925 Reflections: History as Blip

By Robert Silverberg

I was about twelve years old somewhat more than seventy-five years ago, a span of time that I suspect most readers of this magazine will find hard to comprehend. In a second-hand bookshop in Brooklyn I came upon a bulky book called *Lippincott's Pronouncing Gazeteer of the World: A Complete Pronouncing Gazeteer or Geographical Dictionary*. The price was negligible, even for a twelve-year-old schoolboy, and—you guessed it. I bought it. I still have it, somewhere. I did not then nor ever since have any real need for a pronouncing gazeteer of the world, but what fascinated me about it (a musty old tome with a fraying buckskin cover) is that it had been published in 1859, and therefore was Extremely Old—exactly eighty-nine years old, in fact, which is precisely how old I am as I type this now. I wanted to possess something ancient, anything, and here was a genuine nineteenth-century document available to me for, I suspect, something like 25 cents.

About the same time I acquired an even older artifact, a small silver coin of some European country with a date somewhere in the middle of the eighteenth century—a coin, that is, older than the United States of America. For me it was one with the Pyramids in antiquitude. (I still have it, too, though I'm not sure where. But compared with the coins of the Greeks, which were first issued about 600 B.C., or the coinage of Rome, which goes back to 300 B.C. or so, it came out only the day before yesterday.)

Another example of my childhood sense of how past the past was dates from November 11, 1943, which I can remember exactly because it was the date of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of World War I, and there was a newspaper story about it that day. I mentioned it to my father, who was born in 1901 and thus, though too young to have been in that war, remembered it very well. I was awed by the fact that my father could speak so knowingly of events that to me were essentially prehistoric, twenty-five years being about three times as many as I had lived so far, that day. He reminisced about President Wilson, who was president during World War I. I had never known any president but Roosevelt, who came into office a couple of years before I was born, and Wilson was as remote a figure to me as, I suppose, Truman and Eisenhower are to most Americans today. I saw my father as someone whose roots went back into the distant past, and in a sense they did, since he had been born into a world in which the airplane had not yet been invented, such novelties as the automobile, the phonograph, the motion picture, and the telephone were still rarities, electric lighting was something uncommon, radio and television were merely the dreams of visionaries, and the computer not even that. Here I am, just one generation later, living in an era of jet transport, color television, CD recordings, pocket-sized telephones that are also computers, drone warfare, atomic energy, electrical everything, et cetera, et cetera—what would seem to him, if he were still here, a wildly different world. Blinding changes in just a single generation! So you see, the long-ago past has always held some magic for me.

So, too, has the faraway future. I was profoundly moved, when I was thirteen or so, by an anthology called *Adventures in Time and Space,* which included many of the best science fiction stories of the 1930s and 1940s, and which is still well worth reading. (It has remained in print all these decades.) One story that made a particular impression on me was A.E. van Vogt's "The Weapon Shop," which depicts, supposedly, the world of seven thousand years from now—something that had tremendous appeal to me, new as I was to fiction about the future. Looking at it now, I see that the world of seven thousand years from now is not nearly as different from today's world as my father's world of a century ago is from my own. Yes, the planet is ruled by an empress, and credits are used instead of dollars, but otherwise what van Vogt depicts seems like a pleasant suburban place whose main difference from our own is the presence in it of the enigmatic Weapon Makers. That provided a sufficient touch of strangeness to excite me then. But is it plausible, even slightly, that seven millennia would produce so little change?

Let us go the other way, seven thousand years backward in time from today:

Writing has yet to be invented. The building of the Great Pyramid is thousands of years in the future. Now flip forward those seven thousand years, and see all that has changed, from Sumer and Babylon to last week's space launch. All of what we think of as "history" is just a quick blip spanning those seven millennia when looked at against the long record of time, empires rising and falling, technology undergoing astonishing transformations. And yet all that van Vogt managed to tell us of the next seventy centuries is that dollars would be replaced by credits and Empress Innelda, whose dynasty has held power for forty of those centuries, would somehow come to rule us all.

One writer who did have a better view of the rapidity with which things will change in the years ahead was H.G. Wells, who was, I think, the founder of modern science fiction, the originator of most of the ideas the rest of us have been reworking ever since. One of the first science fiction books I read, around the time I turned ten, was his *The Time Machine,* in which he sends a Victorian traveler into the future, skipping quickly over intervening millennia and coming to rest at last in the year 802,701. Wells, aware when he wrote the book in the 1890s that modern mankind had evolved from earlier species, depicted two kinds of post-humans in that year: the fragile, delicate Eloi and the bestial, brutish Morlocks. He had a political agenda in mind—he was showing the evolution of humanity according to social and economic class—but he also was shrewdly registering the transformations that time brings to all species. (And eventually his time traveler leaps millions of years ahead, where the sun is a dim red ball, humanity has vanished without a trace, and the only life-form in sight is a scuttling crab-like thing.)

That the pace of evolution is constantly accelerating is clearly shown by the fossil record, especially when we look at it against the record of all that has changed since the first real civilizations emerged in Egypt and Mesopotamia and China. Evolution moved much more slowly in earlier times. The oldest human species that we think was reasonably

like us in form and ability is Homo heidelbergensis, who appeared about 750,000 years ago and occupied the world for—it is hard for us to conceive of it—hundreds of thousands of years, before evolving into two successor species, Homo neanderthalensis and our very own Homo sapiens. Relatively little is known about Heidelberg Man, because the fossil record for him is sparse, but it appears that he was capable of some sort of speech, and may have had the use of fire. An analysis of his stone tools, though, shows astonishingly little change in technique through all those hundreds of thousands of years—a stupendous, virtually total, technological stagnation during a period beyond our comprehension. And even the Neanderthals, so like us in so many ways, showed scarcely any variation in their way of making stone blades and tools over some 200,000 years.

Cultural change among our prehistoric Homo sapiens ancestors was not quite as unhurried, but still seems incredibly slow compared with what has been going on with us since the days of Sumer and Egypt. A notable example involves the use of strings of perforated shells used as necklaces or bracelets. Sixty-eight of them were found in a cave in South Africa, associated with weapon points and other debris that can be dated to 78,000 and 72,000 years ago. That in itself indicates that the same sort of shell bead strings were in use for six thousand years—a span of time greater than that which separates us from the beginning of civilization in Egypt—but what is even more startling is the discovery that such beads were found in Morocco in a layer dating back 141,000 years. So the fashion for using shells as decoration remained current and virtually unchanged among early Homo sapiens for a staggering length of time, a span that we are utterly unable to envision. Consider, by way of comparison, the changes in the format of the cell phone since it was introduced just a few decades ago.

One writer who saw immense change in store for mankind in the years ahead was Olaf Stapledon, whose wildly visionary book *Last and First Men* (1932) purported to tell us what kind of transformations await us as the evolutionary process rolls on and on. After the total collapse of our civilization comes the mutation that creates the glorious Second Men, a species of big-brained geniuses who live for hundreds of years, and then the Third Men, "slightly more than half the stature of their predecessors," with immense silken ears and "great lean hands, on which were six versatile fingers, six antennae of living steel."

At this point Stapledon starts to hurry his tale along. When he tells us in Chapter Five that we will now skip over the next ten million years, we understand that we are entering a visionary dream. (Ten million years! If we go back ten million years from our own day, nothing like even a primitive human being has yet evolved.) In the remaining pages Stapledon unfurls one successor species after another, eighteen types of human being in all, over a span of two billion years. This, of course, takes no cognizance of the rate of physical evolution, since the first early versions of mankind appeared only four or five million years ago, or the speed with which cultural evolution has progressed just in the last ten thousand or thereabouts.

But Stapledon, though a great visionary, wasn't much of a prophet. Writing in 1930, he failed to foresee the rise of Adolf Hitler, and spoke of the Germany of his day as "the most pacific [of nations] . . . a stronghold of enlightenment." Most of his portrait of the world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is equally wrongheaded. In the preface to the first edition in 1930, though, he said that he did not intend "actually to prophesy what will as a matter of fact occur; for in our present state such prophecy is certainly futile, save in the simplest matters. . . . The activity we are undertaking is not science, but art, and the effect that it should have on the reader is the effect that art should have."

Nor is the book just a zoo of fantastical entities. What is really unrolling before us is a pattern of cyclical history, evolutionary leaps, enlightened civilizations collapsing into barbarism and, eventually, some new resurgence. In the guise of fantasy he is creating an allegory of our own species' uncertain climb from savagery to what we smugly think of as our grand modern era, with much more to come.

We need not expect Stapledon's Second Men to emerge tomorrow and push us aside. But human evolution, both physical and cultural, is constantly accelerating. History's next blip most surely is heading our way. Be prepared to say goodbye! m