

The catalyst who changed British SF?

In a recent email sent to Wikipedia, between 4th and 17th July - the 4th itself, I think - the sender said that 'Cooper was regarded as the catalyst who changed the face of British SF forever.'

I'm uncertain how true this is. I am interested to know if it is a quote, and indeed, I wonder who regarded Edmund as the catalyst who changed the face of British SF forever? For, certainly, most books on the subject of SF, British or otherwise, do not write about Edmund in this way - in fact, few of them include anything about him at all.

The otherwise excellent Encyclopedia of Science Fiction that has Robert Holdstock as main editor (Cathay, 1978) merely gives him as being the writer behind the name Richard Avery, author of The Expendables series, and adds 'Cooper probably reaches a wider audience with his occasional reviews in The Sunday Times'.

John Clute's illustrated encyclopedia of science fiction (1995) doesn't mention Edmund at all. Three Tomorrows, by John Griffiths (1980) also neglects to mention Edmund. Both these books would rather devote space to fantasy writer Susan Cooper. David Pringle's Hundred Best Science Fiction Novels also forgot to include Edmund. However, Pringle's Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (Carlton, 1996) does at least have an entry for him, which, alas, only gives Seed of Light and A Far Sunset as titles, and describes Edmund as 'one of those honourable second-string SF writers who could always be counted on to provide a good read with thoughtful implications.'

I don't mean to diss Edmund, but surely a better candidate for the catalyst who changed the face of British SF forever would have been H.G. Wells or Michael Moorcock?

Both Maxim Jakubowski, in his obituary for Edmund, and Ken Method, in private correspondence, agree that Edmund was headed for greatness as an SF writer. 'He had been, until the coming of the *New Worlds*-supported 'New Wave', a reasonably major figure in Great Britain...it is generally accepted that his later novels never recaptured the energy and decisiveness of his earlier work.' (Maxim Jakubowski, *Locus*, 1982)

Ken Method, writing to me a couple of years ago, put 'Edmund's professional career was actually a tragedy because with *The Uncertain Midnight*, one of the very first and best android novels, he was well on the way to becoming a major British SF novelist. The next two novels were also good, but then it all seemed to go wrong. It seemed as if he then lost faith in himself as an SF writer and most of his later works were, I believe, far below what he was capable of... I think he was a very talented man who quite simply lost his way and either didn't know or didn't want to know how to capitalise on his real talent. His real contribution to British SF has to be the very high quality of his early reviewing for *The Sunday Times*. He contributed greatly, as did Kingsley Amis, to giving SF literary respectability.'

In the obituary, Jakubowski also wrote: 'I am confident that a future re-assessment of his oeuvre will show it to be more important than is generally thought, right now.'

Jim Goddard, in an article about Edmund called *Hope For The Future* which appeared in *Science Fiction Monthly* in 1973, considered Edmund to be 'one of the

most entertaining and philosophically constant writers producing SF in Britain.'

Goddard claims that a close look at Edmund's novel *The Uncertain Midnight*, and all of the novels up to and including *The Slaves of Heaven*, will show that Edmund's basic preoccupations and concepts as to 'things that matter', have stayed the same through the intervening years. This, to me, indicates a remarkable certainty as to the correctness of one's views, and an equally remarkable discipline of mind and sense of idealism that few, if any, other major SF writers can claim.'

Personally, I'm inclined to disagree with some of the views presented in this 'letter'. Like all writers, I imagine, he wrote really good novels and stories, and also ones that were not so good. I would like to see *The Brain Child* made into a film; and I think the same about *The Last Continent* which is one of the best SF novels I've ever read. Here is a review of *The Last Continent*, from *The Sunday Times*, 1970:

'Explorers from Mars come to investigate what they expect to be an uninhabited Earth. They are black, and they find the white people of Earth who are living peacefully in Antarctica disagreeable, both in appearance and colour. Like Mr. Cooper's brilliant *Five to Twelve*, the book is full of good ideas, though rather full of scientific marvels for laymen.'

Finally, if you want an excellent book about SF that does mention Edmund in a few places, and even has an article by him, try *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by Brian Ash (Triune Books, 1978). Besides Edmund, there are contributions by 23 other big-name writers, including Poul Anderson, Keith Roberts, L. Sprague de Camp, J.G. Ballard, Harry Harrison, (to name just my own personal favourites) and many others of the ones you'd expect to see in such a line up.

Shaun