony should spend a few silent moments contemplating the gravestones at Gettysburg Battlefield, where during the American Civil War some 51,000 casualties were sustained in three days. □

Ed Regis is at Western Maryland College, Westminster, Maryland 21157, USA.

Physicist in the shadows

Hermann Bondi

The Recollections of Eugene Wigner as Told to Andrew Szanton. By Andrew Szanton. *Plenum: 1992. Pp. 335. \$24.50.*

HAVING as its subject a man who is not only an outstanding physicist, but also most unusual and indeed idiosyncratic in his attitudes and outlook, this volume should have been superb and gripping, yet in fact it does not generally rise to these heights. Perhaps Andrew Szanton was too self-effacing and too little of the probing professional interviewer who would have coaxed more out of his subject. But then, if he had taken such an approach, Wigner might not have talked to him at all. We should therefore all be grateful to Szanton, because this book is likely to remain the most we will ever know about a fascinating person. It deserves to be read by all with even a modest interest in the personalities who shaped modern quantum physics.

Despite my little gripe, much of the book is absorbing. The early chapters about Wigner's home life and upbringing are thorough and accordingly riveting. Especially moving are his feelings about his school, his teachers in general and his mathematics teacher in particular. Nobody who reads these chapters can have any doubts that an outstanding teacher can deeply influence and foster the abilities of able pupils who without such a stimulus might never rise to great heights of achievement, whatever their innate abilities. How much talent is undiscovered, unstimulated, unfostered in our world? This is a worrying, sobering

thought generated by these chapters.

The life of a Jewish professional family in Hungary in those far-off days comes over well, but I was perturbed by confusion in the text about what was Austro-Hungarian and what was Hungarian in the days of the Dual Monarchy, a matter that is likely to disturb other readers less than me. But the brief paragraph on how such a civilized and humane family could come to terms with living under the blood-stained Horthy regime is superb. I recall only too well how dreadful it looked from Austria.

Although the description of the chain of circumstances that made Wigner a physicist against the wishes of his father makes excellent reading, the account of the rest of these years of apprenticeship is too brief and too scrappy. One hungers for more about the giants of the time and their interaction, but one is given only brief vignettes. Illuminating flashes occur and are a delight. To hear that Dirac's work was found difficult because he wrote in English gives one a healthy shock. For few recall now how dominant German was as the language of science for a period that Hitler brought to a sharp end. It would make a good study to analyse how the language of Newton, Faraday and Maxwell came to be quite secondary to German for some decades before it acquired its present dominance. But again, although there are splendid shafts of light describing Dirac's unique attitude to conversation, one would have hoped to hear more about an extraordinary man who was not only Wigner's friend and colleague but also his brother-in-law. But