

1890 Edition
Subtitled "To which is added the author's reply to his critics."

PHOTO ESSAY

Utopia Began in Chicopee Falls: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

ROBERT E. WEIR

Editor's Introduction: *Edward Bellamy's 1888 utopian novel Looking Backward, 2000–1887 was the third-best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. Within a decade, the book had sold more than a half million hardbound copies in the U.S. and a quarter million copies in Great Britain. Editions in all major languages make it one of the most widely read novels of all time. Literary, labor and social reform leaders championed Bellamy's utopian vision, including such luminaries as Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debs, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. At least 165 "Nationalist" or Bellamy Clubs appeared in the U.S. and grew into the Nationalist Party that influenced the Populist Party. Between 1888 and the early twentieth century, another two hundred literary utopias appeared in the U.S., including Bellamy's sequel, Equality (1897), published right before his untimely death at the age of forty-eight. In this engaging photo essay, Dr. Robert E. Weir explores Bellamy's life and international impact and his all-but-forgotten status as a native of Chicopee, Massachusetts.*

This article is excerpted from Weir's recent book, Who Knew? Roadside Revelations in Western Massachusetts (Amherst, MA: Levellers Press, 2021), pages 84-91. In thirty-two fascinating chapters, Weir reveals the history behind the people, places, objects, and monuments that greet travelers throughout Western Massachusetts. His guidebook brings local history alive in new and intriguing ways. (Note that this excerpt has been slightly edited to fit HJM's style. The accompanying images were located and arranged by HJM co-editor Mara Dodge.)

* * * * *

A Bible passage from Luke (4:24) contains this remark from Jesus: "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown." That certainly applies to Edward Bellamy (1850–1898), whose home in Chicopee Falls stands so



Edward Bellamy, c. 1889

forgotten that when I asked at the Police Department directly across from its location when the building was open, no one knew that it *was* Bellamy's home or who he was. "I know there's a Bellamy Elementary School, but I never knew who it was named after," said one officer. This is sad commentary for a man whose 1888 novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* is the single most important utopian vision the United States has yet produced. Bellamy remains famed abroad, yet in his own backyard his Chicopee home struggles to keep its doors open.¹

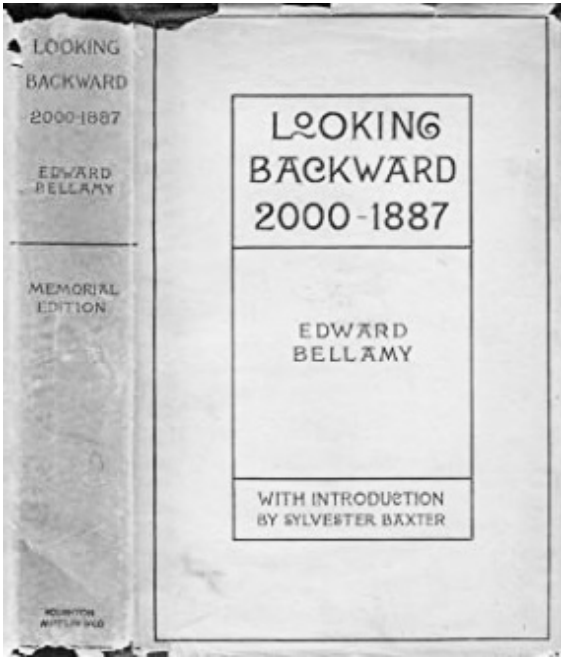
ARMCHAIR UTOPIA FROM AN UNLIKELY SETTING

Although the small city of Chicopee (population 55,991) has its charms, it's unlikely that a first-time visitor would associate it with utopia. In a sense, that's logical, as locals have had other things on their minds. A key lies in the town's name, which local tradition claims derives from the Nipmuc words chekee (turbulent) and pe (waters). Chicopee is located where the smaller Chicopee River joins the broad Connecticut, and Bellamy's home is just a few blocks from where the first river has been dammed since he lived there. The rivers made Chicopee a prime industrial site and a leg of the Springfield-to-Holyoke triangle that made all manner of goods, including beer, bicycles, brass, firearms, iron, paper, and textiles. Automotive pioneers Charles and Frank Duryea once had a shop in Chicopee, as well as one in Springfield.

Edward Bellamy was born in Chicopee, where his father was a Baptist minister. Edward spent most of his life there, although a brief stint at the *New York Post* instilled an interest in journalism that he parlayed into a return homeward and a post at the *Springfield Union* newspaper. In his spare time, Bellamy penned three failed novels, though his fourth, *Looking Backward*, became a roaring success. *Looking Backward* is generally regarded as the nineteenth century's third-best-selling novel, trailing only Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Only Stowe's book was timelier.

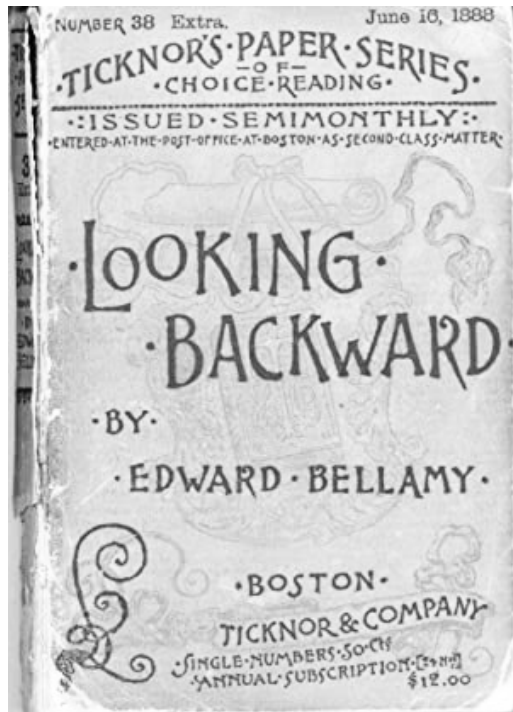
IT'S ABOUT TIME

Looking Backward is a time-travel book. Its protagonist, a bourgeois insomniac named Julian West, retires to a soundproof underground chamber, is hypnotized, and sleeps through a fire that destroys his Boston home. He is awakened 113 years later when a physician, Dr. Leete, unearths the subterranean chamber during home renovations. West revives to find the United States operating under democratic socialist and utopian principles. Money, competition, and inequality have been abolished, thereby vanquishing poverty and crime. The nation is now the sole owner of all goods, services, and property. Each citizen is paid in credits that can be converted as wished, though the lack of competition or opportunity for accumulation operates as a natural check on inequality. All citizens are required to enter the Industrial Army at age twenty-one and to retire at forty-five, and each receives exactly the same number of credits based on the nation's collectively produced aggregate wealth. The only distinction among jobs is that those with less desirable tasks work shorter hours. (The job of the educational system is to determine which job is best suited for each person.)



**First Hardcover
Edition,
January 1888**

(Dust jacket over green clothbound volume)



**First Paperback Edition,
June 1888**

Published five months after the hardbound edition. Bellamy wrote his publisher, "I very much applaud your conclusion to issue a cheap edition at once."

Bellamy's novel was prescient in many aspects. He anticipated such things as the invention of radio, credit cards, shopping malls, and e-commerce. His view of women, though constrained by Victorian notions that men and women were inherently different, was bold for his day; his vision of nationalized childcare, cleaning services, and communal kitchens went beyond those of most Victorian-era feminists.

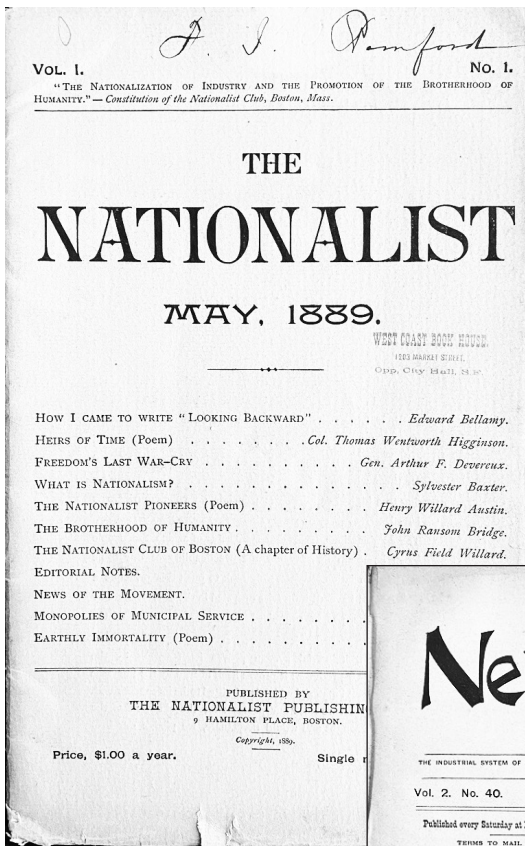
His was a democratic socialist vision—citizens voted for the utopia—but his society was also more realistic than those of other nineteenth-century utopian thinkers. Bellamy took the view that a good society protected individuals from their own base instincts; hence his utopia tied national interests to individual desires. Economic planning was centralized and rationalized.

Bellamy was not a gifted prose stylist. *Looking Backward* is mostly a series of questions posed by Julian West, for which he received lecture-style answers from Dr. Leete that contrasted the values of West's world with those of the twenty-first century. Some of the book's success was due to the contrived (and often mawkish) romance between West and Dr. Leete's daughter Edith, which attracted middle-class readers.

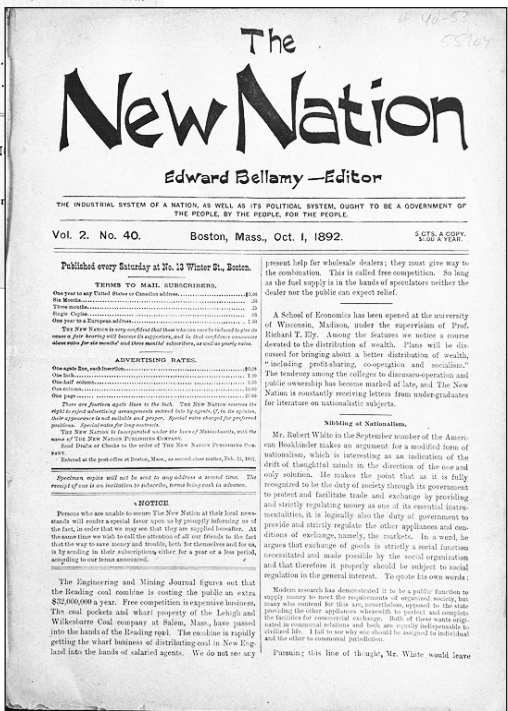
Mostly, though, Bellamy's book appealed because he offered an evolutionary path to a socialist future that looked more like a big cooperative community effort than anything Karl Marx imagined. For nineteenth-century readers, Bellamy's peaceful road to reform was a hopeful counterpoint to the capital/labor strife and violent upheavals of the day. Bellamy's economic visions—based in equality and a planned economy—also appealed to those who had seen the American economy grow, but at such an uneven rate that recessions had occurred roughly every seven years since the end of the Civil War. The recessions—called “panics” in their time—of 1873–79 and 1893–97 were surpassed in severity only by the future Great Depression of the 1930s. Working-class readers longed for a world in which economic and labor disputes were resolved without discord and violence. *Looking Backward* was found on most shelves of Knights of Labor reading rooms, the Knights being the largest labor federation of the period.

ENDURING & INTERNATIONAL IMPACT

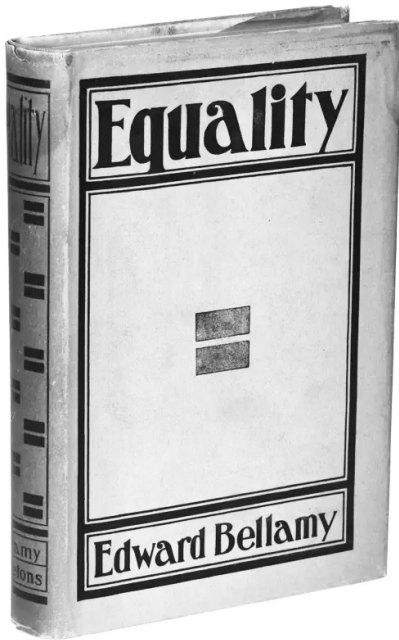
It is hard to exaggerate the novel's impact. Reformers were so taken by it that they formed more than 160 “Nationalist Clubs” across the United States, each dedicated to bringing Bellamy's fictional world to life.² Bellamy was hailed as a visionary and was solicited for his views on social issues of all sorts. Legions came to see Bellamy's utopian novel as a blueprint for real-life



The Nationalist, a monthly magazine dedicated to the "nationalization of industry and the promotion of the brotherhood of humanity," was produced in 1889 by the "Boston [Nationalist] Club No. 1." It was succeeded in 1891 by a weekly magazine, *The New Nation*, which attempted to reach a broader readership. Bellamy served as editor.



This first issue of *The Nationalist* contained Bellamy's "How I Came to Write 'Looking Backward'," along with reports of the formation of Nationalist Clubs across the U.S.



social change. He was even persuaded to pen a sequel, *Equality* (1897), to answer questions about and objections to his utopia, as if the original book was a political platform rather than a work of imagination. *Equality* faltered, though, because it lacked romance and was turgidly written.³

Bellamy died of tuberculosis in 1898, but the legacy of his imagined world lived on. *Looking Backward* was cited as influential by numerous Progressive Era and New Deal reformers. It was even more popular abroad, where it inspired various reforms, including those of New Zealand's Liberal Party politicians, who enacted reforms that predated the New Deal by forty years. It was also popular in Europe, where views of social democracy are

generally more accepted by citizens accustomed to seeing socialism in many different varieties, as opposed to citizens in the United States, who have been indoctrinated to lump all left-wing politics into the same ball of wax.

Though this analogy made some of my colleagues cringe, I used to tell students that political ideals such as socialism, democracy, and libertarianism are like ice cream—just general categories. To know whether or not you admire or dislike a particular set of politics depends upon whether you mean vanilla, chocolate, raspberry swirl, or some blend of objectionable ingredients.

As a person who did not believe in violent revolution or compelling citizens to accept things they didn't choose, Bellamy's views were on the mild end of the socialist spectrum and more like liberal democracy. This explains why both Progressive Era and New Deal reformers adapted some of Bellamy's fanciful ideas in more pragmatic forms such as anti-poverty campaigns, educational reforms, consumer protection laws, regulation of business abuses, and protective labor legislation.

Those who fail to recognize that Bellamy was a utopian novelist, not a political leader, went on to make wildly misleading claims that help explain why Bellamy's star faded. Some hardcore conservatives, for example, equated Bellamy's Nationalism with fascism, simply because Nazism translates as "National Socialism." Bellamy actually used the term Nationalism—meaning



Baptist minister Rufus King Bellamy moved into this house in 1853, along with his wife and four sons. Edward spent most of his life there, eventually raising his own family in the home. The Edward Bellamy Memorial Association purchased the house in 1975. In 2019 parts of the first floor were opened for the first time as a museum. Photos by Robert Weir.



government control of production and the economy—because he knew that many feared the word socialism, but the Nazism parallel is nonsense; the latter is a right-wing philosophy in which there is no democratic input.

Even sillier, because Edward Bellamy was cousin to Francis Bellamy, who wrote the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892, some extremists demonize both men as proponents of dangerous one-world ideals. Attacks such as these have done little to change the fact that *Looking Backward* remains the premier work of American utopianism and it has never been out of print. The novel inspired numerous imitators and touched off a small boom of time-travel and utopian novels, but its far-reaching success has yet to be duplicated.

A movement called Nationalism also developed that was inspired by *Looking Backward* and its sequel *Equality* (1897). Although several communes called themselves “Bellamyite,” he was not associated with them in any formal way. Bellamy had only passing involvement in Nationalism and died before it took off. He had been a largely unknown novelist and a journalist prior to *Looking Backward*. The book made his reputation, but it was too late for him to shift from science fiction and the romance novel to become a political figure.

FADED HOMETOWN GLORY

Alas, neither the author’s U.S. fame nor his house in Chicopee has fared as well. The home (located at 91–93 Church Street) was built by Edward’s father in 1852. However, it passed out of the family’s hands in 1905, and had two other owners before 1975, when a local historic-preservation group was able to buy it. The purchase was substantially underwritten by community development grants that (barely) survived Great Society programs fashioned in the 1960s, but never provided enough seed money for the house to become a full-fledged Bellamy museum.

The Edward Bellamy Memorial Association has shared the space with a host of other associations and city boards and is generally open to visitors only by appointment. As seen today from Church Street, the house’s right-hand side is an addition from Bellamy’s time. The home’s interior has been only partially renovated and contains period furniture, but the only furnishing remaining from Bellamy’s time there is a small oak cabinet that once contained his chamber pot!

Like Bellamy’s, Chicopee’s fortunes have fallen. The city is an example of what happens when the economy shifts. By the time Bellamy’s home passed into the hands of history enthusiasts, factories were closing that once provided thousands of jobs and tax revenue that could have generated operating funds



Edward Bellamy Desk and Chair

Chicopee Archives Online

for a Bellamy museum. The closing of a large Uniroyal Tire plant in 1980 removed still another major employer, and today's median family income in Chicopee is more than \$17,000 less than the Commonwealth average. The city enjoys a reputation as a center of Polish culture, including the production of kielbasa, but its largest local employer is now the Westover Air Reserve base, and many of its civilian employees live elsewhere.

CONSIDERING BELLAMY

As an educator, I often assigned *Looking Backward*. To this day, Bellamy's novel yields admirers, detractors, and skeptics—exactly the sort of disagreement that makes for spirited classroom debate. Skeptics are by far the largest group, the common refrains being that equality is “unnatural,” or that a utopia is “impossible.” When my students said these things, I gently reminded them that equality is allegedly a touchstone American value. I also prodded them to consider the many millions who have mused over *Looking Backward* and asked whether people in the past might have had superior imaginations to those today. It remains worthwhile to read *Looking*

Backward, drive to Chicopee, and stand in front of the house to ponder the city's forgotten prophet.

When I was in New Zealand as a Fulbright scholar, I showed my new friends and colleagues a map of where I live. Some had heard of or even been to places such as Amherst, Northampton, or the Berkshires, but invariably it was Chicopee that sparked excitement. They knew what most Americans, including many in Western Mass, did not: that it was the home of Edward Bellamy. When I told them the sad tale of his homestead, they were incredulous and wondered how this could happen to one of the most famous people of all time.

I met with similar astonishment in Australia and Western Europe. Clearly fame is fleeting and prophets often wear out their local welcomes. It would be nice, though, if folks in Western Mass would do more to make sure Bellamy is remembered and his ideas debated. As in my classroom, it's fine to disagree, but Bellamy challenged us to think about what makes a good society. Surely that is an idea worth discussing.

HJM

This article was reprinted with the permission of Levellers Press (Amherst, MA) and is excerpted from Robert W. Weir's *Who Knew? Roadside Revelations in Western Massachusetts*, Chapter 11 (pages 84-91), published in 2021.

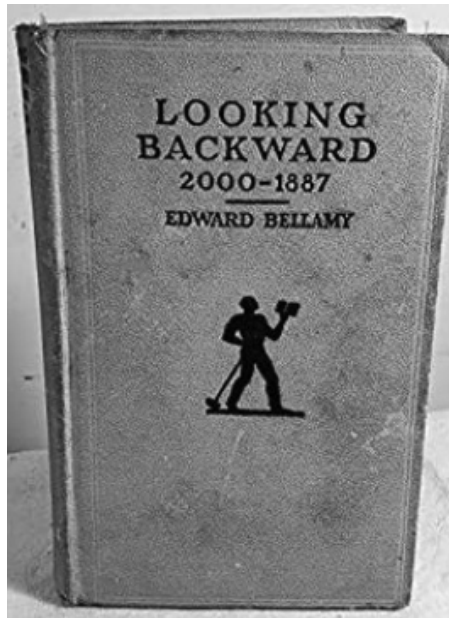
The Edward Bellamy Memorial Association, Chicopee

The Edward Bellamy Memorial Association (EBMA) was founded in 1972 to promote the literary legacy of utopian novelist Edward Bellamy and support the recognition of his former home as a National Historic Landmark. Bellamy's daughter, Marion Bellamy Earnshaw, was among the founding members. EBMA has owned the Edward Bellamy House since 1975. In 2019 parts of the first floor were opened for the first time as a museum, but with very limited hours (see their website).

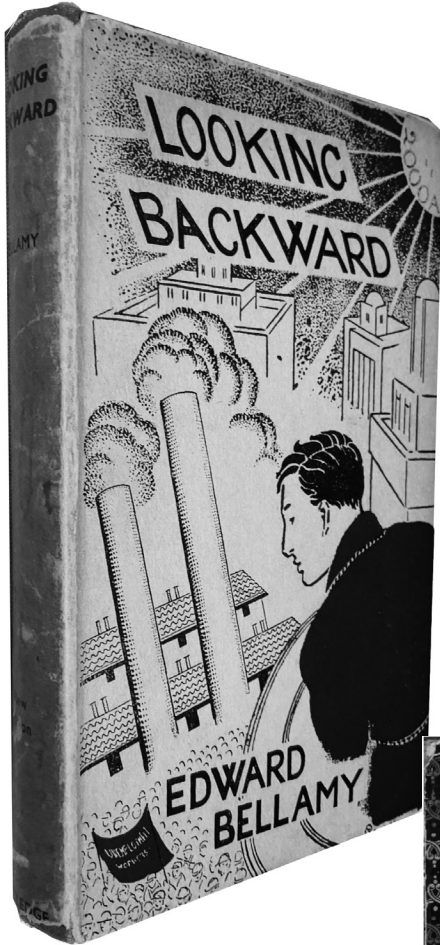
The EBMA continues to collect, preserve, describe, exhibit, interpret, and allow researchers access to materials related to Edward Bellamy and the history of the Town/City of Chicopee. Although EBMA has partnered with the Chicopee Historical Society on various projects, the two are separate organizations. The EBMA is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation that welcomes members and donations. Members receive a print copy of the newsletter, "The Penny News," as well as email and/or print notifications of events. Donations allow the Edward Bellamy Memorial Association to maintain the house and its unique collections.



1925 Houghton Mifflin Co.,
Boston, MA (left)

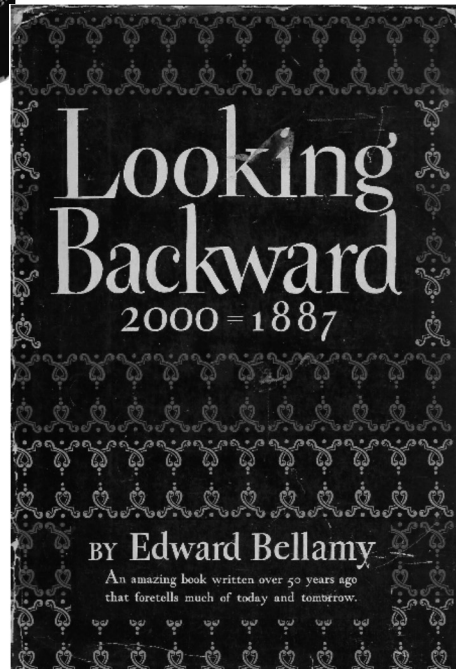


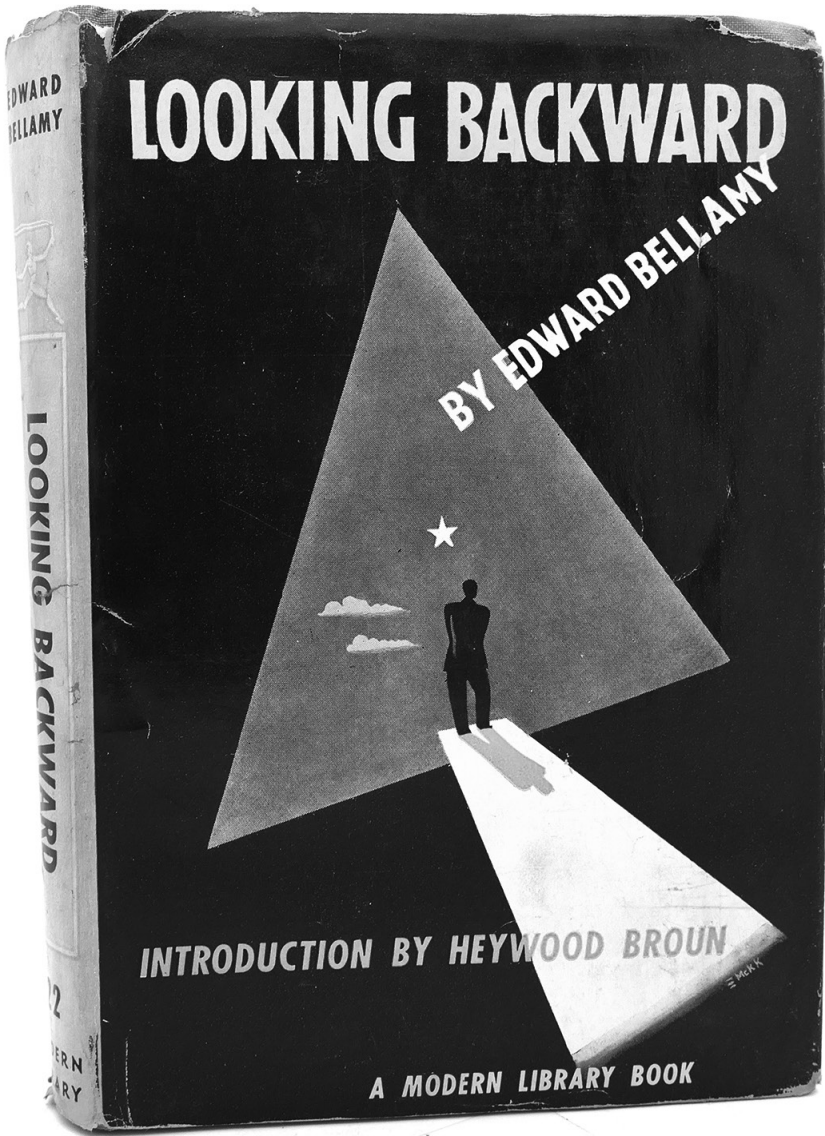
1927 Vanguard Press,
New York (right)



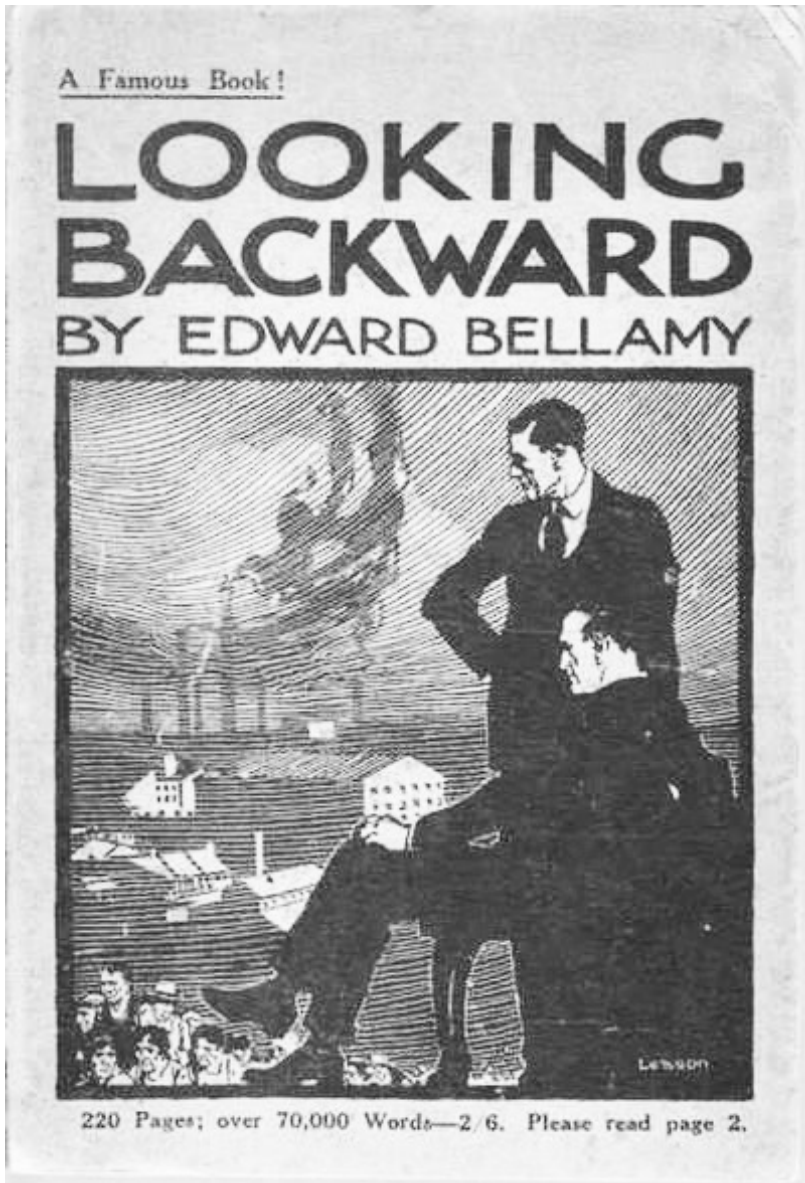
1935 George Routledge
& Sons, London (top)

1941 Houghton Mifflin Co.,
Boston (bottom)

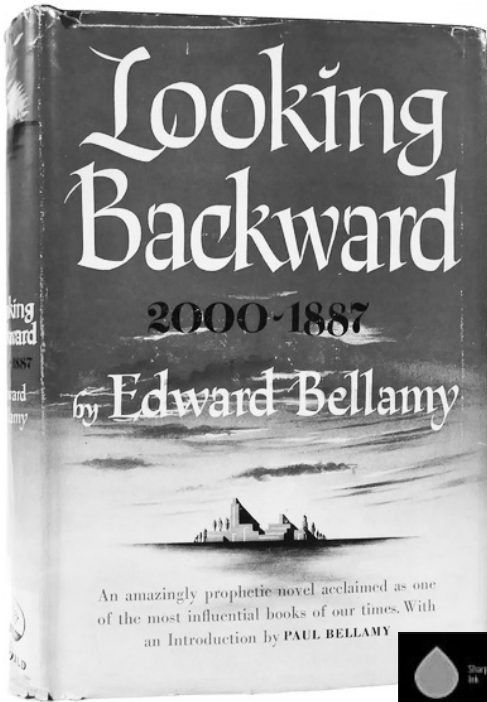




1942 & 1958 Random House/Modern Library, New York



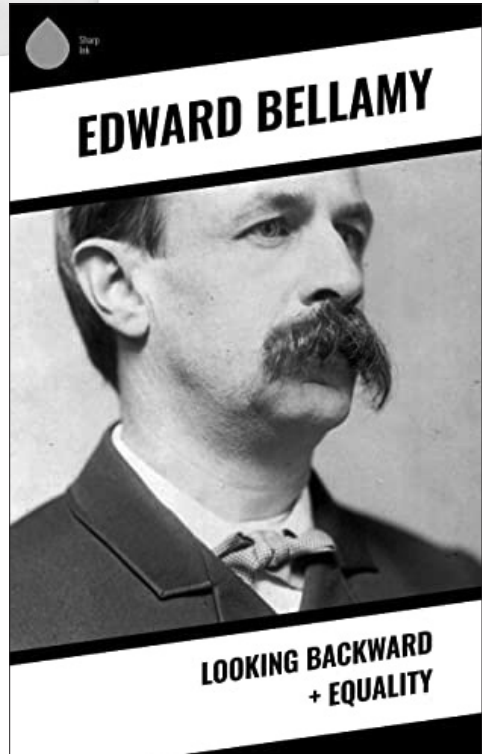
1942 Australia: Socialist Labor Party Edition



1946 World Publishing Co., Cleveland

Cover reads: "An amazingly prophetic novel acclaimed as one of the most influential books of our times."

2023 Kindle Edition



Notes

1. There are no recent biographies of Bellamy. The two classics are Arthur E. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) and Sylvia Bowman, *The Year 2000: A Critical Biography of Edward Bellamy* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958). For other studies of Bellamy see: Sylvia E. Bowman, *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet's Influence* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962), Arthur E. Morgan, *The Philosophy of Edward Bellamy* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), Daphne Patai (ed.), *Looking Backward, 1888–1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886–1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), John Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Adversary Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), Richard Toby Widdicombe, *Edward Bellamy: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988) and Michael Robertson's chapter "Edward Bellamy's Orderly Utopia" in his study *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and Their Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

2. They were called Nationalist Clubs because Bellamy used the word "nationalism" to describe his economic system in which the collective "nation" owned all resources. It was a synonym for state-owned socialism. The founding of Boston's Nationalist Club is described in Cyrus Field Willard, "The Nationalist Club of Boston: A Chapter of History," *The Nationalist* [Boston], vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1889), pp. 16–20. For the history of its magazine see Frederic C. Jaher, "Nationalist: Boston, 1889–1891," in Joseph R. Conlin (ed.), *The American Radical Press, 1880–1960* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), pp. 32–35. Also of interest is John Hope Franklin, "Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement," *New England Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Dec. 1938), pp. 739–772 and Everett W. MacNair, *Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement, 1889 to 1894: A Research Study of Edward Bellamy's Work as a Social Reformer* (Milwaukee, WI: Fitzgerald Co., 1957).

3. For more on America's utopian communities, see Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (NY: Random House, 2016). The primary scholarly source for utopian studies is the journal *Utopian Studies*, which has been published by the Pennsylvania State University Press since 1987. Bellamy is often mentioned in its articles.