Fiat Lingua

A review of *A Hand-book Of Volapük* by Andrew Drummond, and an interview with the author

by Jim Henry III

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A Hand-book Of Volapük
and an Elementary Manual of its Grammar and Vocabulary, prepared from the Gathered Papers of Gemmell Hunter Ibidem Justice; together with an Account of Events Relating to the Annual General Meeting of 1891 of the Edinburgh Society for the Propagation of a Universal Language.

by Andrew Drummond. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006, 2018.

In 1891 <u>Volapük</u> was twelve years old; there had already been three international conventions, the third of which used Volapük exclusively. It seemed to have a huge head start over any other constructed international language that might come along, with its thousands of speakers and hundreds of books and periodicals. But <u>Esperanto</u>, just four years after <u>Zamenhof</u>'s first publication, was acquiring new speakers at a surprising rate, many of them former proponents of Volapük. <u>Solresol</u>, the musical language, still had a few adherents here and there, and dozens of other short-lived proposals for a universal or international language were being published and promoted for a short time. Which, if any, of these languages would prevail?

Andrew Drummond's second novel is set during this suspenseful and exciting time for the international language movement, and focuses on the Edinburgh Society for the Propagation of a Universal Language: more particularly on two of its most influential members, Gemmell Hunter Ibidem Justice, travelling church-organ repairman and Volapük teacher, and his former comrade, now bitter enemy, Dr. Henry Bosman, physician and Esperantist. The rank and file of the Society have many of them their own preferences — for Solresol or Nal Bino, for Leibnitz's system of prime numbers, for a revival of Latin, Greek or Hebrew, or the simple promotion of English; but the real contest is between Mr. Justice and Dr. Bosman, as to whether the Society at its next annual meeting will definitively endorse Volapük or Esperanto.

The story is told primarily (except for a preface by a Dr. Charles Cordiner, phrenologist, who explains how he found the following papers and arranged for their publication) from the hilariously opinionated and unreliable viewpoint of Mr. Justice. We first meet him as he is travelling through the northeast of Scotland, repairing church organs. One night as he leaves a church in Cromarty after a long day's repair work, he meets a mysterious old man in the church graveyard; a man who, though he has never heard of Volapük, is no stranger to universal languages. Mr. Justice and Sir Thomas agree to travel together and assist one another, on terms which Mr. Justice is not inclined to explain to the reader. Sir Thomas proves a persuasive and powerful teacher's assistant as Mr. Justice endeavors to teach the rudiments of Volapük to the Self-Betterment League of Peterhead, the Didactic Society of Newburgh Linoleum Workers, the Workers Improvement Association in Dysart, and other such local societies. But in spite of his enthusiasm and talent for Volapük, Sir Thomas has invented a universal language of his own, and steadily maintains its superiority.

Who or what is Sir Thomas? What was he doing in the Cromarty graveyard? Can we credit his claim to be an old schoolfellow of George Dalgarno? All these questions are eventually answered for the reader who hasn't figured out the answers on his own. But what about the cloak, scimitar and helmet that Sir Thomas loans to

Mr. Justice for use in inducing difficult pupils to apply themselves more assiduously to the study of Volapük, or persuade wavering members of the Society to support Volapük rather than Esperanto? Each time Mr. Justice dons the helmet, it affects his view of the world more strangely than before. Can Mr. Justice trust Sir Thomas? Can the reader trust Mr. Justice? (Apparently not, although he lets slip some clues to things he is unwilling to speak about directly.)

The title may lead some booksellers to shelve the book as a language textbook rather than a historical fantasy novel; in fact this would not be entirely wrong, as the novel contains nineteen lessons in Volapük, mainly adapted from Charles E. Sprague's 1888 primer (also titled *Hand-book of Volapük*). The lessons (most if not all of them) are integrated smoothly into the narrative, as Mr. Justice teaches his pupils and travelling companions about the language; many of the example sentences and exercises for translation are adapted to be relevant to the situation in the novel at a given point, and are generally as funny as the rest of the story; which is to say, very funny indeed. Drummond is not quite on a level with P.G. Wodehouse or Terry Pratchett in his ability to keep you laughing, but he comes pretty close at times.

The novel touches on other issues of language politics — sexism in language, for instance, in an amusing three-way debate between Mr. Justice, Dr. Bosman, and their landlady's daughter; or nationalistic suppression of minority languages like Gaelic, and whether a common language would make this even worse; i.e., whether a universal language, or an international language, is what is really wanted. Besides all this, there is a contest to train two parrots to speak Esperanto and Volapük, the Decennial Census and a number of fraudulent census forms, a dirigible with a broken steering mechanism, and a mechanical translation engine. What more could you ask for?

Everything between the covers except the copyright page adds to the historical verisimilitude; there are nifty pages of advertising for real and fake 19th-century books and other products and services at the back of the book, for instance.

The original trade paperback edition of *A Hand-book Of Volapük* is moderately rare these days, with a handful of copies available in the $20-40 range. A new paperback and ebook edition was released in 2018. The only online retailers I checked that has it are [Amazon UK](#) and [Amazon.com](#).

An interview with Andrew Drummond

Andrew Drummond is the author of two novels, *An Abridged History* (2004) and *A Hand-book of Volapük* (2006). His website is at http://www.andydrummond.net. I interviewed him by email in August-October 2006.

Who were your favorite authors as a child? Who are your favorite authors now? Which authors do you think have most influenced you as a writer?

> As a child, it was the staples of a British child's reading in the 1950/60s — Enid Blyton, Richmal Crompton, C.S. Lewis, the odd dip into the recognised "Classics", Hergé's Tintin, later — and inevitably — Tolkien. Nowadays, it's more likely to be Dickens, Jose Saramago, James Hogg, Laurence Sterne, Mervyn Peake, Michael Innes, Marquez, W.G. Sebald, Le Carre, R.L. Stevenson, Zola, Dumas, Thomas Mann. As a writer, I'd have to say the first four of these have had most influence on me — but I've read quite widely over the years, and I can see that various medieval/post-medieval French and German authors have also influenced both my subject-matter and my style.

Do you mean the first four of the list of your current favorites, or the first four in the list as a whole?

Yes — when I say the "first four", I mean Dickens—Sterne.

You studied Modern Languages at the university, and you've published several translations from German. What other natural languages besides German have you studied? Do you consider yourself fluent in any others? Do you consider yourself fluent in any other constructed languages besides Volapük?

> I studied both French and German at university, and can hold reasonable conversations in, and read easily, both of these. My parents were both linguists — my father in particular had a great enthusiasm for languages: in his time, he studied German, French, Italian, Spanish, Norwegian, Greek, Hungarian, Turkish — even sitting a basic exam in Rumanian, self-taught, at the age of 67! But I don't consider myself fluent in Volapük at all — that would imply a reasonable level of practice: I struggle with it — it's a language that requires considerable thought. From what little I know of it, Esperanto seems a far more fluid language (but that's not an endorsement!!)

Do you use the word "linguist" in the older sense of "polyglot" or the newer sense of "philologist" or "language scientist"?

> "Linguist" simply as "a student of language", certainly in the older sense. I love to find the hidden commonality of vocabulary of languages of the same family. But I am far from being a scientist of language — just a gourmet.

How did you first get interested in the international language movement and Volapük, Esperanto and Solresol in particular?

> To be honest, I can't hit on a defining moment. I came across Volapük when researching into something else related to my first novel, *An Abridged History*; and tucked the reference away for future consideration. The more I found out about its early history, the more fascinated I became with this rather obscure alley-way of linguistics. From Volapük, there was an obvious trajectory into looking at all the other "Universal Languages" which proliferated in the 19th century: some were manifestly bizarre, some were wonderfully naïve — I collect "oddities".

> I have to confess to being a bit astounded by the interest which my "Handbook" has stirred up in the few weeks since publication — my first inkling of it was when I saw Rick Harrison's splendid review on Amazon. And then, last week when I was doing a reading at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, I was quite un-nerved to be approached by a member of the audience and spoken to in Volapük.

> I have to say that the interest in my book has not just been from linguists of various shades, but equally from the general reading public.

> Anyway, it will not have escaped your notice, I suspect, that my take on International Languages is slightly divergent from that of the I.L. movement itself.

How did you do your research on the early history of Volapük and Esperanto? What books besides Charles Sprague's *Hand-book of Volapük* did you find most useful? Did you make contact with current Volapük or Esperanto speakers?

> Some will no doubt criticise me for it, but my lingustic research more or less stopped with a down-loaded copy of Sprague's Hand-book (thanks to http://personal.southern.edu/~caviness). I think, when you're creating fiction, there is a point at which fact must be left behind and imagination must take over. So, although my intention was to create a language manual with a difference, it was also to write an entertaining story: sometimes too much fact just gets in the way. Interestingly, the publication of the book has brought a number of UK-based Volapük-ists

to my attention, as well as those in the USA.

Are you familiar with Schleyer's 1895 article ["Ueber die Pfuscher-Sprache des Pseudo-Esperanto"](#)? Did it influence your presentation of the conflict between Mr. Justice & Dr. Bosman?

> Not at all, I fear (but if you have a copy, I'd be interested to see it — its very title sounds like fun!). The antagonism between Justice and Bosman is simply a reflection of my own experience in similar "agitating" groups as a student, when factional intrigue became far more important — and possibly far more fascinating — than the stated objectives of the groups.

The main characters in your book speak about a "universal language"; nowadays proponents of Esperanto, Interlingua and so forth use the term "international language", and the transition seems to have happened not long after the period when *A Hand-book of Volapük* is set. To what extent do you think this change in terminology reflects a real change in philosophy or goals?

> I fear I cannot give any sensible response to that. My suspicion is that the term "universal" was indeed replaced somewhere close to the First World War, by the peace-movements which arose beside or from the social-democracy movements of the time — "international-ism" became a more widely-recognised concept. But I may be quite wrong on that.

In a couple of places I noticed Mr. Justice making prophecies about the future of Volapük which arguably turned out to be true, except that they were true about Esperanto. To what extent was this deliberate?

> It was deliberate to the extent that the early Volapük-ists doubtless considered their language to be the language of the future -- only for them to see the advantage slip away from them towards Esperanto. I enjoy seeing history from the "wrong end" — my first novel, *An Abridged History*, has as one of its themes the imagined technical wonders of the 20th century, as envisaged by the late Victorians.

Did Volapük deserve its fate? Would the world be a better place if Schleyer and the Academy had resolved their quarrel, or do you reckon would the movement have fallen apart sooner or later for other reasons?

> My view is that Volapük, though cunning in its architecture, was simply far too complex for its own good. Even if the various factions had not fallen out, I doubt it could have held back Esperanto. However, I think there are also broader issues here: two of the questions I raise in my book — and I do not claim to know the answer to either — are these: firstly, the "universal languages" are in themselves very Euro-centric — that is, their vocabulary and grammar is based almost exclusively around the Romance or Germanic language-groups — what should Africans, Asians, Chinese people make of them? Secondly, can a "universal language" ever be anything more than a common means for facilitating communication between different nations — that is, could and should it ever aspire to be the *only* language which all people use all the time? Volapük, for example, tried to cover every possible nuance of grammar, but fell down badly on the vocabulary; in trying to be all things to all men, it rapidly became nothing to anybody. My own personal belief — anathema perhaps to international languages — is that variety in all things can only be healthy.

How did you decide to write about the census? Had you, for instance, picked the period when the story would take place and looked for major events of that period that could be tied in, or were you already interested in the census procedures and so forth beforehand?

> The Census was just another interest arising from previous work. Clearly, when you're writing about the late Victorian period, and want some solid, real background, the Population Census is an unbeatable source; it then occurred to me that a great starting-place for a novel would be all

the stories which could be revealed to the Census Officer as he collected the data. When I then got down to writing the Volapük novel, the Census story was a very convenient mechanism for moving along some of the plot. It's also interesting that the Census forms in those days did ask whether English or Gaelic was a person's "native" tongue — something that indicates the state of language in Scotland at that time.

How did you first get interested in [Sir Thomas Urquhart](#)? — through the Scottish history or literature connection, or the constructed language connection, or in some other way?

> Urquhart came at me from three directions really: firstly, a mention in a novel by Robertson Davies, *[The Rebel Angels](#)*, where a rather unpleasant character descended from Sir Thomas is central; then, when researching further into the history of Universal Languages — he's a hard man to miss; and finally, I chanced upon his absolutely [wonderful translations](#) of Rabelais' Gargantua/Pantagruel works, where his use of the English language — and more! — is quite superb.

How much of Sir Thomas's work have you read? How much of it would you recommend? Are there some of his works now out of print that deserve rediscovery?

> I've read *[The Jewel](#)* several times over, but would be hard pushed to recommend it to others, except as a reference to his use of language: it's fascinating, but decidely an acquired taste. Obviously, his translations of Rabelais are highly readable. I've also had a look at some of his early *Epigrams*, which are entertainingly rude.

I can see where most of the aspects of Sir Thomas's character and the things he does and says are well supported by his surviving works. I'm curious about the helmet, cloak and scimitar, however — is it something from Sir Thomas's life or works, or from another historical source, or something you made up?

> I'm not entirely sure myself where these items came from! Not from Sir Thomas' works, certainly. If the equipment is symbolic of anything (and I'm not sure it is) then it would be of the potentially, and usually ephemeral, dictatorial power of the teacher over the pupils.

Several aspects of your story — the treatment of the dirigible, the mechanical translating engine, and so forth — seem reminiscent of the California [Steampunk](#) authors — James Blaylock, Tim Powers, K.W. Jeter. Are you familiar with their work?

> Short answer: no, none of them are authors I've heard of. One of the many wonderful things about the Victorians was their ability to dream up fascinating devices. For part of the research into my novel, I did also look into the works relating to Lunatic Asylums and in several of these I found case-studies of men who had "invented" all manner of wonderful "engines" — some of these just seemed too good to ignore!

What are your writing habits like? Do you have a set time of day for writing, a daily word count goal? Are you generally revising one piece while writing another, or do you keep those phases separate?

> Since I have a full-time job, Monday to Friday, I tend to limit myself to writing 8 or so hours at weekends, and maybe four hours during the week. If things are going well, I can take a couple of days off work and storm at it! I generally try to write a 'chapter' in two or three consecutive sittings, with a goal of x-thousand words per chapter — 2500 words per day is my best rate. And I can usually only manage to work on one piece at a time.

What tools do you use for writing? Do you write first drafts directly on a word processor or text editor, for instance, or draft with pen or pencil and rewrite on the word processor?

I do almost everything on computer these days, apart from maybe a few brief notes to myself on scraps of paper. It is so much easier to juggle ideas that way.

Do you outline a novel before starting to write it? If so, in how much detail? How much did your first couple of novels deviate from their outlines in the course of writing?

I usually have a master-plan, but frequently find myself deviating from it, especially when the plot, of itself, begins to grow arms and legs. The first draft of my first novel, *An Abridged History*, was about twice the length of the final version, and there was considerable re-working of the plot; the Volapük novel was far easier to write and keep to the plan.

How long had you been writing fiction before you sold *An Abridged History*?

I've been writing fiction — mostly short-stories — since I was a student, back in the 1970s. But most of it was just for my own enjoyment. Various attempts to get published simply failed, until an extract from *An Abridged History* won a short-story prize in 2002, and things then — eventually — took off.

On your website you describe your current novel in progress as "A novel set in 1740, which deals with the Scottish noblewoman, Lady Grange, who was kidnapped in 1732 by associates of her husband, and kept prisoner on a succession of lonely and remote Scottish islands — including St Kilda — until her death in 1745." Can you say anything more about it at this point?

Not much more to say at the moment — the novel is finished, as far as I'm concerned, and my publisher is currently considering it. However, there are certain features of the novel which my publisher may find hard to swallow — most notably the language and the spelling — so I await his response with some trepidation. However, I am formulating ideas for the next novel...

The novel Drummond had just finished and submitted when this interview was conducted is *Elephantina*, Polygon 2008.