

The Key to Canvention 8

A Sort of Report on KeyCon 5 only 23 years too late

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The year was 1899... er, 1988. It was the second time a *CUFF* delegate had been sent to the *Convention*, and the first since the one-shot trip Mike Hall made from Edmonton to Toronto for *Torque 1*, eight years earlier. It had not been an honest race, mind you. That would come in later years. I ran unopposed with the encouragement of Fran Skene, who was one of the movers behind *CUFF*'s resurrection. You might say it's all *her* fault.

Why am I writing this 23 years after the event? The fact is, I thought I *had* written a trip report years ago. But, a dedicated search of relevant fanzines has turned up nothing. The problem was that there *were* no relevant fanzines! *New Canadian Fandom* was too early for *CUFF*, and so was *DNQ*. *The Maple Leaf Rag*'s very last issue makes mention that *CUFF* will be re-launched, but there is no other news. I found no trace of the trip report in *Torus* or the few issues of *Neology* I kept. The conclusion I come to is that I never wrote any such report. What a let-down!

But, then, perhaps I had reasons to keep my silence. It may be no accident that I remember rather little of the trip to Winnipeg as the *CUFF* delegate. Browsing through the PR and program book brings back a few dim memories of things it might well have been best to forget. While I continued to search old fanzines, I also began to jot things down.

To begin on a positive note, I have to say that I liked what I saw of Winnipeg. Spotting the Red and Assiniboine Rivers from the air, I never saw them again, unfortunately, but the downtown was still mainly very picturesque architecture from 1900's to 1920's. It was a little down-at-heels, in a comfortable way, and I would like to have seen more. Since then, most of it has likely been torn down. I would imagine that those old wedding cake buildings and late Victorian decorations have been replaced by modern glass and steel high-rises with as much personality as a supermarket. The photos I've been sent by a friend who moved to Winterpeg haven't been reassuring.

Looking at the old *KeyCon 5* program book again, I find a number of oddities. For one thing, the con seemed to be hosted by every fan group in the city, not just the SF fandom. A few years earlier, I had close ties with the boys of *Decadent Winnipeg Fandom*. Before they drifted out of fandom and out of my ken, they warned me that the newer generation was multi-media and very self-sufficient. They had not networked widely in what we then called mainstream fandom, nor showed much interest in it. The con's program book lists a half dozen organizations who apparently all contributed to the effort – the local SF group, the Trekkies, the SCA, the Whovians, gamers and all. The mixture of interests is shown by *KeyCon 5*'s program schedule. On Saturday, for instance, there is:

- An SCA tourney
- An Elfquest "howl"
- A fanzine panel
- A costuming event
- A panel on story telling
- An autograph session
- A talk on the L5 Society

A debate on whether Star Trek The Next Generation is worthy to carry on from TOS
A comparison of fashion accessories from Dr. Who and Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
A Masquerade
A filk concert
The business meeting for the *Convention*.

Other than the cover of the program book and progress report, there is no other mention of the *Convention*. That, in itself, is a little odd, don't you think?

If that humbles us a little, consider this. *CUFF* isn't mentioned at all, except once, obliquely. On Sunday, 2 p.m.:

“CUFF TURKEY AUCTION – We've all read a real turkey. I mean a story that you would pay to have stopped. Fran Skene presents another great fannish tradition in order to raise money for the Canadian Unity Fan Fund. You are encouraged to bring your 'favourite' pieces of science fiction. The audience is encouraged to help in any way (included acting out the passages).”
Although naming *CUFF* in the title, it is basically a Fran Skene program item in which she does what she had been doing at other conventions for some time. This reading must have been identical to any number of other readings, except that the audience paid to have their choice of turkey meat served up by Fran.

The turkey auction was probably the part of *KeyCon* that I remember most vividly. Fran wasn't the only reader. There were only one or two, but after all this time their identities are a mystery. I had assumed that the connection to *CUFF* meant that I was supposed to be on the panel, so I took a place at the front as well. And I sat there doing nothing while the others read from John Norman's *Gor* books. Otherwise, I might as well have been at the Winnipeg zoo looking for *Winnie the Pooh's* plaque. I think I overheard Fran say later that she didn't know what I was doing there, but it might have been someone else. I felt like a prize chump, though. And that was the highlight of the con for me.

I did sit on two panels. They were predictably panels on fanart and fanzines. I have no complaint about them. In fact, I don't remember one single detail about either. They might have been cancelled for lack of attendance, for all that I recall.

In fact, I don't remember one single bloody thing at all about the entire con. There's a dim ghost of a memory about talking to someone on the concom about my role as *CUFF* delegate, and maybe there was a curtain behind us, but that might be nothing more than a figment of my imagination. Twenty-three years has a way of jumbling up associations in your mind that never made much of an impression in the first place.

For the record, *KeyCon 5* was held over May 20th to 21st, 1988, at the *Holiday Inn Downtown*. The Guest of Honour was Gene Wolfe. They had an Honoured Guest as well, but whether Charles de Lint ranked the GoH, or they were equals, I don't know. Fran Skene was Fan Guest of Honour, and Kevin Davies was Artist Guest. If anyone cares, it cost \$25 for membership at the door. If you got yours early, you would have been set back a mere \$16! The con had a 30 page program book with the usual forgettable crap in it – ads made up about a quarter of it. The rest was schedule information and short bios on the guests. Phil Jennings, Dave Duncan and Judith Merrill were also featured. Does anyone know who Phil Jennings is? I don't. Apparently he wrote SF in 1988. They come; they go; but the great live on. The not-so-great have to be dug up like this in old program books.

Ironically, I see that the artist guest of honour at *KeyCon 5* was Kevin Davies. Kevin was another Toronto fanartist who I knew, at the time, just well enough to use his first name. He had sprung out of a high school media club three or four years earlier, and was as long on ambition as he was on energy. His club had run a media con before anyone in it had even heard of *OSFiC*. A short time later, Kevin was involved in publishing a slick-looking media magazine called *Miriad*. Although he seemed more comfortable with the comics style of drawing, he was adaptable and contributed fanart to a number of local zines. When *Bakka*'s old store sign finally fell off the building, Kevin was asked to paint the replacement. Personable, good looking, loaded with talent, hardworking, he was already fan GoH at conventions.

Meanwhile, after 15 years in fandom, I had only the rather inconspicuous role of *CUFF* delegate to play. But, why is that *ironic*? Kevin moved on rather soon after that. Although he still made annual appearances at the double birthday bash put on by Mike Glicksohn and Mike Harper, Kevin was doing his best to get ahead in the gaming business. I saw him at Glicksohn's funeral earlier this year... but he'd left fandom behind long ago. Twenty-three years later, though, and *I'm* still here... Of course, I'm not saying which course was the better. I'm just nursing an understandable grudge against a Johnny-come-lately.

Another irony of sorts is that *The Maple Leaf Rag* was just about the last of its kind. After Garth Spencer gave up the title, Mike Skeet continued a slicker, more pro oriented version with the abbreviated title *MLR*. I don't recall how many issues the *MLR* lasted, but I don't believe it was many. Keith Soltys published his 8th and last issue of *Torus* in 1989, and that was just about the end of the Age of Publishing Giants in Canada. The two decades since have been dominated by Dale Spiers and *Opuntia* – a decent zine but somewhat off-the-map of the rest of fanzine fandom – and on the West Coast, Graeme Cameron and Garth Spencer. Both the West Coast guys seem determined to *educate* fandom rather than *entertain* it, and their zines tend to show it.

Since we're on the subject, the remainder of traditional fanzine fandom in Canada has amounted to me, Lloyd Penney, Murray Moore and Colin Hinz. I mention Colin because of his support of the dying art of mimeography and because he published an issue of *Novoid* last year. Of late, Felicity Walker has been doing a fine job editing *BCSFazine* as well. Altogether, that's less fanzine fandom than you would find in Seattle. Everybody else is running around organizing conventions as though it were a sustainable growth industry. Perhaps it is.

At present, it's clear that what attracts most fans to fandom are conventions. This is a sea-change that's been going on for as long as I've been *in* fandom. While once cons brought together fans who were science fiction hobbyists, today running a con *is* the hobby for most fans. Well and good for those who can afford the travel, or enjoy committee meetings and exercising miniscule amounts of authority. It does no-one any harm that I know of, and if it gives them pleasure, so be it.

So much about SF and the society we live in has changed since the 1970s, when I became involved in fandom, that I don't think fandom is at all what it was... nor can it ever be that again. Imitating the print medium is not particularly cool. No doubt it will attract a few oddballs, but most young people are clamoring to get on the internet so they can have their own web pages, write blogs, join *FaceBook* or *Twitter*, film themselves while screwing around, to shop on eBay or Amazon and play games. That's an altogether different sort of cool. Fandom today is not the exclusive property of introverts, misfits and loners who were once clued-in to a nonconformist literature. If you want a younger generation to join fandom, fandom will have to be clued-in to the internet

instead. Interactive media are different in important ways than the print media, though. What's in print is indelible. What's on the internet is a constantly changing flow of information, opinion and BS with no filters or ulterior purpose. As fandom moves online we can only be certain of one thing – it'll be different.

Not my cup of tea, though.

There, in a thumbnail, we have one of *CUFF*'s main problems. Of the Publishing Giants still practicing in this country, at least three of them have already been *CUFF* winners!

The fall-back position seems to be to award Auroras and select *CUFF* delegates on the basis of their recipe for hot, chili-chutney pierogi or the ability to juggle live chickens in front of a webcam while dressed as a Klingon. How in the world do you compare such things?

Returning reluctantly to topic, I have no memories of Kevin Davies at *KeyCon*. He may have been busy with program, and locked behind closed doors with his guitar much of the rest of the time. The only person I have any clear memory of knowing at the con was Fran Skene, and I may have made rather a pest of myself by hanging around. I went along with her party the only night I can recall going out of the con hotel for a meal. Someone enthused about a certain restaurant they knew and it was agreed on through the mysterious process of "consensus." From the start, I had my doubts. While it might have been an exaggeration to call the place a "gourmet" hot dog emporium, hot dogs were indeed the restaurant's specialty. It served them boiled or grilled, split or whole, on whole wheat or white, sesame seed, onion or plain and with any condiment you asked for. For that matter, I can't say I had any complaints about the food.. The dogs were tasty and filling. What I kept to myself, though, was that they weren't any better than a hot dog from one of the licensed wienie wagons on Queen street downtown, back in Toronto, where they only cost a buck-ana-half. I suppose if your idea of a treat is a *pierogi* – the absolutely blandest food in the firmament –then a hot dog must indeed seem like Food of the Gods. I wonder how many native Winterpegiens went home with a belly ache from all the "spicy" food that night?

While speaking of pierogi, I had never eaten one before *KeyCon*. I suppose you *could* call it good luck that almost every other room party served them. There were two kinds, as I recall. Those with a pasty white filling, and those with a different pasty white filling. I was told that one was a very mild, white cheese and the other boiled potato. They were as bland as you'd expect a lump of dough with boiled potato or process cheese would be. Since that day, I've never understood the pride with which Winnipegians rave about their pierogi. It isn't so much the essential idea that's wrong. Wrap some meat or shrimp in dough, and it might have a chance. Spice it up and wok fry it for flavour. Put wasabi or soy on it. Blintzes, raviolis, Chinese pot stickers, Momo or Japanese gyoza, samosa, roti – anything would be better than bland pasty dough and a bland pasty filling! Of course, its possible that the Winnipeg version is not the real deal, and the same dish in the Ukraine would put a rijsttafel or dim sum to shame. The only way I know to settle the issue, though, is to run a fan fund to Kiev and have the winner write a trip report...

Of course, none of this has much to do with *KeyCon* or Winnipeg fandom today. Twenty-three years is a considerable span of time to look back over and for the world to have moved on. Indeed, I've moved on a considerable amount myself. Yet, strangely, while I've been the Fan *GoH* at the *Worldcon* in Montreal, I've never attended another Canadian convention west of Pearson International Airport. Nor am I likely to run for *CUFF* again. Once was enough, thanks!

Yet, it would be a mistake to connect my disappointing experiences at *KeyCon 5* to the general

level of skepticism I have toward the fundamental concepts of the *Convention*, *CUFF* and the *Auroras*. I view my attitude as “realism.” Perhaps, ideally, there *should* be a Canadian fandom, but the reality is that we are part of American fandom. If it were only because of the proximity of larger, better organized groups of fans on the American side of the border, that would be enough in itself to ensure we were drawn into their orbit. But, we simply don’t differ from American fans in any significant way. The British and Australians have their own dialect of English – along with pubs and barbies, their own brands, their own TV programs, their own films, their own way of doing everything.

What have Canadians fans to show? *Molson’s* instead of *Coors*? Otherwise we tend to eat at the same McDonalds, watch the same episodes of *House*, drive the same GMs, read the same Steven King novels and attend the same *Worldcons* in Chicago, LA or Reno. This isn’t to say we aren’t different at all. I don’t carry a gun or worry that my next trip to the doctor bankrupting me. I flunked French in high school rather than Spanish. But in the little things that make us fans (rather than Canadians) we’re not different enough from our American cousins to make any sort of fuss over it.

It was inevitable that I’d run out of memories about KeyCon, and I have. Nor can I think of anything to add even as marginally relevant as my digressions on pierogi or the changing nature of fandom. Clearly, it’s time to come to an end.

And I still haven’t found my damned KeyCon report! Then again... maybe this is it. What’s a 23 years wait, after all?

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