

## It came from space

Peter Kemp

**Comet Halley: A Novel.** By Fred Hoyle. *Michael Joseph: 1985. Pp.410. £9.95. To be published in the United States later this year by St Martin's Press.*

WHAT'S most astronomical about Fred Hoyle's new novel, *Comet Halley*, is the number of different subjects packed into its pages. The book sets out to be a love-story and a political satire, a thriller, a spy mystery, an exercise in science fiction, a pacifist tract, a comedy of Cambridge manners and an essay in evolutionary theory. Like the heavenly body at the heart of its narrative, it whizzes along — sometimes garish, sometimes gaseous — throwing off material in all directions.

The story opens with scientists in Cambridge, England, amazedly receiving radio messages beamed from Comet Halley. As excitement about this mounts, so does the local death-rate. Researchers expire in unusual circumstances; there are murders, lethal booby-traps, a deadly bombing; several characters are found mysteriously charred to death. Gradually sorting out what's behind all this is the improbably-named Isaac Newton: no relation to the seventeenth-century luminary but like him in opening up a new dimension in thinking. For, along with Frances Margaret, a brainy beauty who becomes his lover, he reaches the conclusion that Comet Halley harbours life — and life of a civilized and civilizing disposition. Comprising "a biologically generated nuclear reactor", it seems, the comet is directing itself to the prevention of nuclear war on Earth.

Soon, in his efforts to assist the comet in its pacific purposes, Newton is striding down the corridors of power (echoes of C. P. Snow keep reverberating through this ambitious sprawl of a novel), trying to convince politicians that humanity is on the brink of a momentous breakthrough. If only nations would realize the folly of pouring money into military budgets and divert resources into the building of telescopes instead, it's argued, then they will be able to receive and re-direct messages from Halley and a host of other would-be communicative comets throughout the Galaxy. The Earth, Newton points out, could become the hub of "a sort of cosmic telephone exchange", "an extra-terrestrial communications system". Since each comet is "a giant brain by our standards", the linking of them all into one vast network of brainwaves must result in hitherto undreamed-of intellectual advances.

Factors standing in the way of this — scepticism, militaristic bigotry, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons — are robustly geyed and decried in this book. Likewise, those who attempt to deflect Comet

Halley's benign aims find themselves having a hard time. When not actually reduced to blackened stalagmites by long-distance emissions from the peace-loving projectile, they succumb to curious maladies: in Moscow, the Politburo go down with "the mad itch", an extra-terrestrial ailment that plagues people into frenzies of nude scratching; the population of Washington is afflicted by a strange derangement which brings on an irresistible urge to hibernate. Finally, raming its aims home with some emphasis, the comet bombards the Arctic with a guided missile, pulverizing the ice-cap and hastening a change in the climate of opinion on Earth by drastically altering the planet's weather.

As if this weren't striking enough, Hoyle throws in further excitements for good measure: there's a particularly grisly sub-plot involving "a flying torture chamber" staffed by a quartet of odd-shaped psychopaths: a sadist with a Neanderthal skull and larger teeth than is customary, an ape-like giant, a vicious dwarf and a "ghastly waxen-faced creature" with shoulder-length white hair who wields a syringe filled with some unbearably agonizing concoction. Injecting one dramatic incident after another into his plot, Hoyle is generous to



a fault with dramatic incident — but always for didactic purposes. In as eye-catching a way as possible, *Comet Halley* is designed to trail its author's views on the emergence of life — and the likely extinction of it on Earth unless there's a change in thinking. □

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## Grains of evidence

Peter D. Moore

**The Palynology of Archaeological Sites.** By Geoffrey W. Dimbleby. *Academic: 1985. Pp.176. \$45, £34.50.*

POLLEN analysis has proved a valuable asset in the investigation of archaeological sites, though the problems involved in its application have not always been adequately appreciated. Only rarely are such sites conveniently located close to deep lake or peat sediments which permit extensive environmental reconstruction; more often the archaeologist has to make do with a buried soil, an infilled ditch or a compacted cave deposit. And such unconventional sources require specialized techniques of sampling and interpretation.

Geoffrey Dimbleby has been the pioneer in this field and has now brought together the collated wisdom of his years of research. It is a book with a strong practical emphasis, reflecting the fact that Dimbleby has been concerned not only with the laboratory analysis of samples but also with the collection of materials in the field. Such field experience shows through in the discussion of the various sources of polleniferous material and in the helpful warnings given about the limitations

that are imposed by different site factors.

Very naturally, much of the book is given over to soil pollen, Dimbleby's principal interest. This subject, which has been neglected and undervalued by most palynologists, has long required the kind of detailed and frank scrutiny which Dimbleby has here provided. He examines the many processes, such as the downwash and the faunal mixing of pollen, which prevent the simple interpretation of soil pollen profiles as stratified sequences.

As well as dealing with interpretive problems, the book contains many of Dimbleby's soil pollen diagrams which illustrate the kind of information to be gleaned from soil pollen profiles. Perhaps this aspect should have had less prominence, however, since these diagrams are readily available elsewhere and undoubtedly contributed to the book's high cost.

The author's cautious attitude to the application of pollen analysis and interpretation of the results may dismay some archaeologists who expect rather too much from the technique. But the book should be welcomed as a timely damper on those exuberant spirits whose enthusiasm outpaces their data. □

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