
Looking Backward, *2000—1887*

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Edward Bellamy's book, bearing the title *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*, we learn from the title page, has reached a sale of 154,000 copies. It is safe to say that up to the time of this writing, the book has had a million readers; how many more it will have, is a matter that belongs to the realm of conjecture. The demand is still on and must run its course.

The author was fortunate, we think, in selecting a title for his book. The title naturally suggests the idea that the author is looking backward from 1887, but such is not the case, as the reader soon learns. He finds himself, with Mr. Julian West, the hero of the romance, projected into the future 113 years and looking backward from AD 2000.

The writer was fortunate in the matter of dates. The 30th day of May, 1887, was a well chosen time for Mr. West to be put to sleep by Dr. Pillsbury, the renowned mesmerist of Boston; the home of cod-fish aristocracy; the Hub of the Universe; the Athens of America; the center of aesthetic art, of literature, and quite as famous for the production of "Soolivan me Soolivan," the champion slugger of the world.¹

Mr. Julian West was a rich young man of Boston, who had never performed a day's work in his life. He inherited his wealth; and lived luxuriously upon his income and belonged to Boston's upper tendom. He was engaged to a charming young lady, was on the eve of solving the problem, "is marriage a failure?" and was building a palatial house for a home. Work proceeded slowly on account of labor troubles. Strikes interfered with his plans; he became nervous. was afflicted

¹ Reference to Irish prizefighter **John L. Sullivan** (1838-1918), nicknamed "The Boston Strong Boy" and crowned as heavyweight champion in 1887.

with insomnia, was mesmerized, slept 113 years, was found by Dr. Leet in his subterranean room, and was brought to life on the 30th day of May, AD 2000. For a short time after his resuscitation Mr. West was dazed and bewildered, but finding himself physically and mentally as good as new, neither old nor infirm, he began investigating the new order of things and tells his story in a way well calculated to interest his readers.

Mr. West's first surprise was in taking from the housetop, a bird's eye view of Boston. It was not the Boston of the 19th Century. "Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings stretched away in every direction." He beheld "open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed" and "public buildings of colossal size and architectural grandeur unparalleled" in 1887 were seen on every side. Such things convinced Mr. West that Rip Van Winkle's sleep was a short nap compared with his prolonged mesmeric torpidity — in fact, the changes he observed were of such stupendous magnitude that instead of 113 years, Mr. West thought he must have slept a thousand years. Fortunately for Mr. West, he went to sleep and waked up in Boston. If it had been Chicago, the splendor of progress that would have met his eyes would have so completely overwhelmed him, that he would have doubtless given up the ghost then and there.

In the year 2000, there were no chimneys in Boston, nor elsewhere in the country. The crude methods of combustion in the days before Mr. West went to sleep, had been obsolete for nearly a century and chimneys disappeared with the crude methods.

Mr. West, having been the victim of a strike at the time he was building him a house and home, desired to know "what solution, if any had been found for the labor question?" He informed Dr. Leet that it was "the Sphynx's riddle of the nineteenth century." The reply was that "no such thing as the labor question" was known, and that there was "no way" such a question could "arise." At the time Mr. West fell asleep there existed "widespread industrial and social troubles," and "the inequalities of society and the general misery of mankind were portents of great changes of some sort." "The most prominent feature of the labor troubles of 1887, and for some years previous," Mr. West thought, were "the strikes" that occurred. These strikes, Mr. West thought, were made "formidable" by "the great labor organization," as "the workmen claimed they had to organize to get their rights from the big corporations." Dr. Leet said that was "just it"

and remarked that “ the organization of labor and the strikes were an effect, merely, of the concentration of capital in greater masses than had ever been known before.”

At, this juncture, in the conversation, the condition, of things at the time Mr. West went into his 113 year trance was sharply defined. Men believed that “the concentration of capital threatened society with a form of tyranny more abhorrent than it had ever endured,” and “that the great corporations were preparing for them the yoke of a baser servitude than had ever been imposed on any race.” It was declared that in the closing years of the 19th Century, “railroads had gone on combining till a few great syndicates controlled every rail in the land.” It was an era of syndicates, pools and trusts.” The great trusts crushed cut all rivals. Small capitalists became the tools of the larger ones. Under such circumstances the great body of the people demanded a change, and Dr. Leet tells Mr. West that:

Early in the last century the evolution was completed by the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation. The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit. The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation, in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in place of all other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens shared. The epoch of trusts had ended in the Great Trust. In a word, the people of the United States concluded to assume the conduct of their own business, just as one hundred odd years before they had assumed the conduct of their own government, organizing now for industrial purposes on precisely the same grounds that they had then organized for political purposes.

In the foregoing, the reader learns the character of the change that had taken place during the period intervening, between 1887 and the year 2000. It is not surprising that. Mr. West was greatly astonished. The codfish aristocracy of Boston had disappeared — no traces of it were left. The high hills of “upper tendom” had been leveled. The millionaire and the mendicant had vanished out of sight. The nation, with a big N, had assumed control. Hunger, cold and nakedness did

not exist in the year 2000. There were no wars, no army, no navy, no militia, and the government had no war powers. Parties and politicians had gone glimmering, and “demagoguery and corruption” were “words having only an historical meaning.” The nation having become the sole capitalist, became “the sole employer,” and “all the citizens, by virtue of their citizenship became employees, to be distributed according to the needs of industry.” In the year 2000, the citizens between certain ages constituted an industrial army and work was “rather a matter of course, than of compulsion;” however if a man would not work, he would “be left with no possible way to provide for his existence.”

Dr. Leet informed Mr. West that there were neither children nor old men in the industrial army AD 2000; that the people held “the period of youth second to education and the period of maturity, when the physical forces began to flag, equally sacred to case and agreeable relaxation.” In addition, Dr. Leet said:

The period of industrial service is twenty-four years, beginning at the close of education at twenty-one and terminating at forty-five. After forty-five, while discharged from labor, the citizen still remains liable to special calls, in case of emergencies causing a sudden great increase in the demand for labor. * * * The 15th day of October of every year is what we call Muster Day, because those who have reached the age of twenty-one are then mustered into the industrial service, at the same time, those who, after twenty-four years of service, have reached the age of forty-five are honorably mustered out.

In the industrial army of AD 2000, every new recruit enters the grade of a “common laborer” in which he serves “three years.” During this period he is assignable to any work at the discretion of his superiors.” There is no way under heaven for him to escape. He is in for three years, and must submit. After three years the man may choose his occupation, and until he does choose he remains a “common laborer.” Men who want to join the liberal professions can make their choice after three years service as “common laborers,” and if they can respond to the demands made upon their brains they graduate, if not they fall out and go back to the ranks of the workers. No favoritism is shown and hence there are no quack doctors, educators or preachers, scientists or philosophers.

The Nation regulates wages. Every worker gets enough. More than that could be of no possible value to anyone. It should be understood that AD 2000 there was no money, no buying or selling, no banks or bankers, neither debt nor credit. No lawyers, lawsuits, nor courts as they existed when Mr. West went to sleep. Neither states nor legislatures, the occupation of lawmakers had forever disappeared, except that something in the shape of a Congress met once in five years, but no change could be made in laws until the proposition had been considered five years. After a citizen's wages had been fixed, he received a sort of a credit card which he presented at a National warehouse when he wanted anything to eat, drink, or wear. This card represents the holder's share of the annual product of the nation. With this he must be content. The only claim he had upon the Nation was his "humanity," and all shared alike. Every man, said Dr. Leet, is "expected to do his best, and is therefore equal to any other man who does his best." If a man having endowments to do twice as much as another man, and didn't do it, it held that he ought to be punished rather than rewarded if he did work to the full measure of his endowments. The people of AD 2000 were determined to keep things on a dead level. They tolerated nothing like aristocracy — not even in intellect. Money, stocks, bonds, mortgages, banks, boards of trade, bucket shops, and shylocks had all disappeared. From ocean to ocean there could not be found a millionaire, a land shark, nor a cattle king. Cornering food products belonged to the infamies of the dead past. Everybody was the ward of the nation. Everybody was prosperous, happy and contented. Everybody had to work 24 years. At 45 all became pensioners and live upon the National bounty.

It should be understood that in the year 2000 women were provided for in a way that disbanded the Woman's Rights Party effectually. All women belonged to the Industrial Army, but were assigned to such work as was most agreeable to them. They were under a discipline entirely different from that which regulated the masculine army, in fact, the women's army constituted "rather an allied force than an integral part of the army of men." Dr. Leet said to Mr. West:

They have a woman general-in-chief and are under exclusively feminine regime. This general, as also the higher officers, is chosen by the body of women who have passed the time of service, in correspondence in the manner in which the chief of the masculine army and the President of the Nation is elected. The general of the women's army sits in the Cabinet of the

President and has a veto on measures respecting women's work pending appeals to Congress. I should have said in speaking of the judiciary, that we have women on the bench, appointed by the general of the women, as well as men. Causes in which both parties are women, are determined by women judges, and where a man and a woman are parties to a case, a judge of either sex must consent to the verdict.

Things were lovely as seen by Mr. West in the year 2000. The women were not subjected to the drudgery of housework, and a girl, without impropriety, could tell her sweetheart that she loved him without being asked to do so. The Nation had abundant means out of the surplus products of labor to educate the young and support the old. Music of the best was had for the asking and was telephoned to the residences of all the people. In times of storms the people of cities went about its if the skies were cloudless protected by awnings, a sort of a National umbrella. Every dining Hall was a sort of Delmonico's and the cooks ranked with the best in any land. Sermons were preached to audiences of 150,000 by telephone, if the people preferred their theology that way. There were no beggars, no poor, no sick. The term "charity" was obsolete. A man demanded his own, received it, and it answered every requirement. And here it should be understood that this millennial era, this miniature heaven, was brought about by organized labor, the industrial army of the country had solved every problem.

Unfortunately, Mr. Julian West's story is a dream, and fortunately, a dream which, unlike Rory O'Moore's,² is not to be interpreted by assuming that things contrary to Mr. West's vision, are to exist in AD 2000. Labor is organizing, a vast industrial army is in the field and is marching toward the highlands of victory. *Looking Backward* is inspiring. It outlines a possibility, or rather many possibilities, some of which are to be accomplished facts a century in advance of AD 2000. Trusts will go, syndicates and monopolies will follow. Land-grabbers will be made to relax their grasp upon lands. Unjust laws will be repealed. Corrupt courts will be purified. Labor is organizing for such work, and those who relish good reading should read *Looking Backward*.

² **Rory O'Moore** (c. 1600-1655) was an Irish revolutionary that was an organizer of the Rebellion of 1641. Debs's reference is unclear.