Iconoclastic British author, he brought a new tone into Victorian literature and began the tradition of New Zealand utopian/dystopian literature with his satire *Erewhon* (1872). Also known for his substantive studies of evolutionary thought (criticising Darwin), his prose translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are still in use today.
SECTION SUMMARY

1. S. Butler's LIFE & WORKS.
2. EREWHON or OVER THE RIDGE.
3. A PROPHETIC SATIRE.
4. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.
1. S. Butler’s
LIFE & WORKS.
1835: he was born at the rectory in the village of Langar to the Rev. Thomas Butler – his relationship with his parents, whom he found particularly “brutal and stupid by nature”, was largely antagonistic: his education, which began at home, included frequent beatings, as was not uncommon at the time.

1854: set on course to follow his father into priesthood, he went up to St. John’s College, Cambridge, where he obtained a First in Classics in 1858.

1858-59: he lived in a low-income parish in London.
SAMUEL BUTLER

- **1859-1863:** he emigrated to New Zealand like many early British settlers of privileged origins, in order to put as much distance as possible between himself and his family.

  He wrote about his arrival and his life as a sheep farmer in *A First Year in Canterbury Settlemen* (1863), and made a handsome profit when he sold his farm, but the chief achievement of his time in New Zealand was the drafts and source material for much of his masterpiece *Erewhon*, a satire of Victorian society.

- **1864:** he returned to England settling in rooms in Clifford’s Inn in London where he lived for the rest of his life.
1872: the utopian novel *Erewhon* appeared anonymously, causing some speculation as to the identity of the author. When he revealed himself as the author, he became famous.

*Erewhon* revealed his long interest in Charles Darwin’s theories of biological evolution. In 1863, four years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, he had already written a letter captioned “Darwin among the Machines” in which he compared human evolution to machine evolution, prophesizing (half in jest) that machines would eventually replace man in the supremacy of the earth. He wrote:

“In the course of ages we shall find ourselves the inferior race.”
SAMUEL BUTLER

• **1886:** his father’s death resolved his financial problems. He indulged himself, holidaying in Italy every summer, producing works on the Italian landscape and art, in particular in the art of the *Sacri Monti*.

  He wrote a number of other books, including a not so successful sequel, *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), a satirical novel. His semi-autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh* – which he had completed in the 1880s – did not appear in print until after his death as he considered its tone of attack on Victorian hypocrisy too contentious.

• **1898:** he made a prose translation of *The Iliad* and, two years later, of *The Odyssey*.

• **1902:** he died in London and by his wish he was cremated.
2. EREWHON
or OVER THE RIDGE.
EREWHON (1872)

- *Erewhon* is the name of a fictional country, supposedly discovered by the protagonist of the novel, Higgs, driven by curiosity to explore *Over the Ridge*: he comes across a very European-like society previously unknown in the larger world.

- At first glance, Erewhon appears to be a utopia, yet it soon becomes clear that this is far from the case.

- Higgs is taken to prison and there he discovers that in this society sickness is looked at as a crime while law offenders are treated as if they were ill. When he is released, he lives with an Erewhonian family and learns about other customs.
MAN & MACHINES

• Once they were very advanced in terms of machinery, but after a while they perceived machines as potentially dangerous since they were

  “ultimately destined to supplant the race of man, and to become instinct with a vitality as different from, and superior to, that of animals as animal to vegetable life”

Thus they got rid of them: they put them in their museums.

• Among the curious notions shared by Erewhonians are:
  • the belief that children choose to be born;
  • churches act as “musical banks” with their own money-changing tables.
3. A PROPHETIC SATIRE.
A PROPHETIC SATIRE...

- 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, and ...

  “The author wishes it to be understood that Erewhon is pronounced as a word of three syllables, all short, thus, *E-re-whon*”

- As the American writer Jerry Stratton states, what is most amazing about Erewhon is that

  “it is yet another example of satire not going far enough; it ends up being true”.

- As a matter of fact, though evidently written with More's *Utopia* in mind, it seems that a devious trick has been played, so *Gulliver's Travels* is the true template to the novel!
Butler was a staunch evolutionist, but when he wrote about machines becoming intelligent his contemporaries read those chapters as attempts to “reduce Mr. Darwin’s theories to an absurdity.” Today, we read them as prophesying not only the extent to which humans would become dependent on “machines” but also on their more and more rapid development:

“There is no security against the ultimate development of mechanical consciousness, in the fact of machines possessing little consciousness now. A mollusc has not much consciousness. Reflect upon the extraordinary advance which machines have made during the last few hundred years, and note how slowly the animal and vegetable kingdoms are advancing.”
4. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.
Both the Irish playwright G.B. Shaw (1856-1950) and the English novelist E.M. Forster (1879-1970) admired Butler for bringing a new tone into Victorian literature and beginning the long tradition of New Zealand utopian/dystopian literature.

The English dystopian novelist Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) acknowledged the influence of Erewhon on his novel Brave New World (1931) and on the utopian Island (1962).

A reference specifically to “The Book of Machines” opens the Spanish poet and essayist Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936)’s short story, Mecanópolis (1913), about a man who visits a city inhabited solely by machines.