

Plans are made to publish here the new novel from one of the most mysterious authors

PN Editor Fred Newman examines the phenomenon of Ronald Hubbard

In a newish sort of castle in Sussex a suite of rooms, with private bar, an electric organ, and an elegant writing desk complete with pens and an unopened pack of his favorite cigarettes, await one of the world's most prolific and richest authors.

Yet the rooms, cleaned regularly, remain unused; the chair behind the desk has not been sat upon for over fifteen years, though the man for whom all this is carefully — even lovingly maintained — has sold over 23 million copies of his 350 books and earns a royalty income of thousands of pounds each day.

It was here, amid the rolling hills of mid-Sussex, that Ron Hubbard, science-fiction author, and extraordinary analyst of the human condition, built the turreted medieval-style creation that was then the world headquarters of the Church of Scientology, of which he is founder and father-figure.

Now Hubbard is back writing science fiction. His *Battlefield Earth*, an 820-page *Star Wars* style saga, memorable for its evocation of the pulp-style SF of the forties of which he was a masterly exponent, has enjoyed considerable success in the U.S. where it was published by St. Martin's Press. It grossed 1.3 million dollars in its first five months and is now in its fourth printing.

Any day now those who represent his fiction publishing interests, an organization in Los Angeles called Author Services Inc., set up especially to handle the book, will announce the publisher here. And close on the heels of *Battlefield Earth*, which marked Hubbard's return to SF writing after a break of thirty years, is an enormous 10-volume work called *Mission Earth* which is scheduled for publication next year.

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, his wealth and his connection with the controversial Church of Scientology which claims around 300,000 students in the UK and 3 million world-wide, Hubbard himself has become a shadowy and insubstantial figure, a ghost writer extraordinary.

Hubbard quit Britain in 1967, at the height of the storm that surrounded the Church and its teachings, founded on Hubbard's best-selling book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, first published in 1950.

But while the sales of *Dianetics* have continued to thrive — over 5 million copies sold to date — Hubbard himself has withdrawn from the world. He has not appeared in public for over fifteen years, his wife claims not to have seen him since 1980, and rumours flourished that Hubbard, born in 1911, is actually dead.

One man who embraced this view with particular enthusiasm was Hubbard's estranged son, Ronald DeWolf, who last November filed a petition in California asking a court to declare his father "dead or mentally incompetent," and turn over his father's assets to him.

DeWolf claimed that a group within the Church was attempting to take over his father's estate. However three months later came a sensational development; Denver, Colorado happens to be the place where *Battlefield Earth* begins and it was the obscure Denver-based *Rocky Mountain News* that Hubbard appeared to have chosen to break a long silence that stretched back to the date of his last interview, in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1968.

Amid high drama, the paper was invited to submit written questions; and although Hubbard still declined to be interviewed in person, his attorneys prepared a special ink with which Hubbard wrote three accompanying letters — one to the *News* and two to the courts. The ink was vouchsafed by experts to be the same that had been sent three days previously to Hubbard, and more experts confirmed Hubbard's handwriting, and fingerprints on the letters. Since then DeWolf's petition has been dismissed by the courts.

But of Hubbard himself, or his whereabouts, there was and still is, no sight nor clue, and doubts over the "interview" still exist. Nevertheless behind the turrets of St. Hill Manor in Sussex, there is a pervading sense that Ron Hubbard, far from being dead, has never really been away.

Certainly it is not merely those lived-in like yet empty rooms that give the impression. Right by the reception area is a post-box that reaffirms Hubbard's dictum that anyone should be free to communicate with him. According to Robert Springall of the Public Affairs Department at St. Hill messages put in are sent to Los Angeles and in due course, a reply comes back, though not in Hubbard's personal hand.



Ron Hubbard: now pronounced 'legally alive'

Again among the notices, are exhortations and memos from the man they affectionately call "Ron". One, dated July 12th, and signed "Love, Ron" announced the setting up in Sydney, Australia, of the Church's newest centre — an Advanced Organization. "1983 will be an unprecedented year of expansion," wrote Hubbard.

Hubbard's direct links with the Church he founded were severed in 1966, when he resigned in order to devote himself to research and writing but his fortunes and those of the Scientologists remain intertwined. The Church is a powerful marketing agency for the 100 or so books that Hubbard has written on Scientology. For those wanting to study its tenets — in essence a belief that people's problems can arise from painful memories or previous lives and that such memories or 'engrams' can be got rid of by Dianetic counselling — *Dianetics* is required reading.

At St. Hill, alone, there may be at any given time 300-400 students, who will have bought copies of *Dianetics* at £7.95 and most likely such other works as the *Scientology Dictionary* (£20.00). According to their own estimates a student training as an 'auditor' — after which he or she could train others — would need to spend around £50-£60 on books.

In addition regular mailings are undertaken by the ten Scientology centres in the UK, who between them will probably send out 60,000 shots in the next three months alone.

The target audience, apart from those who have already expressed direct interest in the Church by attending a centre, is the fitness end of the book market.

Thus the books are promoted in health magazines, and surprisingly perhaps, in rugby magazines. The appeal is clearly *mens in corpore sano*, and for the Church it represents a substantial source of income, though Springall explains that the revenue is kept in a separate 'book account'.

Hubbard retains the copyright of his works, of course; but all the non-fiction books are marketed by the Church worldwide, and marketed aggressively.

Next year *Dianetics* is set for its third relaunch since 1950, and the aim is to push sales to the six million mark. The last boost for the book was in 1982, and attempts were made to broaden the market and get copies into the general bookshop.

"We had a mixed success," says Springall. "But that doesn't mean to say we've given up on that. On the contrary I think we learned a lot, and we'll be putting the lessons into practice for next year."

Even without promotion, *Dianetics* and Hubbard's other treatises have proved remarkably durable. In the U.S. and U.K. markets alone last year *Dianetics* sold 140,000 copies — more, Springall likes to point out, than many a mass-market title, and in the five years to 1977 books on *Dianetics* in general sold to the tune of 7.5 million dollars.

The empty castle that waits for the king of this Sussex Castle



The ink tray is empty, the quill pen dry, and the electric organ silent in Ron Hubbard's study



In the 'Pavilion' at St. Hill, Sussex



The Church of Scientology's fortress-style HQ: but the drawbridge is coming down.

All this is big money, and while Hubbard collects his royalties, the Church of Scientology benefits, too. On sales to its students it takes a normal bookselling margin, and three independent publishing houses in the U.S., Mexico, and Denmark, have been set up to handle Hubbard's books.

In Copenhagen New Era Publications organizes the manufacture and supply of Hubbard books for the European market selling to the individual churches in the same way that a publisher sells to the trade. Precisely who owns New Era has proved difficult to establish, but almost certainly the Church has a controlling interest.

Indeed the impression is of a fairly sophisticated large-scale book-selling operation, carefully orchestrated on an international basis with plans and policies formulated in what is now Scientology's world headquarters in Los Angeles.

The Church itself says it is a non-profit making organization, though in the U.S. the Internal Revenue Service challenged its charitable status, and the revenue from Hubbard's non-fiction books which accrues to it is self-evidently ploughed back to pay costs and invest in growth.

For example a further stage in the development of St. Hill Manor is now in progress, with a large auditorium complete with battlements to match the rest of the building, under construction. And the house and grounds itself are expensive to maintain.

But it would be wrong to assume that its massive book operation is seen simply as a way of making money; what it does primarily is to promote the ideas of Scientology, and sales are a constant affirmation of the appeal of Hubbard's ideas to some people the world over.

Springall and his colleagues are understandably sensitive about the adverse publicity Scientology has received in the past. From 1967 until 1980 the Home Office barred Scientologists from abroad from entering the UK, and Hubbard himself would have been unable to return to the country where he first set up his HQ in 1959 even had he wanted to.

Now Hubbard's return to SF writing may also have led to a reappraisal of public policy within the Church, and a major PR campaign to convince the world that Scientologists have nothing to hide and, as Springall put it "don't eat babies" is about to take off.

There are hints that Ron Hubbard, now 71, might any day re-emerge into the world and even come to Britain for the forthcoming launch of *Battlefield Earth*. So perhaps the ready rooms of St. Hill will, at long last, serve their purpose and were the world's least visible writer to go so far as to undertake an author's tour, it would be a sensation indeed.