

Book Review

Fred G. Thompson, *Looking Back On The Future*, Futurescan International Inc., Ottawa, Canada, 1992, 211 pages.

It was this book's title that attracted my attention. It suggested the use of hitherto unknown techniques (of a science-fiction flavor) to obtain earthshaking foresights into what awaits us. My apprehension turned into disappointment as soon as I received a copy of the book and started reading it. Alas, my disappointment was greater when I had finished reading it.

The book aims to give an account of the Canadian futures movement over the last 20 years. The style oscillates between that of a personal journal and that of notes to be archived. There is a proliferation of anecdotes most of them personal, irrelevant, and unexciting.

The book begins by describing the early days of the Ottawa Futures Society and then goes on to some other futures organizations in Canada. In a section entitled "Futures Organizations Outside Canada" we find details about the founding and the activities of The World Future Society. Other futures studies organizations in the US are also mentioned, but the section is dominated by a description of the author's traveling experience to a conference in Stockholm giving a list of the Canadians who *did not* attend the conference. The book's largest section is devoted to the Canadian Association for Futures Studies and their journal *Futures Canada*.

Throughout the book there is minimal confrontation of predictions with verifications and the conclusions are "soft" and often obvious. For example, Thompson argues: Fish stocks declining on a world basis should stimulate preservation, conservation, restoration and augmentation. Yet it took 15 years before political action was taken to restrict fishing off Canada's Atlantic coast. However, without these early warnings, the action might have been delayed until restoration would not even be possible.

Thompson goes into more detail in confronting the findings of Canadian Delphi surveys of 15 years ago with today's realities. How they had foreseen that the work week would be reduced to 30-32 hours and 4 days, while it did not really change; or, how they had predicted home video-computers by 1986, which was indeed confirmed by the appearance of the PC. No mention is made of Schnaars' *MEGAMISTAKES*, a book devoted to mismatches between forecasts and outcomes.

Another striking omission from a book that tries to enumerate organizations preoccupied with the future is not to mention the existence of the International Institute of Forecasters. This organization has been holding Annual International Symposia with several hundred attendees ever since 1980.

The endless anecdotal narrative of events such as meetings, luncheons, conferences, surveys, interviews, and studies leaves little room for a discussion of the underlying laws and the fundamental forces of nature responsible for the shaping of our future. The few explanatory attempts remain speculative and do not become developed into convincing arguments, for example, Thompson claims that population growth in the poorest countries will continue until their economies improve to the point where children are not

needed as support for the elderly. Another example is the Ark experiment intended to develop a family housing unit that maximized energy conservation, food production, and effective waste disposal. The experiment lasted 2 years and then ran out of funds. Thompson argues: "If visitors had been encouraged and provided for, and if the location were closer to a center of population, and then had political support, the money to sustain it and popularize it, might well have been found."

There are no graphs in the book; even a Time Chart given in Appendix 1 that summarizes organizations, events, and author's experiences is given in the form of a Table. The author's forecasts are often expressed as opinions. For example, contrary to what we believed 15 years ago, he remarks, "oil is not now a scarce commodity, although it has to have a finite life." In the last section he concludes that we must change:

economic growth to stability
 population increase to population control
 consumption of resources to conservation
 competition to cooperation
 self-interest to group interest

To forecasters he recommends the following attitude: "Take risks: it's more exciting and may in the long run be more accurate."

The book's redeeming value comes from three areas. One is as a reference manual—despite a poor index—for events related to futures movements in Canada. Another one is that the reader becomes acquainted with unfamiliar details found in the author's travel-ogues (notably his trip to Japan), or in his description of luncheons with politicians and futurologists such as: Pierre Trudeau, Aurelio Peccei, Kristin Shannon, Alexander King, Walter Baker, David Hoffman, Rick Clayton, René Dubos, and Lester Brown (some names may not be familiar to nonCanadians.) The last and perhaps the most important redeeming value is the book's attempt to raise the reader's awareness of the importance of long-range forecasting.

To summarize, in all probability, the people most likely to enjoy this book are retired civil servants of the Canadian government.

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