OBITUARY

Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008)

Visionary science-fiction author.

Lucky prophets become vindicated sages in their own lifetimes. Arthur C. Clarke, who died on 19 March, was the luckiest of men, becoming the most famous of science-fiction writers by writing of wonder when many were writing of despair.

Clarke was not unique in his optimism. He stood in a tradition of English futurists who have used fiction, non-fiction or both to paint their visions: H. G. Wells, J. D. Bernal, Olaf Stapledon, Freeman Dyson. They held that only science makes reliable prediction possible and the prospects for human society intelligible. Clarke believed that general laws for scientific extrapolation exist in a way that they do not in politics or economics. One such law was that “when a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.”

Clarke, the eldest of four children, was born on 16 December 1917 to farming parents in Minehead in the south-west English county of Somerset. Following service as a radar instructor and technician with the Royal Air Force in the Second World War, he honed his scientific acumen working as an editor for the academic journal *Physics Abstracts*, while earning a first-class degree in mathematics and physics at King's College London.

Humanity's leap into space confirmed Clarke's role as a seer of the possible. In the immediate postwar years, he was twice chairman of the British Interplanetary Society, one of the earliest organizations dedicated to promoting space exploration. Clarke stayed true to the society's motto, “From imagination to reality”, when, in 1945, he proposed the use of satellites in geostationary orbits as communications relays. Clarke never patented the idea, but promoted it ceaselessly. Geostationary satellites have since revolutionized communications and weather forecasting, although Clarke's own dry assessment was that “my early disclosure may have advanced the cause of space communications by about fifteen minutes”.

In *Profiles of the Future* (1962), his elegantly phrased “Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible”, Clarke balanced his scientific knowledge with his creativity to explore more comprehensively what might be achieved within the bounds of scientific laws. Books on futurology date notoriously fast, yet this one has not, perhaps because Clarke was

unafraid of being adventurous. And many of his predictions have come to pass: he foresaw that mobile telecommunications would mean that no one could fully escape society, even at sea or on a mountain top. He went on to describe huge electronic libraries, the breakdown of censorship and high-definition electronic screens.

Clarke favoured wise hopefulness, but saw dangers as well. His 1946 essay “The rocket and the future of warfare” anticipated the essentials of nuclear war waged with intercontinental ballistic missiles, and called for measures to avoid it. At the time, many were concerned at the prospect of nuclear conflict (the United States proposed international regulation of nuclear weapons, although the Soviet Union refused to be drawn), but few had foreseen the fateful mating of the bomb and the rocket.

Whether writing fiction or non-fiction, Clarke achieved a unique rendering of the aesthetic that combines the signal qualities of scientific endeavour: intelligence, tenacity and curiosity. His fiction has few villains, neglecting conflict and the broad spectrum of emotion. For Clarke's purposes these were pointless, even regrettable, diversions. A cool, analytical tone, springing from a pure, dispassionate statement of facts and relationships, pervades his writing. But the result is never cold, and indeed is often aphoristically witty. On religion: “I don't believe in God, but I'm very interested in her.” Of space and politics: “There is hopeful symbolism in the fact that flags do not wave in a vacuum.” On progress: “New ideas pass through three periods: it can't be done; it probably can be done, but it's not worth doing; I knew it was a good idea all along.”

Undoubtedly Clarke's greatest success was his co-authorship, with Stanley Kubrick, of

the film and novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film's technological futurism, grounded in hard science, together with its iconic, mystical opening, made it a cultural benchmark and the embodiment of Clarke's assertion that “whatever other perils humanity may face in the future that lies ahead, boredom is not among them”. Kubrick observed of Clarke: “He has the kind of mind of which the world can never have enough, an array of imagination, intelligence, knowledge and a quirkish curiosity, which often uncovers more than the first three qualities.” Clarke later relished the

story of an immigration official threatening to bar his entry to the United States until he had explained the ending of *2001*.

Clarke moved permanently to Sri Lanka in 1956 to pursue one of his lifelong passions, scuba diving. He continued to dive even after he was partially confined to a wheelchair in the 1980s: he felt, he said, “perfectly operational underwater”. He founded Asia's first diving shop there, and restored the business after the 2004 tsunami. Sri Lanka gave Clarke creative isolation, but he was an early citizen of the global village, travelling and later keeping in touch with friends, colleagues and fans through daily e-mails. Surrounded by tropical cuisine, he never gave up his taste for a steady diet of English food, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding being a perennial favourite.

His home in Sri Lanka contained a room he called the Ego Chamber. Amid the many awards stored there is a tribute from Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong that epitomizes Clarke's peculiar contribution to science: “To Arthur — who visualized the nuances of lunar flying before I experienced them.”

Up to the last, Clarke viewed humanity's ability to further expand its realm of experience, and so survive and prosper, with signature wry confidence. As he told a convention of the European Mars Society in 2002 via video-link from Sri Lanka: “Whether we become a multi-planet species with unlimited horizons, or are for ever confined to Earth, will be decided in the twenty-first century amid the vast plains, rugged canyons and lofty mountains of Mars.”

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