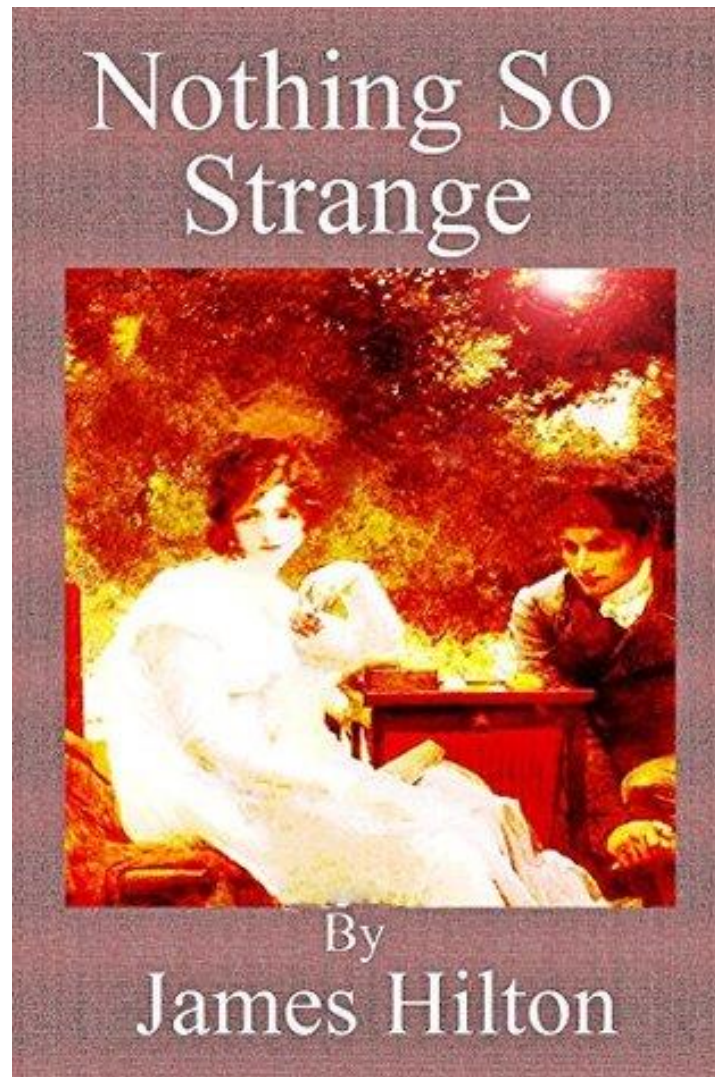


James Hilton's *Nothing So Strange*



An Essay by Garry Victor Hill

The military forces of the Second World War continued the pattern evident in earlier conflicts of developing the importance of the technicians. To some extent technicians as weapon makers and armourers had always had an important role to play, but as military technology advanced so that warriors could kill each other without being in sight their importance increased. This change had been evident in the American Civil War and had become blatantly obvious in the First World War. In 1863 English war correspondent George Sala would describe how Union Infantry were sent into battle to their deaths in an orderly, almost mechanical process. He also describes two other aspects of the emerging new warfare. The cavalryman with his sabre, the epitome of the military hero, has been reduced to a scout and a forager, their sabres are hardly ever used. Sala then predicts how what looks like a process to destroy war after it has destroyed armies will fail because the armies will dig trenches and build fortifications to survive. The European campaigns of late 1914 would show that he was fifty years ahead of his time.

The technocrats Sala dubbed the “Engineers of Murder” in 1863 would develop into a global type over subsequent decades. They increasingly dominated and developed the patterns of warfare, making the decisive role of the individual warrior-hero obsolescent. Around 80% of W.WI’s casualties were caused by artillery and few of those casualties would have even seen the artillerymen who inflicted the shells on them. Cavalry against tanks in Poland in 1939 also vividly demonstrated this tendency to make heroic warriors obsolescent and at times almost inconsequential as war’s deciding factor. The once overwhelming cavalry charge looked pitiful against tanks, machine guns, henkel bombers and stukas. By 1945 even once decisive hand to hand fighting was rare: and mass aerial bombings, submarine warfare, long range artillery and tanks were much more advanced in their technology and widespread in their use than in WWI. The war that began with virtually Medieval images of Polish

lancers charging forward ended with whole Japanese cities annihilated by atomic bombs which had the capacity to destroy all life on earth. This transformation took just under six years, which meant that although the capacity for humanity to destroy itself and everything else on the planet was widely realised, old images of military heroism did not fade away.

Modern warfare developed an increasingly important, sometimes decisive role for technicians who were never intended to confront the enemy in face to face combat and were rarely casualties. As Peter Achinger argues in his *The American Soldier in Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment* this emphasis on technicians tended to make defence a matter for both civilian and military personnel, and soldiers no longer predominated in the defence of the United States.

The trend away from the isolation of the military establishment from civilians was accentuated by the genesis and development of techniques and operations research during and after World War II. These techniques were based on a marriage of scientists and economists in order to solve technological problems as they arose and to fit the solution into the nation's strategic framework.

The most important and salient example of this tendency were the atomic technicians, scientists and researchers, the people who with their success in the Manhattan Project made traditional warfare itself obsolescent. If any side won an atomic war it would be those with the fastest, most accurate and most deadly missiles. Technicians and scientists who were not quite militarised would decide who won, not heroic warriors.

Despite their obviously immense importance, there were very few fictional depictions soon after the war about the workers involved in the atomic projects. The obvious problems involving censorship about military secrets were clearly a cause for this paucity, but the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the topic was

another: the immense ramifications for the concepts of heroism and order meant that most writers needed time to develop a response.

One novel that did deal with the theme was James Hilton's little known work *Nothing So Strange*. In some ways this work resembles Jack London's 1907 futuristic novel *The Iron Heel*, as both Hilton's and London's novels are concerned with the sinister and omniscient power of government in the military, familial, civilian, scientific and political fields. The novels also show similarities between narrators. Caroline Waring, resembles Avis Everhard in coming from a secure upper-class background where their fathers had an interest in researching physics. Both express admiring attitudes towards and romantic involvement with the central character (in Caroline's case Mark Bradley), an important male suspected of treason to the powerful nation-state. In both novels the reader sees the male through the eyes of the narrator, so we do not know their innermost thoughts.

Despite these similarities, the differences between the two novels shows how much has changed in the heroic concept in forty years. The major difference between *The Iron Heel* and *Nothing So Strange* is not the most obvious: that the former is ultimately optimistic futuristic science fiction while the latter is a contemporary, pessimistic realist work. The major difference emerges in the depiction of the hero. Despite his modernist radicalism Ernest Everhard functions as another glamorous storybook hero, little different to Spartacus, Roland or Galahad. In contrast Mark Bradley seems a drab, powerless technocrat who lacks self-confidence and almost every heroic virtue excepting manners and modesty. He lacks even the remnants of awareness and idealism left to such disillusioned 1940s cynics as Robert Jordan in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and Saul Bellow's Joseph in *Dangling Man* (1944). Although he works at the centre of the emergent Military Industrial complex, he understands little about it. He emerges as ineffectual and passive against adverse circumstances. Like Ernest Everhard, his creator locates

him where the hero should be, in terms of romance, conflict and importance, but his lack of heroic virtues and his behaviour in the unfolding narrative go against and undermine traditional tales. These factors blend with his powerful scientific abilities to create something new in the heroic concept.

From the novel's beginning, in 1945, when government agents question Caroline about Bradley, an ambivalence emerges about the protagonist. For the authority figures he seems a suspicious but important person, while Caroline remembers the shy American academic she first met in London in 1936. She, rather than the introspective, reclusive Mark Bradley, functions as the voice for humanity; she speaks from an apolitical upper-class stance which emphasises decency, manners, loyalty and a dislike of extremism, but she seems to sense that the world has drifted away from the values of her British upper-class background. Although she clearly distrusts figures in power, many of the little details she gives, to the interrogators and to the reader, reveal more than she knows, including that she has unknowingly blinded herself by an unwise attraction for Mark. It seems that Mark Bradley and her mother had an affair, or at least shared a romantic attraction while they were in London. This is really why her father, Harvey Waring, a diplomat favouring appeasement who cultivates his connections in Germany, encouraged him to become a research assistant for Professor Framm, a leading physics expert based in Vienna. Years later Mark, then Caroline, find out that Harvey surreptitiously paid Mark's wages for Framm so he would employ him to work away from the Warings. Soon after Mark leaves, the Warings divorce and Mrs Waring starts drinking and dies because of her reckless driving, then Harvey Waring becomes implicated in munitions scandals and becomes is labelled "a merchant of death" and now people despise his once popular appeasement stance. Prematurely aged and reclusive, he dies slowly in a luxurious mansion in the remote and arid Californian mountains. He resembles the fisher king in his wasteland, waiting

for a young hero to revitalise the land. Mark Bradley has a curious relationship to this role.

Unlike most heroes he does not protect the family or restore order: he does just the opposite by causing devastation on both the personal and political levels. He becomes the unintentional catalyst for the Waring family's destruction as a unit. He also functions as the opposite to most heroes in that he fails to learn wisdom from mistakes. He starts destroying another marriage, his own, in Vienna in 1938, when the brazen behaviour of the Nazis and Mark's political apathy make his Austrian wife Pauli increasingly frustrated. Enraged by Mark's refusal to expose Framm's plagiarism of his work she attempts to murder Framm. Mark's response, of giving perjured testimony that his wife is insane and that Framm did not plagiarise, works as part of a deal so that she will supposedly be only briefly incarcerated. This act makes him an unwitting accessory to her murder, as in the asylum Framm has her under control and camouflages her premeditated murder as suicide. After realising this unintentional betrayal, Mark plans to kill him, but his plan appears as even more repellent than his courtroom behaviour. He waits for a chance to stab him while he works as his seemingly servile but extremely important assistant in the Nazis' Atomic Weapons project. Eventually he finds a subtler way to destroy the conceited murderous careerist by altering correct data when Framm needs the calculations to be correct for their atomic weapons project to receive credibility and priority funding. Years later Framm dies in a bombardment.

When Caroline learns of this, her suspicions that he was a Nazi evaporate. The novel's resolution then superficially seems very traditional. When she hears he lives nearby recovering from an injury, she visits and rather oddly, she encourages him to fall in love with her. Although he retains a sense of cynical alienation, with her help he seems to be recovering from both his physical injuries and his damaged psyche. Like the traditional hero and heroine, they

return from their wilderness journey to renew the life force within the wasteland. Mark will replace her father in her life.

This apparent reaffirmation of the couple reveals more reversals in traditional roles and actions. Mark is no hero returning order to the land. This becomes evident when comparing the novel's final desert settings. Nearby at Los Alamos where Mark was working on the Manhattan Project, the wilderness became almost permanently dead because of atomic testing. Deliberately launching indiscriminately destructive and natural or magic forces, which destroy the fertility of the land and unleash disorder and fear, creating a wasteland, traditionally works as the villain's role. This uncertainty about Mark's role increases as they travel through the desert into the fog near her father's mansion, with Caroline's subconscious recalling a cautionary warning story about a road going nowhere. Here she also drives in dangerous conditions, near her mother's fatal crash, which may not have happened if her mother had never met Mark, who has brought destruction to all the women in the novel except Caroline – so far. Readers are right to pensively wonder what her future will be.

This sense of destruction develops from the outside world. From their car radio they hear of the Hiroshima bombing, a force for destruction greater than the natural order's capacity for regeneration. Mark and others like him have doomed regeneration and order, and this appears evident in the way the radio news overshadows Mark and Caroline's personal happiness. There are other reasons for seeing the victory of the couple as being hollow and uncertain as Mark Bradley clearly demonstrates by his actions to anyone but Caroline that he must be almost the traditional hero's antithesis.

Until the narrative's concluding sections, Mark shows much more interest in his work and the few people around him than in humanity in general. His discrediting of Framm seems more important to him than the fact he cannot see: he has saved the world from the horrors the Nazis would have inflicted if they

had atomic bombs. He has done something more beneficial for more people than any mythic, fictional or historic hero: yet he remains oblivious to the fact. This oddly innocent man who has unintentionally caused more havoc than most deliberating villains has by one act done more good than the combined efforts of thousands of heroes.

He remains almost equally oblivious to his role in the Manhattan Project. When he describes his experiences there he concentrates on complaining about such trivia as the regimentation, the accommodation and cafeteria food, nor does this seem a cover for his secret work. This tendency to obliviousness about everything but the mechanics of his work was evident from when Caroline Waring first met him, but it could also be a part of his mental problems. He holds himself responsible for Pauli's death, lived under Nazi rule for years, endured the blitz in England, has been under strict and hostile surveillance as a traitor and survived a plane crash that left him physically injured and traumatised. Although he was always introverted, he clearly has reasons for blocking the world out. His initial remoteness and obliviousness has deepened as it provides a way to cope with too many pressures and crises, but this concentrating on the smaller things also distracts from a terrifying knowledge.

This rather colourless, mousy, neurotic and naive technocrat, who once reassured Caroline and her mother that he would not kill laboratory animals for experiments, has helped create a force more powerful than the mythic might of most gods. His work has unleashed the power to rapidly destroy all life on earth. Even the greatest traditional warrior heroes such as Naisi, King David and Roland destroy the enemy in legendary thousands, but Mark Bradley and men like him can destroy millions – and in contemporary understated realist fiction, not myth or legend. The contrast between Mark's lack of vision and heroism and the immense powers he helps unleash shows that people can take on Godlike powers almost unknowingly, but do not develop the wisdom such power demands.

The realisation developed slowly in literature. Apart from *Nothing So Strange* and Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948) this realisation rarely emerged in literature before the 1950s. Samuel Hynes in *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* argues that nuclear war "had not been imagined before."¹ Even those imaginative science fiction accounts of H.G. Wells *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The War in the Air* (1908) which show civilian populations being devastated by bombardments from a powerful enemy, are different from the nuclear genre in two aspects: even Wells's in these works did not visualise total obliteration or resistance as being totally futile. He would come close to writing that in his last work *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1945) but even here was not as totally pessimistic as many assume. Hynes argues that by making all resistance instantaneously futile, atomic and nuclear warfare remove the conflict, the narrative and the slightest chance to be heroic and everyone becomes a passive victim: "The action at Hiroshima was an action without duration: in its story everything is aftermath. And everyone is a victim. Nobody resisted."² Even Mark Bradley, one of the fictional creators of this obliteration, stays strangely passive, as if he cannot alter his fate either.

This was something new in heroic literature, the threat of literal and immediate annihilation of the hero, cast and setting by an unseen, invincible all-powerful enemy. Ultimately the hero figure was so durable that even nuclear holocaust would lead not to the death of the hero, but to the "after the nuclear holocaust" genre and several works which would concentrate on spies or soldiers preventing nuclear war. War literature would generally continue to focus on soldiers rather than on the implications of nuclear war, but the traditional literary view of war and fighting was waning. Peter Aichinger describes how this created a problem for the representation of the hero:

¹ Samuel Hynes in *The Soldiers' Tale : Bearing Witness to Modern War*. London; 1998. p. 259.

² *Ibid*, pp. 270-271.

Perhaps in the United States this loss of the sense of the heroic quality of combat was not completely assimilated until the nation had experienced a full-scale commitment to a foreign war, but the novels of World War II illustrate the increasing awareness of the problem. The writers are faced time and again with a fundamental dilemma; the novel that lacks a hero or heroic action tends to be mediocre and incohesive, and yet the traditional patterns of heroic conduct usually end in meaningless destruction. (p. 65)

This dilemma did not lead to the death of the hero. The individual warrior was still be portrayed in popular fiction from 1945 onwards by American writers as diverse as Ernest Hemingway, Howard Fast, Irwin Shaw, Leon Uris, James A. Michener, James Jones, Larry MacMurtry, Norman Mailer, Shelby Foote, Glendon Swarthout, Herman Wouk, Flannery O'Connor, Joseph Heller, Gore Vidal, Ursula Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Robert Stone, Madge Piercy and Tim O'Brien. However many of their narratives would be historical, science fiction or fantasies. Such writers would set their adventures in the wilderness, the colonies, the dominions or the Third World, locales where the power of technology was weaker and surviving in the wilderness or supposedly uncivilised lands was the challenge.

The successful warrior-hero could still appear in World War Two scenarios, such works had a ready market, over two hundred and fifty such American novels appeared between 1946 and the late 1962 and this popularity was not a hunger for images of lone heroes; the emphasis was now more on groups than on individuals. Between fifteen and sixteen million Americans had served in the armed forces during the war, and many of them must have served under alienating men who saw the war as an opportunity to be heroes. While the "good" gallant, idealistic, officer does appear, (often to show that such heroism no longer works) the obnoxious, ambitious, blindly conceited-to-the-point-of-insanity commander bent on being a hero no matter what the cost to others,

functions almost a fixture in post war stories. Instead heroism now often centred less on showy leadership and victories and more on stoicism, group loyalty and common sense. It seems that while many ordinary service people felt that while they despised the would-be hero, they and their compatriots had some heroic qualities worth depicting.

There was no such place for the atomic technicians in that genre. The bizarre, extremely dangerous and repellent Doctor Strangelove typified them. Despite James Hilton's previous successes in producing bestsellers and popular Hollywood screenplays Mark Bradley remained a little known literary figure. The title *Nothing So Strange* was also underrated, for it referred to the idea that nothing was so strange as the truth.

The idea that a mousy, gentle, innocuous man could play a crucial part in destroying all life on the planet seems not only impossible, even paranoid, yet the truth of that became clear to me when I briefly met Andrei Sakharov in Sienna in early 1989. A more gentle, fragile, courteous and modest individual would be hard to find – and yet this scientist played a crucial part in developing the hydrogen bomb and put it into the hands of Stalin.



James Hilton 1900-1954

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