

Readers of the *Wellsian* have probably heard of this incident, but may not know of a similar, even stranger debacle which occurred ten years later, in Ecuador. The event is recorded in Reuters and Associated Press dispatches carried by the London *Times* on February 14th and 15th 1949. (If anyone has further information, I for one would be interested to hear it.)

Again, it was a "localized version" of *The War of the Worlds* which did the damage. A music broadcast was interrupted for "urgent news". Description of a cloud-shaped enemy approaching Quito, destroying a neighbouring town and air base, was followed by three pronouncements from apparently reliable figures, played by actors. A government minister appealed for calm, so defence and evacuation could be organized. The mayor urged women and children to leave the city and men to prepare themselves for combat. A priest begged for divine mercy. After a recording of church bells ringing an alarm, the announcer said he could see a monster approaching, anguished in fire and smoke.

Not surprisingly, many people were fleeing by this point, some of them still in their nightclothes. When at last they realized that they had been misled, they changed direction and stormed the radio station, housed in the offices of the newspaper *El Comercio*. The irate crowd set light to the building. Many people were injured jumping from windows to escape the blaze. Order had finally to be restored by troops with tanks and tear gas. Fifteen people died; damage was estimated at £90,000. The authorities, unimpressed by this remarkable example of audience participation, indicted the station's dramatic and artistic directors.

A study of the 1938 case concluded that those listeners most liable to panic were the insecure or inadequate, who suddenly (sometimes with relief) found public embodiment for their fears, at a time when the threat of a second world war had raised the general level of anxiety.¹ It may, then, be relevant to an understanding of the 1949 case that it occurred at the end of the most turbulent period in Ecuador's always-turbulent history. For twenty years the ever-increasing need to modernize had been frustrated — by the Great Depression, the Second World War, and persistent internal disunity. There had long been resentment, erupting sometimes into violence, over the Peruvian invasion of 1942 which had deprived Ecuador of much of its Amazonian territory.

From the other side of the Atlantic, the 1949 riot provided the *Times* with an opportunity to denounce excessive realism in broadcasting, sententiously reminding us that "the ear is at the mercy of the fleeting word".² The first, last, and least fleeting word is Wells's. He made Ecuador the location of one of his short stories, a story written as early as 1904 and entitled with prophetic aptness 'The Country of the Blind'.

Notes

1. Hadley Cantril *The Invasion from Mars* (Princeton, 1940).
2. *Times* (February 15th 1949) p.5.

Book review

'*The War of the Worlds*' / '*Der Krieg der Welten*': *Vier Hörspiele*. Transcripte von Werner Faulstich. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1981. Dr Faulstich has brought together transcripts of four different sound dramatisations of *The War of the Worlds* in this handsomely produced, limp-covered volume. He begins, inevitably enough, with Orson Welles's 1938 production for CBS, and ends with a 1977 German version of Welles's script. In between there are the Hollywood Radio Theatre production of 1955, using the stars of George Pal's Paramount film version — an excruciatingly folksy piece of slush — and a stereo LP made by the Wonderland Imagination Theatre in 1974, which enacts the invasion by the Martians of an unnamed country in 1896. Dialogue throughout is in English, though the script directions and extensive critical apparatus are in German. It is fascinating to see the enormous variations that are possible within a framework of broad fidelity to different aspects of Wells's text. For those unfamiliar (as I was) with the 1938 Orson Welles/Howard Koch version, it is a masterpiece even when read silently and will have you gripping your seat, if not exactly leaving the house in panic. Dr Faulstich's edition of these scripts will be of great interest to those engaged in 'media studies' and, in addition, makes an enjoyable and worthwhile item for the Wells collector.

P.P.