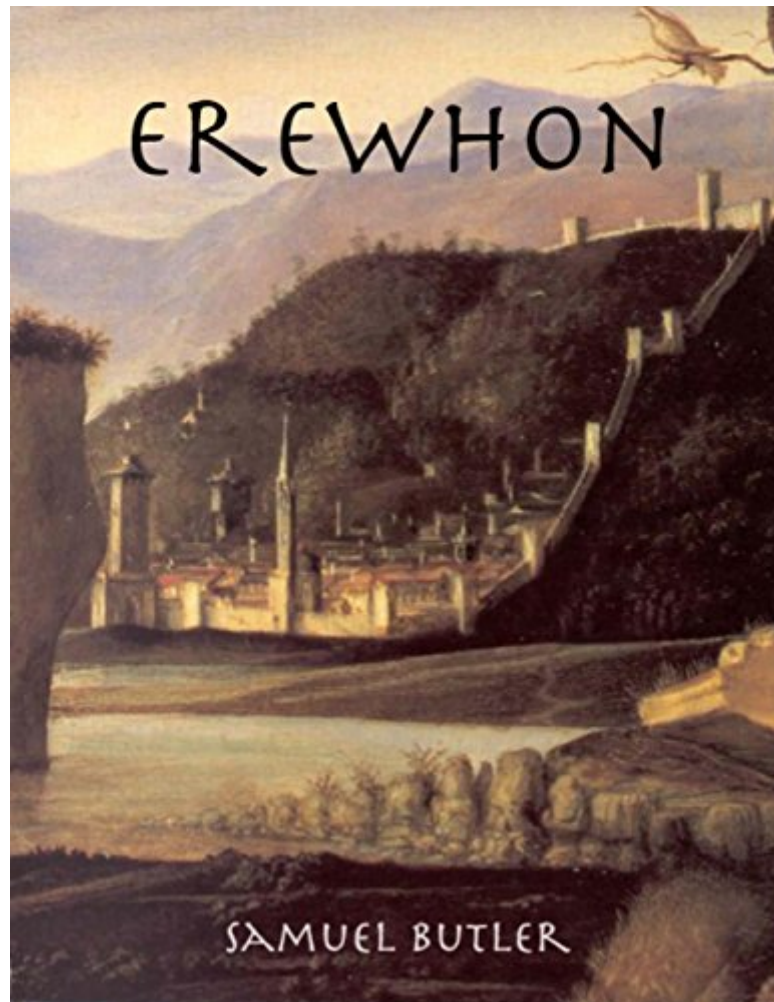


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Erewhon (Unabridged)



Synopsis

Erewhon is a novel by Samuel Butler, published anonymously in 1872. The title is also the name of a country, supposedly discovered by the protagonist. In the novel, it is not revealed where Erewhon is, but it is clear that it is a fictional country. Butler meant the title to be read as the word Nowhere backwards, even though the letters "h" and "w" are transposed, therefore Erewhon is an anagram of nowhere. The book is a satire on Victorian society. The first few chapters of the novel dealing with the discovery of Erewhon are in fact based on Butler's own experiences in New Zealand where, as a young man, he worked as a sheep farmer on Mesopotamia Station for about four years (1860–1864), and explored parts of the interior of the South Island. Sometimes compared to Gulliver's Travels (1726), a classic novel by Jonathan Swift; the image of Utopia in this latter case also bears strong parallels with the self-view of the British Empire at the time.

Book Information

File Size: 1017 KB

Print Length: 217 pages

Publisher: Samuel Butler (April 7, 2016)

Publication Date: April 7, 2016

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01DZ39FDG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,247,236 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #155

in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Utopian

#544 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > Classics > Humor #580 in Kindle

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Customer Reviews

Samuel Butler does a neat balancing act with "Erewhon," a novel that is equal parts fictitious travelogue, philosophical tract, social/political/religious satire, and adventure story complete with a romantic subplot. The protagonist, a young Englishman named Higgs who is unsatisfied with

employment prospects in his home country, moves to a distant colonized land where he takes a job as a shepherd. Beyond a mountain range there lie some mysterious lands that he would like to explore, and, setting out one day with a timid guide who later abandons him, he eventually gets to the other side of the peaks and finds himself in an isolated country named Erewhon. One of the first things Higgs notes is that Erewhon is a few hundred years behind the times technologically. They have no modern mechanical conveniences, and when Higgs is discovered to own a watch, it is confiscated and he is put in prison. Later released and placed into the custody of a rich man named Mr. Nosnibor, Higgs learns all about the bizarre customs and beliefs of the Erewhonians. In Erewhon, sickness is punishable by law and criminal acts are treated medically by people called "straighteners"; so, stealing a pair of socks is analogous to feeling a bit under the weather. The Erewhon banking system is a facade, as their money is worthless. The Erewhonians believe in an ethereal prenatal world where babies are given the (preferred) option not to be born into the mortal world. Their institutions of higher education, the Colleges of Unreason, teach conformity and resist originality and progress.

Following in the tradition of Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels," the English novelist, essayist, and iconoclast Samuel Butler published "Erewhon" privately in 1872. The title is an anagram of "Nowhere," which is the literal translation of the word "Utopia," the title by which Thomas More's 1516 work has commonly become known. "Erewhon" is arguably the first anti-utopian or dystopian novel, anticipating the later and better known works such as Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" and George Orwell's "1984." Whereas More and other utopianists are primarily interested in attacking society's ills and making the world a better place, the anti-utopians engage primarily in either satire of the society in which they live or in making dire predictions about the dismal fate that awaits humanity. Butler is most decidedly in the former category, since he proves in not only "Erewhon" but also his more famous work, the semi-autobiographical novel, "The Way of All Flesh," that his main concern is in attacking the complacency and hypocrisy he saw infecting Victorian society. Like More's island of Utopia, Butler's Erewhon is a remote kingdom, not to be found on any map, which is discovered by the narrator of the novel (biographers of Butler have assumed it is modeled on a part of New Zealand, which anyone who has viewed the "Lord of the Rings" movies can attest has some spectacular landscapes). Cut off from the rest of the world, the citizens of Erewhon live according to their own rules and dictates. Butler breaks from the tradition of creating an idealized world that goes back from More to Plato in favor of a more realistic society.

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