

***Futuristic Fiction, Utopia, and Satire in the Age of the Enlightenment:
Samuel Madden's Memoirs of the Twentieth Century (1733)***

Giulia Iannuzzi

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Since the 1980s, or the advent of New Historicism, much of the research on the literature of the eighteenth century can be referred to as scholarship of recovery. A lot has been lost, ignored, or forgotten. As scholars of the period, we find old texts, bring them to light, and show why they merit attention or how they change our picture of the course of literary history.

This new edition of Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733), which comes with a sizable introduction by Giulia Iannuzzi, puts before us a work of fiction that has received scant attention even by specialists of the eighteenth century. One of the reasons is that Madden, an Irish writer, clergyman, and philanthropist, destroyed most of the 1,000-copy print run for reasons that remain uncertain, so that only 18 first editions are now listed in the catalogues of North American and European libraries. And yet the text has earned the honour to be considered the first instance of what is called 'future fiction,' a kind of creative literature that imagines the state of the world in time to come, much as utopias, since Thomas More, tell of unreal places that are far away geographically. The point of origin, for many, is the French writer Louis Sebastian Mercier's *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1771), on which lots of arguments about conceptions of history and futurity have been hung. It is no stretch, therefore, to say that Madden's abortive experiment lets us rethink the course of literary and intellectual history. How was the future envisioned in the early eighteenth century? How was it marshalled to critique the culture and politics of the present? How was it posited as a plan or model to strive for in the future? This new edition makes widely available the first footprints, so to speak, on what is now a busy thoroughfare.

The long excursus at the front of the book, written by Iannuzzi, is as detailed and descriptive as any reader could wish it. In fifteen chapters and 120 pages, this section lays out the context quite rigorously and comprehensively. It is almost a monograph, at least in length, but without a central argument, apart from the claim that 'this work of fiction is an exceptionally fascinating piece of early eighteenth-century literature and an important—albeit hitherto rather obscure—chapter in the

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history of the futuristic imagination' (17). Iannuzzi considers, among much else, the history of science fiction and utopian literature; understandings in early modernity of history and futurity; the life of the author, an Irishman who was loyal to British interests; his connection with well-known thinkers and writers of the day, including George Berkeley, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson; his engagement with myriad sources and precursors, from accounts of natural history to narratives of exploration; the main targets of the book's satire, in particular the Jesuits; and the conditions of publication, including the question of why the author would suppress his own creation. For Iannuzzi, there are two explanations: one is that Madden, unnamed on the title page, had lost his anonymity, and that he deemed it unseemly for a member of the clergy to be seen wading into issues of politics; the other, congruent with the first, is the current events had made matters sensitive, and that the author feared the anger of England's de facto Prime Minister, Robert Walpole.

Let me describe Madden's narrative, since so few have read it. The text includes a dedication and not one but three prefaces by a fictive editor who has received a pack of letters from the future. These letters, addressed to the Lord High Treasurer, the editor's five-times great grandson, will be written in the 1990s by British diplomats who are stationed in such cities as Rome, Paris, Moscow, and Constantinople. They have been carried by a ghost, or spirit—'my good *Genius*'—to the year 1728, then recast by the editor in the English of the eighteenth-century (157). The letters show a world in which Britain rules the oceans and runs global trade and commerce. Stanhope, an agent in Constantinople, writes that 'our glorious *George VI.* hath by the Success of his Arms oblig'd his Enemies to accept the Terms he was pleas'd to prescribe them'; the British King has 'taught all the Powers in *Europe* the Respect and almost Dependence they owe us' (163). The villains are the Jesuits, who control parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. As Stanhope puts it, 'they have been able to divide and distract the *Protestant* Powers, to corrupt and pervert some of them, perfidiously and atheistically to break thro' Oaths, and the most solemn and sacred Engagements, and to embrace the *Romish* Communion' (177). Some of the letters, far fewer, tell of the state of Britain. Madden's perspective was that of a clergyman of the Protestant Ascendancy, a Whig who believed in Britain's eminence, and that comes through in the letters. The text as a whole should be read as a kind of frame story in which the three prefaces are of a piece with the letters. Playful and facetious, the voice of the editor instils a sense of caution and unsureness as to how to interpret what follows. Just how sincere or ironic are Madden's predictions? We cannot be expected to accept at face value the story by Clare, in Moscow, that a Lapland ritual can bring warm sunshine to cold climates, though he tells us he has seen 'the Clouds break into a small Aperture, as regularly as if one would draw the Curtains of a Bed,' so that 'there were about three Acres thus enlightened, while all the rest of the Garden about them, as well as the whole Country, was covered with a dark misty Fog' (186). A letter on protocol to slow the plague in the Ottoman Empire—a system that has saved 'many millions' in Turkey—sounds more like a candid proposal, one that Britain would do well to follow (233). And one assumes Madden means it when a letter from London

tells of noble families that have faltered, judging that, ‘all the empty noise, and pomp, and shew of Life, which Men aim at with such infinite expense and folly, is not worth one action greatly generous, humane, or honest’ (268).

It will not be unkind, I hope, to conclude that *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* is one of those texts that is, perhaps, less fun to read than to discuss. The same has been said of some of the greatest works of literature, for instance Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), though I would not put *Memoirs* at that high level. The fiction of the time could be placed in two categories. The first is for writing that seems old and strange, writing that is interesting (if it is indeed interesting) because it is so different, so archaic. The second is for narratives that come across as modern or familiar. *Memoirs*, without a doubt, fits better in the former. It is a ‘novel,’ according to Iannuzzi, but readers should not expect a story in the vein of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740). There is no plot. There are no characters. There is, instead, lots of detailed description and explanation, as is the case with all utopian and dystopian literature. What makes the *Memoirs* intriguing, for me, is the way it plays with the future. Free of the dictates of what we now call ‘science fiction,’ Madden was free, as well, of the genre’s tendency to dream up new inventions that structure human existence. His is a future of not gizmos and gadgets but cultures and politics. What determines the progress of history, in Madden’s account, is not new and strange machines but rather the exchanges and influences wrought by travel and commerce. That, in itself, is compelling, given the obsession, in the actual twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with the latest and greatest technologies. The oddness of Madden’s narrative—its divergence from later science fiction—should remind us that the virtue of the genre is that it can show us a wide variety of possible futures. I would not want the outcome that Madden imagines for the twentieth century, but the *Memoirs*, at least, affirms both the power of the creative imagination and the freedom we have to think up and plan for many new worlds to come.