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ignatius donnelly pseudomath

by L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

He was certain that Atlantis had existed, and that it was from there that man had first begun the long climb upwards.

A PSEUDOMATH is one who appears or pretends to possess great learning but really lacks it, or whose knowledge, while seemingly vast, is largely false. America's greatest pseudomath was Ignatius Donnelly (1831-1901): lawyer, promoter, politician, reformer, scholar, author, lecturer, science-fiction writer, and pseudo-scientific cultist.

Donnelly was a man "with an extremely active mind, but possessing also that haste to form judgments and the lack of critical sense in testing them, which are often the result of self-education conducted by wide and unsystematic reading." Not only was he the leading American science-fiction writer of his day. He was also responsible for popularizing three of the most durable pseudo-intellectual cults that have come down to the present: Baconianism, Atlantism, and cometary catastrophism. Of these, Atlantism has become a cliché of science fiction. The other two beliefs, if never taken very seriously in science-fiction circles, are of equal interest to

L. Sprague de Camp, noted as a historian and popularizer of science, has been prominent in the science fiction and fantasy field for the past twenty years. He is the author of LOST CONTINENTS (Gnome Press, \$5.), a definitive work on the Atlantis theme in history and literature.

the connoisseur of human folly.

Many would like to be thought of as wise and learned. Some try to become so. A few succeed. Success in the pursuit of wisdom takes not only brains and the power of original thought, but also the power of self-criticism. Without self-criticism, a strong and original mind is like a vehicle with an engine but no brakes or steering-gear. It takes its owner down intellectual blind alleys or mires him in the swamps of cultism. Donnelly is a case in point, though modern science fiction has shown some egregious examples of this failing.

Donnelly's early history shows little sign of his later flights into lands of mental faerie. Born in Philadelphia to a prosperous family of Irish immigrants, he studied law, was admitted to the bar, married, and in 1856 moved to Minnesota.

His arrival in the Gopher State showed the first sign of his bent for high-minded fantasy. A syndicate of which he was a member bought a tract about ten miles southeast of St. Paul on the south bank of the Mississippi. Here, they thought, should rise the great metropolis of the Midwest, outshining not only the Twin Cities but even distant Chicago. It should be called Nininger City.

As his part in this promo-

tion, Donnelly put out a periodical, the *Emigrant Aid Journal*. Below a masthead showing "steamboats, railroad trains, covered wagons, men plowing, wheat growing, and fruits and vegetables of truly startling girth" appeared such weighty contributions as poems by Whittier and essays by Mrs. Stowe. Whether or not the high intellectual tone of the paper repelled the emigrants, they failed to settle in Nininger City, despite the attractions of the local inn and of the Literary Society and the Musical Club. Today a little blue circle on a road-map of the Twin Cities region bears the name "Nininger," but it is well the "City" has been dropped. Not only is there no city; there is nothing, not even a crossroad. After tracking back and forth on secondary roads, you learn you have passed through Nininger, but you have seen nothing but Minnesota farmland and woodlots.

When real estate failed to profit him, Donnelly went into politics, at first with striking success. He became Lieutenant-Governor of the brand-new state of Minnesota in 1858, at the age of twenty-eight. In 1864 he went to the U. S. House of Representatives for two terms. When not arguing on the floor for vigorously pushing the Civil War and for buying Alaska, he spent his time in the Libra-

ry of Congress soaking up facts and becoming perhaps the most erudite Congressman ever to hold office.

Now, however, his brain had begun to burn with the first of his great ideas: Atlantis. After a term in the State Senate, he retired to the rambling wooden mansion he had built at Nininger and tried to support himself by farming while, with the help of the bulky notes he had taken in Washington, he scratched away at his book. By 1881 he was almost broke, but in 1882 Harper brought out the work: *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. In this work he set out to prove:

"1. That there once existed in the Atlantic Ocean, opposite the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea, a large island, which was the remnant of an Atlantic continent, and known to the ancient world as Atlantis.

"2. That the description of this island given by Plato is not, as has long been supposed, fable, but veritable history.

"3. That Atlantis was the region where man first rose from a state of barbarism to civilization.

"4. That it became, in the course of ages, a populous and mighty nation, from whose overflowings the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, the Amazon, the Pacific coast of South Ameri-

ca, the Mediterranean, the west coast of Europe and Africa, the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian were populated by civilized nations.

"5. That it was the true Antediluvian world; the Garden of Eden; the Gardens of Hesperides; the Elysian Fields; the Gardens of Alcinous; the Mesomphalos; the Olympos; the Asgard of the traditions of the ancient nations; representing a universal memory of a great land, where early mankind dwelt for ages in peace and happiness.

"6. That the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Hindoos, and the Scandinavians were simply the kings, queens, and heroes of Atlantis; and the acts attributed to them in mythology are a confused recollection of real historical events.

"7. That the mythology of Egypt and Peru represented the original religion of Atlantis, which was sun-worship.

"8. That the oldest colony formed by the Atlanteans was probably in Egypt, whose civilization was a reproduction of that of the Atlantic island.

"9. That the implements of the 'Bronze Age' of Europe were derived from Atlantis. The Atlanteans were also the first manufacturers of iron.

"10. That the Phoenician al-

phabet, parent of all European alphabets, was derived from an Atlantean alphabet, which was also conveyed from Atlantis to the Mayas of Central America.

"11. That Atlantis was the original seat of the Aryan or Indo-European family of nations, as well as of the Semitic peoples, and possibly also of the Turanian races.

"12. That Atlantis perished in a terrible convulsion of nature, in which the whole island sunk into the ocean, with nearly all its inhabitants.

"13. That a few persons escaped in ships and on rafts, and carried to the nations east and west tidings of the appalling catastrophe, which has survived to our own time in the Flood and Deluge legends of the different nations in the old and new worlds."

Though the book's erudition is likely to stun the reader into accepting its theses without resistance, and though Donnelly's tone is sweetly reasonable compared to the Atlantist writings of the occultists, *Atlantis* is in fact a careless, tendentious, and worthless opus, a solid mass of misstatements of fact and errors of interpretation. Donnelly assumed that the Egyptian civilization blossomed suddenly without antecedents; that similar customs or techniques among widely-separated peoples necessarily point to a common origin;

that the American Indian languages are closely related to Greek, Hebrew, and other Old-World tongues; that the Mayan alphabet resembles the Phoenician; and so on, none of which is true at all.

Donnelly took ideas from Plato's *Timaios* and *Kritias* and from the Atlantist writings of various scholars who dabbled in the subject from Plato's time down. For instance, the notion of a common origin of the civilizations of the Mayas and the Mediterranean peoples had been put forward by the American Edward H. Thompson and L. H. Hosea. Thompson, then an undergraduate, had speculated in a magazine-article that refugees from Atlantis had spread to the Great Lakes and thence to Mexico. Later he became a leading Mayologist and disclaimed his juvenile Atlantis ideas. Now we know that such a common origin is ruled out by chronology, since Mayan civilization only arose in the early centuries of the Christian era, when Egypt was already three thousand years old and had become a Roman province.

However, the concept of Atlantis as the fount of all civilization is essentially Donnelly's. It goes far beyond anything Plato ever claimed in his Atlantis-legend.

The book soon became a best-seller. It was read with approval by Gladstone in Eng-

land and made the subject of poems and popular jokes. It went through at least fifty printings, the last in 1949. The last edition was edited by a British Atlantist, Egerton Sykes, who corrected some of Donnelly's errors at the cost of bringing in some of his own. (Sykes also castigated an anti-Atlantist named "J. Sprague du Camp" for the latter's rough treatment of Plato.)

Atlantis was also a major source on which Helena P. Blavatsky based her Theosophical doctrines, though she claimed to get these doctrines from the prehistoric *Book of Dzyan*, which her Himalayan Mahatmas translated for her. All the later Atlantist writers drew on Donnelly directly or indirectly. Later Atlantis added other lost continents in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, in cheerful defiance of all that science has learned in the last hundred years about the past of mankind of the earth on which it dwells.

Furthermore, Donnelly's *Atlantis* was one of the sources of the many Atlantean stories that appeared in imaginative fiction thenceforward. The other main founts of this sub-genre were the works of Donnelly's contemporary Augustus Le Plongeon, a French physician who lived in Yucatan and was the first to excavate the Mayan ruins, and Jules Verne's brief

use of the remains in his *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869). The peak of this vogue of Atlantean tales occurred in the decade 1896-1905, when at least sixteen novels appeared on the theme. They have continued to come out from time to time, along with scores of Atlantean magazine-stories and a few Atlantean movies.

Now back on his financial feet, Donnelly wrote *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Ice* (1883). This revived an idea with which Count Carli had speculated a century before: that once upon a time the earth collided with a comet, with catastrophic results. Again Donnelly added his own contributions. He explained deposits of glacial gravel, which Agassiz had correctly attributed to the Ice Age, as the remains of the comet itself. Donnelly suggested that there had been a world-wide prehistoric civilization which the comet blotted out everywhere but in Atlantis. The book had a good though not spectacular sale. It took its place in the literature of the cometary-collision cult, which Horbiger and Velikovsky had carried on in the twentieth century.

Then Donnelly went lecturing. He proved an excellent public speaker: a plump, handsome man, clean-shaven amid a forest of beards, and radiating charm and good hu-

mor. He looked a little like his younger contemporary William Jennings Bryan.

Another idea, however, had now begun to burn in Donnelly's fertile brain. This took shape in a book, *The Great Cryptogram* (1888) which purported to prove by code-analysis that Sir Francis Bacon wrote the plays attributed to William Shakespeare.

This notion had first been proposed as a joke in the previous century by Horace Walpole, in one of a series of essays in which he undertook to prove among other things that Julius Caesar never lived. In the early nineteenth century, several others took up Walpole's Shakespearean suggestion, but treating it seriously instead of as a piece of learned foolery as Walpole meant it. Notably among these was Delia Bacon, a prudish Bostonian school-teacher shocked by the repulsive thought that the author of the wonderful plays and sonnets could have been an associate of a lot of vulgar, immoral actors. While Miss Bacon did not urge Sir Francis as a substitute for poor Will, others like William H. Smith and Joseph G. Hart in England soon added this feature.

Bacon had, in fact, written of cryptograms in his *Advancement of Learning* and proposed one based on the use of two different fonts of type, mixed, to print the cover-text.

This was perhaps practical in Bacon's day, when a printer who ran short of a given letter in one font would use anything he had in the shop.

Donnelly, though, attacked Shakespeare on his own cryptographic principles. He found places where words like "bacon," "William," and "play" appeared and counted the number of words between them. He tried to make something of the irregularities of the page-numbers of the First Folio. His final system of decipherment was based on the numbers 505, 506, 513, 523, used in counting from one word to the next. If these didn't work, one might use other factors such as the number of words in different subdivisions of the page, and so on, adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing at will until things came out right. Not to leave any stone unturned, Donnelly implied that Bacon (an active politician and a voluminous writer under his own name) also wrote works ascribed to Marlowe, Montaigne and Burton.

Real cryptographers greeted this nonsense with howls of derision. They pointed out that, according to Donnelly's reasoning, Shakespeare wrote the Forty-sixth Psalm. The 46th word from the beginning is "shake," and the 46th word from the end is "spear"; QED.

Donnelly, no whit abashed, set off in two new directions

at once: science fiction and the Populist Movement. Under the name of "Edmund Boisgilbert, M.D." he wrote a prophetic novel, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1890) which sold a million copies. This is probably more sales than those of all the cloth-bound science fiction novels published in the last decade put together.

The story is laid in mid-twentieth century; in other words, about now. A youth from a Swiss colony in Africa, Gabriel Weltstein, awed by the glass-roofed streets, lit by "magnetic lights" and jammed with people; the municipal heating-system, which gets hot water from the depths of the earth; the pneumatic-tube network linking subscribers all over the city; the suicide-houses where people are given a painless quietus on request; the airlines and elevated railways crisscrossing overhead.

Sitting down in a restaurant, Gabriel sees a mirror-like thing on which the menu appears as on a television screen. When he makes his choice by pressing buttons below the screen, the table opens and up comes his dinner. Another button brings a facsimile of a newspaper to the screen. The restaurant is air-conditioned by a canvas tube carried aloft by a balloon to exhaust the hot air in the restaurant and replace it by cold

air drawn down from the stratosphere.

One day, Gabriel snatches a beggar from under the hooves of the coach-horses of one of the wicked world-ruling oligarchy of bankers. The beggar turns out to be a leader of the downtrodden masses. Gabriel is drawn into the revolutionary conspiracy. Alas, the masses have been so degraded by their servitude that when the revolution succeeds, they kill off all their better leaders. Hence the world sinks into barbarism everywhere except in Swiss Uganda.

Caesar's Column was followed by *Dr. Huguet* (1891) and *The Golden Bottle; or, The Story of Ephraim Benezet of Kansas* (1892). *Dr. Huguet* explored the Negro problem by the now well-worn device of transposing souls. To make his Caucasoid hero appreciate the plight of the free but unequal American Negro, Donnelly puts his soul into the body of one.

The Golden Bottle is a kind of alchemical dream. The narrator dreams that a mysterious stranger gives him a liquid that turns base metals to gold. By this power he becomes a financial titan. Then he conquers the world with the help of his girl-friend, who dashes about on horseback with him in the midst of the bloody battles by which he subdues the British Isles and Europe. He abolishes all

kings and aristocracies and imposes American-style democracy on everybody whether they like it or not. By this time Donnelly seems to have gotten over his earlier anti-judaism, for he gives Palestine to the Jews in the course of reforming the world. Then the narrator wakes up. This denouement, as it always does, leaves the reader feeling cheated.

While writing these novels, Donnelly was helping to launch the Populist Party as a vehicle for Western agrarian radicalism. Starting in politics as a Republican, he became a Democrat after being defeated for Congress in 1868. Now he joined the third-party movement of the moment. He wrote the Populist Omaha Platform of 1892 and twice ran for Vice-President of the United States on the Populist ticket. Defeat left him as good-humored as ever.

Donnelly's science-fiction novels are shot through with Populist principles. These included low tariffs, printing-press inflation, the prohibition of monopolies, the graduated income-tax, and a morbid fear of those imaginary bogey-men of agrarianism and of Henry Ford, the international bankers.

Donnelly wrote a few minor works and then died on New Year's Day, 1901. Widowed, he had in his sixties married a 21-year-old girl. Although

brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, he never worked at it. This fact encouraged political rivals to blast him as an atheist. In his later years, like many shrewder men, he dabbled in Spiritualism.

Of the Populist ideals he fought for, the income-tax and anti-trust legislation, at first denounced as communistic, are now accepted facts. Inflation, presented by the Populists as a cure-all, is now viewed as a not altogether escapable evil. Ironically, Donnelly is remembered far more for his pseudo-scientific enthusiasms than for some of his later realized progressive political proposals.

His papers, ninety-nine file-boxes of them, lie in the archives of the Historical Society of Minnesota in St. Paul. A few years ago I heard that a man was using these papers to write a definitive biography of Donnelly on a grant from some learned society, but as far as I know the book has not appeared.

As for his mansion, a few years ago there was a move in the Minnesota legislature to restore it. However, a look at the place showed that it was so far gone in ruin that it would cost as much to fix it up as to build a new house. The Minnesota climate is merciless to old wooden houses, especially after a leaking roof and broken windows let in the elements. A

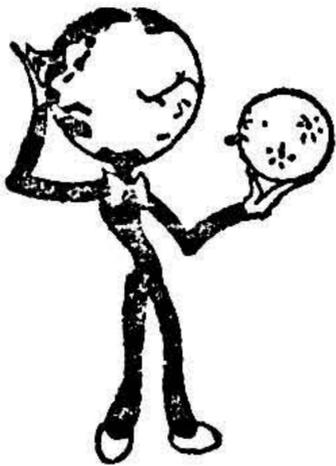
contractor agreed to tear the wreck down for the lumber, but lost money on the deal.

Now the site is occupied by a neat modern farmhouse belonging to a family named Held. When I was there a couple of years ago, I could not even find an old brick or board from the mansion to take away as a souvenir of one of the most original and active minds in the history of American thought.

Despite his virtues, Donnelly's Atlantean commentary,

and Baconian speculations have left no more mark on serious science and literary history than his mansion has left on the plains of Minnesota. His "discoveries" have withered away to mere intellectual fossils, amusing but impotent. He wrote on water, because, for all his intelligence, erudition, and goodwill, he lacked the power of self-criticism. Let him who would profit from others' follies ponder the tale of Ignatious Donnelly, pseudomath.

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