*Morganeering, Or, The Triumph of the Trust: A Satirical Burlesque on the Worship of Wealth*
By A. W. Bickerton, edited by Lyman Tower Sargent. Dunedin, Otago Studies in English, 2020. RRP: $30, ISBN 978-0-473-55007-3.
Reviewed by Philip Steer

I'll begin with a confession: before taking on this review, I'd never even heard of Alexander Bickerton, let alone his only novel, *Morganeering*. In my defence, he doesn't rate a mention in the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (he lies in the gap between "bibliography" and "Biggs, Bruce"), or even in Lawrence Jones' encyclopaedic survey of the novel in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. As Lyman Tower Sargent explains in his thorough introduction, Bickerton was well known during his lifetime, albeit for other reasons than his fiction. As the inaugural professor of physics at Canterbury College, where he taught from 1874 to 1902, he numbered Ernest Rutherford and Ettie Rout among his pupils. More notable still are the sheer range of his extracurricular activities: public lecturer, prolific correspondent to newspapers, founder of a workers' club *and* an Esperanto society, inventor of a "carbo-celluloid" form of building, and—most disturbing to the burghers of Christchurch—founder of an intentional community, "Wainoni," which raised all manner of suspicions but was centred on the chaste principle of "cooperative housekeeping." Inevitably, the university's Board of Governors tried to fire such a maverick, first in 1895 and more effectively in 1902, at which point Bickerton developed Wainoni into "an immensely popular pleasure park," which featured—among many attractions—a skating rink, 7000-seat amphitheatre, planetarium, magic shows, and firework displays. Amid all this, Bickerton apparently began to write *Morganeering* sometime in the 1880s, but it was only published in full for the first time in 1903. Perhaps the major achievement of Sargent's new edition, beyond locating piecing together the fullest version of Bickerton's fragmented text, is to recreate something of the density of a late-colonial culture in which literary production intersected so closely with other domains of cultural, political, and economic expression.

"*Morganeering* is not a particularly good novel," Sargent disarmingly admits. The narrative is riven by an unresolved formal question: whether it is a satire on the late-Victorian status quo, in the mould of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), or a sincere political vision in the manner of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). (Given its lengthy period of composition, it seems possible that Bellamy's success changed the direction of the novel). The title's reference to the nineteenth-century American robber baron, J. P. Morgan, foregrounds Bickerton's satirical intent. In the capitalist future he envisages, one man—Jonathan Wondergilt—has managed to seize control of the entire globe's productive forces and has devolved their administration to the family of his factotum, John Servile Crawley. The narrative mainly focuses on the South Island, home of the inquisitive and sympathetic Dora Crawley, whose marriage to the well-meaning but dopey Charlie has elevated him to the position of chief clerk of Australasia. Dora is the vector for Bickerton's more sincere utopian impulse toward imagining social change, as she learns one of her friends is trapped in a loveless marriage, and another acquaintance tells her of the short-lived socialist experiment of the Federated Commune of the Netherlands. Dora's qualms over the status quo are crystallised through lengthy discussions of a grab-bag of late-Victorian progressivist ideas—communal property, gender equality (within limits), eugenics—marshalled under the label of "scientific Christianity." Eventually, the Wondergilt regime collapses under the weight of its sheer misanthropy, and the "intellectually, physically and morally very fine specimens of mankind" gathered around Dora are left to contemplate how they might change the oppressed working classes for the better. Slowly, in a word: "[W]e may surely begin to educate, begin to show

them some glimpses of the majesty of creation, let them hear some strains of the grand harmony of nature, as revealed by science, let them taste the sweetness of mutual joy?"

*Morganeering* contains echoes of a slightly earlier settler utopia, Julius Vogel's infamous celebration of capital and empire, *Anno Domini 2000, or, Woman's Destiny* (1889). Both are primarily concerned with reforming nineteenth century economic systems and its sexual contract, and both centre their utopian visions resolutely on the Australasian colonies. (It also seems possible that Vogel prompted Bickerton's portrayal of rapid air transportation). Despite their political differences, Vogel and Bickerton both focalise their plots through upper-class coteries that hew closely to gendered and classed norms of propriety, a late-Victorian 0.1% who jet incessantly round the world and base their politics on interpersonal sympathy. Sargent repeats the truism that "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New Zealand was recognized as a world leader in economic and political reform," and indeed *Morganeering* further extends our understanding of the cultural forces that fed into the late-century debates around women's rights.

Sargent is silent, however, on what a text like *Morganeering*—and *Anno Domini 2000* before it, for that matter—reveals of the limits of settler "utopian" thought. Most strikingly: Māori are entirely absent from both novels. In response, we can reach for half-hearted evasions or justifications, or we can face this directly: settler writers of this ilk, surveying the future in the context of dying race rhetoric and social Darwinist ideas, were neither willing nor able to imagine Māori having any meaningful part in it. For those of us still reading, writing about, or otherwise choosing to reanimate settler literature, this surely has to be at the centre of questions as to what we do, how we do it, and whether it is worth it. Otherwise, as is the case with this edition, we simply perpetuate those colonial silences.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the edition itself, because it is a significant achievement to republish any out-of-print New Zealand literary work. Sargent's introduction is a valuable introduction to Bickerton's career and controversies and is a testament to his scholarly labour. There is an invaluable annotated bibliography of Bickerton's publications at the end of the book, but this is unfortunately not mentioned in the Contents page, so if the plot doesn't hold you until the final page, you might never know this exists. *Morganeering* has a nice colourful cover and is printed on quality paper, and these signs of investment make it more surprising that the text itself appears to have received no design attention: the text is dense on the page, the chapter headings are only minimally formatted, and the endnoting of extensive but minor textual emendations is intrusive. Sargent dutifully footnotes unfamiliar references, but his glosses are often less than illuminating. For example, when one character makes the startling claim that Walter C. Smith's *Borland Hall* (1874)—another text I had never heard of—is one of "the most beautiful of all the fine productions of the Victorian age," it would be helpful to know something more than simply when and where it was published. It's a small moment in a long novel, but it encapsulates my feeling that this edition—and the text itself—tells us about as much about settler culture in late nineteenth century New Zealand by what it omits as by what it chooses to reveal.