

50 Years From Today (Review)

One of the neat little perks about being the webmaster of [Tales of Future Past](#) is that people send me stuff. Sometimes it's images, sometimes it's information on various topics, and sometimes it's money via the PayPal tip jar to keep the site going *cough, cough*. And sometimes it's books that someone wants reviewing. In the most recent case, the publishers of *The Way We Will Be 50 Years from Today: 60 Of The World's Greatest Minds Share Their Visions of the Next Half-Century* edited by Mike Wallace sent me two copies of the book, which is a lucky thing because the deliveryman left the package on my back doorstep where Little Ann the Australian Shepherd found it, ripped it open, and promptly tore one copy to shreds. The other one she tore the cover off of a couple of days later when I was foolish enough to leave the volume out by the fireplace. She's never done this with any other book, so I haven't decided whether this means she loved or hated it, though I tend towards the latter.

In *The Way We Will Be 50 Years from Today*, CBS journalist Mike Wallace approached fifty of the "smartest and most imaginative people on the planet" to ask them how they saw the world in 2058. The list included some fairly obvious choices, such as Vint Cerf, Vice President of Google; Francis S. Collins, leader of the Human Genome Project; Ray Kurzweil, futurist and prophet of the Singularity; and Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution. Mixed in with these are the less obvious: Carol M. Browner, former head of the EPA; Kim Dae-jung, former president of South Korea; and Peter Marra, a "leading researcher in migratory bird ecology." The chosen 50 are top-heavy with scientists (mostly biologists and denizens of the softer fields). Though there's a respectable showing of Internet pioneers, futurists, businessmen and bureaucrats, there are relatively few engineers, only one military man, no philosophers or artists of any note and not a clergyman in sight-unless you count Richard Dawkins as a sort of atheologian.

Not surprisingly for a book of short essays *The Way We Will Be 50 Years from Today* is something of a curate's egg. Some, such as Kurzweil or Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, really get into the spirit of the thing and go into detail about the sort of world they see emerging in the next half century. Others, such as Louis J. Ignarro, professor of pharmacology at UCLA, deliver essays that can be summed up as "the world will be a jolly nice place if only I can get decent funding." And then there are those like Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, who basically recycle their mission statement. In a way, it's almost refreshing when Dawkins just chucks the whole thing over in favour of a thinly veiled screed against anyone who believes in the soul.

The predictions themselves are pretty predictable with nothing being put forth that would disturb a cocktail party at Berkley, CA or Islington N1. A lot of them ran along the lines of "I woke this morning and my shower head read me my email" and others went along more broad sweeps about how breast cancer will be a thing of the past or nation states and Bangladesh will vanish thanks to Internationalism or global warming respectively. Life expectancy will go up unless it goes down and we'll be richer unless we are poorer. It's certainly a long way from the consensus about flying cars and edible dishes with the off chance of nuclear war of fifty years previous. The only thing that really unites these essays is not what they predict, but what they don't. There is a lot about global warming, but not a word about mass migration or the demographic time bomb that the civilised world faces. Exotic diseases gets a look in, but not free trade. And the sort of emphasis on manufacturing and serious industrial scale technologies that once dominated predictions now give way to lean and green.

But the most disturbing lack is that there is scarcely a mention of terrorism and none at all of the war we are currently fighting against the Jihadists; a war that by any reasonable estimate we will be fighting for at least another generation. Given that some estimates have at least one of the smaller countries in Europe under Sharia law within 20 years, future employment opportunities for OAPs seems a bit low on the priorities.