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Science Fiction Studies

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A "Stepping-Stone" Study of Early Sf.

Paul K. Alkon. *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology.* Twayne's Studies in Literary Themes and Genres. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. xix+175 pp. \$22.95.

It is known from their correspondence that Jules Verne occasionally complained to his publisher P.-J. Hetzel about the "restricted milieu" that he was "condemned to move around in" when writing the novels of his *Voyages Extraordinaires*. Verne was referring, of course, to Hetzel's insistence that they be highly pedagogical, strongly mimetic, and morally "wholesome." For Hetzel, the unprecedented commercial success of the *Voyages* served as a kind of intrinsic justification for this particular narrative format; but for Verne, such editorial strictures proved to be quite chafing at times.

One cannot help but feel that Paul Alkon, in his new book *Science Fiction Before 1900*, must have experienced similar frustrations with the format required by his own publisher Twayne. As an accomplished scholar of science-fiction narratives whose earlier *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (see *SFS* #47, March 1989, 94-102) made a substantial contribution to the field, Alkon was apparently asked by Twayne to do the impossible: reduce the entire pre-twentieth-century history of science fiction to some 175 published pages (sized 5 x 8), arranged in only four chapters of 20-40 pages each, preceded by a basic chronology, and followed by a supplemental "Bibliographic Essay" and a list of recommended sf titles. In his preface to *Science Fiction Before 1900*, Alkon explains how, when confronted with this daunting task, he was forced to abandon the traditional "survey" in favor of a very different approach:

Every fan of science fiction remembers with pleasure Arthur C. Clarke's classic 1953 short story "The Nine Billion Names of God." But I believe there would be few happy memories of

an introduction to science fiction's early days that read like a catalog of the nine billion works before 1900 with some claim as precursors or exemplars of the genre. Of course there were not quite that many. There are, however, enough serious claimants so that to mention, let alone discuss, them all or even those most widely read in their time would create an impression of astronomical magnitude more bewildering than enlightening. I intend this book, therefore, to provide soundings rather than a survey. Those who know, or think they know, the history of science fiction will have the satisfaction of deploring my omission of many favorite and doubtless relevant texts that are among what I consider the "nine billion."

...

...I have concentrated on a few key works that mark the most significant phases in the early evolution of science fiction... My discussion even of these milestones is not designed to be exhaustive, however, but rather to provide orientation—and, I hope stimulation—allowing my readers to acquaint or reacquaint themselves with these archetypes and with relevant criticism of them as a way of embarking on the right path to their own close encounter with the origins of science fiction. (xi-xii)

The key words here are "introduction," "soundings," "milestones," and "orientation." Together they provide a very apt description of his *Science Fiction Before 1900*, both in its purposefully limited scope and in its goal to be an initial stepping-stone for the neophyte to other works of and scholarship on pre-20th-century science fiction. And, judged by these modest intentions, Alkon's short study is quite successful.

The book opens with a brief chapter called "A Short History of the Future" wherein Alkon discusses the many modern definitions of science fiction as a genre (historical, reader-response, thematic, etc.), the relationship of science fiction to Gothic fiction, and several sf "precursors" like Swift, Defoe, Cyrano, Guttin, Mercier, et al. As concerns the historical starting-point of "true" sf and sf criticism, the author states unequivocally in the opening sentence of the chapter: "Science fiction starts with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Its first critic was Percy Shelley" (1).

Each of the ensuing three chapters targets certain "masterpieces" of 19th-century science fiction in England, France, and America (i.e., the United States): Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*; Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and Albert Robida's *The Twentieth Century*; Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Other sf writers

and works are mentioned, but as a rule only briefly and contextually. The author explains his unusual three-country *modus operandi* by saying: "This arrangement somewhat blurs chronological relationships, but... I wish to stress that science fiction has from its outset been an international phenomenon transcending political boundaries while nevertheless taking on distinctive features that reflect different national preoccupations" (xiii). But Alkon's rationale here is not terribly convincing. One finds, for example, very little detailed comparative analysis of such "different national preoccupations" among the sf traditions of these three Western countries, apart from those facile (and wholly dubious) generalizations attributed to them in the chapter titles—e.g., "England: New Viewpoints," "France: Technophilia," and "America: Technophobia." And although such attributes may well be "ultimately of great significance to the genre" (57), they are nevertheless very misleading when used as national labels. In this respect at least, it seems clear that the organizing principle used in *Science Fiction Before 1900* was dictated less by a desire for critical insight than by a need for exegetical expediency.

Be that as it may, Alkon's discussions of these classic sf texts are uniformly lucid, very informed, and written with an elegance of style that is sometimes sadly lacking in contemporary sf criticism. Despite the "restricted milieu" which Alkon is "condemned to move around in," he manages to synthesize and personalize some of the best modern commentaries on these literary works, and to point the interested reader in the right directions for further study. That is not to say that there is no original scholarship here: Alkon's innovative treatment of Albert Robida, for example, opens new pathways to a long-overdue reconsideration of this French sf writer and illustrator. But, to his credit, Alkon also frequently cites the observations of other respected scholars who have turned their attention to the early history of science fiction (e.g., Amis, Bleiler, Clareson, Clarke, Philmus, Suvin, Aldiss, Stableford, Versins, Franklin, among others—one work, however, which he appears to have overlooked is John J. Pierce's *Foundations of Science Fiction*). And his supplemental "Bibliographic Essay," albeit not exhaustive, lists a wide assortment of previous sf scholarship on this topic in the form of reference works,

historical and theoretical studies, anthologies, and studies of individual writers and works.

True to its Twayne parentage, *Science Fiction Before 1900* is not meant to be a major watershed in modern sf scholarship. Its primary goal, as with most other titles in the Twayne series, is to be a broadly informative and reasonably up-to-date introduction for non-specialists. However, in choosing Paul Alkon to write this particular book (and, we are told, Brooks Landon for a forthcoming volume on science fiction after 1900), Twayne is making significant progress toward enhancing its image as serious criticism.

—**ABE**