

The Town Drunk

Presents

Letters to the Journal of Experimental History

Robert Lopresti

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Dear Editor,

The article on Kendrick and Wolescu's research ("Nordic Intransigence," 26:1) was fascinating. However, I can't help feeling (admittedly, with twenty-twenty hindsight) that their attempt to persuade eighth-century Vikings to try vegetarianism was certain to fail. My sympathies to Dr. Wolescu's widow.

Paul Werley, University of London

Dear Editor,

Why is it that every attempt to use time travel for *practical* purposes causes such rage amongst our colleagues? The angry letters in response to Lambertini's report ("The Past as Incubator Once Again," 26:1; Letters, 26:2) suggest that we have all become such dedicated theoreticians that we can't stand it when a member of our ranks gets his hands dirty with an application.

What is Lambertini accused of? Essentially he pushed modern automobile technology into the hands of the young Henry Ford, resulting in an alternative universe that developed clean and efficient transportation far surpassing our own. This is well within the ever-growing rules of ASEH.

What makes your correspondents howl is that Lambertini has patented these inventions in our own universe and hopes to get rich off them. Well, why shouldn't he? He brought these devices to our world as surely as any inventor dreaming at a drawing board. Besides, it's not like he is going into the future of *our* universe and stealing the money from inventors there. (If only he—or anyone else—*could* break the time-of-origin barrier and visit the future. Wouldn't the ethicists at ASEH have a field day writing rules for *that*?)

The fact is, the inventions would not exist in U-5233 if that cosmos hadn't been created by Lambertini's interference in the first place. Why shouldn't he benefit from the result?

I think our colleagues have been dining on sour grapes.

Miriam Akebe, University of Cape Town

Dear Editor,

Resnick's article ("Failing to Save Kennedy," 26:2) was fascinating, but I think her conclusions are misguided. She suggests that the president's death in a crash of Air Force One in 1964 or, alternately, in a tumble down the White House stairs in January 1965, proves that there was indeed a conspiracy to kill JFK. This, despite her conclusive demonstration that Oswald was a lone gunman.

I propose instead that Resnick has found one of "history's sticking points," to use Terrence Yamamoto's inspired phrase. You may remember that Yamamoto tried in ten different scenarios to throw the Battle of Trenton to the royalists. In each trial the rebels won, under increasingly unlikely circumstances. Only by preventing George Washington's birth entirely was Yamamoto able to give the Hessians a victory.

As a scientist I hesitate to use a word that carries as much superstitious baggage as "fate," but it appears that Kennedy's death during his presidency, like Washington's victory at Trenton, was something that was just plain going to happen. It can't be changed without rewriting the history of the period so as to make it unrecognizable.

Another example, as yet unpublished, would be my failure in 71 attempts to create a universe in which Paula Hundeen would go to the senior prom with me instead of Dickie Salisbury.

Max Gottesmann, Western Washington University

Dear Editor,

Dr. Glidden's attempt to reform Shamanski ("Mrs. S. Still Dead," 26:2) was not the complete failure she takes it for. Her fruitless attempt to make our field's errant founder less of a cad is, in fact, a clear victory for Nature over Nurture.

In a long series of experiments, Glidden tried to influence the young Shamanski's schooling, religion, even baby food, all to no effect. She has demonstrated convincingly that nothing later than prenatal gene manipulation would have made Nickolas Shamanski into a better human being.

As for Glidden's plaintive suggestion that Pauline Bott be recognized as the true creator of our field, I'm afraid that's just wishful thinking. Bott was brilliant, of course, but she was also cautious, professional, and highly ethical. She worried so much about changing the present that her three years of hesitant, baby-step research failed to make a single observable change in the past. It took the bold, possibly deranged mind of Shamanski to prove Bott's own proposed Law of Non-Reciprocity and create U-2, the first true alternate universe.

As the mother of time travel, Bott deserves no more credit for founding the field of experimental history than Benjamin Franklin, as discoverer of electricity, deserves for inventing the light bulb.

Naturally, I wish experimental history had begun with Bott's proclamation that "the gates of time are open!" But the fact is it really began three years later with Shamanski's boast: "I killed my mother before I was born, and it didn't harm a hair on my head."

Sciences, like people—even time travelers—can't choose their parents. Genetics began with a cheat, archaeology with a thief, and EH with Shamanski. Deal with it.

Garrett Pathi, University of Toronto

Dear Editor,

I wish to protest in the strongest terms your decision to publish John Fleer's gleeful report on his own misconduct ("Essene of the Crime," 26:2). His violations of our professional code of ethics are bad enough, but his frivolous tone suggests he still does not comprehend the seriousness of his actions.

To determine whether the Dead Sea Scrolls were written at Qumran, and if so, by whom, was an excellent concept for a time travel study. But to carry a modern device back in time is a clear violation of the ASEH rules on anachronism. To then *lose* the object borders on the criminal.

Because of Fleer and his fountain pen, there is now a universe that believes the Dead Sea Scrolls are a modern fake. I suppose we should be grateful it wasn't, say, a cell phone that he dropped into that clay jar, in which case those 1940s scientists would be searching the skies for UFOs.

Since you have not done so, rest assured that I will be reporting Fleer's shameful behavior to the Ethics Committee.

Deng Wu, Beijing Institute of Temporalism

Dear Editor,

With all the interviews and other nonsense that comes with receiving a Nobel Peace Prize, I have only recently found the time (pardon the pun) to catch up with your twenty-fifth anniversary special. Congratulations on that milestone.

I was most amused by Charlie Chaiken's article ("U-prime and the Causation Paradox," 25:1). Amazing that people are still letting my former assistant write for supposedly learned journals.

I won't discuss here what he said about my own work; rest assured it will be covered in detail in the libel suit. His main argument was, as usual, way off base; there is *no* paradox involved in time travel, as he would know if he had stayed awake in his temporal physics class.

But he did cause me to think about our curious habit of calling the cosmos we inhabit *Universe-prime*. We experimental historians jokingly refer to our creations as pocket or virtual universes, but we smugly assume that the one we inhabit is the genuine article. How can we claim to know this?

Consider all the moments the history of our world was changed by one trifling action *or* *inaction*. How can we tell that each of those wasn't the work of some tinkering historian?

Twenty-three hundred years ago Alexander the Great ruled virtually every land he knew of. Then, at the height of his power, he died from an illness that has never been identified. The mighty Macedonian empire split into pieces, and a dinky cowtown named Rome grew up to fill the vacuum. Doesn't this sound like a bored historian playing games?

Of course, the direct murder of someone in the past is a violation of ASEH's strictest rule—*in our world*. But who knows what the rules are in some other universe?

Or try this one: perhaps some historian in a modern Confederate States of America decided to see how the world would have turned out if his side had lost. He forged a copy of Lee's battle plans, wrapped them around a few cigars for authenticity, and dropped them where a union soldier was sure to find them. And so, in our world, the Battle of Antietam became the bloodiest day in American history, and the Confederate advance was turned back.

And what of Pauline Bott? For those (probably including Charlie Chaiken) who never got around to reading her autobiography, let me explain that her first attempts at time travel were a complete failure. Her funding was cancelled; the staff was on the verge of dispersing. Then, at the last moment, an anonymous donor contributed the necessary cash and *voilà*—time travel was discovered.

Jones and Keillor conducted a set of experiments to discover the identity of that anonymous donor. They failed. Who could better hide his tracks than a historian, coming from the distant future to push the discovery of time travel farther back into the past? Perhaps in the *true* Universe-Prime Bott's experiments in 1971 were a failure and time travel wasn't invented for another ten or twenty years.

My word, imagine if we had gotten all the way to the twenty-first century without time travel! Climatologists would still be trying to calculate whether the planet is heating up or cooling down without the simple technique of manipulating the climate in the past to see what would follow.

Most likely the Theories of War for which I received the Nobel (finally! I thought they were waiting for my funeral) would still be a mystery. Think of all the progress that humankind has made since it became possible for both sides to calculate the outcome of most wars after, at most, a battle or two. Without my work the Cold War might still be going on. Or even Viet Nam!

The one thing that is certain is that we would not be celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of your worthy journal here in 2004. And Charlie Chaiken might have had to find honest work, probably scrubbing toilets.

Daniel Kearney, University of the Moon

Robert Lopresti lives in Washington state. More than 30 of his mystery short stories have been published, including an Anthony Award nominee and a Derringer Award winner. His novel *Such a Killing Crime* was published by Kearney Street Books in 2005. His first science fiction story appeared in the anthology *Jigsaw Nation* in the spring of 2006. Visit his web site at <http://www.roblopresti.com>.