

The Forty-Seven

A Mystery in Scientific Communication

*composed on the occasion of
the sixtieth anniversary of*

The British Society for the History of Science

B S H S
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1947  2007

What is this?

The British Society for the History of Science was founded in 1947. As a diversion from the academic rigours of this year's Annual Conference, we have prepared the mystery story you will find on the pages following, which sees a historical researcher of 2007 investigating another, less salubrious and infinitely more bewildering organisation, also created six decades ago. Will current analytical priorities be of any use in probing the twisted symbology of television's favourite scientist – or will the whole investigation collapse for want of a decent newspaper archive? Will our hero ultimately unravel the true nature of the Forty-Seven?

More importantly: will you?

Study the text carefully and you will find a number of clues which should help to bring you, by the conclusion of the story, to the realisation achieved by Dr Reynard Luff. You will then be in a position to answer the following question:

What is the Forty-Seven?

A one-word answer – six letters, please – is expected.

A small prize (very probably a coveted, limited-edition BSHS Sixtieth Anniversary mug) will be awarded to each of

- the first correct entry emailed to forty-seven@bshs.org.uk during the conference, and
- an entry drawn at random from those deposited with the conference stewards before Saturday evening.

A systematic solution will be made available in due course through the Society's website.

Good luck!

“Date of establishment... 1947. Well, the Society’s listed. Nice to see we signify in the information age. There’s also Atlantic Records, BAFTA, the CIA... oh look, and the ICA. Cominform, the US Air Force, Malvern Town Football Club – that’s the Big Three in a nutshell. No mention of your Committee of 1947, though, Maggie. You’d think the clue would be in the name.”

“That wasn’t the name. No ‘nineteen.’ ‘Committee of Forty-Seven,’ they went by, or just ‘The Forty-Seven.’ Mulliner always said the year was a happy coincidence. Heaven only knows with what.”

“Members?”

“There were never forty-six other bampots crazy enough, or if there were they wouldn’t have found each other. No internet in those days, Ray. I’d say ten, maybe fifteen besides Mulliner. Tailing off from there, as the stories got around.”

“Were they really that far off the scale?”

“When I started the project, I just knew the standard story. Cuddly eccentric with dubious political past, you know?”

Reynard Luff nodded his assent. He remembered staying up past his bedtime to see Wykeham Mulliner’s final TV show: that was when he’d told his parents he wanted to be a scientist. He also remembered, fifteen years later, laughing along with a popular young comedian’s impression of Mulliner the goose-stepping lunatic. Come to think of it, that was around the time he’d had to tell his dissertation supervisor that he didn’t want to be a scientist any more.

“That all started in a manifesto the Forty-Seven put out around the launch. Rambling, bombastic stuff. ‘National salvation’ and ‘the slavering hordes from without’ – that’s a pet phrase. The hordes are always slavering. Now this, as you’d guess, rang official alarm bells. I haven’t been able to find some interesting stuff.”

Maggie Ekborg had a growing reputation in the field for piecing together history from the absent record: gaps in archive runs, embarrassing silences in audio, official documents whose mysteriously restricted classification told as much as if they had been declassified. “What didn’t you learn?” asked Luff.

“I didn’t learn that Special Branch got one of their men recruited into the Forty-Seven to check up on a number of alarming suspicions. It’s generally rather difficult to allay an alarming suspicion, but he managed it in fine style by coming back with something equally alarming but completely different. What Mulliner and his pals wanted national salvation from was the lid coming off Hell, Ray. Literally.”

Luff belatedly produced a pen and began taking notes. “How so?”

“This is the stuff I *really* couldn’t find. But it looks like the slavering hordes were somewhat along the lines of vampires, mummies... cut-price Dennis Wheatley stuff. And then this man goes on to define public science in Britain for two generations.”

“Some researchers have all the luck. So you thought I might be able to suggest approaches?”

“I thought, to be honest, you might be able to suggest you’d take the whole business away and never make me see it again. The book needs finished and I’m entering a strict Bampot Exclusion Zone: the Mulliner weirdness angle would be filling a much-needed gap where I’m concerned. Whereas someone with your reputation, Ray...”

Luff thought for a moment and nodded again: this, he later reflected, was usually his mistake. Ekborg, who knew him well, smiled and handed over a suspiciously well-prepared bundle of notebooks and a CD. “Good luck. Oh, and keep away from Raymond Baxter and *The Sky at Night* or I may be obliged to kill you.”

Luff found Maggie's handwriting considerably more legible than his own. Between sessions of his beloved essay marking, he put in a good three weeks' activity following up her leads, building the groundwork. He viewed the surviving telecines of *Great Visual Representations in Science* – what would a digital-era commissioning editor make of such a title? – with the young Mulliner enthusing over Kneller's Newton portraits and a model of the double helix. He chased, unsuccessfully, details of the unproduced episode, lost to an engineer's strike. He waded through anecdotes from acquaintances and colleagues in television and science: the portraits of Mulliner that emerged divided remarkably neatly between charming bon-vivant and paranoid curmudgeon.

He puzzled long over a comment by Mulliner's care assistant in a local press obituary: "He always joked that he looked like a corpse, but he was full of life." The grainy photo alongside, probably the last ever taken of Mulliner, showed a distinctly non-cadaverous face, chubby as in his youth. But then, everything about Mulliner was puzzling. A gregarious and well-connected man who regularly locked himself away in solitude for three or four days; a public and passionate anti-vivisectionist who once answered charges – or so it was reported – for shooting dead a passing dog from the window of his home. Most remarkably, Mulliner had reached his famous rotundity after a student career as a competitive sprinter. Leading by a hair's breadth at a major European race, he had supposedly thrown up his arms at the finish, allowing his nearest opponent to break the tape. He had never competed again.

The Forty-Seven controversy offered more concrete judgments, all pointing in hopelessly contradictory directions. Mulliner had been declaimed as, variously, a neo-fascist paramilitary; a Soviet mole and provocateur; an incompetent MI5 recruit who could not keep track of his own cover story; an absurdist conceptual gadfly. Most alarming was Mulliner's trial for involvement in acquiring custom-produced rifles, at which he was acquitted in murky circumstances in 1948.

Luff was overwhelmed, and called for backup.

"Kiran."

"Yo!"

"Don't do that on the office phone. I could be anyone. I could be your thesis supervisor, for heaven's sake. Anyway. How's the thesis?"

"Holding at four months ahead of schedule. Sick to the teeth of Victorians and their stupid pipes and dinosaurs. Skint."

"Wonderful. What do you know about Wykeham Mulliner?"

"Invented TV science in the Fifties. Media Don Number One. Except he was never really a don. Trained in chemistry, I think, name on a few crystallographic papers, typical Jack-of-all-sciences once he got an audience. Amused small children, though not my cousin who hated him, by capering about pretending to spin an orb web. Retired some time before I was born, no matter how old that makes you feel. Currently dead. Politics, though never firmly documented, said to lie somewhere outside sweetness and kittens territory."

"An excellent summary of the established literature. Mulliner also led a shadowy band of occultists who felt their national identity was under attack from supernatural forces."

"Course he did. I'll file him with the others."

"Good. What am I now about to ask you to do?"

"Wander round the country poking into tiresome archives that have never heard of online cataloguing or digitisation; amass any and all available detail—"

"*Pedantically* amass. We've discussed this."

"Sorry, Doc. *Pedantically* amass any and all available detail on the life and work of Dr Mulliner; then come back here and make intelligent decisions on which bits to bother you with. And the

answer to your next question is yes, same rates as the aliens thing, and please can you get Finance off my back with their daft questions about why I'm travelling first class."

"Deal. Call me in a week, Kiran."

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Meanwhile, the obvious means of cutting through the hearsay seemed to be to track down surviving members of the Forty-Seven itself, if, indeed, any remained. Yet the group, beyond Mulliner as its public face, had worked with remarkable anonymity; any records Mulliner himself might have kept lay, infuriatingly, with his other effects in a Hertfordshire landfill. Following the Ekborg methodology, however, brought Luff to a conspicuous absence of evidence on the doings, around 1947-8, of a Sergeant Cargill, now deceased, who could reasonably be identified with the Special Branch plant.

Buttressing this with some questionable research practice involving telephone directories brought him before very long into the orbit of a semi-detached house, a round, beaming pink face and a boyishly enthusiastic manner. Luff got the strong impression that Mr Cargill, junior, wished he could have become an undercover agent like his father – which alone would, of course, have nixed his chances of doing so immediately.

"Here we go!" Cargill, rummaging in the loft, handed down a battered cardboard box. "Dad kept some of the stuff from operations – personal belongings, see? Like souvenirs. I get it down and have a look through sometimes. This one, I always think, was the strangest of the lot. Take a look at that!"

A curious and unquestionably alarming symbolic device adorned the cover of a cheap foolscap pamphlet which, Luff realised, was described at second hand in one of Maggie's sources: the handbook of the Forty-Seven. Below the image, a motto Luff had not seen: FORTY-SEVEN, THE STUFF OF OUR SALVATION. Inside, several pages on the iniquities of the slaving hordes. No membership list, and nothing of obvious value in the rest of the box: some incomprehensible police reports, expense claims relating chiefly to bus tickets, and an unfamiliar Wilkie Collins novel in cheap paperback. *Poor Miss Finch*. Luff made a mental note to ask one of the literary people; sensation fiction certainly suited the case. But he was drawing blank on the basics.

"Did your father... I mean, what I'm really hoping to find out is who the other members were."

"No, I don't think... wait a minute! That science man from the telly, I believe he was mixed up in it somehow. Winston Mulliner, that was his name, something like that anyway. I always thought that was interesting. But I suppose they never wrote anything down, and" – he tapped his nose theatrically – "Dad was very precise about operational matters, Inspector. Never talked."

Inspector? But the slip was natural if Cargill had grown up around policemen; and Luff, undeniably, was inspecting things. He decided to come to the point.

"This business, the stuff of our salvation. There's something interesting going on there, but no-one seems to know what. Was your father... was there anything in the way he acted, anything like that, which might have given you some clue?" Even as Luff asked it, the question seemed pointless.

"Can't help you there, sorry. I was very young... yes, he would have been years past that operation before I knew anything about anything. Mind you, that connection was kept up."

"I'm sorry?"

Mr Cargill chortled. "They never found him out! Strange, now I think. Mulliner from the television, that's how I remembered. Made sure my Dad was on his Christmas card list!"

Luff, unsystematic and technologically unsound, owed the establishment of his career almost exclusively to a habit of finding the right questions, howsoever simple, at the right moments. He fastened onto one now:

“Was he on your Dad’s?”

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Three dozen names and addresses, scratched out in places with emendations squeezed in to the limit of legibility on the yellowed list Mr Cargill had obligingly retrieved. Here and there beside a name, a neat little cross told its customary sad story. Middle left, Mulliner’s name and last-but-one address at the head of a clump: six contacts standing apart from the family groups and obvious work connections. Mulliner, then three with crosses, two without. All commonplace, unremarkable names, though the first apparent survivor bore an address in Buenos Aires. Mindful of his carbon footprint, Luff turned his attention to the other, and was rewarded.

“Mr Reynard Luff, I take it? Jack Childs. How d’you do?” The man who rose to shake Luff’s hand was lean but imposing, formally dressed, well over six feet in height. He moved slowly but certainly in spite of a prosthetic left leg. In his eyes, Luff recognised the light characteristic of one who knows something another wants to know.

Luff poured the tea, tested the Marantz for level, and began with a few general questions on the life and background of this unlikely former civil servant. Childs seemed disconcertingly aware, leaning forward as Mulliner’s name came up, and further forward still, his eyes shining directly into Luff’s face, as he gently broached the issue of the Forty-Seven.

“Yes – a crazy adventure, indeed. Some would say regrettable. Speaking for myself I have no regrets. We were all young, you should note, and the world had shown itself to be a crazy place. Mulliner recruited me to the Committee some time in ’47. I had a wooden one of these at the time,” – he patted the leg – “I think the connection amused him. He was always keen to draw connections.”

Luff blinked. “Mulliner was an amputee?”

Childs seemed faintly embarrassed. “Of course not. His connections were never so straightforward. I thought you said you knew his work. Representations, visualisations, symbols... Multiple meanings. Looking at the same thing in different ways. Science and literature and folklore and art. I think Mulliner always saw fiction and reality as the same thing. Forty-Seven, my boy! That was the key to the whole shooting-match.”

“I always thought it was Forty-Two.” The whole room was lined with paperback novels; Luff’s eye had come to rest on a Douglas Adams. But the joke, if it was designed to ease the tension, seemed to have fallen rather flat.

“I’m sorry?” Jack Childs merely stared.

“Life, the universe and everything. ‘The ultimate answer to the ultimate question.’ Forty-Two.”

Childs frowned: was he actually making some kind of calculation in his head? “How very obscure,” he announced presently, “and most unsuitable for the purpose at hand. Dear me, no, Forty-Seven was the stuff.”

“The stuff of your salvation?”

For the first time, Childs’ expression registered something more than amused contempt. “My word, you have been busy.” For a moment he was lost in thought again. “The little policeman fellow?”

Luff, deciding there was nothing to be lost, nodded.

“I thought he’d be the kind to leave a trail. Very vertical in his thinking. As I told you, Mulliner always proceeded laterally. Which is probably why Mulliner never spotted the spy in our midst!”

“You never thought to tell him?”

“I didn’t believe,” shrugged Childs, “not the way Mulliner did. There seemed no point in breaking up an association which happened to amuse me.” His eyes clouded. “I may be the only one left now. Somebody should know. Those who headed south in the Fifties, they’re all dead, or if they’re not they don’t write. The policeman stayed in touch, you know. So did Mulliner, used to send me books. Novels.”

“Wilkie Collins?”

Again, it seemed, Luff was off-target. “New ones, for the most part. This was the last. Christmas ’04.”

Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The blue cover design, with its memorable illustration: an unfortunate dog stuck with a pitchfork. Luff tried hard not to be vertical, not to think about Mulliner’s own alleged incident with a dog. “Another connection?”

“Always a connection.” In the old man’s eyes the light was blazing again. “Look at the source of the source!”

This valuable piece of advice – which Luff himself had offered so many times to so many students, and with so little effect, that it had worn smooth in his vocabulary – had an uncanny ring when delivered by his interviewee. Thoroughly discomfited, Luff moved to the direct approach too soon.

“Mr Childs, I must ask you: what was the Forty-Seven for? What was Mulliner in fear of?”

“Well, what do you think?”

“I was told... Monsters? A twentieth-century society for the extermination of vampires?”

“Good Lord, no. The vampires were on our side!” An uncomfortable pause, terminated by Childs with a loud, barking laugh.

“Who was on the other side?”

Childs sat back and steepled his hands. “You should know that by now, Dr Luff.”

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Typical Jack-of-all-sciences once he got an audience. Luff smiled at the irony. Primarily a physicist before he saw the light, he had shown no affinity whatsoever for chemical theory or practice and still shuddered faintly at the sight of a rotavap. Yet here he was, setting up in a malodorous laboratory, awaiting thirty-odd sixth-formers (no doubt equally malodorous) whom the Outreach Co-ordinator felt might be enlightened by the decapitation of Lavoisier. Suppressing a private suspicion that the old tax-farmer had had it coming, he attempted to toggle the video data output for what felt like the forty-seventh time. *Why the hell didn’t I bring Kiran?*

A sudden blithering and buzzing from Luff’s jacket announced that he’d forgotten to turn his phone off again. “Hello Kiran.” His student’s denials of psychic ability were becoming increasingly tiresome. “What gives?”

“Just been doing the press. You’d be amazed how much you can get online from the privacy of your desk these days.”

“Would I?”

“Yes. Practically nothing. I’m skimming microfilms at Colindale.”

“You have my sympathies, Kiran.”

“Thanks. I also have a splitting headache and two epic revelations. Number one: the dog thing really happened. 1960, March the thirteenth. All very straightforward: neighbour’s dog, shot with a rifle, no question of a pitchfork. Mulliner just says it was keeping him awake, apologises for the over-reaction, gets a fine. I’m chasing up the conviction tomorrow. Number two: I’ve

got some pedantic detail, like you asked. The '48 trial, Mulliner and the customised guns? I've been right down into the statements: there were no customised guns. Guns, yes, and 'supplies of a custom-made nature,' but they're distinct. Same day, same dodgy middle-man, different sources. One box of pilfered service rifles, Lee-Enfield Number Fours, apparently, standard as you like. One consignment of 'armament supplies,' custom-made, carefully unspecified in all the docs. The authorities clearly didn't want it known about. Cost more than the rifles, whatever it was."

Late 1940s... *surely not.* *Question: what's the standard indication that an organisation is importing fissile material? Answer: the complete and systematic absence of any sign or suggestion that that organisation is importing fissile material.* No. Get a grip. Something else, something that fitted Mulliner's peculiar scheme of connections... "Anything about the supplier?"

"I can't find various details – you remember I took that skills course with Dr Ekborg? Supplier is carefully unspecified, but what I can't find suggests a reputable metalworking firm somewhere in South Yorkshire which has made an honest but silly mistake, and will be in much trouble if it does any more of whatever we're not allowed to know it officially wasn't doing. I thought nukes as well for a minute, Doc, but the vibe's all wrong. The powers that be just seem faintly embarrassed."

"Excellent. Listen, I'm on an outreach visit and about to start throwing bits of past around, but I'll cogitate deeply and let you know if I need follow-ups. By the way, how in the name of all that's holy do I get video to the projector?"

"Function-F5. We've been through this."

"Tried that."

"Try it again. Got to go, Doc."

Luff hammered the keyboard as before. Inexplicably, the hardware co-operated, and Luff was momentarily dazzled by the round white projector beam. Blinking, he turned to face the end wall and began checking the focus and sight lines, eyes tracking to the screen across the grubby whiteboard, the reagent shelf...

And then suddenly he got it. Bang. Staring him in the face. The force behind Mulliner's crazy little brigade, the stuff of their salvation. *Forty-Seven...*

"The poor, deluded..."

As the first of the students began to cough their way around the laboratory door, a number of matters resolved to quite startlingly clarity in Luff's mind. Could it be proved, he wondered? Perhaps Kiran could be prevailed on to fail to find something specific... But probably Childs would be more co-operative if there was no spoon-feeding required. He had wanted someone to share the secret, but doubted Luff's worthiness. Perhaps he had a point; but Luff had got there in the end.

No, reflected Luff: on another level he had got nowhere. His thorough disentangling of the *what* behind Mulliner's actions gave him no inkling as to *why*: this would take endless digging into Mulliner's early life, perhaps his childhood, if, indeed, it could be addressed at all. Closing one mystery merely opened another, less tractable one.

But Luff preferred things that way: it kept him in work. Putting the matter temporarily from his mind, he turned to his audience and began to speak.

All events described in this narrative – including any you firmly believe to have happened to you personally – are fictional. All characters depicted are likewise figments, and no resemblance is intended to any individual, institution or eerily looming unidentified presence, whether living, dead or occupying a contested boundary space.