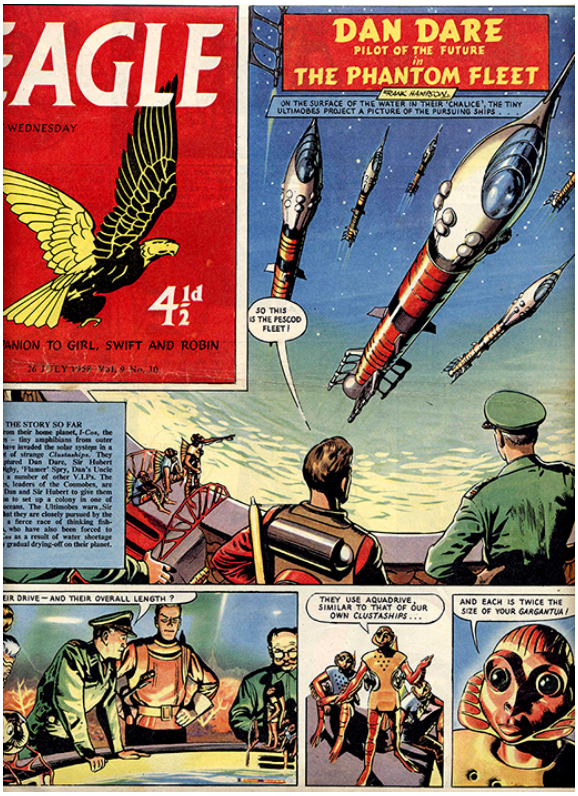
The Genius of Frank Hampson and the Eagle

Richard A. Slaughter



My parents lived in a rented house behind a grocery store on the corner of two unremarkable streets in Southsea, Portsmouth. Their first floor bedroom looked out over the lower level of the shop to the street, whereas mine looked out onto a line of narrow gardens behind the houses. Access to our house was along a short passage bounded by the wall of a two-storey house on the left and a two-meter high brick wall to the right. Our gate was at an angle, held in place by poor quality brickwork. When you opened the gate you found yourself in a small garden behind the shop, a tiny private world where my mother did her best to grow flowers and herbs. There was a short path running down the middle of two flowerbeds and a low shed to the left. The garden faced east so the morning sun was soon followed by early afternoon shadows. The whole house was freezing in winter.

The best thing you could say about the house is that it was insulated from the road – not that there were many cars around when I was growing up. It was only on a much later visit that the narrow streets had filled with vehicles of all kinds. No chance then of anyone playing marbles in the gutters or imaginary games in the street! Once a week a copy of the boy's comic, *The Eagle*, slipped into this small world. As a child, of course, I had no idea where it had originated, how it had been made, or why. All I knew is that each week something marvellous fell into my hands and I was immediately transported elsewhere. I've a distant memory of being transfixed by a child's novel – something about kids on holiday in a houseboat. The boat, the river, the whole scene were way beyond my experience at the time. The echoes of that frisson of delight, of strangeness, remain distantly with me but they are as nothing compared with the effect that *The Eagle* had on me week after week.

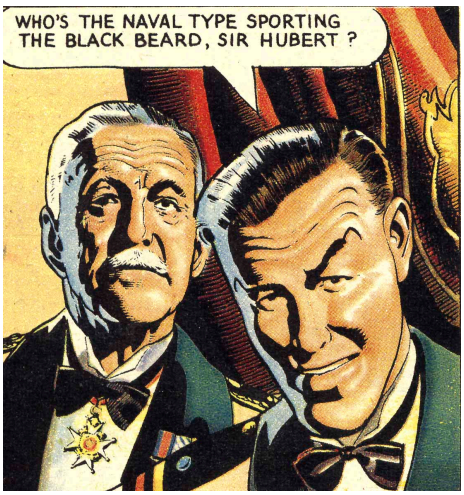
I don't recall for how old I was when I held my first copy – perhaps nine or ten. Even now it is difficult to summarise the effect it had. I was part of a generation growing up in the UK in the shadow of World War Two. Our parents had lived right through it. They carried with them memories of terror and privation: narrow escapes, bomb shelters, explosions and chaos. All we knew of the upheavals were ration books and bombsites, distant echoes from something terrible that was way outside of our own experience. It was a fairly simple life, greyish, local, limited. *The Eagle* was from elsewhere, from a place more distant than I could imagine, and I accepted it gratefully.

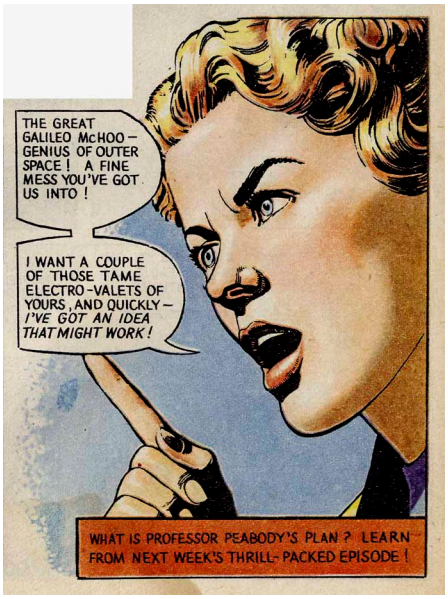
The first thing to hit my colour starved eyes was the cover, red and yellow, with an elegant stylised eagle over the top left panel. Then, underneath and to the right, was the Dan Dare strip. Occasionally the whole front page was taken up with a panoramic view of a scene in space, a detailed panorama of a future city, or the rolling waves of an alien ecology lit by strange suns. The strip carried over onto page two so there was always more to come. The rest of *The Eagle* carried a number of black and white strips, short articles, competitions and so on. There were two other coloured sections. One was on the last two pages and these carried illustrated stories from the bible or the classics. But at the heart of the comic there was a dramatic two-page cutaway image of an aircraft, ship, power station etc. Here youngsters could satisfy a barely expressed desire to understand 'how things work'. Later generations might be tempted to dismiss the *The Eagle's* presentation and content as somewhat conservative and 'PC'. But to kids such concepts could not be more distant. Looking back, and despite the faintly churchy 'feel', the slightly 'boy scout-like' tenor of some of the contents, it was a work of genius. Marcus Morris, the editor for many years, was, in fact, a churchman. This almost certainly appealed to my mother, a devout churchgoer.

It was only much later that I discovered a whole generation of kids had had similar experiences. *The Eagle* in general, and the Dan Dare strip in particular, powerfully drew us forward. They showed us that there was 'something' beyond Portsmouth, England, the everyday world. They lit in many youngsters an awareness that few could have grasped at the time – a view of the future that drew us towards it with a sense of promise and potential. This has to be where my career as a futurist began. But what else was it about the Dan Dare strip that caused so many of us to respond thus? In the 1980s I went to a British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) meeting in Brighton. It was the one and only chance I had to meet the person who stood at the centre of the Eagle's success – Dan Dare's creator, Frank Hampson. I learned later that Hampson had been brutally treated by the publisher at the time. There's a ten-minute TV feature about him several years later where a washed-out Hampson appears saying that, yes, he did have a nervous breakdown 'but I'm alright now'. One can only wonder…

Looking at the comics, then and now, it's immediately obvious that you're holding the work of a master draftsman. You can also see how Hampson inhabited his subject matter and filled it with texture and meaning. It's no accident that a much later book about him was called *The Man Who Drew Tomorrow*. [1] It's exactly right. The cars, ships, spacecraft, all look very much as though they genuinely belong in the future. The sheer quality of the artwork is evident in the comic. But the few original works that I've seen (from which the printing plates were obviously derived) are still considered unequalled by some of those who care about such things. Nowadays they sell for over UK£3,000 each.

If it were only based on this, however, the Dan Dare strip would still not have been so remarkable. The other factor in Hampson's success was his ability to render fully human characters, both male and female, and to embed them in a range of environments – some artificial, some natural. His rendering of alien ecologies was exemplary. One of the key characters was an older man, Sir Hubert Guest, Dan's superior. He cut a striking figure with his short grey hair and a real military bearing. There's a real shock therefore, for all who knew Sir Hubert as a character in a comic strip, when he is seen, albeit briefly, in the TV feature mentioned above, as a living, breathing human being posing in Hampson's studio. It turns out that he was actually Hampson's father. Equally, Professor Peabody, who was no shrinking violet in the strip, was also a real person who sat for the artist, and it shows.

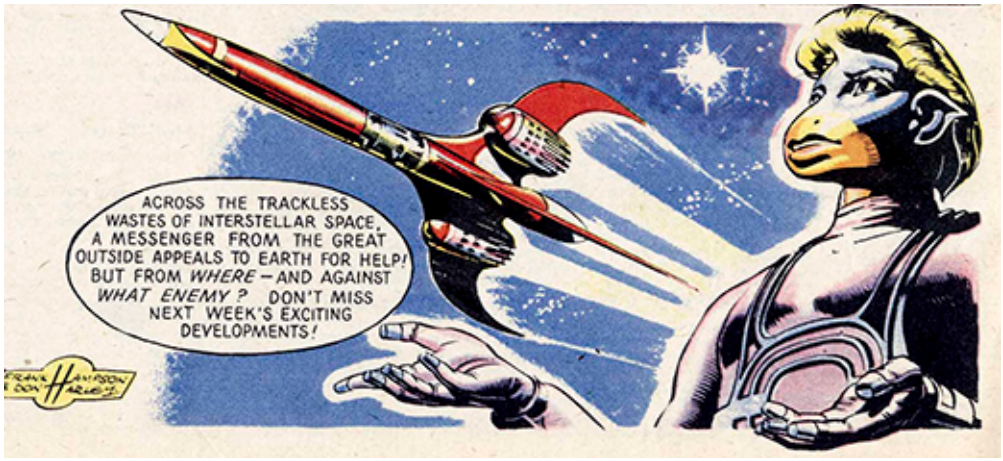




Next to Dan himself one of the most prominent characters was Digby, his overweight batman, manservant, assistant and general dogsbody. Digby was quite obviously a comic relief and contrast to Dan. He was always in trouble, out of breath, falling over things, muttering under his breath. He imparted to the strip a note of human fallibility, streaked with constant humour. He exuded the sense that such fallibility was very much part of this future, but not really anything to worry about. In some of the stories a small striped animal occasionally had a key role. Stripey's utterances were always a variation on 'kuk, kuk, kuk, koo.'

Dan's antithesis, and frequent enemy, was the Mekon – a small, evil genius, with an ugly, emaciated, body, an oversized brain and an army of Phants (alien soldiers), robots and other machines. If Dan represents human agency, the Mekon is cold intelligence and sheer instrumental power without a shred of humanity. He is instrumental reason gone mad. Dystopia. The Devil. Entropy. Death. The dynamic of some of Hampson's stories clearly derive from the age-old conflict between these polarised forces. One of the few things I can recall clearly from hearing Hampson speak at Brighton in 1980 was that Dan was partly modelled on an idealised notion of the British fighter pilot of World War Two. He was an embodiment of bravery and independence and would never flinch despite overwhelming odds. Hampson had a plaster bust of the character on his desk and could draw it from any direction.

Over the years he internalised the features of his hero and gave Dan a vital inner life. His signature feature was the quizzical, upward curving eyebrows that later artists tried to copy but often couldn't. I came to understand the problem myself when, in the late 1980s, I took colour slides of four frames of the strip, blew them up and rendered them into two oil paintings. I was delighted at the way the paintings turned out - except for one small detail. In one of the panels there's a small picture of Dan that I have never been able to get right. Thus my homage to Hampson remains out of sight to this day. As time went by Hampson's place was taken by other artists, some of them very good. But the magic seemed to be his alone. By the early 1960s the Eagle was in decline and Hampson forced to find other work. The comic was resurrected a number of times but the versions of Dan Dare that followed were crude imitations: harsh, violent, debased. Dan is a creature of his time and place, as well as a unique creation of his inventor.



Before very long back copies of the Eagle became collector's items. Whereas once you might find tatty piles of old Eagles in many places, very soon there were just individually marked and priced copies in their own cellophane bags. And the prices continued to rise. I was fortunate in that I'd somehow kept hold of a few of my original copies with '87 Manners Road' pencilled into the top corner. Some years later I bought a small bundle of Eagles somewhere, sorted them into years and put them away. Of the many hundreds that were published I suppose I have about sixty – which is enough to hold as tokens without playing the collection game. I'd also kept several of my *Eagle Annuals* fairly intact and later also purchased others. So I ended up with a full run of the earliest dozen or so. Even now they're like time capsules. I only have to get one of them out and thumb the pages and I'm back at a family Christmas unwrapping the coloured paper, spinning away into that wonderful children's world of good and evil, unlimited imagination, vast possibility.

Despite this I'm not a serious collector and have no idea how much my few comics and annuals may be worth, nor the market value of the Ace Doubles still in my possession. [2] I know what they're worth to me and you can't put dollars on that. I did find a single comic in a shop on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh in 2000. It was in fine condition and only cost a few pounds so I bought it. On another occasion I found a pile of Eagles in a second hand bookshop in a small town in country Victoria. They'd had been manufactured in Australia. But the printing was poor and the bright colours had been altogether lost. I realised that a generation of kids 'down under' had probably never seen the originals, nor been transfixed, as I was, by the sheer brilliance of the imagery week after week; never realised that the original artwork, design and storyline had all been so exceptional. It was Frank's son Peter who perhaps best summed up the comic's appeal when he wrote in later years that:

> Britain had never seen anything like this before. In a decade of technological pessimism (the bomb, the cold war, etc) here was a comic with stories that were optimistic, intensely colourful and richly detailed, both visually and in their story line. And with the possibility of space travel fast becoming a reality, they contained the irresistible combination of realistic contemporary heroes fighting evil and tyranny in an exciting, imaginative and entirely believable parallel world. [3]

For me Frank Hampson's genius sparked a life-long sense of interest and involvement in the future. He seeded in my dawning awareness a view that, challenging though it undoubtedly

is, the future can be positive, something to look forward to and to which we can all contribute in countless ways. Sure, there are plenty of 'Mekons' just about everywhere and always have been. But there are others who don't find the prospect of Dystopia, technological overkill, the Matrix, overwhelming. A humanised future is just as achievable now as it was back then.

I'd like to think that Dan Dare is not merely a child's fantasy but that there's a little bit of him – and what he represents - in just about everyone. Perhaps he was a 'pilot of the future' in more ways than one.

Notes and references

1. R. Crompton, *The Man Who Drew Tomorrow*, Who Dares Publishing, London, 1985.
2. These were small, brightly coloured, pulp paperbacks from the late 1950s onward. They each had two front covers - one for each of the novellas they contained.
3. S. J. Hampson, The birth of Dan Dare and Eagle. https://frankhampsonartwork.co.uk/articleaboutFrankHampson.html