



KEVIN KRENECK

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 21st CENTURY

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

'It doth not yet appear what we shall be.'
~SAINT JOHN

"The sum total of human works...does not equal, in all parts put together, the achievements of the life forms of plant and insect in a square foot of grass."

~PHILIP WYLIE (1968)

The 20th Century, as Douglas MacArthur imperiously proclaimed the end of World War 2, the century's most titanic event, is closed. Humanity by its own contrivance has cast itself into a new century which as yet has no discernible trails into its interior. It is a vast empty space to be explored, a cosmos of time yet to be filled with presence and experience. Almost all of us alive at its start will not be on the planet at its end unless life is significantly prolonged — and even then, most likely only a few will benefit.

The true Millennium this century ordains really started in the middle of the 20th Century when humanity cracked the atom. It was also a moment human beings realized this cosmic power they unleashed from its locks might be their doom.

It was one of those rare moments that seemed as if everything before that moment was inexorably directed toward it, and afterward will be measured from it, until some other great cosmic mystery overwhelms our perceptions.

At that point history could have been renumbered. The Mushroom Cloud was the end of the old calendar but might finally be recognized a century or more up the line, as was the Christian calendar first collated centuries after its acclaimed miracle. The Mushroom Cloud has supplanted the Cross as humanity's new icon.

Unlike the bicameral Christian calendar that contrives a parochial split in history, each half falling away from the other, the fissure of atomic energy is the true historical divide: *Before Atom / After Atom*. Perhaps the infant 21st Century might rectify the calendar and realistically age itself half a century in the process, beginning when the 20th Century blew its gut out in the summer of 1945.

We change centuries and millennia; yet the millions of years humanoids have been on planet Earth are hardly reflected in the 3 millennia our age records. Civilization is at least 10,000 years old; *homo sapiens sapiens*, our current evolution, is perhaps 100,000 years or more: 5,000 years of written record, the rest unrecorded and unknown except for a scattering of broken skulls and bone fragments, shards of chipped rock and primeval cave paintings.

Whether or not the calendar eventually changes to reflect humanity's real course through time, we are the first to cross over into this new century/millennium, and probably will be thought quaint by later arrivals in the century — but it means something phenomenal to straddle two centuries and millennia; it makes a significant difference to our lives which no one for a thousand years can equal.

It seemed to take forever to get here. We plodded toward 2000 as if it were a distant range of mountains barely sawtoothed a far off horizon; suddenly racing toward this new century as if in a spaceship to Mars, bursting through an invisible portal and looking back, swiftly moving past as our ancestors might have trekked quickly over the Siberian landbridge between old and new worlds and into an immense alien landscape.

To encapsulate a century thought should probably be given to the oscillation of time whirling the planet on a swing around a star. Each day is a marching foot stamping the ground. Time seems to our short lives a linear presence in a round universe, much as the near horizon seems flat on a large globe. Time cannot be held even as long as a breath. Our corroding hearts keep our time for us, ticking each hemosecond that perfuses into yesterday.

Prognosticating can be a grisly yet irresistible game; neo-Nostradamus speculation is questionable because it roots futuristic visions in the subsoil of current status quo. Instead a century opens up like a unexplored frontier, a clean slate with manifold opportunities of *Yin* and *Yang*, though very soon everyone learns our shadows follow us through the portal.

The new century promises all sorts of urgent and eager possibilities, from horrifying to sanguine; earnest scenarios of justice and liberty for all to auto/robotic distillation of the human experience that might very well regard our biological past as irrelevant — or perhaps a highly civilized galactic species might discover our presence through microwaves of TV programs beamed into the cosmos and disincorporate us for universal bad taste.

Nothing is more obsolete than yesterday's visions of tomorrow, someone said; or as Niels Bohr facetiously remarked, "Prediction is difficult, especially about the future." Yet hope itself is an attempt to profit by prophecy. A border made on time like gridlines on an ocean chart has been irrevocably crossed and the human inhabitants of this planet stare into unknown space aware that the rest of their lives will be spent unraveling the mystery. The essential question is: *What will it be like?*

Scenarios for the future abound in extensive forecasts of perpetuity: perpetual peace; perpetual war; perpetual progress; perhaps, inevitably, perpetual life?

The most abundant projections for this brand new century are cheerful, high-spirited and starry eyed. Commercial auguries are especially blissful; biotechnology returning humanity to Eden through the beneficent efforts of megacorporations to recreate a McDisney vision of paradise on Earth.

Darker, much more grim prophecies gloom the happy face future beamed at us from all of our electronic offices. This next century might be the ultimate wasteland of wanton human profligacy — Worst case scenarios for the coming century envision catastrophic possibilities of utter obliteration of planet and life.

We might poison ourselves into oblivion by saturating the planet with such highly toxic materials we will no longer be able to eat, drink or breathe without ingesting lethal pollutants we have poured into the land, sky, oceans and rivers. We now have more chemicals in our bodies that were not there even a century ago; we have altered everything organic inside and outside ourselves. "The nature that existed before man no longer exists." Karl Marx said.

We might bake like pies in the sun's oven because our industry has torn large ragged holes in the thin fabric of upper level ozone that protects us from lethal ultraviolet rays intermixed with lifegiving sunlight. The rays screened by ozone are exactly those that are absorbed by DNA and cremate cells.

We might this century or some other period in the upcoming millennium lose our oldest and most desperate struggle against microscopic bacteria and viruses. At some vulnerable moment a bacteria or virus of such intensity and opportunity will surge through humanity before it is able to defend itself. A worldwide pandemic might possibly depopulate entire

continents of human life; at the very least tens of millions could die within days.

We might deliberately or accidentally eradicate ourselves with lethal viruses or chemicals we created to wipe out entire populations of ourselves. Some of these pathogens are designed to infect everyone but an inoculated few; others have been produced for which there is no antidote or antivenom. So-called rogue regimes might have nothing to lose by releasing pathogens into water supplies or the atmosphere. They might be used by bio-terrorists who shrug away human cost with cavalier indifference. Perhaps suicidal eco-terrorism by fanatically impelled 'divine inspiration' will resolve to eliminate humanity. Or well meaning extremists who believe the human population needs serious thinning before it irreparably harms Earth; or that a smaller population is more friendly, less hostile and hysterical-neurotic. Or the irresponsible rapaciousness that underlies humanity and fuels the omnipotence of those who would be masters of the planet/galaxy or cosmos, might very well destroy the species/planet in the biological equivalent of thermonuclear war in their eternal struggle for supremacy.

And of course we might reactivate the old hobgoblin of nuclear holocaust and blast ourselves out of the universe, as we almost did over a half century span, developing arsenals so huge that a decade after the Cold War more than enough nuclear weapons remain stockpiled to blow the planet to smithereens many times over. A real danger rests in reducing armaments to a small enough level that will embolden minor members of the Nuclear Club to let fly with their weapons — such as India and Pakistan against each other. And nuclear terrorists wait for their opportunity. The axiom (which applies also to chemical/biological agents) that what humans invent they use, should be a sobering anxiety these precarious years ahead.

Then again we might culturally self-destruct through a fabulously modern way of virtuality by cyber war, breaking all of the interconnections with which we are increasingly dependent, eradicating our multicultural one-world civilization by the very modern that created it.

Maybe this century Earth will be hit by a 'doomsday rock' that might burst from outer space, as was erroneously (we should hope it is an error) predicted a couple of years ago to knock us off orbit in the year 2028.

We might become so neurotic and paranoid about everything we think threatens our well being and chances for survival in the upcoming century we will suffer psychological meltdown. Humanity spent the last half of the 20th Century in fear of obliteration, and the immense psychological effects are yet to be measured — paradoxically the intense technology of that somber period constructed an electronics milieu greeted as a new dawning of civilization.

Aside from dark fears and premonitions projected as the logical and generally dreadful culmination of intrinsically bad habits and calamitous decisions made by powerful and selfish interests perpetuating only their own menacing agendas, there are prospects that seem benign, or at least less negative — such as a growing though yet reluctant acceptance of homosexuality as a natural form of human sexuality as old and enduring as heterosexuality, which is actually becoming a drastic problem overpopulating Earth. Homosexual love might very well be an innate answer to fulfilling sex and intimacy without destroying humanity with insensate locust-like procreation.

CONTINUED ON BACK PAGE