Head whose homew is among the stars

by Ian Hamilton Fazey

IN HIS headmaster's study at St. George's Junior School, Wallasey, Douglas R. Mason, alias John Rankine, a leading science fiction author, pulled on his pipe and turned the wisdom of his 51 years to bewailing the Generation Gap.

"The breakdown of maturity as an ideal is worrying me now," he said. "In my youth, maturity was something you aspired to. The current generation doesn't want that now."

He is working on a novel which will carry that thought to its logical conclusion. In it, centuries from now, man's life-span will be contained at one score and ten—with compulsory extermination of the over-thirties to preserve the hedonistic fabric of society.

Hero of the piece, Roger Diment, escapes his doom to turn the human race back to better ways. He does so with the aid of a resistance group hiding among the tableaux of man-like robots in Liverpool musuem, where the robots act out scenes of history.

Of such allegory is much modern science fiction—and particularly Mr. Mason's — made.

The 55,000 words it will take to set it down in book form will earn him £100 for hard-back publication in Britain. If and when it goes into paperback, he will get another £300.

If the paperback is published in America, 2,000 dollars will be paid for it. And if it is translated, he will get yet another fee—the German translation of "From Carthage Then I Came," which was re-titled "Stadt unter Glas," brought in £150.

Thus a single idea, plus a couple of hours a day writing it up, can bring in up to £1,300 over several years. This, of course, only happens when you are established and well-known.

Getting established has taken Mr. Mason seven years and now his star is rising in the S.F. world. "This year it's coming to life," he said. Ironically, his best, and most-praised book, "Binary Z," will probably earn him little.

This is because it centres on an English comprehensive school where a strange, alien and dangerous ovoid is found during building work. Mr. Mason makes some telling comments on comprehensive education and it is because of this—the subject is regarded as too esoteric—that it will probably not be published in the lucrative American market.

Douglas R. Mason was born in Hawarden, Flintshire, in 1918. After leaving Chester City Grammar School in 1937, his course at Manchester University was interrupted by war service in Africa. He finally graduated, in English literature and experimental psychology, in 1948.

Since then he has been a teacher and for the last sixteen years he has been a headmaster. He started writing late in life. "In 1963, I was looking around for something to do that would be financially rewarding," he said.

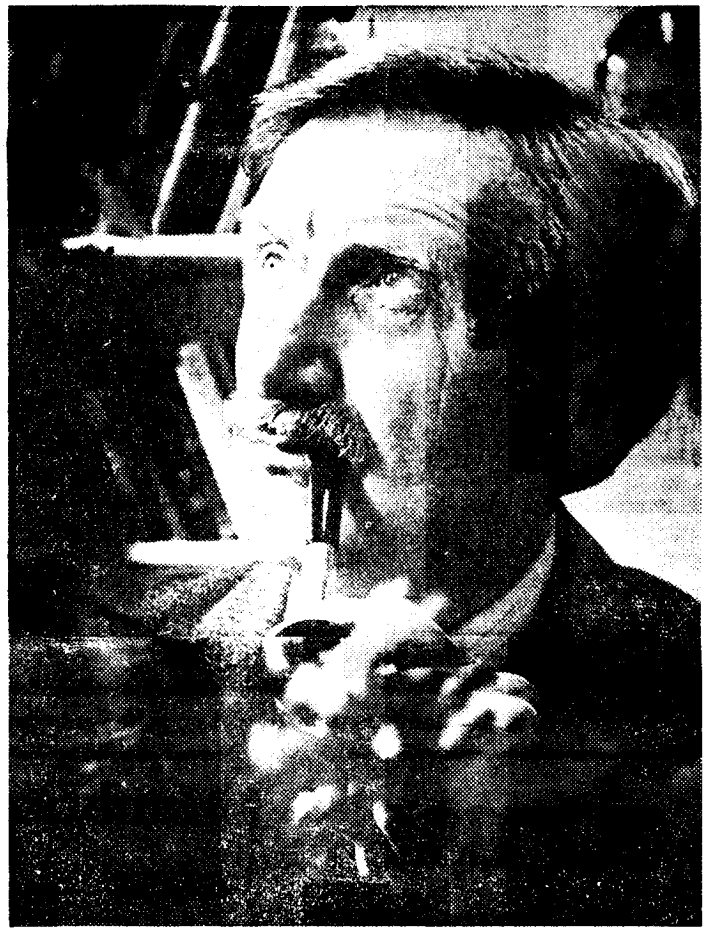
His decision to write science fiction was strange since he was not an S.F. fan. Except for Wyndham's "Day of the Tryffids," he had never read any. Even now, he reads little of other S.F. men's work: "I'm just too busy writing."

Rankine is Mr. Mason's middle name and his mother's maiden one. All his British publications used to be under his pen-name of John Rankine but now it is common for books to be on sale under both his names simultaneously.

Last year, for instance, "Binary Z" (by John Rankine) and "The Janus Syndrome" (by Douglas R. Mason) were published within weeks of each other, the former by Dennis Dobson and the latter by Robert Hale.

Dobson have, in fact, published six Rankine novels. Hale have published five under the Mason by-line. All of these were hardbacks and his other seven novels have all been published by American firms as paperbacks.

His way into novel-writing was via the S.F. short story £20 to £25 a time for British publication plus further fees for republication in other S.F. magazines or anthologies). He wrote a story and sent it to Ted Carnell, agent and S.F. editor. It went straight into the first of the "New Writings in S.F." series which connossieurs know well.



Mr Douglas Mason—John Rankine, the schoolmaster who has become one of our leading science fiction writers.

Proabably his best short story was published in "New Writings," a little while later. "The Man Who Missed The Ferry" took place on Merseyside and the man concerned, rather than wait for the next boat, walks across the Mersey from Seacombe to the Pier Head.

Mr. Mason was not suggesting that such a thing was possible but rather that mind can triumph over matter, a theme he explored further in his last published book, "The Weisman Experiment," in which mind eventually triumphs over machine.

But his own mind has now slipped out of gear as far as short story writing is concerned. He has settled into the genre of the science fiction novel which he scribbles away at "from about seven o'clock every evening, after I've had my tea, until the news comes on at ten to nine."

He works in longhand using rough exercise books—"they're just the right size to get a chapter in each one." He gets it all typed up afterwards. Occasionally, he gets stuck and turns to Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies for inspiration because "they're so full of nostalgia."

He is fond of Eliot, Jane Austen and Simone de Beauvouir, but will draw on practically anything for an

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idea. From Jacquetta Hawkes, for instance, he has culled the word "mamihlapinatapai," a Fuegan native holophrase meaning "the state of two people each looking at the other and hoping the other will do something that both would like but are unwilling to initiate."

"I'll go to any lengths to get that one in," Mr. Mason says.

Unlike many S.F. writers, he always finds room for love scenes between his characters, with the emphasis on the love, rather than on the sex. He is, he says, optimistic that humankind will not destroy itself with its technology, a view which is reflected in the way that so many of his heroes pull the world back from the brink of doom time and time again.

His optimism, he says, is born out of his humanitarian leanings, which are themselves born out of his Methodist beliefs. He draws directly on Biblical times for only one thing though — the names of some of his alien characters (such as Gimil-Sin, Unzi, Urur and Puzur-Sahan), which he takes from the table of Babylonian kings.

Science fiction, however, is only one of the public sides of Douglas R. Mason. He is active in teacher politics and has been teachers' representative on Wallasey Education Committee for ten years.

He is a member of the child welfare sub-committee and his wife, Norma, does welfare work too. She, he says, does not think much of S.F. though their two eldest children, Keith, aged 22, an art student, and Patricia, aged 18, a psychology student, are more receptive. The two youngest children, John, aged 13, and Elaine, aged 8, are too young to understand it yet.

Mr. Mason's are always good tales, well-told. It is the sort of S.F. that challenges the Western for light reading. And it is without the Joycean confusion of modern writers like J. G. Ballard. S.F. addicts everywhere will be glad of his undisputed emergence on the S.F. scene.