

Utopian Readings

by John Lee



It is the new millennium. Full employment, material abundance, and social harmony characterize an age that can truly be described as golden. Monumental architecture defines the great cities, universal healthcare has created a disease-free world and electronic broadcasting has become a pervasive, yet wholly beneficial tool.

When Edward Bellamy forecast this future over 100 years ago in his best-selling novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888), he joined a long tradition of writers with detailed blueprints for a perfect world. Their varied predictions may have never been fully realized but these imagined literary realms – where women reproduce without men, toilets are made of gold and music is piped continuously through every building – are often as popular as when they first appeared.

Thomas More set the tone when he appropriated the word “utopia,” from the Greek words meaning “no place” and “good place,” as the title for his anonymously published book *Utopia* in 1516. Reading like a realistic travel journal, Raphael Hythlodæus’ fanciful account outlines his visit to an as-yet uncharted but highly progressive island in the New World. With a healthcare system so well-resourced that “everyone would rather be ill in hospital than go home,” More’s perfect society also outlaws hunting as “barbaric,” uses science to reclaim land for agriculture and accepts female priests.

But the benefits of a perfect order came with the downside of control. The working class in More’s *Utopia* is bound to hard labour. Slaves work just six hours a day but, “they must be in bed by 8.00 p.m.” Passports are also needed by citizens travelling between towns, with slavery one of the punishments for being caught “wandering around the countryside” without the right papers.

More was more interested in the shortcomings of his own society than in finding the perfect order for a new one, however. He rejected what he saw as the decadent values of Henry VIII’s reign, but

to avoid the head-chopping censure of his king he had to keep his attacks subtle.

More satirized greed and materialism in *Utopia* by turning on its head “the way we treasure up gold.” Plates and goblets in his ideal society are made of earthenware, while silver and gold are reserved for making chamber pots. Slaves are also chained in gold and “anyone who commits a really shameful crime is forced to go about with gold rings on his ears and fingers, a gold necklace around his neck, and a crown of gold on his head.” As well, precious jewels litter the streets in this society but “nobody cares two hoots about them.”

More’s *Utopia*, which he describes on the title page as “a splendid little book, as entertaining as it is instructive,” established a precedent for utopian writers like Bellamy who followed him. Even when these novels seem like nothing more than one person’s ideals imposed on a grand scale, their satiric attacks on the author’s own society should never be overlooked.

The second half of the 19th-century was a golden era for the utopian genre that saw hundreds of authors from Oscar Wilde to Mark Twain offer visions of an ideal future. Some wrote of utopias celebrating the inexorable progress of the Victorian age. Others cautioned against unrestricted “scientific advancement.” Edward Bellamy was one of those who embraced the new possibilities and he drew it to its logical conclusion in *Looking Backward*.

Awaking after a century of sleep, Julian West encounters a paradise of shopping malls, credit cards, and endlessly piped music in late 20th-century Boston. Healthcare and employment is guaranteed and efficient central planning has standardized education and industry. An extensive paternal government has reached out to order away poverty, inequality, and all social ills.

It’s tempting to dismiss Bellamy’s vision given our knowledge of the failures of Soviet-style central planning. But his vision drew

contemporary plaudits and dozens of Bellamy societies sprang up across North America to lobby the government for grand social change.

Yet at the same time, socialist, designer and printer William Morris presented a vision of a very different ideal world. *News From Nowhere* (1890) describes a romanticized, ecologically balanced society that challenges any belief in the perfecting power of science and technology.

William Guest, a thinly disguised appearance by Morris in the novel, awakes from his train ride home one night to find himself in the late 20th-century. But instead of a benevolent scientific paradise, he encounters a vibrant pastoral landscape where the River Thames runs free of industrial pollutants. This is no anti-technological utopia, however. In Morris' ideal society, "machines of the most ingenious and best-appointed kinds are used ... [but they] should be our servants and not our masters."

With its environmental concerns and warnings against the blind acceptance of scientific and industrial innovation, *News From Nowhere* is hardly dated. But, as with most other utopian novels, the ideal society is less than liberating for women. They're usually nothing more than the exotic love interest for the traveller from the author's own time.

It took a novel from Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915), to give women a break. Ironically, Gilman had to write for a distinctly masculine audience to get her message across.

Recently re-discovered, *Herland* reads like a *Boy's Own* adventure as it documents the struggle of pre-franchise women. In the novel, three young American men discover a hidden society in South America peopled exclusively by women for 2,000 years. The women are able to reproduce parthenogenically (without men) and due to the absence of males in society, they live unlike any other women on earth. "We saw short hair, hatless, loose and shining; a suit of some light firm stuff, the closest of tunics and knee breeches, met by trim gaiters," reports one of the visitors. Corsets were unknown.

Gilman's novel shows how bringing up children without men creates a radically different social structure. Each child's welfare is the direct concern of her mother as well as the entire society, and Van, one of the visiting men marvels

at a system "calculated to allow the richest, freest growth, [which has] remodelled and improved the whole state."

The theme of female liberation, this time combined with male enlightenment, continued in the 1970s with Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), where the women of Washington, Colorado and Northern California seek to separate the area from the U.S. and create a "stable-state" eco-society.

The female leader of the new territory leads the environmental utopia through the early stages of its independence, including establishing employee-owned businesses, a twenty-hour working week, the elimination of pollution, and "mini-cities" organized to solve overcrowding. Callenbach's prescient novel showed that utopian literature, a genre in existence for several centuries, remains a fertile vehicle for critiquing current society and discussing ideas for social transformation.

Still, if most utopian novels contain a few accurate visions of what an ideal world might look like, they more often describe societies most people would not care to inhabit. From the slaves and free-will crushing conformity of More's *Utopia*, to the long arm of the state in Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* and the pastoral oversimplification of Morris's *News From Nowhere*, utopias are never as perfect as their authors claim them to be.

But painting an accurate likeness of heaven on earth is rarely as important to the authors as attacking the failings of the real world and encouraging readers to do the same. That they do this in satirical and entertaining ways is the reason many of these works have endured as novels even when some of their political ideas have become obsolete.

~ John Lee is a Vancouver writer with 14 *Lonely Planet* guidebooks to his credit, none of which help readers discover Utopia. His latest project, *Walking Vancouver*, will appear this fall from California's Wilderness Press.