

Olaf Stapledon

By Gavin Chappell

In his day, Olaf Stapledon was a science fiction writer whose only real contemporary rival was his friend HG Wells. He went on to inspire writers such as Arthur C Clarke and the inventor Freeman Dyson. He was also a respected Wirral resident who left us a stretch of woodland named after him, and a house in Caldy that he built himself.

Stapledon was born on 10 May 1886, in Wallasey. He was named William Olaf, but everyone always called him Olaf. Despite spending much of his early years in Port Said, he lived in Wirral for the best part of his life. Even when he became a successful literary figure, Stapledon remained in Wirral, living at first in West Kirby, before building his own house in Caldy.

As a science fiction writer, he is highly influential, if perhaps not the most accessible. His two greatest works, *Last and First Men*, and *Star Maker*, describe vast epochs of future history or immense expanses of space. Civilisations rise and fall, and the individual is insignificant in the face of infinity. Although individual characters are often blotted out by the vast scope of his imagination, Stapledon's own somewhat provincial life informs them – including his years in Wirral. Despite the wildness of his imagination, he always drew on personal experience for his inspiration.

Mere paragraphs in both works have been taken as the inspiration for entire science fiction works by other writers and indeed inventors. Freeman Dyson invented the Dyson Sphere after being inspired by *Star Maker*. Others found Stapledon a source of

negative inspiration: CS Lewis cites Stapledon, with his Socialist, agnostic (and, it has to be admitted, imperialist) view of the universe as one reason why he wrote his Christian science fiction *Space Trilogy*, to propagate his contrary *Weltanschauung*. Stapledon is said to have been the inspiration for the villain Professor Weston. Lewis, like JRR Tolkien, was a regular visitor to Wirral resident and fellow-Inkling Roger Lancelyn Green, but there is no evidence that Lewis and Stapledon ever met. However, in a talk given in Manchester in October 1948, Stapledon mentioned Lewis's *Space Trilogy* as one of his favourite works of science fiction.

In 1936, Stapledon gave a brief autobiographical sketch to the *Saturday Review of Literature*, in which he said that he was

...born in the Wirral, across the water from Liverpool. The Wirral has nearly always been my headquarters. I now live at the opposite corner of the peninsula, across the water from Wales.

The area of his birth was Poulton-cum-Seacombe, of which he saw little, spending his first six years in Port Said in Egypt, where his father worked as the manager of a shipping firm. After Stapledon's father returned from Port Said in 1901 they moved into a house in West Kirby, 2 Marine Park. Ten years later, as the family fortunes continued to burgeon, they bought a house on Caldy Hill named Annery. From here an observer could look north across West Kirby and to the sea, and west across the Dee estuary to the mountains of Wales. Caldy Hill came to have great significance in Stapledon's work.

Stapledon was educated in various schools in Liverpool, before going to Abbotsholme School, a utopian private school which emphasised physical fitness as much as intellectual rigour and inspired Stapledon to remain highly active for his entire life. This was followed by Baliol College, Oxford, where he graduated with an MA in 1913.

For some time after graduation, Stapledon was at a loose end as to a career. His Socialist inclinations and the inspiration provided by nearby Port Sunlight made him toy with a career as an architect. His parents discouraged him, since this would require further schooling. He worked briefly in shipping and education, with little success, by his own admission, and had his first book published, a collection of poetry entitled *Latter-Day Psalms*, before the outbreak of World War One. As a conscientious objector, he did not join up, but instead became a driver in the Friends' Ambulance Unit.

On his return from the war, Stapledon married his cousin, Agnes Miller. He had loved her since childhood. However, he was later to carry on affairs with her unenthusiastic acquiescence, and to immortalise her in *Star Maker* as “merely a useful, but often infuriating adjunct” to his personal life. They had two children, Mary (born 1920) and John (born 1923). As a wedding present Stapledon's father gave them the house on Grosvenor Avenue that appears in *Star Maker*, described as a “mean little villa” in the posthumously-published early draft known as *Nebula Maker*. It is in West Kirby, across the road from Ashton Park, on whose boating lake Stapledon sailed the model boats he enjoyed making for his children.

After the war, Stapledon spent much of his time lecturing extramurally for the University of Liverpool and for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). At the same time he was studying towards the Ph. D. in philosophy that he was awarded in 1925. His next book, *A Modern Theory of Ethics* (1929) was not enough to ensure him a regular post at a university, and this lack of academic success may have been one reason why he turned to writing fiction. Ironically, due to his "speculative fiction" he became the most influential philosopher Merseyside has produced.

His first novel was published in 1930. The initial inspiration for *Last and First Men* came to him while watching seals from the cliffs of Llanbadrig peninsula during a family outing to Anglesey in the summer of 1928. He later compared his Anglesey vision with the experience of "stout Cortez" in Keats's sonnet:

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific - and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise -
Silent upon a peak in Darien.*

The seals he saw on the rocks below were sunning themselves and squealing when the waves hit and they were drenched in spray. Their vulnerability seemed almost human to Stapledon. According to his later book *The Opening of the Eyes*, it was then that he 'had a sudden fantasy of man's whole future, aeon upon aeon of strange vicissitudes and gallant endeavours in world after world...'

The resulting work described the future history of the human race until its last days as inhabitants of Neptune, after two billion years of mutation and evolution, navigating such hazards and horrors as invasion from Mars and even ‘an Americanized planet.’ The Llanbadrig seals directly inspired the “fifth men,” who live on Venus after Earth has become uninhabitable, and adapt to the planet’s watery conditions. However, their descendants, the flying men who represent the seventh evolution of humanity, now living on Venus, were based on the seabirds of the Dee estuary, which Olaf, a keen ornithologist, studied and watched for much of his life.

Stapledon wrote *Last and First Men* in West Kirby, in an attic study at his house in Grosvenor Avenue. He would write until eleven in the morning, when he would have tea with his wife and daughter and sometimes tell them about his labours. Agnes also worked as proofreader and critic, looking through his many drafts with “devastating sanity.”

Last and First Men was hailed as a ‘masterpiece’ by JB Priestley, and its sequel, *Last Men in London*, was a semi-autobiographical work examining the condition of modern man. This was followed by *Odd John*, a story of a mutant superhuman, John Wainwright, who establishes a utopian colony of other superhumans which is ultimately destroyed by normal society. This theme is reiterated yet reversed in his later work *Sirius* (1944) where a dog appears as the superior being. However, this book was preceded by Stapledon’s magnum opus.

Star Maker, which takes its reader on a journey away from Earth, out across the entire universe and back again, begins with its narrator, after a domestic argument, going up onto the hill behind his house. The bleakness of the scene echoes Dante at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, ‘midway through the journey of our life.’ The narrator describes the heather-clad hilltop, the suburb below, the “curtained windows” of his home, the hills, the sea. Thus far, it is autobiographical: the hill is Caldy Hill; the house is 7 Grosvenor Avenue in West Kirby. The surrounding landscape is Wirral, Wales, and the Irish Sea.

From the hilltop the narrator travels out on a mental journey across the limitless wastes of space, encountering world after world, alien race after alien race, galactic empires and worlds at war. One place he reaches is the ‘other Earth,’ a world very much like our own at the time of writing, the late 1930s. One place on this other Earth is described as ‘a maritime country in the temperate zone, a brilliantly green peninsula’¹: in fact, a parallel Wirral: perhaps the only such example in all the annals of science fiction.

On his eventual return from the immensity of infinity to the littleness of Caldy Hill, following his encounter with the super-divine *Star Maker*, the narrator experiences a vision of the entire world on the brink of global war. The novel ends with a description of the land below him, West Kirby and the surrounding area.

While *Last and First Men* had been hailed as a masterpiece, *Star Maker*, as Stapledon had predicted, raised “thunder on the Left and on the Right.” On the political and

¹ Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker*

religious right, CS Lewis was quick to disapprove of the book, whose depiction of an entirely amoral deity was “sheer devil-worship” to his mind.

Later works included the previously mentioned *Sirius*, and *Darkness and the Light*, which shows two alternative futures for the human race. Later works were *Death into Life*, *The Flames* and *A Man Divided*, while *The Opening of the Eyes* and *Encounters* were published posthumously. *The Opening of the Eyes* includes a chapter where the narrator goes up onto Caldly Hill, echoing the beginning of *Star Maker*, but its title ‘The Heavens Declare – Nothing’ suggest a bleak and entirely godless universe.

Caldly Hill was very dear to Stapledon, and he, along with Sir A V Paton and other local benefactors, was one of the people who “had the imagination and the courage to save this natural beauty spot from the builder as a heritage for the people for all time.”²

In 1940, Stapledon built his own house at Simon’s Field on Barton Hey Road in Caldly, where he lived until his death. In 1949 he came to international prominence, even notoriety, when his Socialist convictions led to his participation in the Soviet backed Cultural and Scientific Conference for Peace, in New York.

According to Patrick A McCarthy, to his neighbours he seemed ‘a friendly fellow, rather eccentric’ who apparently ‘swam in the lake at all times of year.’ Lakes are in short supply in West Kirby: if he swam in the boating lake in Ashton Park (or the Marine Lake, for that matter), it is no wonder he was thought of as an eccentric. His

² The Wirral Peninsula, Norman Ellison

neighbours were amazed to see him in his fifties, cracking the ice on the estuary to go for a swim in January. One of his short stories, (*East is West* written in 1934) set in a parallel West Kirby in a world where the Chinese and Japanese have become the dominant culture, also describes him swimming in the estuary.

The Dee certainly was important to him; as a keen birdwatcher, like fellow West Kirby writer Norman ‘Nomad’ Ellison, he was fascinated by the ornithology of the area, and as mentioned the estuary birds provided the inspiration for his avian race of humans in *Last and First Men*. His reputation for eccentricity and extravagant ‘keep-fit’ was a legacy of his Abbotsholme education, and in his diary (5th Jan 1914), Stapledon records that he “Ran in storm & hail to Oxton & back, being paced part way back by a cyclist. It was about 13 miles. All the while I could have shouted for joy.”

Despite this, at the age of 64 he suffered a coronary heart occlusion that led to his death. He was cremated at Landican Crematorium, where the vice-chancellor of Liverpool University gave the eulogy. After his death, in accordance with his will, his family took his ashes from Simon’s Field, over the railway bridge, across the golf course and scattered them on the low cliffs overlooking the Dee, where the birds Stapledon had loved in life still soared, like the fantastic seventh race of humanity that he prophesied in *Last and First Men*.