WHEN Arthur C. Clarke was born in 1917, typewriters were the cutting edge of office equipment, and the first telephone call was a 15-minute round trip.

Today, messages can be transmitted across the world in mere seconds via the Internet, and mankind can travel to the moon in less than an hour.

But these leaps of technology are nothing compared to Clarke himself. The visionary who in 1945 wrote about how space satellites would one day enable near-instantaneous global communication.

Clarke died at 90 in Sri Lanka, his adopted home since 1956, on March 17, 2008. He was captivated by his ideas, which they say were so far-fetched that they could not have been patented. However, writing science fiction was his first love.

But to those who knew him, Clarke was more than just a brilliant writer: He was also a warm human being, a man who tried to be friendly and to help people.

“In my opinion, I feel that way myself,” said Clarke.

From the farm to the moon

Born Arthur Charles Clarke on Dec 16, 1917, in Minehead, Somerset, to a farmer, the eldest of four children, Clarke was fascinated with science from a young age. According to The New York Times, he loved reading Astounding Stories Of Super-Science, then the leading American science-fiction magazine.

While in school, he joined the newly formed British Interplanetary Society, a group of science-fiction enthusiasts who believed in the then far-fetched idea of space travel.

During World War II, he served as an officer in the Royal Air Force, working with a team of American scientists who developed the radar-controlled system for landing airplanes in bad weather.

He then attended King’s College London, graduating in 1948 with first-class honours in physics and mathematics.

However, writing science fiction was his first love, something he had attempted before the war. He started writing science fiction novels in the early 1950s, and his first published work was the short story “The Sentinel” in 1952.

He also considered Ekanayake and his wife, Valerice, and their three daughters as he adopted family, and even traveled to Sri Lanka by plane to visit them.

In 1969, he was included in Queen Elizabeth’s New Year Honours List, but was too ill to travel to London to be knighted. It was also during this time that a British television show, the Sunday Mirror, ran an interview with him in which he appeared to admit that he had sexual liaisons with young boys.

Yet, he strenuously denied these allegations, which were never proven. Though his reputation was marred, Clarke remained a beloved figure in the world of science fiction.

Today, Clarke is remembered not only for his contributions to science fiction, but also for his work in computer science and artificial intelligence. His ideas have inspired generations of scientists and engineers, and his legacy continues to inspire new generations of innovators.

From the farm to the moon, Clarke’s legacy endures, and his influence continues to be felt around the world.

Stephanie Yap