

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with John F. Carr March, 2019

*John F. Carr is an authority on the life and works of H. Beam Piper and his biography *H. Beam Piper: A Biography*, was published in 2008. He has continued to write new novels set in Piper's "Paratime series," "Little Fuzzy series," and "Federation series". He is also the author of seven original novels.*

*He is also recognized as an editor, having edited over twenty theme anthologies and short story collections, many of them with Jerry Pournelle. In 2002, Carr and Pournelle were honored with a Prometheus Award for editing "The Survival of Freedom".*

**Donovan S. Brain: I once read LORD KALVAN with a map of Pennsylvania in front of me and was amazed by how strategically well-plotted it was. The "Draim-damned battle of Fyk" seemed awfully familiar to me; was it based on a Civil War battle?**

**John F. Carr:** The Battle of Fyk was based on the Battle of Barnet, which took place during the War of the Roses.

**Doll Aiello: I'm curious about Pipers' inspiration for Little Fuzzy. I see a lot there about ecology, economics and wistfulness for a simpler time.**

**John F. Carr:** As several friends of Piper's—like Mike Knerr—have pointed out, Beam had a soft spot for cute animals, like kittens and squirrels, and was known to make friends with stray cats and dogs. Beam and his wife, Elizabeth Hirst, used to visit the Central Park Zoo and "adopted" some of the animals.

Piper first used the term fuzzy in his daybook when he was living in a hotel in France with his wife, Betty. On April 1st, 1957, he noted: *"The little girl in the next room has a pet hamster—saw it today. Cute little fuzzy."*

Piper was an avid hiker and camper. He never owned an automobile, he mostly walked everywhere unless it was long distance, and then he took a train. He loved the land and animals of Central Pennsylvania, and knew its history better than most college professors. According to his old friend, Paul Schuchart: *"Beam was asked by Dr. Darlington (I'm not sure), the Episcopal Bishop of the Harrisburg Diocese to mark the Appalachian Trail from the western side of the Susquehanna River to the Maryland State line, sleeping on the Trail and making like a real 'outdoor man.'"*

When it came to roughing it, camping, hunting or living in the wilderness, Piper knew it from firsthand personal experience. From his Colonial and Civil War studies, he knew what it was like to live in a primitive area and I've always seen Pappy Jack as his alter ego.

**Michael Jardeen: Is there something about him that you think most people are clueless to?**

**John F. Carr:** I don't think most people appreciate just how talented a writer Piper was. He had a transparent style that gave his readers an effortless experience that few writers can match. However, embedded in his prose were nuggets of wisdom and historical description that brought his science-

fiction yarns to life in a way that only a few SF writers, such as Robert Heinlein and Jerry Pournelle, can match.

**Michael Jardeen: What was your favorite aspect of researching him?**

**John F. Carr:** My favorite aspect of researching Piper was: the mystery of ‘Who was H. Beam Piper?’ When I started researching his life in the late 1970s, there was very little known about Piper and most of that was wrong, much of it false trails and stories that he himself had helped author. I had to hunt down the few surviving writers, friends and acquaintances who had actually known Beam. It was not easy.... Plus, many of his friends respected his privacy, even in death, and were very reluctant to open up. It took me decades to unearth Piper’s story.

**Jamie Smith: How old was Jerry Pournelle when he first met Piper? What was their friendship like?**

**John F. Carr:** Jerry Pournelle met H. Beam Piper at several science fiction conventions. They hit it off immediately and began to correspond. At that time, Jerry was a senior scientist at Boeing and had a lot of insights and scientific information to impart—a real attraction for most working SF authors. Jerry was a big fan of Piper’s and they would often drink, sing filk songs (they were both horrid singers and had that in common!) and tell tales late into the night, closing the room party.

Jerry always considered himself Beam’s literary successor, as they both “ploughed the same field,” as Jerry put it.

**Doll Aiello: H. Beam Piper included a lot about our military history and how they were fought, as well as a great weapons knowledge. Do you know what prompted him to include this? Don't get me wrong, it works and also is what attracted me to his works. But I am curious.**

**John F. Carr:** As Jerry Pournelle has often said, Beam Piper knew more history than any man he ever met (and remember Pournelle taught political science at Pepperdine University), other than Robert A. Heinlein. Part of that knowledge came from his parents; Piper’s grandfather, Henry Beam Piper, who was a Captain in the Union Army during the Civil War. He grew up listening to those stories. Mike Knerr, Piper’s protégé, used to tell me that you could ask Piper about any Civil War Battle, and he would give you a complete dissertation on it.

**Jamie Smith: How was his manuscript for *Fuzzies and Other People* discovered? I forget.**

**John F. Carr:** Mike Knerr, who was the friend who cleaned up Piper’s apartment after his death, collected a lot of material from the apartment that would have otherwise been thrown out. He gave the manuscripts and important documents to the probate lawyer, but kept most of the keepsakes (like Piper’s “itsy-bitsy” brass cannon), his diaries and some boxes which he put into two trunks. After reading my Piper story collection, *Federation*, Mike decided to go through the trunks to see if he had anything of importance. Inside one of them he discovered a mislabeled paper box containing one of the carbon copies of *Fuzzies and Other People*. He contacted Ace Books and talked to the editors there. They were quite happy to publish it even though it made hash of Bill Tuning’s Fuzzy sequel, *Fuzzy Bones*.

**Richard Whyte: I believe Piper's first published SF story was 'Time And Time Again' (ASF, 1947), in which the protagonist is transported into the body of his younger self. Given that this type of time travel story (I think) gets its power from regret for 'the path not taken', do you think that Piper himself was a man given to regrets about his own past?**

**John F. Carr:** No, I do not. From an early age, Piper lived his life on his own terms. As Anne McGuire (the wife of his collaborator J.J. McGuire) put it, "*Beam's mother treated him like a prince. He could do no wrong in that household. She made all his meals and did all the housekeeping.*" He liked working at the Pennsylvania Rail Road; his job as a night watchman gave him time to work out his stories. Plus, he got free railroad passes and enjoyed being a part of the Pennsy. Piper's biggest dream, from childhood on, was to be a writer. It took him over 30 years, but he finally managed to get published in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*. And his dream came true. He may have suffered poverty as a result, during his later years, but he never mentioned any regrets in his diaries or to his closest friends.

Mike Knerr writes about Piper's writing and says: "This sort of living, by now, was beginning to wear a little thin for Beam, and on several occasions he and I had discussed the idea of becoming 'written out.' It's a possibility that all writers have to consider, and it isn't an easy thing. At the age of twenty-eight, I *thought* about it but it was in the same abstract way that I thought about death.

"You think you'll ever get written out, Beam?" I asked one evening.

'Yes,' he said flatly, without hesitating.

"What'll you do?"

"He made his right hand into a 'gun' with the index finger representing the barrel and stuck it in his mouth. He laughed."

"Jesus. That's messy."

"The grin stayed on his face. "Someone else will have to clean up the mess."

"He was right."

Do you think he was "written out" at the time of his death?

Yes, I do. At the time of his death, Piper only had one outstanding manuscript ("*Hos-Hostigos*"—the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kalvan novelette, that got "lost" when Kenneth White, his agent, died) and the put-together novel, *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*, making the rounds. There is no indication in his diaries that he was working on any new stories; the only stories he mentions are "old works" that never sold—like "Murder at the Conference" (an unpublished Jeff Rand mystery). I believe he thought he was finished and with his new agent not answering his calls—what else was he going to do?

**John Grayshaw: Given "Omnilingual," did Piper have an interest in Ancient languages?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper had interests in many subjects: science, space, history, General Semantics and the history of language. In mid-1955, he writes: "Picked up a paperback copy of Edward Sapir's *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* at Doubleday's; will be useful in next story." This book sparks the genesis of one of Piper's most praised short stories, "Omnilingual."

**John Grayshaw: A recurring theme in his work is strong/capable female characters. Were his personal views on women progressive for the time?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper was very much the "Victorian Gentleman" and there are few references to his views on women throughout his diaries, other than Betty, whom he dearly loved. And Betty was very much a career woman, she worked for the Council on Student Travel. In fact, it was Betty's insistence that they stay in France, where she had been assigned, that doomed the Piper marriage. He loved her to his dying day. They were both too independent for their own good.

**John Grayshaw: Given "Paratime," did Piper have an interest in history?**

**John F. Carr:** Absolutely. Piper wrote many newspaper articles (sadly, all lost) for small local papers about Pennsylvania History, especially the Colonial period. In a January 23rd, 1928 letter to his best friend, Ferd Coleman, Piper discusses his projected trilogy based on local Pennsylvania history for the first time: "*I received the Otzinachson on the same afternoon that I mailed you my letter regarding the meeting, and I am delighted with it. I'd say, off hand, that it is worth all I am going to pay for it (\$15), both as a history of the valley in which I spent some of the happiest days of my life and as a source of information and material for my projected series of three novels dealing with the Fair Play Man...*" At the time of his death, he was working on a major historical novel about Gonsalo de Cordoba, The Great Captain. He also wrote a piece on John Mosby (aka The Grey Ghost) for *True Magazine* in 1950.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the authors who influenced Piper's work?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper said it best in the "Double Bill Symposium" fanzine: "*My formative writings go back a long time, and one tends to forget. I am sure, however, that their name is legion. In the early days, as soon as I'd discover a new favorite, I'd decide that I was going to write like him. I was going to write like James Branch Cabell, which would have taken a lot of doing. Before that, I was going to write like Rafael Sabatini, and like Talbot Munday, and like Rider Haggard, and even, God help us, like Edgar Rice Burroughs. I never wanted to write like H.G. Wells, he spent entirely too much of his time on a soapbox. Eventually I decided to write like H. Beam Piper, only a little bit better. I am still trying.*"

Piper was not just a science-fiction writer. He wanted it all: mysteries, science fiction and historical novels. Fletcher Pratt was master of all three and, if there was anyone Piper would have loved to emulate, it would have been Fletcher Pratt.

**John Grayshaw: What other writers was Piper friends with?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper was friends with Lester Del Rey, L. Sprague de Camp and a lot of the New York based writers. He often traveled to New York by rail to attend meetings of the Hydra Club, an early SF writers group. He was closest to Fletcher Pratt; in fact, it was Fletcher's wife Inga who introduced Beam to Betty. Fred Pohl was Piper's first agent. He knew Robert Heinlein from different conventions and Jerry Pournelle.

**John Grayshaw: What's your favorite Piper novel and why?**

**John F. Carr:** My favorite Piper novel is—not surprisingly—*Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*. I fell in love with it on my first reading, never daring to believe that 20 years later I would be given the honor of writing its sequel, *Great Kings' War*, with Roland Green. It combines history with martial arts in a unique way and the story is one for the ages. *Space Viking* would come in second.

**John Grayshaw: What were Piper's hobbies?**

**John F. Carr:** H. Beam Piper was a gun enthusiast and avid collector. He had a collection of antique swords and pistols that numbered in the hundreds. They were mostly in wonderful condition and would be worth a fortune today. In fact, Jerry Pournelle (upon learning of Piper's death) believed that he had been murdered so that someone could steal his gun collection. Jerry contacted the Williamsport Police for verification; only to learn they had possession of Piper's guns. They were later sold to pay for his coffin and funeral.

Piper's other hobbies would include reading (he loved books), the study of history, hiking, shooting and hunting. He also collected antiques and was very knowledgeable about those from the Colonial period.

**John Grayshaw: Did Piper have a particular writing routine he stuck with?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper was a very hard worker and often wrote from sunup to midnight. He was a very fast typist and meticulous writer, writing up to 4 or 5 drafts of a story or novel. He used to consider himself foremost a "manufacturer of wastepaper." If he had a story idea in mind, he worked like the dickens. If not, he stewed and fussed about it feeling miserable.

Had he lived long enough to use a word processor, Piper's output would have been amazing.

**John Grayshaw: What is it about Piper and his writing that you have spent so long researching him and continuing his series?**

**John F. Carr:** First, he wrote 2 of my favorite novels. Secondly, like many others I was fascinated by his story and wanted to sort the facts from the legend.

It was Jerry Pournelle who started me on this path. When I first started working with him in 1975, he had just signed a contract with Laser Books to write a sequel to *Space Viking*, entitled "Space Viking's Return." About this time, his career really began to take off. *The Mote in God's Eye* was just starting to

lift off and Jerry shifted emphasis from writing his own stories to working with Larry Niven on novels like *Lucifer's Hammer*.

For a while, he had Bill Tuning over to the office to work on the book; Tuning was a big Piper fan and would later write his own Fuzzy novel. Tuning pooped out pretty quickly; he was more interested at that time in writing the sequel to *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*.

Jerry needed someone to do the background research on *Space Viking*; it contains a very detailed history, lists of planets and post-Federation technology. Jerry asked me to do the research, which meant I got paid for researching one of my favorite books—life doesn't get much better than that!

While researching *Space Viking*, I realized that I needed to go over the entire Piper canon—or at least those stories in his Terro-Human Future History. It wasn't easy to find out-of-date pulps in those days, so I did some digging and located Collector's Bookstore in Hollywood, which contained movie/TV memorabilia and old pulp magazines. Within 6 months, I was able to purchase most of the magazines containing Piper's out-of-print short stories. This expanded my Piper study far beyond *Space Viking*, but I learned a lot about Piper's storytelling style and themes.

When Jerry saw just how much work there was in writing "Space Viking's Return," he offered me the opportunity to collaborate on it with him. I spent a year or two working on it and finished the first draft in 1981. Jerry was pleased with how it turned out and paid me half of the original advance (\$5,000). Unfortunately, he never really did much work on the book.

As to why, it's my belief that as a close-friend of Beam's, Jerry felt enormous guilt (as did many of Piper's friends) that he had not helped his friend out financially. At that time (1964), Jerry was earning a very good living as Senior Scientist for Boeing and could have easily helped Beam out. I suspect this was the major reason he never completed the book; it reminded him of his old friend and how he passed alone and in dire financial straits, when Jerry (had he known) could have easily helped him.

### **John Grayshaw: What is Piper's legacy?**

**John F. Carr:** Piper's career is both a warning and a triumph. The triumph is that he wrote several seminal SF works that are considered by many to be classics in the field of science fiction and are still being read 55 years after his death.

The warning is: writing is not a safe career, even for some of its best practitioners.