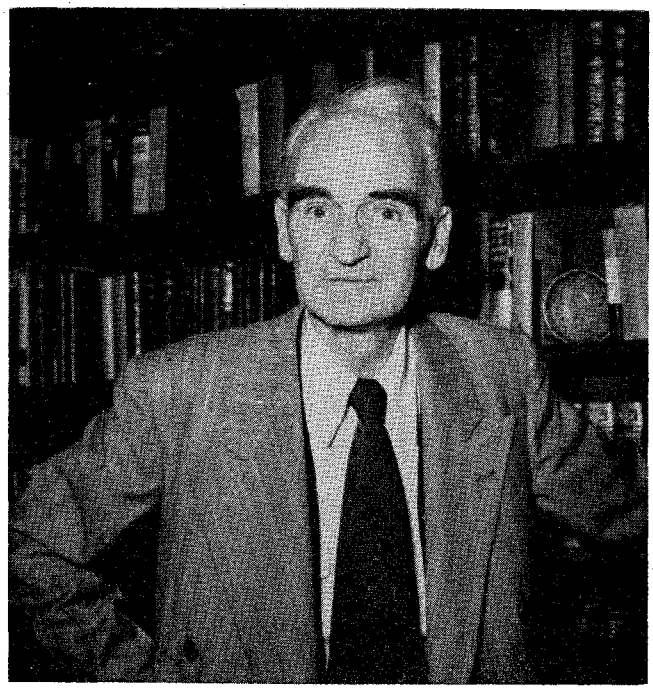
THE DOUBLE LIFE OF DR. BELL



EVER SINCE E. T. (for Eric Temple) Bell came to Caltech in 1926, his double life has been an open secret. He is, of course, not only an eminent teacher of mathematics, but is also a prominent science-fiction writer. For his Dr. Jeykll activities he uses his own name; his Mr. Hyde work appears under the pseudonym of John Taine.

This division of labor led the editor of the local Pasadena *Star-News* to indulge in a sly intramural joke when Bell's serious work, *The Magic of Numbers*, appeared in 1946. He had the book reviewed by Taine.

John Taine gave it a rave review, in which he even quoted from the book jacket which said that "with matchless wit and insight, Eric Temple Bell has made *The Magic of Numbers* . . . a human history . . . a living biography of the men who played and play so great a part in one scientific and philosophical development."

"I agree," wrote Mr. Taine.

There was at least one subscriber to the Pasadena *Star-News* who was not in on the joke though. In an angry letter to the editor she complained that it was an insult to the august Dr. Bell to have his book reviewed by a science-fiction writer.

Mathematics and science fiction are not Dr. Bell's only concerns. Most of his life, in fact, they have had to share his time and interest with such other varied activities as painting, writing poetry, gardening and raising cats. True, any of these latter activities might be considered hobbies by an ordinary individual. But not even his worst enemies have ever accused Bell of being ordinary. He's never had any hobbies—just a series of full-time occupations.

He has published four learned books on mathematics; and just under 300 mathematical papers; 10 popular books of mathematics, history, and social criticism; 13 science-fiction novels, and at least that many more magazine stories.

He has been writing poetry for more than forty years, though not much of it has been published. His paintings, with those of his late wife, cover the walls of his home in Pasadena. The Bell garden, in its heyday, was ablaze with flowers even at that time of year when the neighbors were trying to force up a couple of crocuses. And even the Bell cats seemed somehow bigger and more prolific than most cats.

Double life, indeed; it's been, at the very least, squared.

E. T. Bell was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1883. He came alone to the United States in 1902, with the American equivalent of two years of college behind him, and entered Stanford University. After graduation in 1904 he "bummed around" San Francisco for the next three years. He was there during the 1906 earthquake—and many of his treasured books still bear witness to that fact. After the quake Bell hurriedly buried them in the backyard of the house in which he was living—but not deep enough to keep them from being scorched by the fire which destroyed the house shortly thereafter.

In 1907 Bell went to the University of Washington in Seattle as a Denny Fellow. After receiving his M.A. in the spring of 1908, he went to live in Siskayou County in northern California. He taught school part of the time, and worked for a while in a lumber mill, where he left the thumb of his right hand. During most of

this period he lived in the town of Yreka—whose sole claim to fame, the Yreka Bakery, was spelled backwards long before the invention of Serutan.

In 1910 Bell was married to Jessie Brown of San Francisco and in 1911 went to New York to attend Columbia University. As soon as he got his *Ph.D.* in the spring of 1912 he put as much distance as possible between New York and himself, and went back to the University of Washington as an Instructor in Mathematics.

Acquiring a reputation

He taught mathematics at the University of Washington for 14 years, from 1912 to 1926. During this time his research in the theory of numbers began to win him a reputation as one of the most brilliant, as well as one of the most productive mathematicians in the country. In 1920 he received the coveted Bocher Prize of the American Mathematical Society for his solution of an extremely difficult classical mathematical problem. From 1924 to 1927 he served on the council of the American Mathematical Society, and in 1926 was vice-president of the Society. In 1930 he was vice-president of Section A (the Physical Sciences) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. From 1931 to 1933 he was president of the Mathematical Association of America. In 1938 he received the Gold Medal of the California Commonwealth Club for his mathematical writings. He is a member of the Circolo Mathematico di Palermo, the Calcutta Mathematics Society, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, Sigma Xi, and an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa.

When Bell began his career as a science-fiction writer in about 1918, he took the name of John Taine—not because he was concerned about sullying the scholarly reputation of E. T. Bell, but because his employer had violent objections to staff members engaging in any outside activity. So, while E. T. Bell continued to turn out enough learned papers for any three ordinary mathematicians, John Taine began to produce anywhere from one to three science-fiction thrillers a year.

These were generally written in the Christmas and Easter vacation periods, though one book, Bell recalls, took all of five weeks to finish. The manuscripts were neatly typed and carefully edited by Mrs. Bell, who worked along with her husband far into the night. Mrs. Bell couldn't always match her husband's energy, though.

In the early hours of one morning she rose groggily from her typewriter, leaving half a novel to be typed, and announced that *she* was going to bed.

"Hmph!" said Bell. "If you can leave it without finishing it it can't be any good. I guess I'd better write it again."

Bell's science fiction is distinguished by its violence. It abounds in overwhelming catastrophes of nature, prehistoric reptilian monsters, men turned into brute beasts and men turned into masses of fungoid growth. All these juicy horrors are described in such hair-raising detail and with such devilish pleasure that Bell's books almost all land in the can't-put-it-down class—even for some of Bell's squeamish academic colleagues who never meant to take them up at all.

Most of the science fiction was written in the years between 1920 and 1940. Bell hasn't turned out many new ones in recent years, though he's still got enough of a backlog to keep his publisher supplied with one or two a year.

Seeds of Life, published this year, was written in 1928. It reveals its age only when the hero pays out the princely sum of $10 for a month's rent in New York City. *The Forbidden Garden*, published in 1947, caused one reviewer to remark that it had obviously been inspired by the atomic bomb. It was written in 1918.

G. O. C. 666 was written in 1940. (G. O. G., by the way, stands for General Order of Genetics, and 666 is the number of the beast). The story takes place in an un-named mythical country under a dictatorship. Nevertheless it was turned down for publication in 1940 on the grounds that it was unfriendly to one of our allies. It's still the same manuscript, and the same mythical country but now it's being rushed into publication for this year.

Bell started writing science fiction because he thought he might get some of his serious books published if he could provide a publisher with this sideline of salable staples. The scheme worked nicely for everybody, even though it turned out to have been an unnecessary precaution on Bell's part.

His technical books, notably *Algebraic Arithmetic* (1927) and *The Development of Mathematics* (1940), were valuable contributions to mathematical literature, and immediately became standard works in the field. Of the popular books on mathematics, *Men of Mathematics* (1937) was a legitimate best-seller when it was first published, has sold steadily in this country and abroad ever since, and remains a classic of popular science writing.

The notoriety of Taine Bell

Bell still lives in the comfortable house across from the Caltech campus where he and his wife settled when they first came to Pasadena. His son, Taine—who enjoyed a certain notoriety as a child after he observed a cross on a church steeple and asked what they'd put the plus-sign up there for—is now an M.D. in Watsonville, California. He's married to a girl who's an M.D. herself.

In recent years Bell has cut down on a good many of his varied occupations in order to concentrate on the revision of a long work written almost 40 years ago.

All of which is in partial explanation of Bell's comment, on the biographical-information sheet filled out by all Caltech faculty members, under the heading of Extra-Curricular Activities.

"Unfortunately none," he wrote. "Life is so short."