

# Not the Last Word: Point and Counterpoint

## The "Sweet" and the "Swill": Farewell Welfare?

Chris Goddard

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen" (Orwell, 1949). The opening lines of *1984* have passed into the collective consciousness, gathering the familiarity that is reserved for great works of literature. The 'Ministry of Truth' was Winston Smith's employer and the name is now applied by journalists to the Victorian Government's media unit.

Much science fiction has been treated with condescension and the label of approval, 'literature', has been applied sparingly, if at all. I have enjoyed the genre since reading *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. The terror and adventure of the story of the invasion by Martians held me enthralled, but the real thrill for me as a schoolboy was that much of the early action took place where I lived.

The astronomer, Ogilvy, who was to die in the first round of the invasion, lived in Ottershaw, Surrey, where I went to primary school. His sitting room faced the village, as did ours. 'The Thing' landed on the common between Ottershaw and Woking, where I went to secondary school. The double-decker bus that took me to school in Woking passed through the common. For months I longed for one of the strange cylinders that Wells described to drop out of the sky and create mayhem. Every morning I looked across the heath and heather for the blue smoke and fire that heralded the arrival of the Martians.

The Martians' heat-ray destroyed Woking station fairly early in the story. My school stood adjacent to the station and I can remember the disappointment I experienced every morning to discover that the station, and my school, were still standing and that the "vast spider-like machines, nearly a hundred feet high" had not appeared and done their job.

These memories, and others, returned when I read George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*, a powerful and frightening view of the future. Turner's book, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke award and described by some as a masterpiece, depicts a Melbourne only a few generations from now. The scene is a grim one.

The tower blocks are 70 storeys high and house 70,000 people. Animals are more precious and, therefore, given more space, and each of the tiny flats with blocked sewers and a tenuous water supply 'houses' a dozen or so adults and children. These are the 'Swill Enclaves'. Australia is divided into those that have jobs, the Sweet, and those who live on state charity, the Swill:

Even servants could look down on Swill. Actually, very few of the Sweet kids of the day had ever seen a Swill person; the ghetto lines were finely drawn . . . Nine out of every ten of Australia's population were Swill and many other countries were in worse case. Living familiarity with such knowledge, the horror of it passed us by; it was the normal condition of the world.

(Turner, 1987: 38)

The Sweet life is very different:

We had our own four-roomed house on our own standard block with two metres of lawn strip in front and three metres of back yard and a share in the community satellite dish.

(1987: 38)

How has this come about? The Greenhouse effect has melted the poles and glaciers; a few centuries later it is explained thus:

They fell into destruction because they could do nothing about it; they had started a sequence which had run its course in unbalancing the climate. Also, they were bound into a web of interlocking systems — finance, democratic government, what they called high-tech, defensive strategies, politically bared teeth and maintenance of a razor-edged status quo — which plunged them from crisis to crisis as each solved problem spawned a nest of new ones.

(1987: 26-27)

The year 2033 was a turning point for Australia: bowing to world pressure, a third of Australia (the uninhabitable third) was given to "ant-hordes of Asians" pushed out of their countries by uncontrolled birthrates. Using weather-control and masses of fertilizer, crops were grown in these unsuitable areas but at a price: the world's weather was disrupted and Australia's water became undrinkable (Turner 1987: 48-49).

Much of the problem goes unreported because the Sweet don't want to know and the State doesn't want the Sweet to be interested in the plight of the Swill. The Swill gang-leader, Billy Kovacs, asks the central question:

Swill are nothing because they do nothing because there's nothing for them to do. It costs the State money to keep them alive. How long can that last? One day the State will begin killing them off because it can't afford them any longer. They'll be wiped off the books and respectable Sweet won't have to go on hiding from their own guilt.

(1987: 63)

According to Butor (1971) there are three rubrics of science fiction. Firstly, it can take us to unknown worlds (e.g. Ray Bradbury). Secondly, science fiction can also place us in a position where we are brought face to face with unknown visitors (e.g. *The War of the Worlds*). Thirdly, we can be taken into the future (e.g. *1984*, *Brave New World* and *The Sea and Summer*).

Science fiction is in fact frequently judged by the accuracy of its predictions. Jules Verne, for example, is said to be the 'inventor of science fiction' (a rightly disputed claim) who, according to Costello (1978), saw much of what was to happen to the world. Nuclear submarines at the North Pole; Americans on the moon; Soviet satellites in space, orbiting the Earth; and airships over the Arctic wastes; all these events and more were 'prefigured' by Jules Verne, Costello claims (1978: 15).

The future of *Brave New World* opens ominously indeed. The reader visits the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre where human beings are created on the conveyor belts that were once part of a Ford production plant. Babies are incubated in bottles. At eight months Delta babies are conditioned to hate books and flowers; books because they might be introduced to unsettling ideas, and flowers because they are free. Conditioning constricts man to his designated function. 'Mother' and 'Father' are obscene words. Hygiene has become a religion. Some of these predictions appear to be closer than others.

But itemising what has been accurately predicted and what is likely or unlikely misses the fundamental point. Some predictions, to be sure, have come true. By the law of averages, one suspects, they must. As I write this, for example, I am reminded of the accuracy of one of Orwell's predictions: a police helicopter noisily chops the air above my home.

Novels such as *1984*, *Brave New World* and *The Sea and Summer* have another purpose:

By a projection into the future, we open up the complexity of the present . . .

(Butor, 1971: 1588)

I would like to add to this. Such literature also subjects to scrutiny our view of the past, of history. In *1984*, after all, it is Winston Smith's job to distort history to serve the purposes of the totalitarian state (Schmerl, 1971). In *Brave New World* "History is bunk" and people in the year A.F. (After Ford) 632 are taught nothing of the past (Huxley, 1984: 38).

Most importantly, though, these novels sharpen our view of the present. This was brought home to me on the day I finished reading Turner's book. *The Age* carried an article by Mark Metherell entitled "Is the caring sharing era over?" (*The Age*, 28th July 1989). According to Metherell's article, annual surveys conducted by the Australian National University have put the question: "If the Government had a choice between reducing taxes and spending more on social services, which do you think it should do?"

Metherell reports that in 1967 68% said more social services and 26% said reduce taxes. By 1987-88, the answers had all but been reversed: 26% said more social services, 72% said reduce taxes. A leading social economist, Professor Gruen, is quoted as suggesting that Australians are now hardened to the close coexistence of poverty and prosperity. (How close this is to Turner's description of the Swill, above). Metherell notes that under the Hawke Government spending on social security, as a proportion of gross domestic product, has dropped from 6.9% in 1983 to an estimated 6.0% in 1989/90.

This article in *The Age*, combined with others in recent times suggesting that high property prices and soaring interest rates have created two Australias made up of those who own property and those that do not, bring the conditions of *The Sea and Summer* somewhat closer.



The nightmare of Turner's world was created by "the Greed Syndrome":

... the pursuit of wealth, the survival of the wolf; the sapping of the money system as starvation mounted ... statesmen and philosophers and bleeding hearts all helpless against *I want, I want*, as the Earth's resources were sacked to shore up the illusion of an endlessly expanding economy.

(1987: 97)

All this was made possible by people "deliberately not knowing" (1987: 64). This, perhaps, is where the hope lies. Turner's novel describes an anti-utopia to be sure. As such it raises the questions that other anti-utopia novels have raised. Of these, the most important, according to Howe (1982: 307), is the choice between the pain of independence and the 'contentment' of obedience.

Howe (1982) points out that the central question in novels like *Brave New World* has been whether satisfying all our material wants will destroy our desire for freedom. Turner's novel, *The Sea and*

*Summer*, has moved us on to what is now, hopefully, recognised as the central, crucial realisation that faces us all: attempting to satisfy all our material wants will not only destroy our desire for freedom but will ultimately destroy us all. One can only hope that this is going to change the responses in next year's survey by the Australian National University.

*The Sea and Summer* is a magnificent Australian creation, a vision of a bleak Melbourne and a desperate world. It is science fiction and great literature. If it didn't sound like an order from Orwell's Big Brother, I would make reading it compulsory.

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