

► **From Association Founder—Peter Burke**



**Shaping up the 2009 SCANZ Conference**

SCANZ now has ready for you an exciting 6<sup>th</sup> annual conference with some outstanding guest speakers, set for 9-10 November at Massey University in Palmerston North.

The SCANZ conference has grown to become a highlight on our national science communication events calendar, and is relevant to everyone in the business of communicating science.

For that reason I ask that you give us your support and attend! Equally importantly, please pass on this newsletter to your colleagues—be they communicators, journalists or scientists.

In terms of the organisation itself, I am putting together a draft three year strategy, to be posted to the SCANZ website by mid October for review. This strategy will outline our plan, objectives, the services SCANZ can contribute, and will outline some ideas around more effective administration.

We will not send out subscription notices until this strategy is in place, and in the short term SCANZ will continue to be run by the small group of individuals behind the conference, with a view to holding a formal AGM in 2010.

Stick with us! New Zealand needs SCANZ, as do all of us in the profession of science communication. I put a lot of personal effort into setting up SCANZ and am committed to seeing it grow. Come to the conference and encourage your colleagues to do likewise. We appreciate the support you can offer now, and into the future.

Peter Burke  
Founder and Conference Organiser

## ➤ **Conference 2009**

**Are you a scientist, journalist, public relations professional in the science sector, science educator in the classroom or museum or just interested in learning more about communicating science?**

**THEN DON'T MISS!**



**Annual Conference – Massey University, November 9 – 10**

**“Science Communication – Beyond the Daily News”**

Once again SCANZ has organised an exciting conference that will appeal to a wide range of people who are involved in various levels of communicating science. The programme features some outstanding keynote speakers, including the Executive Producer from Natural History New Zealand, Andrew Waterworth, the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, Barry Fox a former Vice president of CBS, Dr Brennon Wood from Massey and Greg Carlyon from Horizons Regional Council.

As well as the top flight keynote speakers, a series of workshops will be staged including:

- Communication tips for scientists
- Communicating with kids
- Making videos for the web
- Communications opportunities for museums
- The challenges of dealing with IP

There will be sessions on blogging, communicating across the sciences and getting science to the public. There will also be a session from Peter Griffin who attended the recent World Conference on Science Journalism

The venue for the conference is the Sport and Rugby Institute on the Massey Campus <http://www.sportandrugbyinstitute.co.nz>. The conference dinner will be held at Te Manawa, the Science Centre and Museum at Palmerston North. [www.temanawa.co.nz](http://www.temanawa.co.nz) The cost of the conference is just \$240 which includes the conference dinner.

For more details and to register go to the SCANZ website [www.scanz.co.nz](http://www.scanz.co.nz) or contact Peter Burke 021 224 2184 or [peter.burke@horizons.govt.nz](mailto:peter.burke@horizons.govt.nz)

## ► **News and views**

### **On the ground at the 2009 Royal Society Prizes for Science Books**

*Exclusively for SCANZ readers—an account of the recent 2009 Royal Society Prizes for Science Books event by London-based New Zealander and science communicator Michael Bycroft.*

The New Zealand Embassy in London, located just off Trafalgar Square, is beautifully placed to observe the landmarks of the city. Nelson's column, the National Gallery, Charing Cross, Downing St: they are all close by and instantly recognisable.

I felt a bit like the New Zealand Embassy at the press conference for the 2009 Royal Society Prizes for Science Books, mingling with some top attractions in the UK science writing world. With a 21-year history, a £10,000 victory cheque, and a winner's list that includes Stephen Hawking and Bill Bryson, the Royal Society can rightly claim this as "one of the UK's most prestigious non-fiction literary prizes".

So it attracts its fair share of scientific and journalistic landmarks, from the monumental Lord Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society and distinguished science writer, to newer erections like Bed Goldacre, author of the *Guardian* newspaper's "Bad Science" column and scourge of quacks and hacks alike. The audience was made up of various jobbing reporters from major UK outlets, including our very own Tim Radford.

Aside from the announcement of this year's winner, the press conference featured a lively panel discussion about the nature and value of good science writing. This was no ordinary press conference but a "People's Press Conference", a chance for some lucky members of the public to put questions to the judges and authors (though only three of the six short-listed authors were present).

I wanted to know what was the most interesting science topic that had not yet been turned into a book. For some reason the authors were not willing to disclose their latest book ideas, but they had plenty to say about other questions, and their answers were as varied as their books.

Lord Rees and MC Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock began with some suitable bromides about the "power of the imagination to bring books to life" and about science being "the only true global culture." Author Jo Marchant played along by noting the importance of "personal stories" in science writing. Ben Goldacre disagreed. For him, a "third-generation nerd" and author of a book on bad science badly reported, the day jobs of scientists do not need historical or personal embroidery to give them pattern and texture. To think otherwise is, he said, "an insult to science". Richard Holmes politely objected, and reminded

everyone why they were there, by pointing out that science has its own drama and "tells a natural story". And he should know: his shortlisted book is "Age of Wonder", a history of science during the Romantic period that Radford describes as an "exhilarating sprint through 70 years of scientific discovery".

The received wisdom of science writing came under further attack in a sprightly debate about style. "We should encourage people to write badly, but at great length." So said one panellist (no prizes for guessing who) before wondering out loud why there was no Royal Society Prize for Science Blogging.

Say what you like about received spelling and split infinitives, the argument runs, at least bloggers get the science right—the good ones, at any rate. Other panellists were all in favour of Goldacre's attempt to put science back in science writing. Not surprisingly, they were less keen to take the writing out.

Holmes came to the rescue with another graceful compromise: science is not opposed to good writing, he said, but demands it: witness Humphrey Davey, the Romantic era chemist famous for his miner's lamp, electro-chemistry, and flowing prose. Jo Marchant applied the same principle—clear writing aids clear thinking—to present-day science writers. And Marchant needed clarity of both mind and style to navigate the maze of research into a 2,000-year old clock, in her "Decoding the Heavens: Solving the Mystery of the World's First Computer."

These and other exchanges set the scene for the question that everyone had come to answer: who won? And would the winning book be the kind that gives "enlightenment", "relief of man's estate", or a study of those "ingenious and curious gentlemen" who made the great discoveries of the past?

The terms are from Lord Rees' opening spiel, where he also noted that the third category is "especially fascinating". A prescient comment: the winner was Richard Holmes, for his "relay race of scientific stories" about the discoverers and discoveries of the Romantic era.

So this year's prize was not just a victory for Holmes—biographer, literary historian, Fellow of the Royal Academy, and keen balloonist—but also for history, drama, and the "writing" in "science writing." But Holmes is not short on ideas about science. As he revealed in his acceptance speech, he is keen to explore further a theme that ran through his winning book, "Age of Wonder": the importance of teamwork in science.

Holmes' remark about teamwork may be as close as I got to finding out the most important science topic that no one has written about. But I also found out that science can produce superb writing in a variety of different styles—even if no-one quite agrees on which style is best. The style, and content, of the next prize-winner is impossible to predict, but so much the better for the competition. The last word goes to the ebullient Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, who summed up what all of the panellists (even Ben Goldacre) seemed to

agree on: "I love science, I think it is a ball, and I think everyone in society should know about it."

Royal Society Press Release announcing the 2009 winner

<http://royalsociety.org/booksnews.asp?id=8764>

Tim Radford's short reviews of the 6 short-listed books (from The Guardian)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/sep/08/royal-society-science-book-review>

### **Science Media Centre unites science bloggers**

The brand-new Sciblogs.co.nz site launched on 30 September by the Science Media Centre (SMC) aims to bring together New Zealand's best science blogs as well as launch a few new good ones.

Sciblogs launched with 25 bloggers from universities, CRIs and private research institutions, people that SMC staff describe as knowing their stuff with "two dozen PhDs between them...they aren't afraid to tackle the big science-related issues affecting society."

Sciblogs is designed as an online hub for discussion of scientific topics and will grow to include other bloggers. If you would like to enquire about hosting a science blog on Sciblogs, contact either Peter, Dacia or Aimee on [smc@sciencemediacentre.co.nz](mailto:smc@sciencemediacentre.co.nz)

<http://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz/>

### ➤ **For your eyes and ears**

- Interview with Sharon Begley, science news editor for Newsweek Magazine, on The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe weekly Podcast talkshow.

<http://www.theskepticsguide.org/archive/podcastinfo.aspx?mid=1&pid=166>

- Coming out soon from RSNZ 2009 Science Book of the Year winner Rebecca Priestly—*100 Essential New Zealand Landforms*.

### ➤ **Notices**

- Wellington-based science writer Marilyn Head invites SCANZ members and readers to join a book/DVD club focused on science/non-fiction. There are two groups in Wellington and another in the Hutt Valley—the clubs have an ever-expanding range of books and DVDs available. Contact [marilyn@actrix.co.nz](mailto:marilyn@actrix.co.nz) for more information.

- Keen to keep tabs on events? Check out the Science Media Centre's and the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology websites:

<http://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz/events/>

<http://www.morst.govt.nz/about/calendar/>

### **Want to join SCANZ?**

If you have an interest in communicating science and subscribe to the objectives of the organisation, you are welcome to join. Current members include working journalists, public relations professionals, academics, science festival staff, museum directors, policy advisers, students, scientists and researchers, and science leaders.

The membership fee for 12 months is \$80 (\$32 for full-time students).

Membership forms and instructions are available through the SCANZ website, at <http://www.scanz.co.nz/joinus.asp>

### **Want to get in touch?**

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