
How I Came to Write Looking Backward

Author(s): Edward Bellamy

Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Jul., 1977, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Jul., 1977), pp. 194-195

Published by: SF-TH Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239113>

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Edward Bellamy. How I Came to Write *Looking Backward*

From *The Nationalist*, May 1889

I accept more readily the invitation to tell in *The Nationalist* how I came to write *Looking Backward* for the reason that it will afford an opportunity to clear up certain points on which inquiries have been frequently addressed to me. I never had, previous to the publication of the work, any affiliations with any class or sect of industrial or social reformers nor, to make my confession complete, any particular sympathy with undertakings of the sort. It is only just to myself to say, however, that this should not be taken to indicate any indifference to the miserable condition of the mass of humanity, seeing that it resulted rather from a perception all too clear of the depth and breadth of the social problem and a consequent skepticism as to the effectiveness of the proposed solutions which had come to my notice.

In undertaking to write *Looking Backward* I had, at the outset, no idea of attempting a serious contribution to the movement of social reform. The idea was of a mere literary fantasy, a fairy tale of social felicity. There was no thought of contriving a house which practical men might live in, but merely of hanging in mid-air, far out of reach of the sordid and material world of the present, a cloud-palace for an ideal humanity.

In order to secure plenty of elbow room for the fancy and prevent awkward collisions between the ideal structure and the hard facts of the real world, I fixed the date of the story in the year AD 3000. As to what might be in AD 3000 one man's opinion was as good as another's, and my fantasy of the social system of that day only required to be consistent with itself to defy criticism. Emboldened by the impunity my isolated position secured me, I was satisfied with nothing less than the whole earth for my social palace. In its present form the story is a romance of the ideal nation, but in its first form it was a romance of an ideal world. In the first draft of *Looking Backward*, though the immediate scene was laid in America (in Asheville, North Carolina, instead of Boston, by the way), the United States was supposed to be merely an administrative province of the great World Nation, whose affairs were directed from the World Capital which was declared to be the city of Berne, in Switzerland. The action of the story was made to begin in the thirtieth century.

The opening scene was a grand parade of a departmental division of the industrial army on the occasion of the annual muster day when the young men coming of age that year were mustered into the national service and those who that year had reached the age of exemption were mustered out. That chapter always pleased me and it was with some regrets that I left it out of the final draft. The solemn pageantry of the great festival of the year, the impressive ceremonial of the oath of duty taken by the new recruits in presence of the world-standard, the formal return of the thanks of humanity to the veterans who received their honorable dismissal from service, the review and march past of the entire body of the local industrial forces, each battalion with its appropriate insignia, the triumphal arches, the garlanded streets, the banquets, the music, the open theatres and pleasure gardens, with all the features of a gala day sacred to the civic virtues and the enthusiasm of humanity, furnished materials for a picture exhilarating at least to the painter.

The idea of committing the duty of maintaining the community to an industrial army, precisely as the duty of protecting it is entrusted to a military army, was directly suggested to me by the grand object lesson of the organization of an entire people for national purposes presented by the military system of universal service for fixed and equal terms, which has been practically adopted by the nations of Europe and theoretically adopted everywhere else as the only just and only effectual plan of public defense on a great scale. What inference could possibly be more obvious and more unquestionable than the advisability of trying to see if a plan which was found to work so well for purposes of destruction might not be profitably applied to the business of

production now in such shocking confusion. But while this idea had for some time been vaguely floating in my mind, for a year or two I think at least, I had been far from realizing all that was in it, and only thought then of utilizing it as an analogy to lend an effect of feasibility to the fancy sketch I had on hand. It was not till I began to work out the details of the scheme by way of explaining how the people of the thirtieth century disposed of the awkward problems of labor and avoided the evils of a classified society that I perceived the full potency of the instrument I was using and recognized in the modern military system not merely a rhetorical analogy for a national industrial service, but its prototype, furnishing at once a complete working model for its organization, an arsenal of patriotic and national motives and arguments for its animation, and the unanswerable demonstration of its feasibility drawn from the actual experience of whole nations organized and manoeuvred as armies.

Something in this way it was that, no thanks to myself, I stumbled over the destined corner-stone of the new social order. It scarcely needs to be said that having once apprehended it for what it was, it became a matter of pressing importance to me to show it in the same light to other people. This led to a complete recasting, both in form and purpose, of the book I was engaged upon. Instead of a mere fairy tale of social perfection, it became the vehicle of a definite scheme of industrial reorganization. The form of a romance was retained, although with some impatience, in the hope of inducing the more to give it at least a reading. Barely enough story was left to decently drape the skeleton of the argument and not enough, I fear, in spots, for even that purpose. A great deal of merely fanciful matter concerning the manners, customs, social and political institutions, mechanical contrivances, and so forth of the people of the thirtieth century, which had been intended for the book, was cut out for fear of diverting the attention of readers from the main theme. Instead of the year AD 3000, that of AD 2000 was fixed upon as the date of the story. Ten centuries had at first seemed to me none too much to allow for the evolution of anything like an ideal society, but with my new belief as to the part which the National organization of industry is to play in bringing in the good time coming, it appeared to me reasonable to suppose that by the year 2000 the order of things which we look forward to will already have become an exceedingly old story. This conviction as to the shortness of the time in which the hope of Nationalization is to be realized by the birth of the new, and the first true, nation, I wish to say, is one which every day's reflection and observation, since the publication of *Looking Backward*, has tended to confirm.

The same clearer conviction as to the method by which this great change is to come about, which caused me to shorten so greatly my estimate of the time in which it was to be accomplished, necessitated the substitution of the conception of a separate national evolution for the original idea of a homogeneous world-wide social system. The year 3000 may, indeed, see something of that sort, but not the year 2000. It would be preposterous to assume parity of progress between America and Turkey. The more advanced nations, ours surely first of all, will reach the summit earliest and, reaching strong brotherly hands downward, help up the laggards.

Announcement. SFS #13 (Nov 1977) will be a special issue on the sociology of science fiction: Charles Elkins on an approach to the sociological function of American SF; Albert I. Berger on SF fans in socioeconomic perspective; Linda Fleming on the American SF subculture; A.E. Levin on English-language SF as a sociocultural phenomenon; Genrik Al'tov on levels of narrative ideas; Gérard Klein on Le Guin's escaping the trap of discontent (part two of the article begun in #11); Robert Plank on a case history ("From SF to Life and Death"); and four articles from West Germany: Bernt Kling on SF comics; Dieter Hasselblatt on the SF market; Wolfgang Jeschke with a publisher's view of SF; Rudolf Stefan on SF and the Bureau for the Examination of Youth-Endangering Writings. Introduction by Darko Suvin; bibliography by Marc Angenot. Also documents, reviews, correspondence, and notes on various matters by various hands.
