

EDWARDIAN FICTION

Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell & David Trotter, eds. *Edwardian Fiction: An Oxford Companion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. £30 429 pp. ISBN 0-19-811760-4

By its nature, a "Companion" aspires to be both eclectic and comprehensive. This *Oxford Companion to Edwardian Fiction* certainly makes the attempt. It provides over 800 individual author entries, plus entries by title for better-known novels; it also includes contextual material of various kinds. There are, for instance, "thematic entries", covering such genres as horror stories, science fiction and Empire; such historically defined topics as Boer War fiction and literary agents, plus headings for textual matters like illustration. The entries are arranged alphabetically and the cross-referencing is extensive and useful. The editors have adopted the generally agreed parameters of 1900 to 1914 as defining the Edwardian era and only books published within the selected period are included. American authors (with the exception of those like Henry James with "marked English affiliations") are excluded from the Companion, but what is termed "colonial" literature – from Canada, the African colonies, India, Australia and New Zealand – is considered to be central to English fiction of this period.

The Introduction, too, certainly aims at comprehensiveness. It offers a wide-ranging socio-historical account of the Edwardian political and cultural scene, an account of changes in publishing practices and demographic shifts in readership plus a literary appraisal of the fiction. The problem is that this cannot be done in a scant ten pages, with the result that tentative interpretations and hypotheses are presented as accepted facts or established truths. One brief paragraph, for instance, states that Arnold Bennett employed a variety of genres in his fiction as a form of literary experimentation, but it is clear from his journals that Bennett knew exactly what readership he was aiming at in each novel and had a practical end in view.

The editors point proudly to the range of authors included – women make up nearly half the author entries, it seems, and well-known names are accompanied by a number of "unjustly neglected" obscure writers who have been judged worthy of resuscitation – but, of course, the editors have had to be highly selective. Pointing to omissions is a favourite game for reviewers of anthologies and reference books of this

kind, and it is always easy to disagree with the choices that have been made – but I'm going to do just that! My first impulse, of course, was to look up H.G. Wells, then I decided to look up a few other entries and was surprised to find no trace of three writers I had taken for granted would be part of any reference book on Edwardian fiction – and so far I have not discovered any reference to two of them under other headings (although I haven't read every entry, so I could be wrong). I presume that Rebecca West was left out, because she had not published a substantive fiction before 1914 (although she had already made her name as a journalist and short-story writer), but Dornford Yates *had*, and surely such an immensely popular and ideologically fascinating writer is of more interest to any student of the period than Lady Amabel Kerr or Mrs Coulson Kernahan (two names picked out at random because I have never heard of them and what is more, after reading the accounts given of them, I am not interested in finding out more). I am puzzled too by the omission of Jack London's 1903 *The People of the Abyss*. Admittedly, London was an American, but the book was first published in Britain, and its account of the life of the East End poor is still of considerable interest to any reader who wants to know more about the period and about some of the favourite topics of Edwardian fiction. The book is important also because it added another dimension to the metaphor of the abyss which the editors cite in relation to *Tono-Bungay*, *Howards End* and Arthur Morrison's *The Hole in the Wall* (xi-xii). It seems perverse, too, to enter Elizabeth von Arnim under "Elizabeth" when (since Virago have reprinted ten of her books) she is known by her full name to present-day readers.

H.G. Wells is accorded a two column entry, and there are fourteen title entries for his work – although the choice of books for specific mention may strike Wellsians as rather odd: why, for instance, are we given an entry for *The Passionate Friends* and not for *The Time Machine*? – but such choices are inevitably arbitrary. What is more important is the striking difference in tone and substance in the title entries. The account of *The Passionate Friends*, for instance, comprises a rather plodding plot summary, with a brief and unexplained claim that this is "Another of Wells's 'prig novels' and his only 'tragedy'" (308), whilst the much longer entry for *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* contains analysis of and value judgements about the texts themselves, as well as a summary of their literary and publishing context. This variance is, in fact, a marked feature of all the title entries I have read – it may well be a consequence of co-editing.

One glaring error of fact so far as H.G. Wells is concerned is the ascription of *Anticipations* to the year 1908 instead of 1901, what is more, the title is misprinted as *Anticipation* – a curious mistake. The editor of the Arnold Bennett Society Newsletter tells me that she spotted over twenty errors in the Bennett entries (Bennett is mentioned frequently in the Introduction and in the cross-referencing as a kind of archetypal Edwardian). These errors range from the trivial proof-reading type – Simon Cheswardine of *The Matador of the Five Towns*, for instance, is described as a toilet *seat* maker rather than a toilet *set* maker – to a far more significant error in the entry for *Anna of the Five Towns* which can only be a misreading. The plot summary states that the novel's hero, Willie Price, is forced by the scandal of his father's financial disgrace to emigrate – and this is the assumption made by everyone in the book – but, as the last five lines of the text make clear, he had thrown himself down a disused mine-shaft. Such errors of fact are worrying. Literary interpretations and aesthetic judgements may always be open to argument, but the presentation of reliable factual information is the *raison d'être* of the reference book.

Overall, then, although I found *Edwardian Fiction* interesting in parts, I also found it irritatingly variable and ultimately unreliable. It tries to accomplish too much and, far too often, fails to provide what is really needed, either by the student or interested general reader.

Aims and Functions of the Society

The H.G. Wells Society was founded in 1960, and has its members in over twenty countries. It aims to promote widespread interest in the life, work and thought of Herbert George Wells. It organises a number of meetings and events each year, including an annual residential conference every September.

Publications

The Society publishes an annual journal and a newsletter. A fourth revised and enlarged edition of its comprehensive Wells bibliography was issued in 1986. A collected edition of Wells's last two books, *The Happy Turning* and *Mind at the End of its Tether*, edited by G.P. Wells, was published in 1968 and reissued as a paperback in 1982. *The Discovery of the Future* (together with the *Commonsense of World Peace* and *The Human Adventure*) edited by Patrick Parrinder appeared in 1989. *Select Conversations with an Uncle (Now Extinct) with Two Hitherto Unreprinted Conversations*, edited by David C. Smith and Patrick Parrinder, with a foreword by Michael Foot, was published in 1992, and other reprints are currently in preparation. Copies of *Human Rights and World Order* by James Dilloway, published in 1983 to mark the fortieth anniversary of Wells's Rights of Man, are also available.

Membership

Membership of the Society is open to anyone who subscribes to its aims and agrees to pay a subscription of £14 a year (UK and EC); couples and overseas members £17 a year. A corporate membership is £20, retired, unwaged and full-time students £8. (UK and EC), overseas £11. Corporate membership is £20. Donations for general purposes and especially toward the Society's publishing expenses will always be gratefully received.

Subscriptions and enquiries should be addressed to:

The Secretary, Mr J.R. Hammond
Ridings
49 Beckingthorpe Drive
Bottesford
Nottingham NG13 0DN
England

Orders for Society publications, including back copies of the Wellsian should be addressed to:

John Green
29 Valence Circus
Dagenham
Essex RM8 2LU
England