



Art C. Clark

SIR ARTHUR CHARLES CLARKE

1917–2008

Elected in 1986

*“For conception of geosynchronous communications satellites,
and for other contributions to the use and understanding of space.”*

BY HANS MARK

SIR ARTHUR CHARLES CLARKE died on March 19, 2008, at this home near Colombo, Sri Lanka, at the age of 90. He was elected a foreign associate of NAE in 1986.

Sir Arthur, the first of four children, was born in Minehead in southern England on December 16, 1917. His father was a farmer and his mother a post office telegrapher. Early on, he developed an interest in science and technology, especially astronomy, and while still in grammar school, he built a telescope to “map the Moon.” At age 13, young Arthur discovered science fiction and became a voracious reader of stories of space exploration and life on other planets in the very popular “pulp” magazines. Thus the interests that would shape his life took hold in his mind when he was still very young.

Arthur attended a private school in Taunton on a scholarship from 1927 to 1936. Upon graduation, he secured a position as an auditor in the Department of the Exchequer. In 1941, he joined the Royal Air Force. As a technical officer, he was a member of the very successful British-American team working on the early ground-controlled approach (GCA) radar system being developed by people at MIT. Arthur was demobilized

with the rank of flight lieutenant in 1945. He then enrolled at King's College of the University of London, and in 1948, he received a Bachelor of Science degree with first-class honors in physics and mathematics.

I first ran across the name of Arthur Clarke in 1947 when I was a senior at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. My early interests were also oriented toward space exploration, and I had acquired a book by the German author Willy Ley entitled *Rockets and Space Travel: The Future of Flight Beyond the Stratosphere* (Viking Press, 1947). A passage on page 296 cites a "recent and most interesting suggestion advanced by Arthur C. Clarke of the British Interplanetary Society." More than 60 years ago, I underlined this passage and the sentence that followed: "In an article published in "Wireless World" in the October 1945 issue he advocated a system of three space stations revolving in the same orbit (and forming a triangle with the Earth at its center) for worldwide radio and television coverage." This was an audacious idea, and I remember wondering if I would be alive when Clarke's proposal was implemented. But it happened long before I expected.

In another article published in 1947, Clarke predicted that nuclear-powered rockets would be developed "within 20 years." (Unfortunately, I cannot find the reference, but later, when I met him, he confirmed that he had said this.) So Arthur was not infallible as a technological prophet.

In 1948, Arthur Clarke made the decision to become a professional writer, and he published his first science fiction novel, *Against the Fall of Night*, in 1953. In 1956, he moved to Sri Lanka (Ceylon at the time), where he resided, near Colombo, for the remainder of his life, although he continued to travel widely and spent extended periods of time abroad. In 1963, he published his only non-science fiction novel, *Glide Path*, which is based on his work on radar during World War II. This was the beginning of his great productive period.

Arthur's collaboration with Stanley Kubrick began in 1964 and led to the memorable film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968. The movie was an example of Arthur's unique talent.

He had a first-class technical intelligence, and all of his books were somehow plausible; he also had a superb imagination. The high quality and popularity of his books were based on a combination of these elements. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the imaginative idea was that a computer, HAL, would try to take over the spaceship. The story was a cliffhanger until HAL was finally bested.

My personal favorite among Arthur's writings is *Rendezvous with Rama* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973). In this book, Arthur's imagination takes the lead. After an asteroid collides with the Earth causing catastrophic damage, a group of people decide to leave. They build a huge spaceship to accomplish their objective. The gripping story also involves imagining something completely new at the time—a group of humans leaving the Earth forever. Arthur's book describes the consequences.

During the years I spent in Washington (1977–1984), I met Arthur Clarke several times. He would visit NASA Headquarters, and we would arrange discussion sessions, which were always unique experiences for those of us who attended. Following those sessions, we would take Arthur out to dinner. During one such party, I remember discussing Clarke's law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Someone added that it must also violate the "principle of least astonishment," which we decided was a good general principle related to magic! We also added some other laws, which were adopted by consensus. My favorite was: "If an old, distinguished scientist or engineer tells you something cannot be done, he is probably wrong." Arthur had a good sense of humor, and he always enjoyed these visits.

Arthur Clarke's achievements were widely recognized, and he received many honors. The most important was nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, probably based on his long-standing advocacy of international collaboration in space exploration as "an alternative to armed conflict." In 1998, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his contributions to literature. Arthur's achievements were also honored in the

United States, where he was elected a foreign associate of the National Academy of Engineering in 1986 and awarded NASA's Distinguished Public Service Medal in 1995.

For all of his fame and notoriety, Arthur Clarke was a private person who loved his life in Sri Lanka. He was an expert ping-pong player, and he loved scuba diving. He married Marilyn Mayfield in 1953, but the marriage was dissolved in 1964. Arthur never had any children.

Arthur Clarke was one of the most influential people in the last half of the twentieth century. His legacy is the books he wrote and the ideas they contain. I consider it a great privilege to have known him. I miss him and mourn his passing.

