

Close Encounters of the Earliest Kind: A Postcolonial Sighting of Aliens from the Planet Venus and the First Human Colony in Science Fiction (1881)

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Volumes I and II of *The Great Romance*, two novelettes fifty-five pages and thirty-nine pages in length respectively, were published separately under the pseudonym of The Inhabitant in 1881 in Ashburton (or possibly Dunedin), New Zealand. Volume I is an account of nineteenth-century protagonist John Brenton Hope, who, after awakening from a 193 year deliberately induced chemical sleep, discovers a wonderful future society replete with mechanical marvels, immense orderly metropolises, and a romantic love interest in the form of a beautiful young woman named Edith Weir. Volume II follows Hope on a journey to the planet Venus with two male companions (one of whom is Edith Weir's brother) on the scientifically advanced spaceship *Star Climber*. The purpose of their space mission is to sound out the planet for future human settlement. Once an initial investigation is undertaken, Hope's companions return to Earth to report their discoveries and begin transporting human colonists (including Edith) back to the planet. Hope, in the meantime, is left on Venus to further explore this new world, in the process encountering its sentient alien population.

Volume I, although hitherto neglected, was included in A.G. Bagnall's *National Bibliography of New Zealand to the Year 1960* (1980) and is intriguing as it just may be the principal source for the frame story of Edward Bellamy's influential American utopian novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888). Volume II, which was assumed non-existent or lost until uncovered during the mid-1990s at the Hocken Library, Dunedin, is also of importance (like much of the material in Volume I), for its innovations within the genre of late nineteenth-century science fiction,

particularly with regard to a focus on technological developments in space travel. While most early science fiction works ignored the intricacies associated with space travel, *The Great Romance* makes a credible effort at scientific realism, evidenced by the author's emphasis on the need for the astronauts to exercise while in space to prevent muscle fatigue and the use of a planet's rotation as a braking device. Furthermore, *The Great Romance* appears to be the first work of its kind to describe spacesuits, spacewalks, and airlocks, as well as developing the concept of a shuttle craft/planetary rover. Both novels are, therefore, worthy of attention for their position in the history of utopias and science fiction, and much recently published work in the United States and New Zealand in relation to *The Great Romance* has focussed on these two particular themes (Alessio, *Science-Fiction Studies* and *Kotare*).

The Great Romance is particularly of interest, however, in that it is apparently one of the first works in the history of science fiction to provide a non-didactic depiction of an overtly alien species, as well as the first work to consider seriously the human colonization of other planets. What is more, the treatment that the alien "Venuses" receive in *The Great Romance*, although paternalistic and laced with late Victorian eugenicist and Darwinian tropes, seems sympathetic. As such, this relatively benevolent depiction of alien life forms would appear to put the work once more ahead of its time, as even most early twentieth-century novels in the science fiction genre generally tended to depict alien creatures as overtly threatening bug-eyed monsters. Since alien species in science fiction tend, parabolically, to displace the Other (read indigenous Maori peoples in *The Great Romance*), the attitude toward aliens and colonization presented in the text serves not only to illustrate a complicated late nineteenth-century British imperialist, racist, and militarist zeitgeist, but simultaneously to underline the unique attitude of Pakeha (European) settlers toward the Maori people of New Zealand. This somewhat more open attitude distinguishes the history of colonization in that former colony from the history of contact with indigenous peoples in the rest of the British Empire. As M. P. K. Sorrenson argues with regard to the distinctive European attitude in New Zealand:

The conflicts that resulted from European colonisation had much in common with frontier conflicts in other colonies—but there were also some marked differences. While in Australia “the Aboriginal was despised as a rural pest,” in New Zealand “the Maori was respected as a warrior.” (169)

Nowhere is this more approving attitude toward the Other more visible than when Hope appears to have begun pondering in Volume I (and well before his first encounter with the aliens), the consequences of cross-species miscegenation: “how our thoughts wonder over the intellectual union which might arise, should two such experiences join their pleasures, their results” (I 51). Such a willingness by a late nineteenth-century New Zealand author to consider a partnership of some kind (intellectual and/or physical) with a distinctly alien life form is provocative considering that, before the unearthing of this manuscript, the first time that such a cross-species relationship in science fiction can be found is as late as 1925, when the French author J. H. Rosny, in *The Navigators of Infinity*, describes a love affair between a human and a six-eyed tri-pedal Martian (Clute and Nicholls 15). Moreover, the consideration of such a relationship in *The Great Romance* might be indicative (if one assumes that the aliens are a substitute, either consciously or unconsciously, for the Maori), of the sexual interaction and intermarriage that did occur in colonial New Zealand between Pakeha and Maori. Such a practice appears to have been officially tolerated by both peoples during the nineteenth century and would seem to make New Zealand colonial attitudes toward the Maori unique in terms of nineteenth-century race relations within the British Empire.

I The Depiction of Aliens in *The Great Romance*

The issue of inter-species relationships raises what is quite possibly one of the more interesting developments in *The Great Romance*, namely the detailed and nuanced description of the alien Venuses. *The Great Romance* is not by any means the first work to develop the concept of life originating away from Earth. As early as the second century A.D., Lucian of Samosata was peopling the moon and other heavenly bodies

with strange races. Most of his creatures, however, fitted “more into supernatural fiction than ancestral science-fiction” (Bleiler 455). As such, they were intended for didactic or satiric purposes, rather like the talking animals in Aesopian fantasy or Jonathan Swift’s proto-science fiction Houyhnhnm creations in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). The latter, with their emphasis on reason and their ignorance of the human (or Yahoo) emotions of love or sorrow, were depicted by Swift as living on a different metaphysical level from humankind and, as such, seem to represent a convincing alien culture (a possible Enlightenment version of *Star Trek’s* logical Vulcans?). By comparison, those later nineteenth-century science fiction authors who did develop a concept of intelligent alien beings such as the “Martials” in *Across the Zodiac*, tended instead to restrict their descriptions to a type of humanoid that was biologically very similar to humankind: “Until *The War of the Worlds*, interplanetary fiction had typically peopled other worlds with beings little different from ourselves” (Pierce, *Foundations of Science Fiction* 93). The Martials in Greg’s story, for example, are essentially just shorter and weaker human beings. The only general exceptions to this rule appear to be the sentient plants in two works by the French writer Camille Flammarion, namely *Real and Imaginary Worlds* (1864) and *Lumen* (1887). According to John Pierce, “for the most part, the story of aliens in science fiction before 1934 is one of missed opportunities” (*Great Themes* 2).

The Venuses in Volume II of *The Great Romance*, however, are a visibly physically distinct species from homo sapiens:

there before me in the uncertain distance, some thing with two colourless insect-like wings stood up. [...] Strange beings! how shall I describe them? with [sic] no likeness to humanity except that they stood on two legs; with arms, yet not arms; faces human, yet how unlike [...] with soft eyes [...] their fine bodies covered with a down—neither of bird nor animal—soft and dark, and their heavy, lithe limbs, such as might have developed from that earliest of prehistoric elephant. [...] (II 11)

The two Venuses whom Hope encounters (one male and a smaller female) are also given a good deal of basic personal development and

attempts are made at apparently realistic xenobiological characterization. For instance, when the two races first meet, they struggle to communicate with hand gestures, as the aliens do not speak English. These communication difficulties are a radical step forward from the talking animals in Aesopian fantasy, as well as more modern science fiction, which tended to ignore the problem of language difference and non-linguistic communication until the post-World War Two period (Clute and Nicholls 723, 751). While the smaller female alien initially shrinks back with fear when Hope approaches to initiate a dialogue between their two kinds, first contact between the Terran and Venusian species in *The Great Romance* appears particularly successful:

Strange sounds they made; the huge limb [of the male alien] descended; it touched my hands with a soft motion; then I stroked that extended arm, and [...] became emboldened and took the quaint ending of that limb in my hand, and shook it as I would a friend's hand. Then what was the laughter of the planet broke in motion over their faces.[...] It swept away my dread.[...] I went still nearer—I put an arm on each and laid my face against the face of the smaller one.[...] (II 12)

Following this description of Hope and the aliens initiating physical touch there occurs an exchange of gifts and hospitality between the two races: “I brought out of my stores what I could think of to please the eye or delight the palate. I spread these things on the grass” (II 12). Such contact procedures between Hope and the Venuses would appear to mimic eighteenth-century reactions by the Maori tribes of New Zealand to the crew of Captain James Cook's *Endeavour*. Horeta Te Taniwha, a small child when the *Endeavour* first visited Whitianga harbour in November 1769, recalled in his memoirs how the women and children of the tribe at first ran away from the European “goblins” out of fright, but then, gaining confidence, “came back one by one [...] and] stroked their garments with our hands” (Salmond 87). Similarly, the crew of Cook's *Endeavour* often presented visiting chiefs with gifts of linen or nails which would have presumably been valued by these visiting dignitaries (162).

In addition to these seemingly naturalistic encounters in the novel, which imitate British imperial contact experiences, the alien couple in *The Great Romance* also appear to have a particular, distinctive belief system, in addition to a well-developed code of social behaviour, all of which indicate that the Inhabitant might have intended them to be more than simple one-dimensional personalities. Before agreeing to act as Hope's guides to the planet Venus, the Venuses enact a kind of "solemn covenant" from Hope that he will not disclose the whereabouts of the other inhabitants of the planet. As Hope presumes this to be an oath of secrecy, he vows in reply that: "wherever your native home may be I will always hold it as a sacred thing" (II 32).

Once a friendship is established between Hope and the Venuses, the aliens continue to follow their own greeting customs even after Hope had shaken their hands in the Earthling manner: "Then the Venuses would insist on going through their code of salutation—their long right arms would curl around Hope, then the smaller left arm would stroke in a soft, methodical manner" (II 31). Such a practice reflects both indigenous accommodation and a Venusian persistence to maintain their identity in the wake of a foreign presence. This behaviour is very much in keeping with visual depictions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Maori leaders, as demonstrated in L. C. Mitchell's "Reconstruction of the Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi" or the Tanner Brothers' series of photographic images of prominent Maori such as Paora Tuhaere or Ngakapa (1900), in which beautiful ornamental cloaks, facial moko (tattoo) patterns, greenstone jewellery, and traditional cultural practices such as the haka, were emphasized as objects of cultural empowerment.

Other practices described in *The Great Romance* resonate with imperialist overtones. The Inhabitant states that Hope's two Earth companions, Moxton and Weir, before they began their return journey home from Venus, "collected fruits, flowers, and the smaller animals, to be taken back" (II 8). Such an accumulation strategy not only anticipates the collection of cosmic debris by modern inter-planetary expeditions to the Moon or Mars, but also echoes the actions of naturalists who accompanied the early South Pacific explorers. Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, for example, who participated in Cook's eighteenth-century

journey to the South Pacific, collected rock, soil, animal, and insect samples of the places they visited:

No people ever went to sea better fitted out for the purpose of Natural History. [...] they have all sorts of machines for catching and preserving insects; all kinds of nets, trawls, drags and hooks for coral fishing.[...] (Joseph Banks quoted in Salmond 102)

Coincidentally, Banks and Solander were also commissioned on this journey to observe the astronomical transit of Venus, the very same astronomical body that is the focus of attention in *The Great Romance*. In addition to its eighteenth-century connections, at times *The Great Romance* also reads like a nineteenth-century safari adventure. Its descriptions of “huge lion-like animals,” (II 5) “tigers,” (II 33), myriad fish, and strange landscapes, appear more often than not an exotic variant of Victorian travel writing. Nevertheless, what additionally underlines the uniqueness of the work is the fact that the author, on occasion, appears sympathetic to the aliens themselves.

In discussing contact experiences in science fiction, John Pierce states that Florence Carpenter Dieudonne, in her work *Rondah, or Thirty-Three Years in a Star* (1887), is “ahead of her time [...] in defending the rights of aliens” (*Foundations* 59). Likewise, Kingsley Amis (95) states that sympathetic attitudes to alien species can be found to have developed in American science fiction only from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. Such a seeming unwillingness by early science fiction authors to develop friendly alien beings may in part be due to the influence of H. G. Wells and Darwinian concepts about the survival of the fittest. Science fiction authors may well have imagined most aliens as threatening, since evolutionary philosophy seemed to turn them into the natural competitors of humankind (Clute and Nicholls 16). Certainly, early anti-alien feeling in science fiction would have reflected some of the negative racial stereotypes evident throughout numerous late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Euro-American narratives that depicted indigenous peoples as having sub-human, lazy, or dangerous personalities. Matabele warriors in South Africa, for example, were

sometimes described as “daemons” while Australian Aboriginals were often accused of cannibalism (Alessio, “Race, Empire and Photography” 81).

The Great Romance, at least initially, belies such racist and imperialist attitudes. Hope concludes, as early as Volume I, before contact has been made with the Venuses, that, if alien life does exist on the planet, then Earth colonists will just have to find another world to develop: “we must seek another planet—for earth’s over-crowded happiness” (I 37). Hope’s subsequent encounter with the Venuses will severely test this resolve. After all, in spite of their alien appearance, they are described as having a degree of mental ability: “There was intelligence, knowledge, in every line of their features” (II 12). They are also depicted as being high up on the evolutionary ladder: “These were not savages, and how far removed from animals” (II 13). It is interesting to speculate on the possible reasons for the empathy and respect shown in this novel for the aliens, attitudes that would appear to put the work ahead of its time in relation to the science fiction genre as a whole. It is possible, for example, that such attitudes mirror a more favourable history of race-relations between Pakeha and Maori. This history, while certainly not benign, dramatically contrasts with the contact histories of European colonization in the Americas and Australia, many of whose indigenous peoples were displaced or eradicated during the settlement process. The more positive images of the Venuses could reflect a Pakeha belief that the Maori demonstrated “a rare capacity for civilization” (Sorrenson 169), as well as the somewhat contradictory belief in a noble savage stereotype which also contributed to European perceptions of the Maori as “an innocent, happy child of Nature, free of the corruptions of ‘civilized’ society, the utopian inheritor of the biblical Garden of Eden” (Salmond 95). Not surprisingly, in this context, Hope refers to Venus as Eden and himself as “Adam” (II 14).

II Orientalizing the Venuses

Initial sympathy for the aliens aside, obviously paternalistic attitudes toward the Venuses in the two novelettes mirror late nineteenth-century cultural attitudes of racial superiority toward native peoples, while at

the same time revealing a more ambivalent and more complex approach to racial categorizing. Although in Volume I Hope has stated that colonization will not proceed should there be life on Venus, that idea is quickly forgotten by Volume II. For even after Hope has befriended the Venuses, he announces grand plans for the alien world: "They had come to find a future home for the growing millions of their native earth, and here all around the tropical zone was a region fitted with everything necessary" (II 26). The imperialistic/militaristic attitude is also reflected in Hope's concern to maintain a frontier fort to which he can retreat if attacked, his "little castle" with its "formidable [...] powers of defence" (II 5). Such a militaristic intention is foreshadowed by the formidable defenses installed in the space ship *Star Climber*, including a cannon that can blow up a moon, à la Deathstar:

Our offensive powers were certainly enormous. A cannon or mortar was almost built into the vessel, yet swivel-working with patent discharge, so that with its mouth in space it could pour forth such an incessant stream of fierce projectiles as might frighten the boldest adversary. (I 29)

The description of such a well-defended spaceship and fortified retreat mirrors both the defensive precautions taken on board Captain Cook's *Endeavour* (which included a complement of marines and weapons), as well as the frontier forts of the American West. As a further defensive safeguard, Hope carries on his person a revolver, and, even after befriending the alien couple, brings with him an even more powerful handgun—just to be on the safe side. Hope does admit, however, to a feeling of guilt after bringing his weapon along: "Afterwards I thought almost with shame at my doubts concerning my gentle companions" (II 13).

Such lingering uncertainties on the part of Hope toward his newfound alien friends might reflect prevailing Pakeha anxieties in the colony in the wake of the New Zealand Wars. These frontier conflicts saw certain Maori tribes going to war with the settler government and other Maori tribes over such issues as land and mana (authority). Although these wars had ended by the early 1870s, an armed constabulary remained

garrisoned in the North Island of the colony until 1885, and, in the early 1880s, peaceful Maori protests against the government's confiscation of native lands (purportedly as payment and punishment for enemy Maori tribes supporting the war effort), were conducted in the Taranaki District by leaders such as Te Whiti. According to Sorrenson, "A raw military edge to race relations thus persisted until the early twentieth century" (188). Nor was New Zealand at this time the only colony wherein indigenous tribes, although allied to the British, were still treated with some suspicion. In South Africa, although Zulu warriors were employed in the service of the empire to help quell an 1878 insurrection by fellow Zulus, these native auxiliaries (evident from an 1879 commercial tourist photograph from the period of the "Natal Native Contingent"), remained under-armed with inferior weapons. (Alessio, "Race" 104). All in all, therefore, "colonial rule was frequently haunted by a sense of insecurity" (Thomas 15), the ghostly presence of which can clearly be traced in *The Great Romance*.

Hope's insecurity when faced with the alien presence of the Venuses may also be interpreted as just one of many examples of Victorian cultural superiority. Soon after contact with the Venuses, Hope begins naming them. What is more, he chooses the classical/mythological appellations of Philomenia and Hyperion [sic], and, in using such classical designations, appropriates automatically the legacy of the Greco-Roman heritage and all its intonations of civilized authority. This was a favourite tactic of late nineteenth-century empire propagandists: "in the Protestant countries [...] classicism was the uniform of civilization" (Pieterse 19). Such a naming process is, in fact, very similar to the way in which Robinson Crusoe imperialistically names Man Friday, although, to his credit, Hope does not assume such a magisterial role. Instead he vows "he would learn their own names as soon as he could master their most strange speech" (II 25). Nevertheless, we never learn if Hope is able to maintain this oath since Volume III of *The Great Romance* remains lost or incomplete.

Hope tends to view the Venuses, despite their intelligence, as "children" whose minds "had little that was superior to humanity [...] of that great body of thought which has arisen from our mechanical and

omnivorous propensities, they knew nothing" (*II* 16). The association of the indigene with the child-like helped to foster among certain imperial authorities of *The Inhabitant's* time an impression that native peoples were primitive and inferior. Such an impression was consequently seen to necessitate and justify white intervention and control, as was the case in Australia where white officials viewed Aboriginals as "a race of humanity who had not quite grown up" (McGregor 74). Those images of arrested indigenous development would have been further reinforced by the apparent low level of material culture achieved by these indigenous groups. Such interpretations were a legacy of Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, who assumed automatically that, since Africans had not apparently produced anything he judged to be of substantial material significance, blacks were "naturally inferior to whites" (quoted in Goldberg 31).

Such cultural assumptions are also evident in Hope's description of the Venuses' little boat as "rude" and in his portrayal of their primitive-looking home: "[Their] hut or nest appeared built on piles out in the water, covered with grass and boughs, and only to be approached by coming along a row of stilt-like piles driven between it and the land" (*II* 15). Hope's racial superiority and, by implication, the Venuses' own inferiority, is also made manifest in Volume II when Hope begins to "civilize" them. He shows them the benefits of fire (*II* 16) and teaches them to cook the local "fish," in the process commenting that they will soon be "as completely civilized in these respects as the inhabitants of the earth" (*II* 17). The portrayal of an apparently open sexual behaviour of the Venuses toward one another could additionally have signified to a Victorian audience a relatively uncivilized manner. Certainly it was the case that images of naked native peoples in the photography of the time became the subject of severe missionary criticism and served as an indicator of the supposed deprived spiritual state of the people concerned. The depiction of the sexual practices of an alien race might also have reflected an interest in exotic eroticism that bordered the pornographic, such as in European fantasies of the harem in Orientalist descriptions.

One of the more obvious ways in which *The Great Romance* exhibits the imperial attitudes of late colonial New Zealand society is in the

discussions of race and eugenics that recur frequently in the narrative, particularly in Volume I. As soon as Hope awakens in the future he is told that the human race has advanced beyond measure, as evidenced in the physical strength and beauty of the planet's inhabitants; the descriptions of these advanced humans as "holy" or "perfection" (I 6); the advent of telekinesis which implies super-human capabilities (I 15-16); and the fact that telepathy has done away with crime on most of the planet, at least "among the higher races" (I 5). The latter suggests that there are pockets on Earth where, such mental and physiological advances have yet to be realized, something Edith Weir admits when she tells Hope that "the Hottentot, the degraded Negro, and the great border lands of peoples [...] are] not yet incorporated in the kingdom of thought" (I 23). Edith also tells Hope, however, that such nations are in decline and that the peoples living there, while presently outnumbered by ten to one, will soon be outnumbered by one hundred to one (II 23).

Statements like Edith's recall late nineteenth-century "Doomed Race" theory, which was especially popular among evolutionary anthropologists in Australia, as well as the rest of the British Empire, over the course of the late Victorian period. Such a theory owed its origins to a complicated mix of Enlightenment monogeneticism and polygeneticism, as well as nineteenth-century phrenology, Darwinism, and imperial expansion. "Doomed Race" theory envisioned non-white indigenous groups such as the Aboriginal Australians, Native Americans, and Maori slowly dying out as a result of a Darwinian-inspired belief in the evolutionary process of natural selection. It was certainly true that, by 1891, the Maori population in New Zealand had decreased to about seven per cent of the colony's total population while, by contrast, Pakeha figures were still on the increase (Sorrenson 192). Translated as a ratio, by 1890, the European population of the islands had exceeded that of the indigenous people by a ratio of ten to one (168), a figure not too far removed from the one given by Edith. To some nineteenth-century observers, therefore, it looked as though the Maori would soon go the way of their Tasmanian cousins across the sea, a factor *The Great Romance* may well reflect. Furthermore, Hope's willingness to consider miscegenation with

the aliens might also reflect an aspect of the contemporary scene in New Zealand, namely attempts by some Pakeha to “save” the Maori through amalgamation with white New Zealanders.

On the other hand, Edith’s emphasis on the population ratio between the supposedly lower and higher races might also have mirrored an even darker “War of the Races” tenet, a theme which emerges in xenophobic Anglo-American literature such as M. P. Shiel’s *The Yellow Danger* (1898) or Jack London’s *The Unparalleled Danger* (1910), works that expressed a sense of insecurity about foreign invasion by non-white groups. Consequently, the emphasis on declining numbers of non-whites in *The Great Romance* may have been intended to assuage such white anxieties.

The hierarchy of races evident between white and black peoples in *The Great Romance* is also, however, apparently evident within the “advanced” white population of the future. Edith Weir’s father, when discussing Hope’s desire to travel to Venus in Volume I, criticizes the decision on the basis that such a voyage would be dangerous, and he states that there are other less valuable persons who could take his place: “Well, Hope, you are a fool.[...] When there are hundreds of useless, dull-brained animals whose loss would be no detriment to anything, you must go” (I 24). It appears, therefore, that class-like disparities, as well as racial ones, still play a part in the society of the twenty-second century.

III Colonizing Venus

There is a story (probably apocryphal) that in the late 1960s, when NASA astronauts were training in the Arizona desert as part of their preparations for a moon landing, they came across an elderly Navajo shepherd and asked him if he had any messages for the inhabitants of the moon. The shepherd apparently replied, “Be careful. They will steal your land” (Cornwall, *The Independent* March 3, 1997). The shepherd’s comment serves as an apt warning for what is to happen, in spite of Hope’s initial reassurances, in *The Great Romance*. John Clute and Peter Nicholls, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), point out that while H. G. Wells was one of the earliest science fiction writers

to borrow from the example of British colonial history for his famous Martian invasion of Earth in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), he never deliberated upon the settlement of Mars by humankind (244). Moreover, Clute and Nicholls conclude that “Later writers of Scientific Romance were also completely uninterested in the conquest of space” (244). Not only does *The Great Romance* appear to be one of the first science fiction works to treat seriously the subject of the human colonization of space (a theme in science fiction which, like alien creatures, has since become a staple of the modern genre), but the nonchalant treatment of the issue of colonization of Venus by the Earthlings additionally serves to underline the imperialistic meta-narrative which runs through much of the work.

Very early on in Volume I the issue of the colonization of space is raised when Hope, after seeing the fantastic technological advances of the future and the biological superiority of Earth’s inhabitants, wonders if the power behind creation deliberately “[left] the rest of the solar system for our increase, for the increase of those godlike moving beings” (I 8). Halfway through the first volume, substantial plans are already afoot for the human settlement of Venus, even before it has been thoroughly explored and before it can be determined if alien life is already existent on the planet, or whether or not its inhabitants would welcome such an intrusion:

Should we reach Venus, I had intended to stay while Moxton and Weir returned [...] Then Weir would lead the second voyage—and were it practicable, Edith and Lucy Moxton would come with others. The boats for the second voyage now were far advanced [...] (I 28)

During the process of befriending the alien Venuses, Hope concludes that he has as yet met only this particular couple as the ecology of the planet Venus is solely geared to supporting their isolated nomadic existence: “if they lived without tillage on the fruits of ground, they must need be few in number, and live far apart” (II 16). Yet even after contact with the Venuses and the realization that the planet’s environment is fragile and only suited to the Venuses’ particular mode of life, Hope still

dreams of other humans following in his footsteps: “here, too, should reign the works of man, and this planet should *teem* with human pleasure” (*II* 24, emphasis added). Perhaps it isn’t too surprising then, that Hope initially finds it difficult to induce the aliens to show him the way to the rest of their people.

One of the reasons for Earth’s attempted colonization of Venus in *The Great Romance*, apart from the need to relieve the Earth of its growing population, would appear to be a desire to improve further upon the human condition and to ensure that the human race does not go into decline. Such a motive is touched upon by Alfred Malcolm Weir, the brother of Edith Weir and also the first person to raise, with Hope, the issue of colonizing other planets: “we are dreaming now of other worlds—of Mars and Venus. Could we reach them and inhabit them life might again increase, I don’t think we should feel degraded, at least for two or three hundred years” (*I* 6). Weir’s comments also happen to express a late nineteenth-century British concern about race deterioration, epitomized by the birth of the motherhood movement, the growing popularity of eugenicist ideas, falling birth rates, the spread of venereal disease, calls for women emigrants to the colonies, and widespread anxiety over military and industrial decline in the wake of German, American, and Japanese rivalry.

Considering the theme of colonization in *The Great Romance*, it does not require much imagination to read the work as a veiled promotional piece encouraging emigration to New Zealand, for the novelette, apart from its science fiction/utopian theme, also appears to be an example of a sub-genre of literature designed to attract emigrants to the supposedly Arcadian lands to be found in the Antipodes. As Clute and Nicholls point out, because of New Zealand’s distance from Old World centres of power, the colony became “a convenient setting for moral and Utopian tales” (869). Propagandists for New Zealand, such as Richard Wedderspoon in *The Dominion of New Zealand, Brian’s El Dorado of the Southern Hemisphere* (1927), frequently used such rhetoric in their promotional literature. The emphasis on friendly aliens, like the noble savage couple in *The Great Romance*, may indeed be part of this booster strategy, intended obliquely to assuage European readers concerned

about rebellious natives in the post 1860s New Zealand Wars climate. It was certainly the case that, as late as the 1920s, New Zealand promoters were attempting to show that the country was “no merely half-developed land peopled chiefly by copper-coloured natives and a few white settlers” (Wedderspoon 22). Moreover, New Zealand filmmakers, in motion pictures such as *The Adventures of Algy* (1925), poked fun at comical Englishmen arriving by steamship in Auckland harbour armed with guns to ward off Maori attacks. The reader of *The Great Romance* may be forgiven for seeing it as a promotional piece, as one has simply to substitute the advanced but overcrowded utopia of Earth in the twenty-second century with that of Europe in the late 1870s or early 1880s, and then replace the descriptions of the vast and supposedly nearly uninhabited lands of a Venus rich in wildlife and natural resources with either New Zealand (or Australia), for the booster intent of the publication to become readily apparent. The author, in fact, has actually included kangaroos as one of the exotic animal species on Venus in Volume I (51), and refers to the “tropical zone” of the planet as being the most suitable for human settlement (*II* 26). In this light, the choice of *The Inhabitant* as nomenclature is important, as the pseudonym was one common at the time to guidebooks in Great Britain and the United States.

The actual choice of the planet Venus for human settlement, as opposed to the Moon or Mars, might also underscore the colonialist promotional theme. Although early on in Volume I Venus is chosen as a destination because of its supposedly earth-like atmosphere, it is perhaps more significant that, in ancient Italian mythology, Venus was a minor deity identified with the spring and vegetation, and that historically classical female imagery was often employed by European maritime powers to signify land as a resource to be penetrated and exploited. Amerigo Vespucci, for instance, when he described the new continent of America, imagined it as a benevolent and fertile female figure who, from within her cornucopia, offered untold wealth and riches to all (Klarer 5). Such classical associations of land with the female form could not have been lost on *The Inhabitant*, for the author exhibits a classical education throughout the text, witnessed by the fact that Hope chooses Latin names for the Venuses and makes references to Renaissance

works of literature. The choice of the name Philomena (or beloved) for the female alien, not to mention Venus's later Roman association with Aphrodite as the goddess of love, might additionally foreshadow the protagonist's contemplation of sexual relations across the species line. It was certainly the case that early planetary tours to Venus, such as Emanuel Swedenborg's *The Earths in our Solar System* (1758) "were influenced by the planet's longtime association with the goddess of love" (Clute and Nicholls 1274).

IV Conclusion

It has been suggested that nineteenth-century science fiction remained uncommitted to the colonization of other planets due to "a sense of shame about the methods employed in colonizing terrestrial lands" (Clute and Nicholls 244). As early as 1818, even the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is critical of the results of colonization: "I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants" (115). Likewise, as we have seen already, when distinct alien beings were eventually introduced into early twentieth-century science fiction, they were usually depicted as bug-eyed monsters. *The Great Romance*, therefore, would seem to run counter to the general trend in science fiction by emphasizing the human settlement of Venus, as well as by offering a unique vision of friendly aliens who are distinct physically (and to some extent culturally) from humanity. This more positive depiction of alien-ness in the work also gives *The Great Romance* an added importance at a theoretical level, as it goes some way toward substantiating recent critical responses in postcolonial literature to Edward Said's *Orientalism* by demonstrating that Western representations of the Other are often far more complex and ambivalent than Said's early work assumed: "Cross-currents of 'Orientalist' or 'counter-Orientalist' thinking can exist simultaneously within a single text" (McLeod 51).

Said's work (which was first published in 1978), was essentially a study of western colonial representations of North African and Middle Eastern peoples that posited them, among other things, as backward, strange, degenerate, and feminine, all in order to legitimize European

rule and domination. One early critical response to Said (Dennis Porter's "Orientalism and its Problems," 1983), argued that Said's work was ahistorical in that it made sweeping generalizations about two thousand years of past history without examining individual moments in time. Porter argued that "even the most seemingly Orientalist text can include within itself moments when Orientalist assumptions come up against alternative views that throw their authority into question" (quoted in McLeod 51). More recently, John MacKenzie, in *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995), has enlarged upon Porter's criticism, arguing "that Western artists have approached the Orient at various moments with perfectly honourable intentions and 'genuine respect'" (McLeod 47). Nicholas Thomas (1994) has also suggested, this time with regard to representations of the colonized in anthropology and traveller narratives, that colonial discourse should not be approached so one-sidedly, only "as a global and transhistorical logic of denigration" (3).

An initial examination of the more optimistic depiction of the Venuses in *The Great Romance* would appear to corroborate much of what Porter, MacKenzie, and Thomas argue. Although the alien couple indulges in foreplay at a time in history and literature when overt sexuality was envisioned as a sign of immorality and lack of control, The Inhabitant also describes the future utopian earth as a free-love community, and Hope does more than hint at having had a number of relationships with women outside of marriage. So it is not just the aliens who indulge in this kind of overt sexual behaviour. Moreover, despite the depiction of the alien couple as primitive childlike figures, they are not described as lazy, violent, or untrustworthy. Indeed, Hope chastises himself for his very own lack of trust in them. Additionally, the aliens in *The Great Romance* are not stereotyped superficially as simple one-dimensional characters. Rather, the author of the work has made a genuine attempt to portray them as believable, indeed even friendly, beings. The very fact that they have been included at all in this early science fiction work, not to mention their visibly non-human appearance and the descriptions of them as having their own customs, language, and even agency (one must remember that at first they refused to help Hope locate the rest of their own kind until they had solicited an oath of

secrecy from him never to betray their cause), should imply a generally more positive view of the “alien Other.”

But, despite this early cause for optimism, there is also a darker side to The Inhabitant’s depiction of a golden future for the human race and the Venuses, one revealing that even sympathetic representations of the Other are still not always free from latent Orientalist assumptions. First, not all Earth peoples are yet able to share in The Inhabitant’s idealized vision of the shape of things to come, as black Africans (among other groups) are explicitly excluded; second, although Hope feigns sympathy for the Venuses, it is only too clear where his real sympathies lie, namely with the racially and culturally superior human race searching for *lebensraum* among the stars. And finally, if English-speaking science fiction authors were indeed critical of the colonization of other planets on account of Britain’s imperial legacy, then the introduction of a cooperative, welcoming, and allied alien species in *The Great Romance* might simply function as a convenient ruse to help counteract any feelings of remorse or guilt. Certainly the more subtle theme of cooperative natives was also emphasized by British authorities to help justify domestically Britain’s over-lordship of Africa and the Pacific (Alessio, “Race”).

Overall, the ambivalent attitude expressed toward the Venuses and other non-white human groups by characters in the text such as Edith or Hope, when coupled with the Orientalist-like descriptions of the Venuses as children or backward, the subtle use of science and reason to legitimize and assist colonization, and the overt references to eugenics and race, would further suggest the imperial conceit explicit throughout *The Great Romance*. If one reinterprets *The Great Romance* as an alternative history of contact between the Maori and the British over the course of the nineteenth century, then, despite the initial optimism for cooperation between these groups that followed in the wake of the British annexation of the islands and the signing of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, it is not surprising that things still turned out the way they did. As John McLeod comments on the results of such well-intentioned and benign colonialism generally: “the road to hell is often paved with good intentions” (48). Even though Said’s earlier work can now be seen

to overlook the contradictory elements and multiple readings possible in some colonial writings, and MacKenzie and others are right to point out the need for a kind of Rankean-inspired historicist approach to each period and then to recognize issues such as resistance and gender in colonial texts (not to mention the more unique contact history of Pakeha and Maori in New Zealand), as far as *The Great Romance* is concerned, the central colonialist assumptions about Orientalism would appear to continue to remain valid, albeit in a muted form.

The Great Romance distinguishes itself from contemporary science fiction works in a number of ways, including its importance as a possible influence on Bellamy, as well as its relatively sophisticated approach to scientific realism. Yet leaving aside the still unproven Bellamy link, the work remains interesting as a kind of cultural barometer. Like much other science fiction, it can be used as a tool to analyze popular perceptions from a specific historical period, in much the same way that more modern science fiction sources such as films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or the television series *Star Trek* can be used to examine Cold War paranoia in the 1950s or a change in American opinion toward the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. *The Great Romance* is also of interest from a literary point of view. Although there are obvious holes in the plot (telepathy is relatively important in Volume I, but appears to be forgotten in Volume II), and some serious errors in the narrative structure (there is a sudden change from a first- to third-person narrator halfway through Volume II), the work still reads quite well as fiction and is not quite as dull as a good deal of similar science fiction/utopian material produced during this period. The concluding episode regarding Hope's companions on the comet, particularly Weir's fall off the face of the comet, is particularly gripping and is literally a cliff-hanger, left unresolved at the conclusion of the second volume. What remains to be done now is to try to find Volume III (if it exists at all?), and perhaps, most importantly, to continue the search for the identity of the author who may hold the key to this work's unique place in the history of science-fiction writing.

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