

# BLACK LAMB & BLACK HOLES

BY TOBY TOMPKINS

A little more than three years ago Terry Ross took my suggestion to print his 'Black Lamb' literary magazine at the Daily Astorian, although its birthplace and primary distribution is in Portland (and the rest of the world, judging from the geography of its contributors). 'Black Lamb' has in only three years shown itself to be an exceptional and exceptionally rare publication. The following essay is from Black Lamb's third anniversary issue, January 2006.

~MPMc

Black Lamb has sailed through another year as one of the quirkiest literary magazines in America, because it excludes fiction or original poetry, which are, of course, what literary magazines were invented to celebrate. The editor also frowns upon religious rants or political polemics, but that ban has proven a little flexible (or he'd have crook'd me out of the sheepcote months ago). Perhaps the initials BL also stand for *belles lettres*, the neglected genre of the personal essay, and a given issue offers a wildly differing, consistently interesting flock of belles-lettresses Lambs. Kudos to all in the fold, and to its shepherd most of all.

But the Black Lamb Anniversary Issue got this contributor thinking about the nature of anniversaries. Call them commemorations of events considered important by certain people at a certain time in the past. I got through this year (2005), but there's no guarantee I'll get through the next one, so pass the birthday cake. Uncle Walt fell off his perch, but I didn't, so pass the funeral baked meats. My legally recognized partner and I are tired of one another, but what the hell, pass the champagne.

But as official holidays they celebrate the lives of the famous, and the observations get a little fuzzy over time. The birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are anniversaries, although Americans haven't celebrated them on the men's actual birthdays for many years, in the interest of long weekends and shopping. It is doubtful that when we check out a Presidents' Day sale at the local Wal-Mart, we meditate much on the guy who made possible, or the other guy who preserved, the country we shop in.

Christmas is the Son of God's birthday, so the believers say, although it was originally assigned to the vernal equinox.

Question: when's Santa Claus's birthday, and where was he born? I do have an answer. Interested readers and fellow Lambs can contact me through Terry Ross. Hint: Santa was Dutch.

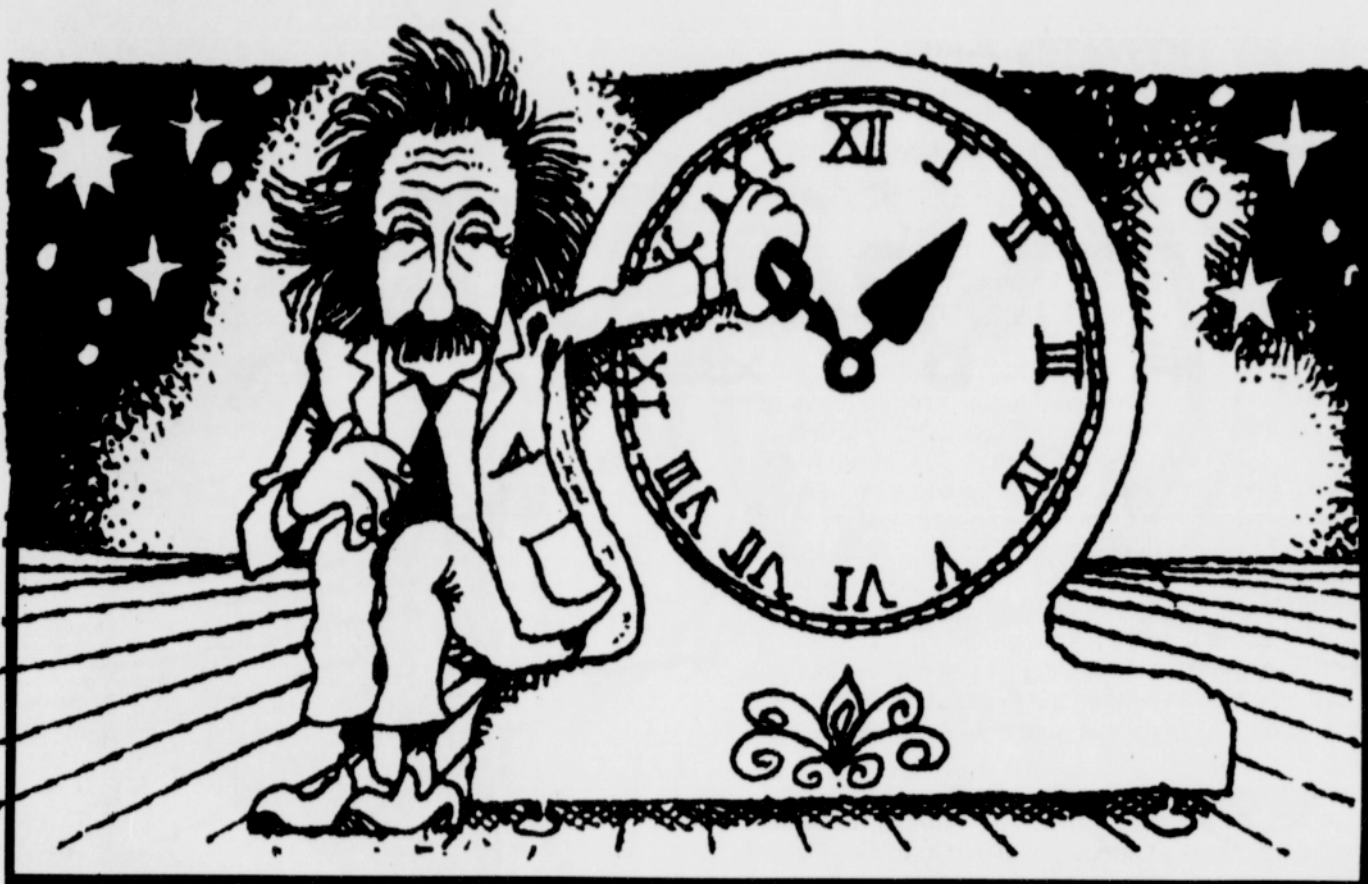
Things get even fuzzier when it comes to anniversaries of events. Take a few at random: 9/11/01, Armistice Day, Bastille Day, and the treaty which ended the Franco-Prussian War. Some are forgotten altogether. There may be a few old Prussian families that still keep the tradition of devouring *Blutwurstchen mit Kopfenschlag* and knocking back *Schwartzkatsenlager* while hurling stuffed *bichon frisé* into the *Feuerstunken* to celebrate the humiliation of the French, but I doubt it.

In France, Bastille Day seems to have lost a bit of its oomph. It once commemorated the founding of only the second democracy to arise since the fall of Athens in the 5th century BCE, and was once celebrated here almost as fervently as in France, by Franco-Americans and others who remembered that the French Constitution was modeled upon ours. But since the invasion of Iraq, when the French declined to join the Coalition of the Willy-Nilly, all things French have become suspect in the United States. And even in France, thanks to the unholy triple alliance between the entrenched unions, the xenophobic and antisemitic ultra-nationalists, and the consumerist culture (who says America has never given anything back to the French since the Marshall Plan?), Bastille Day is an official excuse to take the rest of the week off, go shopping, and, if leisure-time permits, wrap oneself in the tricolor and listen to the hard-rightists scream about Muslims and Jews. I have also heard that in Paris the night of Bastille Day has become a citywide party for the gay community, perhaps because the commoners who stormed the Bastille were known as *sans-culottes*, or Men Without Shorts.

Some anniversaries are shuffled arbitrarily into wider categories and lose their original significance altogether. Armistice Day originally marked the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the monstrous blood-letting of World War I; it was an international holiday set up by France, Britain, the United States, and the rest of the Allies. In America today it's long been swallowed up by Veterans' Day, whose compass is so wide as to lack all meaning, another long shopping weekend punctuated here and there by parades honoring every American who ever served in any of America's wars. You don't have to have gotten killed, or wounded, or even heard a shot fired in anger. Just having worn the uniform is enough to earn you a place in a parade somewhere, if you are more or less alive and can still fit into your soldier suit.

And some events never really set as anniversaries, becoming almost immediately co-opted for political reasons. The atrocity of September 11, 2001, the worst attack on Americans since December 7, 1941, became the excuse for a military invasion of a country that had nothing to do with it; and the attempt to memorialize the innocents who died that day has been egregiously trivialized by disputes between political parties from the federal down to the city level, and by special interests fights over the design of the Ground Zero monument. And this year Hurricane Katrina's destruction of an entire city rather muted the 9/11 commemorations. No doubt there will be some movement to establish a New Orleans Day, but since the devastation of the city wasn't complete until the Lake Ponchartrain levees broke, it will be difficult to pick a particular 24-hour period. But since San Francisco never got an Earthquake Day, nor Johnstown a Flood Day, an annual New Orleans Day isn't in the cards any day soon. Natural disasters don't make for comfortable anniversaries.\*

In fact the term is meaningful only in its highly-selective application. Each year is composed of 365 anniversaries, layered massively atop one another, since important things have always happened to somebody or some people, somewhere, every day since humans first tried to impose a measure of control upon



K. MOSHIN ("IN THE RIVER OF TIME" BY IGOR D. NOVIKOV)

time by inventing calendars, at about the period when they got smart enough to fear death and invent gods who lived forever.

But calendars are always subject to nature's rebuttals, because Earth's elliptical orbit around the sun stubbornly refuses to be reduced to a nice even number of sunrises and sunsets. Even Earth's 24-hour rotational period is changing: our home seems to be spinning a bit slower than it was in Newton's time, and I've heard that there's movement afoot to add a full second to the 24 "hours" of the "day," to keep human time-counting in synch with nature's. Except for computer programmers and planetary scientists, people probably won't notice the tiny retard. But when month-counting needs adjustment, all hell breaks loose.

Witness the year 1752, when Britain and its worldwide colonies shifted finally from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. September 3rd of that year disappeared, by an act of Parliament, and was replaced by September 14th, because there was, by then, what mathematicians call a non-trivial discrepancy — 11 whole days — between the two methods of marking time. Ancient feast-days celebrating essential annual events like plantings and harvestings were out of whack with what was really going on with crops (the Midsummer Night Shakespeare wrote his dream play about occurred on the summer solstice, on or about June 21, which even in his time had become too early to be considered the middle of an English summer). In 1752, the Year of the Missing Days, people all over Britain rioted. Many of them had been deprived of their birthdays that year; weddings and funerals had to be rescheduled; and tenants found themselves paying a full month's rent for what amounted to two weeks' occupancy of their lands or houses.

One thinks also of Leap Year adjustment at the end of February every four years, which never has really solved the problem of coordinating the Western world's 365 days with the actual period of Earth's orbit around the sun. The Babylonians, borrowing from the Egyptians, had a pretty accurate calendar that meshed orbital reality with the onset of the seasons, but their numerical system was based on 12, not 10. Any mathematician will tell you that base-12 is a better counting system than base-10, when working with the world as it is: nature seems to prefer multiples of three, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic organization of its procedures. The Babylonians were on to something, but they got conquered by people who didn't do science and counted on their fingers.

The Greeks and early Romans, dedicated decimalists, favored twelve 30-day months and dealt with the awkward 5-day leftover by taking them out of the year's order altogether, proclaiming them days of festival. Hoi polloi were allowed to get wrecked and romp around mocking their betters (to a point) during what amounted to a suspension of time-counting, a long *fermata*. Of course the commoners who enjoyed the escape from the iron round too boisterously were summarily executed as soon as the stutter-stop was over. But during the *fermata* Dionysos/Bacchus, the God of Whoopee, misruled, as if to prove that the gods mock calendars.

The Universe exhibits periodic behavior, which cosmologists assure us, can be measured with nanosecond exactitude: the spasms of light from pulsars, distant stellar teenagers that date to the earliest millennia of the universe, have enabled us to set a rough date for the Big Bang that set everything reeling and wheeling. Yet Einstein's General Theory posits that time itself is not a wholly independent force, but is woven inextricably with space and matter, with gravity as a possible fourth strand to the warp and woof of the weave. Time at the Schwarzschild boundary of the black hole at the center of our own galaxy stops altogether. The hole, where gravity rules entirely, gobbles time, space and matter utterly, although the enormous suck does produce spectacular effects on matter at the boundary: the black hole seems to behave like a furiously-spinning top, sending off enormous gouts of energy from both ends of its spindle as if in protest against its own ultimate nullity. But time, in the neighborhood of a black hole, is rendered moot.

And there are black holes all over the cosmos. Indeed, the barely imaginable energies released near black holes may power the universe's expansion. Of course there is a problem with the expansion rate: the Big Balloon seems to be blowing itself up more quickly than the data deem possible, despite twin theories of Dark Matter to slow down the rate of expansion and Dark Energy to quicken it. But neither Dark Matter nor Dark Energy has yet been detected experimentally to anyone's satisfaction. Meanwhile, recent studies, rebuilding on Einstein, suggest that time itself flexes and retracts, depending on what is going on with gravity, which itself seems to be a less than constant lover of continuity.

Is there continuity at all? Birth, copulation, and death are the only demonstrable imperatives in the biosphere, so we slaves to macrobiology are inclined to imagine an Arrow of Time that goes in only one direction. It works okay for us lucky beings on this lucky planet in a lucky solar system, which has won a cosmic lottery — by pure chance, and against all odds — the ambiguous prize of which is the capacity for developing life. But Out There among the pulsars and quasars, neutron stars, black holes, and vast empty spaces inhabited by nothing but potentiality, time itself ebbs, flows, stops, and even sometimes goes backwards. Ultimately at the sub-atomic level where quantum mechanics misrules as whimsically as Dionysos, time is simply a continuum melded with space and matter, a force to which human notions of past and future do not apply. Time simply is, an eternal now, with a maybe enfolded inextricably with a might have been, encompassing everything that has happened, and everything that might happen, with no sure bets. At the fundamental level, past and future are trivial concepts. Good news for science fiction writers infusing their time-travel fantasies with a little undigested seasoning of physics, bad news for the rest of us who celebrate anniversaries.

Getting back to Earth, human beings have never agreed on what time it is. The date I was born is meaningless to a Muslim, a Jew, a Hindu, or anyone else who doesn't buy the Baby Jesus story. The measuring of time, for the layman, is ultimately a reflection of a given human culture's collective decision to remember certain entirely local events. It's coastal navigation, in maritime terms, an attempt to establish one's position during a long voyage along the verges of time's sea by using locally-recognized promontories and landmarks ashore. "Ahoy, Skipper, Declaration of Independence abeam. It must be July 4th!"

So let's eat a little lamb curry and toast Terry Ross on the thoroughly fuzzy anniversary of his peculiar publication. After all, when it comes to the enigma of time, we all try to think cosmically, but we have to act locally.

\*December 8, 1922 might be remembered as The Great Astoria Fire Day. (The centennial of the San Francisco Earthquake is April 6.)



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