

Towards an article on Frank Key

Roland Clare

Miscellaneous chat, typed up directly after a telephone conversation with FK on 25 September 2013.

Frank is a member of the London Library. Born in 1959 in Barking Hospital, he grew up in Chadwell Heath. His father was of Irish descent; his mother spoke Flemish at home.

'I did lots of drawing in the past. No art training since the stupid lessons I had at the age of twelve. A self-taught illustrator. Knew my limitations. Hardly done any for years. I have a confidence with words that I don't have with drawing. The kinds of pamphlets in which I reproduced pictures were effectively killed off by the Internet.'

'There was no booze in the house when I was young. Father was diagnosed with motor neurone disease when he was 55 or 56, and was dead by 58. His last two years, he was permanently drunk on whisky. He wanted to bring up his children properly. But when they had left, he drank.'

The Wilderness Years: 'A long alcoholic stupor; 2001 / 2002 : six months in rehab.

I had a bourgeois life, nice house, wife and children. A human resources and welfare officer in local government, with Islington Council.' He made pamphlets while working with the council. He came out of rehab, and his domestic life was swept away: he resolved to be poor and to write, and has not had a drink since.

When in rehab he had a conversation with a friend who feared he could only be a raconteur when drunk. 'It made me think, can I write sober?' FK was 'permanently a bit sozzled from the age of twenty onwards'. His early writing was 'accomplished in a state of befuddlement. I drank heavily, but was functional. I drank anything I could lay hands on: ultimately two bottles a day of whisky, Scotch. In 2001 I was in and out of hospital five times.'

'How did I get on to Resonance? Nepotism! Ed Baxter and I were friends back in the small press group, doing out-of-print pamphlets. We met again in 2003 and he said, "Do a show." We thought I might do seven or eight weeks. It is now pretty much the longest continuously-running show on Resonance, and the podcasts have been downloaded thousands of times.'

'Hooting Yard writing is very innocent stuff. I have never analysed it. There are not many systems at work. If systems are used, it will be apparent. I was once impressed by Perec, spending hours on demented patterns before writing a word. He was struggling to write. I found Oulipo very helpful early on, but generally speaking there are no devilishly complicated systems.'

Dobson's dates: 'I know they don't cohere. It's partly done on purpose. Dobson's life has no concrete solidity in my head.' Deliberate incoherence of chronology. 'He is meant not to have a clue, or to be utterly confused.'

Regarding sound: 'That is absolutely the key and leading idea, for everything I have written in the last ten years: the oral component is essential. When I read old pieces on the radio they don't have the flow: they were written for the page, not for the ear.'

Strontium 90 Township? 'The key to vast amounts of what I do ... on the day I wrote it I came upon the words "Strontium 90", and thought, without understanding what it really meant, it was a nice phrase to use in something.'

The long machine-sentence was originally in *Crop Circles, the Mystery Solved* by Zoltan Crunlop, 1985.

'*Slab's Song*, which includes the first mention of Hooting Yard, was actually written a few years before 1987, but I can't recall when that might have been with any precision.'

The man with the hammers is Traitor Bill

His flag is made of shoes

*He shut up shop in **Hooting Yard***

And drowned himself in booze.

