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# Last and First Men

Olaf Stapledon



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LAST AND FIRST MEN

OLAF STAPLEDON





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*A story of the near and far future*

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## General Editor's Foreword

*LAST AND FIRST MEN* is the greatest of the writings of Olaf Stapledon. Written in 1930, it looks ahead from that date into the distant centuries to come, until such time as our present and all its affairs have sunk below the horizon of the future.

Over the course of two thousand million years, Stapledon shows us races of men dying and being reborn, changing to sub-men or to spirits, leaving Earth for planets nearer to or further from the sun. Man is the hero of the chronicle; men are of little account. 'Of the two hundred million members of the human race,' the narrative tells us laconically at one point, 'all were burnt or roasted or suffocated within three months – all but thirty-five, who happened to be in the neighbourhood of the North Pole.' As the various species of man succeed each other, and are in turn laid low by human foolishness, natural hazard, or cosmic calamity, we see ourselves in perspective to be much like the million million spermatozoa of Aldous Huxley's poem, of which

Out of their cataclysm but one poor Noah  
Dare hope to survive.

But Stapledon imagined that our race would destroy itself for aesthetic reasons (in the fifties and sixties he might have found more immediately practical reasons). Austere he can be, yet he ends without disgust or despair; there is simply 'It is very good to have been man'. Even extinction cannot alter that fact. This may not be a particularly comfortable viewpoint, yet to us in the sixties, it can hardly fail to have an austere appeal.

It says much for the grandeur of Stapledon's view that his words still retain their power. This is partly because his delivery is always deceptively simple, his tone of voice level, even when he is telling us, 'Man's sojourn on Venus lasted somewhat longer than his whole career on the Earth', or something similarly mind-stretching. It is also because many of his concepts retain their poetic and scientific impact; this is true especially of his major theme, the mutability of man.

Stapledon was the first to speak of 'man's fluid nature', and the first – although here one thinks of George Bernard Shaw and of Thomas Hardy's epic poem 'The Dynasts' – to portray man as a sort of outcrop of cosmic energy. In his novel *Star Maker*, he writes of suns possessing consciousness; in *Last and First Men* he writes of men as parasites of the sun.



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In full consistence with such a vision, his *Last Men* prepare artificial human seeds which will propagate throughout the galaxy, using the pressure of light radiated from the sun as their driving force, until they achieve speeds almost up to the speed of light itself. This is amazingly modern thinking. You might come across the idea in a contemporary science fiction story and think it new minted.

William Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950) was born near Liverpool, later working in a shipping office there, and later still lecturing at Liverpool University. Most of his childhood was spent in Egypt. During the First World War, he worked with an ambulance unit, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. He was the junior by twenty years of H. G. Wells. It seems natural to compare these men, undoubtedly the two great names in English science fiction. Fame reached Wells early and stayed late; it never visited Stapledon in equal measure, although when *Last and First Men* appeared in 1930, the work was widely popular, and acclaimed in literary circles on both sides of the Atlantic.

J. B. Priestley called it a masterpiece. Hugh Walpole, a little askew with his astronomy, said the book was 'as original as the solar system'. Arnold Bennett said 'There have been many visions of the future . . . but none in my experience as strange as *Last and First Men*. Mr Stapledon possesses a tremendous and beautiful imagination.'

The terms these critics used still recognizably describe the book today (one cannot call it a novel, for it is much less than a meditation); this is more surprising when we consider that the events of the past thirty years have rendered the first part of the book obsolete. Stapledon's history runs from 1930 to the eventual destruction of the solar system. Some of the earlier details will inevitably strike a modern reader as odd.

Like Shaw – and their outlooks are similar in other respects\* – Stapledon seems to have venerated power. His eulogy of Russia appears naïve now (at one stage in his career he embraced communism), both his praise and his blame of America are misdirected, while his boob on Germany is of stapledonian proportions. After the First World War, he tells us, Germany 'became the most pacific [nation], and a stronghold of enlightenment'. It is easy to find in an admiration for Spengler, with his grandly cyclic view of history, excuses for such an error of optimism, particularly since Stapledon wrote before Hitler had risen to

\* Both Stapledon and Shaw joined the British Interplanetary Society.

power, but how does one account for his having a Chinese wearing a pigtail in A.D. 2300?

No, some early passages of this futuristic *tour de force* have subsided into period charm. But *Last and First Men* was not intended as prophecy; it is a work of philosophic speculation; and in this respect it has lost none of its original power. Stapledon became a Doctor in Philosophy, writing several books on the subject; one of them, *Philosophy and Living*, was commissioned as a Pelican in 1939. He produced several novels, many of them on startling science fictional themes, the most notable of these being *Odd John* (1935), *Star Maker* (1937), *Sirius* (1944), and *The Flames* (1947). These works are all characterized by the grandeur and strangeness of their concepts. All are philosophically engaged in putting *homo sapiens* into his proper perspective.

It may be because we are not really very impressive when seen even in a benevolent perspective that Stapledon has been labelled a pessimist. He was hardly that, although his writings certainly make Wells's fiction – even such dark adventures as *The Island of Dr Moreau* – seem cheery by comparison. But there was a chill in Stapledon's writing that well suited his theme.

In Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), Wells set out to show the Victorians how wrong they were to think of Evolution as a process thought up by one of their number for making the world an increasingly better place for men. But however corrective Wells's vision was, his people – even the Eloi and the detestable Morlocks – remain of mankind, shackled for the most part to natural law and to man-made laws of economics and so on. His two gentlemen who take advantage of time in 'The New Accelerator' return to normality under the disapproving eye of a colonel in a bath-chair. Wells's wonders, in fact, occur within the rigid framework of human nature as it was envisaged in his day.

With Stapledon, the situation is changed. Here are no bath-chairs, no colonels, no immutable economic facts. Here are ether ships, world states, presidents, and supermen. Bowing to the dynamic forces of life, even planetary environments can be altered; man can undergo complete mutation a dozen times – and it is in this respect, if this only, that Stapledon reads more satisfyingly than Wells. Wells wrote several excellent novels; but *Last And First Men* is a masterpiece.

I first met the book in Burma. The year was 1943, and I formed an insignificant part of the British forces slowly pushing the Japanese from the hills of Assam into the plains round Mandalay.

It was an appropriately unusual period of life at which to encounter a vision so far outside ordinary experience.

The edition I read was a Pelican; *Last And First Men* can claim the honour of being the only work of fiction to appear between those blue covers. By the time I had finished reading it, in bivouac or by the grizzling little Fullerphone I manned, its covers were in tatters – and I was a convert to the cosmic view of things that haunts many of my generation, thanks largely to Stapledon, Wells, and the lesser lights who followed them. The impact Stapledon had then is still reflected in my writings. On many other science fiction writers (one thinks especially of James Blish) he has made the same impression; the sense that we are as sparrows that fall – and without any divine glance cast in our direction as we go.

Stapledon was a great visionary. *Last And First Men* must be counted as among the most imaginative works ever written. Even if the myopic savants who compile histories of English literature forget to mention it, its influence on other works is strong and living, as the book itself is strong and living.

Stapledon's impartial distribution of disaster; his lack of sadism; his steady questioning of many current values, coupled inevitably with a too easy swallowing of others; his use of sex for propagating the race rather than for staging bedroom scenes; his generosity of vision; his blindness to the heart; his awareness of the dynamism of the chromosome; above all, his conception of the paradoxically combined greatness and insignificance of man; all are echoed in the best of today's flourishing school of science fiction writers.

That school – to say nothing of thousands of his readers – must owe Stapledon a great debt. For Stapledon had more than a unique vision; he had the courage, in a country and a time still comparatively smug and over-certain of their values, to throw open a wide window of doubt. Today we have lost such certainties; the mutability of mankind and its standards has been proved by war, by nuclear radiation, by brain-washing, by drugs. Like the Last Men, like the spermatozoa, we seem often to rush rudderless between catastrophes.

It is possible to look through Stapledon's window from the other side now. The courage of his vision remains; as it once engendered the liberating quality of doubt, so it is now possible to draw from it the fortifying principle of reassurance.

BRIAN ALDISS

*Oxford, September 1962*



# *Preface*

THIS is a work of fiction. I have tried to invent a story which may seem a possible, or at least not wholly impossible, account of the future of man; and I have tried to make that story relevant to the change that is taking place today in man's outlook.

To romance of the future may seem to be indulgence in ungoverned speculation for the sake of the marvellous. Yet controlled imagination in this sphere can be a very valuable exercise for minds bewildered about the present and its potentialities. Today we should welcome, and even study, every serious attempt to envisage the future of our race; not merely in order to grasp the very diverse and often tragic possibilities that confront us, but also that we may familiarize ourselves with the certainty that many of our most cherished ideals would seem puerile to more developed minds. To romance of the far future, then, is to attempt to see the human race in its cosmic setting, and to mould our hearts to entertain new values.

But if such imaginative construction of possible futures is to be at all potent, our imagination must be strictly disciplined. We must endeavour not to go beyond the bounds of possibility set by the particular state of culture within which we live. The merely fantastic has only minor power. Not that we should seek actually to prophesy what will as a matter of fact occur; for in our present state such prophecy is certainly futile, save in the simplest matters. We are not set up as historians attempting to look ahead instead of backwards. We can only select a certain thread out of the tangle of many equally valid possibilities. But we must select with a purpose. The activity that we are undertaking is not science, but art; and the effect that it should have on the reader is the effect that art should have.

Yet our aim is not merely to create aesthetically admirable fiction. We must achieve neither mere history, nor mere fiction, but myth. A true myth is one which, within the universe of a certain culture (living or dead), expresses richly, and often perhaps tragically, the highest admirations possible within that culture. A false myth is one which either violently transgresses the limits of credibility set by its own cultural matrix, or expresses admirations less developed than those of

## *Preface*

its culture's best vision. This book can no more claim to be true myth than true prophecy. But it is an essay in myth creation.

The kind of future which is here imagined, should not, I think, seem wholly fantastic, or at any rate not so fantastic as to be without significance, to modern western individuals who are familiar with the outlines of contemporary thought. Had I chosen matter in which there was nothing whatever of the fantastic, its very plausibility would have rendered it unpalatable. For one thing at least is almost certain about the future, namely, that very much of it will be such as we should call incredible. In one important respect, indeed, I may perhaps seem to have strayed into barren extravagance. I have supposed an inhabitant of the remote future to be communicating with us of today. I have pretended that he has the power of partially controlling the operations of minds now living, and that this book is the product of such influence. Yet even this fiction is perhaps not wholly excluded by our thought. I might, of course, easily have omitted it without more than superficial alteration of the theme. But its introduction was more than a convenience. Only by some such radical and bewildering device could I embody the possibility that there may be more in time's nature than is revealed to us. Indeed, only by some such trick could I do justice to the conviction that our whole present mentality is but a confused and halting first experiment.

If ever this book should happen to be discovered by some future individual, for instance by a member of the next generation sorting out the rubbish of his predecessors, it will certainly raise a smile; for very much is bound to happen of which no hint is yet discoverable. And indeed even in our generation circumstances may well change so unexpectedly and so radically that this book may very soon look ridiculous. But no matter. We of today must conceive our relation to the rest of the universe as best we can; and even if our images must seem fantastic to future men, they may none the less serve their purpose today.

Some readers, taking my story to be an attempt at prophecy, may deem it unwarrantably pessimistic. But it is not prophecy; it is myth, or an essay in myth. We all desire the future to turn out more happily than I have figured it. In particular we desire our present civilization to advance steadily toward some kind of Utopia. The thought that it may decay and collapse, and that all its spiritual treasure may be lost irrevocably, is repugnant to us. Yet this must be faced as at least a possibility. And this kind of tragedy, the tragedy of a race, must, I think, be admitted in any adequate myth.

And so, while gladly recognizing that in our time there are strong seeds of hope as well as of despair, I have imagined for aesthetic pur-

poses that our race will destroy itself. There is today a very earnest movement for peace and international unity; and surely with good fortune and intelligent management it may triumph. Most earnestly we must hope that it will. But I have figured things out in this book in such a manner that this great movement fails. I suppose it incapable of preventing a succession of national wars; and I permit it only to achieve the goal of unity and peace after the mentality of the race has been undermined. May this not happen! May the League of Nations, or some more strictly cosmopolitan authority, win through before it is too late! Yet let us find room in our minds and in our hearts for the thought that the whole enterprise of our race may be after all but a minor and unsuccessful episode in a vaster drama, which also perhaps may be tragic.

American readers, if ever there are any, may feel that their great nation is given a somewhat unattractive part in the story. I have imagined the triumph of the cruder sort of Americanism over all that is best and most promising in American culture. May this not occur in the real world! Americans themselves, however, admit the possibility of such an issue, and will, I hope, forgive me for emphasizing it, and using it as an early turning-point in the long drama of Man.

Any attempt to conceive such a drama must take into account whatever contemporary science has to say about man's own nature and his physical environment. I have tried to supplement my own slight knowledge of natural science by pestering my scientific friends. In particular, I have been very greatly helped by conversation with Professors P. G. H. Boswell, J. Johnstone, and J. Rice, of Liverpool. But they must not be held responsible for the many deliberate extravagances which, though they serve a purpose in the design, may jar upon the scientific ear.

To Dr L. A. Reid I am much indebted for general comments, and to Mr E. V. Rieu for many very valuable suggestions. To Professor and Mrs L. C. Martin, who read the whole book in manuscript, I cannot properly express my gratitude for constant encouragement and criticism. To my wife's devastating sanity I owe far more than she supposes.

Before closing this preface I would remind the reader that throughout the following pages the speaker, the first person singular, is supposed to be, not the actual writer, but an individual living in the extremely distant future.

O. S.

WEST KIRBY

*July 1930*





# *Introduction*

By One of the Last Men

THIS book has two authors, one contemporary with its readers, the other an inhabitant of an age which they would call the distant future. The brain that conceives and writes these sentences lives in the time of Einstein. Yet I, the true inspirer of this book, I who have begotten it upon that brain, I who influence that primitive being's conception, inhabit an age which, for Einstein, lies in the very remote future.

The actual writer thinks he is merely contriving a work of fiction. Though he seeks to tell a plausible story, he neither believes it himself, nor expects others to believe it. Yet the story is true. A being whom you would call a future man has seized the docile but scarcely adequate brain of your contemporary, and is trying to direct its familiar processes for an alien purpose. Thus a future epoch makes contact with your age. Listen patiently; for we who are the Last Men earnestly desire to communicate with you, who are members of the First Human Species. We can help you, and we need your help.

You cannot believe it. Your acquaintance with time is very imperfect, and so your understanding of it is defeated. But no matter. Do not perplex yourselves about this truth, so difficult to you, so familiar to us of a later aeon. Do but entertain, merely as a fiction, the idea that the thought and will of individuals future to you may intrude, rarely and with difficulty, into the mental processes of some of your contemporaries. Pretend that you believe this, and that the following chronicle is an authentic message from the Last Men. Imagine the consequences of such a belief. Otherwise I cannot give life to the great history which it is my task to tell.

When your writers romance of the future, they too easily imagine a progress toward some kind of Utopia, in which beings like themselves live in unmitigated bliss among circumstances perfectly suited to a fixed human nature. I shall not describe any such paradise. Instead, I shall record huge fluctuations of joy and woe, the results of changes not only in man's environment but in his fluid nature. And I must tell how, in my own age, having at last achieved spiritual maturity and the philosophic mind, man is forced by an unexpected crisis to embark on an enterprise both repugnant and desperate.



## *Introduction*

I invite you, then, to travel in imagination through the aeons that lie between your age and mine. I ask you to watch such a history of change, grief, hope, and unforeseen catastrophe, as has nowhere else occurred, within the girdle of the Milky Way. But first, it is well to contemplate for a few moments the mere magnitudes of cosmical events. For, compressed as it must necessarily be, the narrative that I have to tell may seem to present a sequence of adventures and disasters crowded together, with no intervening peace. But in fact man's career has been less like a mountain torrent hurtling from rock to rock, than a great sluggish river, broken very seldom by rapids. Ages of quiescence, often of actual stagnation, filled with the monotonous problems and toils of countless almost identical lives, have been punctuated by rare moments of racial adventure. Nay, even these few seemingly rapid events themselves were in fact often long-drawn-out and tedious. They acquire a mere illusion of speed from the speed of the narrative.

The receding depths of time and space, though they can indeed be haltingly conceived even by primitive minds, cannot be imaged save by beings of a more ample nature. A panorama of mountains appears to naïve vision almost as a flat picture, and the starry void is a roof pricked with light. Yet in reality, while the immediate terrain could be spanned in an hour's walking, the sky-line of peaks holds within it plain beyond plain. Similarly with time. While the near past and the new future display within them depth beyond depth, time's remote immensities are foreshortened into flatness. It is almost inconceivable to simple minds that man's whole history should be but a moment in the life of the stars, and that remote events should embrace within themselves aeon upon aeon.

In your day you have learnt to calculate something of the magnitudes of time and space. But to grasp my theme in its true proportions, it is necessary to do more than calculate. It is necessary to brood upon these magnitudes, to draw out the mind toward them, to feel the littleness of your here and now, and of the moment of civilization which you call history. You cannot hope to image, as we do, such vast proportions as one in a thousand million, because your sense-organs, and therefore your perceptions, are too coarse-grained to discriminate so small a fraction of their total field. But you may at least, by mere contemplation, grasp more constantly and firmly the significance of your calculations.

Men of your day, when they look back into the history of their planet, remark not only the length of time but also the bewildering acceleration of life's progress. Almost stationary in the earliest period of the earth's career, in your moment it seems headlong. Mind in you, it is said, not