

LOOKING
BACKWARD

2000-1887

by Edward Bellamy

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

BY ROBERT L. SHURTER

Man's long quest for utopia extends from Plato, writing against the background of the social disintegration brought on by the Peloponnesian War, to the latest commentary of the twentieth century presenting social orders to solve our present discontent. In this record, there have been great gaps like that of almost two thousand years between Plato and Sir Thomas More, when men's minds were more occupied with attaining the Kingdom of Heaven than a better life on earth. Despite these gaps, however, literature about utopia—the name itself was contributed by Sir Thomas More's famous book in 1516—has had a steady development. To this quest, America has contributed one important book, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.

✓ In America, the utopian novel made a comparatively late appearance, probably because men rarely turn to literature for escape from unfavorable conditions so long as there is a possibility of actual escape. And until approximately 1890, our frontier served as the safety valve for much of our discontent. It is more than mere coincidence, therefore, that the great era of the utopian novel in America—from 1888, when Bellamy's book ap-

peared, until 1900—coincided with the end of the frontier. During these years, nearly a hundred utopian novels appeared, many of them imitative of or answers to Bellamy's book. During the same years, the full impact of a laissez-faire, mass-production economy was turning men's thoughts to solutions which would produce a more nearly equal distribution of wealth and a stable society.

As a further background for Bellamy's novel, we might profitably examine the motives which have impelled men in all ages to record their dreams of a better world. First of all, there is the desire for escape to other times, other places, and new societies where man's inhumanity to man is less apparent. Second, and more important, the utopians have been impelled by a desire to chart a course toward which humanity may ultimately set its sights. The times may be out of joint today, but look ahead five, fifty, a thousand years where the brave new world of the future dawns; toward that new society we must direct our efforts, says the utopian. And finally, the writer may be motivated largely by his desire to write a commentary on the society of his own times, pointing up its defects by contrast with an ideal society.

These motives offer certain criteria by which *Looking Backward* may be judged, for Bellamy's book would be comparatively unimportant if it were merely an escape mechanism; rather, it should be considered both as an illuminating commentary on America in the Gilded Age and a sincere attempt to chart a course for a better society. Considered in this light, *Looking Backward* is a significant document in the development of American

social thought, furnishing the philosophy and impetus which led later to the activities of Ida M. Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and the "muckrakers" who apparently believed, with Ralph Henry Gabriel in *The Course of American Democratic Thought*: "Let the cancers of society merely be exposed to the light . . . and they will be cured, for human nature is basically good and will not tolerate corruption, when once it is brought to view."

Utopian literature in the United States has developed on two general levels. We have had the works of such men as William Dean Howells, Edward Bellamy and even Henry George, whose appeal has been largely to readers interested in social reform. At the same time we have had another level, typified by the productions of forgotten novelists like Ignatius Donnelly, Albert Chavannes and Solomon Schindler, in whose works the motive of reform has been secondary to a desire for depicting fantastic adventures set in some future century.

Looking Backward deserves to rank along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ramona* as one of the most timely books ever to appear in America. Published in January, 1888, this one novel included most of the reform ideas of Bellamy's generation, expressed in a form so attractive and with a social system so seemingly capable of attainment that the book immediately became the focal point of innumerable idealistic schemes. *Looking Backward* appeared less than two years after the great labor struggles of 1886, when membership in the Knights of Labor swelled to seven hundred thousand. In that year, the struggle for an eight-hour day culminated in an abortive general strike under the leadership of Samuel

Gompers; the attempt of labor to provide for the jobless, of whom there were a million throughout the nation, was incorporated in the slogan:

“Whether you work by the hour or by the day,
Decreasing the hours increases the pay.”

On the opposite side, the *Illinois State Register* denounced the eight-hour movement as a “consummate piece of humbuggery . . . too silly to merit the attention of a body of lunatics.”

These and other tensions of a laissez-faire economy, such as the Haymarket Riot, were still fresh in the memory of Bellamy's readers. Later, when thousands were reading Bellamy's descriptions of future peace and prosperity, occurred the bloody strikes in the Carnegie Steel Works at Homestead, Pennsylvania, and in the Pullman plant at Chicago. To these readers, the contrast between Bellamy's ideal society and the unrest of their own times was all too evident, pointed up as it was by the newspaper accounts of unemployment, strikes and bloodshed; small wonder, then, that to its million or more readers in the years immediately following publication *Looking Backward* seemed to offer one way out.

Furthermore, Bellamy's solution to these social problems appeared to be so consistent with “the American way of life” that it won a hearing where other books failed. Nothing in the book smacked of European or “foreign” ideas; it merely projected into the future the trends which were already apparent in American society. And yet, however it is examined—and despite the fact that Bellamy labeled it “Nationalism”—the system ad-

vocated in *Looking Backward* is a modified form of socialism, although his contemporaries failed to recognize it as such. Professor R. T. Ely recalled "hearing a lady speak in high praise of Bellamy's book and in the same breath speak in abhorrence of socialism, not realizing that what Bellamy and his associates were working for was simply socialism under another name."

Equally important with the novel's timeliness and American quality was the fact that Bellamy's socialism was far removed from the Marxian variety, which was, of course, anathema. In his novel there is no suggestion of a class war. Instead, he made skilful use of the salient trends of his own time which lent plausibility to his novel. His was the era of great economic trusts; why wasn't it possible that the next step would be one great trust—the United States Government? In his ideal commonwealth of the year 2000, this next step had occurred—in his words "the epoch of the trusts had ended in the Great Trust." A simple solution this—far too simple, Bellamy's critics say—but to readers of the Gilded Age, beginning to be aware of the great trusts controlling oil, iron, steel, copper, lead, sugar, this concept of the government as "The Great Trust" seemed not so much a dream as a realistic projection of nineteenth-century trends into the future. And this future seemed to lie close to their grasp, for as William Dean Howells, looking back on this period wrote in the preface (1909) to *Their Wedding Journey*:

We had passed through a period of strong emotioning in the direction of the humaner economics, if I may phrase it so; the rich seemed not so much to despise the poor, the

poor did not so hopelessly repine. The solution of the riddle of the painful earth through the dreams of Henry George, through the dreams of Edward Bellamy, through the dreams of all the generous visionaries of the past, seemed not impossibly far off.

Howells, whose *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894) was one of the best of the American utopias because of its satire on contemporary life, saw clearly the forces which produced the sudden outburst of utopias. In his novel, he contrasted the period of the 1850's with that of the 1890's and commented:

If a man got out of work, he turned his hand to something else; if a man failed in business, he started in again from some other direction; as a last resort, in both cases, he went West, pre-empted a quarter section of public land and grew up with the country. Now the country is grown up; the public land is gone; business is full on all sides, and the hand that turned itself to something else has lost its cunning. The struggle for life has changed from a free fight to an encounter of disciplined forces and the free fighters that are left get ground to pieces between organized labor and organized capital.

Today, readers of *Looking Backward* should put the book in this "frame of reference" which Howells described; for it was out of such forces and events as the end of the frontier, the unequal distribution of wealth, the growing organization of capital and labor, and the consequent sense of frustration that Bellamy wrote, and his life spanned the years which Howells contrasts.

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Edward Bellamy was born on March 26, 1850, in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, where he spent the major part of his life. As a child he was a dreamer, preoccupied with various fantastic ideas which he set down daily in a "Journal." Following his early education in the schools of Chicopee Falls, he spent one year at Union College. At eighteen he went abroad with his cousin, William Packer; here his interest in social problems was apparently first aroused, for he later wrote, "It was in the great cities of Europe and among the hovels of the peasantry that my eyes were first fully opened to the extent and consequences of 'man's inhumanity to man.'"

Upon his return from Europe, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in Hampden County, Massachusetts, in June, 1871. He opened his own law office, but after taking one case, he abandoned this career because of his belief—entirely characteristic of his idealistic philosophy—that as a lawyer he would be forced into the hypocrisy of defending people in whom he did not believe. This dislike of the legal profession, incidentally, carried over into *Looking Backward*, where he completely banished lawyers from his ideal commonwealth.

In 1871 he started a career as a journalist on the staff of the *New York Evening Post*; the next year he went to Springfield to become editorial writer and book reviewer on the *Springfield Daily Union*, a post which he held until 1877, when he resigned because of poor health. During the next ten years, Edward Bellamy established his reputation as one of the most promising young writers in America, contributing to leading magazines more than thirty short stories, all stamped with what Howells

later called "a romantic imagination surpassed only by that of Hawthorne." In the same period, he wrote three novels: *Six to One: a Nantucket Idyll* (1878), *The Duke of Stockbridge* (1879), and *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process* (1880).

In these early works there is little hint of any great interest in social problems, and there has been some confusion as to the reasons which led Bellamy to turn to economics and social problems in his best-known book. To this confusion Bellamy himself contributed by writing two explanations—"How I Came to Write *Looking Backward*" in the *Nationalist* for May, 1889, and "How I Wrote *Looking Backward*" in the *Ladies' Home Journal* for April, 1894. The earlier explanation indicates that Bellamy "stumbled" more or less by accident upon the system that he set forth in his book and that the book was actually written twice—first as a mere fantasy, later as a serious work. As Bellamy described it, "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 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 hanging in mid-air, far out of reach of the sordid and material world of the present, a cloud palace for an ideal humanity." Only when he began working out the details of his Industrial Army did he feel that he had struck something far from fantastic. Then, as he put it, "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 working model for its organization. . . .”

With the Industrial Army as the cornerstone of his new social order, Bellamy rewrote his novel so that, in his own words, “Instead of a mere fairy tale of social perfection, it became a 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.”

This seems a credible account of the evolution of *Looking Backward*, but in his later explanation in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Bellamy attempted to show that his book was a logical culmination of years of thinking about social problems. After referring to the awakening of his social conscience through his travels in Europe and to his rediscovery of the manuscript of an address he had delivered in the Chicopee Falls Village Lyceum in 1871 or 1872, he concluded, “Since I came across this echo of my youth and recalled the half-forgotten exercises of the mind it testifies to, I have been wondering, not why I wrote *Looking Backward*, but why I did not write it, or try to, twenty years ago. . . .”

Bellamy's second explanation of the writing of *Looking Backward* may be mere rationalization, but he had undoubtedly been thinking for a long time about problems of our society and this interest merged with the interest in fantasy, which his early works show, to produce *Looking Backward*. In its final form, *Looking Back-*

ward reveals a force more intimately connected with Bellamy's personal life than he admitted in either of his explanations. In 1882 he had married Emma Sanderson, and the birth of their two children—Paul in 1884, Marion in 1886—unquestionably set Bellamy thinking about how he could give security to these children in an unstable and competitive economic system. One of his most serious indictments of the Gilded Age is expressed in the following words from *Looking Backward*:

Do your work never so well . . . rise early and toil till late, rob cunningly or serve faithfully, you shall never know security. Rich you may be now and still come to poverty at last. Leave never so much wealth to your children, you cannot buy the assurance that your son may not be the servant of your servant or that your daughter will not have to sell herself for bread.

Behind these words, it is easy to discern Bellamy's thinking of his own responsibilities as a father and of the fate of his children.

Sales of *Looking Backward* were slow during the first year but increased tremendously as more and more Americans discussed its controversial ideas. In March, 1890, the *Literary Bulletin* of Houghton, Mifflin and Co. said, "*Looking Backward* holds in American literature an almost unique place in character and in popularity. Of only one other book (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) have three hundred thousand copies been printed within two years of its publication." This popularity has continued steadily ever since, and it would be difficult to estimate how many millions of readers this utopia has had in America and in its numerous translations.

Perhaps the significance of this novel is best shown by the fact that in 1935, Columbia University asked the philosopher John Dewey, the historian Charles Beard and Edward Weeks, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, to prepare independently lists of the twenty-five most influential books since 1885. On each of these lists, *Looking Backward* ranked second in influence only to Marx's *Das Kapital*, or in other words, the most influential book by an American during that fifty-year period. William Allen White, in a letter to Arthur E. Morgan, Bellamy's biographer, summed up its effect in more personal terms:

I remember the tremendous thrill I had from reading the books from the late Eighties and the early Nineties. I was a young man passing out of my teens. I went into life a thoroughgoing conservative but before I had been ten years out of college, I was crossing the deadline into an open-minded attitude about political, social, and economic problems. Probably this was the yeast of Edward Bellamy working in me. I have never been permanently cured. The book had a tremendous influence on my generation.

With the publication of *Looking Backward*, Bellamy was transformed from a romancer into a social propagandist. As the author of the most widely read book of his times, he received numerous opportunities to capitalize on his fame through lecture tours, speaking engagements, and contracts for new books. His integrity and his devotion to this cause are best shown by his rejection of all these lucrative offers in which he could not see a chance to advance the cause of Nationalism. Most of

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the royalties he derived from *Looking Backward* were donated to this cause.

The most tangible result of *Looking Backward* was the formation of more than 150 Nationalist Clubs throughout the country to translate Bellamy's ideas into action. Representatives of these Nationalist Clubs attended the conference of the newly formed Populist Party at Cincinnati, and after the Omaha convention of the People's Party in July, 1891, declared that the ideas of the Nationalists were incorporated in the new party. By the time the Nationalists held their final meeting in Chicago in 1893, the movement was waning. The dates of the two most important periodicals devoted to the movement clearly show the active period of Nationalism—*The Nationalist*, published monthly from May, 1889, to April, 1891, and Bellamy's weekly paper, *The New Nation*, from February, 1891, to January, 1894. The fundamental weakness of the Nationalist movement lay in its lack of any definite organization strong enough to exert real political pressure.

That Bellamy left the world of belles-lettres with some regret for a career as a social reformer is indicated by a letter he wrote in 1890 rejecting Horace Scudder's offer to write a serial for the *Atlantic Monthly*. "As a literary man I fear that I am a 'goner' and past praying for. There is a sense in which I am sorry for this, for I had much work laid out to do, and should have greatly enjoyed doing it. There is one life which I would like to lead and another which I must lead. If only I had been twins." His last book, *Equality* (1897) shows how far he had turned from literary interests. Whereas *Looking*

Backward has some plot to carry the reader's interest through the economics of the future, *Equality* is nothing more than an economic treatise intended to fill in the gaps in the social structure described in *Looking Backward*.

Bellamy's labors on behalf of Nationalism were too great a strain on his health, which had never been good. He developed tuberculosis and in September, 1897, went with his family to Colorado in a vain attempt to find relief. He then returned to Chicopee Falls, where he died on March 22, 1898.

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Bellamy's reputation today rests solely on one book—*Looking Backward*; his earlier novels and short stories are known only to a few scholars and *Equality* has passed into oblivion. There is little doubt that *Looking Backward* speaks to the modern mind, for this novel, more than any other in American literature, poses the basic issue of security or freedom as the ultimate objective of American society. And regardless of whether the individual reader deplures or approves the trend, he can hardly question the fact that the course of American society since 1888 has been in Bellamy's direction. The book, therefore, has become an important milestone in our social thought.

Above all else, the reader of *Looking Backward* will sense Bellamy's intense hatred of social injustice in any form and his complete sincerity in attempting to strike a blow at the inequities of our social and economic system. His famous analogy of the stagecoach—probably the best-known passage in the novel—reflects these feel-

ings. Furthermore, no reader should underestimate Bellamy's achievement in writing a book which millions of people have read; this is no mean accomplishment for a utopian novel which in essence must deal with the dry bones of economics. For every reader of George's *Progress and Poverty* or Bellamy's *Equality*, there are thousands of readers of *Looking Backward*, and the reason certainly stems from the fact that Bellamy's literary interests and his desire for social reform merged in this novel. The plot, one must confess, leaves much to be desired; and the more sophisticated reader will view with incredulity the stilted conversations between Julian West and Edith Leete; the far-fetched coincidence of Edith Leete being the great-granddaughter of his "lost love," Edith Bartlett; and the cumbersome mechanism of Mr. Barton's sixteen-page sermon. Yet there is enough sugar coating of plot to make the economic pill palatable, and while this is looking at the book on its lowest level, Bellamy achieved his purpose of getting his social system examined by capitalizing on the desire of millions of his readers to learn what happened to Julian West!

Each reader must judge the merits of Bellamy's new social order for himself and, in the final analysis, he will do so in terms of what it is he wants from American society—security or the risks that go with a competitive system. For to Bellamy competition—ruthless competition, as he saw it—is the root of all evil; to him it is "absurd economically," "morally abominable," and merely "the instinct of selfishness." From this conviction stem such devices as "credit cards" giving each

citizen an equal share of the goods in the new society, the elaborate planning and organization of industry to eliminate what Bellamy calls the "fatal defects and prodigious imbecilities of the systems of private enterprise," the network of "sample stores" at one of which Edith Leete does her shopping, and all the other paraphernalia of the new society. His alternative is, of course, "the principle of share and share alike" as the only humane and rational basis for society.

Absolute equality of all citizens and the mechanism of the Industrial Army are, therefore, the foundation stones of Bellamy's social order. One could wish that Bellamy, in discussing the basic principle of equality, had offered more logical proof that men of the year 2000 would not use the same devious and sordid methods to gain the emblematic badges and ribbons of this society as they used in getting the financial rewards in the nineteenth century. And one can hardly read about the Industrial Army without seeing the spectre of the vast bureaucracy and endless regimentation which would inevitably accompany such an organization. Finally, one is led to wonder by what magic men in this new society have learned to work for the good of all rather than for personal rewards; it is true that noble men in all societies have labored for the general welfare, but unfortunately it is equally true that all societies have comprised men both noble and base. And in a real society including both types—with all the shadings in between—Bellamy's statement that "All men who do their best, do the same," can be seriously questioned.

In a well-known passage in *King Henry IV, Part I.*