

Once upon a future time...

Alan Brack

meets a leading science fiction author

When I rang the bell of Douglas R. Mason's house in Wallasey I wondered what the effect would be. Would the door silently open of its own accord? Would a disembodied metallic voice invite me in? Would a robot glide into the hallway to take my hat and coat? Would the furniture be all glass and steel?

And what about Douglas Mason himself? Long hair down to his waist? Ear-rings and a gold chain round his neck, and dressed in a luminescent catsuit and sandals?

After all, here was one of the country's leading science fiction writers, a prolific author of futuristic novels set in times which are beyond the imagination of most of us. Two hundred and more years hence when inter-planetary journeys are as commonplace as flying to the Isle of Man.

My conjectures were cut short when the door was opened by a kindly, sober-suited man who could have been the prototype school headmaster and I was ushered into the sort of comfortable house one would expect a headmaster to have.

It was no coincidence, really. Douglas Mason is retiring at Christmas from the post he has held for the last twelve years as headmaster of St. George's Primary School in Wallasey, following on twelve years as headmaster of Somerville Primary School there. His writing is a spare-time occupation and as he has written over forty books in the last fifteen years since he started, the obvious conclusion would seem to be that he must have had a lot of time on his hands. But, no. The fact is that outside his headmaster's job he was, among other things, very active in local education politics, representing Wallasey teachers on the Wallasey (and subsequently Wirral) Education Committees from 1960 to 1975, and is a family man with four children.

Born in Hawarden in 1918, Douglas Mason attended the City and County School, Chester, and after war service as a Lieutenant in the Royal Signals, went to university and graduated in English Literature and experimental psychology.

It was, he says candidly, the needs of his four growing children which sparked off his literary career. "In 1963 I began to wonder what I could do which might augment my income a little and since I had an English degree and could turn a phrase, I thought I'd try to write something."

Why he chose to write science fiction is something he cannot readily explain. He had never been a sci-fi fan. Apart from H. G. Wells, the only science fiction book he had ever read was John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*. But an idea came to him and by May 1965 he had completed a sixty-thousand-word book which he called *Interstellar Two Five*. It was published by Dobson in hardback two years later, by the Readers Union in 1967, and Corgi put it out in paperback in 1968. It was published under his pseudonym, John Rankine (Rankine being his second name and the maiden name of his mother), and his output since then has been almost equally divided between his pen-name and his own name.

Since then the books have flowed at an average rate of three a year and his latest, *The Vort Programme* (by John Rankine, published by Dobson) and *Mission to Pictolus R* (under his own name, by Robert Hale) are due out any time now.

This all adds up to an impressive two and a half million words and, allowing for a natural ability, of course, the secret of his success is twofold; he is extremely methodical and he follows a maxim of Anthony Trollope's - "Let no day pass without a line being written". And following this injunction he writes every night from seven o'clock in the evening until nine.

His method is to chart the story-line and wordage on a large sheet of paper which he pins on a notice-board above his study desk, together with various aids to the imagination and authenticity. There was a sketch plan of Festiniog power station culled from a Sunday colour supplement, a map of the world, Speed's map of Wirral in 1611, various pictures of rockets and space equipment - and a photograph of an attractive young girl.

"She is the heroine of my current book", he explained. "I always like to keep a picture like that in front of me. In that way I don't give her long dark hair in one chapter and make her a page-boy blonde in another."

The hero? "That's always me! I don't write in the first person but I am always totally involved nevertheless. In fact, if I am not moved by my own plot then nobody else will be."

The ancient map of Wirral points to yet another ploy of his. Wirral and Wirral place-names figure prominently in many of his books. He frequently refers to "Wirral City", imagining the peninsula when it is

completely urbanised with a population of some four million. This is a horrifying thought for those of us who know it now, but for his readers it is just a fictitious place and it is easier writing about somewhere he knows well. Similarly, he uses Cheshire, Liverpool, and Lake District settings, too.

His stories are allegories, usually inspired by a single underlying thought beginning "what would happen if..." which he then pursues to a reasonably logical conclusion. He finds that his experimental psychology studies come in useful though he has only once made use of his teaching experience. This was in his book, *Binary Z*, which is set in an English comprehensive school and he was able to slip into the text some of his own thoughts on comprehensive education.

Unlike a lot of science fiction writers Douglas Mason does not shy from including love scenes in his books; but nothing salacious, the emphasis is always on the love, never on the sex.

He writes in longhand in exercise books which he buys by the

hundred. His handwriting naturally gives him almost exactly 110 words to the page so that each completed exercise book is a chapter. He seldom finds the need to amend to any great extent so that eight or nine exercise books can be handed straight to a typist for typing.

Like most writers in this genre Douglas Mason always keeps in mind possible publication in the United States where sci-fi fans tend to be thicker on the ground than they are in this country, and a number of his books have already been published there by the well-known firms of Putnam and Doubleday. Others have been translated into German, Swedish and Dutch.

Now that he is about to retire it seems reasonable to suppose that he will have little difficulty in keeping faith with Trollope's maxim to write every day but he realizes that it could involve just as much, even more, self-discipline. The temptations of having whole days to spend as one chooses are so great that other distracting activities could easily take over... and he has already started oil painting.

