

DAVID HADEN, *H. G. WELLS IN THE POTTERIES: NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE AND THE GENESIS OF THE TIME MACHINE, A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY* (BURSLEM: BURSLEM BOOKS, 2017) ISBN 978-1-387-10546-5 (PB) £13.59 [EMELYNE GODFREY]

When he was born, my husband was given a plate which was painted by his grandmother who worked in the Staffordshire potteries. The plate was a test piece and it secured her a job. She was fourteen years old at the time. So, when an opportunity came up to review David Haden's book, I was curious to know more about the Potteries, which had featured in my husband's family history. My own personal connection to the area was merely confined to a childhood day trip to Stoke-on-Trent area, where I attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to mould a porcelain rose at a taster craft workshop.

Haden's book offered a useful introduction to the Potteries. In this work, the author clearly demonstrates his knowledge of, and passion for, his neighbourhood. He has written histories of Burslem and Fowlea Valley, and the fruits of his research at local archives are manifest in the plentiful contemporaneous maps and photographs that he has unearthed reprinted in his book on Wells and the Potteries. As well as writing biographical works on H. P. Lovecraft, Haden has situated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in North Staffordshire and highlights opportunities for further scholarship and pastiche in his *The Cracks of Doom: Untold Tales in Middle-earth*, subtitled 'a comprehensive list of plot openings for writers, game makers, role-players, performers and daydreamers' (2018). Therefore, his book on the Potteries promised to be an unusual read, encompassing, as Wells did, the fantastical and the everyday. When Wells left the Potteries after a three-month stay, he had only £5 to his name, but a wealth of material on which he would draw, and so the story Haden has to tell of his visit to the area is crucial to the formation of Wells as we know him.

The book starts with a letter from Arnold Bennett to Wells in 1897, asking Wells about his experiences with Burslem and the Potteries. Bennett told him that he had noticed references in *The Time Machine* (1895) and his story 'The Cone' (1895). David C. Smith and others have indeed mentioned the role of 'The Cone' in forging a friendship between the two men.¹ Wells's reply was reminiscent, but vague. He told the enrapt Bennett that he had been deeply impressed by the Potteries and had admired the bluebells in the Etruria Woods. Bennett had not met anyone who had had an emotional response to the Potteries. Wells did not, he added, have much to do with the locals: 'I don't know the people and "cram" is vile. I shall never do it' (9). Haden's footnotes are well worth perusing, containing many gems. Here, he unpicks the meaning of Wells's word 'cram'. Surely, it was not, he asks, a type of unappetising biscuit, which occurs in Tolkien's world? He argues that cram referred more likely to a hasty mugging-up of information, such as cramming for an exam. As Haden also adds, the local accent was very pronounced and needed much time to learn; it could not be crammed, learnt quickly and intensively. Haden feels that Wells wanted to be honest with Bennett about his lack of knowledge of the locals rather than risk 'com[ing] across as the sort of weaselling socialist who would pretend to be "in with the industrial workers"' (9).

When Wells visited the Potteries in April 1888, he was contemplating his potentially imminent death from the injuries he had incurred at Holt Academy. He had just escaped the stultifying environment of Uppark and turned to the invigorating Staffordshire air. 'Then, as now, the Potteries were a curious side-by-side mix of leafy verdance and clanging industry', notes Haden (16). Wells stayed with his friend William Burton, whom he had met at the Normal School of Science. Burton was now engaged in detective work at the Wedgwood pottery attempting to replicate, using surviving samples, the original glazes used by Wedgwood.

Haden tells us what local events Wells may have seen and novels he may have borrowed from the local library. The local weather, too, Haden emphasises, influenced Wells's life-changing walk in Etruria Woods. Krakatoa's eruption had altered the world's temperature, leading to a later spring, so that when Wells arrived in Etruria in April, wood anemones (normally early spring blooms) were in abundance. Wells's brief conversation, at a gate, with a local girl who was holding these flowers, buoyed him and he temporarily forgot his precarious health. Haden poignantly tells us that, in his description of the meeting of the local girl in 'How I Died' from *Certain Personal Matters: A Collection of Material, Mostly Autobiographical* (Haden has the date of publication down as 1898), Wells

¹ David C. Smith, *The Journalism of H. G. Wells: An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Haren: Equilibris, 2012), 98.

preserved a charming piece of local vernacular: the girl told him that wood anemones were called 'wind stars'. The 'wind star' would resurface in *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) when Jessie educates Hoopdriver on roadside flowers.

Haden shows through painstaking research and on-the-ground investigation where the conversation in Etruria might have taken place. And it was not the same location as Wells's later description in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) of enjoying bluebells in 'Trury Woods'. The location matters, as becomes clear, when he reminds us that the encounter with the girl and the wind stars are a key chapter in Wells's life, which is most famously recast as an interaction between Weena and the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine* (1895). Weena is indeed likened to a star. (For Haden, the red weed, which ripples in the breeze in *The War of the Worlds* of 1898, also has its basis in the wind star.) The Potteries may also have inspired the Morlocks' shafts and tunnels, while the White Sphinx could be based on the statues at the Egyptian Court at Biddulph Grange, North Staffordshire. There was even a Morlock-like baboon statue on display at the time when Wells's visit to the Grange might have taken place.

Rather than following a widely held belief that the Time Traveller was modelled on Wells, Haden considers a local influence: the scientist and Potteries resident, Oliver Lodge. Bearing a striking resemblance to and traits in common with Nebogipfel and the Time Traveller, Lodge experimented with electricity, researched optics, and gave lectures to the Royal Society of Arts. He propounded the idea of a 'whirling machine' which could be ridden and would move about in the space around us. Haden's book includes a photograph of the bearded Lodge, seated in his machine, peering down into the controls, watched by two assistants.

Among the book's appendices is a thoughtfully annotated reprint of 'The Cone', Wells's tale of incandescent revenge in which Horrocks, a man of the Potteries, slowly and menacingly reveals to his visitor Raut his knowledge of Raut's affair with his wife. As we see with Wells's ever-tightening narrative and Horrocks's gripping of Raut's arm, as he takes him on a guided tour, Horrocks also indicates to him that he is the wrong kind of man to mess with. I began to wonder who the villain of piece actually is. Could it be Horrocks, who casts Raut into the flames or the weedy Raut? Horrocks makes it clear that he sees beauty in the Potteries and in industry – Haden situates his comment that 'machinery is beautiful' within a discussion of the industrial aesthetic, mentioning Christopher Dresser and hinting at Bauhaus. Haden's exploration of the subject implies that while Horrocks's act of murder is criminal, his appreciation of aesthetics is heroic. He has an emotional connection to the place after all. So then, the story raises questions about villainy in general, of murder as a fine art.

Haden concentrates very much on Wells's earlier work, mentioning also that the Potteries occur in *The New Machiavelli* (1911) and *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). What of Wells's later work? This is not elaborated on. Albeit an academic study (Haden credits the works of John Partington and John Hammond), Haden's slim and portable book is also a highly accessible guidebook. Haden's skill at introducing the Potteries is so effective that I felt subject to my own space and time displacement. Had I really only spent an afternoon attempting to carve out that 'rose' in porcelain, a flower which slowly began, in my imagination, to take on a different shape, its petals gently stirred into life by the early spring breezes?