

I confess to being a Science Fiction fan in my youth. I took a monthly magazine “Astounding Science Fact and Fiction” edited by John W Campbell; a giant character in the genre and much respected as an editor. He took his job and his science seriously and was known for rejecting sub standard stories –sometimes because the ‘science’ was unacceptable even if it was fictional.

About that time I was enjoying physics in school and was perfectly well aware that there was no such thing as a perpetual motion machine. Or so it was thought.

John Campbell witnessed a demonstration of a machine devised by Norman L Dean that was claimed to produce a force without a balancing instantaneous reaction force. The Dean Drive as it was called would be put on a scale and when it was switched on the scales would show a loss of weight.

Campbell was convinced that something was happening, but a lifetime of experience (not to mention Newton’s Laws) made everyone sceptical. However, the potential pay-off was so vast that several bodies wanted to investigate further.

Dean claimed he was terrified that someone would steal his idea and was prepared to demonstrate his drive only after the money had been put up and wanted to be promised a Nobel Prize.

He was no crank. He had already invented a guidance system that had had been appropriated by the U.S. government for use in submarines and ballistic missiles. Its value has been likened to that of Harrison’s Chronometer that solved the problem of Longitude.

Satisfactory investigations never took place. Ever since Dean’s death, scientists have tried to prove his device will work or prove it will not work. Naturally, as the device contradicts the laws of physics as we know them, any tests results are easier to accept when they say it does not work. The interesting thing is there are some scientists who say they can’t prove that it doesn’t!

Dean had the same problem as Alan Turing. In the 1940’s scientific developments were made in great wartime secrecy, so the public were as unaware of his drive as they were of computers.

What if Dean was right about his reaction-less thrust? His device means that a rocket would not need the fuel to spit out the fire to produce the thrust that drives the rocket. Space travel would be transformed. It cannot possibly happen, can it?

Sixty years ago we wouldn’t have thought it possible to carry around 10,000 books in a Kindle; talk to someone in Australia; watch a film on a hand-held screen or listen to a selection of thousands of tunes as we walk along.

Arthur C Clarke said: “Any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic.” – And we know he’s right.

