

BOOK REVIEW: David Lodge, *Lives in Writing* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014) ISBN 978-1-846-55790-3 (HB) £18.99 [Michael Sherborne]

David Lodge has done a huge amount over the years to shape Wells's literary reputation. Anthony West and Bernard Bergonzi first challenged the mid-century view that H. G. was an inept promoter of naïve Utopias and redirected attention to the imaginative depth of the early science fiction, but it was Lodge who then pushed the debate forward, by bringing the Edwardian fiction into the discussion and by examining the narrative techniques Wells used to combine potentially conflicting elements into compelling stories. Lodge's essays 'Tono-Bungay and the Condition of England' (1966), 'Reassessing H. G. Wells' (1967) and 'Utopia and Criticism' (1969) remain among the best in the field. Four decades later, in 2011, Lodge returned to the subject with a highly praised novel about Wells, *A Man of Parts*. In his latest work, *Lives in Writing*, he tells us that the motivation behind that story was to get closer to Wells's fascinating complexity. 'Wells was riven with contradictions in principle and practice, but ... was also one of the most interesting and prodigiously talented figures in twentieth-century cultural history.'

Lodge notes that the creation of fictions based on fact has been a growing trend in his own work and in contemporary literature in general, so it is hardly a surprise that his latest work consists mostly of articles about 'the lives behind the books'. Several subjects are figures he has written about previously – Graham Greene, Kingsley Amis, Muriel Spark and indeed H. G. Wells. One might reasonably expect the outcome to be a rerun of old ideas, but in fact Lodge has elaborated and combined the pieces he has selected to produce a coherent, thoughtful set of essays.

A preoccupation with ageing and death runs through the volume, in part because half the subjects are people whom Lodge knew personally and who have died fairly recently, Malcolm Bradbury the closest of them. But Lodge also offers an intriguing account of *The Fixed Period*, an uncharacteristic piece of speculative fiction from someone he certainly didn't know, Anthony Trollope, which recounts how the president of a remote British colony plans to introduce compulsory euthanasia. Lodge traces the novel's origin to its author's fears of senility and incapacity, noting that a stroke was to afflict Trollope at sixty-seven for the 'mercifully brief' period of a month before he died.

The old adage that art is long, life short, naturally hovers over the pages. After recording his feelings at the death of Simon Gray, Lodge offers the writerly consolation that 'his brilliantly witty, searingly honest diaries will live on.' Since he presumably hopes the same for his own work, I can't help wondering whether there is an intentional ambiguity in the book jacket's proclamation, *David Lodge Lives in Writing*, with the noun 'lives' stealthily recast as a verb.

While Lodge's critical sense is as perceptive and discriminating as ever, the elegiac nature of the book leads him to take a pleasingly generous view of his

subjects. Kingsley Amis, for example, emerges not as a small-minded curmudgeon, but a daring artist who turned self-hatred and a bleak world-view into life-enriching comedy. The critic Frank Kermode is not an obscurantist who juggled fancy concepts to little purpose, but a source of stimulating ideas ‘who passed you the ball and left you some space to run with it yourself.’ Even those vacuous icons of the eighties, Princess Diane and Terry Eagleton, are treated with good humour and credited with a positive role in contemporary culture. Despite initial scepticism, I found my sympathy for all the subjects growing as I read the book, along with far greater understanding of their aims and achievements.

And what of H. G. Wells? *Lives in Writing* concludes with a piece called ‘Writing H. G. Wells’ in which Lodge explains how he came to create *A Man of Parts*, how his conception of the book changed as he was working on it and the scrupulous rules which he adopted for mingling fact and fiction. He walks us through some detailed examples of his decisions, summarises and answers arguments against the ‘bio-novel’ as a genre and gives a brief survey of other recent instances, including A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* and an intriguing-sounding novel called *What Alice Knew* by Paula Marantz, in which Henry and William James unmask Jack the Ripper. No, really. I am sad to report that Lodge has nothing to say about the respective merits of the Wells biographies he consulted, though he does note that by their nature all biographies subordinate the voice of the subject to that of the biographer and rely on a ‘limited repertoire of narrative modes and stylistic effects’.

The insights into Lodge’s writing workshop are welcome, but die-hard Wellsians will learn little new about H. G. here. For those of us who are real obsessives, nevertheless, there are eagle-eyed discussions of Wells’s friendship with the Bland family, the date at which he tried to abscond to Paris with Rosamund Bland, his reaction on first reading his mother’s diary and whenabouts he faced up to the likelihood that Moura Budberg had been spying on him for the Kremlin. In all these cases, the novelist’s insights into the course of events and into Wells’s personal psychology are well worth having.

All in all, then, Lodge’s twenty-ninth book is one for which we should be grateful: a humane, perceptive set of reflections by a man who cares deeply, writes clearly and never fails to enhance our appreciation of his subjects. Rumour has it that Lodge’s thirtieth book may be his autobiography. I rather hope it will.