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# ...Off the CUFF

## A True History of the Fund

(With Newly Added Footnotes)

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For those of you who aren't in the know, there is a newsletter for parties interested in the back-room machinations of the annual **Convention**, the **Caspers**, and **CUFF**. But I forget that many of you probably won't know what a Convention, Caspers, and a CUFF are either. Once a year, once convention held somewhere in Canada is deemed to be the annual Canadian equivalent of the worldcon.

Again like the worldcon, the Convention gives its own awards – two professional categories, one in French and one in English, and a fan award.<sup>(1)</sup> Anyone may be nominated for the fan award on the basis of their fanzine activity, convention running, filking, costuming, apa-hacking, video-taping, gaming, fund-raising, huckstering, puns, impersonations, bubble-gum card and action figure collections, namedropping, clever buttons, origami and for holding really super nitrous parties. Or you may become eligible for six coupons clipped from “**The MLR,**”<sup>(2)</sup> and redeemable from the current Convention.

**CUFF** is the **Canadian Unity Fan Fun**, also administered by the con. For reasons that will be apparent, I've put off the subject of CUFF until later. The newsletter I mentioned began more in the nature of a collection of letter excerpts, organized by the editor along with her own commentary. Most of the letters are earnest, and not in the least self-conscious. I'm reminded of the great debates over the tables of organization of vanished fannish empires that one reads about in **All Our Yesterdays**. This is to their credit, in a way. Without such beginnings, would there have been an occasion for our later generation of witty and urbane fans to refute it all? Aside from this food for thought, the newsletter also serves as a source of unintended humour.

One letter-writer had more or less this to say, “Perhaps it can be argued that we have exhausted our supply of nationally active fans for an award, but I don't believe it. The same argument was made about the pro award, saying there were only a few writers eligible, but in recent years we've seen that number expand. I like to think that the award has played a role in their growth. There may not be too many nationally known fans right now, but that just proves why we need an award.”

(1) Of course, this has all been changed since 1988. Now there are many more categories of renamed Aurora Awards than there are usually adequate nominees for.

(2) MLR, or The Maple Leaf Rag, makes a convincing argument to be Canada's foremost fanzine in that era.

At first this just seemed like specious reasoning. Putting the cart before the horse. But before I could commit myself to print I had second thoughts. What do I know about the real motives of professional writers? Suppose I'm wrong, and they do write principally for the egoboo, and that, with the simple legerdemain of a new award, an entire generation of new writers can be created where none existed before? The only way to check was to ask a writer. Fortunately I had one at hand, Bob Wilson. He was just one of the fans I grew up with in the 70's, but of late he's also **Robert C. Wilson**, the author of **The Hidden Place** and of **Memory Wire**.<sup>(3)</sup> I phoned him up immediately.

"Bob, " I said, "How is it I've known you for many years, and all this time you've been allowing me to believe you had been writing because you'd always wanted to write science fiction, and because there were people who aid you money for it? You've been misleading me. Your real motive all along was to win a Casper."

"Yes, I'm afraid it's true. I knew what friends thought about the Caspers, and didn't want to look foolish to them. All this time I've been keeping the real reason for my writing to myself." "Foolish? Why would we think that? Why, you've been fiendishly clever. Imagine the genius behind conceiving an ambition to win a Casper, years before the thing was even invented! Why you deserve the award just for that."<sup>(4)</sup>

"Gosh. If only I'd known how you'd react, I might have spared myself years of humiliation and self-doubt. Now that I've been nominated, do you think I should make my current ambition known?"

"By all means. But what ambition could top a Casper nomination?"

"I want to go down in history as the **Boswell of Canadian SF**."

"That's already taken, I think."<sup>(5)</sup>

Uh-oh... But maybe it's just as well. I was running out of ideas anyway."

Not long after I hung up I began to think maybe he'd been pulling my leg. I seemed to recall that Bob had once told me that the real reason he was writing science fiction was because he couldn't write for fanzines.

To return to the subject of **CUFF**, we have to go back several years. At the time, I was working on a small, book-oriented and sometimes-fannish convention called **Torque**. Bob Webber had the spur of the moment idea of a Canadian fan fund. He called it the **Canadian Unity Fan Fund** at first, but later thought it over and realized that there was room for improvement. **COFF**, the Canadian Overland Fan Fund never caught on however.

<sup>(3)</sup> And as of 2006, ten other novels (including Darwinia, Blind Lake, and this year's Hugo nominated Spin).

<sup>(4)</sup> And as a matter of fact, he did win a Casper, now known as the Aurora. But not for any good reason... some minor detail about a novel or story he'd written.

<sup>(5)</sup> Taken by John Robert Colombo, who for a number of years was... well... the Boswell of Canadian Science Fiction

WebBob kicked in \$25 to get whatever-it-was-called started. He talked the local club into another \$25, and Torque was set to hand over the entire fortune to the first official winner.

WebBob not only put up half the money, he wrote the rules, and picked the winner as well. “In recognition of his great contributions to Canadian fandom,” he explained the club newsletter, Bob awarded the fund to **Robert Runté**. In a moment of candour Bob was later heard to say, “who else was there west of **Humberside Collegiate** in 1981?” <sup>(6)</sup>

It would have been like that too; only history had other plans. Runté had some trifling little obligation to attend to, his thesis or job or some such unimportant detail. He couldn't make it. The money was given to **Mike Hall** instead, who'd driven all the way to Toronto from Edmonton, and probably deserved the fifty bucks and the handshake on just that account.

Some years go uneventfully by. CUFF had been laid to rest by that great leveller in fandom, apathy. Until one day someone thinks, “no one seems much interested in travelling to far-away Canadian conventions.” Following the incontestable logic of the fan award, it was obvious that there needed to be a fan fund as well. It is directly attributable to this line of reasoning that CUFF went on to the humiliation of 1987.

Although it was not noticed at the time, the second campaign began inauspiciously. A nomination form was produced which, among other things, gave a brief history of the fund. In crediting the originator, Webber was spelled W-I-L-S-O-N. I'm tempted to blame Mike Glicksohn <sup>(7)</sup> for this, but since two wrongs never make a right, I'll resist the impulse. The ballot was otherwise impeccable, and efficiently distributed.

However, that was the last anyone heard from CUFF that year. **Convention 7, Ad Astra**, came and went without a word about the nominees. No final ballot ever appeared. There was no winner. And no explanation of the missing fund until there had been so much bellyaching that there was finally a public accounting. Speculation had been rife, and particularly irresponsible up to that point. One theory I liked was that **Mike Wallis** and the Toronto concom were held hostage by a Winnipeg in '90" terrorist squad, to prevent a competing worldcon bid. The actual answer turned out to be rather simple, though. And I imagine the Canvention had been a little red in the face.

No one had been nominated. Therefore there'd been no race.

To be sure, a few ballots had been sent in. But not one of the names on the ballots could fulfill the requirement of three nominations from his or her region, and two from the other. Apparently no fan in Canada was known by as many as two other fans nation-wide. Or, putting it kindly, it seemed that no one was thought well enough by more than two fans from one end of the country to the other.

<sup>(6)</sup> Make note of this for future Trivia contests! Humberside Collegiate is the high school where Mike Glicksohn has taught math for many more years than there are issues of Energumen.

<sup>(7)</sup> To be honest, I don't remember why I wrote that. Most likely, though, Mike was the one who typed the form and made the mistake. It was natural enough, as Mike knew neither Bob especially well and wasn't in on the original brainstorming that created the fund.

Fortunately, other explanations were sought, and found. It wasn't the lack of well-known fans that was to blame, but a lack of interest in remote events and personalities on the part of the rank and file fan.

After all, wasn't that the rationale for the need of a fan fund? Although this explained everything, it still left the central problem – how to make a fund work in the conditions that made it necessary? The solution was felt to be more promotion. The idea was that, even if they didn't care, you could talk people into anything if you talked loud enough, long enough, and often enough. Would it work? Did it work?

I'm happy to announce that I'm the living dis-proof. After a dedicated twelve-month campaign for **CUFF '88**, the powers-that-be arrived at precisely the same impasse as last year. There were no nominees meeting any requirements whatsoever. The self-appointed factotum of the unofficial standing Convention and Casper committee was **Fran Skene**. Fran also published the committee's newsletter.<sup>(8)</sup>

And Fran had all but instructed her select peers who and how to nominate in '88. You'd think it would be enough, but only two weeks before the deadline for nominations, there still weren't any. Word went around that *If Something Wasn't Done*, she'd close the fund down for another year.

So much for the open, above-board, democratic way of running a fan fund. If that wouldn't work, well, there was always the closed-door, smoke-filled room full of **SMOF's**<sup>(9)</sup> approach. In the original tradition of 1981, CUFF was fixed. Here I am, ladies and gentlemen, this year's er... "winner", quote unquote. Once again, there was no final ballot, no candidates, nor a vote. But by god you've got a winner whether you want one or not.<sup>(10)</sup>

I heard someone out there mutter under his breath, "ohmigod, what about his bloody integrity?" I resisted, I swear it. When the whispering campaign for my nomination started, I turned a deaf ear. When people asked me if I wanted to be nominated, I said I was above politicking for egoboo, and they would have to act as they saw fit. When Fran wrote to tell me that the fate of CUFF was in my hands, to choose to run or let it die for another year, I was fraught with indecision. I took my quandary to the phone. One after the other, people I talked to said, "Go for it"!

"Who else is there?" said **Glicksohn**.

"You've got our nominations", said **Toolis** and **Skeet**. Oh hell, I could even count on my old archenemy, **Jo McBride**. Next thing I knew people were congratulating me for winning CUFF.

"Haven't you heard yet?" they said.

(8) Casperapa.

(9) SMOF – Secret Master of Fandom. Also Small Minded Old Fart.

(10) Reminds you of the recent election and our currentt Prime Minister, does it not

I've tried my best to be true to myself, to be independent of public approval, and show a lordly disdain for the symbols of status in fandom. But I ask you, caught up in the implacable mysteries of fame, would you do better? In the end I took the offered bait, and went cheaply at that.

*I've ... sold... out... dammit!*