

FANTASTICAL WORLDS AND FUTURES AT THE WORLD'S EDGE: A HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

**by
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INTRODUCTION

New Zealanders have been creating science fiction since the Nineteenth Century, yet look at any globe of the world and New Zealand looks very isolated. How has one of the most remote English-speaking countries on the planet managed to develop fantastical worlds and visions of the future that have gained international recognition and popularity?

Being close to Australia means New Zealanders have access to a country with six times its population, and this means access to a large market. Even better, New Zealand has exotic wildlife and landscapes, so much so that visiting it can be like travelling to another Earth-type planet, or even a fantasy world.

Since the 1990s the availability of the Internet has publishing centres like New York and London a couple of mouse clicks away from any New Zealand author, but even before the Internet arrived, science fiction and fantasy from New Zealand had a long and impressive history. An account of its achievements is long overdue.

CHAPTER 1: HERE BE UTOPIAS

New Zealand was settled out of Polynesia by the Maoris in the Thirteenth Century, with European settlements established there from the 1820s onwards. New Zealand had been discovered, mapped and named by Europeans in the 1640s by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman so Europeans were aware that there were a couple of large islands beyond Australia with a large and advanced seafaring society. However, trade, which was something the Dutch at the time were very keen on, was off limits due to a lethal cross-cultural misunderstanding endured by Tasman and local Maori.

For the Europeans that came to New Zealand there was much to marvel at. The landscapes, fauna and flora, and the indigenous civilization were totally different to that back home. This was definitely the stuff of great settings for anyone wanting to write about lost civilizations. It is important to remember that while the Maoris did not produce works of science fiction until well into the Twentieth Century, they did have what may be described as sagas, along the same lines as the Arthurian legends of Britain and France, and the Scandinavian Viking sagas.

Utopian fiction was big in the antipodes when the first identifiable works of New Zealand science fiction were being written. Like Australia, the colony was on the other side of the world from Britain, so setting one's novel in a real but remote location tended to give it credibility. An important feature of Nineteenth Century utopian fiction is the agenda of the

author. Someone wanting to tell the reader about their vision of how society should be organised is not going to spend many words developing characters or mapping out a dynamic, exciting plot. This does not lend itself to a great read.



As with Australian lost world and utopian novels, some novels with New Zealand as a setting were written in Britain. **Samuel Butler** was born in the UK, then migrated to New Zealand in 1859 where he set up a sheep station. It was while living in New Zealand that Butler read Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, and published the articles that were to become the basis of parts of a novel - beginning with *Darwin Among the Machines* in the New Zealand journal *The Press* in 1863. His premise was that machine intelligence could evolve, and that this might not be a good thing.

After selling the station - at quite a large profit - he returned to Britain and completed *Erehwon* (Trubner and Ballantyne, 1872), which was published there in 1872. Thus, the work does qualify as early New Zealand science fiction, and even New Zealand's first work of science fiction. *Erehwon* was followed by *Erehwon Revisited* (Grant Richards, 1901) three decades later.



Bison 2008
edition

What is often forgotten is that before science fiction was called science fiction, it was bundled in with romance fiction. H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was classified as a romance when it was first published in 1901. Such is the case with *The Great Romance* (1881), published privately and anonymously in 1881.

The author of *The Great Romance* was credited as The Inhabitant in the book, but the Christchurch newspaper *The Star* identifies him as Mr **Henry Honor** of Ashburton in 1882. Thus, *The Great Romance* qualifies as the first work of science fiction actually written and published in New Zealand. Only a single copy of the original edition exists, but it was been republished by Bison in 2008.



Sir Julius Vogel was New Zealand's premier from 1873 to 1875, and again in 1876, and introduced the first woman's suffrage bill in 1887. Suffrage was granted six years later in 1893 - when New Zealand became the first country to give women the vote. He had *Anno Domini 2000, or Woman's Destiny* (Longman, 1889) published in 1889. It is often referred to as the first New Zealand work of science fiction, but perhaps it should be called the country's first truly significant work in this genre, being preceded by the novels of Butler and Honor.

As the Nineteenth Century drew to a close and during the early years of the Twentieth Century, increasing numbers New Zealand authors were writing novels identifiable as science fiction. **Ajor's** *The Secret of Mt Cook* (1894) features the revival of frozen people,

preceding a similarly themed Australian work, Erle Cox's *Out of the Silence* by a quarter of a century.

The UK born **Edward Tregear** was a social reformer, and was concerned that the Maori were dying out, which might have been behind *Hedged with Divinities* (R. Coupland Harding, 1895) in which all men die.

Godfrey Sweven was the pseudonym of the UK born John Macmillan Brown who moved to New Zealand in 1874 and became chancellor of the University of New Zealand. He wrote two utopian novels, *Rialloro: The Archipelago of Exiles* (1901) and *Limanora: The Island of Progress* (1903).

William Satchell's *The Elixir of Life* (Chapman and Hall, 1907) was published in Britain. Satchell was born in Britain, but migrated to New Zealand in 1886. The novel is based on the author's experiences on the voyage to New Zealand.



Katherine Mansfield was one of New Zealand's most famous writers, and stylistically was well ahead of her time. Mansfield moved to London aged fifteen to attend Queens College, and returned permanently five years later to become one of the most exciting luminaries of early Twentieth Century literature. What is not well known is that she corresponded with the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley and horror author H. P. Lovecraft, revealing that the original versions of some of her stories contained themes of horror, fantasy and even science fiction. The Sir Julius Vogel Award winning collection,

Mansfield with Monsters (Steam Press, 2012) by Katherine Mansfield, Matt Cowens and Debbie Cowens, presents a selection of her stories reconstructed as her original (and unpublished) versions might have been. Some of her published fiction pioneered the questioning of the traditional roles of men and women, but not with the futuristic settings of Sir Julius Vogel. *Mansfield with Monsters* suggests that she first developed some of her plots using fantastic themes, then recast them as mainstream works for publication.

An interesting variant of the New Zealand utopian novel might be called New Zealand Survivalist. This assumes that New Zealand is so very remote that a catastrophe elsewhere in the world will not reach quite as far as New Zealand, and has been used from time to time by authors from other countries. A few Nineteenth Century British works were based on the well known New Zealander remark by Lord Macaulay (1800-1859) in *Critical and Historical Essays* (1843): "... when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul's." New Zealand's curse, extreme distance from the cultural, economic and scientific powerhouses of the northern hemisphere, was seen as a welcome buffer from war, degeneration and civil strife.

Better known is a more recent novel by the English author John Wyndham. In *The Chrysalids* (1955), the setting is a post-armageddon Labrador, but a telepathic child establishes contact with fellow telepaths in Sealand (New Zealand), where high-tech society

has endured and prospered. Sealand aircraft arrive to save a group of children that are about to be executed for being mutants at the end of the novel, and it is implied that Sealand will lead the rest of the world out of the dark ages.

During this period, in 1903, New Zealand became the first English speaking country to produce a work of science fiction for the cinema when a seventeen minute version of the 1899 British play *A Message from Mars* was released. This will be covered in more detail later.

Critical analysis of works

Generally speaking, *Erewhon* is a satire on some of the stricter aspects of Victorian society, but its most remarkable feature is Butler's speculation that machines might develop intelligence through natural selection. This is seen as bad for humans, and machines are banned in Erewhon as being potentially dangerous, anticipating problems that James Cameron raised in his 1984 movie *The Terminator* by 112 years. When one remembers that intelligent robots would not emerge in fiction until the 1920s, and the term artificial intelligence would not be coined until 1956, this was a very advanced and original idea. Butler did not share the Victorians' general optimism of open-ended progress, and felt that any utopia was better off without them.

The Great Romance has the distinction of being New Zealand's first space travel adventure, and the technology is not at all bad. The spacecraft is equipped to cope with the lack of anything to breathe in space, and the lack of gravity during the flight to Venus is also featured. By Nineteenth Century standards, this was very advanced indeed. Fifteen years later a novel by the Australian W. H. Galier, *A Visit to Blestland* (1896) had the astronauts travel to Mars in an open rowboat! One imagines that breathing, staying warm and floating out of the boat would have been problems, but Galier was more interested in describing his utopia than issues like staying alive on the way there. A sort of space race between Australia and New Zealand had begun, and New Zealand had better spacecraft.

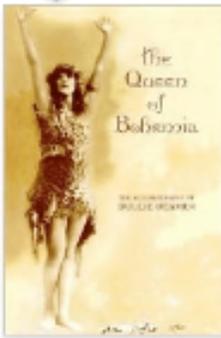
Anno Domini 2000, or Woman's Destiny is definitely futuristic in theme, being set 121 years after the year of publication. The plot involves the United States being reabsorbed by the British Empire after a war, which cannot have been a popular prospect for American readers. After all, the Redcoats had burned Washington as recently as 1814, which was still within living memory at the time of publication. On the other hand, it did present a well reasoned and convincing vision of women participating successfully in politics, and although the author's style could be rather slow and laboured, the scenario was optimistic and exciting. Like *Erewhon*, it was written after the author moved to Britain.

Sweven deals with a number of different types of dystopias on islands surrounding the central island of Limanora. On this central island is a scientific utopia, however, where the practice of eugenics has created a rational, efficient and placid society with advanced communications and transport, and even meteorological control. The explorer who describes all this flees when volcanic eruptions threaten to destroy this island paradise.

The Elixir of Life plot sees the passengers and crew of a ship marooned on an island when the propeller breaks. Satchell deals at length with the need for authority in this little society, following the fashion for utopian themes that were still current. However, the ship's doctor devises an elixir which renders him immune to all disease. A select few in the island's society are also granted an injection, and the author goes on to explore the implications of immortality. No conclusions are drawn, however, and the author seems more concerned with the power of love to solve all problems.

THE EMPTY YEARS

The period from World War I to the early 1960s is, with one or two exceptions, an apparently empty period in New Zealand writing. During this period, one could be forgiven for thinking New Zealanders no longer knew how to write. However, Ngaio Marsh crime fiction puts paid to that theory. The war had almost eliminated the fascination with utopias and, due to the high mortality rate from the war and the immediate post-war influenza pandemic, had turned its attentions to occultism and contacting the spirits of the dead.



Deamer at a 1924 artists ball.

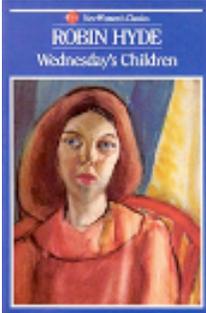
It is within this period that the beginnings of New Zealand's fantasy literature are to be found, however, and the unlikely author was a woman better known as The Queen of Bohemia, **Dulcie Deamer**. Born in New Zealand in 1890, she had a number of stories with a stone age setting published in Australia's *Lone Hand* magazine, starting with *As It Was In The Beginning* in the January 1908 issue. These have been described as marginal science fiction, and if true, the Norman Lindsay artwork would be the very first illustrations of any work of New Zealand science fiction. They were published as the linked collection *In the Beginning: Six Studies of the Stone Age and other Stories* (1909). Another story in this collection, *Halloween*, has lycanthropy as a theme, and may be the first work of horror by a New Zealander. Some time around 1922 she moved to

Australia, and became a prominent figure in the rather scandalous subculture of artistic creativity, wild parties and general debauchery in Sydney's King's Cross.



Deamer's novel *The Suttie of Safa* (1913) has been described as containing some fairly heated fantasy elements, but is more erotic-historical than fantasy. *The Devil's Saint* (1924) was published soon after she moved to Australia, and with its middle ages setting and witchcraft themes, is fantasy beyond question. An excerpt from the novel, *The Devil's Ball* was published in *Vision: A Literary Quarterly* in November 1923. The decidedly sensual illustrations were by Norman Lindsay. Set in the Roman Empire, and with a theme of reincarnation, *Holiday* (1940) was her final fantasy novel.

Long before Xena Warrior Princess, there was the Red Haired Woman: Norman Lindsay's artwork for Deamer's 1908 story, *As It Was In The Beginning*.



Robyn Hyde's *Wednesday's Children* (1937) was closer to magical realism than Deamer's novels. The main character is a woman living on an island near Auckland with a family of dream children by a variety of strange fathers. This may have been a way of expressing the author's pioneering progressive attitudes to love, sex and marriage, and justifying the circumstances of her own pregnancy outside marriage.

There is a fifty-five year gap between the publication of *In the Beginning* in 1909, and Adrienne Geddes's alien invasion novel *The Rim of Eternity* reaching the bookshops of 1964. Why the gap of over half a century? Did the people who had achieved so much in the Nineteenth Century simply stop writing science fiction for nearly sixty years? The answer? No.

The late Graham Stone, a Sydney bibliographer of Australian science fiction, quite literally spent thousands of hours going through Australian journals, newspapers and magazines, tirelessly searching for stories or serialised novels. What he found almost certainly applies to science fiction in New Zealand.

For example, from the 1940s to the 1970s "men's" magazines published more Australian science fiction stories than all the science fiction magazines put together. These were magazines featuring photographs and sketches of female nudes, suggestive cartoons, detective fiction and true-life adventures. The editors also included science fiction from time to time, because the teenage boys who bought the magazines for the photographs of women wearing nothing in particular also bought science fiction comics and went to science fiction films.

Australian newspapers also serialised novels, and from time to time those novels were science fiction. Earl Cox's *Out of the Silence* was originally serialised in *The Argus* newspaper in Melbourne in 1919, and Eric North's *Three Against the Stars* was serialised (under his pseudonym The Satyr) in the *Melbourne Herald* in the 1920, to be followed by *The Green Flame* in 1928. Newspapers like Sydney's *Daily Mirror* also published science fiction short stories in this period, as did children's magazines like *The Comet* in the 1930s.

Given that amount of science fiction present in Australian magazines and newspapers from this period, the assumption can safely be made that there is a similar body of science fiction and fantasy in New Zealand library archives. However, until someone decides to spend those thousands of hours going through every newspaper from every major New Zealand city from early European settlement until the 1960s, most of those works will remain undiscovered.

An easier body of work to research is that of New Zealand authors in overseas science fiction magazines. The contents of most of the major magazines are mostly indexed, online, and easy to search. Stories should be easy to locate, except for one problem: knowing the authors. For example, an Australian author of the 1950s, Veronica Wellwood, had two stories published in Authentic Science Fiction, but without Graham Stone's research we would not know that she was Australian. Ron Nicholson was a Sydney fan who had *Far From the Warming Sun* published in *Galaxy* in 1952. Again, without Graham Stone's work who would even know that he was Australian? Did any New Zealand authors get published in *Amazing*, *Astounding*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, *New Worlds*, *Nebula* or *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* from the 1930s to the 1970s? The answer is yes, because we do know of examples.

Australia and New Zealand have similar demographics, and the Australian experience is that when there is no specialist market for science fiction, it will find its way into mainstream markets. That definitely happened in New Zealand: *The New Zealand Times* published **George W. Bell's** *Mr Orseba's Last Discovery* in 1904, and it is unlikely to be the only example. Overseas science fiction magazines provide even more examples of New Zealand's science fiction from this period, and the stories are easier to track down,



Internal by
Virgil Finlay

Cedric Mentiplay migrated to Australia from New Zealand in 1946, and subsequently had three science fiction stories published in the men's (well, schoolboy's) magazine *Man: Hatred in Space* (November 1950), *Lifeline to Infinity* (July 1951) and *Ghosts of Tomorrow* (October 1956). He also had *The Eyes of Dromu* published in the American magazine, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, in the February 1953 issue. The latter story featured a full page illustration by the great Virgil Finlay. His style is confident, his science is - for the time -

competent, and the prose is a subtle blend of Australasian and American accents.

The Eyes of Dromu begins with an alien spacecraft crashlanding in the USA, and a World War Two ex-serviceman rescuing the alien pilot. The alien is from the interior or Jupiter, and thrives at a temperature that would melt steel. His race has been keeping humanity under observation for tens of thousands of years, but ever since nuclear weapons were invented there have been calls to wipe out the dangerously belligerent humans. The rescue of the alien pilot is seen as a strong argument in favour of sparing humanity. The influence of the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is undeniable, but it is nevertheless a very solid work of science fiction, and scientifically ahead of what was being written in Australia at the time.



D. S. Stewart's *Five* appeared in Britain's flagship science fiction magazine *New Worlds* in March 1961 and was followed by *Junior Partner* in the July issue. He was credited as being Australian, because he had moved to Australia by then. He was also listed as D. D. Stewart in the magazine, apparently due to a typing error. *Five* is the story of human

astronauts exploring a very Earth-like planet where the dominant intelligent species needs five individuals to form a reproductive unit. There are six in the human crew, which leads to a serious cultural misunderstanding, resulting in a well intentioned homicide. Although the style was a bit raw, the concept was original and well thought through. Stewart would have had to have read a lot of science fiction to have produced such a sophisticated work.

Contemporary science fiction was definitely available to aspiring New Zealand authors in libraries, bookshops and cinemas, and one could definitely be a science fiction author from New Zealand in the 1950s and 60s, so how much more science fiction was published in the first two thirds of the Twentieth Century? We know of seven science fiction stories by men: one in a New Zealand newspaper in 1904, and six more in overseas magazines. Janet Frame and Dulcie Deamer wrote another twenty-four, mainly fantasy, which gives a total of thirty-one stories. How many more are probably out there?

Sean McMullen's *Bibliography of Australian Science Fiction* lists 507 Australian stories published in Australia and overseas from 1900 to 1969. New Zealand had roughly a sixth of Australia's population over this period and demographically the populations were similar, so we can expect a sixth as many New Zealand stories to have been published. This works out at around 85 stories. Subtract the thirty-one stories that we do know about, and there ought to be another fifty or so science fiction and fantasy stories by New Zealanders that were published but are now lost in the archives.

A similar analysis for science fiction and fantasy novels published indicates that there should have been a dozen books by New Zealanders in this period. We do in fact know of exactly twelve in this period (six by men and six by women, which verifies the prediction. We also know of sixteen Australian women who had at least one work of science fiction or fantasy published between 1900 and 1969. Again assuming an Australian population about six times greater than New Zealand's, this means at least three women from New Zealand should have written science fiction or fantasy in this period. We know of six, double the prediction. We also know of six male authors who had novels published in this period, but none of those books came out between 1907 and 1967. It is unlikely that no men wrote any SF or fantasy novels for the whole sixty years, so what were these lost novels and who wrote them?

There are many gaps in the story of New Zealand's science fiction and fantasy in this period that may never be filled. When was its first science fiction play performed? It was a performance of a British play, *A Message from Mars*, in Wellington in February 1902. The New Zealand actor and playwright Richard O'Brien wrote the science fiction musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, which was staged in London in 1973, but was there nothing else staged in the intervening seven decades? Radio plays are by their very nature transitory, so were there broadcasts of futuristic visions by New Zealanders in the 1930s, 40s or 50s that have been forgotten? Unless there are keywords like rocket, satellite or nuclear in the published broadcast guides, we shall never know.