

## Sir Julius Vogel, 1835 – 1899

*Roger Robinson*

Julius Vogel takes his place in literary history on the strength of one novel, written very late in life and with no previous experience in imaginative fiction. Yet *Anno Domini 2000; or, Woman's Destiny* (1889) has a secure standing as a point of reference in histories of literary utopias, the women's movement, and imperialism, especially but not only in New Zealand. Its curious status as a utopian classic that everyone knew about but few had read was somewhat modified by a new 'commemorative' edition in the actual year AD 2000, and its subsequent first American publication.

The novel's main fame is for its prescient advocacy of a leading place for women in politics, commerce, science and the arts. It is almost equally interesting for its fictional enactment of progressive thinking about Empire, social welfare, and the global economy. On all these subjects, Vogel as novelist made astute and sometimes impassioned use of his experience as one of New Zealand's major political leaders. He had been Prime Minister, playing a crucial role in New Zealand's development as an independent nation. Probably only Edward Hyde, Benjamin Disraeli and Winston Churchill are comparable as national political leaders who also achieved distinction in literature. Before entering politics he had been successful as a journalist, founding New Zealand's first daily newspaper, and had adapted popular novels for the stage.

Julius Vogel was born in London on 24 February 1835, into an upper-middle-class commercial family. His father, Albert Leopold Vogel, was of Dutch Protestant origins, and his mother, Phoebe Isaac, was the oldest daughter in a large and prosperous Jewish family. This affiliation was to affect much of his life, as a source sometimes of support, sometimes of anti-Semitic unpopularity and challenge, especially in his political career, as his adopted country's first Jewish Prime Minister. In his novel, too, it is an element that has been too little noticed, in the sympathy for excluded minorities, a number of Jewish achievers among the characters, and the interesting figure of Colonel Laurient, who as a noble action hero anticipates Bulldog Drummond and James Bond, but who less conventionally is also Jewish.

After Vogel's parents separated during his early childhood, his mother lived with her parents, and he was educated for a business career at

University College School in south London and a Jewish school at Ramsgate. At sixteen he entered the Government School of Mines, learning chemistry and metallurgy for work in assaying, and at seventeen, in 1852, he took the opportunity of the Victoria gold rush to sail to Australia, and set up a business in assaying and importing in Melbourne. His lack of success set the pattern for his lifetime's many business enterprises, which were more notable for inventiveness than profitability. By 1856 he was selling patent medicines to gold-miners from a tent.

He discovered one of the two true vocations of his life by taking up journalism, working in various capacities for the *Melbourne Argus*, *Maryborough and Dunolly Advertiser*, and the *Inglewood and Sandy Creek Advertiser*, which he founded. His first venture in his other calling of politics was less promising, when he stood unsuccessfully for election to the Victoria General Assembly. He then followed the lure of gold to the newly discovered Otago goldfields, arriving in Dunedin in October 1861. This time he focused his innovative energies immediately on journalism, and within a month, with a partner William Cullen, he established New Zealand's first daily paper, the *Otago Daily Times*, which he edited for over six years, until April 1868, and which still appears.

As a journalist Vogel was a vigorous writer, substantial in content, well informed in community and business matters in particular, and radical in his opinions, supporting free trade and regional autonomy. He also provided for another demand in the new city by adapting best-selling novels for the stage. His dramatization of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) was performed at Dunedin's Princess Theatre in 1863. The progressive political polemic of his journalism and the unshakeably formal dialogue, melodramatic situations and moralistic outbursts of 1860s popular drama, all left their mark nearly thirty years later on the prose of *Anno Domini 2000*.

In Otago Vogel again became involved in politics, at provincial and national levels, and after some patchy electoral fortunes in the 1860s was almost continuously a member of the New Zealand government from 1869 to 1876. His tendency to strong personal opinions, and perhaps his Jewish origins, sometimes made him less than popular in parliament, but he was always energetic and could be persuasive. However variable his career, he found stability in his marriage and family. He married Mary Clayton, daughter of an architect neighbour, on 19 March 1867, and they had four children. Her perceptiveness and vitality, and their unquestionably strong relationship, are often seen as a likely stimulus for his early support of women's suffrage, his

introduction of a Women's Suffrage Bill into Parliament in 1887, and his imaginative creation in *Anno Domini 2000* of a world in which 'woman has become the guiding force of the world' and 'women have long ceased to be the playthings of men'.

His priority in national politics was to enable New Zealand to operate as an independent economy. He fought for autonomy from British restrictions in trade (another theme of *Anno Domini 2000*), promoted large-scale immigration, and with that supply of new labour initiated an ambitious programme of public works, including roads and railways. Based on heavy loans, this was an optimistic, even utopian, scheme. Like most of his enterprises, it suffered from budget overruns and insufficient capital. But in the long term it was of incalculable benefit to a country with such a small settler population (at that time only a quarter million) and severe if spectacular terrain.

Vogel led the government as Premier from April 1873 to July 1875 and from February to August 1876. He received a knighthood in 1875, and resigned in 1876 partly because of ill health (he suffered from deafness and gout among other ailments), partly so that he could return to London as New Zealand's agent-general and also rebuild his finances through business ventures. This combination entailed some conflict of interest, and he resigned as agent-general in 1880. Nor did the businesses go well, despite support from his mother's family in London, and Vogel was soon quite seriously in debt. He returned in 1884 to New Zealand, and quickly reentered government, but a recession brought electoral defeat for the party in 1887 and after a short period as leader of the opposition he moved for the last time, early in 1888, back to England.

He probably started to write *Anno Domini 2000* on the voyage, as it was published in London in October 1888. The novel was simultaneously an exercise in wish fulfillment, the old politician dreaming a utopia in which all his schemes and aspirations had come to perfect fruition, and an attempt to restore his financial fortunes. His publisher Hutchinson & Co wrote optimistically, 'we could possibly make your history a success – perhaps a large one'. But despite 'a very exceptional push with the book', and their investment in a cheap and a colonial edition, it failed to find enough purchasers to make a profit.

Probably the failure was because Vogel's imagined world of the future is neither enough of a fantasy nor enough of a satire. It is unusual in being a

genuine 'eutopia', an imaginary 'good place', not a 'utopia' or 'no place', and certainly not the 'dystopia' or 'bad place' that has dominated in literature in English. It is the work of a politician, interested in actual improvements in society, not a satirist chastising the present, nor a visionary offering a far-fetched fantasy of the future. Within the novel Vogel's priorities as politician have become reality. There is general suffrage, including votes and high political office for women; 'United Britain' is a benevolent federation of equals, no longer an Empire dominated by Great Britain, but giving equal voice to flourishing affiliated states like New Zealand and Ireland; global business interests have as much influence as national governments; poverty and unemployment have been alleviated by social welfare; and technology has transformed daily life for the better.

Much of this imagined future had become reality by the actual year 2000. Vogel's novel also anticipated universal air travel (sixteen years before the Wright brothers), hydro-electricity, European federation, reverse migration to Ireland, rent-subsidized high rise apartment blocks with electric elevators, air conditioning, improvement in the appearance of cities by the replacement of coal as fuel, the decline of the classics as elite educational subjects, the development of tourism and wine as industries in New World countries, and (perhaps most disconcertingly to those who remember how recent email and text-messaging are) the availability of instant global communication by 'noiseless telegraph' on the desk of every politician and journalist. As prophecy, Vogel came nearer to the actuality of the year 2000 than Orwell did with *1984*.

As fiction the novel has limited strengths. Some action episodes would make good film material – a spectacular explosion during research on manned flight, a chase and rescue scene involving speedboats and helicopters, a storming of the White House by airborne troops, and a high-tech war in which lasers and paralyzing electrical fields are tactically crucial. Unfortunately, these do not compensate for most readers for the unremitting formal eloquence of the writing, the staginess of the scenes and dialogue, the barely convincing characters or the conventional love interest. The novel's significance in literary history lies in its ideas, not its narrative. The best writing comes when Vogel deals with issues like the independence of Ireland, or the diplomatic tensions of a federated Empire, or the development of new technologies.

A prologue set in 1920 briefly narrates the story of a man unable to provide against misfortune and ill health, whose tragic death leads to a

worldwide collaboration between great finance houses to improve social welfare. The plot proper, set in the much-improved world of 2000, is centred on the political and personal careers of twenty-three-year-old Hilda Richmond Fitzherbert, the New Zealand born rising political star whose outstanding intelligence outshines even her great beauty. Her romance with the decent and self-doubting Emperor progresses unevenly while she copes with the crisis of a plot by Australia to secede. She thwarts the planned coup as resourcefully as she resists the amorous advances of its villainous leader, who at one point abducts her. The Emperor's growing preference for Hilda affronts the female President of the United States, whose office, Vogel observes, confers greater personal power to initiate war than any other leader possesses, a comment still pertinent to world affairs. In the subsequent conflict, United Britain defeats America by invasion from Canada, and a plebiscite of the New England states votes overwhelmingly to rejoin the Empire by becoming part of Canada, with New York as the capital.

The unlikelihood of this outcome has amused some readers but should not detract from the value of Vogel's concept of United Britain as a benevolent global federation rather than the expansionist London-dominated Empire that was in fact emerging in the 1880s. This aspect of the novel inspired at least one imitation, a story published in 1891 in the Welsh nationalist journal *Cymru Fydd* ('Wales To Be'). The preface gives full credit to Vogel for inspiring its vision of independence for Wales within the federated Empire, and revisits Vogel's narrative to explain that Welsh troops played a distinguished role in the defeat of the United States. Vogel's influence has also been postulated in the utopian feminist novel *Gloriana* by Florence Dixie (1890). The vision in *Anno Domini 2000* of a society in which women 'have gained perfect equality', and 'woman has become the guiding, man the executive, force of the world' is sustained with such conviction that it continues even now to be striking. Surgeons and scientists, ministers and business leaders, are women.

Vogel made no further venture in fiction, though in his last years he published many articles in British periodicals, despite constant pain and severely restricted movement that confined him to a wheelchair. Money worries and the death of his second son, Frank, in action in Africa in 1893, further saddened him. He lived in modest retirement with the supportive Mary at East Molesey in Surrey, across the Thames from Hampton Court. He did not live to see the twentieth century, for which he had imagined such utopian progress, but died, following two heart attacks, on 12 March 1899, and was buried in the Jewish cemetery at Willesden, in the northwest suburbs of London.

The diverse strands of Vogel's reputation are surely unique. Other nineteenth-century politicians contributed to the development of the new nation, and some have a street, an office building or even a government residence (Vogel House in his case) named after them, but none founded an important newspaper, had popular plays produced, or published still-interesting utopian novels, and certainly none is honoured in the name of the annual award of a society for science fiction and fantasy writers ('The Vogel Awards').

As befits a country whose European settlement in the nineteenth century was strongly utopian, New Zealand has a distinctive tradition in imagined world literature, including science fiction. Its earliest futuristic story was published in 1864, only a few years after colonization began, 'A Night at the Club; or, Christchurch in 1964', by Mrs. (probably Sarah) Raven. Other key early texts include Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), *The Great Romance* by 'The Inhabitant' (1881), *The Secret of Mount Cook* by 'Azor'/ John Petrie (1894), *Hedged with Divinities* by Edward Tregear (1895), which is a riposte to Vogel's utopian feminism, Butler's *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), 'Godfrey Sweven'/ John Macmillan Brown's *Riallaro* (1901) and *Limanora* (1903), and George Bell's *Mr. Oseba's Last Discovery* (1904).

*Anno Domini 2000* is prominent in this New Zealand line, with the extra interest of being written by a major statesman. Internationally, as a politically based fiction of a utopian future, it stands close in time and quality to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (USA, 1887) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (Great Britain, 1890).

## LINKS

[Te Ara – 1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

[Sir Julius Vogel Awards](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

[NZ History on line – Portrait of Vogel](#)

[Te Papa on line](#)

[Te Ara – Letter from Vogel](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

## BOOK

*Anno Domini 2000; or, Woman's Destiny*. London: Hutchinson, 1889; Auckland: Exisle, 2000; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

## PLAY PRODUCTION

*Lady Audley's Secret*, Dunedin, Princess Theatre, 1863.

## SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS – UNCOLLECTED:

'Greater or Lesser Britain'. *The Nineteenth Century*, 1 (July 1877): 809-831.

Some Remarks on the Resources of New Zealand'. *Fraser's Magazine*, New Series 16 (July 1877): 134-138.

'The British Empire – Mr. Lowe and Lord Blanchford'. *The Nineteenth Century*, 3 (April 1878): 617-636.

'Social Politics in New Zealand'. *Fortnightly Review*, New Series 53, (January 1893): 130-144.

'Greater Britain and the Queen's Long Reign'. *The Nineteenth Century*, 41 (March 1897): 343-351.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Dalziel, Margaret. In *Julius Vogel. Business Politician*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986, pp. 354-361.

## BIOGRAPHIES

Burdon, R.M. *The Life and Times of Sir Julius Vogel*. Christchurch, 1948.

Dalziel, Margaret. *Julius Vogel: Business Politician*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986.

## REFERENCES

Bohata, Kirsti, and Roger Robinson. 'Vogel in Wales: Anno Domini 2000, "Lady Gwen" and the Federated Empire'. *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 21 (2003): 140-146.

Dalziel, Margaret. 'Vogel, Julius 1835-1899. Journalist, politician, premier, writer'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume One (1769-1869)*. Wellington, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 1990, pp. 563-66.

McNaughton, Howard. 'Drama'. *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 272-277.

Robinson, Roger. 'Introduction'. *Julius Vogel. Anno Domini 2000*. Auckland: Exisle, 2000; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, pp. 11-21.

Robinson, Roger, and Nelson Wattie. 'Science fiction'; 'Utopian Literature'; 'Vogel, Sir Julius'. *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 481-83, 555-56, 559.

## PAPERS

As a leading statesman, Sir Julius Vogel features extensively in official records in the National Archives (Wellington), National Archives Record Centre (Auckland), the Public Records Office (London) and Public Records Office (Victoria State Library, Melbourne), and in published records such as the *New Zealand Gazette*, *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* and *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*. His unpublished private papers and correspondence are in the Alexander Turnbull Library (Wellington).