

THE MAN WHO DREW TOMORROW: EXPLORING THE FUTURE THROUGH DAN DARE

By Richard A. Slaughter



Image source: Canva

After the carnage and destruction of World War II the 1950s were a period of recovery and reconstruction for all those blighted by the conflict, which included those from South Coast cities, such as Portsmouth, U.K., where my generation grew up in the shadow of war.

Our parents had lived right through it since the Naval Dockyard was a prime military target. They carried the memories of terror and privation: narrow escapes, bomb shelters, explosions, and chaos. For kids, the conflict appeared in the form of ration books and bombsites -- echoes of something terrible beyond our experience.

As such it was a plain, unadorned life. Church on Sunday, occasional outings but, overall, greyish, local, limited. I was about 10 years old when something from another world fell into my hands -- a brightly illustrated comic called *The Eagle*. I had no idea where it came from, how it was made, by whom or why. All I knew is that week by week it fed my imagination and transported me elsewhere.

WORK OF GENIUS

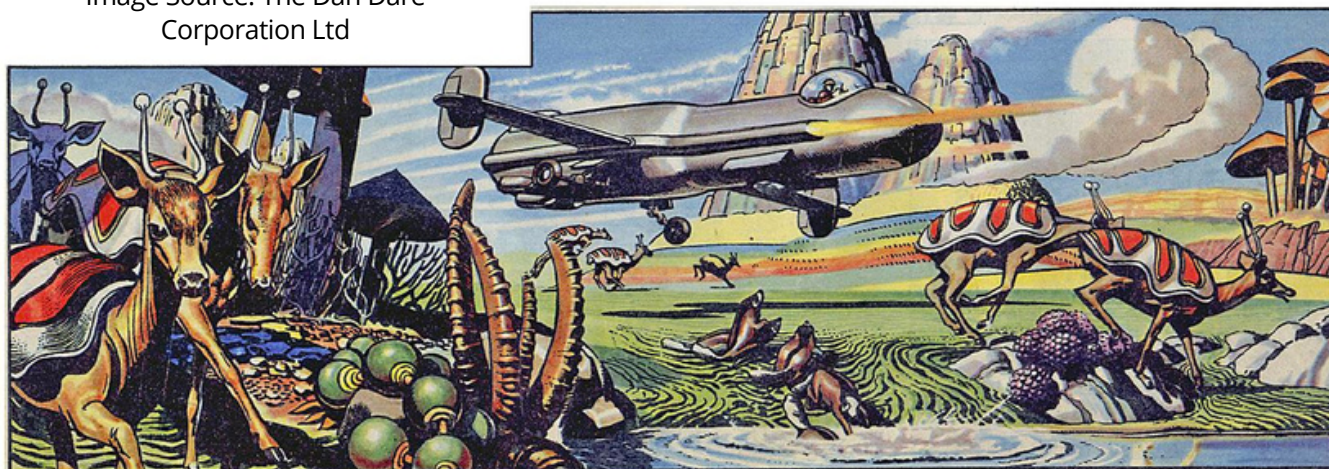
The first thing to hit my color-starved eyes was the cover, red and yellow, with an elegant, stylized eagle over the top left panel. Then, underneath and to the right, was the main panel of the Dan Dare strip. Occasionally the whole front page would be taken up with a panoramic view of a scene in space, 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. At the heart of the comic was a colorful two-page cutaway image displaying the interior structures of aircraft, ships, power stations and the like. Here, youngsters could satisfy a barely expressed desire to understand 'how things work.'

Later generations might well dismiss the *The Eagle's* presentation and content as somewhat conservative and culturally constrained. But to kids at the time, such concepts could not have been more remote. Looking back, it was a work of genius.

Dan and Digby landing on Terra Nova. F. Hampson, *The Eagle*, 1956.

Image Source: The Dan Dare Corporation Ltd



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 comic strip, in particular, drew us powerfully forward. They showed us that there was 'something' beyond the post-war world. And, in so doing, laid the foundations for positivity and hope. They lit within 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. As [a later writer](#) expressed it:

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."

This is, without doubt, the spark that marked the origins of my later career as a futurist / foresight practitioner. In the early 1980s I went to a British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) meeting in Brighton. It provided the one and only chance I had to meet and thank the person who stood at the center of the *Eagle's* success – Dan Dare's creator, Frank Hampson. I soon discovered, however, that during the early 1960s Hampson had been brutally treated

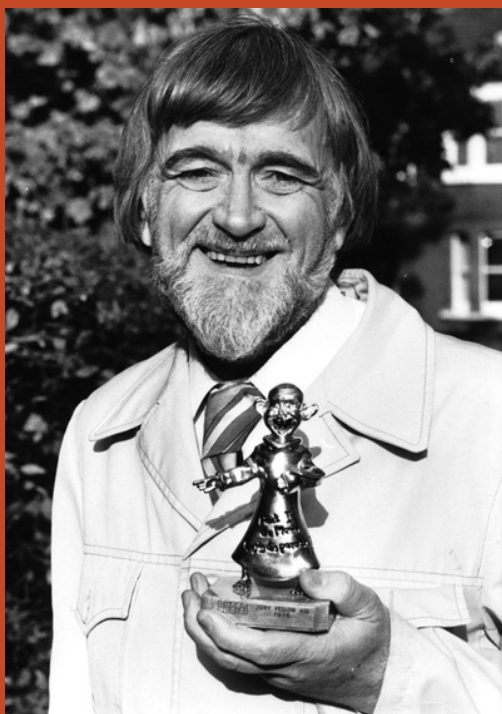


McHoo Masterpiece.
F. Hampson, The Eagle, 1959
 Image Source: The Dan Dare Corporation Ltd

by his publishers. While his creation continued to evolve, a fair share of royalties was denied to him. The fact that the 1950s were his most successful period makes the achievement even more ironic and remarkable. It also raises the question as to what else may help explain the near-legendary status accorded to his work over time.

MASTER DRAFTSMAN, CREDIBLE CHARACTERIZATION

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 later book about him was called [The Man Who Drew Tomorrow](#). It's exactly right. Even now, decades later, the vehicles, ships, spacecraft often look very much as though they still belong in the future. The sheer quality of the artwork is evident in the comic and the few original works I've seen are still considered unequalled in the genre. Nowadays a single original page layout can sell for perhaps AUD\$4,000 (about \$2,650 in US). Back in 1977, the Science Museum in London apparently agreed with the readership and set up its own [Dan Dare display](#).



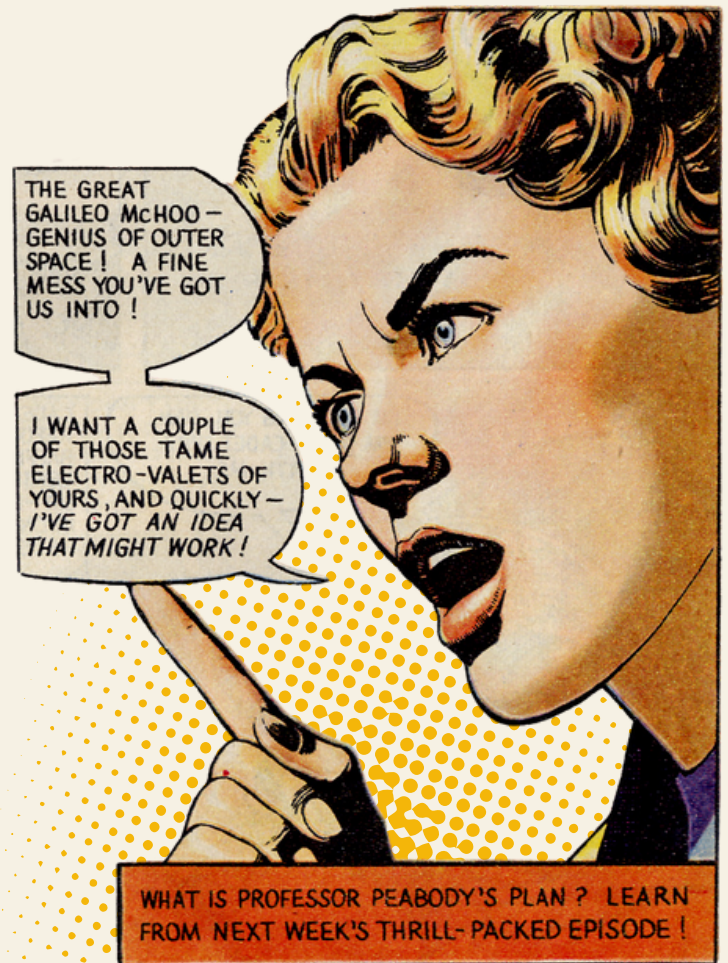
Frank Hampson

Image Source: www.frankhampson.co.uk



Image source: Shutterstock

If Hampson's work was merely based on visual appeal, however, the strip would not have appeared so remarkable. Perhaps the underlying reason for his durable success was the artist's ability to render fully human characters, both male and female, and to embed them within a range of exquisitely rendered artificial and seemingly natural environments. His depiction of alien ecologies was exemplary and clearly drew on a deep understanding of natural form. One of the key characters was Sir Hubert Guest, Dan's superior. He cut a striking figure with his short grey hair and military bearing. There's a real shock therefore, for all who knew Sir Hubert as a comic strip character, when he appears, albeit briefly, in rare video footage as a living, breathing human being right there in Hampson's studio. He was actually Hampson's real-life father. Equally, Professor Peabody, who was no shrinking violet, was also based on a real person. Again, Hampson was ahead of the pack. It turned out later that Prof. Jocelyn Mabel Peabody was the [first female professor](#) illustrated in children's literature.



Professor Peabody. F. Hampson, The Eagle, 1959
Image Source: The Dan Dare Corporation Ltd



Dan, Stripey and recovering 'Phant' warrior.
Oil painting, R. Slaughter. 1978

Next to Dan himself, one of the most memorable and lively 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 humor. He exuded the sense that human fallibility was very much part of this future, but not really anything to worry about. In some of the stories a small striped animal known as Stripey made an appearance. His utterances were usually a variation on 'kuk, kuk, kuk, koo.'

GOOD AND EVIL

Dan's antithesis, and frequent enemy, was the [the Mekon](#), a small, evil genius, with an ugly, emaciated body and an oversized brain. He lived on Venus, a planet divided between his barbaric green-skinned Treen army and the floating cities of the peaceful Therons, in the south. If Dan represents positive human agency, the Mekon is cold intelligence and sheer instrumental power with no shred of humanity. He is instrumental reason gone mad. Dystopia. The Devil. Entropy. Death. The dynamic of many of Hampson's stories clearly derived from the age-old conflict between such polarized forces. One of the few things I recall clearly from hearing Hampson speak at Brighton was how Dan was partly modelled on an idealized 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 internalized 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 frames from the strip, blew them up and rendered them into oil paintings.

As time went by Hampson's place was taken by other artists, some of whom created legendary figures in their own right: Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman and so on. Unfortunately, however, as the 'superpowers' of these figures grew more outrageous, their



**Dan Dare. Voyage to Venus (re-issue),
Titan Books, 2004**

Image Source: The Dan Dare Corporation Ltd

human qualities seemed to diminish. The seemingly magic combination of depth characterization, exquisite artwork and positivity was lost. By the late 1960s, The Eagle was in decline and Hampson turned to other work. The comic was resurrected a number of times but the mass market versions of Dan Dare that followed tended to follow broader trends and become crude imitations of the mainstream: harsh, violent, and debased. More recently, however, several mainstream publishers have conserved the best of Hampson's work and made it available in more than one series of beautifully rendered hard copy art books.

LEGACY

Dan certainly remains a creature of his time and place. But it seems unlikely that he, his creator, and the team behind this remarkable work will be forgotten anytime soon. For me, 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 which we can all help create in countless ways. Sure, there are plenty of 'Mekons' just about everywhere, and there always have been. But there are others who don't find the prospect of dystopia, technological overkill, the Matrix, overwhelming. A humanized future is just as achievable now as it was back then.

I'd like to think that Dan Dare is not just 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.



Richard A. Slaughter

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