

LIFE JOURNEY OF A FUTURIST

***Memories of the Future* by Wendell Bell
Transaction Publishers 2011**

Review by Thomas Lombardo

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I met Wendell Bell in 1997, and over the ensuing years have had numerous conversations and interactions with him, discussing topics as diverse as science, ethics, philosophy, history, and most notably futures studies. During this time we have read and written on many of each others' publications, and hence believing that I had a good understanding of his theoretical work, I was pleasantly surprised when I read his new autobiography, which, for me, is filled with numerous intriguing and fascinating personal revelations. I encountered the story of the man behind the philosophy.

Dr. Wendell Bell, professor emeritus in sociology from Yale University and author of the acknowledged two-volume futurist classic, *Foundations of Futures Studies* (1997), recounts his life journey and professional development in his new autobiographical work *Memories of the Future*. He chronicles his tumultuous yet happy childhood, his growing and life-long passion for reading, his emerging excellence as a student, his time in the Navy during World War II, his marriage and family life, his fascination with his graduate study of sociology, his extensive and intensive sociological research in Jamaica, his many years at Yale, watching and reflecting on the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and his eventual discovery and passionate dedication to the field of futures studies. Wendell Bell is an exceedingly clear thinker and writer, and his autobiography evinces these qualities of lucidity, directness, and logic.

Aside from Dr. Bell's demonstrated capacity for remembering in great detail and exactitude the people, events, and locales that make up his rich and often highly dramatic life, what is most striking about his autobiography is the ethical and humanistic quality of his evolving character and professional pursuits. Bell, without pretense or self-congratulatory prose, emerges as a very good soul, dedicated to the improvement of the human condition. All his work, both as a sociologist and later as a futurist, serve the ends of understanding through scientific research the social (and often political and psychological) reality of human life and applying this knowledge to creating a better world. Dr. Bell, in fact, in his own thinking and writing becomes increasingly cognizant of the connection between scientific research (in his case, primarily social research) and ethical issues. Furthermore, in synthesizing issues of fact and value, he reflects on how such considerations serve as a rational and humanistic foundation for action and policy. Bell is an empiricist, an ethicist, and a man of action, all rolled into one.

This is not to say that Bell slights the personal drama and mayhem—the struggle and tragedy, the color and noise—of his life. We learn, for example how, as a young boy, his life was uprooted when he fled by train from the Midwest to California with his mother and maternal grandmother in a secretly planned escape from both women’s alcoholic spouses, taking with them only what they could carry in a few suitcases. Later on, he recounts other adventures and melodramatic events: a long lost and later re-discovered child born out of wedlock; another daughter who suffers from chronic mental illness; Wendell’s own struggles with alcohol and sleeping pills; and incidents involving his maternal grandfather, who tracked down his estranged wife and daughter and weaseled his way back into the household—if only for a short time.

This reviewer would have liked to see Bell say even more about the various personal stories and traumas in his life. To be fair, he did confide to me that his publisher’s readers recommended that he delete of such material because it sounded too “confessional.” But including such episodes provides a fuller and more rounded picture of the challenges faced in private, and successfully dealt with by an author whose public persona of wisdom, personal character, and distinguished accomplishment we can now recognize actually grew in some measure from his having suffered miseries and painfully assimilating these into a positive social character and philosophy.

In point of fact, I was once asked by a fellow futurist to give examples of individuals I would consider as “wise contemporary futurists,” and one of the first that came to mind was Wendell Bell. Wisdom is, in my mind, a synthesis of high ethical principles and broad knowledge acted upon and applied to the pragmatics of life. Bell—both in his vision of future studies and in his approach to life—evinces this capacity for wisdom.

It is worth noting that, as a general rule, he saw the best in others. Throughout his numerous recollections here concerning the people he met at various times in life, he manages to find something good to say about each, and to reflect on the positive impact that meeting them had on his own life. Possessing an understanding heart and a kind and forgiving nature, he looked consistently for lessons to be learned and knowledge to be gained from his encounters with other people. Further, it seems clear that right from the start, when he first studied sociology and later in his futures studies, he was always thinking how he could apply what he was learning to advance the overall improvement and well-being of human existence. This, it seems to me, is truly the goal of wisdom.

Some readers of this book may regret, as I do, that Bell does not spend more time talking about his loving relationship with his wife Lora-Lee (and about her own career as an artist) and less time recounting stories of airplanes and flying them. He was indeed an accomplished pilot—trained during World War II in the Navy and working briefly after the war as a commercial pilot. But it is those passages that reveal the author’s introspection and self-examination that hold the reader’s interest far more than the simple chronicling of various teachers, colleagues, and people he met and worked with along the way, even though describing all the personalities that he encountered does give one a real flavor for the richness of his life. After all, Bell is a philosophical futurist

(he has written extensively on utopian thought, epistemology, and the nature of good and evil) and it seems that perhaps a bit more philosophizing about life in general and his own life, in particular, would have been in order.

And finally, though one can see even from Bell's early sociological research a concern for the future—his studying, in Jamaica and other locations in the Caribbean, the beliefs, goals, and values that individuals hold concerning preferable futures for their people and nation—more detailed information on this might have helped document his evolution from a sociologist to a self-identified futurist. In fact, in the closing chapters, I would have welcomed more extended treatments of Bell's futurist thinking—his philosophy, his values, his main conclusions, and his hopes for the ongoing role and development of futures studies as a discipline. He does discuss all of these points, but it would have been more edifying if the sections on his futurist work and thinking had been more extensive.

All in all though, Wendell Bell's life as chronicled in *Memories of the Future* emerges as a fully-human life—filled with adventure, accomplishment, purpose and meaning. He journeys between periods of intense academic work in the ivory towers of Stanford, UCLA, Northwestern, and Yale and his beat on the streets stomping through mud, knocking on doors to do interviews, and befriending the kinds of people that so engaged his interest. He excels in describing his experiences as a pilot and later in life as a devotee of horseback riding and ballroom dancing (with his wife). He recounts his work at numerous odd jobs growing up in Fresno, California; and also his later travels around the world, conversing with leading politicians, educators, and people from all walks of life. As a sociologist, he has collected vast amounts of scientific data, written and published profusely, developed research programs, supervised students and faculty, and brought himself close to exhaustion at numerous points along the way. He has experienced periods of great sadness as well as times of great joy—both necessary components of a life fully lived.

And there have been comical stories along the way, as well. For instance, in spite of all his academic accomplishments, Bell had failed to really impress his mother. Then one day, while he was at a conference, his wife, Lora-Lee, with Wendell's mother present, found herself locked out of their house, which had been rented by an aspiring young actress named Tippi Hedren (later to become famous for her role in *The Birds*). Lora-Lee went across the street to a neighbor's house to see if Tippi had left a key there. The neighbor happened to be the actress Hope Lange, who at that moment was entertaining actor Glenn Ford. There was no key, but Ford came over, and, climbing through an open window, helped Lora-Lee get in. This, as Bell expressed it, was a "game-changer." If Glenn Ford would come to their rescue, his mother reasoned, then Wendell must be doing something right!

Bottom line: what Wendell Bell (or, as his friends call him, "Wendy") has learned on his existential journey is the critical importance of the future. As he notes, not only was the future the central interest in his study of preferable future visions in Jamaica, but the future also became a fundamental concern in his later research on urban migration to

the suburbs and “creating futures” of equal opportunity. In fact, Bell regards his fascination with the future as having emerged during his time he was learning to fly airplanes—anticipating where the aircraft carrier would be, which is the point towards which you want to fly, and projecting the future movements of weather patterns—both key survival skills for flyers.

As “time travelers” (his phrase) we see before us the light of different future possibilities, some of which appear preferable or desirable, and some of which we would rather avoid. That one can intelligently make some sense out of this adventure of time, anticipating (or forecasting) with a degree of rationality and empirical grounding, and ethically guide ourselves and our institutions in positive and humane directions is the great insight and over-riding goal human beings should strive toward and realize. Just such a human being is Wendell Bell.