



Back Step: A Novel

Burnard Winburn

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This fun tale of time travel to early America will appeal to military and history enthusiasts.

Started by the late Master Gunnery Sergeant Burnard Winburn and completed after his death by Ralph Bates, both retired from the US Marine Corps, *Back Step* is an ambitious story rife with Americana and explorations of the people and ideas that founded the country.

The story begins as Steven Priestly is hired at an optical instrument company in Hampton, Virginia, where renovations are taking place to allow them to use radioactive tritium to create state-of-the-art equipment for the military. He immediately notices something is amiss when his boss cancels important safety upgrades in favor of saving money. When a thunderstorm knocks out the power keeping the tritium safe, Steven is shocked to see a group of workers and equipment vanish in a flash of light.

In the next scene, we meet John Williams, a maintenance expert with the Marine Corps also stationed in Virginia. When the same storm hits, he too disappears with a flash, along with crates full of military equipment. John awakens to find himself in an unfamiliar place without power lines, planes in the sky, or the sounds of car engines. He stumbles on a group of farmers and soon learns he has somehow been transported to the year 1769. Marooned in the first years of a young America, John must learn to live in his new and unfamiliar world, and come to grips with the idea of never returning to his old life.

The book has an interesting premise, and succeeds brilliantly at re-creating the era of the founding fathers. Williamsburg comes alive through rich description and engaging characters, made both surreal and humorous by John's anachronistic observations. Particularly interesting is the portrayal of political struggles of the day, including tension between the patriots and British soldiers. However, some structural issues and incomplete ideas make it difficult to become fully immersed in the narrative.

After the first chapter, no mention is ever made of tritium, Steven Priestly, or any of the other groundwork that the authors introduce at considerable length in the initial pages. The rest of the novel is equally long-winded and often focuses on strange details, such as the quantity of chainsaws included in the crates that travel in time with John, rather than attempting to explain how the time travel occurred.

To their credit, the authors don't address the typical and tired paradoxes usually grappled with in time-travel stories. There remain, however, quite a few clichés of the genre ("Sir, is that a little clock you have around your arm?"). Repetitive phrasing and regular typos further distract from what is an otherwise well-written book.

Setbacks aside, the story's strong setting and unique juxtaposition of new and old make *Back Step* a fun read sure to be enjoyed by military and history enthusiasts alike.

ERIC ANDERSON (March 2, 2015)

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