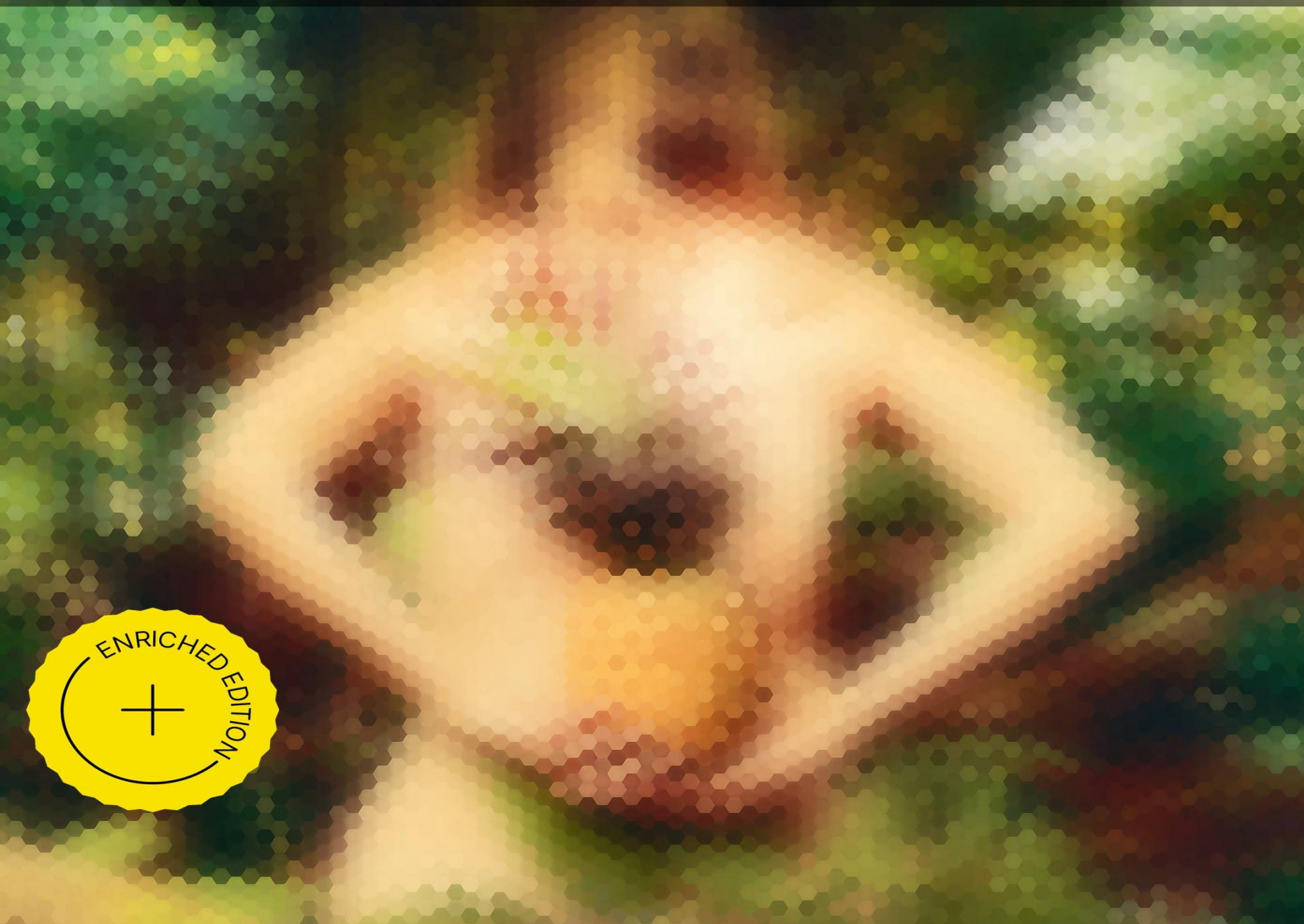
ELIZABETH BURGOYNE CORBETT

NEW AMAZONIA



THE TALE OF FEMINIST UTOPIA

Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett

New Amazonia - The Tale of Feminist Utopia

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Aria Baxter

Published by

MUSAICUM

Books

- Advanced Digital Solutions & High-Quality eBook Formatting -

musaicumbooks@okpublishing.info

Edited and published by Musaicum Press, 2020
EAN 4064066392550

Table of Contents

Introduction

Table of Contents

Framed as a provocative thought-experiment, New Amazonia presses a single, insistent question: what political, social, and imaginative horizons open when women's demands are treated not as an aberration to be contained but as a foundation on which to rebuild public life, reform private relations, and rethink the very grammar of progress, and how might that rebuilt world—efficient, equitable, and unapologetically female-led—mirror back to the nineteenth-century reader the contingent nature of customs they took for natural, exposing the friction between entrenched habit and reasoned reform while testing whether satire and optimism can together engineer a plausible alternative to patriarchal common sense?

Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future is a late-Victorian work of speculative fiction in the feminist utopian tradition, first published in 1889 amid intense public debate over women's rights in Britain. It situates its future society—New Amazonia—as a fully realized matriarchal commonwealth, approached through the conventions of a travel narrative. Corbett uses a recognizably contemporary point of departure and then leaps forward to a reordered state in which institutions, customs, and laws have been reimagined. The result is a narrative positioned between satire and earnest reformism, speaking directly to readers attuned to suffrage arguments and broader social questions.

At the level of plot, the book begins from a familiar world and moves, by abrupt narrative dislocation, into a distant future where women hold political authority and civic responsibilities are redistributed. Guided by courteous hosts, the narrator is shown how this society organizes governance, education, work, family life, and leisure. The episodes unfold as a sequence of visits, conversations, and observations, during which assumptions inherited from the nineteenth century are tested against institutions designed for different ends. Without relying on elaborate inventions, Corbett builds her futurity from policy and principle, making the tour’s surprises feel like arguments staged in lived spaces.

Readers encounter a voice that blends brisk reportage with polemical clarity, using plain description, pointed contrasts, and occasional irony to steer interpretation. The tone is confident, often playful, and deliberately didactic, yet it remains accessible, favoring concrete scenes over abstract treatise. The style draws on the era’s reform journalism and on the utopian travelogue, inviting us to measure present norms against the future’s routines. Exposition does much of the narrative work, but character reactions and small comic beats keep the pages moving. The book’s pleasures arise from clarity of design: institutions are explained, contested, and then left to speak for themselves.

Throughout, Corbett insists that structures matter: who votes, who teaches, who heals, who adjudicates, and who is paid to do what work shape the possibilities of a life. New Amazonia explores civic participation, equitable law,

economic independence, public health, and the ethics of care, linking personal freedom to collective arrangements. It interrogates entrenched gender roles, critiques the alignment of custom with authority, and proposes that rational organization can be humane. The future here is not a marvel of gadgets but a reorientation of values, prompting readers to ask how education, employment, and domestic expectations mutually reinforce or loosen inherited hierarchies.

For contemporary readers, the book matters as both a historical artifact of feminist imagination and a still-usable toolkit for thinking about power. Arguments over representation, workplace equity, family policy, and the valuation of care continue, and Corbett’s strategy—show the system, then compare—remains clarifying. The narrative also exposes the limits and blind spots of its moment, offering a chance to examine how reformist projects inherit the assumptions of their age. Reading it alongside current debates highlights continuities in rhetoric and resistance, while reminding us that design choices in law, education, and media shape who thrives, who speaks, and who is heard.

Approached as a lively tour rather than a prophecy, New Amazonia offers a focused, argument-driven excursion through a future constructed to test the reader’s convictions. It rewards an inquisitive, critical stance: notice how details of dress, housing, schooling, and ceremony encode political judgments; listen for the narrator’s shifting certainties; ask which reforms persuade and which provoke. Without foreclosing mystery or discovery, the opening

movement establishes enough foundations to let the ensuing chapters proceed by contrast and elaboration. To engage with it today is to practice comparative thinking, to see institutions as designable, and to imagine consequences when justice is taken seriously.

Synopsis

Table of Contents

Published in 1889, Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's New Amazonia is a late-Victorian feminist utopia that blends satire with speculative social critique. Framed as a traveler's account, the novel confronts the legal, economic, and cultural constraints placed on women in the author's present and imagines a polity organized to remove them. Corbett situates her vision within contemporary debates about suffrage, education, and marriage, using an accessible narrative voice to lead readers from familiar injustices to unfamiliar possibilities. Without relying on extravagant machinery, the book uses a simple device of temporal displacement to stage a methodical comparison between nineteenth-century Britain and a reformed future society.

The story opens with a woman narrator facing the precarity and indignities of her era, where limited rights and social expectations narrow her options. An extraordinary interruption to ordinary life transports her beyond her own time, and she awakens after a long interval into a far future where a flourishing commonwealth, administered by women, has reshaped the institutions she once knew. Guided by hospitable hosts, she begins a tour that is as much intellectual as geographic, learning how the new order arose and what principles sustain it. The journey supplies the framework for sustained, comparative inquiry.

First impressions emphasize order, civility, and competence rather than spectacle. Public spaces are clean and well planned; officials are calm, practical, and unpretentious. Dress and demeanor reflect health and utility more than ornament or constraint. The narrator encounters women in roles formerly barred to them—legislators, judges, professionals—and sees men participating without resentment in an arrangement designed to promote mutual benefit. Her guides, often amused by antique prejudices, explain that the transition to this settlement was deliberate, educated, and incremental. The text foregrounds reforms achieved through collective will, careful lawmaking, and a culture that values capability over privilege, inviting readers to compare premises.

Corbett devotes much attention to institutions that had most troubled Victorian women. Education is universal and thorough, preparing citizens for service rather than status. Professions are open by aptitude, and public office is contingent on proven usefulness. Marriage is contracted as a partnership of equals, with rights and obligations clearly balanced; property, guardianship, and inheritance laws have been revised to protect individual independence and children’s welfare. The result is a civic order that prizes consent, accountability, and competence, rendering many of the period’s anxieties about female ambition irrelevant. Through dialogue and observation, the narrator traces how these legal frameworks sustain everyday ease.

Economic life in New Amazonia is engineered to prevent the poverty and dependence ubiquitous in the narrator’s past. Production and distribution are organized to meet

social needs, with incentives aligned to public benefit rather than speculation. Labor is dignified, waste is discouraged, and corruption is curtailed by transparent oversight. Public services—education, health, and housing—are conceived as investments in the commonwealth, not grudging charity. Environmental considerations temper development, and scientific advances are evaluated by their ethical and practical consequences. The picture is one of steady, humane efficiency, achieved not by coercion but by a widely shared belief in fairness and responsibility.

Men’s status is neither caricatured nor erased; rather, it is recalibrated within a framework that expects partnership over dominance. Opportunities are determined by competence, and masculine prestige no longer depends on excluding women. Social customs that once enforced fragility or swagger give way to mutual respect and practical solidarity. Throughout, Corbett stages courteous but pointed conversations in which her hosts probe the narrator’s inherited assumptions, exposing the illogic of customs once considered natural. The gentle comedy of these exchanges keeps the tone from dogmatism while clarifying the reforming impulse: to secure collective flourishing by widening the sphere of capable participation.

As the visit proceeds, the narrative’s chief interest lies not in peril but in perspective. New Amazonia functions as a mirror for late nineteenth-century readers, demonstrating how laws, habits, and institutions shape possibilities, and how revising them could release talent and reduce harm. Without resolving every question or detailing every mechanism, the book advances a coherent proposal: that

equitable arrangements are neither utopian in the pejorative sense nor incompatible with order. As an early contribution to feminist speculative fiction, it endures for the clarity of its critique and the steadiness of its hope, inviting ongoing reflection on practicable social change.

Historical Context

Table of Contents

Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett’s New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future appeared in Britain in 1889, at the height of late-Victorian debates about women’s rights. Corbett, a British journalist and novelist active in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote within a bustling provincial and national press culture that amplified reformist arguments. The novel imagines a future women-ruled society, a familiar speculative frame for contemporaries who used utopias to test policies and morals. Its vision is anchored in the institutions of the era it critiques: Parliament, marriage and property law, universities, professional guilds, the churches, and a rapidly growing civil service shaped by imperial administration.

Political representation in Britain had expanded through the Second Reform Act (1867) and the Representation of the People Act (1884), yet women remained excluded from the parliamentary franchise. They did, however, gain limited local votes as ratepayers from 1869 and could serve on school boards and, increasingly, as Poor Law Guardians. The Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 began to secure wives’ control over earnings and property, reshaping household authority. Divorce law reforms remained uneven and costly. These legal frameworks, still privileging male heads of household, supplied concrete targets for feminist argument and furnished the institutions New Amazonia evaluates by imaginative contrast.

Organized women’s suffrage activism had been persistent since the late 1860s. The National Society for Women’s Suffrage coordinated petitions and lobbying, while leaders such as Lydia Becker and Millicent Garrett Fawcett pressed Parliament to consider franchise bills that repeatedly failed in the 1870s and 1880s. In 1889—the year Corbett’s novel appeared—Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst helped found the Women’s Franchise League, advocating votes for married as well as single women. Female participation in party auxiliaries grew through bodies like the Primrose League and the Women’s Liberal Federation. This steady, lawful agitation forms the political background against which the novel’s radical institutional reimaginings become legible.

The social-purity campaign profoundly shaped late-Victorian feminist priorities. Josephine Butler’s movement secured the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, overturning a regime that had subjected suspected prostitutes to compulsory medical examination in garrison towns. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 raised the age of consent to sixteen and intensified debate over sexual coercion, seduction, and the double standard. Temperance activism, often led by women, linked alcohol regulation to domestic welfare. These controversies sharpened critiques of masculine privilege embedded in law, medicine, and policing, and they inform the novel’s interest in reorganizing social power, public health policy, and the ethics of intimate life.

Access to education and professions broadened but remained constrained. The University of London opened

degrees to women in 1878; Girton (1869) and Newnham (1871) at Cambridge offered instruction without full degrees; Oxford permitted women to sit examinations from the 1870s but withheld degrees until 1920. Pioneers such as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake fought for women's medical training and professional recognition. The Rational Dress Society (1881) symbolized challenges to restrictive norms. These partial gains and continuing exclusions—within universities, learned societies, and the professions—frame the novel's proposals for reorganizing education, scientific research, and work so that women's intellectual authority appears both plausible and necessary.

Industrial capitalism reordered British work and family life. Large numbers of women labored in textiles, domestic service, and sweated home industries for low pay, while protective factory legislation sought but struggled to limit hours and hazards. The 1888 London matchgirls' strike publicized women workers' organization and the health costs of phosphorus. New cooperative and socialist currents—exemplified by the Fabian Society (founded 1884) and reform journalism—encouraged readers to imagine state planning, municipal ownership, and welfare. These debates about economic justice and social organization supplied contemporary blueprints and anxieties that a speculative feminist commonwealth could amplify, redirect, or correct through alternative institutions and civic ethos.

New Amazonia also belongs to a late-nineteenth-century surge in speculative fiction. Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward (1888) popularized future-oriented social blueprints; William Morris's News from Nowhere followed in

1890. Feminist precedents included Mary E. Bradley Lane's Mizora (1880–81), which imagined a women-led scientific society. Adventure romances such as H. Rider Haggard's She (1887) probed anxieties about female authority. In 1888 the press erupted with debate over marriage after Mona Caird's essay, "Marriage," and the "Is Marriage a Failure?" symposium. Corbett's novel uses the utopian mode to test reforms under contest—marriage, education, property, and power—rather than to furnish mere exotic entertainments.

Corbett's future commonwealth is less prophecy than argumentative mirror to late-Victorian Britain. It deploys satire and extrapolation to assess the institutions shaping women's lives—legislatures, courts, universities, professions, churches, and armies—and to imagine how altered franchises, education, and economic organization might recast citizenship. The work echoes contemporary feminist strategies that coupled claims for equal civic rights with appeals to women's social responsibility in public health, education, and morality. By translating ongoing parliamentary debates and reform campaigns into a complete, functioning polity, New Amazonia simultaneously registers frustration with incrementalism and exhibits the era's confidence that systematic redesign could remedy entrenched, gendered inequities.

New Amazonia - The Tale of Feminist Utopia

Main Table of Contents

PROLOGUE.

Table of Contents

It is small wonder that the perusal of that hitherto, in my eyes, immaculate magazine, the *Nineteenth Century*[1], affords me less pleasure than usual. There may possibly be some articles in it both worth reading and worth remembering, but of these I am no longer conscious, for an overmastering rage fills my soul, to the exclusion of everything else.

One article stands out with such prominence beyond the rest that, to all intents and purposes, this number of the *Nineteenth Century* contains nothing else for me. Not that there is anything admirable in the said article[1q]. Far from it. I look upon it as the most despicable piece of treachery ever perpetrated towards woman by women[2q].

Indeed, were it not that some of the perpetrators of this outrage on my sex are well-known writers and society leaders, I would doubt the authenticity of the signatures, and comfort my soul with the belief that the whole affair has been nothing but a hoax got up by timorous and jealous male bipeds, already living in fear of the revolution in social life which looms before us at no distant date.

As it is, I am able to avail myself of no such doubtful solace, and I can only feel mad, downright mad—no other word is strong enough—because I am not near enough to these traitors to their own sex to give them a *viva voce*[2] specimen of my opinion of them, though I resolve mentally

that they shall taste of my vengeance in the near future, if I can only devise some sure method of bringing this about.

But perhaps by this time some of my readers, who may not have seen or heard of the objectionable article in question, may be anxious to know what this tirade is all about.

I will tell them**[3q]**.

But I must first allude to the fact that my sex really consists of three great divisions**[4q]**. To the first, but not necessarily the superior division, belongs the class which prefers to be known as *ladies**[5q]***.

Ladies, or rather the class to which they belong, are generally found to rest their claim to this distinction, if it be one, upon the fact that they are the wives or daughters of prominent or well-to-do members of the other sex.

They find themselves in comfortable circumstances**[6q]**. The money or distinction which may be at the command of their husbands or fathers enables them to pass the greater portion of their time in dressing, or in airing such charms as they may possess. They lead for the most part a frivolous life, and their greatest glory is the reflected lustre which shines upon them by virtue of the wealth or attainments of their husbands or other male connections.

It is always noticeable that the less brains and claim for distinction a lady possesses herself, and the less actual cause she has for self-glorification, the higher and the more arrogantly does she hold her head above her fellows, and the more prone is she to despise and depreciate every woman who recognises a nobler aim in life than that of populating the world with offspring as imbecile as herself.

*Il va sans dire***[3]** that there are thousands of ladies to whom the last remark is scarcely applicable**[15q]**. Gentle in manners, and yielding in disposition, they are perfectly satisfied with the existing order of things, and quite believe the doctrine that man in his arrogance has laid down, that he is the God-ordained lord of creation, and that implicit obedience to his whims and fancies is the first duty of woman.

They have all they feel necessary to their well being. They have husbands who regard them as so much personal property, and who treat them alternately as pets or slaves; their wants are liberally provided for without any anxiety on their part; they rather like the idea of having little or no work to do, and to their mind, independence is a dreadful bugbear, which every lady ought to shun as she would shun a mad dog or a leper.

They are not to blame, poor things, for they are what man and circumstances have made them, and their general amiability and vague notions of doing what they have been taught is right, at all costs, partly exonerates such of them as have been persuaded to sign the *Nineteenth Century* protest.

Although I am not disposed to regard *ladies* as the wisest and most immaculate members of my sex, I do not include in this category all those who would fain usurp the doubtful distinction of being regarded as such. For instance: a young friend of mine, on her marriage, found herself domiciled in a very pretty little house in the suburbs, her domestic staff being limited to one maid-of-all-work.

One day, while the latter was out upon an errand, a tremendous ring at the front-door bell put my friend all in a flutter. She had but recently returned from her honeymoon, and wished to receive callers with becoming dignity**[7q]**. She would have preferred the maid to open the door, and show the visitor into her tiny drawing room; but as the maid was not at home, there was nothing for it but to officiate as door-opener herself.

She need not have been alarmed, for the individual at the door proved to be a big, fat, dirty, perspiring female, with a large basket of crockery-ware, some of which she tried to persuade my friend to buy. Finding her efforts in this direction fruitless, she began to wonder if she had been forestalled, and somewhat surprised my little friend by the following query: “If ye plaze, mum, can ye tell me if there’s been *another lady* hawking pots about here this afternoon?”

No; decidedly this individual’s claim to be regarded as a lady was somewhat too pretentious, and it must be understood that when speaking of *ladies*, I draw the line at hawkers.

The second great division of the female sex is composed of *women**[8q]***. These do not sigh for society cognomens such as are essential to the happiness of their less thoughtful sisters. They want something more substantial**[9q]**. Many of them find it necessary to earn their own livelihood**[10q]**. Others possess a sufficient percentage of this world’s good things to enable them to banish all dread of poverty in their own lives. Others, and I am glad to say that this class is ever on the increase, prefer to work, simply because they prize independence above all things.