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Notes on Australian Science Fiction

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SPACE BUS TO VELLA, by Bettina Bird. Longmans Cheshire 1980. 101 p. 7" PB

D-MATT TO ORORIA, by Bettina Bird. Longmans Cheshire 1982. 95 p. 7" PB.

These were included in a Trend Series of varied content, designed for use in schools. They are noted here as Australian science fiction of a sort: lifelessly derivative of the imitative, all safe and familiar images of a homogenised family-viewing future, set in a fuzzily visualised interplanetary age, nothing controversial or (however halfbaked) original. But still a story with a remote foundation in scientific speculation.

In the first book a group of young space-station dwellers on a routine short trip run into trouble and finish up a long way from home among some friendly humanoids; in the second they are helped to get back home after some glitches. Well, it's a picture of life in another time, in another milieu with new resources and opportunities and -- though they are glossed over -- dangers and problems. It is a meek and unpretentious attempt at what science fiction is about.

But the style, the treatment, the constraints. These books are designed to give the young something to read, to promote reading; something carefully designed according to educational ideology, sorry, theory and with no dangerous ingredients. As such they are typical of a lot of garbage that primary schools inflict on their victims. The unstated assumption is that children don't read anything or have any other sources of information outside the classroom, making them a naive captive audience without taste or standards of their own to judge what they are given. This series, we are assured, is "graded into levels of reading difficulty. Vocabulary at the lower levels is introduced gradually and consolidated systematically. Sentence length and structure are controlled throughout but not at the expense of natural language." Indeed.

These books are intended for kids of nine and ten. Any parent of a nine or ten year old could tell Ms Bird that that age group know all about anything they will

find here. Saturated with input from television which includes plenty of background on space, other worlds, aliens and the common predictions, they are also used to livelier and less elementary and inhibited stuff in comics and have seen real children's books.

Printed in overlarge type and embellished with illustrations in a carefully flavorless style, the effect is paralytically dull as well as patronising.

The CELESTIAL HAND, a Sensational Story, by Joyce Vincent. J.C.McCartie, Sydney 1903. 256 p. 7½"

This item appeared in Stan Larnach's pioneering Checklist of Australian Fantasy with the annotation "A red hand in the eastern sky portends the destruction of Sydney", which was not promising. I approached the book with little hope as part of my examination of all Larnach items. I expected something of a mystical or evangelical cast. But not in your life.

Sure enough, there is an apparition of a great red hand in the east -- the east, mark you, the East! With a backup campaign of posters and dodgers promising doom on the way for Sydney. But this incident is only one among many marvels, and sensational is certainly a good word for the book.

There is a mystery of an apparent mining operation carried on behind a high fence on Sydney's North Shore, with nobody in authority seemingly aware of it being there or caring about it. Armed guards of oriental physiognomy excite the populace by shooting an intruder before many pages have passed (this, after all, is what armed guards are for) but still there is no immediate OK Corral action. Part of the purpose of the fenced enterprise proves to have been construction of a gun capable of firing a missile to Melbourne, but meanwhile there are other practical jokes like the hand, and what seems to be a pterodactyl flitting around, before we get to the main action of the book which is a Chinese attack on Western civilisation with poison gas and other novel weapons.

One of the more preposterous Yellow Peril books.

Notes on Australian Science Fiction

INVASION, by John Wallace. Popular Publications, Melbourne nd (1940). 288 p. 7½"

Well, this does have some imagined technical advances so the thought was there. We'll call it science fiction though it is not very impressive. There is a German scheme to attack Australia with biological warfare but not much is made of it. The main action is about spies after details of a radical aircraft, and this is where we have some doubts.

This war-winner has airscrews fore and aft counter-rotating to eliminate torque, and its airfoils are reduced to small fins since its velocity is enough to keep it aloft (sic). Named Swordfish, it is fitted with a sharp projection at the front for ramming opposing fliers. Now, this was not what aircraft designers were visualising for future development in 1940. It rather suggests the kind of thinking of perhaps 1910. But there is no other indication that this book might be something resurrected from some old source which would explain how Wallace came to be so outdated in his prediction.

The RADIUM TERRORS, by Albert Dorrington. Doubleday Page, NY 1912. 3-361 p. 7½". Front, 3 pl. by A.C. Michael.
-- Eveleigh Nash, London 1912. 316 p.

-- originally serialised in The Scrap Book, NY, Jan-Aug 1911, and in the Pall Mall Magazine, London in 1911, dates unknown.

Born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1871, Dorrington lived in Australia from 1887 to 1907 and wrote a fair amount of fiction of which only two novels seem to be of interest here. The Radium Terrors is one of many books in which vague if remarkable properties were ascribed to radioactive materials. Radioactivity caught the public imagination about the turn of the century when little enough was known about it but there were great hopes, and popular understanding did not improve much until the new panic reaction after 1945. In this detective novel a Japanese villain working in London uses radium to cause blindness and other afflictions and provides treatment at extortionate rates. An un-

usual wrinkle is the theft of radium using a trained rat.

THE HALF-GOD, by Albert Dorrington. Wright & Brown, London nd (1933). 7-251 p. 7½"

Another lurid mystery novel with a scientific or pseudo-scientific motif of a new highly radioactive element extracted from radium and given the Name Zeu, hence the title. As with the earlier book the setting is London and the wickedness provided by Japanese, and the advance of science over twenty-one years is not reflected in any improvement in the author's familiarity with radioactivity. This time the existing small sample of the new element is stolen using a trained bee, less plausible I would think than a rat.

GOBI OR SHAMO, A Story of Three Songs, by G. G. A. Murray. Longmans, London 1889. 376 p. 7½"

Gilbert Murray, as he was usually known, was born in Sydney in 1866, son of Sir Terence Murray who was President of the NSW Legislative Council, brother of Sir Hubert Murray the long-serving Administrator of Papua. He went to England at eleven, but that's all right. We count them as Australian authors if they leave, we count them if they come here from abroad. He was a Professor of Greek at Glasgow for ten years, then at Oxford for twenty-eight; author of works such as History of Ancient Greek Literature and Five Stages of Greek Religion and numerous translations, recognised as the pre-eminent classical scholar of his time, died in 1957 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Apart from his professional work he wrote books on the League of Nations and modern international affairs, plays and this one work of fiction which he dashed off in a month for something to do in the vacation.

Gobi or Shamo is one of the classic Lost Civilization adventures, telling of an ancient Greek enclave in central Asia which has some remarkable devices, a force-field and a stored-energy explosive missile of immense power.

And here we are again with the duds, the rejects, the gay deceivers. The books which, on examination, prove to be not science fiction, or not of enough interest. This is an undertaking fraught with perils, for after all where does one stop? I couldn't set out to list all the fiction of Australian origin that's not SF, and it's not really a proposition to list all that might be thought to be SF either. After all, I couldn't predict what someone out there might think.

What I'm doing in this series is examining books that are rumored or suspected to be science fiction, or that are declared to be science fiction by someone I don't consider reliable or can't even identify. Some booksellers are in the habit of carelessly categorising books or listing books that they think ought to interest SF readers even if not right on target. There are besides people running around out of control who declare themselves to be into "fantasy (whatever that is) and science fiction", so one never knows whether something they may mention is relevant or not. Defining what should be described as "fantasy" would not be as simple as might be thought. Ultimately all fiction can be called fantasy if we're going to treat it logically. As a rule of thumb I think any appearance of spooks, gods or devils, reincarnation or metempsychosis, magic, lycanthropy or vampirism or similar phenomena would make a story fantastic to most of us. On the other hand, it might be argued that events taking place in the future are "fantastic" or that a supposed new scientific development even if one that is clearly possible and expected should be called "fantastic" if it hasn't yet become a reality. As a matter of fact, before science fiction existed as an established category that's just how critics described stories of new inventions or whatever.

So I am looking at books which have been mentioned somewhere, which the unsuspecting SF reader is likely to hear of as something of possible interest. I ought to say that while not belonging in the area of interest here some of these books may have merit from other

Or not, as the case may be
points of view.

Some of these must have crept into the scene as other works by someone who has indeed written something of interest. Some may merely seem to have suggestive titles. Some look promising but do not deliver. There are books with so little content that can be considered that it is hard to say what their subject is: these are common among older books. Some books are apparently or nominally set in the future, usually the very near future, but this is merely a device to introduce something that might happen at any time but obviously has not happened yet, usually a political change. It is easier and safer to write about an imaginary government than to attack the one we are stuck with. Some books have settings that cannot be identified with any known time or place -- some authors seem to find this easier than dealing with real places which would call for detailed knowledge and understanding -- but with that out of the way tell stories not involving any scientific possibilities.

The INVASION, by W. H. Walker (pseud. i.e. George Ranken) Turner & Henderson, Sydney 1877. 159 p.

Books about Australia being attacked by wicked foreigners are legion, usually they are the Asiatic hordes. It is rare for such books to introduce any new weapons or other predictions other than the military action, indeed the details are usually out of date for their own time. Here it is the Russians who are the threat, and an attack on Sydney is repulsed. Why would someone named Ranken choose to write as Walker?

A FEW HOURS IN A FAR-OFF AGE, by Mrs. H(arriet) A. Dugdale. Author, Melbourne 1883. 105 p. PB.

A vision of a remote future, quite unrationalised. Attention is on education viewed as a family activity, and a mother and children discuss the faults of ancient times, that is the 19th Century. The oppression of women in 19th Century Australia is rightly deplored but no positive action to break it down is proposed. There are some vague references to the future world,

Or not, as the case may be

which seems to have had some climatic change and land movements historically and aircraft are mentioned without details. Not enough.

The GOLDEN IDOL, a Tale of Adventures in Australia and New Zealand, by. M. C. Walsh. Donohoe, Chicago 1891. 333 p. front.

There is no evidence that the author was ever in Australia or New Zealand, indeed I would guess not. The action is varied, with some criminality in England and Australia. Mention of a gold image in an old manuscript leads eventually to New Zealand after a side trip to the Ballarat gold diggings and an encounter with bushrangers, which places it in the 1870's. Sure enough there is a gold idol found in a cave, hauled away against some opposition from local natives. Not a lost race story, there is no description of a culture beyond the idol itself, and its owners are merely conventional spear-throwing savages.

The COMING TERROR, also issued as OLIVER SPENCE, by Samuel Albert Rosa.

The / Coming terror; / or, the / Australian revolution / (rule) / a romance of the twentieth century / By S.A. Rosa / (rule) / If there be any law that makes many poor to make one rich, that suits / not a commonwealth. -- Oliver Cromwell / Sydney: / Published by the author / 302 Parramatta Road, Petersham, / 1894. (8), 35 p. 8.75" PB. Port. Pictorial cover signed J. McNally. At head of cover: "Complete edition".

Oliver Spence, / the / Australian Caesar, / or / the coming terror / (rule) / Bu S.A. Rosa / (rule) / published by the author, / 302 Parramatta Road, / Petersham, / 1895. (8), 35 p. 8.75" PB. Cover: "Cheap edition".

These seem to have the same text and no other printings are known though the "Complete edition" note suggests an earlier one. The story predicts a despotic regime as a result of the federation movement then afoot.

Or not, as the case may be

The INVASION OF AUSTRALIA, by S. A. Rosa. Judd, Sydney 1920. 9-164 p. PB

A non-fiction work discussing the possibility of an invasion by some foreign power, probably European. Rosa gives figures to show how difficult it would be to undertake a successful invasion with the available means, and concludes that there is little danger.

ISBAN-ISRAEL, by George (Herbert) Cossins. Gay & Bird, London 1896. 276 p. 7"

Ah yes, the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Little heard of now, but once an inspiration to crackpots in a class with Easter Island or the Pyramid of Cheops.

The origin of this supposed mystery is complicated enough though the facts are known. There were originally twelve tribes when the Jews came out of the desert and took over the historic area. The original nation split into two after internal strife in the 10th Century BC, roughly the period when history was beginning to be verifiable from written records. Some two hundred years on the Assyrians clobbered the larger northern state, abolished it as a state and deported large numbers of its people to Assyria. No more was heard of them and these were the Ten Lost Tribes. Vanished, but remembered by their southern neighbours who recovered from a similar conquest by the Chaldeans in the following century.

de Camp and Ley comment in their Lands Beyond (Rinehart 1952): "For a tribe to disappear under stress of war and migration is the most natural thing in the world. Where are now the tribes of the Hittites, the Etruscans or the Goths? The Mystery is not that ten of the twelve tribes disappeared but that the other two managed to survive as a distinct cultural group despite so many adversities."

But that was too simple for mystery fanciers, and descendants of the Ten Tribes were imagined all around the world. Naturally they figured in 19th Century fiction.

In this lost-race novel by a South Australian author they are found in the interior of central Af-

Or not, as the case may be

rica, established in extensive caves, complete with Kafir retainers. Scientific content is nil. None of the technical marvels often associated with lost civilisations.

VISIT TO TOPOS, and how the science of heredity is practised there, by William Little. Berry, Anderson, Ballarat 1897. 28 p. 7¹/₂" PB

After a brief introduction this is a series of imaginary press extracts on various matters in a moralistic-religious utopia with emphasis on 19th Century ideas of eugenics. There is no discernable story so there seems nonead for the dream ending. There is no location given for Topos (which of course is a Greek word meaning "place") or any description of getting there. Little had been Mayor of Ballarat, not that this was any excuse. (I've made that remark before, have to stop it).

MOSTYN STEYNE, by Roderick (Joseph) Quinn. Robertson, Melbourne 1897. (5)-224 p.

In the 1890's it was possible to introduce a book as a manuscript written in the margins of a Bible found in a cave in the MacDonnell Ranges without inducing too much laughter, I suppose. It tells Steyne's history beginning in 1720; after an apprenticeship in poaching and smuggling in England he went on to piracy. Following a voyage to the Pacific via Cape Horn he finished up on the shores of Australia where his crew lost confidence in him and put him ashore. He didn't find anything in Australia not already familiar to the 19th Century reader, however.

FEDERATION AND AFTERWARDS, a fragment of history (A.D. 1898-1912), by A(rchibald) Nugent Robertson. Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1897. 60 p. 8¹/₄" PB

This is another entirely political prediction. Queensland and WA hold out against federation so it goes ahead without them. (Quiet, please.) The way it works out is grossly unfair to NSW prompting an unsuccessful attempt to secede. Supposedly written in 1915 with no indication that any of the problems are solved.

Or not, as the case may be

PHAROS THE EGYPTIAN, by Guy Boothby. Ward, Lock London 1899. 9-376 p. Ill. John H. Bacon, front. + 10 plates.

"Resurrection of an ancient Egyptian priest" says Larnach, so I didn't expect to give a positive report on this book. Nor can I, though there is just one bit that some might call marginal.

Pharos is a mystery man-about-town in London, and later on he says he is a surviving ancient priest -- details are nebulous, he might be reincarnated or long-lived. There is a tedious, obscure plot with various things going on, for instance Pharos finds a mummy in London which he says was an ancestor of his, appropriates it and returns it to Egypt. But there is mention of a major plague in Europe some two years before the time of writing, which Pharos is supposed to have in some fashion spread. Deliberately infecting people with some disease new or old might qualify as a perverted use of science. There's really not enough detail to say.

FUGITIVE ANNE, by Mrs. Campbell Praed. J. Long, London (1902). 437 p. New Amsterdam Book Co. NY 1903. same, with added col. front, ill. by Clare Angell.

Mistreated wife gives up on violent husband and absconds, accompanied by faithful black servant, into northern Australian wilds. After linking with an explorer they fetch up in a vaguely located region, maybe Cape York Peninsula, where local blacks have a tradition of an alien colony.

Sure enough there is a temple, in a state of disrepair, and some survivors of a group that once came from the sunken Pacific continent with Mayan connections. There is a giant turtle kept as an object of veneration -- its actual size is not at all clear, how large is a giant turtle? -- and Anne finds herself installed as new chief priestess of the cult. Happy ending of sorts.

As a lost race -- not lost civilisation -- yarn it's not too bad, but neither the tale of a lost continent nor the turtle brings it any closer than that.

Or not, as the case may be

MARK MEREDITH, a Tale of Socialism, by Charles Henry Chomley. Egerton, Melbourne 1905. 192 p.

As this was described as dealing with fifty years of socialism in Australia, there was always the slight **chance** that there would be some mention of marvels of modern science. Alas, no such luck. Merely another of the many predictions that socialism would prove dull and unrewarding.

The LIGHT OF MARS, an Extraordinary Communication, by Will Ford. Author, Sydney 1907. 52 p. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

A visiting Martian -- we are not told how he got here -- and a representative Terrestrial discuss the usual woes and problems of Earth. No information about Mars except what we might guess from the Martian's views. Generally the tone is anti-religious and what is proposed is rethinking of the whole mess along individualistic socialist lines.

FROM THE SOUL OF THE TI-TREE, by Edwina C(atherine) Geach. Lothian, Melbourne 1909. 11-94 p. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " port.

A memorial volume of sorts, though no details are given about the author except that she had died on 25 Dec 1905. This is another Larnach item, which he describes as "including fantasies and verse." The prose bits are sentimental sketches or fragments, none of interest here.

The AUSTRALIAN CRISIS, by C. H. Kirmess. Robertson, Melbourne; Walter Scott, London, 1909. 5-335 p. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

One of several Yellow Peril tales originating in the notable nationalistic magazine The Lone Hand, where it ran from Oct 1908 to June 1909 as The Commonwealth Crisis. For a change instead of launching an all-out surprise invasion the Japanese imperialists land settlers in remote areas to establish colonies before Australia wakes up that something is going on. Yes indeed. Oh, no scientific content.

The LAST SHOT, by Frederick Palmer. Scribner, NY; Robertson, Melbourne 1914. 2-472 p. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

This book by a presumed American author appeared first in New York in April 1914 and is not among the

Or not, as the case may be more notable books of the time about imaginary wars. Here we have a war between "Gray" and "Brown" nations, with the action as general as the appellations. There is nothing that could new beyond some indistinct references to use of aircraft.

The LOST VALLEY, BY J. M. Walsh. C.J.de Garis, Melbourne 1921. 215 p.

When a voluminous author is known for a few works in our field we naturally suspect that there may be points of interest in some more of his hundred-odd books, the more so those with promising titles. The Lost Valley however proves to be about some hidden loot in the bushranging period in Victoria.

OVERDUE, a romance of unknown New Guinea, by J. M. Walsh. States Pub. Co., Sydney 1925. 9-214 p.

Here we have a search for a lost yacht leading into a stock jungle adventure story. Incidentally, though the title page claims that this has "illustrations by Percy Lindsay" in fact there is only a frontispiece.

TZANE, a Novel, by J(eanie) L(ogan) Ranken. Nelson, London 1926. 281 p.

Hello, another Ranken. Whether related to the one who posed as W. H. Walker nearly fifty years before is not known.

"Commercialisation of a chemist's invention, involving quarrels over a secret formula, with South American complications." Thus E. Morris Miller. It looked a possibility.

On reading the book it seems that the good professor was improvising, unless he got the information that there was a "chemist's invention" involved from some other source.

"Tzane" is some kind of mineral or natural substance obtained from various localities, which is of great value for some purpose never explained. The action of the book revolves around a secret formula for use in improved processing of it in some way. Nowhere is there any indication of how Tzane is mined or

Or not, as the case may be

harvested, or what it is used for. Quite an achievement in its own way.

Obviously not one for us.

YIN-YANG, by Hardy Wilson. Author, Flowerdale, Tas. nd. (1934). 7-213 p. 7½". Ltd ed. of 220.

William Hardy Wilson, 1881-1955, was a noted architect, watercolor painter and author of a variety of works, though best known for his Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania (1924). Three of his private publications seemed possibilities.

"...fantastic aeroplane...world flight of marvelous proportions," quoting Miller again. I found it to be a whimsical tale perhaps conceived as a children's book which follows the travels of a Chinese scholar as traditionally portrayed. It is not rationalised, the various places visited not closely resembling what we know of them. After finding "Yin-Yang, the force which makes the world go round" in a New Guinea volcano he puts it to work to power an aircraft for further adventures.

COLLAPSE OF CIVILISATION, by Hardy Wilson. Author, Melbourne 1936. 19 p. 10".

This is nothing more than some vague thoughts on the world situation of the time, when Wilson was not alone in fearing for the survival of civilised life through the likely time of trouble to come. He had no better suggestion than to give up on technology and go back to a pre-industrial culture, which after all was at least one aspect of the dark age that was thought possible. He could not forbear plugging his own specialty architecture and the arts generally.

ATOMIC CIVILISATION, by Hardy Wilson. Author, Melbourne 1949. 109 p. 12½". 7 plates by the author. Ltd. ed. of 100.

It was a very different world by 1949, but here we have Wilson quite oblivious to most peoples' concerns, trying to relate everything else in history to aesthetics and talking about a world artistic revival, as far as I can make anything out of it.

Or not, as the case may be
FUTURITY, included in volume FOUR PLAYS, by Adrian Consett Stephen. Penfold, Sydney 1918. x11, 164 p. Port. 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

A memorial volume, the author having been a war casualty. Unfortunately Futurity is not of interest, its title referring to a discussion of heredity related to the unremarkable plot.

EVELYN, Something More than a Story, by James Francis Dwyer. Sampson Low, London nd.(1931?). ix, 214 p. 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Vanguard, NY same 1929, probably 1st.

A sentimental novel involving clairvoyance.

The AWAKENING, by George Dean Mitchell. Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1937. x, 280 p. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Ill. Noel Cook.

Once more, Australia beset. The warfare is traditional, and the invasion seems to be a joint German and Italian project. In no way of scientific interest but its Introduction by the infamous William Morris Hughes gives it value for some collectors.

DAYS AFTER TOMORROW, A Voice from 2000 A.D., by Frank R(obison) Kerr. Robertson & Mullens, Melbourne 1944. (5)-85 p. 7" PB.

Not exactly fiction. A supposed series of broadcast talks in 2000, very indistinctly referring to social conditions of that time. No specific reforms can be found but presumably the purpose was to show how we might live better. There was a lot of solemn oratory in Australia at the time about what a lovely world it might be after the war if only we did something which wasn't made clear, this is typical of it.

The DAY BEFORE TOMORROW, by Rie Throssell. Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1969. x, '83 p. 8"

Appears the first publication of a play staged in 1956. Not much of a play, set nowhere in particular after nuclear war, when apparently quite a lot of survivors are having a thin time under military rule. We might say marginal.

PIG, by Kenneth Cook. Schwartz, Melbourne 1980. 204 p. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Rigby, Adelaide 1983. 5-208 p. 7" PB.

How this thriller about hunting a feral pig came

Or not, as the case may be

to be listed as science fiction is a mystery that I do not expect to be explained.

BARD, by Keith Taylor. Berkley, NY 1984. 283 p. 7" PB

BARD II, by Keith Taylor. Berkley 1984. 260 p. 7" PB

Action in mythical times of ancient Ireland. Can't get much hairier than that.

The CHANGELINGS OF CHAAN, by David J(ohn) Lake. Hyland, Melbourne 1985. 170 p. 8½" HC/PB

An imaginary Asian country with supernatural elements.

-- G. S.

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