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Introduction

Sexual relations with aliens; free love among men and women; time travel; telepathy; world-shattering weapons of mass destruction; an astoundingly sophisticated vision about the problems of space flight; the first-ever discussion of off-world colonization by humankind; an urbane encounter with a friendly and intelligent nonhumanoid species; as well as the earliest mention of spacesuits, spacewalks, airlocks, shuttle craft, and planetary rovers: these are just a handful of the cutting-edge features to be found in volumes 1 and 2 of *The Great Romance*. The two novelettes, respectively only fifty-five and thirty-nine pages in length, were published separately under the pseudonym of The Inhabitant in 1881 in Ashburton, New Zealand.¹ This technological sophistication combined with a relatively not-too-turgid prose style that is commonly found in many scientific romances of the late nineteenth century make for a remarkable read. Hence *The Great Romance's* republication for the first time here within a single bound volume and with an extended critical introduction.

The Great Romance is an extraordinary written work for a variety of other reasons as well. First, it is possible that this work was the urtext for the frame story of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), the most widely read and, among the general public, most influential of all utopian literature—one whose impact “has often been ranked as second only to Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867).”² This relationship with *Looking Backward* becomes more likely when *The Great Romance* is compared to Bellamy's 1889 short story, “To Whom This May Come,” on which its influence appears pervasive.³ Second, *The Great Romance* is another indicator of just how widespread the writing and publishing of science fiction and utopian literature was in the nineteenth century. In particular it reaffirms a distinct antipodean tradition particular to New Zealand

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that includes the work of other well-known authors such as Samuel Butler, Jules Verne, and Anthony Trollope. Third, *The Great Romance* is one of the first works in the history of science fiction to provide a nondidactic depiction of an overtly alien species. The treatment that the “Venuses” receive, although paternalistic and laced with late-Victorian eugenic and Darwinian ideas, is sympathetic in nature. This rather benevolent depiction of intelligent alien life puts the work ahead of its time, since most contemporary science fiction novels (post-*The Great Romance*) generally tend to depict alien creatures as overtly threatening bug-eyed monsters. Finally, since alien species in science fiction are, as a rule, parabolically displaced in time and space by a postcolonial “Other” (such as the indigenous Maori peoples in *The Great Romance*), the attitude toward aliens and colonization presented in volume 2 not only illustrates a complicated late nineteenth-century British imperialist, racist, and militarist zeitgeist, it simultaneously serves to underline the more enigmatic and unique attitudes expressed by Pakeha (European) settlers toward the Maori people of New Zealand. Such an attitude makes the history of colonization in that former colony different from the history of contact with indigenous peoples in the rest of the British Empire. As M. P. K. Sorrenson reiterates with regard to this more distinctive European attitude in New Zealand, “The conflicts that resulted from European colonisation had much in common with frontier conflicts in other colonies—but there were also some marked differences. While in Australia ‘the Aboriginal was despised as a rural pest,’ in New Zealand ‘the Maori was respected as a warrior.’”⁴

For all these reasons, *The Great Romance* not only ranks with the well-known New Zealand-based science fiction and utopian texts from the turn of the century—such as Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872) and Julius Vogel’s *Anno Domini 2000; or, Woman’s Destiny* (1889)—but also deserves mention alongside some of the contemporaneous and more renowned science fiction texts of the European and American metropolitan world. Such an achievement is even more remarkable when one considers that this work was published in a small South

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Island agricultural town that even today boasts fewer than fifteen thousand inhabitants.⁵

Although published separately as two novellas, volume 1 can be further divided into two parts. It begins with the account of nineteenth-century protagonist John Brenton Hope who, after waking in a geographically unspecific location in the year 2143 following a deliberately induced chemical sleep initiated in a future 1950, discovers a wonderfully advanced society replete with mechanical marvels, immense orderly metropolises, telepathy, space travel, and a romantic love interest in the form of a beautiful young woman named Edith Weir. In what can be called the second part of volume 1 (which begins with chapter 8), Hope journeys to the planet Venus with two male companions, Alfred Weir (Edith's brother) and their mutual friend Charles Moxton. Their means of transportation is the scientifically advanced spaceship *Star Climber*. The purpose of their mission is to sound out the planet for future human settlement. Volume 1 ends with a landing on a very Earth-like Venus and the subsequent exploration of the new world. Volume 2 follows the story of Hope's companions' return to Earth in order to report their discoveries and to begin the transportation of human colonists, including Edith, back to Venus. During this return journey Weir accidentally remains adrift in space after the *Star Climber* makes an unplanned landing on a meteor; he literally falls off the face of this small peripatetic world. In the meantime Hope, who has been left on Venus to further explore the planet by himself, encounters a sentient, and by-all-appearances friendly, alien couple. The novel ends abruptly with Hope's quest to find other Venuses. It is not known whether a volume 3 was ever written and, if so, if it still exists.

PROVENANCE AND AUTHORSHIP

Volume 1, although neglected until recently, was included in A. G. Bagnall's *National Bibliography of New Zealand to the Year 1960* and Lyman Tower Sargent's bibliography of New Zealand utopian

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literature.⁶ The only known original of the work exists in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. Volume 2 was assumed to have never been written or lost until it was rediscovered during the mid-1990s at the Hocken Library in Dunedin. Apparently it had once formed part of Dr. Hocken's original collection.⁷ There is no listing of either novella in the National Library of New Zealand/ Te Puna Mātauranga O Aotearoa, the British Museum, the British Library, or the U.S. Library of Congress catalogs. Both volumes are briefly mentioned in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, which points out that *The Great Romance* exhibited "considerable scientific acumen."⁸ The mention, however, is found under the general rubric of science fiction, and the work neither merits a separate entry nor includes discussion of how innovative it was. As far as international literary criticism is concerned, only volume 1 is mentioned in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, albeit briefly as "NZ's first space story."⁹ Subsequent discussions examining various significant aspects of the work have also appeared in the journals *Science Fiction Studies*, *Kōtare*, and *ARIEL*.¹⁰

With regard to authorship, only the pseudonym "The Inhabitant" is given, a description quite common at the time for guidebooks in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The choice of nomenclature appears appropriate since the work purports to be, in part, a kind of guidebook from the perspective of a future traveler. As to the identity of the author, nothing further is known, although in his *National Bibliography*, Bagnall states without explanation that the writer was one "Honor of Ashburton." Dr. Hocken's annotation in the Hocken Library also mentions this same author. A search of various New Zealand databases identified one Henry Honor who had settled in Dunedin in 1858 but was listed as a carpenter by profession. In the 1880s a Henry Honor (with a single *n*) was also apparently working as a carpenter in Blenheim, two hundred miles to the north of Ashburton. To compound the mystery of the author's identity, yet another Henry Honor, this one from New Plymouth, also owned land in the Ashburton vicinity.¹¹ Furthermore, two farmers

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by the name of Herbert Honour and Henry Honour are listed in the 1880–1881 Ashburton Electoral Roll.¹² Unfortunately, there is no evidence linking the Dunedin-based Honnor, or any other Honors or Honours, to the text.

Most recently, Garry Tee at the University of Auckland has joined the fray, suggesting that the introductory dedication to John Keats in volume 1, for which there is no explanation and no obvious link with the story itself, is similar to another sonnet dedicated to Keats that was also published in Dunedin in 1881. According to Tee, its author was local solicitor Ebenezer Storry Hay (1850–1887), who wrote under the pseudonym “Fleta.” Although Tee suggests it is highly unlikely “that two people would both have published, in Dunedin in 1881, poems dedicated to John Keats,” there is no direct evidence to definitively link Hay with *The Great Romance*.¹³ Unfortunately, the destruction by fire of the *Ashburton Guardian*’s offices has made it impossible to check old records. In an attempt to identify The Inhabitant, searches have also been conducted of various Dunedin newspapers from 1881, including the *Otago Daily Times*, *Echo*, *Illustrated New Zealand Herald*, and *Saturday Advertiser*, as well as the literary sections of the *Otago Witness*, all to no avail.¹⁴ The only known contemporaneous reference to the novellas is an anonymous review that appeared on page 1 of the *Otago Daily Times* of February 18, 1882, which alludes to the volumes being the work of “a young writer.”¹⁵ We are left, like Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, with a text without an ending and no clear idea about the identity of the author.

THE INFLUENCE ON BELLAMY

Questions of authorship and the existence of a third volume aside, *The Great Romance* would be worthy of attention in its own right in the history of utopias and science fiction for its possible influence on *Looking Backward*. Bellamy’s novel recounts the tale of a wealthy Bostonian who, having fallen asleep in the year 1887, awakens in

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Boston in the year 2000 to see a wonderfully advanced society that had resolved, by way of nationalization, all the problems plaguing the industrializing nineteenth-century world. Partly because of the story line (especially the protagonist's psychological struggle to come to grips with awaking in a future society), and partly because of the timing of his vision (in a world struggling to accommodate the effects of rapid industrialization), the novel went on to become an international best-seller. Bellamy's Cabet-like clarion call went on to affect, in varying degrees, the Populist Party in the United States, the Fabians in Britain, revolutionaries in Russia, Zionists in Europe and Palestine, and labor leaders throughout the British settlement colonies. His optimistic vision of the future is reported to have also directly influenced numerous writers and thinkers, including Charles Beard, Anton Chekhov, Eugene Debs, Maxim Gorky, George Bernard Shaw, Leo Tolstoy, and H. G. Wells. By 1900 it had also generated more than fifty other utopian responses, the most notable being William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890).

The Great Romance and *Looking Backward* hold an intriguing number of similarities, suggesting that the former may have been the inspiration for the latter. Although varieties of stories about suspended animation, such as the twenty-year sleep in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1820), were a literary contrivance used well before the late nineteenth century, the narrators of both novels (Hope in *The Great Romance* and Julian West in *Looking Backward*) awake after especially long sleeps—193 years for Hope, 113 for West. When Hope awakens he sees a strange man, who appears to be a mesmerist, staring at him. West, too, was put to sleep by a mesmerist. Both narrators fall in love with women named Edith, who coincidentally happen to be descended from the narrators' friends in their original time periods. In *The Great Romance* Edith Weir is descended from Hope's closest friend, John Malcolm Weir; in *Looking Backward* Edith Leete is the great-granddaughter of West's nineteenth-century fiancée, Edith Bartlett. Both Ediths are, not surprisingly, additionally described as dazzlingly attractive. Hope's Edith "swept completely all other thoughts or imaginations, joys, or sorrows, from [his] heart" (vol. 1,

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pp. 12–13; subsequent references here will use a similar but abbreviated format). West’s Edith is “the most beautiful girl [he] had ever seen.”¹⁶ Furthermore, both Ediths act as cicerones for Hope and West in their respective future worlds.

A further likeness between *The Great Romance* and *Looking Backward*, although one common to other fantastic tales, is that both authors assume the future will be, to quote The Inhabitant, a “GOLDEN AGE” (1.12). The cities of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries are depicted as the apotheosis of an urban planner’s dream. When Hope is first shown the cityscape of the future he sees “an immense city” where “the streets were as thickly peopled as the old London streets, but they were four times their width and planted with trees along either side” (1.16). West’s description of Boston in the year 2000 is similar: “At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings . . . stretched in every direction.”¹⁷

Where the two works differ is in intent. The Inhabitant appears primarily concerned with producing an entertaining read packed with a number of remarkably sophisticated technological visions. The text might have simultaneously doubled as a promotional piece aimed at attracting European settlers and visitors to colonial New Zealand. The reader simply has to substitute the overcrowded Earth of the twenty-second century for Europe of the nineteenth century, and a Venus full of wildlife, natural resources, and the odd friendly “native” for colonial New Zealand, for the booster intent of the novelette to become readily apparent. The Inhabitant even includes kangaroo-like animals as one of Venus’s exotic species, although kangaroos, which are unique to Australia (and not New Zealand), also appeared as Martian animals in Percy Greg’s pivotal 1880 science fiction work, *Across the Zodiac*, where they functioned as exotic proxies. It is possible, too, that rather than knowingly operating as a booster piece, *The Great Romance* may merely have been drawing upon the wealth of ideal imagery that had already been used to promote the young and distant colony.¹⁸

Nevertheless, if *The Great Romance* had been conceived primarily

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as a promotional device, it was certainly not the only New Zealand utopian work to do so. Elements of former premier Julius Vogel's utopian novel, *Anno Domini 2000; or, Woman's Destiny* (1889), also read like advertisements to promote the country, especially those relating to the healing properties of the country's thermal baths.¹⁹ On occasion the association of the nation with the fantastic may have been deliberately made in order to promote the country, as in George Bell's *Mr. Oseba's Last Discovery* (1904), which tells the story of an inhabitant from the center of the world who discovers utopia in New Zealand. It has been said that this text, which includes fulsome landscape descriptions and praise for New Zealand's trailblazing politics as well as photographs of some of New Zealand's politicians and scenic sites (many of which are entirely unconnected to the book), could have been underwritten by New Zealand's Tourist and Publicity Department in order to deliberately encourage tourism and investment.²⁰

In contrast to the potential promotional appeal of *The Great Romance*, the agenda of Bellamy's novel, although also propagandistic, appears to be the ideological polar opposite, namely, to emphasize the need for a socialist transformation that would end "the old laissez-faire capitalist order" and transform America "into an orderly society based on cooperation and social harmony."²¹ Bellamy's work is not, therefore, a glorified real estate advertisement. According to Paul Alkon, author of *Science Fiction before 1900*, one of Bellamy's additional aims was to argue that an efficient use of advanced technology could "liberate people for retirement at age forty-five."²² While this social agenda might seem a world away from *The Great Romance*, there is a hint of similar thinking when Hope proffers a vision of singing and vigorous workers who only needed "a few year's work in the early years of life" for there to be ample material provision for all of the technologically advanced Earth in the twenty-second century (1.25).

Stylistically the two works differ considerably. *The Great Romance* reads like a fevered dream in which The Inhabitant exhibits

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a passionate thirst for new experiences, an “appetite for the wonderful” (1.56) or an *innatus cognitionis amor* such as that expressed by Dante’s Ulysses. Chapter 20 of his novella is even entitled “Exploring the Wonder.” Bellamy’s story functions as a more practical reality, his paradise being restricted to Earth, where progress is achievable and not already existent, as in some fairylike land of luxury. Unlike *The Great Romance*, therefore, the Boston of Bellamy’s world offers a concrete blueprint for social action in this “reality” and does not necessarily depend upon a pseudoscientific turn in humanity’s evolution.²³

This emphasis upon evolutionary development raises a further significant difference between the two works, namely, the means by which these future utopias arise. Whereas *The Inhabitant* attributes the rise of utopia to the advent of telepathy, Bellamy envisions it as the result of nationalization. Consequently, telepathy plays no part in the cooperative Boston of 2000. Bellamy did, nonetheless, credit the rise of a utopian society to telepathy in his short story “To Whom This May Come.” In that tale a shipwrecked narrator is rescued from a group of Pacific islands by telepathic inhabitants. Here, as in *The Great Romance*, the fact that all thoughts are public and wicked intentions cannot be concealed, has resulted in everyone having only honorable thoughts or those who have undesirable motives are isolated. In both telepathic stories the utopians are friendly and the narrator finds a guide to educate him about the society as well as a beautiful woman to love.

Tales involving the theme of immortality have been a traditional staple of classical writing since the ancient Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*. In the same vein but in relation to interplanetary travel, a special sleeping drink was taken by humans to protect them from the vacuum of space in Johannes Kepler’s 1609 tale *Somnium*. Suspended animation and other variants on the theme are also topics frequently alluded to in *The Great Romance* and they provide an important basis for the plot. However, these are not aspects of the text that appear to be satisfactorily developed or explained. Early on in the story Weir

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informs Hope that “amongst the younger men and women, the old idea of perpetual life is reviving” (1.9). A short time later, during a conversation with Weir’s father, the latter warns him, “You are afraid to let nature take its course, you are strengthening your body with the perpetual elixir . . . hoping to give yourself a right to perpetual life” (1.30). Do Hope and some utopians desire to take the original sleeping draft again, or is there a new version of this potion extant that awards immortality without all the sleepy side effects? As if to support the latter, soon after landing on Venus the astronauts partake of their own stock of this “aqua vitae,” an elixir which, according to Hope, if taken with “discretion” will allow humans to “outlive the very world” they inhabit (1.53).

A further weakness in the text, related to the theme of immortality, is an obscure and very brief indication from a future fictional *Punch* publication suggesting that Weir was not the only one to take a sleeping potion. What’s more, the publication also indicates that both Weir and Moxton partook of a special chemical mixture. Moxton’s concoction, though, is described as being “not so good” (1.6). A few lines later the Weir of the twenty-second century tells Hope that “your friend [the John Weir of Hope’s century] left this world” (1.7). Some explanation as to why only Hope’s potion seems to have worked might have been helpful. It is also somewhat unsettling, although never fully explained in the text, that for a great deal of Hope’s time in suspended animation he was being subjected to psychic violation by whomever chose to read his thoughts. There had even been some discussion by these so-called advanced humans about terminating Hope’s life.

Just as Bellamy may have borrowed elements of his novel from contemporary sources, the same appears true of *The Great Romance*, for a possible relationship also exists between it and the dystopian text *The Coming Race* (1871) by the English politician and novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873). The connection between these two works deserves some comment. Not only do both deal with the evolution of the human race into a higher telepathic order but they

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also showcase the use of electromagnetic forces. The scenes in *The Great Romance* in which Moxton uses magnetism to control the movements of a stick and later to repel the clutch of a predatory flower are strikingly reminiscent of the rod used in *The Coming Race* to control what Bulwer-Lytton terms the “vril” (from which the British commercial name Bovril originated).

Although the “late nineteenth century saw a boom in occult romances featuring various kinds of extra-sensory perceptions,” the fact that *The Great Romance* stresses that these ESP powers are the result of humankind’s natural evolution—a factor only truly developed by science fiction writers of the twentieth century—serves to make this obscure and early New Zealand text all the more interesting.²⁴ Susan Stone-Blackburn, who discusses the treatment of psychic powers in early science fiction, calls Edward Bellamy’s “To Whom This May Come” “a trailblazer in its exploration of effects telepathy might have on society and in its suggestion that under special conditions evolution might distil ancient and genuine but sporadic and unreliable human psychic abilities into universal and reliable ones.”²⁵ It should now be evident that this trail was blazed not by Bellamy in 1889 but by The Inhabitant seven years earlier and that *The Great Romance* forms an important bridge between Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* and Bellamy’s short story.

The Great Romance is not the first text that has been mentioned as a possible source for Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Bellamy scholars, including his biographer, Arthur E. Morgan, have suggested that he may have borrowed some of his ideas from John Macnie’s 1883 dystopian tale *The Diothas*, which was written just after *The Great Romance*. According to Morgan, in both *The Diothas* and *Looking Backward*, “the device of hypnotism was used . . . [and] the hero had a sweetheart named Edith. On waking from the long sleep in each case the hero fell in love with a distant descendant of ‘Edith.’ In each case, too, the father or guardian of the heroine, a man of exceptional intelligence and culture, became interpreter of the new world to the

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hero who had emerged from the nineteenth century. Each of these works foresees radio, television, automobiles, and other technical developments.”²⁶

As there is no direct evidence linking Bellamy with *The Inhabitant’s* text, or even with *New Zealand* (which Bellamy never visited), a probable scenario—excluding an unlikely but not impossible situation in which Bellamy somehow came across a copy of *The Great Romance*—is that Macnie himself was influenced by the novella and he in turn influenced Bellamy. While there is also no proof that Macnie had read *The Inhabitant’s* work or had even visited *New Zealand*, there does exist a substantial body of circumstantial evidence to link Macnie with the former colony. In *The Diothas* Macnie referred frequently to *New Zealand*, which he called “Maoria,” and he also wrote a great deal about the progress that the colony had made over the centuries. Furthermore, the protagonist of his utopian story, Ismar Thiussen, was mentioned specifically as coming from the North Island of the country.²⁷ If Bellamy’s biographer can suggest that there are enough similarities between *The Diothas* and *Looking Backward* to support the possibility that Bellamy may have borrowed some of his ideas from Macnie, and since the similarities identified between these two texts are virtually identical to those between *The Great Romance* and *Looking Backward*, it stands to reason that there might have been a relationship between Bellamy and *The Inhabitant*, albeit an indirect one.

SCIENTIFIC REALISM

While a number of space-travel stories were published earlier than *The Great Romance*, there were perhaps only a handful that provided so detailed and extensive an account of the difficulties involved, namely Jules Verne’s *Autour de la Lune* (1869) and Percy Greg’s *Across the Zodiac*. Otherwise many of these earlier works, according to David Pringle, “tended to turn a blind eye to the problems involved in moving outside the Earth’s atmosphere.”²⁸ Instead these early works are often credited with being “flights of fantasy using the journey itself