TINTIN

Belgium's most famous journalist celebrates his 65th birthday this year: the boy reporter was created by Georges Remi, a young Belgian graphic artist, late in 1928. Yet Tintin can lay even more of a claim than most cartoon characters to a certain agelessness.

All we really know about him is that he's a reporter. He never mentions a mother or father—he doesn't even have a surname. Nor do romance, domestic trivialities or daily hack work intrude in any way on his jet-setting existence.

One can only guess at how the other, more conventional journalists on the Belgian Catholic newspaper Le XXe Siècle (The 20th Century) felt about this newcomer to their ranks. But then, only the most adventurous of them would have envied him his first assignment—in the stories that were eventually published as Tintin Au Pays des Soviets (Tintin In The Land of the Soviets), the young adventurer was frozen in ice, narrowly escaped drowning in a dungeon and faced a firing squad, all in the name of exposing the villainy of the young Soviet state.

Remi (who signed his drawings Hergé), had of course never been to the USSR. In fact, he took his vision of the Soviet Union wholesale from Joseph Douillet's Moscou Sans Voiles (Moscow Unveiled). In this and the second Tintin adventure, Tintin Au Congo, he took his cues and his views from his employers at Le XXe Siècle. Tintin's Congo adventure is high on slapstick and very low on everything else. Hergé, like most Belgians, had no idea of his country's horrific exploitation of its over-sized colony. Tintin moves among the carefree and lazy Congolese as if he were wandering around a toyshop.

Hergé's professed naïveté did not seem to have undergone much of a revision even by the time he colourised and 'updated' this adventure in 1946. Where in the original story Tintin plays schoolteacher to four black boys and draws them a picture of Belgium ("votre patrie"), the current version sees him asking them to add two and two, to which he receives only the most stupefied blank stares. It's hardly surprising that these first two Tintin adventures have yet to be given the mass-market treatment of other works.

Hergé began hitting his stride—and making a belated attempt to redress the political balance—with his third Tintin adventure, Tintin En Amerique (Tintin in America). Readers were surprised to find depictions of white cruelty towards native Americans; and had Al Capone had a knowledge of French he might have been surprised to find himself captured at gunpoint by the young reporter.

Tintin had by now become a national hero in Belgium, largely because his was the first locally-produced comic strip. Le Cigares du Pharaon (Cigars of the Pharaoh) and Le Lotus Bleu (The Blue Lotus) followed. Hergé abandoned the slapdash style of the first Tintin adventures and began to give hundreds of hours to researching and developing his stories. If Tintin's readers were shocked at seeing American Indians—"bad guys"—portrayed as victims in Tintin In America, they must have been amazed to see the Mukden railway incident—which sparked off the Sino-Japanese War—told from China's point of view in Le Lotus Bleu. Hergé had found a valuable source—a Chinese student studying in Brussels. Chang Chon-Chen not only set him straight about Chinese customs and culture but also furnished Hergé with anti-Japanese slogans in Chinese characters for the backdrops to Tintin's adventures.

Sadly, while Hergé continued his researches and expanded his outlook, Tintin stayed resolutely the same. If anything, he became less of a personality and more of a straight man to the cast of eccentric characters with which Hergé began filling his stories. First came Dupont and Dupond, the detectives, (translated into English as Thompson and Thomson). Identically idiotic, the two were always eager to arrest Tintin—or, alternatively, to embrace him as an old friend. The drunken and gruff Captain Haddock, the deaf and alternately brilliant/hopeless scientist Professor Calculus (Toumesol in the original) and the aggressive and condescending Madame Castafiore were all to be added to the Hergé gallery in ensuing years. While Tintin is always cunning and brave, he remains a hero in the true Mickey Mouse tradition: too popular, righteous and sensible to have a real personality.

In the 1938 Le Sceptre d'Ottokar (King Ottokar's Sceptre) Hergé brought his political satire closer to home, as Tintin travelled to the rural Balkanesque monarchy of Syldavia, under threat from the evil dictator Müssller. It is ironic, then, that less than three years later Hergé and Tintin would be working—in a manner of speaking—for Hitler.

Once again, Hergé claimed political naïveté and innocent neutrality: he had fled Belgium as the Nazis moved in, then returned to tough it out as a loyal subject of Leopold III. Tintin, meanwhile, embarked on a trip to find a bizarre meteorite that almost destroyed the world. Here he was competing with a group of unscrupulous American explorers funded by a businessman named Bohlwinkel (Hergé claimed to be unaware this was a distinctively Jewish surname). In later versions of L'Etoile
Mysterieuse (The Shooting Star), the explorers became citizens of the mythical state "of Sao Rico, but the damage—to both Hergé and Tintin—had been done. When Belgium was liberated in 1944, they were out in the cold for years.

However, it wouldn't have been possible to keep a journalist as popular or as gung-ho as young Tintin blacklisted forever, no matter what his collaborationist crimes may have been. In 1950 he embarked on his moon adventure, which was depicted with astonishing attention to technical detail (the only scientifically inaccurate fact of the voyage is the inclusion of a patently unfit, temperamental alcoholic such as Haddock among the spaceship's crew).

Cold War intrigue was the theme of the 1956 L'Affaire Tournesol (The Calculus Affair). Having experimented with a number of dotty professors, Hergé finally found one who suited him to a tee. Calculus is just as comfortable inventing machines to destroy whole cities as he is propagating a new rose in honour of the opera singer Castafiore. The high regard in which Tintin and Haddock hold the professor seems not at all tempered by the fact that he is resolutely unable to understand anything they say to him.

Tintin's adventures continued throughout the 60s, ultimately grinding to a halt with the ill-conceived Tintin et Les Picares (Tintin and the Picaros) in 1975. Remarkably, Tintin abandoned his regulation plus-fours for a pair of jeans, and even acquired a peace sign on his motorbike helmet—all to no avail. But if Tintin failed to come to terms with the 70s, Hergé's clear line drawing style and technical excellence have assured him a life far beyond the bookshelves of children and intelligent adults.

The French, who give comics the respect they deserve and then some, have cultivated Tintinism above and beyond the call of duty. Briton Harry Thompson has finally done the decent thing for English-speaking Tintin fans and produced a small volume called Tintin: Hergé and his Creation (Sceptre, $14.95) which has all the facts and a little too much flippancy, perhaps to counterbalance the academic earnestness with which the French-speaking world treats the subject. Somewhere along the line, it seems, Thompson fell foul of Hergé's estate. He was unable to reproduce any image of Tintin except for one which used on a Belgian stamp. Benoit Peeters' Tintin and the World of Hergé (Methuen, $39.95), however, was prepared with the assistance of the Hergé Foundation. It contains many fascinating illustrations, as well as a lot of garbled English, but glosses over various sensitive points which Hergé's successors couldn't stomach in Thompson's book.

What of Hergé himself? It seems that while Tintin was having all the fun, adventure and camaraderie, this talented and meticulous lapsed Catholic suffered all his life for his creation. Tintin caused him nervous breakdowns and depression. During his most successful period after the war (which itself brought on a plague of boils), Hergé developed appalling eczema on his hands whenever he began work on a new story. No wonder that towards the end of his life he often professed to hate Tintin passionately—except in lighter moments, when he was simply horribly bored by him.

Perhaps it's only right, then, that Hergé died without finishing his last story, Tintin et L'Alph'Art, leaving Tintin in yet another tight corner—about to be cast in plastic by a gang of ruthless art forgers. Georges Remi's widow and estate elected to leave him there, and the book was never completed. For someone who never perceptibly aged a day in sixty-five years, it seems fitting.

DAVID NICHOLS writes for teen magazines.