

**Book Review:** *The War of the Worlds. A Critical Text of the 1898 London First Edition, with an Introduction, Illustrations and Appendices*, by H.G. Wells, ed. by Leon Stover (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001). xii, 321 pp. ISBN 0-7864-0780-8. \$55. Order line: 1-800-253-2187. [By John S. Partington]

In his critical edition of *The War of the Worlds*, Leon Stover continues his alignment of Wells with the mad scientists and anti-heroes of his early scientific romances (such as Griffin in *The Invisible Man*, the Grand Lunar in *The First Men in the Moon* and Moreau in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*) by declaring that “His progressive Martians are his allies in ‘The War with Tradition’.” Far from *The War of the Worlds* being an ironic assault on British imperialism or simply a vehicle to shake late-Victorians out of their belief in the inevitability of progress, the technological prowess and organising powers of the Martians are together taken as an image of the Wellsian utopia later to be applied to human society by Ostrog in *When the Sleeper Wakes*. As in the other volumes of ‘The Annotated H.G. Wells’ (with *The Sea Lady*, now numbering seven), Stover claims Wells to be an unreconstructed Saint-Simonian socialist, supporting the rise of a managerial elite to control a planned industrial society in the name of efficiency and at the expense of general happiness (at least in the short term; ultimately the managed masses will learn to be content). As with the other six volumes (so far; *Man Who Could Work Miracles* is to appear as the eighth and final volume in the series), Stover uses anachronistic and ahistorical referencing to argue Wells’s political philosophy in *The War of the Worlds*. Hence, in Book One, Chapter Twelve of the story, Stover footnotes the fact that Shepperton Church tower, destroyed by the Martians, has been replaced by a spire and decodes Wells’s symbolism for the reader thus:

The new spire is the steeple of a new religion, but it is not a Christian one. It is rather the “religion of the future” ([*God the Invisible King*] 1917: 76), science, which the Martians confess [sic]. But they also are as martial as the heathen god naming them. In Wells’s equation, their “Religion of Progress” ([*Democracy Under Revision*] 1927: 32) = “War with Tradition” ([*What Are We to Do with Our Lives?*] 1931: 65). Such was the twentieth century’s errorist faith in Collectivism, the belief that the state can improve on the

spontaneous tendencies of civil society and democratic capitalism, which for Wells always threatened a “loosening of bonds and general disintegration” ([*Democracy Under Revision*] 1927: 15). Its extreme manifestations were in Communism and Fascism, beginning with the exemplary Russian Revolution of 1917. Led by Lenin, Wells had by the next to last year of the First World War learned the totalitarian formula: “If the state can organize society for war, why not for peace?” (Skidelsky [*The Road from Serfdom: The Economic and Political Consequences of the End of Communism*] 1995: 47).

Here we have Stover leaping from the replacement of a church tower with a spire to declaring Wells an advocate of Fascist or Communist (both are the same to Stover) collectivism through snippet quotations of Wellsian and non-Wellsian sources dating from 1917, 1927, 1931 and 1995, and maintaining that *The War of the Worlds* was making this argument as early as 1898, before the existence of the Fascist or Communist Parties and before the Great War or the Russian Revolutions! Now, while I would be the last person to deny a degree of continuity in Wells’s political thought between his student-advocacy of socialism in 1884 and his death in 1946, and, indeed, would even go so far as to say his feeling for some sort of global organisation was already apparent as early as 1897 in “Morals and Civilisation”, Stover’s reading of *The War of the Worlds*, in conjunction with *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), as blueprints for the Wellsian world state *à la* Soviet Russia and Fascist Italy is not only critically shoddy but logically ridiculous. Such a supposition implies that the establishment of both Communism in Russia and Fascism in Italy was purely programmatic and outside of the historical events that most historians believe made their emergence possible, and is the kind of supposition one would only expect from a romantic enthusiast of either Fascism or Communism rather than from a learned anthropologist of the stature of Prof. Stover.

If Stover’s ideological reading of *The War of the Worlds*, and especially the textual evidence he uses for it, is worth pursuing no further, it is worth looking at his understanding of some of the socialist factions existent in late-nineteenth-century London, and Wells’s position towards them. As we know from *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) and the abstracts of his college debates as published in *Science Schools Journal* (1886-89), Wells was critically interested in organised socialism in

the 1880s, though there appears to be no evidence of a continued interest in the 1890s or before his entry into the Fabian Society in 1903. However, Stover is content to ignore this fact and looks at the whole period from 1884 to 1908 as Wells's early socialism. Stover mentions the founding of the Social Democratic Federation in 1883 and the Socialist League in 1884 before turning to "the founding of the counter-Marxist Fabian Society" in 1884. This labelling of the Fabian Society is rather retrospective given the cross-fertilisation that occurred between the various socialist groups. Rather than being founded to "counter" Marxism, Fabianism was intended as an alternative body appealing to a different constituency, namely university-educated middle-class 'brain workers' (as opposed to unskilled, semi-skilled or apprenticeship-trained skilled manual workers), such as civil servants, educators and medics. While Fabianism did indeed reject violent revolution, it nonetheless invited speakers from the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League to address its meetings and even reprinted a tract by William Morris, the erstwhile Social Democrat and founder of the anti-parliamentary and revolutionary Socialist League. Stover also errs by claiming the Fabian Society "later became a think tank for the newly emergent Labour Party (1893, with its first MPs by 1900)." The party founded in 1893 was, in fact, the Independent Labour Party and the Fabian Society was never that party's think-tank. Rather, the Fabian Society, the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party and a few trade unions formed the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 (to be renamed the Labour Party in 1906) and although the Fabian Society has remained an affiliate of the Labour Party from 1900 to this day, it was only really after the Great War that it became merely a think-tank; before that time it saw itself as a semi-independent socialist organisation with its own constituency and which aimed to influence all the main political parties through its network of personal contacts. Rather than being "stimulated by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), a novel that attacked the American labor movement" as Stover claims, the Fabians followed a different route to socialism entirely using the party system and the mechanisms of parliament, local authorities and the civil service to achieve socialism piecemeal and insidiously.

As to Wells's position on socialism in the 1880s, the abstract of his paper on "Democratic Socialism" in 1886 as printed in *Science Schools Journal* shows a rather muddled advocacy of nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and

defence and progressive inheritance duties on the wealthy. While Stover claims that Wells "took the negative" in the paper, he actually argued that increased taxation and nationalisation was "Democratic Socialism" and maintained that the Fabianism of Annie Besant and Bernard Shaw was nothing short of "Communism"!

Stover also claims that, "like Marx's communes, [Owen's] cooperatives are based on a weak principle of organization that for Wells is lacking in scientific design; for him, *cooperation* is the very opposite of *coordination*, the real thing in organizational planning. [...] *cooperation* is far too voluntary and self-serving to provide socialism a meaningful basis." In fact Wells objected to Marx's advocacy of *class-war* socialism while insisting that Marx's contribution to socialism was his internationalisation of it in contrast to the localised models of such ideologues as Robert Owen. Far from condemning the cooperative element in Marxism, Wells saw Lenin's Communist Party as a model of political organisation based on voluntary membership by dedicated individuals who were involved in politics out of enthusiasm and who could leave or take a rest from political organisation at any time they chose. As flawed as Wells's vision of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union might be, he even went so far as to credit himself with the initial idea as depicted in *A Modern Utopia* as the Samurai. To Wells, cooperation and coordination were both equally necessary and he hoped to achieve them through his educational schemes of the 1930s whereby equal access for all to education and the tools of learning would create a politicised population which would insist on socialism following its educational enlightenment. To this degree Wells advocated popular socialism while scorning existing democratic political systems.

Having briefly ironed out a few of the issues arising from Stover's misunderstanding of late-Victorian socialism and Wells's position in it, one finds oneself asking what bearing all this has on *The War of the Worlds*. The answer, quite frankly, is none. Stover is to be applauded if his series of critical texts encourages greater consideration of Wells on universities courses. It is clear, however, that little effort by students will be required to demolish the premises upon which Stover bases his misguided political readings of any of the texts in the series, not least *The War of the Worlds*.