

'UTOPIA OR OBLIVION, R. Buckminster Fuller, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press.

Buckminster Fuller is one of the great men of the 20th. century, although that is not universally acknowledged at the present time. His reputation is largely confined to the U.S.A. His name may mean nothing to a great many Australians, and those who do know his work and his theories, because they share some of his fields, tend nowadays to take him for granted because he has been around for so long. That is his fate in the restless, superficial, technological age in which he has such faith.

A book which explains his achievements and theories and the philosophical foundations to which they are tethered - and which restricts their tendency to spin off beyond this galaxy - was needed. Unfortunately it still is. This new book does not attempt anything so deliberate or orderly. Nevertheless in the meantime it is better than no new book from or about the man.

When the name Buckminster Fuller is known in Australia it is usually in connection with his most spectacular physical achievement: the design and construction of giant domes and spheres on the geodesic principle. Thousands of these are now used throughout the world for various mundane purposes, and a big one became famous as the U.S. pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal.

Fuller has a number of other practical inventions to his credit and a few other unsuccessful ones, the latter only because, it can be proved, they were too early. However, this book has practically nothing to

do with domes, or "Dymaxion" houses or any of the other devices which once placed Fuller more or less in the company of architects and engineers. Here he talks more of his other interests, which are unconfirmed by the world.

"In 1917", he relates, " I found myself asserting that I didn't think that nature had a department of chemistry, a department of mathematics, a department of physics, and a department of biology and had to have meetings of heads in order to decide what to do...I thought that nature probably had one coordinate system..."

So he became a comprehensivist or a generalist, the antithesis of a specialist or expert - for which he has little time. That is the answer if you ask what's his line. He is a scientist-humanist, proud to claim that he influenced C.P. Snow to modify his news about the incompatibility of sciences and arts. He is the nearest thing to a Leonardo that the Technology Era produced, and he may be the last of all, for the Technotronic Era may not permit them. If so, he will be profoundly disappointed because, as the name of this book implies, he believes in humanity. He is an unrepentant optimist who thinks not only that Utopia is physically possible but that it can be populated by humanity transformed into a race of happy Leonardos. He is also a compulsive propagandist for such ideas.

Fuller's central thesis is that the time has come for Utopia. We all know that the atomic arms race gives a fair promise of carrying the world down the dark spiral to oblivion. The extent of normal optimism is to think that that won't happen and we may be free to continue the world mess as before, effecting little reforms one at a time.

Fuller believes in a Big Bang Theory of reform. He knows (not guesses, or hopes, but knows) that for the first time Utopia is theoretically possible - now. The saviour is technology. The physical background - health and wealth for everyone - is achieved directly with existing resources better developed and distributed.

Overpopulation is no bogey to Fuller. Higher living standards will automatically bring lower birthrate. A refrigerator for every family in the world's starvation regions would be a good start to reducing starvation. "All we have to do to make the world physically successful for all humanity is to raise the overall efficiency of world mechanisms from four per cent to twelve per cent."

How would he achieve the third ingredient, happiness? Grossly oversimplifying: no problem! It follows indirectly from the active minds which would grow in his technological Eden. Half of the most profound effects of the environment on a human life have been completed by the age of four. Nearly all of the brain function has been stimulated into action by the age of thirteen, and if not by then it never will be. Therefore a bountiful environment and concentration of stimulating educational effort on small children could produce a transformed race in about 25 years.

These theories are ornamented with much fascinating detail. Fuller's mind is like an inventor's workbench, crowded with exciting appliances and strewn with seemingly unconnected wires. As he talks, Fuller picks up items at random and discusses them. A newcomer to the lab soon sees

a pattern forming in the tangle.

There are serious faults in the book, but they are not Fuller's. He did not write it, he talked it, in marathon unprepared lectures (some delivered in Australia). It was a mistake of the publishers to collect such talks, virtually without re-writing. Despite an attempt in the introduction to claim advantages for the inevitable repetitions in the spoken words, they are disturbing in more ways than one. The book does a disservice to a great man in his 75th. year. Its 416 pages could and should have been edited down to half. Just the same, the good half is so very good that the book must be at least half read.