

Selected excerpts from

Belfast, with Dinosaurs, 1979 -a Prehysteria Farce

From:

Chapter One: Northern Irish Dinosaurs, Pt.1, April, between 20-25, 1979

The dinosaur story all started as a bit of a joke -a bit of a 'geg', as it might be translated in Belfast-talk. It might also have been a wee rumour that started the ball rolling -the 'wee' being a freely floating and much over-used diminutive which wasn't necessarily, or always, a diminutive. Or, like any gigantic snowball, it would start out 'wee' and then just balloon as it ran. 'Geg' or 'wee rumour', it was difficult to say which was first or most pertinent. But start it most certainly did.

Whatever the story was, it threatened to sabotage some serious research into good Antrim soil and rock. Professor Janek Heinkle, of the Palaeontology Department of Heidelberg University, now visiting Prof at Queen's University, certainly felt so. He was nothing less than livid, if 'livid' is expressive enough, when he found out. He called his minions before him, to the stage area of a rather antiquated lecture room where he'd hurriedly arranged to meet them. His team comprised of one of Queen's archaeologists, Professor Tweedy (who actually often wore Tweed, even in summer), together with twelve under- and post-graduate helpers and researchers ('apostles' they called themselves), all of whom now wondered what was going on with their boss (or 'Führer' to some). Professor Heinkle wondered, too, and out loud: 'VAT is dis?', holding out a newspaper, which some could see was *The Belfast News Letter*. His voice boomed through them, and beyond, around the rickety nineteenth century auditorium. The silver threads of his usually well-behaved -abundant but orderly-hair shook, dislodging a renegade clump or two which then fell disconcertingly behind his glasses. Beads of sweat dappled his well-creased forehead, helping to amplify the image of a man in raging consternation. 'Duelling Dinos Discovery!' he trumpeted -just as the headline trumpeted, in robust alliteration, albeit as a fairly small headline on a fairly small article on page four...

[It might be noted here that the Editor of the paper in question had hoped -against hope-that this dip into alliteration wouldn't come across as too-tabloidy, or even if it did... 'What the odds!' he'd exclaimed, as only newspaper editors can. 'Just what we need!' This was the first smile anyone had seen on the Editor's face in weeks, murder and mayhem in Belfast and environs having taken centre stage for so long. 'This'll take their minds off things!' This blinding positivism was given an edge by virtue of the fact that the reporter responsible for the story was no less a figure than his own dear nephew, Ivan Stacks, neophyte in the journalism business, whose own positivism convinced Uncle not to have the story checked. 'I have it here in black and white!' thrusting his notebook under Uncle's nose. Nepotism blinds, too.]

'Vat is DIS?' Prof Heinkle screamed again, with even greater intensity, the boom making an echo of sorts, if only within the minds of his astonished audience. 'Duelling fucking Dinos Discovery? I'll be made a laughingstock off. Dis cud destroy my reputation! Obliterate za mission! Vat is somevon doing to me?' His normally well-pronounced and functionally civilized English had succumbed to a fury which put the usual delicacies through the ringer, so to speak. It had Tweedy doing a bit of a double take, never having imagined he would hear his eminent superior formulate such indelicacies,

even if he had sometimes bristled at his style. He straightened the lapels of his Tweed jacket, even though said lapels didn't actually need straightening.

It soon became clear from the reactions of the assembled team members which one, or ones, were likely to blame. The faces of Tracey Williamson (local lass) and Manny Jal (from Birmingham, England) were exhibiting a wider range of expressions than those of anyone else in the room, gauged in depth of frown and micro-twitches, realization why they'd all been summoned so precipitously dawning at last. Their body language also spoke reams, be it in the dog-like tilting of the head (made more noticeable by their respectively distinctive coiffures) or the sudden need to fold arms, and then unfold them again, with the odd scratch at the back of the head thrown in for good measure.

Heinkle had them right away. 'Du!' he exclaimed, his 'du' imaginable as a sonic projectile launched beyond the reach of his suddenly out-flung right arm, hand, and gun-barrel-like index finger. It helped that he was six-foot tall and stood as straight as a die. 'Are you the...' and he then brought the paper up to his eyes, eager to pinpoint the offending article. This entailed both hands, and no little exasperation as he soon realized he had to tear off his pince-nez glasses (which he didn't need for reading). At last, he had it, and read: '... "*sources close to Professor... Hanek Jeinkle*"?' He stopped. You could almost say he smiled. 'Thank Moder Mary Jesus unt all ze saintz, at least they spelt mine name wrong!' he roared with what you might term the coldest of cold comforts. Tracey and Manny looked up in unison, doubt, shame and/or fear coursing through their neural networks, making whatever differences they possessed as individuals physiognomically unimportant. They were just two frightened kids. 'Yes,' they said chorally, if weakly, tremulously, pathetically. 'Da!' exclaimed the Professor in a startling release of exasperation, 'Da!' -startling as it concerned the possible ruination of all, all his research and planning, and all those weeks spent in calm and methodical study of the secrets of the distant past, even as a bloody -both uses- war raged on all around. (Not to mention 'ze damned weater!') Heinkle thereupon strode toward the offending two, twisted the newspaper into a baton and set about beating them on the head with it, slowly and methodically (as was his way in palaeontology), more in mock-blows than ones with any physical force, but fit for purpose. What he was doing was dealing out public punishment for private betrayal. In return, Tracey and Manny uttered suitably anguish-filled mock 'Ow!'s and 'Ah!'s and other utterances that defied transcription, lending to the scene a decided touch of the surreal, or the farcically surreal, even the Dada-esque.

The others looked on disbelief, not so much because they felt these students had let the side down, as Tracey and Manny were well known as 'loafers' and 'spoofer's', never taking things as seriously as they should, but because their eminent Professor had been reduced to this. It was a case of tut, tut, tut all round. This went on for several seconds, until poor Professor Janek Heinkle (not Hanek Jeinkle), of the Palaeontology Department of Heidelberg University, sixty-five years old, and now suddenly feeling each and every one of them, desisted, dropped the paper baton, and, like a broken man, exited the auditorium in what were discerned to be actual tears...

Alas, here we see what 'loose talk' can mean, or could mean back in the late '70s when this all happened, in Northern Ireland, land of conflict, clash and contumacy. Had it been a case of some silly rumour floating about, a rumour generated by a bit of spoofing, perhaps? Is that what had sparked this Greek tragedy? Sure, everybody knew they had to be careful what they said in certain company in ole Norn Iron... All eyes fell on Manny and Tracey, but they weren't saying boo. 'Whatever you say, say nothing', the mantra of the day, was usually only about politics and religion - not dinosaurs. You could always chance your arm, of course, if you were fishing (and not for fish). You'd either catch something or get pulled in. Disaster or glory, there was a very fine line between the two, and, bejeeper's, glory had a shine to it. There were fearless ones about who'd plough through all the barriers, just to get a decent morsel, -and bugger the consequences if it all blew up in their face.

Ivan Stacks was the man for all this, the man to uncover the tightest-held secret, or, if need be, unearth a story completely devoid of truth, but pungent with all the juice he imagined his readers, and his Editor uncle, would willingly lap up. That, and he had always been partial to anything to do with dinosaurs, having never gotten over the happiest time of his life, starting at the age of ten -a mere thirteen years ago-, playing with his plastic dino kit in the front parlour of the family house on the Shankill Road. He'd done his best to develop things by trips to the local library, but it was the images of these fabulous beasts stalking the plains with erupting volcanoes in the background that he lived for, not the difficult-to-pronounce or hard-to-remember terms and descriptions. Dinosaurs had lived in his mind as safely scary playmates, and inhabited a place where he could always go, when the going got rough, so to speak. Like when he'd be smacked for making a mess, be it a poorly balanced glass of milk, standing in for a volcano, on the parlour settee, undergoing an... *'Earthquake!'* So, when he got his job as 'Junior Reporter' at the *News Letter*, and was given 'free rein', not realizing that in fact he'd just been shunted off into a place where he couldn't possibly touch any story of worth, he leapt at the chance to follow his heart whenever he could. And with a heart such as his, and his wallet stuffed with cash, Ivan felt he was on a mission to loosen tongues and shake the treetops for all the precious coconuts he could have rain down on his head. Wherever it took him and into whatever nook and cranny he had to squeeze (and with even the largest nook or cranny he'd likely have to squeeze quite a bit, having grown slightly porcine since the age of the dinosaurs), he would gladly go.

He was pals with a bloke who knew a gal who worked with another bloke who knew a gal who, he was told, was a 'vital member of the team of Professor Janek Heinkle of the Palaeontology Department of Heidelberg University', digging for dino bones in the ground near Carrickfergus. And that bloke, the first one, the one who was pals with Ivan, knew that Ivan was into all that kind of thing, so he started in: 'I know this gal who works with this bloke...' 'Yeah?' replied Ivan, 'I know this other gal who works with this other bloke...' 'Aye, but wait'll ye hear...' Ivan's eyes narrowed in expectation. 'Aye, well, this bloke...' 'The one who works with the gal?' 'Aye. The same. Well, he knows this other gal...' Now Ivan was looking confused. Abe had him where he wanted him: '...who is a flippin' dinosaur hunter!' Ivan, in mid-sup, blew some of the head of the new pint he was raising to his lips onto the face of his drinking interlocutor. 'Watcha!' said a slightly splattered Abe, but then resumed his tale. 'Apparently, there's this team up in Carrick, and, well,' confided 'Abe', as he was known (for his conspicuous Abraham Lincoln-like overgrown goatee, but plain 'Davy' to his Ma and Da), 'it's all very hush-hush, ye understand...' He'd gotten Ivan's attention, and, with a little tap of the glass, accompanied by a look which plead the poor mouth, he'd also gotten Ivan's acquiescence to get the next round in, even though it was Abe's turn. 'Don't fuckin' go away!' blurted a deadly serious Ivan, as he rushed to the bar and hurriedly petitioned the barman for two stiff ones (and a shining new pint of Harp for Abe).

He could feel his journalistic juices rise -there was a story here to be had. Three rounds later there *was* a story: that Ivan Stacks was as gullible as a toddler watching *Romper Room*. Strictly speaking, however, this dino story was a mixture of Abe 'coddling him on', not to mention 'drilling him for drink', combined with actual rumours Abe had heard down through that chain of blokes and gals. Abe/Davy/bloke/Ivan's friend and latest source hadn't taken these seriously (or cared tuppence either), but now he saw a use for them. Ivan swallowed every word (just as Abe swallowed every golden drop) and all he had to do now was 'get on it', in the best traditions of investigative journalism. They'd discovered evidence of a world's first, Abe insisted, almost believing it himself, of 'actual signs, in the fossils, that two fuckin' dinos had been four-square in battle together, millions and millions of years ago! Bitemarks, torn-off limbs, broken teeth, you name it, beating the fuckin' shite outta each other!' Ivan sank a sizeable slurp of his own pint, Tennent's ('less chemicals than thon'), followed by a drag of his White Horse, briefly contemplating the ancient scene: 'Fuck!' he exhaled. 'A scoop ready to be had, Ivan!' Abe stoutly slapped his friend's shoulder, and asked, 'Are you the man for the job?'

In Abe's defence, he was pretty 'snattered' by this stage, having imbibed copious amounts of Harp and even a few Carlsbergs, too (a speciality here). That *and* he loved to rib his friend. 'Remember, Ivan', slurred Abe, one whole hour later, as they were leaving the Rex Bar, on the Shankill Road, the one carrying the other, 'fuckin' hush, hush... don't let them know you're onto the bastards...' 'Gotcha, Abraham,' slurred back Ivan, 'they won't know what hit them...'

Ivan woke up the next morning in his wee house off the Woodvale Road with two things weighing on his mind, his Goliath Crane scale hangover and the distant memory of a glory that was his for the taking. Wolfing down an Ulster fry the size of a large frying pan, he worked on both. As he forked into his second piece of 'tatie bread' (ominously, Belfast rhyming slang for 'dead'), satisfyingly coated with Heinz beans in tomato sauce, and sprinkled liberally with salt, he started on his plan. Sure, it was 'hush-hush', but it would have to start with a simple inquiry, a phone call. Or, would it be a trip into work to peruse the files on recent activity in science-related stories? (With all this roadworks going on inside his noggin, he winced.) A few bites of salted black pudding and runny-egg-soused soda bread later, he realized it would have to be a bit of both, and before he knew it, he was dressed and out the door. To cut a long story short, Ivan rifled through whatever files he could get his hands on in the offices of the *News Letter* on Donegall Street, to the bemusement of many, found this and that, phoned Queen's, and put it together that he'd need to get to Carrickfergus, and slightly beyond, to a spot called 'Eden', to attack this thing properly, even get an interview. His hangover had long dissipated. The lunchtime pint in The Morning Star made sure of that.

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From:

Chapter Four: Dinosaur State, Pt.2, Friday, April 27

As Christopher Maguire stood there, just past the security gate, outside of Boots ('the Chemist'), initially looking at the disappearing figure of Ivan Stacks, he then looked down onto what he was holding, a copy of the *News Letter*, and, before beginning his own walk down the street, he located the article he'd been told about, on page four, halfway down the page, squeezed in between a piece about 'Disgruntled Antrim Pig Farmers' on the left and, on the right, an ad for 555 cigs: 'Mild. But Not Meek'. The headline in question, with its slightly wince-inducing alliteration, virtually trumpeted its presence to Christopher: 'Duelling Dinos Discovery'. Assembling folds of the paper so that this article was face up and the whole manageably small enough to be held in his left hand, Christopher started to amble, eyes half on what he was ambling past -pedestrians and the occasional street post-and half on the article. He savoured the printed name of the author, thinking to himself (in his best Hiberno-English grammar): 'I'm only after seeing Ivan Stacks... Must tell the Da about this.'

He soon realized this was not an ideal arrangement, especially after bumping into a lady shopper carrying full plastic bags in both hands, who said: 'For eff's sake, look where yer going.' Ideal or not, he persevered, snatching pieces of the story on the page as he did his best to navigate the pavement, ignoring Smyth's for Records, against his normal instincts... He'd actually been hoping to noodle around the record shops a little, like Harrisons and Makin' Tracks, and he was sure he would, but for the moment, he was in a different world... A Scelidosaurus, he learned, was a rather small

dinosaur, not much bigger than a large dog. The Megalosaurus, however, (whose head and mouth, in the inserted drawn illustration, somehow looked like someone he felt he knew, someone famous...) was 'almost the size of a T. Rex'. And the article suggested that 'palaeontologists' (Christopher had to look up from the paper after encountering that word, and back down again, in a concerted effort to be able to pronounce it properly, while dodging a fast-walking bloke wearing a not-very-well-preserved Rory Gallagher T-shirt) had discovered fossils in a site near Carrickfergus which indicated that some sort of battle between the two had been uncovered 'through painstaking work'. Christopher loved that the site was located in 'Eden', a detail which set him off on a series of playful associations which saw him imagining Adam and Eve playing hide and seek as hungry dinosaurs stalked them. The God of the Old Testament would have kept them safe, he guessed, zapping any of the giant beasts who got too close. After a brief vision, which was actually a memory, of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delight* (from a booklet from the Prado Museum his brothers had brought back from sunny Spain the previous year) in which strange creatures cajoled within the same space as the earth's first nubile lovers, Christopher's shoulder made painful contact with a hard thing jutting out of a street post. It was a sign, possibly from the same God he had just been thinking about, he mused, telling him to desist with the reading-while-walking thing, and just walk. And so, somewhat reluctantly, he did just that, opening the flap of his dark leather school bag and consigning the paper into darkness and invisibility, to make friends with Herman and the two Thomases. He then started walking on, eyes up and ready for any moving, or unmoving, obstacle.

Apart from the occasional red and cream-coloured Citybus making its way down the street, perhaps even the one he could have been on, he noticed a police Land Rover pass by -how could he not, with its gravelly high-gear whine and sudden expulsion of noxious gas. It reminded him of seeing the Saracen a few minutes previously, which then prompted him to wonder why it had been there at all. You usually saw Saracens in 'trouble spots', he reflected, not in the centre, mucking up the tarmacadam and spoiling the image of what was supposed to be one of Belfast's premier shopping streets. Like the Saracen, this Land Rover was armoured and as ugly as sin, grilles on the front and headlights, over the windscreen and up top, a little circular grille round the spotlight (or was it a camera?) at the top. Drab green and a little battle-scarred, too, it was a reminder, if you needed one, of what normality was like in 1979 Belfast. The vehicle passed but its exhaust smoke lingered a moment like a ghost, a ghost that needed a good scrub. Welcome to Belfast, city of dinosaurs on wheels.

It was time to bid farewell to the big thoroughfare, though. His stomach had been sending him messages for the longest time. He turned left up into Castle Street past the doughty brown of Anderson & McAuley, with the image of fried potato chips etched onto his mind and the contours of his stomach. And yet, life is funny, as they say, and the unexpected happened: SAWERS happened, again. The banner draped above the long window display, 'Celebrating 100 Years of Good Food Service', helped to open up a narrative, but Christopher had visited this famous delicatessen many times before, and was always 'gobsmacked' by the various arrays. It wouldn't hurt to take another 'butchers', he told himself punningly, as though needing to assure himself that his loyalty in Victor's hadn't wavered.

Well, inside the shop it did. The sight of an enormous white flat fish, and accompanying full-body dappled fishy partners, beached on a bed of ice did not excite his taste buds, but, aesthetically-speaking, it did slap him up the face. This was fleshy glistening modern art, clamouring for attention, and punctuated with wooden staves near the heads of each telling us the price they had died for. It did the trick, opening Christopher's eyes just that little bit extra as he surveyed the shelves and counters with their various crammed jars or fresh-cut slices of cheese and ham and veg and cured and smoked bits of this animal's leg and that animal's breast. Somewhere within the murk of a jar of

mixed pickles and another of curled anchovies, and then the chance sight of ‘Today’s Special Offer’, Victor’s ‘chip’ dissolved like the sound of a solitary passing bee might on a summer’s afternoon. Today’s Special Offer was a palm-sized paper bowl of Fresh Ardglass Mussels, 29p. Christopher almost dropped his coins on the floor in anticipation of just getting his hands on this most delectable prize. It was compensation for his decision not to have a chip after all, and for not being able to afford to purchase one particularly sexy wedge of Stilton, which had called to him plaintively as he spent an inordinate amount of time looking into the cheese counter, obviously bothering others. These mussels would provide plenty of gastronomic relief, and, as he exited the shop, past the cured hanging hams, and left that atmosphere which was also a cloying smell of the recently cut or killed, he plunged in the provided plastic toothpick to the first -of about twenty- and, closing his eyes for the maximum effect, just bunged it in his gob (which had become once again rightly smacked).

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From:

Chapter Five: Tidying up, Pt.1 Saturday, April 28

Professor Tweedy’s shoulders were slightly hunched as he sat at his desk in his office at Queen’s University, his head down and lower lip pushing up against his stiff upper lip. He looked very much a man pondering the imponderable. In fact, he was simply pondering the best choice of words, and the best tone, with which to address the two students who had caused the recent upset. He wasn’t very good at telling people off, or even just talking to them, and students presented a particular challenge, being generally so immature, impatient and inordinately inarticulate. He liked students best when they were quiet, taking notes at his lectures, or raising the occasional hand to ask a pertinent question. He wasn’t pally-wally with them, and never addressed any by anything other than their family name.

If he was honest with himself, he was also a little upset by having been seconded onto this project, having been happily engaged in his own studies and pursuits in archaeological, not palaeontological, digs. Why hadn’t the geologists been asked? Instead of pursuing the record of ancient human settlements in Belfast and environs he had now been spending most of the year basically holding the chisels for the insufferable Heinkle. No wonder they called him Herr Heinkle! ‘Don’t! Don’t! Don’t!’ was hardly the most diplomatic way for the visiting Professor to address his well-meaning and extremely welcoming local Professor, exhorting Tweedy not to even touch the rocky outcrop they’d come across early in the dig. It was so infuriating being talked to like that, and yet, he had gladly complied with Professor Jope’s ‘request’ that he offer ‘our German friend’ every assistance, as it would ‘reflect well on our global standing’. Tweedy was vexed by the behind-backs phrase that was used about him from time to time, as ‘Jope’s Hope’. *Jope’s Joke*, more like... And, Lord, oh Lord, yes, both disciplines did involve digging into the earth, but the Permian surfaces they were working with had to be about the most uninspiring and, quite frankly, uninteresting substances known to man -unless you happened to be lucky and came across the tiniest speck of ancient calcified organic matter, the wingtip of an Early Triassic mosquito, perhaps. *Oh, joy, oh, celebration! Let’s open the Champagne!* This was probably what Heinkle would do, but Tweedy, no. Tweedy would just have to pretend to be in raptures over the enormity of it all, smiling for the camera, engaging Heinkle in rapt

conversation over the ‘significance’ of this, when, in reality, he didn’t care one iota for a mosquito’s wing, even a Triassic one. He would have been the first to swat the creature it belonged to with the flat of his palm. *Die, little thing of no worth, and don’t show your face round here for the next hundred million years!*

Yes, and no. Yes, he did entertain such frivolous channelling of his inner frustrations, but no, he also knew the thrill of any exploration of what lay below our feet, however far back in time, and was -relatively- happy to be part of this enterprise, partly, at least. Uncompromisingly obstinate characters appeared to populate academia anyway, whether they had German accents or not. Jope was nice, of course, but he, like Tweedy, had to answer to higher forces within the university, the ones who called the shots and from time to time interfered with the happy course of their work. ‘The University envisions this enterprise as a bridge to international cooperation for a department sometimes too closely focused on Northern Irish rock and soil.’ This was particularly galling as a policy tweak considering they had lassoed Professor Jope, who was already as international as archaeologists got, and made sure he kept his nose in Northern Irish soil and rock during term time. It was hard to keep up with the powers that be, and not wishing to second guess anyone, Tweedy had felt it better just to accept -accept all he was given, be it on a silver platter or in a dirty paper bag, metaphorically speaking.

Oh, the joys he derived from uncovering the tangible past! What ineluctable pleasure Tweedy had derived from even just reading about that giant beaker rescued from the depths of the mud and clay in Cluntyganny Townland last year! (The pamphlet was still on his desk.) That was work and a half! He well recalled his meeting with the authors Brennan, Briggs and the curiously named ApSimon -those funny Welsh names were always a wonder, too! Had that one-and-a-half-foot tall pot been part of a burial chamber or had it been a utensil used daily for a family in Neolithic times? That had led to some wonderful discussions... Even today, in the *Telegraph* he’d read about what the people at Historic Monuments were doing down in Armagh. It could only happen here of course: how to find a four and a half thousand-year-old pot? Just blow up the local Woolworths store or have the local terrorist organization do it for you, and then start digging! He’d done plenty of digging himself, of course, at Shantallow, in Londonderry, and closer to home, up at the Malone Ridge, where pre-historic settlements in this area had begun. With what painstaking care had they worked, day in, day out, chipping away at the past, tenderly wiping away dirt here and there, pulling away the chaff of the relatively modern, to get at the kernel of ancient habitation and culture and life! How many months had he spent, endangering his family happiness in the process, working upon those three-dimensional jigsaws to restore the various vessels and utensils, sherd by loving sherd? All for the goal of being able to re-construct the most precious artefacts of the past, for ultimate display either within an academic institution or, glory of glories, at the Ulster Museum... Yes, it could be very satisfying to delve into the dirt and pull out jewels which would lead to a great understanding of our past, ourselves, and this great Province -but where was the greatness in exploring the deep, dark past Heinkle dwelt on so much? Who cared about trilobites?

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