



KALASHNIKOV KULTUR

By Ricky Savage, the voice of social irresponsibility

Saw you coming...

Phineas T Barnum's famous remark that a sucker is born every minute was proved right as 2002 ended. The sorry tale of the Prime Minister, his wife, her guru and the conman, reminded me of the dictum that you should never give a sucker an even break.

But whacko slimming scams cooked up by some smooth-talking Aussie are small beer compared with the really great cons of the past. Few can match Horatio Bottomley, the East-End-born Hackney MP and publisher of the jingoistic John Bull. His final flourish in 1918 was the Victory Bond Club, a neat little con that consisted of helping those who couldn't afford the £5 bonds by letting them pay what they could afford into the club which would buy the bonds for them. Bottomley pocketed £150,000 of the £500,000 that flowed into the club.

Jabez Balfour, a JP, Mayor of Croydon and MP for Burnley was at it a good few years earlier. His scam was called snowballing, his worthless companies sold land and property to each other, turned in huge 'profits', paid dividends to investors and looked almost honest. The trick was to use the money from the latest stock issue to pay the dividends due on the last and pocket the difference. Eventually the snowball melted and Balfour got 14 years. I think Enron came up with something similar...

In Europe Victor Lustig was a conman of such sublime skill that he 'sold' the Eiffel Tower, not once, but twice. Next stop was the USA where he even tried to pull a fast one on Al Capone!

I can't leave out Maundy Gregory, the man who 'sold' knighthoods and peerages by finding out who was going to get a gong a few months in advance, then approaching the sucker and offering to 'arrange' it in return for a hefty fee.

There's one born every minute and all a conman needs to do is pick his moment, sound convincing and pocket someone else's cash. I guess we're all suckers in the end; it's just that no one but my friends will laugh if I fall for some con artist; if you're either famous or married to someone famous or both the whole world has a good laugh at your expense.

Michael Gentry: Craftsman Extraordinaire

By John Dearing

Michael Gentry is a picture framer and restorer, whose talents have also been applied to all manner of restoration projects. He is a keen guitar player who likes skiffle and swing; recently, he has restored a Martin acoustic jazz guitar from 1933.

In 1955, he became an apprentice restorer in Muswell Hill Broadway, and started his own business in Aylmer Parade in 1975, moving to his current workshop at 28, Church Lane in 1983.

In the frame

His varied clientele includes dealers, collectors and other private owners, galleries, museums, exhibitions, manufacturers, shipping and insurance companies. In 1986, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, presented the Pope with a painting of St. Thomas a' Beckett by Robert Wraith, framed by Michael Gentry. It is said that this painting still hangs in the Pope's private apartment.

The RAF museum in Hendon preserves some unusual wartime art. The practice of painting mascots onto the sides of airplanes was common, but it was only possible to remove and save the mascots



Michael Gentry in his workshop with jazz guitar restored by him. Photo by John Dearing.

if they were fabric-covered planes such as the Wellington bomber. Michael has restored about a half dozen of these.

He has worked for Marlborough Fine Art, framing pictures for their 'stable' of artists, which includes John Piper, Ron Kitaj, and Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. He has framed prints by Hockney and Picasso, and originals by Ben Nicholson. Another of his clients was Gloraphilia of Mill Hill, who produced tapestries.

Heirlooms

Michael's local trade is mostly antique / period pieces requiring restoration, typically family heirlooms, usually in very poor condition until he works his magic. He

recently restored six antique leather screens which were filthy and rotten in places, and some regency mirrors whose wooden frames were in a parlous state.

An incident some years ago that many readers may recall was when Lady Sonia Melchett hosted a party for TV-am, and Anna Ford threw wine at Jonathan Aitken. The wine splashed some of Lady Melchett's pictures, and Michael was subsequently called in to do repairs.

Michael will also copy or do pastiches of famous paintings, for example, horses in the style of Stubbs.

Michael Gentry can be contacted on 020 8444 7152.

Deep in the Rainforest

By James Loveday

First I would like to thank very much everyone in East Finchley who sponsored me, enabling me to participate in this amazing expedition.

After reaching Lima airport at midnight we departed on a disconcertingly old plane. The flight took about four hours, mostly over thick rainforest. We landed at the ramshackle airport in Iquitos. It wasn't yet midday but the heat was intense. There were two buses waiting to take us to base camp, provided by the university of the Amazon region of Peru. We set up our hammocks and received our food: pasta, rice, beans, tinned tomato paste, tinned mushrooms, tinned peaches and porridge. We had to purify the river water and drink that. We acclimatised for a few days and met the three Peruvian students who were joining our group. There were sixty English kids in five groups of twelve, each with three Peruvian students.

Sailing up river

My group began with two weeks on a research boat. We sailed upstream from Iquitos deep into the rainforest. The channel narrowed; the wild-life was spectacular as we were granted special access to restricted places. We studied river dolphins, manatees and macaws

from canoes at dawn and dusk, and bats and primates on land at midday and midnight. The crew were also skilled guides, helping us spot the animals - parrots, toucans, eagles, piranhas, cayman, snakes, iguanas, tree and poison dart frogs, monkeys of all kinds, huge butterflies and anteaters.

We stopped at a town on the way back, had a night out at its club, then swapped over with another group and were speed-boated back to Iquitos.

We drove to an entry point and faced a six mile hike in. We each had about 35 kilos to carry. It took seven hours to get to the wooden house where we were

staying. After recovering we set to work with our professor, who took us out to catch lizards. We did more bat-netting as well as studies on praying mantis, butterflies, six-inch caterpillars and enormous ants. We gave a good chunk of our kit to the couple who had put us up - and supplied us with home grown exotic fruits - so it took us half the time to walk out.

A minibus carried us back to base camp. We wrote up the science, had a day out in Iquitos and visited a local village to plunder their shop and play the children at football. Then we flew back to Lima for our flight home.

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