

REFLECTIONS

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REREADING S. FOWLER WRIGHT

The novel of the remote future has been my special favorite among science fiction genres since I first discovered H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* when I was ten or eleven years old, just after the Second World War. Wells' vision of the vast vistas of time to come led me to seek out other books of the same type—Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night*, Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, and, when I was about fourteen, S. Fowler Wright's *The World Below*. They all made profound impressions on me, the Wright not the least. And so after many years I have given *The World Below* a second look. It proved to be both more and less than the book I remembered.

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I didn't know anything about S. Fowler Wright when I first read *The World Below* and I don't know much more than that about him now. He was a prolific British writer whose writing career began at the age of fifty after he had been an accountant: his long life stretched from 1874 to 1965, during which time he produced many novels, a translation of Dante, and a biography of Sir Walter Scott. He seems to have been an odd sort, bitter and misanthropic, whose life brought him many disappointments; few of his many books attained any sort of popular success, and all, even his masterpiece, *The World Below*, are hard to find in print editions today, though a Fowler Wright website provides the texts of all of them.

I own three editions of *The World Below*. I first heard of the book in 1949, when Shasta Publishers, a small press operating out of Chicago that offered a select list of books by Robert A. Heinlein, L. Sprague de Camp, Alfred Bester, and others of that level, reissued the 1929 British edition. But the Shasta book cost \$3.50, an enormous amount for a schoolboy in those days, and so I imported a very much cheaper edition from England, done by a company called Books for Today. My copy, surprisingly, had been autographed by Wright, and bears a lovely, mysterious jacket illustration depicting the novel's protagonist and three of the strange creatures he encountered during his journey through distant time. Then, in 1951, *Galaxy* Novels, the paperback adjunct of *Galaxy*, the newest and instantly dominant magazine of the field, issued the book in two volumes, as it had originally been published in England—the first bearing the title of *The Amphibians* and the other called *The World Below*. Later I acquired the Shasta edition also, and that, too, was signed by Wright—did he sign every copy of his books? There do not seem to have been any other editions until recently, when various new publishers, taking advantage of the book's public domain status, have brought it back once more via print-on-demand and Internet distribution.

The book opens, as *The Time Machine* does, with a prologue set in modern times, in which the protagonist is about to be shipped into the future after a brief conversation with a few friends. Wright was aware of the Wells novel—one of his characters refers to it on page three—but he makes no attempt to invent a counterpart of Wells' time machine, which Wells had described as a sturdy chariot with glistening brass rails and quartz rods and nickel bars. Indeed, he does not describe the device at all. Our narrator—his name is George, and that's all we know about him—will depart from an empty circular room with gray metal walls. His goal is to find Brett and Templeton, two previous time travelers who have been sent into the future and remained there. That might seem like a rash thing for George to be doing, but Templeton had made an ear-

lier trip from which he had safely returned, only to insist on making another voyage in time the next night. So George knows there is some hope of coming back intact from his journey. And, as we will learn, he is bold by nature, a willing venturer into the unknown.

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Wright was a Dante scholar, and his knowledge of the *Divina Commedia* shows in the form of his novel, which, like Dante's poem, portrays a journey through a very strange place. *The Inferno* opens with Dante lost in a dark wood, where he encounters the poet Virgil, his guide through the subterranean regions of Hell. Wright's narrator arrives on an "unbroken plain of purple-brown, on which were growths of one kind only, compact and round, and averaging some eight feet in height, like gigantic cabbages in shape, and of a very vivid green." Behind him rises a great cliff, and in front of him is a radiant paved path about twenty feet wide. "The whole scene," we are told, "was one of great though alien beauty." Armed only with an axe and a clasp-knife, he walks briskly forward until he comes to the mouth of an enormous cavern, where "someone who was neither man, nor beast, or monkey" appears, "someone who ran without effort, but as in urgent and silent fear."

This is a sleek humanoid figure, sexless but somehow feminine, "her" whole body covered with fur, who is immediately seized by tentacles emanating from a creature in the form of a bright-green globe. George frees her with blows of his axe, but not soon enough; the strange being is mortally injured, and, telepathically ordering him not to touch her body, instructs him to carry word of her death and the location of her body, which apparently is capable of resuscitation, to her kinsfolk on some distant beach. He already has the task of finding his two time traveling predecessors; now he has a second obligation laid upon him, one that he seems to have no intention of refusing, though he has no idea how to carry it out.

We are just a few pages into the book and already there is plenty of strangeness in this world of what we will eventually learn is half a million years into the future: a radiant opalescent roadway, predatory green globes, a lithe furry humanoid being. Good. What a far-future novel ought to deliver is plenty of colorful visionary wonder. Certainly Wright's book delivers that, as I saw quickly on this rereading. We will find that the world of 500,000 A.D. is populated by all sorts of unfamiliar beings, not just the furry humanoids (who are the Amphibians of the first volume's title) but also the Dwellers, a race of yellow-skinned giants twenty or thirty feet tall, and sinister-looking bat-winged beings of a somewhat humanoid shape, and little malignant ape-like things with huge, gaping, frog-like mouths equipped with fierce teeth, and many more. Yet, as the passage I quoted above should indicate, Wright's prose is oddly pedestrian even as he unrolls his skein of futuristic wonders. His narrative voice is flat, uninflected, weighted in a sort of Victorian way with a host of subordinate clauses that weaken the vividness of his descriptions. ("On hearing this, she at once set out again, though the day was then dawning, and the open paths had to be taken as a new peril; she found her would-be rescuer herself captured, and apparently in the greatest danger, and on her return to obtain the help which was essential, had encountered me, with the result of which I knew already.") I found the flatness of Wright's prose the biggest surprise of this new reading, for I remembered the book as awash with bright colors, as I believe a novel of the far future should be. (My own attempt at such a book, 1969's *Son of Man*, pulls out all the stops in that regard in an almost psychedelic way.) But that was not the case here.

Nevertheless, the steady unveiling of new marvels draws the reader on and on; and there is an element of philosophical debate in the book, an investigation of great moral issues, that perhaps I had not noticed when a boy, but which holds considerable power now. These investigations call all our era's values into question, and George is

hard put to defend them against the Amphibian's probings.

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The Virgil of the book soon appears: another of the furry Amphibians, who affiliates herself with George, protects him in time of danger, sustains him as his strength fails, and explains to him the strange world in which he finds himself. Their relationship becomes, in fact, a curious sort of sexless love story: she regards him as less than human, an interesting but primitive beast out of the distant past, whose attitudes toward almost everything show mere animal amorality, and yet, linked as she is telepathically with his mind, she comes to feel a certain affection for him, as one might for a particularly intelligent pet, and he is surely very much in love with her. Wherever there is a decision to be made as they travel together, they discuss it—often at great length—in a kind of Socratic way, testing each other's positions against the very different moralities of their very different species. Sometimes she expresses her disgust at his views; and sometimes she sees something fascinating about the utter alienness of his mind and of the culture he has come out of.

Wright's misanthropy is shown not only by his savage Swiftian satire of our own era (the relationship between George and his guide is at best that between the houyhnhnms and the yahoos of *Gulliver's Travels*, though she tries to shield him from the full force of her contempt) but also is revealed, perhaps unintentionally, by the fact that man and all his works have utterly vanished from the world of 500,000 A.D. as though they never were: not even a ruin remains, not a stump, not the outlines of some ancient wall. The various denizens of the future are vaguely aware that in distant prehistoric times there was some sort of precursor race that destroyed itself through its own foolishness and evil ways, but their existence is hardly more than a myth. To the Amphibians George is an animal, and to the dominant race, the gigantic Dwellers who live in underground caverns, he is scarcely more than a kind of vermin, to be kept for scientific study and then, perhaps, to be dissected and discarded.

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George carries out his double quest and the book ends, somewhat inconclusively, with his return to the twentieth century and his announcement that, like the earlier adventurer Templeton, he wishes to return to the world of the Amphibians and the Dwellers. Wright evidently intended to complete the book with a third part, but the exigencies of his life in his later years prevented him from doing it. (The British SF writer Brian Stapleford has written his own third volume of the book, but I have not seen it.)

It is a powerful book, for all its weaknesses of style and structure. Certain scenes have stayed with me for fifty years: the one in which a panther-like creature retrieves her cub from a ghastly little carnivore that has swallowed it, and another a cold, eerie trial scene in which some of the bat-like beings are judged, and judged harshly, for having conducted themselves by the mores of their own kind in violation of those of the Dwellers and Amphibians. Those two scenes stand out; but the whole book has the chilly clarity of a very strange dream, a dream that is not quite a nightmare but which, as a novel of the far future should, observes a logic that is not the logic of our world at all. Weeks later, it echoes in my mind.