

His Majesty's
Grand Conceit

Robert Barclay

Also by Robert Barclay

Non-fiction

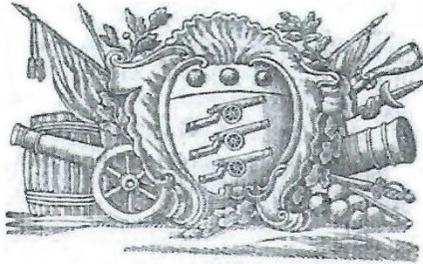
The Art of the Trumpet-maker
The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments
Making a Natural Trumpet

Fiction

Triple Take: A Museum Story
Death at the Podium
Ask Me About My Bombshells
Jacob the Trumpeter

HIS MAJESTY'S GRAND CONCEIT

Being *firsthand* descriptions by the *dramatis personæ*
of all the machinations, plots, subterfuges, craft and
wiles undertaken in bringing about His Royal Highness
King George II's FIREWORK SPECTACLE of April 27,
in the year of Our Lord 1749 at the *Green Park* in
London in celebration of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle,
closing the War of the Austrian Succession



As told to Robert Barclay esq.

Printed and sold at the sign of the *Loose Cannon*
GLOUCESTER
MMXX

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: His Majesty's grand conceit / Robert Barclay.

Names: Barclay, R. L., author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20200281666 | ISBN 9781988657196 (softcover)

Classification: LCC PS8603.A7244 H57 2020 | DDC C813/.6 –dc23ISBN

Copyright © 2020 Robert Barclay

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review or critical article, the reproduction or use of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means—including xerography, photocopying, scanning and recording—or in any information or storage retrieval system, is forbidden without express permission of the publisher

Published by
LOOSE CANNON PRESS

www.loosecannonpress.com

DEDICATION

During research for this story I was especially surprised by two historical characters who emerged from my reading: one, a man who was prosecuted, sentenced to death and then exiled for his sexual orientation; and the other, the child of a deceased African slave living in a cold and alien land. Captain Robert Jones was a dabbler in fire-works, invented the modern ice skate and perfected its sport, and came against an intolerant society that treated people of his kind as criminals. Charles Ignatius Sancho had the good fortune to be saved, cherished and nurtured, enabling him to express his creative powers in a milieu that more often regarded people of his race as scarcely human.

To Captain Robert Jones and to Charles Ignatius Sancho: your lives are remembered.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

In Order of Appearance

John Byrom, 4th Earl of Orford

Poet and Inventor

King George II

King of Great Britain and Ireland, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg and Prince-Elector of the Holy Roman Empire

John, 2nd Duke of Montagu

Master-General of His Majesty's Ordnance

Charles Frederick

Surveyor-General of the Ordnance

Captain Thomas Desaguliers

Chief Firemaster of His Majesty's Royal Laboratory

James Morris

Master Carpenter to the Office of Ordnance

Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni

Architect, Artist and Theatre Designer

Gaetano Ruggieri

Pyrotechnician

Jonathan Tyers

Impresario, Businessman and Proprietor

George Frideric Handel

Composer and Impresario

SETTING THE SCENE

Late in 1748, a great edifice in the form of a classical temple arose in the Green Park in London's west end, opposite St. James's Palace, King George II's residence. This edifice would be the launching pad for the fireworks to celebrate the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, a festive occasion which would take place the following April on the anniversary of the signing. The preparations for the extravaganza were the rage amongst Londoners, and the popular press made great sport of it all. The construction spawned announcements of progress on the site and many firsthand descriptions of the subsequent spectacle. Newspapers of the period abound with ribald satires and highly pointed criticism, while comical pamphlets, letters and memoirs mercilessly lampoon the entire grand conceit. Division, disagreement, misunderstanding and folly enrich the literature of this extraordinary event. There is much to draw upon, making the documentation a gold mine for the historian and for the writer of historical fiction. To add to the fun, I don't know another period in English history when the satire was so pointed, so well-honed, and done with such panache.

I have summoned ten eyewitnesses, all of whom were engaged on this incredible project, so I can record their impressions and memories. All these characters lived and breathed, and several of them left records of their doings. But all their documentary material only comes alive when the tale is told in the first person. It is only when we hear the characters' voices that we are truly drawn into the narrative. I feel privileged to have been their conduit so their interlocking stories may be passed along. But did it all transpire as these ten narrators have related it to me? Well, in the greater part, yes, but if not quite, they probably think it should have. And over a span of two centuries and more, I can hardly argue with their views and memories.

Occasionally, these raconteurs make passing mention of details from their everyday experiences and the milieu in which they lived. These references might be obscure to the modern reader, so I have included endnotes for clarification and sometimes enlightenment. You may refer to these as you wish, or leave them alone, because they add

nothing to the immediate flow of their stories. I have made no conscious adjustments to the timeframe, allowing the historical record and its witnesses to dictate the unfolding of events. I'm sure you will appreciate the contemporary illustrations on the opposite page of the "machine" for launching the fireworks—the Temple of Peace—and the map of its location. Further in the narrative you will find the official drawing of the machine and the frontispiece of the subsequent publication. All these, together, give some idea of the vast scale of this extraordinary achievement.

Now let us proceed forthwith to the Green Park and meet our first eyewitness, so he can tell us what all the fuss is about.

PRELUDE

John Byrom, 4th Earl of Orford (1692 to 1763)
Fellow of the Royal Society, Poet and Inventor

In which the first eyewitness opens our story

It was an astonishing spectacle, supreme amongst any other that season, or for many a year, truth to tell. But the celebration of peace between our German king and the damned Austrians and French and whatnot was hardly the reason I went to the Green Park. I care not a damp fart upon squabbles across the Channel. I'm English through and through, and damned proud of it, although 't is more than unwise to hold in public a view that Hanover is less legitimate than Stuart. Besides, the so-called peace that our oh-so-English George had wrought at Aix-la-Chapelle was stale news by April of 1749. No, for me, 't was purely for the spectacle, for 't is not often one can have music, cannon and fireworks all laid on in one evening. 'T was indeed a grand conceit.

I perforce left my carriage in charge of the driver far down James Street, a fair walk from the gates of the Green Park, because of a crowd of like-minded gentry milling forward. I say gentry, for those were the ones I mixed with, but in truth, anyone in London with a lust for spectacle was there, from the highest to the lowest. This is the great vexation of laying on spectacles at no charge. It is not pleasant to go far afoot in the London streets, for one sees the filth of humanity closer than is desirable. On this night, the risk of being accosted by cut-purses, beggars or the gin-sodden refuse of the lower sort was greater in the press of people.

As I stepped quickly through the east gate of the park, happily unmolested, I encountered Horace Walpole, a chance acquaintance. I had met him recently on this visit to London, and we found we shared a kindred wit even though he was a Whig Member of Parliament. He represented somewhere in Cornwall at that time, although he never set a foot farther west than Twickenham that I know of. He knew not a hint

of my political views, for I hold them to be mine and no one else's. In truth, Whig or not, we were united only by our wit and a fondness for coffee, snuff and fine drink. That's plenty enough acquaintance for a stroll together in the park.

'Damnable press of bodies,' I remarked as we came away from the crowd. 'Hard put not to be set upon and robbed.'

'I hear tell Fielding hath designs for a force of constabulary.'

'Aye, from his Bow Street office. Cannot come sooner.'

'Assuming they will be sufficient.'

We walked side by side into the greenspace as the sun was falling before us, and there was the great erection we had heard so much of, silhouetted by the last of the light. This gigantic Temple of Peace designed upon classical lines had been built upon the grass of the park facing the Queen's Library of St. James's Palace. Some 400 and more feet long it was, and rising to at least a quarter that height. And soaring even above that, a gigantic sun figure, a vast firework wheel with VIVAT REX writ at its centre, to be picked out in fires when the show was to be played off. And this was no thing of stagecraft, this temple, being as thin as canvas and propped at the rear; no, 't was a full building in its depth, with front, sides and back. It is quite remarkable what can be done with timber, plaister, canvas and paint, especially in the short few months since the start of its erection. It was extremely neat and pretty and grand to look at, and a world of fireworks were placed in an order that promised a most amazing scene when it was all to be in full display. His Majesty and other great folks were walking to see the machinery, but it was all railed about there, where the lords, ladies, commons, et cetera were sat under a scaffolding. They seemed to be under confinement in comparison to us mobility, who were enjoying the free air.

Accompanying the king was his youngest son William, Duke of Cumberland—him they call the Butcher for his bloody pursuit of the ragged Highlanders after Culloden—with Lady Yarmouth, the sovereign's mattress bounce, Princess Emilia, Lady Pembroke and old John, Duke of Montagu, whose nose had been in the whole pie from the start. The fence about the structure was picketed with fusiliers who stood at the ready with their weapons at their sides, preventing trespass of those who had not tickets.

'What think you of this squib castle?' I asked Walpole with a smile

after we had surveyed its immensity.

‘Oh, I don’t doubt but ’t will be a fine spectacle. But the Peace gives not the least joy; the stocks do not rise, and the merchants are unsatisfied. And here, to rub their noses in it, the government is to give a magnificent firework.’

‘Aye, and one designed and fired off by foreigners. But you’d not deny yourself the entertainment?’

‘Oh, for myself, I enjoy a spectacle as much as the next man. Doth not signify that I subscribe to the principle.’

The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle had been signed the November past, and although His Majesty had long planned these festivities, their execution needs must wait until the ink was dry. And it was hardly opportune to stage such a spectacle in the winter months. We strolled closer to the fenced area where we could see the musicians on the platform of the machine, preparing the Grand Overture under the eyes of Mr Handel, who was standing upon a raised podium of wood. Trumpets, horns, reeds, drums and such, all warlike instruments for a peaceful occasion, but no one apparently taking this with any irony.

‘And Tweedledum is contracted to provide the music,’ I observed, seeing Mr Handel waving irascibly at his band of musicians.

He laughed at that. My rhyme lampooning George Frideric Handel, when he and Giovanni Bononcini were matching opera for opera like duelling puppets, was now common currency.¹

‘Ah, but Tweedledee had the last laugh, did he not?’ said Walpole. ‘His *Te Deum* was performed last year at the signing of the Peace, which I am sure must have exercised Handel.’

‘Hardly. Pleased him, surely, Bononcini being dead these two years!’

We laughed again and shared a pinch of snuff from my pouch. I placed my pinch just so at the junction of my thumb and index finger, as did Walpole, and together we sniffed and sneezed almost simultaneous. There is nothing that more induces a kindred spirit amongst men than to expel one’s air explosively in unison. I sneezed again, returned my square of cambric to my vest pocket, and together we strode to the front of the structure. I was once more taken with the elaborateness of it all. The entire front of the pavilion was adorned with frets, gilding, artificial flowers, inscriptions, carvings and allegorical

pictures. I counted at least twenty statues in relief, many friezes, festoons and medallions, and texts in Latin throughout. The principal text, which occupied a high place at the front and centre, amused me in particular. Here, rendered in English, is said:

George II, the Assertor of our Liberty, the Establisher of our Tranquility, the Father of his People.ⁱⁱ

Oh, there was such irony in the father of our people being this man who took himself off overseas, fought battles for his Hanoverian holdings, and in so doing ran up a bill that he then foisted off upon the English people's Parliament. On one side of the façade, there was another depiction that also gave me wry amusement: His Majesty Giving Peace to Britannia. Fine sentiment... but for the fact that we'd had peace all along; damned if the warring *frogs* and *cabbages* and whoever on the Continent had spilled onto Britannia's soil, and the king and his butcher had done with the Scots long since.

That the sole function of this great erection was for this one occasion, and that it would be torn down thereafter, was a symbol to me of the extent to which our beloved sovereign will go to curry favour with his English subjects. And the extent, also, to which he most seriously misunderstands the people over whom he rules. I had never seen such a flurry of ribald pamphlets, lampoons and adverse press opinions as spewed forth since the public first learned of this regal folly. We had been laughing over the papers for months, yet were also titillated by the lure of it, so whatever one's politics, one was drawn to it and captivated by anticipation of it.

Behind the structure, ranged along Constitution Hill, were the guns of the Royal Train of Artillery, which were to fire the royal salute of 101 shots. Six pounders, twelve-pounders and great twenty-four-pound guns were ready blank-shotted, their gun captains and matrosses in attendance with ramrods, swabs and matches. Mr Charles Frederick, the Surveyor-General of the Ordnance, stood close by the viewing stand with a kerchief in his hand, ready to signal the start of the spectacle before riding forth to join his gunners on the hill.

The sun had long since slid behind the dwellings of Grosvenor Place when a single rocket was fired to call attention and bring all to

order. At the rocket's report, Mr Handel on his podium bowed deeply to the king and the court, turned to his musicians with raised arms, and swept them down...

CHAPTER ONE

His Majesty King George II (1683 to 1760)

King of Great Britain and Ireland, Duke of
Brunswick-Lüneburg and Prince-Elector of the
Holy Roman Empire

*In which King George hatches his scheme for a grand firework
and John, Duke of Montagu, finds himself cast upon the bonfire*

I have lately made John, 2nd Duke of Montagu Master-General of my Board of Ordnance. Poor John thinks it a sinecure and treats it as such, but if there were ever one who could organise the spectacle I have in mind, it is he. It is often questioned why I, as did my father before me, give such preferments to the jester and wag he hath proved himself to be. But he is a man of many and varied talents, and of great diplomatic skill, and I have promoted him far and awarded him many duties in our household. Even so, he is becoming prone in his advancing age to seek the easy life. I decided to shake him out of his indolence. I summoned the man to St James's Palace to administer my great surprise. I had him come up to the library, not the great reception room. That one's too filled with damned flunkies and hangers-on and all the nuisances of state that make decisions longer and more tedious in the execution. Besides, the library looks out upon the park.

'Montagu! Come sit yourself down here.' He is a tall, long-nosed fellow with a serious mien that is but skin-deep. Indeed, a roguish twinkle in his eye belies the countenance of first impression. He is a man who always dresses immaculately; this day his coat was well brushed, his hose and shirt spotless, and a fine shine to the shoe buckles. Withal, his wig was somewhat crooked, and he was a little out of breath from the few stairs to the library, so I waved my man to pull forward a chair at the other side of the work table, then sent him from the room.

'I trust I find you well?'

'Indeed, Your Majesty,' he puffed as he straightened his apparel and twitched his wig, 'I am as well as might be, though this November weather doth so work at my joints.'

'Aye, these last few days have been the coldest for many years. I hope 't is not presaging the winter to come.'

'I hope not, Your Majesty,' he answered, with an expression of anticipation.

'Listen, John. It's damnable. I am sick of vulgar disrespect.'

You may wonder to hear a mighty king, duke and prince-elect speak thus to one of his subjects. Where is gravitas? you ask; where the dignity of high office? Truth to tell, there is none in my court to open my heart to, so John Montagu sees a privy side of me that none other knows, nor even suspects. He respects this bond, so whilst we may be intimate when we are quite alone, he is formal and precise when in company, as he must ever be in the respect due his royal sovereign. Not one crack in my imperial armour shall any other see.

'I was ever disrespected,' I complained, 'by those who hold that their throne is a British prerogative and that only British born and bred need apply. Their history shows them Normans, French, Dutch and yokel Scots amongst their so-called island purity, yet still I am mocked as a foreigner.'

'Your Majesty, I beg you to set aside the vulgar...'

'My heart still burns from that vile pamphlet pinned to the gates of this palace: "Lost or strayed out of this house, a man who hath left a wife and six children on the parish." Vile calumny! Just so I spent some time in Brunswick-Lüneburg!'

'Oh, I had hoped that scurrilous slur did not still rankle. 'T was years past.'

'Aye, mayhap it was, but nothing is repaired! Nothing! I speak their language a hundred times more fluently than my father ever tried to. Lucifer roast his soul, I choose *not* to spend half the year in Brunswick-Lüneburg, I leave policy and decisions on Britain to their own Parliament, and I've prised the Catholic Stuart pretenders off their backs, yet still they despise me.'

'I am sure it is but a noisy few... ' I paid him no heed. My choler was fully risen, and Montagu was the prime vessel for my spleen.

'They have it that this late war more benefitted Hanover than

England and that the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle sold them to the French. Damn it! I finally have the French recognise the legitimacy of my throne—*my throne!*—I have them kick the Papist Scots out of France, and all the English people do is whine and satirise. Eight bloody years of war, for what? Mine is a *Hanoverian* throne by Protestant right, and it is our own Parliament that passed the Act of Succession to make it so. Blast those who would seek to have it otherwise. Oh, it is damnable!

‘I am ever your servant, Your Majesty,’ he replied, in no way put out by my venting. ‘If there is any duty I may perform...’

‘Yes, you may!’ I said, fixing his attention and reining in my choler. ‘You know, quite before the Peace was finally signed, that we had plans for a spectacle.’

‘Aye, Your Majesty. It hath been the talk for some time, and we have even discussed possible venues. After all, The Hague, Paris, Dublin, all are putting on great spectacles to honour the Peace. So must we.’

‘Enough talk. Now we act! What I conceive will be a vast show of prestige. We need to turn the English head, show my people our might, our authority, our will. A gigantic spectacle of pomp and guns and a great machine for fireworks to celebrate the Peace in magnificence; one such as hath never before been seen in this land. I will see to it.’

‘Where shall this spectacle take place?’ he asked. ‘You recall we had mooted Lincoln’s Inn Fields as a suitable site.’

‘Oh, that was ill-thought nonsense! Besides, have the Duke of Newcastle reap the benefits? Never.’

‘Aye, truly, he owns the land thereabouts. Besides, the tenants of the place were much up in arms about it.’

‘Bugger the tenants! It’s Newcastle who exercises me!’

‘Where then, sire?’

‘It needs be in the closest proximity to this palace as possible. The association between the Crown and the Peace is paramount.’

‘Then, there,’ he waved at the window. ‘In the Green Park.’

‘Of course, in the Green Park! Five hundred feet from the Queen’s Walk, no more. As directly and as closely adjacent to this dwelling as is possible. Those are my very words.’

And when I speak such words, my subjects do my bidding. Montagu’s curiosity as to why he had been summoned was patent on his face, but there was now a worm of thought as to what I intended to

charge him with. I rang for my man and had him pour two glasses of claret, then sent him for a large sheet of paper and writing instruments; medium folio at least, for I wanted space.

'To the continuing good health of your joints,' I toasted. We drank in silence until my man returned and laid the paper and instruments on my work table.

'Look you, John,' I said, 'here's what's in my mind.'

I dismissed my man, and once the door closed behind him, I sketched quickly: there would be a great machine for the launching of the fireworks, a vast structure along classical lines with Doric columns and pediments, arches and all manner of architectural and decorative devices. I'd seen these things in French papers and knew what store their King Louis set by pomp and theatre and show. Well, we'd employ their best artificers away from them, bring them to this land, and top them at their own game! I reckoned a length of 400 feet would impress the world; then, say, a hundred high, so I wrote the sizes in. There would be inscriptions celebrating the Peace, there would be passages from the classics, there would be encomiums to my warlike greatness. I sketched 'em in roughly as well. After a while, I put my pencil aside and imagined the thunderous cannonades to split the ears with my prowess and my victory. My crown; my kingdom.

'More rockets, wheels, fountains and aerial fire effects than have ever been seen, here or anywhere else on earth, John. Anywhere else on earth! Y' hear me? And there will be cannon for a mighty salute; 101 of them, as is customary! Aye, I can see in my mind's eye the Train of Artillery ranged along Constitution Hill.' I swept my arm along the skyline visible through the window.

'I am in awe of this conceit, Your Majesty,' he said slowly, 'and feel privileged to be the first to whom you have expressed it.'

'So you should be. This will be finer, larger, more elaborate than anything those puffed-up French clods could call forth.'

'And what you have sketched here is the form of the machine for the fireworks... the structure from which they will be launched?'

'Just so.'

'But, 't is enormous. T' would dwarf the proposition we made for Lincoln's Inn Fields...'

'Of course! Bigger, better, grander! And there shall be a viewing

scaffold with as many seats as may be for the court, for the gentry and the merchants of the city. Now, tell me, John, do you know of Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni?’

‘Of course, Your Majesty. A Frenchman who designs theatrical structures. A highly regarded designer who hath done much work here in England.’ His face was the picture of expectation.

‘What of the Ruggieri family?’

‘Why, the Ruggieri are the finest artisans of fireworks in the whole of Europe. The new pyrotechnicians.’ His expression became even more one of bated anticipation.

‘Yes. *Pyrotechnicians*.’ I pronounced the new word with some relish. ‘I would employ them.’

‘And so you should...’ Now I could see comprehension beginning to run across the wrinkles of his face.

‘Yes, employ. And,’ I continued, launching my bombshell, ‘I am given to believe that it is you alone who will be capable of bringing about my grand spectacle.’

His horror at the thought of such onerous duty, the labours and responsibilities of the undertaking, was writ large upon his face. He looked for all the world like a Guy Fawkes effigy flung upon the bonfire.

‘I see this comes as a great surprise.’ I relish always the expressions of those who must do my bidding, waver as they will.

‘Aye, Your Majesty,’ he waffled, ‘but... but I am sure my talent is but insignificant, and perhaps those who have given you to believe my capability exaggerate my usefulness in this endeavour.’

‘Your modesty, sir, might well be taken for reluctance to do my bidding.’ I was waspish because he needed to know his place.

‘Oh, no, no, Your Majesty!’ he cried in a dither, the scurrilous bastard, imagining my favours of a sudden withdrawn. ‘Far from it for me to hint that your judgement is in any way wanting...’

‘Good. Let it be settled then. You will immediately contact Charles Frederick of the Ordnance, have him muster his staff at the Laboratory in Woolwich and the master carpenter. You will communicate forthwith to Servandoni, offering him work and, with the Ruggieri family, indicating that it will be our pleasure to employ one of them as soon as might be convenient.’

'They are all, I believe, to be found in Paris...'

'You must inform them directly, and in plain words, that we want the greatest, the best, the most extravagant.'

He finished his glass at a gulp, and I poured him more. Oh, yes, I love to watch a face when its owner is given unwanted but incontrovertible instruction. There begins perplexity, followed by the dawn of comprehension, then horror, brief intransigence quickly masked by probity, and so succeeded by resignation and finally acceptance with a false willingness to serve. 'T is a comedic peep-show.

'When will this be accomplished? How long do we... I... have to get it done?'

'Well, damn it to Hades, it should have been done ere this! The Peace was so long in the signing that the good weather slipped away.' By God, the delays and fiddle-faddling these past months had driven me nigh to distraction. 'But time is of essence. It must take place in the spring of next year, at all costs before the end of April. The anniversary.'

'That's... that's scarce...' his fingers counted off, '...five months away, Your Majesty!'

'Then it would be well to act now. In faith, it would have been well to have acted sooner. Off with you, and see to the organising of it. Take this paper with you, and we will meet at some time convenient to draw it up in detail.'

He stood a while, not moving towards the door as I had waved at him, and looked expectantly at me.

'What then?'

'It is the matter, Your Majesty, of the ah... fiscal aspect of the endeavour...'

'All works will be undertaken by the Board of Ordnance. How else? Powder, firework fabrication, erection of the structure and assignment of working men. All of it. Frederick will inform William Earle, Clerk of the Cheque, of our pleasure in this matter.'

'And your chosen contractors... to bring them from overseas and to supply their wants?'

'Yes, yes, of course. I'd quite forgot. See Richard Arundel's flunkies at the office of the Treasurer of Chamber. I may not be troubled with detail. They will have you control a purse. But mark my words,' I warned him, 'I've told Arundel not to spare the purse—nor you the

Ordnance—for want of a few guineas. This must be done well! Lavish. Spectacular. Royal!

He bowed and scurried out, willing as always to do our bidding. Damned certain it was the old scoundrel would find a way to line his purse at the Crown's expense, but damned certain also was that a shower of coin was a sovereign physic and a spur to the flanks of my servants. I knew damned well that the cost of my fireworks would look well on paper, that the figures would balance to a nicety, but that the executors thereof would be well served by it. It was ever thus in this world.

Even though damnable betimes, 't is good to be king.

REFERENCES

ⁱ In present-day popular culture, Lewis Carroll takes all the credit for Byrom's little ditty.

ⁱⁱ GEORGIO. II. REGI. OPT. AVCTORI. SALVTIS. LIBERTATIS.
VINDICI. FVNDATORI. QVIETIS. PATRI. PATRIAE.