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Searching for Gems in Future History

Alan Sandison and Robert Dingley, eds. *Histories of the Future: Studies in Fact, Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Palgrave, 2000. xviii + 202pp. \$59.95 hc.

This overpriced book has a wonderful dust jacket featuring an illustration from Robida's *Le Vingtième siècle* (1883, *The Twentieth Century*) and is dedicated to the pioneering scholarship of I.F. Clarke, whose "ground-breaking research on stories, dreams and projections of the future ... resulted in such studies as *The Tale of the Future* (1961), *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (1966), *The Pattern of Expectation 1644-2001* (1979) and the eight-volume *British Future Fiction 1700-1914*" (xi). Unfortunately, the quality of its contents is not always up to Clarke's standards, as it features a variegated grouping of thirteen essays by sf scholars and writers whose common theme is supposedly "the historiography of the future" (xi) but whose individual relevance to the topic is sometimes difficult to discern. The editors, to their credit, forewarn the reader of this lack of thematic unity, saying "a compilation such as this is always going to prefer the ♦relaxes' of eclecticism to inelastic editorial braces" (xi). But such rationalizations do little to convince one to purchase such an expensive little tome whose focus seems almost as disparate as a volume of published conference papers. The table of contents of *Histories of the Future* reads as follows:

Harry Harrison. *Introducing the Future: The Dawn of Science-Fiction Criticism*

Ken MacLeod. *History in SF: What (Hasn't Yet) Happened in History*

Robert Dingley. *The Ruins of the Future: Macaulay's New Zealander and the Spirit of the Age*

Roslynn D. Haynes. Celluloid Scientists: Futures Visualised

Beatrice Battaglia. Losing the Sense of Space: Forster's "The Machine Stops" and Jameson's "Third Machine Age"

Bruce Brasington. Boys, Battleships, Books: the Cult of the Navy in US Juvenile Fiction, 1898-1919

Charles E. Gannon. American Dreams and Edwardian Aspirations: Technological Innovation and Temporal Uncertainty in Narratives of Expectation

David Seed. Filing the Future: Reporting on World War Three

Brian Baker. The Map of the Apocalypse: Nuclear War and the Space of Dystopia in American Science Fiction

Alasdair Spark. A New World Made to Order: Making Sense of the Future in a Global Era

Robert Crossley. Sign, Symbol, Power: The New Martian Novel

Tom Shippey. Starship Troopers, Galactic Heroes, Mercenary Princes: The Military and its Discontents in Science Fiction

Damien Broderick. Terrible Angels: Science Fiction and the Singularity

As in most critical anthologies of this sort, some of the essays are especially good (Dingley, Gannon, Spark), a few leave much to be desired (Harrison, Haynes, Battaglia), and the remainder are either of moderate interest or largely off-topic. Rather than comment on each individually, I will discuss two which, in my opinion, rank as the best and worst of the lot.

As an aficionado of early sf, I was especially impressed with the essay on the "New Zealander" by co-editor Robert Dingley. First, unlike its two predecessors in this volume, its title accurately denotes its content. Second, its subject-matter correlates closely to the advertised "Histories of the Future" theme of the volume. Third, it presents a rich ideological-

iconographical analysis of the growth and popularity in Victorian England of a new "last man" sf archetype: Macaulay's 1840 mythic New Zealander, standing on a broken arch of London Bridge and contemplating the collapsed dome of St. Paul's cathedral amid the ruins of what was once the city of London (as illustrated by Gustave Doré in 1872). According to Dingley,

[T]he New Zealander became lodged in the collective cultural consciousness ... endlessly invoked as an apocalyptic bogeyman, as a joky *memento mori*, or simply as part of that common vocabulary of allusion which can facilitate relations between writer and reader....

Macaulay's conceit, then, both in its incidental recurrence and in its more sustained elaborations, haunts the literary memory of the mid-nineteenth century, representing a nightmare future in which the present world order has passed away. (16-17)

The essay offers some valuable historical context for understanding the thematic evolution of this new post-apocalyptic icon. For example, it details how the "Enlightenment's cultivated predilection for antique ruins" and the ensuing Romantic penchant for "elegiac reflections ... [on] the spectacle of decaying architecture" (19) eventually became a well-worn cliché in Western literature and art by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Macaulay's New Zealander helped to redefine this topos as "future history" instead of as a simple melancholic remnant of times past. In so doing, at least for the British during the height of their colonial empire-building, the image began to convey a powerful new message:

While the New Zealander and his literary relatives clearly belong within this cultural tradition of ruin-spotting, there are nevertheless crucial differences. The New Zealander may occupy the position of meditative tourist, but he is, precisely, *not us*: the ruins he observes in the future are our present reality. (20)

Macaulay's concisely elegant image ... becomes a summary emblem for British cultural anxieties in an age of unprecedented transition. Wren's dome, which was beginning to resume, in the early nineteenth century, a

central role in the iconography of English greatness, becomes a monument to the transience of national glory; the New Zealander, in contrast to his sedately contemplative eighteenth-century ancestors, is a harbinger of doom.... (25-26)

Finally, throughout this well-documented piece, Dingley's exegesis moves seamlessly between the many literary and artistic manifestations of this popular end-of-the-world image (Shelley, Trollope, Martin, Doré, et al.) and its rhetorical use by politicians and historians in both England and Australia from the 1850s onward (Walpole, Volney, Trollope, et al.). In sum, this is a fine socio-archeological investigation of an important sf motif that has heretofore received, to my knowledge, very little scholarly attention.

The Harry Harrison essay that opens *Histories of the Future*, however, is another matter entirely. Its well-turned title—albeit of questionable relevance in a collection about future histories—seems to promise insights of historic proportions about the beginnings of sf criticism. But, sadly, the commentary itself turns out to be inaccurate, misleading, and persistently self-promotional. Although lauding I.F. Clarke as an important trailbreaker in sf scholarship (after all, this collection is dedicated to him), Harrison chooses to ignore a large number of other important contributions to the field: not only Philip Babcock Gove's *The Imaginary Voyage in Prose Fiction* (1941), Everett F. Bleiler's *The Checklist of Fantastic Literature* (1948), and Marjorie Hope Nicholson's *Voyages to the Moon* (1948), but also that great body of early sf criticism from the 1920s through the 1960s by editors and academics such as Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, Reginald Bretnor, Roger Lancelyn Green, Mark R. Hillegas, Sam Moskowitz, H. Bruce Franklin, and R.D. Mullen, among many others (see the "Chronological Bibliography of Science Fiction Criticism" on the SFS website at <www.depauw.edu/sfs/biblio.htm>). Harrison then proceeds to indulge in a bit of self-aggrandizement by hyping the importance of his own scholarly contributions (in *SF Horizons* [1961]) while simultaneously downplaying the role of J.O. Bailey's seminal *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (1947) and the influential work of Damon Knight and James Blish, whose essays he criticizes as having "faint overtones of the

fanzines," which he dismisses as "amateur, ephemeral and too enthusiastic and uncritical" (2).

Following this cursory and rather self-serving overview of early sf criticism—which might be interpreted as one sf author's attempt at historical revisionism—Harrison then misrepresents I.F. Clarke's own work as the study of "alternate history," whereas Clarke himself has consistently referred to it as "future fiction." One is led to wonder if this elision of subgenres is more than accidental since it allows Harrison to offer up his own taxonomic musings about the "three disparate and simple forms" that characterize narratives of "AH" (as he terms it), thereby providing him with a convenient opportunity to remind the reader, with disingenuous modesty, that "I am pleasantly surprised to find that I have written novels in all of these categories" (6).

Other misguided generalizations follow, such as the pronouncement that "Up until the present time no attempt has been made, by either authors or editors, to group these stories and books as a distinct and separate classification of writing" (4). Granted, the most recent anthology edited by Harry Turtledove and Martin H. Greenberg, *The Best Alternate History Stories of the Twentieth Century* (2001), was not yet on the market when Harrison made this claim. But a few well-known predecessors—Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg's *Alternative Histories: Eleven Stories of the World as It Might Have Been* (1986), Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg's 4-volume series *What Might Have Been* (1989-92), and Gardner Dozois and Stanley Schmidt's *Roads Not Taken: Tales of Alternate History* (1998)—certainly were. Further, over the past couple of decades, there have been a growing number of scholarly studies that, either in whole or in part, discuss "AH" sf: books such as Paul Alkon's *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (1987), articles such as Marc Angenot, Darko Suvin, and Jean-Marc Gouanvic's "L'Uchronie, histoire alternative et science-fiction" (*imagine ...* [1982]) and George Slusser's "History, Historicity, Story" (*SFS* [1988]), as well as several Ph.D. dissertations by academics such as Joseph William Collins (1990), Edgar McKnight Jr. (1994), Nicholas Gevers (1997), and Karen Hellekson (1998, recently published as *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* [2001]). In fact, a quick search of the Internet

reveals a number of websites that deal with alternate histories. The best of them is "Uchronia, The Alternate History List" at <www.uchronia.net> which has been in existence for over ten years. Interestingly, this site's "Anthologies and Collections" page lists more than *sixty* alternate history entries (accessed on Jan. 6, 2002).

As the above works and references suggest, Harrison's claim that "I foresee no great spate of books since writing the AH novel does require a great deal of time-consuming research, which, unhappily, many authors are loath to do" (6) seems questionable indeed. As with so many other assertions made in this superficial and highly biased essay, it is evident that Harrison did not do his own "time-consuming research" before writing it.

Let me hasten to say that most of the contributions to *Histories of the Future* are more substantial and less self-promotional than Harrison's. Nevertheless, because of their wide-ranging heterogeneity in subject-matter, approach, and originality, the scholarly value of this book is much less than it could have been. I'm certain that, if I.F. Clarke had himself edited such a collection, the results would have been quite different.—**ABE**