



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

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Dated, already, 18/05/04.

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## MeCon Special

**Tommy** >> Well that touched a nerve. I had a lot of responses to my report on this year's MeCon and MeCons in general, both pro and anti. In fairness to both camps I've printed Eugene Doherty's letter and Sinead Larkin's letter to try and balance it out. There were also a number of detailed and well-argued emails, which I've had to butcher due to space. On a historical note Eugene and I ran the first series of Belfast conventions, called NiCons, from 1986 to the National Universities Convention, UniCon in 1989 (which attracted over 350 people to the Queen's Elm's halls of residence.) It also left me so exhausted I collapsed during the convention. We're not just ranting and raving here we've been through it all before and do care that a good convention is held – we'd like to see more of our UK, European and US friends over here.

**Eugene Doherty** >> Please note that what follows is only my own opinion based on my experiences with Norn Iron cons in general and MeCons in particular. The overwhelming impression I get from the last few MeCons is that the committee don't care because they don't have to. The society funds everything so they don't need attendees through the door. And this isn't just my fanciful thinking; it's something I have heard past committee members say. The impression they give is that it is just a weekend piss-up for them and their mates. Hold that thought; I'll come back to it. Certainly by the Sunday the lack of attendees means that events don't kick off until mid day and then many items implode in a wash of apathy, not helped by the lack of drink until 4pm.

So why get upset about it? The embarrassment factors of having guests come along and are faced by a room where the panel outnumbers the audience? The apparent "don't care attitude" of the committee. We have your money, we don't need you now!

I hate to sing out the old dirge of "when we ran things" but when we had the Nicon series of cons in the late 80s, we were also funded by the Society but we used that money to put on the best damn cons we could (and still have a good time at the same time.) We fell at the fences early on (I still wake screaming at the thought of Nicon 87) but we learned from our mistakes, until we hit the dizzy heights of running the UK national university convention here in Belfast. Could the present committees run something like that now? Would they want to, would they care? And yet only last year they were talking of Eastercons and Eurocons?

Here is my personal view from my own recent Mecon experiences. I have run the Turkey Buffet item for the previous two years and a talk on quack medicine this year, and every time I felt like I was only there as a favour by the committee. Maybe they didn't really want me and just didn't like to say no. I certainly pushed myself forward for the items because I thought I had something interesting, entertaining and

relevant that fans might like and yes I liked the attention of sharing my interests/obsessions. Perhaps the committees have felt otherwise which would explain their lukewarm enthusiasm, their lack of including my items in the programme descriptions and even the lack of a free pint during the items (oh yes, I am that petty!)

Sorry this is starting to get whiney which wasn't really my intention but this is just my perspective from items I was involved with. I appreciate that there are other pressures on the committee rather than just massaging my ego, the apathy of the society can be overwhelming, the slog of writing to people, working the shops and walking the streets putting up posters lacks the glamour of choosing guests and devising panel items but these things have to be done and I wonder if they have been done in recent years.

When requests have been made on the society mailing list for help with items such as videos/dvds or ideas for events, I have often not even had the courtesy of a reply to my offers/suggestions, and I'm sure I'm not the only one. This sort of apathy/insularity doesn't help to promote an esprit de corps.. Now that Sci-Fi is more mainstream than ever, now that media cons such as Uncharted Territories can get people to pay £25-30 for one day, why can't Mecon get more paying attendees than committee and guests? It isn't easy, I know, I've got the tee-shirt (sic) as have you Tommy but there's no short cuts or easy way round some solid graft..

Ultimately one has to say to the committee, as Tommy and others have already suggested, if you don't want to do it, then don't! Just have a piss-up and stop pretending that you have any mission to promote science fiction and fantasy as the Society's constitution states. Of course the obvious riposte from the committee will be, "if you don't like it, do your own con", and you know.....you might want to watch this space!

**Sinead Larkin (MeCon 7 Director)** >> In response to the article, I agree that there was a very low turnout at Mecon (though I don't think it's the lowest ever) but I know that I tried my best (along with the committee) to publicise as much as possible. We publicised in shops, on various internet sites and forums, in different publications. We also got contacts in UK and USA to publicise the event and this all generated a lot of interest. However, before the event I received many emails from newbies who had thought about attending telling me that they couldn't afford it. Lack of funds was a big issue which hasn't really been highlighted, but it is an important one: because the con is in Belfast, it means that England-based fans (for example) have to pay more costs than a fan in Belfast (transport etc) and this year people just didn't have the money.

Also, despite our best efforts, there were only 5 in the committee and we couldn't do all the work ourselves. Mecon is a society-run event and the society members are generally supposed to help out. The committee oversee things but the society are always encouraged to get involved too. However, out of the non-QUB and QUB people we asked for help, it was (nearly always) the non-QUB people who helped out in publicising the event. Again, lack of funds was a contributing factor, as was the fact that shops seemed to remove our posters a few days after we put them up!

Another major factor was the lack of club members. As I said, Mecon is a society-run event. It looks very, very bad on the society if its members don't even support it! Several QUB and non-QUB people brought this up after the closing ceremony and I seriously think that the society should start supporting Mecon more. After all, it does actually look very bad on the society if Mecon is financially unsuccessful - Queen's don't just pick up the tab, if we make a loss then we lose out on money for the following year and that has a very severe effect on the club. I think that it's only fair that the society support its own convention, which is run by its own members. Yet this year, at the elections for Mecon 8, only one person stood per post and very few voted in the elections. Some people opposed the people running for committee posts - but they hadn't even thought about an alternative candidate. It is this lack of motivation within the society itself, which is badly affecting Mecon. The only people with motivation are those who stand for the committee posts.

The extreme level of bitching by certain individuals had a bad effect on Mecon: particularly the encouragement by some members for others not to attend and thus make Mecon a failure financially. The bitching also took place during the convention, thus giving a very bad impression of our society and con to those who aren't from Belfast. This needs to stop I believe, otherwise people will stop attending Mecon because they'll hear nothing but bitching about committee members. We all tried our hardest to involve the club and to make the convention work but there are just some sad individuals who feel the need to spoil everything, and I do think that this contributed to the low numbers. I am very disappointed that the turnout was so low, but we all did try our hardest within the committee, I just would like it if the rest of the society started helping out in the future.

**Tommy >>** I think Eugene makes a number of important points – guests and people helping out, for example, should be properly looked after. It is important to massage their egos, that's about all they get for the hard work they put in. That kind of thing leaves a bad taste in the mouth of those involved, as I'm sure you can tell. On a more general note from his piece, the committee have got to start looking outwards more. This is highlighted in Sinead's letter and others below. The committee have to look beyond their immediate sphere of influence, towards Greater Belfast fandom that we know is there from the numbers at UT events. Holding the con away from the Common Room could highlight that, a proper marketing campaign and a bit of self examination (what's it all for?) can all point towards a focus. As for another con in Belfast, Eugene and I have been talking about this in the past, and we may talk more about in the future.

**Michael Perkins MeCon 8 Committee Member >>** As you said, attendance may not have been the greatest, but 70+ people in total is still quite respectable, and certainly compares favourably with MeCons past.

**Tommy >>** Pardon my cynicism, but of those 70 people, how many were committee, guests (and partners), mascots and supporting attendees? Of the remaining memberships, how many of them actually turned up over the weekend? It is just that the whole thing seemed sparse, something which the last few MeCons have suffered from as well. Perhaps a change in venue may be a good thing?

**Michael Perkins MeCon 8 Committee Member >>** MeCon this year had its heels clipped somewhat because of a number of reasons - gaming events both north and south of the border in the week immediately before and immediately after MeCon drew some of our core attendees away, while a couple of other regular attendees went to an SCA event on the same weekend instead. Uncertainty over the status of the Common Room led to the lack of on-site accommodation, which made it less attractive this year to those visiting from the Republic or from the mainland UK. None of this is in any way a reflection on those who chose to do something else - after all, MeCon attendance is not compulsory (though it dashed well should be, by jove!!!) ;-). But it is an illustration of events that are simply out of the control of the Committee impacting upon the convention.

**Tommy >>** So why did people choose these events over MeCon? What can MeCon do to make it the 'must see' event of the SF calendar? Why did these people pay extra money (referencing Sinead's arguments above) to go elsewhere; i.e. why can't MeCon also do what some of these cons are doing if there is a market for it? As for other events, NiCon 87, which Eugene mentions above, was scheduled on the same weekend as NovaCon in England! We've already made those mistakes – MeCon should now be the event, which others have to timetable around!

**Michael Perkins MeCon 8 Committee Member >>** I would take issue with the observation that MeCon is a con run by and for the QUB SF&F Society. Yes, the Society does run MeCon, but it unfair to say that MeCon is run as a "private party with guests." The aim of MeCon is now and always has been to provide an opportunity for science fiction & fantasy fans in Northern Ireland to meet up, meet guests they would normally have to go to England to see, interact with each other and generally have an enjoyable 3 days.

In that respect, I think MeCon 7 worked admirably. Robert Rankin was a superb guest of honour, and all who entered his sphere of influence left it mightily entertained!

**Tommy** >> This is an interesting point, which I raised in order to get a response. I rarely see anyone I don't know, at least by name, at MeCons over the past few years. Those I don't know I recognise from the odd society meeting I've attended, or they're partners of committee members or their friends (see below.) Is MeCon really after new people, people from outside the society? What about those who attended the last few MeCons, have they been contacted again? What about the likes of Eugene and myself – we have a bit of influence as shown by the turn up of Alison and Max from England a while back. I think the society is too insular, things need to be opened up a bit more if you are to get away from the 'private party with guests' accusation. On which point, here's Pádraig from [Irish SF News](#):

**Pádraig Ó Méalóid** >> Yup, I agree with pretty much all of that! I asked the outgoing committee to send me flyers and such, and I'd put them around Dublin, but they never appeared. I'd gone up to Mecon a few times with a few boxes of books, and my abiding memory is of the attendees standing, like a flock of skittish gazelle, looking at me suspiciously from a distance. I got the impression that if I made a sudden movement, they would have all run away. However, the incoming committee seem to have something going on. They've already set up a Live Journal account for the con, with fairly regular postings. Your point about the funding being already available to the con is particularly well taken, mind you, and one I've observed a number of times in student run cons. Now, what NI fandom \*really\* needs is for some of the old hands to run a con, independent of Queens.

**Christopher Ross McWatters** >> I strongly disagree with your review of Mecon 7, I was at Mecon and I had a wonderful time, those on the committee for that year are good friends of mine & they poured their heart and soul into the convention. It was publicised greatly, had the con had the support from the club that it deserved, your review would have been quite different.

**Heather Lennox** >> Mecon7 was the first Mecon I have attended and I really enjoyed the entire weekend. I helped out at the reg. desk and anywhere else I was needed and had fun doing it. The pub quiz was highly informative and our team won the quiz.

**Tommy** >> As I said at the very start of this, I know exactly what the committee went through, I've been through it myself before. I have no doubt about all of these, but as a SF con, with a remit as mentioned above, why not put all the effort from the raffle, charity auction, gifts and prizes etc into the convention itself? Having a SF convention about SF, driven by SF and for SF fans does not need to be justified by raising money for charity, a welcome sideline to the main event, it is justification in and of itself... More?