

LIGHT AND LES CROUTCH

By Harry Warner Jr.

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Note: Years ago Harry gave me permission to use his fanhistory writings any way I saw fit. His article on Leslie A. Croutch is so important I now take him up on his permission. I miss Harry. Wish he were still among us. – The Graeme

I keep thinking about Les Croutch. His death more than a year ago might still be unknown in fandom, if Bill Danner hadn't belatedly answered a letter and found the answer back in his mailbox, with DECEASED stamped on the envelope. There's nobody active in Canadian Fandom today who was part of the old Croutch gang. Les is rarely mentioned when people reminisce about old days in fandom. Nobody ever reprints from the fanzines he published over a span of two decades. It would be hypocritical to eulogize him as the great forgotten fan genius of the past, because he wasn't up there with Laney, Hoffman and Willis as a writer or personality or innovator. But he was at the very top of the ranks of the important fans who never quite reached the highest level of creativity. I dug out a lot of copies of his fanzines to make sure I hadn't remembered them wrongly. They turned out to conform to their mental image, but when I inspected details in these ancient pages, I decided that today's neglect of Les Croutch is even less justified than I'd originally assumed.

Les was one of two famous people who lived in Parry Sound, Ontario – the hockey star, Bobby Orr, is the other one. I never met either of them. But what I have read of Bobby, and the interviews I've caught with him on television, cause me to suspect that his personality isn't too different from the Les Croutch that emerged from letters and fanzines. Casting about for a modern equivalent for Les, solely on the basis of the written word impression, I thought about Dick Schultz. Their fanzines resembled each other to some extent, there is a common informality of style that sometimes seems to move faster as you read it, as if your eyes can barely keep up with the rush of words as they tumble onto the stencils, and there's another common trait, a lack of hesitancy about changing areas of emphasis when some aspect or other of fandom or the real world suddenly began to occupy their attention.

LIGHT was the title used for his biggest and most important fanzines. In the October, 1952 issue, he told something about himself: "Hair: brown, grayed at the temples (started going that way when I was 17); eyes: brown; height: 5'9"; weight: 232 lbs.; chest: 46"; waist: 42"; I wear glasses, smoke cigarettes mostly, a pipe now and then as a change and the occasional cigar." He had his own television and radio repair business and occasionally a Parry Sound mundane became immortalized in LIGHT for presenting him with a particularly hard time at the shop, like the woman who brought in a filthy radio for repair, then accused him of switching cabinets when she failed to recognise the radio after the free cleaning and polishing job he'd thrown in.

One of the many flaws in *ALL OUR YESTERDAYS* [Note: Harry's superb volume of fannish history covering SF fandom in the 1940s.] is its failure to pin down definitively the fans and fanzines that turned the tide to the deliberate red ink financial policy most fanzines now use for their budgets, in place of the old strict rules about distributing copies only for cash or trade. Lowndes' *LE VOMBITEUR* has been credited with the pioneer status in this respect, but that was an awfully small fanzine, and for years after its appearance, its influence wasn't fully felt. I suspect that an untitled single-sheeter that Les Crutch mailed out to a lot of fans late in 1945 provides one of the first full statements of the attitude that was taking control of fannish thinking, and the appearance of this philosophy in duplicated form may have helped to popularise it.

If you want to receive *LIGHT*, all you have to do is drop me a line, a card will do, and say so," Les wrote. "...you don't have to send any money. I am not after a contribution, though if you ever send one I'll be very appreciative and read it, though I won't promise to take it and use it. I don't even ask you to write a letter in return for every issue, though I do like to get them and feel that if I spent time on this publication and send it to you, you should drop me a line now and then. You needn't feel duty bound to say nice things when you do, either. I want honest, truthful letters, even if they do nothing but criticise... My return for this? Well, this is a hobby. It is a sort of avocation... I like publishing. I like to show what I print to others. I like to write just for fun."

Les published some material by United States fans, although he liked to feature Canadians, who considered him as a sort of founding father of their fandom. The August, 1942 *LIGHT* contains an article by Ackerman that has no significance today for its message – the existence of a feminine fan, Barbara Bovard, whom a few fans had considered a hoax, but it happens to provide a first-rate sample of Ackermanese, the odd writing style that Forrest J than used in fanzines. I wonder if the *FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND* readers would recognize their hero if he still wrote this way?:

"I have been derelict in my duty to myself & my fellow fangelenos by letting *LITE*'s 'Babsy' remain undiscovered on the home front all the time she's been making a faname for herself amongst U Fanadians! But do U noe what? I thought BB was a seudonym! Well, look at the picture for yourself: Barbara Bovard – appears out of nowhere – is featured extensively and exclusively in Canadian fmz – while reputedly living in Los Angeles, hot-bed of fan activity. Why would a girl centre her interest in Canadian fandom when she didn't even get the *VOM* that was published practicly in her own backyard? (Odd coincidence: My st. no. 2367 ½, hers 1236 ½). No, I assured myself, 'BEB' is but a brainchild of lil Les Crutch, who latterly has brancht out under the same seudy in *CENSORED*. Well, there myt be a Barbara Bovard in LA – but she must be just some maiden aunt of Crutch's, or sumthin! No connexion with stf."

Curiously, Les loved Christmas and tried to produce extra-large issues of *LIGHT* decorated with Christmas seals and sketches of holly each December, despite his outspoken opposition to many aspects of organized religion. The Christmas issue for 1942 might conceal some information about Van Vogt which has not been accessible since, in a three-page biography written by Les and verified by both Van Vogts, shortly after he'd attained his first fame as a science fiction writer. For instance, Indiana's burgeoning fandom might like to know that the author of *SLAN* obtained some of his earliest impressions of the world in Indianapolis. His family lived there briefly, starting when he was eighteen months old, while his father went to law

school. His first sale was to TRUE STORY MAGAZINE, an 8,000 word explanation of how he was a poor girl who had to live in the park for a while, which brought in \$160. He wasn't a newspaper man as Campbell once wrote, coming closer to that unfortunate condition when he did some trade paper writing for several years in the late 19930's. Campbell's WHO GOES THERE? Was the story that finally hooked him on science fiction as a genre that can be written well.

In July, 1950, Canadian Norman V. Lamb wrote the feature article in LIGHT. It has a familiar ring, because its twin theme is the rising cost of science fiction publications and the way some publishers were charging new fiction prices for publications containing mostly reprints. Lamb found that astounding in the past dozen years had increased its price 25% while its wordage had dropped by 8%. Science fiction, he estimated, cost 135 per cent of its pre-war price and weird fiction cost 125 per cent of its pre-war price. 'there is a mystery the writer is unable to fathom and that is how one publisher can give its readers nearly 200 pages of all new material for 25 cents, while another purveys a mere 128 smaller pages of mostly reprint material and charges 35 cents for the resultant product.'

In April, 1942, incidentally, LIGHT had given some news on the reprint question. Croutch wrote: "The U.S. Federal trade Commission trampled hard on the toes of publishers of MARVEL and the publishers of FUTURE FICTION – seems the two outfits have been caught printing yarns that weren't new and not telling anyone they were reprints. Such magazines must henceforth run the word 'reprint' or 'reprints' on the cover in type equally plain to see as the title. This must also be done on the 'contents page'. This 'reprint' must also appear on the title page of the story that is not original. If a new title is substituted for the original, the original must also appear conspicuously." Now, if someone today gets angry with the whole science fiction publishing industry, and digs into the lawbooks and discovers that this regulation is still on the books, and that it can be enforced today and retroactively as well, some enterprising young fan equipped to overprint paperbacks and prozines might find the business quite brisk.

Les kept getting into trouble with a few fans over his artistic productivity. His own sketches ran heavily to Chic Sales as subject matter, usually with some kind of punch line involving science fiction science fiction or fandom. When he published the work of other artists, he had a bad habit of putting extremely ugly nudes on his front cover. Some of them had ninety-degree angles at spots where a normal body should be either straight or gently curbed, leading to the general impression that only girls with steel plates in their bodies would pose for LIGHT's artists. Breasts usually looked like the extra pair of lungs that someone or other in today's fandom conjectured loud-mouthed women must possess instead of the usual mammary glands. But occasionally LIGHT had a cartoon that was amusing enough to neutralize the impression left by the nudes, like one by Gordon Peck on the last page of the October, 1942 issue: the explorer being roasted to death in darkest Africa by a native tribesman, who is using a giant test-tube supported by an ingenious array of pipes and tubes to turn it over the flame, with the caption: "Best equipment, bwana."

If Les still exists somewhere and hasn't altered his outlook on life and fandom, I'm sure he'll understand my good intention when I say that LIGHT was the best of all possible crudzines. If you looked for impeccable mimeography, polished writing, the best available art, and a

consistent format, you would have a long hunt through all those scores of issues, with little success in your quest. But LIGHT was as comfortable as a pair of old shoes, nobody ever got angry at anyone else in its pages, and after all these years it still seems to be alive as the ink and paper incarnation of a good guy's personality. Nowadays, when I'm afraid to open a fanzine for fear the staples holding its 140 pages together will fall out, or I must improvise a temporary binder so its four-color covers don't get smudged, or I must spend hours thinking about how I can write a loc without getting myself involved in the deadly hatreds nurtured in its pages, I wish someone still produced something as scruffy and unassuming and genial as LIGHT.