

The Terrohuman Future History of H. Beam Piper

by John F. Carr

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*Horace Beam Piper, the son of a minister, was born in 1904 and died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound on November 9, 1964. He started working for the Pennsylvania Railroad as a laborer at age eighteen and received no further formal education.¹ He was self-educated in both science and history, "without"—he once said—"subjecting myself to the ridiculous misery of four years in the uncomfortable confines of a raccoon coat."² H. Beam Piper was first and last a John W. Campbell writer, his first SF story, "Time and Time Again," appeared in *Astounding* in April 1946, and his last, "Down Styphon!," in *Analog* in November 1965.*

The most successful of the political future histories in science fiction incorporate either a strong socio-economic or political theme, use a powerful historical philosophy (such as James Blish's

Spenglerian approach to the Cities in Flight series, and Isaac Asimov's Gibbon-influenced Foundation future history) or transform historical events into plot models. H. Beam Piper wielded all of these elements in his crowning creation, the Terrohuman Future History, a unique chronicle of the future spanning more than four millenia. In the study of Piper's Terrohuman Future History that follows, I intend to explore his use of political themes, his historical philosophy, and his utilization of historical paradigms.

First, I will discuss Piper's major political themes and how they molded his future history. I have identified eight major and minor themes, most of them interrelated, which recur throughout most of his published science fiction. The three major political themes that apply to this discussion are the self-reliant man or John W. Campbell's

H. BEAM PIPER

H. Beam Piper was a reticent and solitary man who left almost no written records concerning either his personal life or his political and historical convictions. Therefore, to draw any meaningful conclusions about his historical philosophy, I have had to rely on personal reminiscences of some of his friends, primarily Jerry Pournelle and Charles N. Brown; the Piper/Pournelle correspondence and the Piper/Brown correspondence; letters from Frederik Pohl and Piper researchers William J. Denholm III and Richard A. Moore; and the views Piper expressed in his own works.

Jerry Pournelle, who assisted Piper in constructing the latter parts of the Terrohuman Future History and was working on his doctorate in political science during that period of time, remembers Piper admitting to him several times that he placed his own political and historical philosophy into his stories. John H. Costello, who wrote the three-part series in *Renaissance* called "H. Beam Piper: An Infinity of Worlds," drew most of his data from Piper's published works and made the following statement in the introduction:

Into his stories he [Piper] put a great deal of philosophy—of the Campbellian sort—and, this writer thinks, a great deal of himself. Which is fortunate, as he was in life a most private man, and other than reminiscences from some of the people who knew him there is little to put down on paper that Piper did not state, either explicitly or between the lines, in his published works.

This contention is further bolstered by some autobiographical comments Piper made in his only published mystery novel, *Murder in the Gunroom*, where one of his minor characters, Pierre Jarrot—a science-fiction writer and confidant to the protagonist, Jeff Rand—replies to the question "What are you writing?":

Science-fiction. I do a lot of stories for the pulps . . . *Space-Trails*, and *Other Worlds*, and *Wonder Stories*; mags like that. Most of it's standardized formula-stuff; what's known in the trade as space-operas. My best stuff goes to *Astonishing*. Parenthetically, you mustn't judge any of these magazines by their names. It seems to be a convention to use hyperbolic names for science-fiction magazines; a heritage from what might be called an earlier and ruder day. What I do for *Astonishing* is really hard work, and I enjoy it. I'm working now on one of them, based on J. W. Dunne's time-theories, if you know what they are. [pp. 152-53]

Replace *Astonishing* with *Astounding*, Piper's major and lifelong SF market, and you have a cogent look at the SF market of that time (the early 1950's), an interesting assessment of SF writing, and Piper's own attitude about his writing. J. W. Dunne's time-theories formed a large part of the theoretical basis for Piper's Paratime stories, which first appeared about the same time he must have been writing *Murder in the Gunroom*.

—John F. Carr

