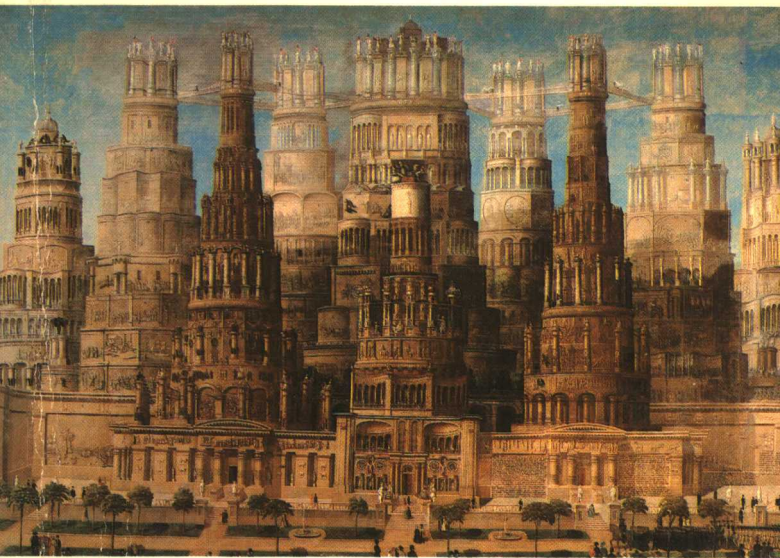


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# Looking Backward by Edward Bellamy



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# Looking Backward 2000-1887 by Edward Bellamy

With an Introduction by  
Andrew Delbanco



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LOOKING BACKWARD

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## Edward Bellamy

was born on March 26, 1850, in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. At eighteen, a trip abroad profoundly shaped his social conscience, and 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.'" Following his return to America, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1871. After taking one case, he abandoned law as a career, disliking it so much that he banished lawyers from the ideal society portrayed in *Looking Backward*. During the next ten years, Bellamy made his reputation as a journalist for the *New York Evening Post* and the *Springfield Daily Union* and as a promising young writer. He wrote several novels: *Six to One: A Nantucket Idyll* (1878); *The Duke of Stockbridge* (1879), a romance dealing with Shays's Rebellion; and *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process* (1880) and *Miss Ludington's Sister* (1884), two romances involving psychic phenomena.

In 1888, during a decade marked by intense labor struggles such as the call of Samuel Gompers for an eight-hour working-day, the Haymarket Riot, and the bloody strikes at Carnegie Steel and the Pullman plant, Bellamy's deep social concerns merged with his interest in fantasy to produce the great utopian novel *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. An immensely popular book, *Looking Backward* advocated "Nationalism," a form of socialism that Bellamy felt was consistent with the "American way of life." Enthusiasm for the work quickly led to the formation of more than 150 Nationalist Clubs, influenced the platforms of the newly formed Populist Party and People's Party, and spurred the publication of the political periodicals *The Nationalist* and the *New Nation*. For the rest of his life, Bellamy devoted himself to social reform. His last book, *Equality* (1897), was primarily an economic treatise expanding the ideas put forth in *Looking Backward*. Bellamy died at the age of forty-eight on May 22, 1898.

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# Looking Backward

# INTRODUCTION

Since the sixteenth century, when Thomas More invented a certain King Utopus as ruler of his imagined Christian commonwealth, that monarch's name has attached itself to a durable literary genre. The utopian novel has been a place for writers to confess their highest hopes for the human future, or—what is sometimes the same thing—their outrage at the present. It has also provided an outlet for authorial self-indulgence—dreams of social perfection, space travel, mesmerists, transforming elixirs, all the brain-teasing contraptions of science fiction. Though such fantasies have become critically acceptable in recent years, the utopian form remains vulnerable to condescension from those who demand that literature stick to the business of portraying life as it is, rather than as it may become.

Edward Bellamy, a preacher's son from a small western Massachusetts town, published his contribution to this tradition in 1888. *Looking Backward* appeared at a time of extreme social and intellectual ferment in America, a moment when writers felt urgently pressed into the responsibilities of politics—not in the narrow sense of that word, but in the conviction that Americans needed their eyes opened to the frightful condition of their society. The dominant mood of American letters had darkened in the years preceding Bellamy's experiment. Mark Twain, for instance, had turned from charming his audience with memories of the unspoiled Mississippi, to disturbing them with glimpses of savagery beneath the surface of Southern grace. William Dean Howells had left behind his popular honeymoon vignettes and was at work on a long novel about street violence and poverty in New York. Henry

James had just published a merciless study of New England reformers—a book with sexual hysteria near the heart of its concern. No region of the country was exempt from the new literature of exposure.

Amid this explosion of realist candor, Edward Bellamy's effort at imagining the future was by no means a solitary one. Though Twain preferred to send his time-traveler back to King Arthur's court, and Howells waited until the mid 1890s to tell his story of a benevolent teacher from another planet, a flurry of publications from lesser writers was turning the novel of the future into something of a fad. Now-forgotten books like *The Diothas* (1883) and *The Crystal Button* (1890) attracted a wide readership in their day, and the vogue for prophetic fiction continued into the twentieth century, yielding works that are still challenging, such as the feminist utopias of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Among these books, *Looking Backward* has lasted best. A huge bestseller in its time (200,000 copies sold in the first two years), it has been a canonized classic ever since. Yet, despite the stamina of its reputation, it is not an entirely simple book to recover.

For one thing, Bellamy's faith in progress has acquired more than a touch of quaintness for us. Not just the famous dates but also the somber prophecies of such modern "anti-utopias" as Orwell's *1984* and Kubrick's *2001* are crowding fast upon us. Orwell's vision of perpetual war reported through mind-numbing television no longer seems eccentric; Kubrick's astronauts do not seem caricatures as they munch synthetic sandwiches while excavating an alien civilization—just another lunchtime in a world without revelation. We have come to expect such visions from our best artists; Bellamy's forecast of the good society makes a startling contrast. And as much as his optimism distances him from us, it had a great deal to do with the enormous commercial success of *Looking Backward* in its own time.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century the American reading public continued to expect from books what Howells called the "smiling aspects of life." The demand for diversion was high; for provocation it was low. Refusing to slake this appetite for mere entertainment, our serious writers found

it less and less conscionable to gloss over the ironies of the Gilded Age—digging for diamonds at Newport garden parties, for instance, while a good portion of the country agonized through cycles of deprivation and bare survival. Conflict between producers and consumers had spread from the economic to the literary sphere, setting off a battle for the future of American letters within the larger struggle over control of the nation's economy. The "romanticists," Howells wrote in one of his periodic identifications of the enemy, "merely tickle our prejudices and coddle our sensibilities." In this contest over the function of art Bellamy struck a compromise. He wrote a novel that stared unblinkingly at the harsh realities of American society, at that "prodigious coach [to] which the masses of humanity were harnessed . . . the driver was hunger . . . the seats on top very breezy and comfortable." And yet, in *Looking Backward* Bellamy also provided release into a fanciful future. The novel was both progressive in its politics and conservative in its artistic strategy. It did what the new literature was ceasing to do: it resolved conflict into harmony.

The America that Bellamy deplored was reeling from a series of social shocks that promised worse to come. The financial collapse of 1873 had actually left the great steel and railroad combinations less hampered and more brazen than before in cutting wages and fixing prices. But by the 1880s, among those who depended on the giant industries—which meant just about everyone—a new restiveness was evident. With increasing ferocity, the Populist movement in the Midwest was combatting mortgage foreclosures and transport monopolies. Labor strife in the cities had become a regular occurrence. In 1877 twelve people were killed by the Maryland militia during a strike against the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; nearly sixty died soon after as strikers against the Pennsylvania Railroad were attacked in Pittsburgh. In 1886 something happened that especially stunned the intellectuals: a rally in Chicago protesting the killing of a picket at a McCormick harvester plant ended with several police officers dead or dying from a dynamite bomb; many more in the

crowd were shot by the police in reaction. Six months later four self-avowed anarchists who had nothing to do with the bomb were hanged. Those who had prophesied open class war seemed justified in their prediction.

Out of this turmoil Bellamy produced his consolatory fiction, a portrait of a socialist paradise where "the true self-interest of a rational unselfishness" has replaced the dog-eat-dog world of industrial America. In Bellamy's alternative world the trials of labor have been resolved by organization of an "industrial army." Government is the "sole capitalist" and therefore the only employer. Private property has vanished; women's rights and socialized medicine are well established; and the universal retirement age is forty-five. Drudgery of any kind is unknown, since all tasks from cooking to music-making are performed in central locations by cheerful conscripts and sent by pneumatic tube or telephone to the consumer. Salesmanship, unhappy spinsters, resentful servants, are all phenomena of the past—since in the new society it is no longer necessary for manufacturers to make a profit, for women to hide their sexual feelings, or for anyone to feel inferior to anyone else.

It is tempting to dismiss such a world as intolerably bland, to say of it what Yvor Winters once said of Emerson's ideal community: it is "a universe of amiable but perfectly unconscious imbeciles." And it is true that the Bostonians who play host to Bellamy's time-traveler wear the eternal smiles of Disneyland tour guides. Their lives do seem devoid of productive as well as debilitating tension; they are improbably, incessantly, content. Even the novelists in Bellamy's utopia, while continuing to tell stories of "love galore," do so without such encumbrances as "contrasts of wealth and poverty, education and ignorance . . . social pride and ambition . . . [or] anxieties of any sort for one's self or others." It is difficult to conceive what kind of literature remains after such exclusions—lazily paced pornography is perhaps a reasonable guess.

A more serious doubt about Bellamy's utopia concerns his enthusiasm for indoctrinated patriotism—what he commends as zealous "service to the nation." Such mass emotion has, of course, taken hideous forms in our century and left us

wary of the nationalist motive when pressed into political service by the state. But finally, such objections boil down to the charge of banality and are as easy as they are obvious. They are only one step removed from the defenses of laissez-faire capitalism that Bellamy was used to hearing in pernicious refrain. By the last decades of the nineteenth century it had become a stock pronouncement that conflict and struggle are good for the soul, that a vigorous society must reproduce the crucibles of nature. God, so the cliché went, had arranged for the "survival of the fittest" among men as well as predators. Bellamy heard this platitude in many variations, usually as a kind of quasi-religious sanction for suppressing the collective efforts of labor. It was, said certain "Social Darwinists," perfectly acceptable for vast steel companies to gather their collective strength into trusts, but it was somehow unnatural for laboring men to do the same. When it came to unions, God preferred every man for himself.

This garbled version of the struggle for survival that Darwin had seen in nature became the official ideology of big business and therefore of the Republican party, which traditionally represented its interests. And though one feels a certain genteel restraint in the political critique of *Looking Backward*, there runs beneath it a swelling revulsion at the society that embodied such principles. Indeed, one reason that the book retains its freshness today is that some of the specious distinctions that it questioned have lately been revived: federal assistance to individuals, for example, is now under fire as somehow at odds with individual virtue, while federal assistance to corporations apparently violates none of the same prohibitions. Bellamy, one suspects, would also find the currently fashionable distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian governments less than convincing.

Faced with a society of ample hypocrisy and inequity, Bellamy was not writing only out of indignation. He was writing out of a sense of emergency. The Chicago killings and their "legal" retributions, "public be damned" outbursts by the magnates, financial panics and the gathering fear of those whose livelihoods were meager and threatened—all this

seemed to him not just a distasteful spectacle, as it does to the inconvenienced protagonist of *Looking Backward*, who waits for striking tradesmen to build his house. Things appeared far graver to the author than to his character.

To many thoughtful people, in fact, the only conceivable outcome of the national distress was violence. The rhetoric of Populism, for instance, which by the 1890s represented a formidable political force, was becoming increasingly apocalyptic. This is most vivid in Ignatius Donnelly's Populist novel of Armageddon, *Caesar's Column* (1891), with its vision of funeral pyres burning in New York after a civil war between rich and poor. Even such a fatherly figure as William Jennings Bryan, who led the Democratic Party's adoption of the Populist financial platform in 1896, used the Christian language of agony to climax his famous speech supporting free coinage of silver as relief for debtors: "We shall not allow mankind," he thundered at the national convention, "to be crucified upon a cross of gold." Though they may have been alarmed, most Americans did not find it strange that the nominee of a major party could declare one part of the society to be in the act of crucifying another.

Bellamy was not without Populist instincts. One of his previous novels, *The Duke of Stockbridge* (1879), had treated an earlier farmers' uprising, Shays's Rebellion of 1786, with unconventional respect, and put forth a tentative picture of the early republic as divided by class interest along urban/rural lines. In *Looking Backward* Bellamy continues to express an aversion to the nexus of credit and investment that made the country run: "interest on investments," he explains in a phrase with a Populist ring, "was a species of tax in perpetuity upon the product of those engaged in industry." He draws here an implicit division between producers and exploiters, a reductive notion that has led some scholars to attribute to him a "village mentality." One does hear in his outbursts against the credit system a pining for a precapitalist world, a nostalgia for what Alfred Kazin has called "the vast cousinship of American village life." In this sense Bellamy's ideal future is as much a retreat as an advance. He shared not only with the American Populists but also with such European radicals as William Morris a yearning for a return to a unified society of

common purpose—an emotion that would find its greatest American literary expression in Henry Adams's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1905).

Yet, one should not deny Bellamy his hardheaded astuteness about the actual tendency of his times. *Looking Backward* does, after all, forecast the overwhelming efficiency of economies of scale, and Bellamy retained enough of his Calvinist heritage to doubt the imminent renovation of human nature in any economic order: the youth of his utopia have no opportunity for old-fashioned avarice, but they compensate by being "very greedy for honor."

Bellamy, then, could embrace neither the official ideology of individual enterprise, nor the nascent collectivism of the farmers and industrial workers. In trying to understand his place among the dissenters of the Gilded Age, one must pay close heed to his native New England tradition, especially to its religious confidence in a caretaking providence. This inheritance included, no doubt, a taste for tidiness: "The cultured man in your age," says the time-traveler's host, "was like one up to the neck in a nauseous bog solacing himself with a smelling bottle." This is the patrician squeamishness to which even the open-minded Henry Adams gave vent when he shrank from too many immigrants "snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of customs." Returning to America after an absence of twenty years, Henry James betrayed a similar distaste in describing the "general queer sauce of New York." And Bellamy expressed it too.

But it is no more satisfactory to think of *Looking Backward* as a flight from social disorder toward a Progressive blueprint for discipline, than to label it a Populist homily to a martyred people. One deficiency in such narrow readings is that they inevitably obscure the personal dimension of the book. It is quite true that *Looking Backward* has been, above all, a book of large public consequence: Bellamy Clubs sprang up immediately upon its publication; a movement called Nationalist took it as its manifesto; for decades it appeared high on everyone's "most influential books" list.

But if it has always been primarily a public document, it has only been able to retain this public power because of its

personal intensity. And its personal dimension includes more than a commitment to what we ordinarily think of as social reform. *Looking Backward* contemplates as well the reformation of sexual attitudes.

In muted and scattered, but nevertheless clear passages, Bellamy reimagines relations between men and women. Not least among the reasons why his time-traveler dreads a return to old Boston is the charming young woman whom he meets in new Boston. Conveniently, his new love is great-grandchild of his old—a neat way of disposing of the specter of infidelity. Much has changed in the century between generations, and all of it is to his liking. His first fiancée had opened the novel by sending her ardent suitor home at nine o'clock with orders to get some health-preserving sleep. The new lady, by contrast, is capable of panting when he has "barely tasted the sweetness of her lips." She has, as her lover is quick to point out, a delightfully "pink finger-tip," and is altogether representative of "the entire frankness and unconstraint" that characterizes the new femininity. This change—more important, one suspects, than credit cards and radios—may help to explain something about the contemporary power of *Looking Backward*. There is certainly no case to be made for the book as anything less than wholesome to its Victorian audience, but there is a quiet potential for personal liberation within its political vision. The reader of *Looking Backward* should not be surprised to discover that fifteen years earlier in an essay, "The Religion of Solidarity" (published posthumously), Bellamy had compared the apprehension of natural beauty to the experience of orgasm.

So Bellamy counted the containment or distortion of sexual energy among the costs of his culture. *Looking Backward* predicts much more than technological progress and a shift from class conflict to cooperation. It proposes a thoroughgoing change in American life, private no less than public.

Still, the dominant emotion of Bellamy's new Bostonians is incredulity at the ignorance—not the squalor, or greed, or repression—of their ancestors. The dawning of the new age

will be characterized above all by a new abundance of knowledge. In this respect Bellamy has his modern counterparts in such figures as Buckminster Fuller and Herman Kahn, who preach the civilizing power of technology. And as he has heirs, so he had forebears. His direct ancestor, the New Light minister Joseph Bellamy, had written ecstatically about the imminence of the millennium in the 1760s, and it was such an expectation of divine intervention in American affairs that Edward Bellamy restated in *Looking Backward*. This is not a religious book in any sectarian sense, but it is a book of deeply religious spirit—a part of the movement that would come to be called the “Social Gospel,” and which would restore American Protestantism to its tradition of social activism. Like his revivalist ancestor, Edward Bellamy expected a forgiving, not an avenging, savior. There is no last day of reckoning for the unconverted in *Looking Backward*, nor in its sequel, *Equality* (1897). There is no sorting out of the damned from the saved. Both Bellamys had a vision of universal eligibility for the kingdom of God.

If these personal and religious sources for *Looking Backward* converge into a specific political program, it is one that prescribes government itself as the instrument of salvation. One of Bellamy's claims to our attention is that in commending government as the most potent and reliable agent of social change he anticipated by twenty years such works as Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909). Though this was heretical in a land where individualism had become a religion of its own, Bellamy insisted that “there is no such thing in a civilized society as self-support.” He managed not only to inject the idea of paternalist government into American political discourse, but also helped to divest the idea of socialism of its threatening, alien appearance. “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his need” was a famous formulation of the socialist ideal stated by Marx himself in 1875 (paraphrasing Bakunin). *Looking Backward* respects the principle and echoes the phrase: “every man in accordance with his natural aptitude” is its guideline for assigning citizens to work.

Bellamy had, in short, a gift for intellectual reconciliation.

He was a Jeffersonian at heart, while proposing a socialist economic order. He was an evolutionist in favor of bigness and centralized power, while at the same time repudiating the individualist doctrines of Social Darwinism. And it has long been established that *Looking Backward* was an important transmitter, through such figures as Walter Rauschenbusch and John Dewey, of the spirit of liberal reform into the New Deal and beyond.

It is therefore appropriate to acknowledge Bellamy's prescience. But one must nevertheless concede the flaws in his crystal ball: the rise of amateur sports and the extinction of professional, the "maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave," are only two of his cultural predictions that will surely require more time than he allotted for their realization. Readers of *Looking Backward* will doubtless discover more.

If one excuses Bellamy from the obligation of clairvoyance, *Looking Backward* becomes a book of formidable imagination that opens our eyes to meanings of the commonplace in our lives. The civilized doctor, for instance, who is Bellamy's mouthpiece, interprets the curious practice of using umbrellas in the rain as an emblem of the absurd individualism of preenlightened man. Everyone carried his own shelter, he remarks, when a spirit of cooperative enterprise would have produced much better solutions to the problem—city-sized domes, perhaps, or weather control.

Enjoying such wit, we may read *Looking Backward* as an adroit and spirited literary escapade—and yet still undervalue it. More than prescient and more than ingenious, it is finally an expression of Bellamy's passionate belief that Americans would not condemn their posterity to the same struggle for survival which he was witnessing. "How men dared to leave children behind them, I have never been able to understand," says Bellamy's twentieth-century man. There can hardly be a stronger indictment of any age.

Yet, with all its anger, it is a magnanimous book. Generous in the respect it accorded its audience, it was embraced by Americans as no book had been since the triumphs of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Progress and Poverty* (1879).

It spoke with an intensely personal voice to a public crisis, and through that combination expressed a whole people's fatigue with their way of living. Neither solipsistic, nor addressed to a cadre of readers, as so much writing would be in the century it imagined, it was a therapeutic book for the nation. Partly fulfilled and partly discarded, its prophecies no longer dazzle us, but it can still move us with its insistence that the fate of the self is inseparable from the fate of the republic.

ANDREW DELBANCO