

FEATURES

Chunks, or a Tin-Opener's View of Late Capitalism



Graham Head

The title of this essay is intended not only to reference the sweet, canned pineapple that I use to string my argument together, and which is one partial focus of the paper, but also reflects that the argument itself comes in, well, chunks.

When, early in Robert Heinlein's 1958 juvenile novel, *Have Spacesuit Will Travel*, the protagonist, Clifford, or Kip, tells his father that he is set on going to the moon, the latter answers 'fine'—but the method is up to Kip. He cites a novel he is reading in which the protagonists try several routes to open a tin can of pineapples:

...when he told me I could go to the Moon, but the means were up to me, he meant just that. I could go tomorrow—provided I could wangle a billet in a space ship.

But he added meditatively, 'There must be a number of ways to get to the moon, son. Better check 'em all. Reminds me of this passage I'm reading. They're trying to open a tin of pineapple, and Harris has left the can opener back in London. They try several ways.' He started to read aloud and I sneaked out – I had heard that passage five hundred times... (Heinlein, *Spacesuit*, 6)

This was the last of Heinlein's juveniles published by Scribner's. In these books, as Farah Mendlesohn argues, he attempts to guide and instruct his audience, assumed to comprise mostly of boys in their early teens, as well as to entertain. For Mendlesohn, this is perhaps his most 'quintessential' juvenile, in addition to being a political novel (Mendlesohn, 48, 90-91). It was written after a period when he'd been working on what eventually became the 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and a year before *Starship Troopers* would be released. Kip's dad is one of Heinlein's all-knowing omniscient father-figures, so, again, we might well expect the book to contain some messages.

The book Kip's dad is reading is Jerome K. Jerome's 1889 comic novel, *Three Men in a Boat*. As he mobilises Jerome's description of his three characters' desire for a tin of sweet-fleshed pineapples, he apparently deploys it as a basic narrative of desire motivating entrepreneurial action. Invention, innovation, and adaptation to circumstances are key, and it's true that these are themes in Heinlein's novel. In the next chapter, in fact, Heinlein describes how Kip tries to win a trip to the moon by entering a competition to write an advertising slogan for 'Skyways Soap', depicting in loving detail how he mass-produces his competition entries. It seems the conquest of space—or a trip to the moon, at least—is supported by active entrepreneurship and improvisation.

However, looked at another way, this passage from Jerome is a rather strange choice:

FEATURES
Chunks of Pineapple

We are very fond of pine-apple, all three of us. We looked at the picture on the tin; we thought of the juice. We smiled at one another, and Harris got a spoon ready.

... There was no tin-opener to be found.

Then Harris tried to open the tin with a pocket-knife, and broke the knife and cut himself badly; and George tried a pair of scissors, and the scissors flew up, and nearly put his eye out. While they were dressing their wounds, I tried to make a hole in the thing with the spiky end of the hitcher, and the hitcher slipped and jerked me out between the boat and the bank into two feet of muddy water, and the tin rolled over, uninjured, and broke a teacup.

... Harris rushed at the thing, and caught it up, and flung it far into the middle of the river, and as it sank we hurled our curses at it... (Jerome 116-117)

The desire for pineapple is certainly a parallel to Kip's wish for the Moon, but Jerome's protagonists completely *fail* to open the tin, despite their many attempts. They don't achieve their aim. They are wounded in the process, and they are clearly figures of fun, not entrepreneurial exemplars. They give up. It is possible that Kip's father is just tone deaf to what he is saying, but it is perhaps worth looking further. Has he simply offered a rather unhelpful parallel, or is Heinlein hinting at something more?

Jerome's novel was hugely popular when it was published, a best-seller that seemed to tap into the spirit of the times. His characters and the events he describes touched a chord; they were of the moment. And canned pineapples were a relatively new innovation. They had only just become widespread in Britain, and available to nearly all classes of society, in the previous decade. Perhaps, then, it is worth looking at the means of production of those tins of pineapples.

The first pineapple in Europe was brought over from the Americas by Columbus. For many years afterwards, because of the difficulties of cultivation in a European climate and the fact that the fruit would often rot during long voyages, it was the preserve of the elite classes. Large hothouses were built in the estates of the landed gentry, and it became a symbol of wealth and elite privilege, as well as an object of epicurean—and occasionally sinfully erotic—desire. Early in the nineteenth century, faster and more reliable transport from the Americas made a trade in pineapples to Europe practical. At the same time, more people built hothouses, to grow the fruit in all weathers. Pineapples slowly stopped being the preserve of the very rich and became accessible to the middle classes. Dickens' titular David Copperfield sees piles of the fruit for sale in London (Dickens, 215), although they remain, for many, an inaccessible object of desire.

By 1850, 200,000 pineapples were being unloaded on the London docks every year. The main source of imported pineapples in this period was the Bahamas, where, by the end of the 18th century, pineapple cultivation had supplanted the pre-eminence of cotton. Following the abolition of slavery in 1834, many ex-slaves were essentially forced to become share croppers, leasing the land for pineapples from a landlord and surrendering up to half of their profits to them

FEATURES

Chunks of Pineapple

in return. It was a pretty miserable existence. They also had to deal with those who marketed and transported the fruit, who would rarely give them a fair price. With the increasingly successful trade with Britain, tens of thousands of acres on the islands of New Providence and Eleuthera were given over solely to the production of pineapples. But development was still paternalistically organised by the ruling British state. Finally, in 1876, a method was devised for canning pineapples. This eased the difficulties of transport and made the fruit available to the masses all year round. A further massive expansion in production and trade occurred as a result. By 1885, over a million pineapples were exported annually, and it was the main crop of the colony. The cultivation of the fruit continued to grow, extending significantly beyond the West Indies to the Azores and North Africa, as well as to Hawaii.

... I will not tell the needless trouble I had breaking into that house... nor how I ransacked every room for food, until just on the verge of despair, in what seemed to me to be a servant's bedroom, I found a rat-gnawed crust and two tins of pineapple. The place had been already searched and emptied. In the bar I afterwards found some biscuits and sandwiches that had been overlooked. The latter I could not eat, they were too rotten, but the former not only stayed my hunger, but filled my pockets. (Wells 142)

Wells' unnamed narrator, tired, hungry, and in hiding from the Martian invaders, chances upon two tins of pineapples in a ruined Surrey house. In mordant opposition to Jerome's use of the same food a few years earlier, these tins have already been ignored by previous scavengers and hold no interest for the hungry refugee. Situated as they are in an ironic narrative that casts the white, moneyed English as the invaded and brutalised people, this is a telling intervention. Wells' narrator encounters an industrialised foodstuff that symbolises civilisation, technological advancement, and national power, but also colonialism and exploitation. At the very least, alongside his destruction of the home counties, Wells intends to signal the demise of the comfortable lives of Jerome's protagonists. There will be no more pleasure-seeking on the Thames. This is a novel that takes colonialism as a key subject, making it hard to believe that Wells didn't also intend the tin of pineapples as a handy signal of the end of the European hegemony. That said, not every SF use of the tinned fruit is an indicator of colonialism. For example, in George R Stewart's 1949 novel, *Earth Abides*, the survivors of a worldwide apocalypse value the tins primarily because they keep their contents safe from predating rats. The tins are valued because they securely preserve their contents. (Stewart 114).

Robert and Virginia Heinlein visited a large-scale pineapple cannery in Hawaii as part of their 1953 world tour, and thus had a sense of the scale of cultivation. Many indigenous plants and animals had been swept aside in the mass planting of the fruit, but in writing about this visit, Heinlein professed only a profound pleasure in the development of the island and supported the industrialisation of production (Heinlein, *Tramp*, 333-334). So is it really reasonable to think that the darker side of pineapple cultivation was also in his mind, when he wrote the novel?

Well, just possibly, because *Spacesuit*, like *The War of the Worlds*, is amongst many other

FEATURES

Chunks of Pineapple

things a novel about colonisation and colonialism. Kip, wearing the spacesuit he won in the soap slogan competition and which he has carefully refurbished, is kidnapped by alien—the evil ‘Wormfaces.’ A hostile, spacefaring race, they are scouting the Earth with the intent of invasion and taking it over. They are colonisers. And, to continue our discussion of food, they eat humans. It is impossible for Kip, or the other humans around him, to face up to these creatures; if they give an instruction, there is no possibility of rebellion; it must be obeyed. The Wormface aliens have technology well beyond that of humans, enabling travel to Pluto in only five days. Resistance is only possible with the support of another alien, the Mother Thing, who turns out to be a kind of interstellar policeman.

This places Kip and Peewee, the preadolescent girl who is his fellow-prisoner, in the role of the colonised and the oppressed. And if there is a clear parallel in the book to the failed attempts of Jerome’s boating holidaymakers to open a tin of pineapples, it may lie in Kip’s repeated failed attempts to escape his captivity. He tries several different avenues, including a march across the lunar surface, improvising with their shrinking oxygen supplies, as well as various attempts to escape his cell on Pluto. Innovation and improvisation are shown to be the province of the prisoner, not just the entrepreneur. At one point, in fact, as Kip is fed from tin cans, he manufactures one into a crude knife, hammering it flat with a second can, creating a weapon of resistance from Wells’ symbol of colonisation.

Eventually, Kip and Peewee are rescued by Mother Thing’s colleagues and taken to the star system of Vega to recover. The Mother Thing’s race is far more advanced than that of the Wormfaces; they are members of an enormous civilisation that covers three galaxies (our own and the Magellanic Clouds). They have intergalactic travel and some form of time travel. Once healed, the children are taken to a court in one of the Magellanic Clouds for judgement of both humanity and the Wormface aliens—and if anything, questions of colonisation and exploitation become more insistent. This court judges whole races. Those who are deemed a threat to the great multigalactic civilisation are sentenced to ‘rotation’ into another space without their sun: an act of summary racial genocide. The Wormfaces are found guilty, and despite their aggressive defiance and hatred, are sentenced to death in this way. Part of their defence reveals their contempt for the indigenous humans:

The Wormfaces had been operating in their own part of space engaged in occupying a useful but empty planet, Earth. No possible crime would lie in colonizing a world inhabited merely by animals. (Heinlein, *Spacesuit*, 150)

Then it is time for the humans to be judged. Kip has already, in all innocence, given the Vegans something of a potted history of human civilisation, as he understands it—a rather warts and all account. The Court also has the power to reach back in time and pluck other examples of the human race out of the past: a Roman soldier (Iunio), who is a legionnaire from the garrison at Eboracum (York), and a Neanderthal from prehistory. The latter is timorous, and is eventually recognised as not of the same species as the humans, so is sent back. Iunio, however, part of

the Roman force colonising England, sees everyone else, including the children, as barbarians, uncivilised, and beneath him. He offers to buy Peewee as a slave. He has been guarding the building of a wall in the North, where the weather is awful:

The climate there was terrible, and the natives were bloodthirsty beasts who... didn't appreciate civilisation—you'd think the eagles [i.e., the Romans] were trying to steal their dinky island... (Heinlein, *Spacesuit*, 146)

Iunio's views closely parallel those expressed by the Wormfaces. Both see the indigenous inhabitants they are supplanting as less than human, as bestial. Humans may in fact be no better than the Wormfaces.

This very act of extracting people from the past may suggest a reification of John Rieder's notion, when discussing *The War of the Worlds*, that the confrontation of humans and Martians is a kind of anachronism, an incongruous co-habitation of the same moment by people and artifacts from different times. He cites George Stocking's 1987 *Victorian Anthropology*:

Victorian anthropologists, while expressing shock at the devastating effects of European contact on the Tasmanians, were able to adopt an apologetic tone about it because they understood the Tasmanians as 'living representatives of the early Stone age,' and thus their 'extinction was simply a matter of... placing the Tasmanians back into the dead prehistoric world where they belonged'. (Rieder, 5, ellipses in original)

To the Wormfaces, the humans are animals, invisible. To the Three Galaxies they are children. They are infantilised—as indicated, overtly, by the very name of the Mother Thing who befriends the hero. In each case they occupy the position of indigenous peoples in the face of invaders.

Both the Wormfaces and Iunio end with a defiant, threatening, and self-centred outburst at the galactic court. It is something of a shock to the reader, that when Kip is called to give evidence, he ends in the same fashion. Condemned out of his own mouth, this suggests he is little different from the colonisers. Despite that, the humans are reprieved. In a sense, their infantilisation saves them, as it is hinted in the court that they are a young race that might be trained to know better. The paternalistic galactic empire is judging the human race, rather as the British—at the time the novel was written—were judging their colonies. "It's the same all over Africa... Africa is growing up... And in all the countries which have been under British control they are being given their independence as soon as they are able to manage their own affairs. (Daniell and Matthew 48)"

However, Heinlein also likens the three galaxies to Hawaii in their isolation (Heinlein, *Spacesuit*, 141). So it may be that, as their decisions are based more on security than justice, he is suggesting they have something of the America of the 1950s about them. Not claiming to be colonisers themselves, but still perhaps setting themselves up to police the whole world."

It is now, finally, possible to understand Heinlein's choice of passage from *Three Men In a Boat*. The frustration of Jerome's boaters is reflected in Kip's frustrations with his captivity, but more

widely, humankind appears to be curtailed in its desire to drive into space; the novel challenges the notion that humans can expand without check. It takes on one of the pervading monomyths of the genre, and it refutes the notion that humankind will forge into space and build a galactic civilisation there. There are people living there already, and they are dangerous. And humankind has no solution for that. We can't have the pineapples.

Admittedly, little of this concern with the colonising urge comes through Kip's narrative voice, which remains that of a can-do American chap who has just finished high school. He's bright and brave, he knows engineering and science, and has enough Latin to speak with an ancient Roman. The novel remains, at heart, a juvenile story of derring-do. He defeats the evil aliens, travels to other galaxies, and saves the human race from extinction. The entrepreneurialism noted at the start remains throughout. So I'm not arguing that the main thrust of the novel comprises a paean against colonialism; rather, that this remains as a troubling undercurrent running alongside the main narrative. And, I suggest, a helpful symbol of that parallel current is that pesky tin of pineapples.

Notes

1. The material in this section is drawn from Beuman, ch. 9-10 and O'Connor, ch.3.

Works Cited

Beuman, Fran. *The Pineapple: King of Fruits*. Vintage, 2005.

Daniell, David Scott and Jack Matthew. *Flight Five Africa: A Ladybird Book of Travel Adventure*. Loughborough, Wills and Hepworth, 1961.

Dickens, Charles. *The Personal History of David Copperfield*. Penguin, 1966.

Heinlein, Robert A. *Have Spacesuit - Will Travel*. New English Library, 1975.

---. *Tramp Royale*. Ace, 1992.

Jerome, Jerome K. *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*. Penguin, 1957.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein*. Unbound, 2019.

O'Connor, Kaori. *Pineapple: A Global History*. Reaktion, 2013.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Stewart, George R. *Earth Abides*. Gollancz, 1950.

Wells, H.G. *The War of the Worlds*. Everyman, 1993.