

Five British Dinosaurs

Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick [www.michaelswanwick.com] lives in Philadelphia, and is one of the leading writers of fantasy and science fiction today. He is also among the most prolific in short fiction in recent years. He has won and been nominated for more awards than bear mentioning. His fine novels come out every three or four years— *In the Drift* (1984), *Vacuum Flowers* (1987), *Stations of the Tide* (1991), *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), and *Jack Faust* (1997). *Bones of the Earth* was his new novel in 2002. He published more than fifty short stories in 2001 and 2002, and his bibliography is bewilderingly difficult to update, since he publishes frequently online.

“Five British Dinosaurs” appeared in *Interzone*, which maintained its high level of quality in fantasy and science fiction, though it skipped two issues during the year, publishing two combined issues. The piece is composed of five independent vignettes ringing playful variations on the theme of British dinosaurs, and they are light, witty, and humorous. This is Swanwick at his most evanescently charming.

Iguanodon anglicus

It was Mary Ann Mantell who discovered the first *Iguanodon* fossils, in the South Downs of Sussex. She was a doctor's wife and had accompanied her husband on his rounds, when she was attacked by pixies.

It was a lovely day and, since Mary shared her husband's interests in natural history and geology in particular, she stayed outside while Gideon went into a patient's house.

He'd only been gone a few minutes when two or more invisible, giggling imps began pelting stones at Mary. Small, hard pebbles struck her on the arms and shoulders. Though she could see perfectly well from whence these missiles came, there appeared to be no one there. That, and the small, wicked voices, told her what her tormentors were.

A doctor's wife in Sussex of the 1820s was no weak and simpering thing. Without hesitation, she ran to a nearby pile of gravel (the road was being graded) and proceeded to give as good as she got. Then she spotted something white in the gravel. It was a tooth, embedded in rock.

When Gideon Algernon Mantell emerged into the sunlight again, Mary had gone through the entire pile of gravel, and had a handful of teeth to show him. The pixies, capricious as ever, had stopped their barrage when she had, and were now gone about their mysterious ways.

Dr. Mantell published a description of the teeth as belonging to a gigantic Mesozoic lizard which he named *Iguanodon*, or “iguana-tooth,” in 1825. It was a fine piece of research, and only the second dinosaur (though the term “dinosaur” did not yet exist) ever described.

Mary never told anyone of the part the Little People had played in her discovery. A new era of scientific discovery was dawning across Europe, and fairies were no longer entirely respectable.

Yaverlandia bitholus

Prior to our discovery, *Yaverlandia* was known only from a single fragmentary skull excavated from the Wealdon Marls in the Isle of Wight. Imagine our astonishment when our expedition (Chapman, Brett-Surman et al.) discovered a living specimen of this least-known of all pachycephalosaurs holding down a rather exalted civil service position in Whitehall!

With some difficulty, we obtained an interview.

“Oh, the usual,” he said when Dr. Brett-Surman asked him how he made his living. “I keep my head down, I try to keep the other chaps off my turf.”

“And head-butting?” Ralph Chapman asked.

“Well, I am a bureaucrat, after all.”

“How do you like the modern world?” I asked.

“Things were infinitely better run in the Mesozoic,” the Yaverlandia said firmly. “One associated with a better class of being. Admittedly, theropods were a bit of a problem. But mammals knew their place then.”

“Are there more of your species about? Surely your existence argues that there must be a breeding population somewhere.”

“I am a widower. My wife died, along with all the rest of my kind, at the end of the Cretaceous, 65 million years ago.”

“But how on Earth,” I cried, “have you managed to survive all the millions of years that separate the Mesozoic from the modern day?”

“I’m afraid I’m not cleared to give you that information,” the Yaverlandia replied stiffly. And showed us the door.

Altispinax dunkeri

Like so many of Ray Harryhausen’s films, the plot was unworthy of him. But when your talent is for special effects and your special genius lies in the creation of dinosaurs, you take what work you can get. Still, even for Hammer Studios, *Bertie Wooster and the Dinosaurs* was a particularly ripe notion.

Somehow, though, the movie was put into production.

Ordinarily, Harryhausen favored stop-motion animation. It chanced, however, that a friend in the Ministry of Defense knew of two experimental bipedal walking-machines that were being scrapped and could be picked up for a song. They were shaped and sized just right for a pair of *Altispinax*—fleet, sail-backed theropods.

He re-gearred the cams to lengthen the stride, then fitted both with small, powerful gasoline engines. Lastly, he sheathed them in moulded latex, so that they looked the part of living and carnivorous dinosaurs. There was a cockpit midway down the back of each. In operation, the driver would be hidden by the sail. But for the shakedown run, he left the sails undeployed.

It was night time when he was finally done. Harryhausen turned to his assistant and, with a courtly little bow, said, “Well, young lady—care to take ’em out for a spin?”

Tess leaped into a cockpit. “Yes, sir!”

A minute later, the two *Altispinax* sped into the night.

It was a wild run. Cars braked wildly and slid into ditches at the sight of the two prehistoric monsters running side-by-side down Maidenstone Road. Dogs barked savagely after them. Children stared wide-eyed from bedroom windows.

The stride was smooth—Harryhausen had put a great deal of thought into the shocks—and quiet, too.

Twice they ran past patrol cars, the faces of the officers within stiff and white with disbelief. They ran all the way from the studio at Bray to the steps of the British Museum. Laughing, Harryhausen drew up his beast, and made it dance in place, lifting up those great legs and setting them down with exquisite delicacy. Tess threw back her theropod's throat and, putting hands to mouth, let out a howl that would shiver spines if they decided to use it in the movie.

A paleontologist, letting himself out by a side door after a late evening's work, glanced up at the two dinosaurs and sniffed. "You're not fooling anyone, you know," he said. He pointed to the feet. "The toes are all wrong, and the hallux is reversed."

And, so saying, he went home.

Megalosaurus bucklandii

Megalosaurus was the first dinosaur ever named, and one of three (the others were Iguanodon and Hylaeosaurus, both discovered by the energetic Gideon Mantell) that caused Richard Owen to create the grouping Dinosauria. Alas, the species remains something of a dustbin for large, difficult-to-attribute theropods. The original specimen, found in a quarry at Stonesfield in Oxfordshire and described by William Buckland, was fragmentary in the extreme. Which helps to explain the sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins's reconstructions.

Waterhouse Hawkins was commissioned by Owen to create life-sized statues of his newly-named dinosaurs for the grounds of the Crystal Palace. The results—heavy, lumbering, and evil of visage—were an enormous success. A dinner party held within the body of the Iguanodon, just before its completion, was one of the great scientific social events of the Victorian era.

It was not long afterward that a Megalosaurus called upon Waterhouse Hawkins in person.

It looked nothing like he had imagined. It was a biped, for one thing, and properly attired for another. Stooping its head, so it could pass through his doorway, it entered his flat with hat and gloves in one hand, and presented him with its card. Its manners were impeccable. He had no choice but to invite it in for tea. "My dear fellow," the Megalosaurus began. "You cannot possibly imagine the distress you have caused me by your uncouth representations." It shuddered. "You have me crawling about the ground on all fours, like a common beast! The expression upon my face is that of one who is a slave to his baser emotions." It took a delicate sip from its cup. Waterhouse Hawkins could not but note how delicately it held out its third finger. "And yet, as you can see, I am quite a civilized creature."

"The difficulties presented by incomplete fossils—" Waterhouse Hawkins began.

"Yes, yes, of course. One understands, and one sympathizes. Yet consider my position. Consider my reputation! I must ask for a retraction."

"I worked, sir, with the leading comparative anatomists of Europe. Had you presented yourself while we were consulting on the designs, we should certainly have taken your self-characterization into account. However, you did not."

"But—"

"At any rate, the models were extraordinarily expensive to fabricate. There is no money left to have them redone."

The Megalosaurus stood. "You leave me with no choice but to consult a solicitor."

Waterhouse Hawkins stood as well. Coldly, he said, "I content myself with the knowledge that there is

not a lawyer in London who would accept as a client a gigantic carnivorous reptile.”

With an angry clash of teeth, the Megalosaurus seized his hat and left.

Waterhouse Hawkins would have taken it all for a dream, save for the fact that he saw the dinosaur once again. It was a Sunday, and he was out for a stroll when he spied the Megalosaurus coming toward him on the sidewalk. It was the exact same creature—there was no possible way of mistaking it for anyone else.

Nor could he avoid it. Common courtesy required that he smile and nod as it passed. So he did.

The brute looked at him...and then through him. It cut him! Waterhouse Hawkins stood trembling and outraged. He had been snubbed, by God. The monstrous beast had cut him dead!

Craterosaurus pottonensis

Our coven hired a small bus to take us to Bedfordshire, where we intended to raise the spirit of a Craterosaurus—bones of one such stegosaurid had been found there, so it seemed a good bet. We had a pleasant drive, and sang old camp songs, rather to the dismay of our driver, and then retired to our rooms to get some sleep, so we'd be fresh for the event. Midnight found us in an appropriately spooky cemetery (mood, after all, matters) with the twelve of us, male and female alike, sky-clad, and our necromancer in Druidic robes.

We had brought a rather nice trilobite fossil to sacrifice. After the appropriate ceremonies Tim, the necromancer, smashed it to powder with one blow of a hammer, and shouted the Word of Summoning.

Out from the ground rose bone after bone, assembling themselves into the complete skeleton of a Craterosaurus. Earth flowed over the bones, became muscle, and sprouted skin. The great brute shook its head and opened its eyes. It studied us a moment in silence. Then—

“You're naked,” it said.

Jane Giddings blushed. (There are those who'd say that seeing Jane naked was in and of itself reason enough to join the coven, and I'd not be one to gainsay them.) “We're not ashamed of our bodies,” she told the ghostly animal. And stood so straight I could hardly catch my breath.

“Oh,” it said, in a tone that indicated it was beginning to find us all rather boring. “Well, I suppose you've got some questions for me. Out with them.”

There was a moment's silence. I don't think any of us had prepared questions. We'd decided to raise the Craterosaurus more for the challenge of the thing than with any particular end in view. On an impulse, I said, “How did the dinosaurs die out?”

“Haven't the foggiest. After my time. When I was alive, everything was going swimmingly.” It yawned. “Next question.”

But neither, it turned out, did the Craterosaurus know anything about climatic shifts or ecological issues. Nor did it know if it was warm-blooded or cold-blooded (“Define your terms,” it said, and it turned out that none of us could), or whether birds were really and truly descended from dinosaurs, or who was going to win this year's World Cup. That last question was Tim's. A good necromancer, was Tim, but not the brightest bulb on the porch.

Finally, we all got as tired of the conversation as the spirit of the Craterosaurus was, and sent it back to its eternal rest. “What a stupid beast!” Ian muttered to me, as we were all getting dressed afterward. “As

far as I'm concerned, this has been a complete and utter waste of time.”

“Oh, I don't know.” I glanced over at Jane Giddings, who was busily buttoning up her blouse. As soon as she was fully dressed, I was going to march right over to her and ask her out. “I personally learned rather a lot tonight.”