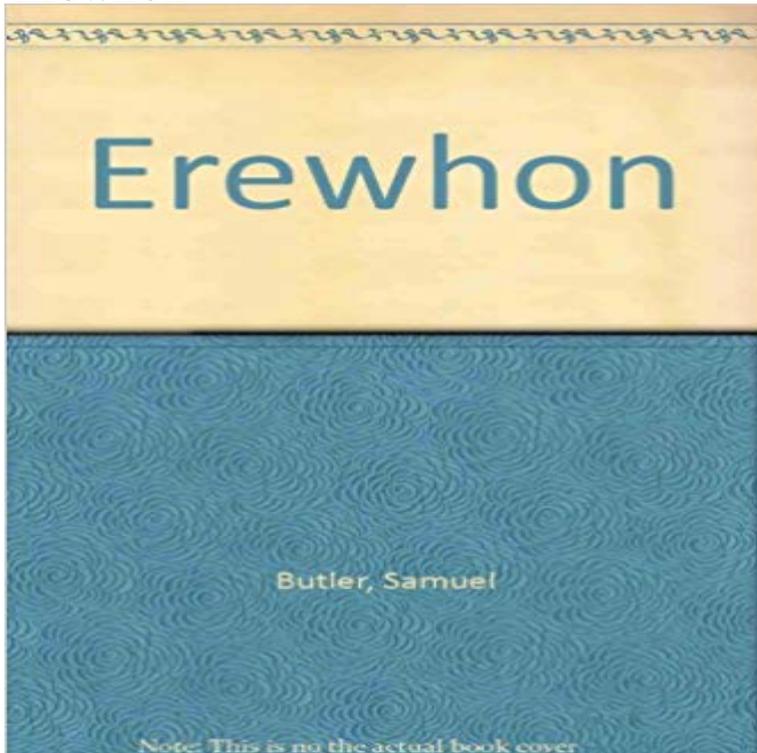


# Erewhon



Following in the tradition of Jonathan Swifts Gullivers Travels, Samuel Butler published Erewhon privately in 1872. Arguably the first first anti-Utopian or dystopian novel, Erewhon anticipates later and better known works such as Aldous Huxleys Brave New World and George Orwells 1984. Whereas More and other utopianists were primarily interested in attacking societys ills and making the world a better place, the anti-utopians engaged primarily in either satire of the society in which they lived or in making dire predictions about the dismal fate that awaits humanity. Butler is most decidedly in the former category, since he proves in not only Erewhon but also his more famous work, the semi-autobiographical novel, The Way of All Flesh, that his main concern is in attacking the complacency and hypocrisy he saw infecting Victorian society. Like Mores island of Utopia, Butlers Erewhon is a remote kingdom, not to be found on any map, which is discovered by the narrator of the novel (biographers of Butler have assumed it is modeled on a part of New Zealand, which anyone who has viewed the Lord of the Rings movies can attest has some spectacular landscapes). Cut off from the rest of the world, the citizens of Erewhon live according to their own rules and dictates. Butler breaks from the tradition of creating an idealized world in favor of a more realistic society. In Butlers world money, the rich, the poor, and even a monarchy still exist. It is when we notice strong parallels between Erewhon and the members of Victorian society that we start to see Butlers true purpose. Hypocrisy is rampant in Erewhon, where citizens think nothing of agreeing with things they do not believe in and their friends know that they do so. While the citizens pretend to worship deities that are the personification of lofty human qualities such as love, justice, and hope, they really worship a

goddess, Ydrgun, and the Church of England is transformed into the system of Musical Banks. As Butler hits his stride in this novel he creates a topsy-turvy world where illness is treated as a crime (there are no physicians in the country) and criminal behavior, such as theft, are seen as minor weaknesses in character. Unlike Francis Bacon's utopian work *The New Atlantis*, where science was seen as the salvation of humanity that would correct all ills and provide all necessities, Butler's world has outlawed machinery because they might one day become the masters rather than the servants of humanity. Clearly Butler was no more enamored of the Industrial Revolution than he was of Victorian society. In many ways this is the section of *Erewhon* where Butler makes his most cogent arguments. It is also the point where the book's narrator, whose initial attitude of admiration turns to one of surprise, now becomes one of condemnation as the eccentricities of the citizens of *Erewhon* are fully revealed. Ultimately, the shortcomings Butler sees in them are the same of which he accuses British society, politics, and religion. Because Butler is satirizing Victorian society his value to modern readers remains inferior to that of Huxley and Orwell, not to mention Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward* 2000-1887) and Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*). However, in many ways *Erewhon* is a pivotal novel in the history of utopian literature, not only because of how it sets the stage for what other forgotten writers of dystopian fiction, but because it remains one of those novels where historical significance outweighs literary appeal.

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