



The Seventy Second issue of a sort-of letter substitute, kinda thing. Maybe weekly, maybe not. Available from:

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Available via the World Wide Web, or as an email attachment. I recommend the Portable Document Format (pdf) or, if you insist, a word or Rich Text Format (rtf) can also be emailed. Get in touch and we'll sort something out. You are going to [vote James Bacon](#) for [TAFE](#), aren't you? Dated, already, 08/05/04.

A Northern Ireland Convention

Following on from James' article last issue I managed to attend MeCon this year for one day at least and, like James, was keen to find out how the rest of the weekend went. I asked around, giving my impression of the first night and got much the same response:

"Turnout was very low and the place look deserted."

Colin Tate [Project Ultraviolet](#) went so far as to say:

"I know that this is rich coming from a man who only turned up for an hour and a half on the last day, but the general aura of the convention, including the numbers attending would make my use of the word 'piss-poor' an understatement of polite proportions."

I was thus interested to read then that Michael Carroll has a brilliant time, <quote> until I thought back to the five or six hours I spent at the con and realised I had had a good time as well. I had arrived early on a Friday, a fact that did not go un-noticed, and joined in the quiz for a bit, went to buy a pint and talked to Ian McDonald for a bit and then went to the bar downstairs and talked to a whole bunch of people. All well and good, you may say, Tommy had a good time.

Now this I hasten to add had very little to do with the convention itself – as always you'll find me in the bar most of the time. This year, though, I did attend the quiz for a while – only to realise how little I really know about SF. In my declining years I realise that this is no longer all that is required for me to have a good time at a convention. If I travel over to an EasterCon or a NovaCon in England, or even some of the cons that are run regularly in Glasgow, I don't mind paying up to £40 or so. I'll get to see some stuff I wouldn't normally see at an Irish con, meet guests that rarely travel across the water and certainly meet a lot more fans than I would normally see in any one year. That is worth it for the admission – the fairly expensive room rates are something that you have to put up with any con you travel to.

For MeCon however that no longer works for me. Sure I wouldn't normally see any of the people I met that night at the con during the rest of the year. And I certainly got to meet an interesting bunch of new people as well. However, and this is me being rather cynical, the con was so small this year that I eventually met those people in the bar anyway. The bar at MeCon is not a con bar, but is open to members of the Queen's University Senior students, graduates and staff, which I certainly could join.

I could basically come next year, sit in the bar most of the night, enjoying the excellent local real ale, at 'club' prices and talk to people as they wandered in and out of the bar all night and probably have just as good a time. Having talked to a few other people who were there that weekend I know this is a distinct possibility next year; and for one person in particular non-attendance more likely.

Now I know I'm an old fogey and the convention is a student run convention. I sat in on the election process for this convention last year and it was a fairly hum drum experience. There was no real get up and go, no over the top enthusiasm and in fact for most of the posts it was fairly clear from the get go that a specific person would be doing a specific role. There was an acceptance that these people would run the convention and it was left to them to get on with.

The problem with this set-up is that as a student society run convention there is no onus on any of the committee to worry about attracting numbers. By this I mean that is no threat to themselves or their chequebooks; no personal loss will ensue. If, as is the case over the last few years, numbers are well below fifty, then the Society will pick up the tab. None of the events organised by the committee are dependent on a certain amount of people paying to get in. There is a budget, a lot of which goes on guest expenses and booking of the venue I assume, and the balance towards the con itself. That is it, a fairly prescribed environment in which to work, with no real impetus or threat to the status quo.

I've often said that as the only Northern Irish SF convention MeCon should shoulder the responsibility and put on a better show. Last year I realised that is completely unrealistic to expect students, who have many other priorities, to do this. The con was a student society run convention whose core audience was society members. Members of the Joe Public like me just happen to wander along because we know what to expect and, in a way, feel obligated. This is not a convention aimed at the public – this is a large Queen's University Society 3 day party, with guests.

However if there were more numbers going through the door there would be a great opportunity to develop programme items, provide more hospitality to guests and attendees alike and to put on a much more attractive looking convention. More people would also generate a better atmosphere in corridors of the senior common room, more

attendance at programme items and even leave a little left over for the likes of me to commune with in the bar.

Given the circumstance outlined above, and assuming that attracting more people is a desired objective that is high on the agenda of the forthcoming committee, how do you go about achieving it? One complaint I heard this year was that not enough members of the SF society were joining the convention and this kept numbers down. Well they don't have to attend, do they? You have to make it attractive to them. A guest is just not going to be the pulling power for these people who turn up on Wednesday nights and go to the society cinema outings. Likewise non-society members need something to rouse them from their Lord of the Rings and Angel/Buffy stupor to make a commitment. Although cheap compared to the UK, the £15 charged for attendance is a high figure for most people in Northern Ireland. [Uncharted Territories](#) do their thing at more cost but provide the pulling power of actors. Perhaps this could be tapped into?

Above all does the committee want to continue on the way it has been for the past few years: small attendances leading to empty rooms and disappointed attendees? How about shaking things up a bit this year, pushing the boat out and making an effort to get some life back into MeCons? You might even tempt me into buying a membership...

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Next issue, which should pop up in a couple of weeks, will be book reviews. Neal Stephenson's latest baroque cycle book is just out. I'm just finishing off the first – more on that later. Stephen King is also someone I've started reading again. Hype? HmMMM. Book reviews, never thought I'd see the day.

Fanzines, now that's more my speed. I'm still getting some through the letter box and well they deserved to be written about. Some personal stuff coming up as well. You know you want to subscribe (just as soon as this new host service pulls the finger out, you and all your mates will be able to.) Just you wait. Blogging? Well, maybe..