The Sea and Eternal Summer: Science Fiction, Futurology and Climate Change[1]

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Much science fiction has been both deliberately intended by its authors and deliberately received by its readers as value-relevant. Some, but not all, science fiction (henceforth sf) consists in future stories; and some, but not all, is concerned either to advocate what its authors and readers see as desirable possible futures or to urge against what they see as undesirable possible futures. In short, the future story can be used as a kind of futurology. Moreover, these futurologies are often preoccupied with questions concerning the relationship between humankind and its natural environment. As Patrick Murphy observes:

> Attention to nature has always been a significant aspect of sf . . . Detailed depictions of nature abound in hard and soft sf, and there exists a significant body of environmental and ecological sf. Ecocriticism offers a method for engaging the particularities of such works . . . (Murphy 380)

Sf of this kind is meant to be politically or morally effective, that is, to be socially useful. 'We badly need a literature of considered ideas', the Australian sf writer and critic, George Turner, argued in 1990: 'Science fiction could be a useful tool for serious consideration, on the level of the non-specialist reader, of a future rushing on us at unstoppable speed' (Turner, 'Envoi' 209). Three years earlier, in the 'Postscript' to what is by common consent his best and most explicitly environmentalist sf novel, *The Sea and Summer* (1987), Turner had written that: 'We *talk* of leaving a better world to our children, but in fact do little more than rub along with day-to-day problems and hope that the long-range catastrophes will never happen.' This novel, he explained, 'is about the possible cost of complacency' (Turner, *Sea and Summer* 318).

Despite the international success of individual writers like Greg Egan and of individual novels like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), Australian sf remains essentially peripheral to the wider contours of the genre. Yet, there is a long history of what Adam Roberts describes as 'works that located utopias and satirical dystopias on the opposite side of the globe' (Roberts 56), that is, in Australia. Lyman Tower Sargent's bibliography lists something like 300 Australian print utopias and dystopias published during the period 1667-1999 (Sargent 138-73). European writers made extensive use, then, of Australia as a site for utopian imaginings well before the continent's conquest, exploration and colonisation. There are two reasons for this, the one obvious, the other less so. First, Australia remained one of very few real-world *terrae incognitae* available for appropriation by European fantasy as late as the mid-late nineteenth century. And second, although Australia is conventionally described as a continent, it is also in fact an island, with all the properties of self-containment and isolation that have proven so helpful to utopian writers ever since Thomas More. In Australia, however, as elsewhere, as the nineteenth century proceeded into the twentieth, utopias were increasingly displaced by dystopias. The best-known Australian examples are almost certainly Shute's *On the Beach*, a nuclear doomsday novel, and

Turner's *The Sea and Summer*, one of the first novels to explore the fictional possibilities of the effects of climate change as a result of global warming. Both make powerful, albeit often scientifically implausible, use of Australia's self-contained isolation.

Much sf scholarship exhibits a certain antipathy to dystopia, essentially on the grounds that it tends, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, 'to denounce and . . . warn against Utopian programs' (199). But many dystopias, including some of those most disliked by Jameson, actually function as implicitly utopian warnings, rather than as 'anti-utopias' in the strict sense of the term. This is true, I would argue, for *On the Beach* and *The Sea and Summer*. Writing in *The Age* in January 2008, Peter Christoff, the then Vice President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, observed that *On the Beach* had 'helped catalyse the 1960s anti-nuclear movement.' Comparing the threat of nuclear war in the 1950s with that of global warming in the early twenty-first century, he warned that 'we are . . . suffering from a radical failure of imagination.' When Christoff connected *On the Beach* to climate change, he did so precisely to urge the need for a parallel contemporary effort to imagine the unimaginable. 'These are distressing, some will argue apocalyptic, imaginings,' he admits, 'But without them, we cannot undertake the very substantial efforts required to minimise the chances of their being realised' (Christoff 13). *The Sea and Summer*, it seems to me, had attempted more or less exactly this two decades previously.

Turner was born in Melbourne in 1916, and died in 1997. He published the first of five non-sf novels in 1959, began reviewing genre fiction for *The Age* during the 1970s, produced his first sf novel *Beloved Son* in 1978, followed by sequels, *Vaneglory* and *Yesterday's Men*, in 1981 and 1983, and, by the time of his death in 1997, had become in effect the genre's Australian elder statesman. He published four further sf novels between 1987 and 1994, *The Sea and Summer* (1987), *Brainchild* (1991), *The Destiny Makers* (1993), and *Genetic Soldier* (1994), a collection of sf short stories titled *A Pursuit of Miracles*, in 1990; two posthumous works, an unfinished novella *And Now Time Doth Waste Me* (1998), and the novel *Down There in Darkness* in 1999. All were essentially exercises in futurology, all preoccupied with the ethics of socio-political action, all distinctively Australian in tenor. By far the most critically successful was *The Sea and Summer*, which in 1988 won both the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award, for the South East Asia and South Pacific Region, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best sf novel published in Britain. In 1985 Turner had published a short story, 'The Fittest', in which he began to explore the fictional possibilities of the effects of global warming on his home city. He quickly expanded this story into the full-length novel, published in 1987 as *The Sea and Summer* in Britain, and as *Drowning Towers* in the United States.

As with *On the Beach*, *The Sea and Summer* is set mainly in and around Melbourne, a vividly described, particular place, terrifyingly transformed into the utterly unfamiliar. The novel is organised into a core narrative comprising two parts set in the mid twenty-first century, and a frame narrative comprising three shorter parts set a thousand years later, amongst 'the Autumn People' of the 'New City', located in what are today the Dandenong Ranges to the east of Melbourne (3-16; 87-100; 315-316). The core narrative deals with the immediate future of our 'Greenhouse Culture'; the frame narrative deals with the retrospective reactions to it of a slowly cooling world. The latter depicts a utopian future

society, which uses submarine archaeology to explore the drowned remains of the 'Old City' but which is also simultaneously aware of the imminence of a 'Long Winter' that might well last a hundred thousand years. The novel opens by introducing the frame narrative's three main characters: Marin, a part-time student and enthusiastic Christian, who pilots the powercraft used to explore the drowned city; his great-aunt, Professor Lenna Wilson, an expert on the collapse of the Greenhouse Culture in Australia, who teaches history at the University; and Andra Andrasson, a visiting actor-playwright from Sydney, researching the twenty-first century as possible material for a play (3-6). Together they explore the remains of the substantially submerged 'Tower Twenty-three' (6-11), investigate the ruins of the only Swill 'Enclave' never to have flooded (93-96) and debate their meaning both on-site and at the University.

The core narrative takes the form of a novel within the novel, also entitled *The Sea and Summer*, written by Lenna as an 'Historical Reconstruction' of the thirty-first century's real past (15). In form it is polyphonic, tracing the development of the Greenhouse Culture through a set of memoirs and diary extracts written during the years 2044-2061 by six main protagonists: Alison Conway, Francis Conway, Teddy Conway, Nola Parkes, Captain Nikopoulos and Arthur Derrick. The only silent voice is that of the Tower Boss, Billy Kovacs, the remains of whose flat Lenna and Andra eventually explore (9). Billy Kovacs is the novel's central character and also, perhaps, its central enigma. This core narrative is counter-chronological, beginning and ending in 2061, but moving through the 2040s and 50s as it proceeds. The sections set in 2061 might themselves be considered a frame within the frame. In the first of these, Alison recalls her own childish delight in play on the beach at Elwood, from the vantage point of what we will later learn to be the last year of her life. She wistfully concludes: 'The ageing woman has what the child desired—the sea and eternal summer' (20). In the second, her son Francis records his intermittent diary entries from the period February 2056 to March 2061, concluding with that for 20th March:

> Mum is dead . . . Once, she said very forcefully, 'I've had a *good* life, Francis. So full.' Full, I thought, of what would have been avoided in a saner world . . . Billy came in later, but by then she was rambling about the past, about summertime and the glistening sea. (311)

Professor Wilson's historical reconstruction depicts the twenty-first century as a world of mass unemployment and social polarisation, where rising sea levels have resulted in the inundation of the city's bayside suburbs. As the historical reconstruction opens, the poor 'Swill' already live in high-rise tower blocks, the lower floors of which are progressively submerged; the wealthier 'Sweet' in suburbia on higher ground; the 'Fringe' in the zones in between. In 2033 a third of Australia has been set aside for Asian population relocation, by 2041 the global population has reached ten billion and the cost of iceberg tows and desalinisation projects has brought the economy close to bankruptcy (29, 21, 30). On his sixth birthday in 2041, Francis and his nine-year old brother, Teddy, are taken by their parents, Fred and Alison, to see the sea. What they find is a concrete wall 'stretching out of sight in both directions'. Francis's mother surprises him, however, by explaining that:

> 'This is Elwood and there was a beach here once. I used to paddle here. Then the water came up and there were the storm years and the pollution, and the water became too filthy'. 'It must be terrible over there in Newport when the river floods', she continues: 'A high tide covers the ground levels of the tenements'. (23-24)

In 2044 Fred is laid off and commits suicide, leaving Allie and the boys to move to Newport (30-34). There they meet Billy, the local Tower Boss, who becomes Alison's lover, Francis's mentor and the reader's guide to the social geography of an Australian dystopia.

In adolescence both Teddy and Francis abandon their mother in pursuit of upward social mobility, although both will eventually be returned 'home'. For Teddy, mobility comes through formal education, leading to Police Intelligence Recruit School (48-49) and thence to a career as a Police Intelligence Officer. For Francis, it comes by way of an unusual aptitude for mental arithmetic, leading to a career as a 'cally that spouts answers without using a key or chip' (57) for illicit business deals. Each acquires an appropriate sponsor: for Teddy, 'Nick' Nikopoulos, a Captain in Police Intelligence (113); for Francis, Mrs Nola Parkes, the owner of a small import-export firm, who, after the collapse of the money economy, directs the State sub-department performing essentially the same function (72). Alison and the boys tell their own stories; Nikopoulos and Parkes retell the boys' stories from different vantage points. Eventually, these are all contextualised by Derrick, a senior State official with a quite literal power of life or death over the other characters (291). 'Why don't you all go home?', he tells them, 'We're finished here' (301).

The novel is at its most compelling in its representations of the everyday horror of life in the drowning towers, and of the sheer ferocity of status consciousness within a class structure mutating into a caste system. Both are recurrent motifs in both the frame and core narratives, although in the latter they invariably prove more telling because more experientially-grounded. There is a terrible poignancy, for example, to Francis's diary entries for 11 February 2056:

> Five years back in the Fringe and resigned to it. Not reconciled, never that.
> What a hopeless, helpless lot the Swill are. (306)

And 22 March 2057:

> Three times this month the water has raced through the house. Sea water, salt and cold. We pay now for our great-grandparents' refusal to admit that tomorrow would eventually come. (306-307)

In the novel's final sub-plot, Captain Nikopoulos, Billy Kovacs and Teddy discover that Mrs Parkes and Francis are unwittingly involved in a State-sponsored conspiracy to 'cull' the Swill by means of a highly addictive 'chewey' designed to produce infertility. 'A State that strikes its own,' Nola Parkes observes, 'at random, for experiment, is past hope' (303). Arthur Derrick's response is directed at Turner's twentieth century readers as much as at Parkes herself:

> Nola, idealism was for the last century, when there was still time . . . we're down to more primitive needs. The sea will rise, the cities will grind to a halt and the people will desert them . . . the State has no time to concern itself with moral quibbles . . . (304)

The debates amongst the Autumn People in the frame narrative are clearly designed to make meaningful sense of the Greenhouse Culture. For Marin, its meaning is straightforward and simple: 'They were wicked—they . . . ruined the world for all who came after . . . they *denied* history' (6). Lenna, however, conceives of their distant ancestors more sympathetically, as victims of the unintended consequences of their own collective action. 'In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,' she tells Andra, 'the entire planet stood with its fingers plugging dykes of its own creation until the sea washed over their muddled status quo. Literally' (13). Andra's own underlying response is incomprehension. Attempting to grapple with the social inequalities of the Greenhouse era, he can only ask '*How did this division arise? Why no revolution*?' (16). Lenna suggests the answer might lie in the 'rise of the Tower Bosses' to run 'small states within the State.' This allowed the poor 'a measure of contentment,' she explains, 'by letting them run their own affairs.' Moreover, she continues, the Political Security executive was also able 'to convince the Tower Bosses that only a condition of status quo could preserve a collapsing civilization' (93). Ultimately, however, Andra remains as uncomprehending as ever and, after 'three years and a dozen attempts,' abandons his play (315).

A primary effect of this frame narrative is to blunt the force of dystopian inevitability driving the core narrative. 'We're very well equipped to endure a million years of cold,' Lenna tells Andra, ' . . . We have knowledge and we have the Forward Planning Centres. We'll make the change smoothly' (12-13). A secondary effect, however, is to suggest how little control humanity actually exercises over its destiny. 'It is history that makes *us* . . .' Andra observes in his letter to Lenna: 'The Greenhouse years should have shown that plainly; the Long Winter will render it inescapable' (315). Much the same is true of the frame within the frame when it moves forward into the late 2050s. For here we learn how Teddy, Nikopoulos and Kovacs, and eventually even Francis and Derrick, become involved in an attempt by the 'New Men' to organise the Swill in preparation 'for the dark years coming' (310). The crisis will not be averted, we know from the thirty-first century, but 'little human glimpses *do* help,' Lenna will conclude, 'if only in confirming our confidence in steadfast courage' (316).

The least persuasive aspect of the novel is in its understanding of how the crisis developed. In the 'Postscript' Turner identifies six 'major matters' of futurological concern: population growth, food shortage, mass unemployment, financial collapse, nuclear war and the Greenhouse effect, only one of which—nuclear war—fails to feature in the novel, presumably because it seemed to him increasingly unlikely in any foreseeable future (98, 317-318). Empirically, Turner's predictions have often proven surprisingly accurate, although the financial crisis predicted for the 2040s actually began in 2008. But neither he nor his characters have any sense of which, if any, of these processes is the driver. One suspects his answer might well have been essentially Malthusian. Mine, by contrast, would be Marxian, that is, that all six are likely outcomes, within a world of finite resources, of any

system of unregulated competitive capital accumulation akin to that sketched in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and analysed in detail in *Capital* (1867). Of course, the days are long gone when anyone could take a writer to task simply for being insufficiently Marxist. One might, however, still object to the implausibility of a thousand years of hindsight failing to provide the history profession with any generally accepted account of so significant an event as the collapse of an entire social order. Turner's *The Sea and Summer* is clearly not the socially paradigmatic climate change dystopia for which Christoff hoped. Nonetheless, the novel is long overdue a positive critical re-evaluation and, hopefully, this essay will make some small contribution to that effect.

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