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Voices Propheying War: Future Wars 1763-3749



Synopsis

In 1918, the American colonists were loyal subjects of the British crown, the British army crushed the Russians at Vienna with a roar of musketry and cavalry charges, the British navy unveiled its secret weapon (fireships), and the British king--after personally leading his men in battle--claimed the title of King of France. Or so went a less-than-accurate prediction from 1763 entitled *The Reign of George VI, 1900-1925*. It was the first of a long line of fiction forecasting the shape of wars to come. In *Voices Prophesying War*, I.F. Clarke provides a fascinating history of this unusual genre--a strand of fiction that has revealed more about contemporary concerns than the direction of the future. The real surge of fiction about future wars, he writes, took place after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Clarke skillfully evokes the context of fear and political tension that gripped Britain after the German victory as he describes a wave of stories that predicted a foreign conquest of England. Starting with *The Battle of Dorking* (an account of a German invasion that was later translated and issued by the Nazis in 1940), forecasts of a future catastrophic war led to an invasion scare and a demand for military reforms. The French, too, fought fictional wars with Germany over Alsace-Lorraine (and occasionally with Britain), taking revenge in print for their humiliating defeat in 1871. The tense years just before World War I spawned another surge of fiction predicting the next great war, (leading G.K. Chesterton to publish a hilarious parody, *The Swoop! or, How Clarence Saved England*, depicting an attack by eight separate enemies on an England so indifferent that the newspapers report the invasion with the cricket scores). But Clarke shows how the predictions were taken seriously by the public and the military authorities. In 1906, Field Marshal Lord Roberts collaborated on an invasion scare story to promote his campaign for a larger army (and the newspaper that published it had him reroute the invaders, to take them through its strongest markets). Ironically, the most accurate predictions (including a story about unrestricted submarine warfare by Arthur Conan Doyle) were derided as implausible. Clarke follows the genre though to the present day, looking at how the Cold War shaped speculative war fiction and even science fiction accounts of conflict in the distant future. The end of the Cold War, he notes, has left writers floundering in their search for a believable enemy. No author, he writes, was as remarkably prescient as H.G. Wells, who foresaw atomic bombs as early as 1913. But, as Clarke shows, writers have yet to give up trying to predict the wars to come--offering a window into the fears of the present.

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Customer Reviews

About the Author: I.F. Clarke is a former professor of literature at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

Free from academic jargon, Clarke traces the development of the future war. The main focus is on a period starting with 1871's [The Battle Of Dorking](#) by Sir George Tomkyns Chesney and going to 1978's [The Third World War](#) by General Sir John Hackett et. al. There were future war stories before Chesney's work. Clarke's 38 page checklist of titles goes back to 1763's [The Reign of George VI](#). While predominantly a European phenomena, there were even a couple of American titles preceding Chesney, both predicting an American civil war: 1836's [The Partisan Leader: A Tale of the Future](#) from Edward William Sydney (actually Nathaniel Tucker) and 1860's [Anticipations of the Future to serve as Lessons for the Present Time](#) by Edmund Ruffin. But Chesney's work was the one that took off. Translated into several languages, Chesney's skillfully told story of England being invaded by Germany spawned many, many imitators. He was a professional military man eager to influence public policy, and Hackett was the same. Clarke's regards [The Third World War](#) as the technical and realistic apogee of the genre. Not every documentarian of future conflict was a military professional or as skillful a writer as Cheney, but the genre flourished in the European democracies prior to World War One. Clarke primarily concentrates on English examples but also covers German and French ones. The shifting alliances prior to the Great War are reflected in the enemies of each country's fiction. Understandably, the bloom went off most European future war stories after World War One. The technology of mass

murder and mayhem became part of a genuine anxiety over where science was taking humanity. American fiction, relatively unaffected by the war, reflected less anxiety. After his "From the Somme to Hiroshima" chapter, Clarke's book starts to lose focus when he talks about the nuclearized future war story. While he mentions some obvious titles like Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* and Whitley Strieber's and James Kunetka's *Warday*, the relevance of titles like Greg Bear's *The Forge of God* and C. J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station* is less obvious given that they are not tales of exclusively human war or the immediate future that Chesney and Hackett wrote. Clarke himself later said he wished he hadn't continued his history past 1939. Still, this is still the definitive work on the future war sub-genre of science fiction and a rewarding book with those interested in the place where politics, culture, war, and fantasy come together.

Voices Propheying War traces the development of a peculiar brand of fiction - the tale of the future war. I.F. Clarke argues that a work of speculative fiction about future warfare reflects the attitudes towards war of the author's society. Furthermore, Clarke maintains that tracing the development of the genre as a whole allows for a better understanding of the attitudes that Europeans held about warfare since the nineteenth century, and also for a better understanding of how those attitudes changed. On the face of it, merely stating that art reflects the values of the culture that created it does not seem like much of an argument. If one wanted to examine European art glorifying war, the paintings of Jacques-Louis David or the poems of Tennyson are readily at hand. For European art depicting war negatively, one may consult Picasso's *Guernica* or the poetry of Robert Graves. There does not really seem to be a need for a work such as Clarke's. Yet, with *Voices Propheying War*, Clarke has done something clever. It is true that *The Charge of the Light Brigade* presents British soldiers as noble and glorious, and that *Guernica* depicts the high cost of modern war. But these works are not generic treatises about the abstract concept of war, but rather commentaries on specific events that had already occurred. Clarke does not aim to measure reactions to specific events, but to get at the more general attitude towards war as an abstract concept held by the European masses in the modern period. To do that, Clarke investigates the way in which Europeans presented their view of imaginary wars. This body of evidence permits Clarke to gauge generic attitudes towards war, but also to measure attitudes about technology, the concept of progress, and nationalism that works simply reflecting on events cannot. Clarke sees four distinct phases in the presentation of the future war, largely in line with the major military events of modern European history. The first runs from 1763 until 1871, beginning with the anonymous *The Reign of George VI*, an eighteenth-century vision of life in the twentieth century, and ends with the creation of

a German nation-state. For this phase, Clarke argues that the bulk of the speculative fiction was English and French, and largely taken up with wars against the other, as one might expect from the Napoleonic era. Clarke maintains that with the creation of the German Empire in 1871, the genre of the tale of the future war was properly born, with a groundbreaking English work, *The Battle of Dorking* by George Chesney. Chesney's story, published just months after the creation of Germany, posits a future German invasion of England, and is full of prescriptions for its prevention. Clarke demonstrates that Chesney's story had a deep impact, both in the world of fiction, and on the British public, who reacted to Chesney's story with panic. This infancy of the future-war story lasted, as one might expect, until 1914. Clarke presents this phase as one caught up with the European balance of power and technological progress. For those writers who focused on technology, science and its machines were seen as incredibly positive, and many writers envisioned a future without wars, or in which wars were waged with minimal human cost. "Not a single writer," Clarke writes, "ever guessed that industrialism plus mass conscription would make it possible for a Falkenhayn to plan the Battle of Verdun with the intention of bleeding the French armies to death." The First World War changed all of that. Now, "the mood shaping most of these tales of the war-to-come was a profound sense of anxiety and doubt about the future." Following the Second World War, these tales took an even dimmer view. The awesome destructive power of atomic weapons convinced people that if there were ever another war, it could only result in the destruction of all. At the end of this journey, Clarke argues that in the history of the tale of the future war, one can trace a major shift in social attitudes to war that are not necessarily visible in more traditional types of historical evidence. Clarke's argument is well founded, well documented, and also a pleasant historical exercise. Yet there are flaws. First, while Clarke's body of evidence at first seems vast, it becomes clear that Clarke is writing only about Western Europe and the United States. Although there are a few nods to the Russian experience, and the incorporation of some German works, the book seems very unbalanced. Second, Clarke's evidence is limited by medium. Clarke confines himself to the fiction of the printed word, but arguably, beginning in the interwar period, film and radio were at least equally important in shaping and representing social attitudes, and also offer a rich body of evidence regarding the war-to-come. Finally, Clarke fails to integrate his narrow scope of evidence into a broader evidential context. Missing are reviews of these works, detailed commentary on accompanying illustrations, and the non-fiction works by many of these prolific authors. Clearly, while Clarke has demonstrated the potential this body of evidence holds, much work remains.

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