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## The Other Millennium: Review of *Yesterdays Future: The Twentieth Century Begins*. Michael E. Stevens, ed.

George W. Geib  
Butler University

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# The Other Millennium

GEORGE W. GEIB

Michael E. Stevens, ed. *Yesterday's Future: The Twentieth Century Begins*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1999, x + 167 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 0-87020-313-4.

The widespread public interest and accompanying media hype surrounding the millennium celebrations of December 31, 1999, produced several interesting projects among historians and documentary editors. One of those is this slender volume, published in 1999 by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. *Yesterday's Future* uses the pen and eye of the print media of a century ago to look at one state's responses to the coming of a new century. Intended as part of a series, "Voices of the Wisconsin Past," the book is a selection of nearly one hundred reports and opinions offered to Wisconsin newspaper readers a hundred years ago.

The editor is quick to point out that the question of defining the appropriate date for the celebration was then, as in 1999, a matter of dispute. Most Wisconsin residents observed December 31, 1900, as the proper date for a new century. But a portion of the state's large German-American community followed the German practice and, with the Kaiser's implicit sanction, held their observances a year earlier. Thus, we really see two unequally large bodies of commentary separated by a year in time.

The texts are divided into four major areas. First, the book explores the nature of the celebrations, looking at both private social events and public community programs. Second, the editor samples the retrospective views offered of the nineteenth century, heavy with a pride in American political and economic achievement. Third, the book samples a broad and optimistic review of the shaping power of technology and science in 1900. Finally, *Yesterday's Future* presents a number of predictions regarding the course of the coming twentieth century.

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George W. Geib is professor of history at Butler University in Indianapolis. His research interests include the culture and politics of the American Midwest.

The editor selected reports of celebrations that describe families and communities dominated by local responses. Many are scenes of parties, dinners, buggy rides, and other midwinter social occasions in private homes, town halls, or church basements. It is a world of fashions, participatory activities, and popular piety that affirms the continued power of the genteel tradition. Side by side with the social pages are the police blotters that reveal another milieu of crude pranks, drunken revelers, and human foibles.

In the retrospective views, the editor chose comments dominated by a nationalistic pride in the achievements of the young American republic. Here the emphasis is on progress, expressed in language that will not surprise any student of the celebratory fairs of the era, such as nearby Chicago in 1893 or St. Louis in 1904. Americans appear consistently as an energetic and enterprising people, harnessing political and technological power in ways that produce a society superior to its European counterparts. No section of the book offers a more positive vision than the *Janesville Gazette's* comparison of the confident American girl of 1901 with her timid predecessor of 1801. No entry offers a more amusing, or dated, counterpoint than the *Wisconsin Agriculturist's* similar study of the dairy cow.

On the topic of technology, the editor marshals views heavy with new science and innovative engineering. Parts are what one might have expected in an era that enjoyed such futuristic fiction as that of Edward Bellamy or H. G. Wells, as well as a reminder of our own tendency to reflect the science fiction of earlier ages. The most interesting entries describe an expanding public sphere in which government will place the new technology at the service of the citizen, particularly in public health. The fear of epidemic disease runs as a dark undercurrent through these optimistic visions, reminding us again that we are looking at an anticipatory, not a descriptive, world.

The selections of the ensuing section on predictions affirm the same progressive spirit seen in the earlier entries. Most are visions built upon current politics, available technology, and public health. If the new century was also a time of disorder that caused many to worry about the social fabric, little of this found its way to *Yesterday's Future*. Clerics troubled by materialism, and industrialists concerned with an adequate labor force are more indicative of the voices quoted here. It is enjoyable to note how many of the specific prophecies, at least in the short term, came true in areas such as public education and women's rights.

Since the book is intended as a summation of the

voices of the Wisconsin past, we necessarily ask whose voices are being offered. The overwhelming majority of the selections are taken from Wisconsin city newspapers, mostly written by editors, reporters, and columnists. Of approximately one hundred selections, about sixty are by identifiable state residents, about twenty are from syndicated articles reprinted in state papers, and about twenty are by authors who cannot be identified. Two of the contributors are women, one is an African American editor, and one is a specialist writing for the hearing impaired. The newspapers quoted represent a vigorous local press in many county and regional centers as well as in Milwaukee.



*The baby new year in his steam-powered "New Century" sleigh knocks the old year on his back. (Superior) Evening Telegram, December 31, 1900, as captioned in Yesterday's Future: The Twentieth Century Begins, p. 94.*

Some of the most interesting choices stem from the editor's decision to move beyond commercial dailies and weeklies to seek writings from a large, and largely ephemeral, body of society newsletters, school newspapers, church bulletins, and other organs of small-group interest and activity. Diaries, letters, and other manuscript sources are not included. What we thus hear are voices of the articulate, journalists chief among them. What we do not hear as clearly are the less articulate, the readers, and the subjects of their reading. We know that Wisconsin leaders thought the new century to be a time for reflection and celebration. What we would like to know is how widely those views were shared by the public.

The editor accompanies these sections with thirty-one illustrations: fifteen photographs from various archives, and sixteen cartoons and graphics from newspaper sources. The photographs are less effective in presenting the title theme of the book. Selected from the years between 1895 and 1910, they generally illustrate scenes of education, agriculture, and women's interests of the era. But none was specifically taken in response to the celebratory events or speculations of 1900-1901, and their contribution thus depends more on their captions than on their content. The graphics and cartoons are much more valuable. Several are representations of Father Time, calendars of the new century, or interpretations of the new woman or the new technology of 1900. In most places, these illustrations are comments on their own, rather than references to the printed texts. They remind us forcefully of the visual power bred by a new century, and leave us hoping for more. The same might be said of at least two editorial decisions.

One was the decision to exclude works not written in (or translated into) English. The editor is forthright in noting the key exception: the German-American community, which is represented by six selections. Here the editorial decision was either to translate German text into English, or to use an earlier English text if it had been translated before its publication by a German-language newspaper. The mechanism of translation is barely discussed, and the small number of selections from a vigorous foreign-language press is notable in a state with a large immigrant population that still used native languages in press, pulpit, and popular discourse. Granting that the loss of that linguistic base a century later would require modern translations, it still seems a curious editing decision. You will search the index in vain for Danes, Swedes, Poles, Irish, or other groups that in 1900 were a significant part of Wisconsin's population. In short, the decision appears to limit the range of voices unnecessarily.

The second decision of interest is the proper extent of annotation. Here again the choice is minimalist. Each essay is preceded by a short introduction, usually no more than three sentences that identify the author, source, and general topic of the entry. Authors are identified very briefly, but the world of journalism that bred such a fascination with speculative analysis is little considered. Footnotes are almost nonexistent. The editor does explain his approach in a six-page preface that suggests the book is best seen in the context of the futuristic literature of a century ago. It is an interesting humanistic approach, but it leaves us wishing the editor had been more explicit about his choices and methods.

### **Editor Sought for *Documentary Editing***

The ADE solicits proposals for a new editor and a new institutional home for its quarterly journal, *Documentary Editing*. Beth Luey will continue as editor until she has seen the December 2001 issue through to publication. Her successor will begin work in the fall of 2001 to produce the March 2002 issue. The Association seeks a two-year renewable commitment to the journal from a new editor and institutional host. Proposals should identify the editor, include a projected budget for the first year, and indicate the level of institutional support available to the publication. Interested parties should apply to:

Beverly Wilson Palmer  
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For more information about the responsibilities connected with the publication of *Documentary Editing*, applicants should contact Palmer at either of the above addresses or 909-607-3443.