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PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE, a quarterly for inquiry and reflection on science fiction, is produced for free distribution by Graham Stone, GPO Box 4440, Sydney 2001, Australia.

== 80 == THE GERM GROWERS, by Robert Potter: an early Australian work of unusual interest

This 1892 novel is a surprisingly original and ambitious example of early science fiction. It may well be the earliest story of an extra-terrestrial invasion: I cannot think of any earlier, and it anticipates Wells' The War of the Worlds by six years.

The invaders at first appear to be merely typical specimens of Homo Sapiens, European ones at that, engaged in a clandestine project whose nature is not immediately clear. But before long it transpires that while they take human form on Earth they can dematerialise at will into their natural state as ethereal beings living in space. It is stipulated that they are not demons or spectres, but merely a form of life strange to us, operating according to physical laws. This was a new idea and is discussed at some length. Of course, it's easy today to ask questions that are not covered. Why human form, for instance. Why don't they shape themselves into bears, tortoises or jellyfish as the mood takes them? Never mind, Potter was doing well to visualise any kind of nonterrestrial being in his time.

There is a long-term plan to take over Earth, and the invaders are toiling to that end at several bases in remote regions, the one featured in the book being in North-West Australia. Their technology includes efficient airships for travelling around the planet, invisibility to avoid being spotted, synthetic food production and so on. As the title suggests they contemplate reducing us natives with biological warfare, and are working to develop some deadly new plagues for the purpose.

The situation is brought out little by little throughout the book, the gradual uncovering of the full horrid truth giving form and direction to a rather slow and pedestrian tale. As with many books of the time there is more sentimental and moralistic verbiage than we are accustomed to now, but it is generally quite relevant. Still, only towards the end is everything that is going on made clear. Of course, the nineteenth century reader was used to unhurried narrative, and being previously unexposed to concepts like these he would have found considerable shock and suspense in the book.

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The Germ Growers contd.

In the end, the issue is not really resolved at all. The invaders are frustrated, beaten, forced to give up and evacuate their bases, yes. But Earth is still unaware of the threat, potentially in danger of a new attempt some day and no better able to resist it -- which is more realistic than the usual happy ending to invasion stories. (Wells, you say? His Martians are undone by the pathogenic microbes they omitted to guard against. But that doesn't rule out their coming again and better equipped.)

All that saves Earth, for the time being, in *The Germ Growers* is the intervention of other space dwellers of better moral character, who frown on the invasion scheme and act to stop it.

As nineteenth Century books go it's quite good, certainly it has great historic interest and ought to be reprinted.

The book was published in London by Hutchinson; an Australian edition was printed from the same type on a lighter paper and given a new title page, and issued in Melbourne by Melville, Mullen & Slade.

The London title page reads:

The / (device) / Germ Growers (underlined) / The Strange Adventures / of Robert Easterley / and John Wilbraham / Edited by / Robert Potter, M.A. / Canon of St. Paul's, Melbourne / "His.... / Prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna." / London Hutchinson & Co / MDCCCXCII Paternoster Square.

The Melbourne title page reads:

The germ growers / An Australian Story of Adventure and Mystery (Gothic type) / by / Robert Easterley and John Wilbraham / "His.... / Prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna." / Melbourne: Melville, Mullen & Slade / London: Hutchinson & Co. / 1892 / All rights reserved (Italic) (all caps except lines 2, 10).

Pagination of both, which are typographically identical, is vi, 274 p; both measure 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". The Hutchinson edition has a frontispiece and three other plates by W. Hatherell, which are unfortunately missing from the copy sighted.

It is curious that the author's name appears on one title page, thinly veiled as "editor" in a common practice of the time, but not on the other. If he wanted to remain anonymous (as he might, a church official writing a sensational work of fiction) he should not have been named on either. If he wanted to be known as the author then it was the Melbourne edition that was the important place to have his name, since there he was well known. In London nobody would have heard of him. Clearly something must have come unstuck here.

It is not known whether there were any later printings, but there were binding variants. The copy of the Hutchinson sighted is in plain dark red cloth giving the author as Canon Potter; copies in red or green pictorial cloth are also reported. The Melville is found in dark red or blue cloth; the copy examined is in red, and has a series title, Library of Australian Authors -- with the book of course credited to the fictitious Easterley and Wilbraham.

Robert Potter was born 18 Oct 1831 at Louisburg, Ireland, Graduated from Trinity College, Dublin and shortly afterwards emigrated to Australia where he had an unremarkable life in the clergy. After serving in Sydney, Geelong and Albury he became established in Melbourne and eventually served as Canon of St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral until shortly before his death on 12 July 1908. His only other publications were religious tracts and collected sermons, and the volume of verse that was expected of a nineteenth Century gentleman -- though he may not have lived to see it published: it was dated 1908 and is not mentioned in the fulsome obituary in the Melbourne Argus of 13 July 1908. Not at all the kind of background one would expect to lead to such unorthodox thinking as appears in *The Germ Growers*.

== 81 == THE LAST LEMURIAN, by G. Firth Scott:

Here we have good old Lemuria represented by a surviving long-lived Queen, and also by a synthetic product of advanced ancient science, a human-headed water reptile. Queen Tor Ymmothe (sic) currently lords it over a tribe of subhuman pygmies. Altogether a stock lost-race setting, not very plausibly located in far northern W.A. No doubt to a lot of British readers that would have seemed as remote and unknown as Roraima, or Central Asia, or Antarctica. By the 1890's I think few Australians would have had much tolerance for it.

Scott was no Haggard or Merritt, however. He did little with his material, and the effect is rather dull. Details are vague, but the marvels are not presented as based on occult forces but on the applied science of the lost continent. So unlike most works involving Lemuria the book qualifies as science fiction of a sort. 1898 puts it early in the Lemurian tradition at that. Despite the touch of buffoonery in the word-play (another name is Eilatow) the treatment is not humorous or satiric (unless, which I doubt, it's too subtle for me).

I learn from George Locke* that a version appeared in *The Golden Penny*, a London magazine not familiar to me, in its Christmas Extra issue for 1896, titled *Tor Ymmot, Queen of Lemuria*, and given seven illustrations by B. E. Minns including a rendering of the monster.

The book itself: *The Last Lemurian, a Westralian Romance*, by G. Firth Scott. James Bowden, London, 1898. viii, 339 p. 7½". Front + 2 plates by Stanley L. Wood. HC issue in green pictorial cloth; PB (Colonial Library) with a plain cover.

The Australian connection of the author, if any, I have not been able to determine. He has been listed as Australian, but I suspect that this may be merely because of the geographical setting of the book, as seems to be the case with other obscure authors. George Firth Scott, or later Firth Scott, wrote a few other books, all published in the UK, which do not seem to be of interest or to show his origin; the last was *This Reeling World* from Blackwood in 1931. The firm did not reply to my letter appealing for any information, and no facts about him can be found in the usual likely sources. Let's put him down for the present as unconfirmed.

== 82 == COUTTS BRISBANE, unsung Australian pioneer of science fiction

Four stories by Coutts Brisbane appeared in the first true British science fiction magazine, *Tales of Wonder*. *The Big Cloud*, in No. 7, Summer 1939; *The Planet Wrecker*, in No. 9, Winter 1939; *The Lunar Missile*, in No. 10, Spring 1940; and *The Law of the Universe*, in No. 13, Winter 1941. It was mentioned that the author was a native of Australia. At about the same period he appeared in the British juvenile magazine *Modern Wonder*. What else? Nothing was known, it seemed. T. G. Cockcroft reported that the name was a pseudonym of R. Coutts Armour, in his *Index to the Weird Fiction Magazines*; he had had two stories in *Oriental Stories*, of all places.

The four in *Tales of Wonder* were not new then, however. The late Walter Gillings, editor of that underrated magazine, wrote in answer to my query: "I bought Armour's stories through a man at Amalgamated Press, and still have the tearsheets from the *Yellow* and *Red Magazines* in which they appeared between 1913 and 1922, though I never let on how old they were and changed all the titles. *The Planet Wrecker* was originally *Beyond the Orbit* in *Red Mag* 15.2.19; *The Lunar Missile* was *Ex Terra (Special)!* in *Yellow Mag* 24.2.22; *The Law of the Universe* was *The Dominant Factor*, by Reid Whitly, in *Red Mag* 1.6.13. But I have no personal details, I'm afraid."

The *Red Magazine* ran from June 1908 to September 1939 for a total of 620 issues, fortnightly for most of the period; its publishers, Amalgamated Press of London, produced a number of other titles including the *Yellow Magazine* which ran from 23 Sept 1923 to 17 Sept 1926, 130 issues fortnightly; it was then re-

* Locke, George. *A Spectrum of Fantasy*, the bibliography and biography of a collection of fantastic literature. Ferret 1980. p. 191

placed by All-Story Magazine which ran monthly to Jan/Feb 1928 (not to be confused with the American magazine of this title, notable for Burroughs, Cummings, Merritt and so on). There was also a Green Magazine with 30 fortnightly issues in 1922-3. Armour, as Brisbane and Reid Whitly, contributed a large number of stories to these, of which at least 87 were of science fictional character. Without looking any further this makes him one of the most prolific writers of science fiction of the period before the specialised magazines came to dominate the scene, when it was an element of more or less significance in general magazines. 87 stories puts him in a class with Ray Cummings, and well ahead of such writers as Leinster, England, Aubrey or Hodgson. And that's only one related group of magazines. For details of these (and much more of interest) see George Locke's listing. (*1)

He wrote a lot of juvenile fiction for the little documented British field of ephemera between the wars. He wrote some Sexton Blake books and all of the contemporary Robin Hood Library, for instance. As a sample I have The Vanishing Three, a schoolboy tale of invisibility, no. 346 of the Boys' Friend Library, 4 Aug 32, which puts him in the company of such as Frank Richards. Noting a short entry on him in Lofts & Adley's who was who of the field (*2) I wrote to ask if any more facts were known, knowing what a lot of new material comes to light after such a work is published.

"It is curious that you should bring up R. Coutts Armour," replied co-author Lofts, "As he is an author of whom I have longed to get more biographical details...although I have looked at deaths since (1953) to 1960 in England I have found no record of anyone of that name dying -- though he might easily have gone back to his native land...Jackie Hunt (editor) said he was a typical old swagman type with white beard and small sack on shoulder. He was also quite a character, buying books for a few pence in local street markets then selling them for shillings to editors thinking he was hard up." Do you wonder at the reputation Australians used to have in the UK?

Another name he is known to have used is Hartley Tremayne, and there may well have been others again. He was represented in Modern Wonder, the notable British weekly of fact and fiction of 1937-9, cheek by jowl with John Beynon (Wyndham), John Russell Fearn and other figures. Finally, he had a number of books published by Nelson up to 1953. Of these, Wheels of Fortune (1948) is of marginal interest, involving a steam carriage well ahead of its Napoleonic time. Tom Cockcroft produced a copy of this, which I had looked at then and completely forgotten.

According to Locke, "In the pages of the Red, Yellow and Green Magazines (he) made something of a specialty of tongue in cheek stories set on other planets and peopled with the weirdest non-human aliens imaginable. In some respects he can be seen as paving the way for Stanley G. Weinbaum's inimitable approach to otherworldly creatures." Other themes were remarkable inventions, vignettes of future ages, natural catastrophes, monsters, social trends extrapolated to absurdity. He seems to have been full of original thoughts and to have had a light touch. Why he did not make more of a mark and was almost completely forgotten was, I think, that he was writing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But if he was too early, we may be too late to learn much more about him, though no doubt more of his work will be unearthed as all the popular literature is searched for early SF. We do not know his full name; his life span, any closer than some time before about 1890 to some time after 1953; what part

*1. Search and Research. Ferret Fantasy Ltd. Fantasy in The Red Magazine, in v. 1 no. 1, Nov 1973, p. 1-9; Fantasy and Mystery Fiction in The Yellow Magazine, in v. 1 no. 2, June 1974, p. 23-26; The Green Magazine, *ibid.* p. 27.

*2. Lofts, W. O. G. and Adley, D. J. The Men behind Boys' Fiction. Howard Baker Press 1970.

of the Lucky Country he came from (though that's not too hard to guess); whether he ever had another profession than writing; when he went to England and whether he ever returned, as Lofts speculates. If he had anything printed in Australia it has not come to light. He had no book published here under any of the names we know to look for, but there could be undiscovered stories buried in newspapers or magazines of the 1890's or 1900's. The Queensland State Library, a logical possibility to have some record, could give no more help than the National or Mitchell.

At Gillings' request, Coutts Brisbane wrote something about his work for the Authors' Corner department in Tales of Wonder no. 10, Summer 1939. I think it worth while to reproduce it here, for want of any biographic data.

"To use the formula of the Stud Book, I might give the origin of the sundry fantastic tales I have written as being by Jules Verne out of a desultory study of the queer fauna of my native Australia. The platypus -- Ornithorhynchus Anatinus -- that duck-billed, egg-laying mammal, if only on account of his name. Why, I wanted to know, should a creature with webbed feet be able to burrow long tunnels through hard soil? Why was the male provided with sharp spurs on its hind legs?

"Why should the young kangaroo come into the world in such very incomplete trim? Why should the Tasmanian Devil, like the jub-jub bird, live in a state of perpetual passion? Why should wombats walk across the bottom of a creek when their partly-webbed feet were obviously fitted for swimming? To some of these questions, one may find an answer; others remain unsatisfied. But, having attempted analysis, I naturally went on to attempt synthesis; and created a menagerie highly logical, perhaps, yet recalling a zoologist's nightmare. They were possible, but so very improbable on our well-regulated Earth that I must needs plant them in alien worlds.

"So the canals of Mars were proved necessary because the ruling race of that interesting planet retained many of the characteristics of their crustacean ancestry, and especially the constant need of a copious water supply. Because the dominant inhabitants of Venus retained racial memories of that nasty habit of their far-off spider ancestresses -- you may remember that the female spider invariably devours her smaller and weaker spouse -- therefore, the young bachelors of the Planet of Love had to be coerced into matrimony by drastic means. And Saturn was the scene of the last stand of mobile trees against the intrusion of better-equipped mammals upon their ancient peace.

"Anyhow, my yarns have had a basis of logical and biological facts, despite their light-hearted disregard of Earthly limitations. Yet, perhaps because of that very logic which natural man so rightly detests, they have stirred the bile of some of their readers. But I remain unrepentant. A speculative story should be a stimulant, an irritant, a positive incitement to the more violent forms of controversy; for he is a benefactor of the human race who causes two ideas to sprout where but one struggled for being before."

== 83 == GEORGE B. BEATTIE: another mystery

In Walter Gillings' series on the development of the British science fiction movement in Vision of Tomorrow* he discussed the Brits and colonials who were published in the American SF magazines in the early 1930's, and remarked that George B. Beattie was probably an Australian.

* The Impatient Dreamers: the Story of British Science Fiction. Series by Walter Gillings with additions by John Carnell and William F. Temple, in Vision of Tomorrow v. 1 no. 1-12, Aug 1969-Sep 1970.

George B. Beattie contd

This possibility was new to me. What of George B. Beattie? He had four stories published:

The Martian Nemesis, in Wonder Stories Quarterly Winter 1931

The Murders on the Moon Ship, in Wonder Stories Feb 1931

The Man who Shrank, in Wonder Apr 1932

The "Platinum Planets", in Wonder Aug 1932

No facts about the author seemed to be on record. What had led Gillings to think, without being sure, that he was Australian, I asked. Nearly forty years later, he admitted that he could not remember. "I don't know what made me surmise that Beattie was Australian, unless it was the locale of some of his stories, or references to your part of the world -- or perhaps J. M. Walsh may have suggested it to me. Perhaps New Zealand may be nearer the mark; anyway, he seems to have had an English (or Scottish) background and to have roamed the seas as well as serving in the 1914-18 war. Or am I reading too much into his characters?"

The next step was to unearth the stories and read them looking for clues. Well, internal evidence seemed to be lacking. Nothing in them clearly pointed definitely to an Australian or New Zealand background. The Man who Shrank has a standard Pacific Island setting without enough local color to suggest that the author had actually been in the region. The other three are interplanetaries not at all relevant to these countries. None had anything suggestive. One doesn't expect expatriate Australians to write stories in which characters speak the language of Snake Gully or Spadger's Lane or drop remarks about Bondi Trams, but sometimes there will be a suggestive turn of phrase or a point of view, a certain nuance perhaps: here there seemed to be none.

The Martian Nemesis, which once I looked at it I did remember once reading before, is a rather offbeat treatment of space exploration for 1931, about a heroic pioneer who is not quite what the public image presents. The Man who Shrank is not, be reassured, on the infamous into-the-atom theme as you might perhaps fear, but tells of macabre Dr. Moreau-recalling experiments. The other two are quite interesting attempts to visualise the possibilities of crime and skullduggery in the interplanetary era. All four are as good as the typical science fiction of 1931-2 or better, but somehow not distinctive enough to attract any attention to the author.

In a further letter Gillings added: "I find that Wonder referred to him in a footnote to one of my letters as a British writer -- but I still think he was from your part of the globe." Granted that he was living in the UK, it is plausible that he was known to others in the small British SF community of 1932, known as an Antipodean -- perhaps indeed the Australian J. M. Walsh knew him as would be logical and appropriate.

Unfortunately this is mere conjecture. We do not have any facts about George B. Beattie himself, and know of nothing else he may have written. If these stories were the work of a beginner they were unusually well told. Does anyone have anything to report?