

CHILDHOOD'S END

RICHARD GRAINGER

 **Libertarian
Alliance**



Bob Jones MP woke late to the sound of shouting in the streets. He checked his battery alarm clock. The LED display flashed 88:88. His six weeks pregnant wife, Margaret was still asleep beside him. Taking care not to disturb her, he rubbed his eyes, hopped out of bed and walked over to window. His face registered no expression, as his not-fully-awake brain failed to make sense of the scene on the street below. The people of Tunbridge Wells don't loot supermarkets, do they?! He closed his eyes, shook his head and tried another look. Nothing had changed: Tesco's was still being rampaged by a mob of rather well-turned-out rioters and a woefully unprepared police force was having no luck at keeping back a growing crowd, most of whom were wearing neckties. Bob's attention was eventually taken by the mechanical calendar on the side of the council offices next door to Tesco's. It read 21.12.2012. The date hit Bob's retina at the speed of light; it was converted to electro-chemical impulses and transmitted to his visual cortex. A few nanoseconds later, after several thousand parallel neural-synaptic connections had been made, a thought gently materialised in Bob's brain: "Oh, of course, today is the end of the world."

Bob's brain came to this conclusion after retrieving an otherwise useless memory concerning a TV programme he had watched a few years ago. It one of those Mysteries of the Unexplained type programmes that were always being shown on Channel 5. The presenter was an amateur Indiana Jones type; traipsing around South America spouting nonsense about an ancient civilisation that spawned all the known civilisations of antiquity. Bob was about to turn over to East Enders, when the presenter managed to recapture his interest by using the phrase: "the end of the world".

Bob had always had a secret morbid fascination with Armageddon. He got through all the books about Nostradamus in his local library when he was a kid, sometimes getting funny looks from the librarian as he checked out his pile of arcane tomes. He used to tie his Sunday school teacher up in knots, with unwelcome questions about the book of Revelations. His interest lessened over the years as he grew up and now he never mentioned it (not a respectable topic of conversation for a Junior Minister of HM Government).

The presenter of Secret Mysteries, or whatever it was called, was explaining the Mayan Calendar. The presenter's explanation was grossly oversimplified, but essentially correct: The Mayan Calendar's largest unit of time was the Great Cycle, each of which were approximately 5,125 years long. The presenter explained that the Mayans predicted their own downfall three quarters of the way through the fifth great cycle in 900AD. Then came the interesting bit: The Mayans had also predicted when the fifth Great Cycle would finish and not only that, they had said that the fifth cycle would be the final cycle, i.e. "the end of the world". The presenter gave the date: 21st December 2012.

Next came some fancy computer graphics illustrating the presenter's wild theories about how the end would come about: huge solar flares hitting the Earth's ionosphere and reversing the Earth's magnetic field. He even claimed that the activity of these flares had been shown to operate in the same cycles as the Mayan Calendar. He didn't know what affect these flares had on the Mayans last time around, but showed how some serious scholars thought that they were wiped out by sudden mass infertility. He then posited that there must be an undiscovered link between magnetic fields and infertility and claimed that because it was the end of the last great cycle and not a just a significant point within a cycle as it had been with the Mayans, it would affect the whole of mankind next time, leading to extinction. The presenter talked ominously about a world without children. The programme showed scenes of chaos as a futureless mankind's civilization descended into anarchy. It ended showing the last humans dying of old age, childless and alone. A grim future, Bob had thought at the time, but thankfully extremely unlikely.

Bob was jolted back to the present when his wife awoke, distressed at the noise coming from outside. He calmed her down and from the safety of their second floor flat they both watched the chaos outside, which was starting to be brought under control by the authorities. In a couple of hours the electricity was back on and an hour after that the TV and phone were working again. The people outside were returning to their houses.

Of course, all the television channels were covering the event: At 3:17 am GMT, a solar flare had hit the atmosphere and reversed the Earth's magnetic field. It was like the millennium bug had come twelve years late. Electrical devices the world over reset or failed. Electricity and phone networks had gone down, TV stations went off the air and more importantly eighty percent of the world's magnetic storage devices (hard drives, floppy disks, DAT tapes, etc ...) had been wiped. Russia, China and about twenty smaller states around the world had revolutions. The news showed riots the world over. Several militia groups in the US had sealed themselves permanently into underground bunkers. Birmingham was in flames. The chaos may have ended in Kent, but not yet elsewhere.

Bob's first phone call was to his office in Whitehall. They told him he wasn't needed and to sit tight and to not say anything to the media. After phoning their friends and relatives, who were mostly fine, Bob and Margaret sat down to watch 'The End of the World Show' for the rest of the day. After about four hours, it looked like it was going to be something of a damp squib. Once people realised the TV was on again, they stopped revolting and went back home. In London, the police projected Neighbours onto the side of the houses of parliament, which sent half the angry mob running home (for a variety of reasons). By 11 pm, Newsnight's aging Jeremy Paxman was able to report that "Armageddon is over with fewer than 700,000 dead worldwide". Bob feigned relief to Margaret, but was secretly disappointed. Being an apocalypse buff, he had wanted to see fire and brimstone and the four horsemen. Being a Minister, he knew that national emergencies were a great opportunity for personal advancement. He felt somehow cheated.

It was about four months later and Margaret had dragged Bob along to her first pre-natal class. The nurse commented on how small the class was. Another month went by and Bob started seeing the first stories about reduced male and female fertility



Libertarian Fictions No. 4

ISSN 1361-7761 ISBN 1 85637 519 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 2001: Libertarian Alliance; Richard Grainger.

Richard Grainger had what he describes as a "bog-standard" Comprehensive education in Nottingham, before moving to Brighton and obtaining a BSc in Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence from the University of Sussex.

He now lives in Lewes, East Sussex ("early political stomping ground of Thomas Paine") and works in IY support.

Childhood's End is based on an idea by and has had input from Chris Jenkins.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



rates, popping up on the Internet newsgroups he had been monitoring since 'the end of the world'. A few days later Matt Drudge broke the story on his website and news channel and the next morning it hit the world's mainstream media. For the first time since the Channel 5 programme (which was actually called "Strange Mysteries of the Unknown"), Bob saw 'Indiana Jones' on TV again. He had hastily been made a Professor at Cambridge and his real name was actually James Oldfield. This time his platform was a little more prestigious, being BBC1 rather than Channel 5. The presenter and other members of the academic panel that had been assembled for the show, were now showing him great reverence, when before they would have labelled him a crank. He was revelling in it. He nodded vigorously when a fellow academic was commenting on how the lack of children would be a disaster: "As Professor Oldfield has said, children are the glue of society," he was saying, "Child welfare has been the motivation for a lot of the most progressive social and economic legislation of the last century. A society without children is a society without a conscience; they are what drive us to make our environment a safer and more comforting place in which to live."

After another six months, it was clear to Bob that his and Margaret's new son, Bob Junior, might be one of the last human beings to be born. It was clear to the rest of world that there would be no more children until the scientists got around to fixing whatever had gone wrong. Initially, this affected the third world worst. They had survived the earlier electrical damage relatively unscathed. "A donkey doesn't have a hard drive and neither does a plough" chuckled one particularly technosavvy Indian farmer, to a news reporter at the time. Infertility was another thing entirely. The third world was scared and angry. Some thought that the Western governments or NGOs had poisoned them. This rumour was kept alive by the unfortunate comments of some Western environmentalists who said that a reduced population, or even mankind's extinction, would be a good thing for Earth.

However, after a year or so, there were only a handful of humans on the planet who didn't know what had caused their infertility and most had faith that it would be sorted out in a due course. The subject was never out of the media and some people talked of little else, but for a while most people got on with their lives as normal.

A few years passed. The scientists had got nowhere. Their various leads had come to nothing. It soon became evident that the magnetic effects were completely alien to the particular branches or interpretations of physics and biology that Earth's scientists had ventured down in the twentieth century. Eventually pressure came on the world's Governments to declassify any scientific secrets they might have. The FBI gave up some documents concerning experiments conducted by Nikola Tesla over a century ago. The CIA revealed some of the electromagnetic science behind their MK Ultra programme conducted in the nineteen fifties and sixties. The Russians gave up some rather esoteric stuff, conducted by Soviet scientists who weren't sticking exactly to the principles of Marxist dialectic materialism. These all gave the scientists some headway, but it was clear that a complete paradigm shift was needed. Bob resigned as a Minister and gave up his seat as an MP because, for some reason, the will to power was no longer in him. This seemed to be case with a lot of other MPs. He decided to teach Bob Jnr. at home. A few of the local schools had closed and the two that were left weren't very good. A lot of Bob and Margaret's friends, especially the ones without children, had also changed jobs. Some had gone back into education, some were working part time whilst pursuing a hobby more seriously and some had started their own businesses. Almost without exception, their friends said they felt as if a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Bob couldn't help agreeing.

It was the 2030 general election and Bob Junior was a first time voter. Of course he wouldn't be voting; what a waste of time that would be! Two thirds of the population agreed with him on that

point. What was the difference between the two parties? New Labour were going to abolish the ban on tobacco advertising (that had somehow managed to stay on the books until now), whereas the Progressive Conservative Party were going to formalise the legalisation of opium derivatives. Big deal! Everybody knew it was academic anyway. Neither of these 'offences' were enforced by the major security agencies and even if they were, any cases brought would be laughed out of the tribunal. He turned on his ancient TV, which had an equally ancient digital receiver perched on top of it. Kilroy was hosting a debate about the election (he looks younger every year, thought Bob Jnr). A middle aged Scottish woman was in apoplexies of rage over the suggestion that handguns should be formally legalised in Britain. "What about the childr ..." she started to say, before stopping herself and saying instead, "What sort of message does that send?"

It was 2050 and Bob Snr. was celebrating his seventieth birthday. Margaret's present was the most extravagant — a Harley Davidson motorcycle. Bob Jnr had even sent a real hard copy birthday card all the way from the Red Planet (Margaret must have reminded him over a month ago). Of course, the family kept in regular contact with Bob Jnr. by TeslaPhone and other electronic means, but Bob didn't think he'd ever tire of the novelty of an envelope dropping through his door with the address ending: "The Kent FreeState, England, Earth" in handwriting on the front. Bob's party went with a bang. It had all his favourite elements. The music and drugs were from the nineteen nineties; the cocktails were from the twenty twenties and the visual entertainment was state of the art. Even some of his old friends from the Commons had turned up. Most had left Parliament soon after he had. They now had a variety of occupations. One was an Arbitrator, one was a successful exporter of Mercian hemp, and several were "artists". One of them was still an MP, because he "liked the drinking". As the party wound down and people started talking rather than dancing, the conversation turned to current affairs. Apparently there was news from the scientific community that they were about to make a breakthrough in fertility treatment. A biochemist, who presumably worked in the natal industry, explained to the other guests that the "Three Prong" approach, as it was popularly referred to, had become the first successful semi-natural birthing procedure. The approach combined fertility drug treatments for both parents, reliable synthetic womb augmentations and a microbe-based monitoring and repair system. The real success lay in the fact that treatment compensated for the fragility and incompleteness of the human womb, allowing for a virtually normal conception and birth. "Looks like the party will soon be over then," said the hemp exporter, "The world will soon hear the patter of tiny feet again!" "True," warbled one of the younger artists, "but what sort of world have we made for them? We may have prepared people medically but that seems to be where the line has been drawn." A look of recognition momentarily flashed across Bob's face before he turned his attention to the Marlboro joint between his fingers.

It was 2099, when Bob Jnr. and his wife Kate decided they would have a child. It was to be a girl. They had decided to take the fertility treatment after Kate was established in her third career as a Wormhole engineer in Antarctica and Bob had just retired from University teaching (for the second time). They had decided to buy a place in Kent, as there were apparently a few other families with children there. Bob Jnr. thought it ironic that just as mankind was growing up and just as he would soon be able to live anywhere in the galaxy, he had decided to move back to his hometown with a wife and kid. He found it ironic, but not in any way depressing. It was his choice. It was Kate's also. So what if they were different? The Anti-geriatric treatments (which were now part of most people's genetic make-up) may have stopped most people from feeling the need to have children. But he and Kate didn't need to have kids, they just wanted to.

"Welcome home," said the man who could have been Bob Jnr's brother.

"It's good to see you again Dad," said Bob Jnr.