

## My Life in the Steam Trade

by Jim Blaylock

I've been accused by the Steampunk community of not owning any goggles, but in fact I do own a pair – authentic Human Aura Goggles, also known as Kilner goggles, made in England. I inherited them from my uncle, John Carl Blaylock, when he passed away a couple of years ago. He bought them, and quite likely wore them, in the late 40's or early 50's when he was active in New Age and Theosophical movements in Los Angeles. They qualify as quintessential Steampunk, to my mind, since Walter Kilner was a “medical electrician” at St. Thomas Hospital in the 1880s and 90s, where he performed experiments on the human aura. I believe that Madame Blavatsky must have had a pair, maybe several, through which she could see the many-spined shadow of Atlantis lying on the ocean somewhere off the coast of Long Island. I'm afraid to wear them, but then I'm afraid to wear a baseball cap. That kind of finery makes me look conspicuous.

My attraction to the world of Steampunk is mostly literary, and it's in a literary sense that I understand it, although I'm happy that it's manifested itself in fashion, art, technology, and even as a philosophy for living. My own life as a reader, and hence as a literary type, began when I was ten years

old and became interested in the books in my mother's library. It was my first discovery, The Return of Sherlock Holmes, published by McClure, Phillips, and Co., that was the siren song. I had no idea, of course, that Sherlock Holmes had ever left, and so the "Return" in the title meant little. The book itself was the talisman, and it still is: it's sitting on the desk in front of me right now. The cloth is black, with yellow-gold printing on the spine and blood red printing on the front, with a cover illustration of the dark silhouette of Holmes (actually a Holmes facsimile) sitting placidly beyond mullioned windows in a lamp-lit room, waiting to be shot. The cover is as alluring to me today as it was fifty years ago, and so are the stories inside. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to my literary sensibilities if instead of "The Affair of the Empty House" I'd opened the cover and found a treatise on the economies of northern Europe or a discussion of fifteenth-century Italian fashion. I'd probably have taken up juvenile delinquency.

What actually happened was that my mother, noting the evident effect that the book had on me, began hauling me down to the local library on Beach Blvd. in the neighboring suburb of Stanton on Tuesday afternoons, where I set out to find more books with signifying covers – ideally with the familiar black cloth binding and red or gold lettering. A cover or frontispiece illustration was preferable, but not vital. I found an H.G. Wells

that filled the bill – The First Men in the Moon – and a seafaring book by Howard Pease, and, over the weeks and months that followed, a dozen assorted novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs, where I discovered Pellucidar and the mechanical mole: “Then Perry interested me in his invention...”

My mother suggested that if I liked Wells and seafaring books and lost lands, I might like Jules Verne, and so I came home with 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea and The Mysterious Island. By that time the die had been cast: the workings of my mind were already steam-driven, with the occasional octopus or whale or arcane submarine looming into view in the shadows. Not much has changed in that regard over the years.

(In all this I’m reminded of the sad story of Thomas Chatterton, whose mother instigated, aided, and abetted his enthusiasm for medieval poetry, leading to his early fame as a writer and then – in the face of literary neglect and starvation – to his drinking arsenic in a London garret at the age of 18, his career already washed up. People find Chatterton’s story endlessly interesting, but I’m convinced that his mother’s story would be equally so, if anyone ever thought to tell it.)

The second Steampunk die, like the infamous other shoe, was cast a couple of years later. I saw two films by Czech director Karel Zemen: The Fabulous World of Jules Verne and The Fabulous Baron Munchhausen –

films that are in fact fabulous in nearly every sense of the word: dreamlike, mysterious, and evocative – absolutely quintessential Steampunk in all its squid-and-clockwork glory, and the only two films that I’ve ever set the alarm clock to wake up for. (Back in the day they were often aired at two or three o’clock in the morning. Maybe they still are.) If you haven’t seen them, then quit reading this immediately and buy them. Sell this book if you need to in order to raise the funds.

By the time I was a student at Cal State Fullerton my aspiration was to be a literary beach bum, which suggested marine biology as a major. I envied Doc’s life in Cannery Row (which had certain Nemoesque qualities about it) and I had read and reread Steinbeck’s descriptions of Western Biological and of the tide pools along the shoreline of Monterey Bay. “That’s the life for me,” I thought, and I set up aquaria full of tidepool creatures, including an octopus the size of your hand, which could devour a dozen hermit crabs in a sitting. I bought a copy of Between Pacific Tides, co-authored by Ed Ricketts, the prototype of Doc in Cannery Row, and Steinbeck’s traveling companion in The Log of the Sea of Cortez. I remember following that up with Gunther Sterba’s Freshwater Fishes of the World, pondering the photos of South American leaf fishes and gobies and freshwater puffers with a strange avidity, not knowing that I was in a very

real sense learning my trade, but that it would be a trade that had little to do with marine biology, which turned out (unfairly, I think) to require math classes. I did the sensible thing and changed my major to English, where you were rewarded when you simply made things up. The beach would have to be its own excuse.

In the following couple of years I developed a broad taste for Victorian literature, and I met Tim Powers, who suggested I read P. G. Wodehouse alongside the Robert Louis Stevenson that I was already stuffing myself with, and out of that, in 1977, came my first Steampunk story, “The Ape-box Affair,” which is devoid of fish, but has an orang-outang in it. (Orang-outang, by the way, is the official Steampunk spelling of the word. Don’t let anybody tell you differently.) The story was almost feverishly informed by the Bertie Wooster and Jeeves stories in symbiotic collision with Stevenson’s New Arabian Nights and The Dynamiter. Unearth magazine paid me forty dollars for the story, and I suspected at the time (and still suspect) that I had gotten away with murder. Writing the story had been immensely fun. Someone had paid me for it. Readers seemed to like it.

Now it’s 30-odd years later (some of those years particularly odd) and writing Steampunk stories is still immensely fun. I’m working on one now. And, marvel of marvels, more people than ever are not only reading such

stories, but have wandered off the Steampunk deep end, and are going out in public dressed like Conan Doyle's Dr. Maracot when he stepped aboard his steamship, off to study deep sea life in uncharted oceans. I'm all for it. I hope that Steampunk consciousness is increasingly infectious, especially the Arts and Crafts Movement influence – the interest in building useful things out of natural materials that are meant to last and that look good into the bargain. A couple of years back our family went off to Singapore, where we all bought new watches for three dollars apiece from a street vendor near the Raffles Hotel – literally less money than it cost to buy a Tiger beer at the satay joint next door. Mine ran like clockwork, till it quit running altogether on the plane on the way home. It had lasted three days – a dollar a day, like a self-destructing rental watch. Captain Nemo would have despised such an item. His chronometer, I can tell you, is still keeping perfect time beneath the surface of whatever far-flung seas he's currently navigating.

And that's my life as a steampunk, if I can use the word in that sense. Sorry that this has been a fairly personal take on the subject. I can't tell you what the movement means or predict how long it will last, although I hope it's a long time. In my mind Steampunk is not a movement of any sort; it's something that happened to me.